

Is Ukraine still capable of being a bridge between the west and the east?

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Following the European Parliament's vote on visa-free travel for Ukrainian citizens, there is renewed hope for Ukraine's European future, writes Eli Hadzhieva.



Ukraine Map | Photo credit: Fotolia

Ukraine has seen a lot of hardship since signing an Association Agreement with the EU in 2014. Russia's occupation of Crimea and the war in Donbass resulted in 10,000 deaths while the ongoing dispute between Gazprom and Naftogaz and the economic turmoil marked by a GDP plunge of 17 per cent, could be exacerbated by the recent trade blockade.

With increasing oil prices, a costly war and a growing dependence on IMF assistance, it's no surprise that Ukrainians rank as one of the world's most suffering people in the 2017 World Happiness Report.

The political situation is also fragile. Draft constitutional changes on decentralization - including separate legislation regulating local self-governments in Ukraine's Luhansk and Donetsk regions - followed by violent protests in August 2015 demonstrated that snap elections could be called anytime in the country, although the next elections are expected in 2019.

Disagreements and accusations of bad management and corruption have seen many parties leave the ruling coalition government and has led to an explosion of new political parties.

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Through their non-mainstream political movements, figures such as Valentin Nalyvachenko, the former head of Ukraine's Security Service, Mikheil Saakashvili, the ex-governor of Odessa, ultra nationalist Andrea Byletsky, and Vadim Rabinovich, a businessman and a popular media personality, are the new anti-establishment opposition.

Rabinovich, who is one of Ukraine's top three leaders, has established a new centrist and unifying party 'For Life'. The party represents a fresh approach compared to the other opposition parties with their Communist heritage and baggage of criminal trials, distinguishing itself with an original approach to Ukraine's development.

Using the country's huge agricultural productions to grow GMO-free crops and developing the banking sector to make Ukraine the new 'Switzerland' are two such examples. Waging war on corruption and establishing Ukraine as Europe's next Silicon Valley through an increased focus on the IT sector and by using the full potential of the country's highly educated population are other examples of Rabinovich's fresh approach.

Contrary to the growing nationalism throughout Europe, Rabinovich is also living proof that diversity is an important element in Ukrainian politics.

Although being of Jewish origin, he collected 480,000 votes - a greater share of votes than the collective support secured by all the nationalist candidates in the 2014 presidential elections.

Having launched the former Jewish television network JN1 and other media companies, Rabinovich hosts two political TV shows, which became very popular attracting about four million viewers. He is also the founder and leader of the 120-member European Jewish Parliament and Head of the Ukrainian Parliament's Human Rights Committee.

His bridging role between different communities and religions in Ukraine is also reflected in his foreign

policy targets, as he believes that the country, which is historically European, should have balanced relations with both the West and the East using all means of diplomacy to solve existing conflicts.

Especially, considering that Ukraine's status as a conflict zone could bring about even worse disasters than Chernobyl due to the country's many nuclear power plants.

Amidst uncertainties regarding the stance of the new US administration towards Russia and the nationalist threat in France and other European countries, flirting with Russian interests, new centrist movements like 'For Life' could bring an end to the suffering of Ukraine's people and upgrade its position internationally as a beacon of security and stability at the crossroads of the West and the East.

About the author

Eli Hadzhieva is the founder and director of Brussels-based NGO, Dialogue for Europe

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