

## Ukraine's war on two fronts

*Ukraine battles a second enemy: Corruption*



*Ukrainian activists with portraits of Constitution Court judges in Kiev last Friday, as they demand adoption of the lustration law. (Sergey Dolzhenko/EUROPEAN PRESSPHOTO AGENCY)*

by [Anne Applebaum](#)

KIEV — A year ago, the only topic of conversation in Ukraine's capital was the war. Did Russia want to take half the country, or just a part of that? Would there be a full-scale invasion and, if so, when would it start?

Kiev today doesn't feel like a city at war. Local elections were underway when I was there last week, and the city was plastered with posters. Politicians offering every conceivable opinion smiled benignly at pedestrians from billboards, kiosks and bus stops. Across the country, [more than 200,000 candidates](#) from 132 parties had registered to contest seats in 10,700 local councils.

Most of the voting went smoothly, though not all of the country could vote: Russian-backed “separatists” still occupy a chunk of eastern Ukraine. The promises Russia made in the Minsk agreement have not been fulfilled: Russia has not fully withdrawn its troops and weapons from Ukraine, and the border remains unsecured. Nevertheless, the Russians have turned — at least temporarily — from Ukraine to Syria, and thus the fighting has stopped. There is now a breathing space, and it is one that the Ukrainian government should use to fight its second war: The one against systemic corruption.

In a real sense, the two battles are the same. Russia has long manipulated Ukrainian politics, both subtly and openly, buying politicians, corrupting gas deals and perverting business. In 2006, I sat in a splendid gilded room with the Ukrainian president, Viktor Yushchenko, and listened [as he told me](#) that the Orange Revolution — Ukraine’s first attempt to throw off its corrupt leadership — was failing, thanks to Russian pressure, and why it wasn’t his fault.

Last week, in a somewhat less splendid gilded room, I heard a different story from Arseniy Yatsenyuk, Ukraine’s prime minister. Yatsenyuk has been in politics a long time — not a recommendation in today’s Ukraine — but can point to real achievements in the past year. His government has heroically begun to eliminate the middlemen in Ukraine’s distorted gas market, saving billions of dollars: “No more under-the-table deals, just direct gas purchases.” Under the terms of a [lustration law](#), Yatsenyuk has also begun to fire corrupt officials, putting more than 700 high officials on a special register that prohibits them from taking new government jobs. Yatsenyuk’s government wants to remove many sources of corruption through deregulation — “we’ve stripped off powers from ministries, agencies and the central government, eliminated permissions, certificates” — and the computerization of government services: “Machines do not take bribes.”

It sounds good — but no one I met thinks it’s sufficient. “These things are marginal,” another government official told me. “To most people it feels like nothing is happening at all.” For one, there isn’t an alternative bureaucracy to replace the current one, with its roots in the practices of the past. Worse, Ukraine’s state is so rotten that laws are not executed in any case. As Yatsenyuk himself points out, Ukraine has only just begun to reform its judiciary and independent prosecutors. He plans to fire all 9,000 judges, he says, and only rehire those with clean records — though it hasn’t happened yet. And so a corrupt cabinet minister was arrested, but released after 48 hours. Despite the lustration law, at least some “fired” bureaucrats have re-emerged in new roles.

The fight against corruption also requires cultural change, even moral change, and that can’t come only from the top. The mayor of Lviv, in western Ukraine, has forged [a successful political movement](#) around the idea that the war on corruption begins at the very lowest levels of local government. But elsewhere in the country, local elections were marred by voters selling their votes — a sure sign that cynicism begins at the bottom, too. Yatsenyuk agrees that he has made little progress in fighting “petty corruption, in hospitals, secondary schools, in the universities,” and of course this is the kind of corruption that touches most people. Higher public-sector wages would help, but that would require economic growth. And as long as investors of all kinds keep away from corrupt Ukraine, the economy won’t start moving either.

Yatsenyuk is a convincing interlocutor: The day after our interview, he flew to Berlin, where Chancellor [Angela Merkel praised his government](#) for sticking “rigorously on its reform path.” He’s also paid a huge political price for his job. His party’s poll numbers are now so low that he didn’t field any candidates in the local elections at all.

He attributes this to the rise in domestic gas bills, one of the unavoidable consequences of energy market reform. But everyone else blames the slow pace of change, and no wonder: The stakes could not be higher. Soon the fighting will begin again, the political climate will worsen, the patience of foreign donors will run out. And if the war on corruption is lost, then the war for Ukraine’s sovereignty will be lost, too.