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An unsatisfactory Ukrainian revolution



A woman attends a commemoration ceremony dedicated to the people killed during the 2014 Ukrainian mass protests. (Gleb Garanich/Reuters)

by [Anne Applebaum](#)

Last Tuesday [was the fourth anniversary](#) of the beginning of the demonstration that turned into a revolution in Ukraine. To mark the occasion, Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko visited the Maidan, the central square where much of the drama played out back in late 2013 and early 2014. Together with the prime minister and the speaker of parliament, he and his wife laid flowers beside the monument to dozens of people who were murdered by police sharpshooters at the climax of the revolution, just before Poroshenko's predecessor fled the country. Since then, many thousands more have died in fighting in the east.

I was in Kiev that morning, and couldn't help but note the occasion, not least because the president's appearance caused a spectacular traffic jam in the center of the city. Meetings had to be rearranged, new locations found. I heard several loud complaints — and in a certain sense, this was good news. In 2014, many feared that [the Russian invasion](#) that followed the Maidan revolution would end with the occupation of Kiev. Instead, the Ukrainian capital in 2017 has really, really bad traffic. That's a far better outcome. Incomparably better. Unless you're a bus driver, in which case the situation is catastrophic.

Perhaps that's a trivial example, but right now, any conversation about Ukraine is like that. In the course of 10 minutes, you hear a wide range of perspectives, from optimism, pessimism and pride in the revolution to anger at the things that don't work. The assessment depends on who is talking, and, more importantly, what that person's expectations were four years ago. In her new book, "[The Ukrainian Night](#)," Marci Shore has described how the Maidan revolution genuinely transformed the lives of many of those who participated in it. Forced, suddenly, to make existential decisions, ordinary Ukrainians risked their lives to protest an unjust government, against corruption, against autocracy and in favor of a different, "European" future.

"Facebook 'likes' don't count!" was the original call to protest. In subsequent months, some volunteered to fight against the Russian invasion — to raise money for soldiers and equipment. It was a moment one described as "the end of ambivalence." And it explains why, four years later, so many who entered the government, joined the parliament or campaigned to change their country are disappointed.

To be absolutely clear: Ukraine's current leadership has achieved more in the past four years than all of the country's previous post-Soviet leaders achieved over two decades. Under Poroshenko's leadership, the country has passed laws on banking reform, [health-care reform](#) and, most controversially, [gas-sector reform](#) (the gas sector having been, hitherto, the most important source of large-scale corruption). The country has instituted a widely praised [electronic procurement system](#) designed to eliminate corruption, too.

After a long, disastrous recession, growth is finally picking up, with a lot of activity in the tech industry. There are efforts, stronger in some places than in others, to radically alter the operations of higher education. At Kyiv-Mohyla Academy, an ancient university re-founded in 1991, students study everything from computer science to history to finance. I asked the rector what percentage of the student body speaks some English. "All of them," he told me.

These changes have taken place against the backdrop of an ongoing conflict that seems to grow stranger and more pointless with time. Just this week, a [coup d'état](#) replaced the “government” of one of the tiny, Russian-backed mini-states created by “rebels” in eastern Ukraine. A [series of mysterious assassinations](#) and [thousands of cyberattacks](#) on everything from private companies to the public electricity grid are also features of the hybrid war. Ousted Ukrainian oligarchs wage information campaigns against the government from both inside and outside the country.

But anti-corruption activists and opposition politicians aren't satisfied, either with that list of achievements or with the argument that extraordinary obstacles have prevented faster change. They want their leaders to break more loudly and clearly with the past. They want anti-corruption institutions that result in actual convictions. They want an [end to infighting](#) between different law enforcement agencies. They complain that the interior police, falling into bad habits, still harass opponents.

“A lot of things have been started,” one member of parliament told me. “But we don't have the feeling that they are irreversible.” Maybe this generation of Ukrainian reformers are impatient, but maybe they have a right to be. If you have absolutely changed your entire life for your country, then it's no wonder you want your country to change absolutely, too.