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## An Outsider Takes on Political Corruption in Ukraine Changing the System

By Christian Neef in Lviv

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**Ukraine's most popular politician lives far away from the country's capital. The mayor of Lviv is admired for his pragmatic approach to politics and for his refusal to do the president's bidding. Many believe he could soon bring his leadership style to Kiev.**

The tinny chimes of the clock, a relic of the time when the city belonged to the Habsburg Empire, ring out from the tower of city hall. It is exactly 10 a.m. on one of the first days of spring, and a small procession marches away from the Latin Cathedral, four women and four men carrying a blue-yellow Ukrainian flag between them. They come to a stop in front of city hall.

A slender, bespectacled man stands waiting for them: Andriy Sadovyi, who is both the mayor of Lviv and the most popular politician in Ukraine. President Petro Poroshenko has long been trying to recruit him for more senior political posts, but Sadovyi has thus far consistently rejected the head of state's advances. He prefers to stay here, far away from the Ukrainian capital of Kiev and its discredited elite.

Every year at this time, the city of Lviv celebrates the historical day in early April 1990 when Ukrainian patriots raised the blue and yellow flag above city hall for the first time. "It took courage at the time," the mayor says into the microphone, flanked by local politicians and a

member of the clergy. "Back then, Lviv was still a part of the Soviet Union, the Ukrainian flag was not shown. Only a year later did it become the state flag." It is an important symbol, he adds. "The word 'Ukraine' has become synonymous with crisis in Europe. We, the people of Lviv, must be the locomotive that changes that again! Glory to Ukraine!"

Back when the city was the center of the Kingdom of Galicia, during the centuries when German was spoken here, it was known as Lemberg. Later, under Polish rule and during the Soviet times, it was called Lwow. Now, as part of Ukraine, its name is Lviv. For the Austrian-Jewish writer Joseph Roth, the city was "a small subsidiary of the wider world," noting that Russian, Polish, German, Yiddish, Ruthenian (Old Ukrainian) were all spoken in the city. Nowadays, Yiddish is only seldom heard, spoken by Jews who used to make up a quarter of the city's population. Now, there are hardly any left. But Sadovyi, the mayor, still believes the city is "the most interesting and most beautiful in the world." He also sees it as the motor of present-day Ukraine.

When President Viktor Yanukovich was toppled in 2014, many activists from Lviv took part in the protests that helped push him out, and it seems there is hardly a family in the city that didn't have a member on the Maidan in Kiev, the central square where the protests took place.

### **Staying Away from the Capital**

Lviv is located just 60 kilometers (37 miles) from the border to Poland and, as such, is a close neighbor of the European Union. And it is a deeply European city. At the same time, though, it is the capital of Ukrainian patriotism and the city was long in the hands of the radical-nationalist party Svoboda.

The 47-year-old Sadovyi has become known far beyond Lviv city limits. Right after the Maidan protests ended, President Poroshenko offered him the position of deputy prime minister, but Sadovyi declined. In March of this year, Poroshenko tried again, this time offering to make him prime minister, but Sadovyi again chose not to move to the capital. He doesn't want to become part of the political clique in Kiev, one which, even two years after the Maidan revolution, continues to try and keep a tight grip on power. There is plenty of intrigue and posts are only meted out once the oligarchs have been consulted. It is a clique that even prime ministers have difficulty dealing with, unless they have strong ties to power in Kiev themselves. For the moment, Sadovyi doesn't yet have such ties.

Just two weeks ago, he again received an invitation from the president, with Poroshenko asking Sadovyi for his support for the appointment of a new general prosecutor of Ukraine. But again Sadovyi refused -- because this post too was to be handed to a Poroshenko ally. Following the meeting, Sadovyi said that such appointments are akin to "raping" the authority of state institutions and spoke of the "cynicism" of those in power in Kiev.

In the capital, another of the president's acolytes, Volodymyr Groysman, was just named prime minister in April. He used to be mayor of the city where the most important factory in Poroshenko's chocolate empire is located. Poroshenko believes he will be able to steer Groysman to his liking.

