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The Spirit of Lviv

How Ukraine's most European city forged a popular
movement against corruption and bad governance.

by Ilya Lozovsky

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About the author

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Ukraine's 2014 Euromaidan revolution produced many memorable images, but some of the most striking came out of Mezhyhirya, the opulent country estate of deposed President Viktor Yanukovych. When activists stormed the grounds, they found luxury on a scale that was almost beyond parody: a vast collection of classic cars, fake ancient ruins, a restaurant shaped like a pirate ship. Most infamously, a two-kilogram loaf of bread made of solid gold came to represent the personal corruption that had characterised Yanukovych's rule. Ukrainians reacted to these revelations with anger, bitterness, and dark humour. The last emotion anyone felt was surprise.

In Ukraine, corruption is not an aberration from a norm; it is the fundamental organising principle of the political order. Forget the standard litany of low-level graft—extortion by traffic police, fraudulent university diplomas—that characterises most post-Soviet countries. Ukraine's corruption is so grand that it has swallowed the state. Political parties are the personal playthings of powerful oligarchs. Cities are drained of funds by a central government that operates more like a criminal enterprise, shaking down administrations at every level. Successful businesses are immediately pounced on and stolen.

In the face of rot this deep, even overturning the government doesn't help: it simply replaces one set of top-level bandits with another. The 2004 Orange Revolution promised change, but proved so disappointing that Ukrainians voted its loser (none other than Yanukovych) back into power. Similarly, even though the Euromaidan has produced far more in the way of tangible results, Ukraine is still far removed from the European standards that inspired the protesters in 2014. The elections that followed the uprisings brought a chocolate magnate to the presidency. Corruption and mismanagement remain rife. And that golden loaf confiscated from Yanukovych? It's already been stolen.

If things in Ukraine are ever to improve, what's needed is a change more fundamental— not different politicians, but a different political culture. This requires reaching the hearts and minds of ordinary Ukrainians, who, after decades of Soviet rule, have forgotten—or never learned—how to be sovereign citizens of a democratic state.

But something is stirring. In the country's westernmost cultural capital, the charming city of Lviv, a remarkable new political movement called *Samopomich* ("self-reliance") promises a different outcome. Samopomich began in 2004 as a local civic organisation that offered legal advice, mobilised citizens to clean up their neighbourhoods, and arranged sporting events for youth. In 2012 it gave birth to a national political party of the same name that has since become the fourth-largest in parliament. It is also a member of President Petro Poroshenko's ruling coalition.

To the extent that Samopomich has a discernible political ideology, it is centre-right and moderately conservative: Christian, pro-business, and pro-Europe. But in Ukraine, these labels are a bit beside the point. When the very concept of impartial government is contested, there can be only two poles in the political world: either you are a player in the corrupt game—or you want to change it. And there's good

reason to believe that Samopomich is Ukraine's first major movement that belongs to the latter group.

In keeping with its name, Samopomich has, from the start, emphasised a pull-up-your-sleeves, can-do pragmatism. Its activists exhort their fellow Ukrainians to become active, responsible citizens who take their destiny into their own hands, rather than expecting Kiev's distant plutocrats to throw them a crumb. Above all, Samopomich is about making ordinary people believe they can—and should—have agency in how their country is run.

Ostap Protsyk, one of the original coterie of activists that got Samopomich going, explains what its founders were thinking: "It was the first two years after the Orange Revolution. People had high expectations from the national level, and we started to tell them: No, no, no! Don't look only there! You have to look to your building, your street, your town. Organise yourself, and don't expect that [Orange Revolution leader Viktor] Yushchenko will come and clean up your city." Such sentiments may seem self-evident, even banal, by Western standards. In oligarch-ridden Ukraine, they add up to a radical message.

In its early years in the first decade of this century, when it was still just a non-governmental organisation with no formal connections to political power, Samopomich focused on bringing Lviv's citizens together to build playgrounds, clean up the courtyards of apartment buildings, and undertake other small, neighbourhood-level improvements. The movement was careful to stick to its principle of "self-organisation," insisting that the people it worked with initiate and develop the projects themselves. Once they did, Samopomich offered advice, media and legal support, and the public backing of its charismatic leader, Andriy Sadovyi.

