

“What Happened in Ukraine” by Sam Friedman

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New Politics readers will be interested in this ZNet article “What Happened in Ukraine” by Sam Friedman, an HIV/AIDS researcher who spent time in Ukraine for many years before the recent upheavals in the country. The article is based on Friedman’s interviews with friends who were participants in the Maidan events, and is posted on the ZNet site. Footnotes are available from the author at sam4wp@netscape.net.

As is clear from the outset, Friedman frames the Maidan and its aftermath very differently from the way that either the mainstream media or most progressives have understood the Ukrainian crisis. His article begins:

Ukraine went through mass mobilizations and a political revolution during November, 2014 – February, 2015. In this it resembles struggles in Tunisia and Egypt since 2010, and as in the Egyptian case, the outcomes of these struggles (to date) have sorely disappointed most of the left in the United States and, indeed, internationally. Unlike the Egyptian and Tunisian struggles, however, from its outset the struggles in Ukraine were seen in remarkably contrasting ways by different parts of the left. Some have viewed the Maidan struggles as an illegitimate movement that supported US (or US/EU) imperialism and should thus be opposed. Others have viewed it more favorably.

Far too much of the discussion on the left and in progressive publications, in my opinion, has focused on the geopolitical aspects of the struggles in Ukraine. Far too little has focused on the failures of those movements that did succeed in ousting their governments in Ukraine but also in Egypt and Tunisia to bring about governments that moved away from supporting austerity, belt-tightening, and support for neo-liberalism. Most importantly, far too little discussion has focused on the failure of left currents in any of these movements to create serious efforts to bring about a socialist, anarchist, environmentalist or horizontalist reorganization of the economic and social order of society.

In this article, I first try to clarify what happened in Ukraine, focusing primarily on events in the Kyiv Maidan movement but also addressing what has happened since. I base what I say on the words of friends of mine who took part in it. At the end of the paper, I will also address several important analytical questions: 1. Why the government that developed from a politically-amorphous popular revolution has been so right wing; 2. why no mass movement has developed to oppose from the left the austerity that has drastically reduced living standards in the months since this revolution; and 3. what are the implications of these events for the actually-existing lefts in the “post-Communist” countries and in the rest of the world.

Unlike most Americans who write and speak about these events, I had several good friends in Ukraine before these events began. I had met them because I have conducted research (and assisted in activism) around HIV/AIDS since 1983, with a considerable amount of this research focused on people who use drugs and their communities. In the 1990s, after the USSR broke up, HIV began to spread among Ukrainian drug users and sex workers.... [complete article]