Sadovyi's stubbornness aggravates the president, but the Ukrainian people are impressed. One Kiev newspaper wrote that his importance as a politician is growing "not with each passing day, but with each passing hour." But how is that possible for a man who has spent much of the last 10 years trying to improve Lviv's potholed streets, rattling buses and aging sewage system? Not only that, but he is far from charismatic and shies away from the kind of self-aggrandizement exhibited by most career politicians.

There are myths about Sadovyi in the city, hymns of praise, rumors and threats. But he nevertheless eschews bodyguards, and anyone wanting to meet with him can do so with ease. Many such meetings take place inside city hall, where his antechamber is decorated with an 1836 map of Lviv from the Habsburg-era quartermaster general.

### **'Change the Entire System'**

On this particular day, though, Sadovyi is presiding over a city council meeting, where 59 representatives have gathered in the city hall. The mayor has brought in a clergyman to open the proceedings; he then crosses himself three times and calls out the first item on the agenda: Proposals and comments. The day's session focuses on bus stops, street markets, electricity prices and alcohol sales after 10 p.m., with representatives from Svoboda and from the party Samopomich, or Self Reliance, taking the floor. Samopomich is the party that Sadovyi himself founded.

During the break, the mayor hurries into the foyer where journalists and television cameras await, wanting to hear his take on the government crisis in Kiev. "Cosmetic changes to the country's leadership" are not helpful, he says. That, he explains, is why his party left the governing coalition, withdrawing its support from Poroshenko and going into the opposition. "We have to change the entire system," he says.

He looks as though he is happy to have escaped the city council meeting -- as though he feels comfortable on the larger, national political stage. But the secret to his success is to be found in Lviv: It is here that he became the kind of politician that has become rare in a Ukraine torn apart by power struggles.

Sadovyi is an electrical engineer by training. He completed his studies three years after Ukraine gained its independence from the Soviet Union, a time when the country's economy was in a shambles. Initially, he worked in a bazaar before moving on to cross-border trade with Poland. Later, he received his qualifications for working in state administration, worked for foundations in Lviv and invested in media companies. The website Zaxid and the television and radio company Lux belong to his family -- he signed ownership over to his wife. Sadovyi is not a poor man, but people we spoke to in Lviv said he is not known to have any criminal connections.

He was elected to the city council in 1998 and founded Samopomich a few years later as a collective for Lviv residents to help themselves. Back during the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Lviv had likewise been home to such a movement, made up of citizens taking care of problems that the state ignored. Sadovyi put together a network of volunteers that focused on helping retirees, the homeless and alcoholics in addition to offering legal assistance to Lviv residents. The group

even helped out with leaky gutters. Sadovyi engaged in something that is rare in Ukraine: politics for the people. In 2006, he was elected as the city's mayor for the first time.

### **The Return of Life and Culture**

"When I took over the city, there was water for four hours in the morning and four hours in the evening," Sadovyi says. "The streets were in catastrophic condition." Since then, a lot has changed: The city center was refurbished and tourists have begun coming to Lviv again.

In 2012, some of the games in the European Championship football tournament took place here, necessitating the construction of a new stadium and a new airport. Life and culture slowly returned to the city and the bars are now full of young people. In the Pravda Beer Theater, across from city hall, the "Truth Orchestra" is playing at 7 p.m. and there is hardly a summer evening without a performance or happening on the market square.

Four years ago, Sadovyi registered his movement as a political party and it ran in parliamentary elections two years later for the first time, winning 11 percent nationwide and a surprising 21 percent in the capital of Kiev. That result made Sadovyi's party the third largest in the country and the mayor of Lviv is now Ukraine's most popular politician, according to public opinion surveys. In March, 35 percent of Ukrainians surveyed said he was doing a good job, putting him far ahead of President Poroshenko and his then-Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk.