Sadovyi was, by this point, already a well-known local figure. During the 1990s he became one of Lviv's most successful businessmen, active the construction industry and the local media market (which was useful in promoting Samopomich's message). He also served a term in the city council and ran (unsuccessfully) for mayor in 2002. It was after this thwarted bid that he founded Samopomich with a close group of advisors, seeking to build a constituency for change.

When he ran for mayor for a second time in 2006, buoyed this time by the popularity of his movement, it was hardly a contest. Sadovyi won handily. He was young, energetic, and had already shown that he could get things done. It was no accident that he campaigned with the vow of making Lviv "a city we want to live in"—the same slogan as Samopomich's. One of the movement's key tenets is the importance of modern, honest, and empowered local government, which must work in partnership with its citizens. With its leader having become Lviv's mayor, the movement had a chance to put this into action.

Mayor Sadovyi's office is neat and sunlit, but nearly empty, seemingly far too large for the desk and chair that it contains. I get the impression the mayor is seldom there. On a balcony that opens onto Lviv's crowded central square, I am met by

Andriy Moskalenko, Sadovyi's chief of staff. I'm astonished to learn that Moskalenko has served in this capacity for the past three years—though he's only 28.

After I comment on his age, Moskalenko tells me that getting more young people into the city government was one of Sadovyi's first initiatives as mayor. A massive internship program brought thousands of students to work in the city hall, and dozens, including himself, stayed. Others developed projects they later spun off. I later met Zoryana Christina, a young woman who had interned in the city hall's legal department as a law student in those early Sadovyi years. Even as an intern, she was entrusted with serious responsibilities, running an office that provided free legal advice to Lviv's citizens. Later this project became a separate entity, no longer affiliated with city hall. It is now run by Samopomich, the NGO.

This example illustrates the continued collaboration between Sadovyi's mayoral administration and the movement he founded. One of his long-time associates, a local businessman named Lev Pidlisetsky (who now represents Samopomich in parliament), remembers Sadovyi being advised to close the NGO after becoming mayor. But Sadovyi refused, wanting to preserve the connection with Lviv's residents, who could offer feedback independent from his city hall advisers.

On the balcony, I ask Moskalenko what Sadovyi has achieved in Lviv, and he points to the happy crowds on the square below. "When [the mayor] first came, this was a parking lot for city employees," he says. Seeing an opportunity to promote tourism, Sadovyi made first the square, then the entire old town, a pedestrian zone. To set a good example for civil servants who had grown used to parking right by the office, Sadovyi started walking to work himself. The parking lot emptied. The numerous cafes and restaurants in the square began opening in the following years.

Boosting tourism has, in fact, been one of Mayor Sadovyi's signal achievements in Lviv. He updated English-language signs and expanded pedestrian zones, all helping the city to gain new prominence as a European cultural capital. By 2010— four years into his first term—tourism had grown by 40 percent compared to the previous three years, according to the Lausanne Hotel School. The mayor's office cites yearly increases in tourism of up to 30 percent since 2012.

Sadovyi has also promoted Lviv as an information technology hub, sponsoring a plethora of initiatives, like the Youth Entrepreneurship Incubator, which wouldn't feel out of place in Boston or San Francisco. In 2009, global professional services company KPMG listed Lviv as one of the world's top "locations to watch" for technology outsourcing. The city currently boasts over 10,000 IT professionals, and is working hard to attract more.

These achievements are all the more impressive considering the environment Sadovyi and his team had to contend with. Even within their own city hall, they were a relatively small group of reformers who had entered a sclerotic culture of old-time civil servants. And Lviv was still enmeshed in Ukraine's political culture of patronage and corruption.

