



People stand next to a pile of trash in Lviv on June 19, 2017. Courtesy of RFE/RL. Photo: RFE/RL

Political Rivalry and Garbage Politics in Ukraine

Andrian Prokip

For more than a year, Lviv, the biggest city in Western Ukraine (Population: 800,000), experienced a massive problem with garbage removal. In late May 2016, the city's only landfill caught fire and four firefighters perished fighting the blaze. As terrible as the fire was, another unpleasant consequence soon arose: the city found itself unable to dispose of its garbage, and piles of uncollected trash soon grew on the streets of Lviv. It quickly emerged that Lviv's trash problem wasn't an issue of municipal collection—it was a pawn in the political battle between Lviv's mayor and Ukraine's president.

Lviv's mayor, Andrii Sadovyi, is a local politician with a national stature. Elected as mayor of Lviv in 2006, Sadovyi helped usher in a new era for the city. Lviv emerged as a center of domestic and international tourism. Several international guides rank Lviv a "must see."¹ The city's economic development has kept pace, attracting new residents and businesses from across Ukraine. Mayor Sadovyi played a key role in promoting his city, and his popularity rose along with his city's fortunes.

In 2012, Sadovyi joined with a group of other prominent citizens to establish the political party *Samopomich* (Self-help). *Samopomich* gathered

11.8 percent of the vote in the 2014 Verkhovna Rada parliamentary election, making it one of six parties represented in the Ukrainian parliament. It later won seats in a wide range of regional parliaments after local elections in 2015. Sadovyi's popularity as Lviv's mayor proved a key factor in attracting voters to support Samopomich, particularly in the regional elections.

As the party's founder, Sadovyi could have easily accepted a prominent position at the top of the *Samopomich* national party list and joined the Ukrainian parliament. He decided to remain mayor of Lviv instead. That was a reasonable step: in Ukraine's turbulent political conditions, it was easy to lose popularity as a member of parliament.

Sadovyi's success as mayor and his growing national political profile did not come easy. For most of his tenure, Sadovyi did not enjoy support from Lviv's city council. After the 2010 elections, the All-Ukrainian Union "*Svoboda*" (Freedom) won the majority of seats on the Lviv city council, and consistently opposed Sadovyi. *Svoboda's* representatives on the council tried to block Sadovyi at every turn and frequently accused him of corruption (but never provided evidence). Despite the opposition and accusations, Sadovyi consistently proved an effective mayor and maintained his popularity, winning re-election twice. *Svoboda* eventually lost popularity nationally, which swung votes to Sadovyi's *Samopomich* party in the 2014 parliamentary elections. Sadovyi's success as mayor while beating back accusations of corruption established him as a formidable political figure nationally. Following the revolution of dignity, both before and after the presidential elections in 2014, people in Ukraine considered Sadovyi to be a strong future presidential contender, though he usually

avoids answering questions regarding his potential candidacy.

Ukraine's current president, Petro Poroshenko, won office in 2014, and his political party, Poroshenko bloc "*Solidarnist*" (Solidarity), leads a coalition government. Poroshenko plans to either run for re-election in 2019 or campaign in support of a hand-picked successor. Sadovyi's national popularity started to emerge as a political threat to Poroshenko.

At the same time, Sadovyi's *Samopomich* actions in the parliament emerged as another kind of headache for Poroshenko, who by nature prefers to control government operations as much as possible. In 2015, Poroshenko demanded that the parliament introduce amendments on regional decentralization to the constitution as part of the Minsk negotiations over Russia's support for the separatists in Ukraine's Donbas. *Samopomich* strongly opposed such changes, viewing them as a legitimization of Russian aggression as well as a dangerous expansion of the president's power in the regions.

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In an interview, Sadovyi stated that parliamentary deputies from the *Samopomich* party were under pressure and were offered bribes to split from the party over the issue. Tensions around the Donbas

issue helped turn *Samopomich* into an opposition party against President Poroshenko, his party, and his allies.

By the beginning of 2017, *Samopomich* was supporting the blockade of transportation links with the separatist Donbas territories. Those who organized the blockade argued that they wanted to stop the smuggling of a wide range of goods in both directions. The utility of the blockade is less than clear: among other things, the blockade actually disrupted supplies of anthracite coal to Ukrainian power stations and contributed to the government's decision to declare a state of emergency over the energy situation. The person who incurred perhaps the greatest losses from the blockade was Rinat Akhmetov – a Ukrainian oligarch who previously was a close friend and political supporter of the deposed president Yanukovich, but is now said to also be quite close to president Poroshenko. Officials tried but failed to stop the paramilitary blockade. Later, in March 2017 President Poroshenko, introduced a gambit – he declared an official prohibition of trade with the separatist areas of Donbas. In doing so, he satisfied blockade supporters (if at the expense of his own interests), and, perhaps more to the point, stole the thunder of those who actually initiated the blockade, including the *Samopomich* party.

Sadovyi personally and his *Samopomich* party in general were causing the president and his allies more and more problems. When the Lviv landfill fire broke out in 2016, it presented an opportunity to exert pressure on Mr. Sadovyi and to chip away at his popularity, as well as his party's.

The Lviv city landfill had been in operation for almost eight decades, since early 1958, and had exceeded its useful lifespan long before Sadovyi took office as mayor. For decades, city and region



Caption: President Petro Poroshenko with Andriy Sadovyi, mayor of Lviv.

Photo courtesy of: <http://www.bbc.com/ukrainian/features-39326008>

administrations had failed to build a new landfill or a waste incinerator—instead, they kept using their obsolete Soviet-era landfill. Lviv is far from alone in Ukraine in putting off this critical infrastructure problem: the lack of modern waste disposal policies and technologies is a national problem.