"We have changed Lviv, now we are trying to do the same in the rest of the country," Sadovyi says in his city hall office. "The people have seen that we are honest. When we built up Samopomich, we noticed that most parties belonged to oligarchs, who made sure that local legislative bodies were under their control. Spots on the party lists were bought as were appointments and political decisions." Party platforms played no role in the country, the Lviv mayor says, but Samopomich is an ideological party with Christian-conservative positions and does what it says it will do, he adds.

Why, then, did Samopomich withdraw its support from the governing coalition? It almost seemed as though Sadovyi's party was shying away from the responsibility of governing. The Lviv mayor, though, says: "We were honest in the coalition. But when we declined to support certain laws, Poroshenko simply got the votes he needed from the old Yanukovych party. He didn't need us anymore and there was no common cause. We were nothing but a fig leaf; we don't fit into this system."

### **Not Yet Strong Enough**

That, one could argue, is politics-as-usual in Ukraine. And Sadovyi doesn't disagree. "That's why even new elections don't make much sense," he says, adding that such a vote is only prudent "when they are conducted with open party lists and an electoral system based on proportional representation. Poroshenko promised to reform the electoral system and I reminded him of that. But he is no longer prepared to do so."

When asked why he declined to accept the post of prime minister, the Lviv mayor said: "Samopomich isn't yet strong enough. What chances would I have without a parliamentary majority?" Regarding his faith in the president, he says: "Thus far, it worked like this: The government would lead the country until 6 p.m. After that, the presidential administration would take over until 2 a.m. And they would block everything."

Sadovyi no longer hides his distrust of Poroshenko, which helps serve his message that his party is different from all the others. None of the party's delegates had ever served in parliament before, meaning that none of them could have been previously corrupted by Yanukovych. They are mostly young: lawyers, IT specialists, municipal politicians and middle-class businesspeople. His party also includes members of the volunteer defense battalions, which formed in mid-2014, early on in the conflict in eastern Ukraine. In a country where nobody trusts the incumbent politicians, the make-up of Samopomich is an invaluable commodity.

That could explain why there is a front currently forming in opposition to the mayor of Lviv. The Security Service of Ukraine, the country's primary domestic security agency, is said to have compiled a file on some of Sadovyi's subordinates alleging that they sold municipal property well below market value, including a hotel and a department store. Such accusations allow for the launching of official investigations at any time -- investigations that would damage Sadovyi. Last year, unknown persons fired shots at his home, where he lives with his wife and five children, on several occasions and hand grenades were twice thrown into his courtyard.

### **'Can't Be Bought'**

"These aren't common criminals. These are people who work in the secret services," Sadovyi says. "Many people don't like us because we can't be bought."

Those who are opposed to him are now accusing Lviv's mayor of being homosexual -- a serious insult in Ukraine -- without any proof at all. Others say that he, like other Ukrainian politicians, is nothing but a puppet, but that it isn't clear who is controlling him. Such rumors are also repeated by members of the Svoboda party, such as Ruslan Koshulynskyi, who ran against Sadovyi in last fall's mayoral elections and lost badly.

The nationalist Svoboda party has lost much of its support in the last few years, even failing to clear the 5 percent hurdle in the last parliamentary elections. Many Ukrainians are yearning for pragmatists who will bring down the country's current political system -- people like Andriy Sadovyi. He is currently looking for allies and has already found one: Odessa Governor Mikhail Saakashvili, the former president of Georgia, who has Ukrainian citizenship. He has become one of the most vocal critics of Poroshenko.

"We have a very close relationship. He has visited me here several times," says Sadovyi. "Saakashvili would be a good prime minister. He has no ties to the old Ukrainian insiders and he could lead the country out of crisis, just as he did in Georgia."

People in Kiev are well aware of the friendship between the two and they are taking the Sadovyi-Saakashvili pairing seriously. Saakashvili is in second place on the list of best-liked politicians in

Ukraine, in part because of the spectacular way he took on corrupt customs agencies and state prosecutors in Odessa. Political scientists say that he could very well become Ukrainian prime minister one day. And Sadovyi could rise to the presidency.