There was little Sadovyi or Samopomich could do about that—for the moment—but they tried to change the culture where they could. Sadovyi has emphasised honesty and transparency in his government, making his income public and encouraging members of the city council to do the same. He has hired administrators from other cities to get new, independent perspectives on local institutions. And he has wrung the maximum possible publicity from even small achievements, building a strong impression of forward momentum—but also earning growing criticism for his penchant for self-advertisement. This strategy may be self-serving, but it is also deliberate: Sadovyi wants to show that politics is not inherently bad, seeking to rescue the concept in a country where it has become synonymous with grand corruption.

"We started our work as Samopomich because we understood a simple truth," he tells me when he finally enters his office. "People always say that political power is bad. But people always elect politicians similar to themselves." Through Samopomich, he explains, he is seeking to show that a different kind of government is possible—if the people want it. And he sees bringing a new generation to power is crucial to accomplishing that goal.

By Sadovyi's second term in office, starting in 2012, his own success in Lviv—and that of his political movement—had become well known across Ukraine. "During the Sadovyi period, Lviv has grown a lot," says Natalia Bordun, an administrator in the city's Ukrainian Catholic University. "New places of employment are appearing, internal reforms of the city administration are happening, and they're meeting people halfway. There's a lot of openness. I think Lviv is lucky to have Sadovyi—and on the other hand, Sadovyi is lucky to have Lviv."

This is undeniable. Lviv is Ukraine's westernmost large city, once part of the Austro-Hungarian empire (and then of post-World War I Poland). The historic buildings of its old town recall Krakow, Prague, and other Central European architectural tours-de-force, though on a less grandiose scale. It's hard to imagine that the city wouldn't be a natural tourist destination. Yet only recently—under Sadovyi's leadership—has it become one.

Unlike Kiev or other central and eastern Ukrainian cities, which fell to the Soviets shortly after the Russian revolution, Lviv was not fully integrated into the USSR until World War II, when the Red Army retook it from the Germans. The city's street names and monuments still reflect the city's pre-Soviet cosmopolitanism. In the centre, *Staroevreiska* (Old Jewish) Street and *Virmena* (Armenian) Street both cross Ivan Fedorov Street, named after a Russian printer. A nearby monument honours Adam Mickiewicz, one of Poland's greatest poets.

The city is also a centre of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, which, unlike the country's other denominations, maintained strong ties to the West during Soviet rule. The Ukrainian Catholic University, based in Lviv, is one of the only institutions of higher learning in Ukraine where you can't bribe your way to a diploma, and it is run by Borys Gudziak, a Harvard-educated Ukrainian born in upstate New York. It is no accident that Mayor Sadovyi's rhetoric is peppered with religious terminology.

In a café in the central square, Frans Geraedts—a Dutch philosopher, gray-haired but youthful and energetic—explains why Samopomich arose specifically in Lviv: "This city makes a certain kind of people," he says. "More than other cities do. And it has to do with its history. When you live here, you're going to discover that you live in the apartment of a Jewish family that was killed. So this isn't something you can actively try not to notice." I suggest, half ironically, that the city has a kind of spirit that permeates the people who grow up here. But Geraedts earnestly agrees. "Yes! It's not religious or metaphysical, but a spirit of this real history that presents itself all the time. And this combination of this city and this history produces something extra. People [here] want democracy, people want a decent state, people want to become part of Europe."

Samopomich, and specifically its fixation with corruption, are precisely why Geraedts is in Lviv. He and his colleague, Ruud Meij (also a Dutch philosopher, also grey-haired, but more reserved, and wearing a wide-brimmed hat), are on a pro bono assignment from their firm, Governance and Integrity Nederland, to instruct employees of the city government how to cultivate a mysterious yet vital quality called "integrity."

Geradets and Meij first came to Lviv three years ago after concluding that it offered fertile ground for their ideas. Sadovyi was looking for a way to get beyond the dysfunction of the city hall's bureaucracy, dominated by local power brokers and virulent nationalists. Geraedts and Meij seemed to offer a suitably unconventional solution. The mayor's chief of staff at the time, Oleh Bereziuk (now the leader of the Samopomich fraction in parliament), recognised this and brought them on-board.