After the fire, Lviv suddenly found itself without its own landfill. The court prohibited the city from using the old landfill, given its age and the dangers of another fire. Lviv municipal authorities then began literally hundreds of negotiations with other cities and municipalities to help with the intake, storage, and processing of the city's trash. But, somehow, the arrangements failed to work. Police in other towns would detain the garbage trucks hired by Lviv and send them back. Other city administrators and landfill managers would refuse to accept the trash, quietly confessing that they were forbidden

to cooperate with the Lviv city administration. Lviv quickly ran out of space to store the garbage and it began accumulating on the streets. Sadovyi called the situation “the garbage blockade,” and accused the government in Kyiv and other officials of trying to drown Western Ukraine’s largest city in trash.

The city drowning in trash proved a vivid backdrop for the political debate between Sadovyi and his party with their political opponents. Poroshenko’s political surrogates quickly went on TV and other media to denounce Sadovyi for his inability to solve basic municipal issues. In June, Prime Minister Groysman publicly treated Sadovyi in a rather rude manner during the Cabinet of Ministries meeting. Groysman blasted Sadovij for his inability to solve the city’s trash problems.

Poroshenko’s surrogates added certain “fake news” items in their campaign against the mayor. Specifically, they mischaracterized the amount of money that the city had at its disposal to solve the trash issue. They also claimed (falsely) that for more than 10 years the Lviv city administration had

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refused to accept offers of foreign investors who were ready to help with the problem. Echoing Prime Minister Groysman, members of Parliament close to Proshenko’s party launched their own attacks against the Lviv mayor. In June they publicly called on Mayor Sadovyi to resign.

According to Sergii Kiral, a member of the Ukrainian parliament from the *Samopomich* party, Groysman, as the former mayor of the City of Vinnytsia, “knows very well about procedures and restrictions on spending municipal funds according to existing regulations.” Kiral further accused Groysman of misrepresenting the funds available in the Lviv municipal budget, and concluded that his statements were meant to manipulate public opinion.

Before joining the parliament, Kiral served as the head of international relations for the Lviv city administration. According to Kiral, none of the private investment offers presented an adequate solution to Lviv’s garbage disposal problem. As the result, the city started working with the European Investment Bank (EIB) to obtain a loan to build a new landfill and waste processing plant. In 2014 the EIB and Lviv city administration came to an agreement on funding for this project.² However, according to EIB’s rules, the bank cannot sign large agreements with non-EU cities, but only with central governments. An agreement was in fact signed in early 2015. Yet by the time the fire destroyed Lviv’s old landfill in May 2016, Kyiv had refused for over a year to disburse the funds that Lviv had negotiated to build a new one.

The conflict between Lviv and Kyiv—or, more accurately, between Sadovyi and Poroshenko’s team – came to a head during May-June, 2017. Lviv had tons of trash accumulated within the city limits, and the warming weather threatened to turn a major inconvenience into a major health issue.

At the end of June, the governor of the Lviv region, Oleg Syniutka (Sadovyi’s former deputy, and now Poroshenko’s representative), demanded that Sadovyi turn over the responsibility for waste

disposal to the Lviv regional administration. For this service, using the same landfills that Sadovyi was prevented from using, the city administration would have to pay Syniutka's regional administration.

The demand was a clear trap for Sadovyi: he had no choice but to agree and accept the terms. The political optics of accepting the offer showed that Poroshenko's team is able to solve problems, unlike rivals such as Sadovyi and his *Samopomich* party. However, if the episode demonstrated Poroshenko's team's ability to solve the city's garbage disposal problem, it also served as clear proof of their willingness to politicize problems of governance as a political instrument against rivals such as Sadovyi and *Samopomich*.

Another interesting fact is that Syniutka's regional administration plans to solve the problem completely in two years, just in time for the next presidential elections. The likely intention is to showcase to all in Ukraine that Sadovyi and his *Samopomich* party were unable to solve simple but important municipal problems. The play on words is particularly inventive: how can citizens rely on the "self-help" party, when they are unable to solve the most basic municipal problems? That image is expected to damage Sadovyi's popularity.

The Lviv garbage story may be drawing to a close, but the political competition between Poroshenko and Sadovyi is far from over. The episode is not an isolated case. President Poroshenko wants to marginalize his competitors, especially those like Sadovyi and the *Samopomich* party, who are not likely to make a deal with him before the elections. The fire at Lviv city landfill presented the Poroshenko team with a good opportunity to bury Mr. Sadovyi's popularity under mounds of trash. The Sadovyi story may not yet be over—he is rather

good at politics. Should Sadovyi remain a political threat, it is difficult to predict what Poroshenko's next gambit might be.

The garbage politics episode reveals Poroshenko's main political strategies: "divide and conquer" and "the end justifies the means." He is now battling with former partners and supporters, while collaborating with former opponents. To a certain extent, Poroshenko is reprising the governing style of President Kuchma from the 1990s: a combination of tight internal controls and supporting the interests of politically friendly business groups. Strong internal controls, especially in wartime, can help a society. But Ukraine still very much needs a viable political opposition and strong civil society to serve as a watch-dog to prevent our current president from taking Ukraine back to a past era when public servants mainly pursued their own private interests.

Endnotes

- 1 E.g.: Best in Europe 2016 by Lonely Planet, <https://www.lonelyplanet.com/europe/travel-tips-and-articles/best-in-europe-2016>
Rough Guides top 10 2014, <https://www.roughguides.com/best-places/2014/top-10-cities>
- 2 <http://www.eib.org/about/procurement/calls-technical-assistance/ta2015048.htm>
<http://ted.europa.eu/udl?uri=TED:NOTICE:302363-2015:TEXT:EN:HTML&tabId=4>

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