Ever since, the two Dutch consultants have been meeting with Lviv's civil servants, working to tackle the city's corruption problem. Their methods are painstaking and unorthodox. They begin by slowly gaining the trust of the civil servants until they feel comfortable speaking openly about the corrupt systems in which they work. Geraedts and Meij diagnose the various pressures their clients face and help them to contemplate alternatives for action. They also offer what amounts to a crash course in ethical reasoning: What is the responsibility of a civil servant? How does one act with integrity in a highly politicised environment? How does one fairly balance competing interests?

By the end of the course, Geraedts explains, many of the staff—not all, but many—have a very different conception of their role as civil servants in a democratising country. But this does not mean they can immediately change their behaviour, still in the midst of a corrupt system. The next step—which he and Meij hope to undertake if Mayor Sadovyi wins a third term this October—is to start putting in place new processes and tweaking the city's bureaucratic machinery to reduce opportunities for graft, thus making ethical behaviour not only desired, but possible.

Geraedts insists that this kind of micro-level, hyper-local analysis is the only way to really defeat Ukraine's corruption. He scoffs at large-scale, national efforts to combat the problem, such as recommendations by foreign experts that Ukraine must pass a national lobbying law. "Here the oligarch is the president," says Geraedts. "What would he need a lobbyist for? To phone himself?" Instead, he

insists, the problem must be tackled city by city, department by department. Lviv is the first step. So what's next?

Had things continued as everyone had expected, Samopomich and Sadovyi would probably have been content to remain in Lviv, working to make their city an island of good governance in a shambolic country. But then, staring in late 2013, the Euromaidan revolution changed everything.

A young generation of Ukrainians, fed up with kleptocracy and broken promises of reform, poured into the streets of the capital. It came as little surprise that Lviv, the heart of the country's most pro-Western region, supplied many of the most visible demonstrators on the Maidan, the central square in Kiev. And Mayor Sadovyi was Ukraine's first public official to openly back the protesters, long before their success was a sure thing. In so doing, he risked not only his political future but his life. (It was later discovered that an order had been made to arrest him days before the Yanukovych regime fell.)

The fall of the old government opened a space for Samopomich to move beyond Lviv—and it has done so with gusto. Though initially projected to win less than 5 percent of the vote in last fall's general election, Samopomich ended up winning nearly 11 percent, sending 32 legislators to parliament. Observers credit its win to a nimble and innovative campaign that made wide use of social media and its ability to convey a vivid sense of grassroots authenticity. Its list of legislators includes a few of Sadovyi's old advisors from Lviv, volunteers who fought against the separatists in the East, businessmen like Pidlisetsky, and prominent Euromaidan activists, such as Yegor Sobolev, who now heads the parliament's anti-corruption committee.

Not a single member of the Samopomich fraction has ever served in parliament before; it's the only party in Ukraine of which this can be said. While it has certainly succeeded in bringing a strong new pro-reform tone to the legislature, so far the party has less to show in terms in tangible achievements. Its battle for national-level measures against corruption has so far yielded few clear victories. It has pushed forward on budget decentralisation, seeking always to return as much money as possible to the cities, but this effort, too, has met with mixed results.

It has also suffered from internal turbulence, including a minor sex scandal involving one of its members of parliament and divides over the party's response to the president's decentralisation law, which controversially ceded some power to areas in eastern Ukraine under Russian occupation. (Five of its legislators, including star activist Hanna Hopko, ended up resigning.) And Sadovyi has plenty of critics—including former advisor Bogdan Pankevych, a long-time civic activist from Lviv who accuses the mayor of exploiting Ukraine's many opportunities for corruption during his rise to business prominence (though he cites no specific details).

And yet even Pankevych concedes that there's no better political movement in Ukraine than the one associated with his former boss. Despite its faults, Samopomich has succeeded in showing Ukrainians that active participation in civic affairs offers a way of addressing the country's deep-rooted political pathologies. The spirit of Lviv still holds out hope to those who believe that change is possible.

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