

EuroMaidan in Dnipropetrovsk: Problems and Peculiarities

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Dnipropetrovsk is not Ukraine's first city, but neither is a second. This old-time joke is often applied to describe various Ukrainian cities, as it was indeed in relation to many a Soviet city in the past. Dnipropetrovsk, however, may be in the position to assert its primacy as the subject of the joke, since in its particular case there is more than a fair share of truth in it. Back in Soviet times the city was hailed as the "forge of cadres" which remains relatively true to this day: like in the past it produced elite party cadres for the Soviet Union, today's Dnipropetrovsk has given to the independent Ukraine many of its oligarchs and well-known politicians. The "fame" remains, despite the fact that members of Ukraine's current political leadership come from the "Donetsk clan" and Dnipropetrovsk's most famous daughter Yulia Tymoshenko - not extremely popular at home anyway - is in jail.

A joke or not - it looks like Dnipropetrovsk residents have seriously accepted this as their identity background. To a large extent, the specificity of protest movement in the city can be explained by its self-identified "otherness" and "differentness". A common argument holds it that a low protest participation rate in Dnipropetrovsk is determined by the region's pro-Russian sentiment and its support for incumbent authorities. It is, in my mind, a simplistic explanation.

Dnipropetrovsk's inherent tendency is to keep a distanced position in any social and political processes. This is a feature typical of all local community - from rank-and-file citizens to power structures. In a month of recent protests in Dnipropetrovsk, the city has not seen a single clash between the protesters and the police, which demon-

strated a commendably tolerant approach.

The only violent conflict was an attack on the "tent camp" - a somewhat strong description of the two tents in European Square - carried out not by the riot-police as in Kiev but by the so-called "titushkas", groups of young sporty men who are hired to do dirty jobs for pay. Even this episode, however, stirred a wave of indignation among Dnipropetrovsk residents who saw it as the violation of a tacit agreement between the authorities and the city community (most city inhabitants believe that the attack was ordered by certain local bureaucrats to showcase their loyalty to central authorities). Moreover, the incident was even seen as violating the tradition of the city's disengagement, an attack on its common sense that has always underpinned local authorities' waiting position allowing them to prepare possible ways of retreat and demonstrate a measure of readiness for joining a winning party.

Rumours that started to circulate shortly after the attack confirm the city population's specific penchant for maintaining the harmony. The legend has it that the "titushkas" attack was organised by a high-rank official at Dnipropetrovsk city council. After the incident the official was reportedly promptly summoned for an unpleasant discussion at the security service (SBU), chided for crossing the limits and advised to remedy the situation as soon as possible. They say that now the same official is responsible for providing financial help to Dnipropetrovsk's EuroMaidan.

Regardless of how much truth or tale there is in this story, it is a good example of Dnipropetrovsk's specificity as seen by its own residents: the authorities here do not like to quarrel

with the citizens and avoid coercive measures.

This idea can be supported by other examples of how Dnipropetrovsk's government plans of suppressing EuroMaidan were thwarted in the city. Thus, a court decision banning assemblies in some of the city's public places from November 26 to December 31 2013 (a motion passed by courts in the entire Ukraine) was cancelled by the Court of Appeals on December 19, after the city council withdrew its claim. In their fight against the protesters, Dnipropetrovsk authorities tend to use more nuanced methods: for example, by organising a permanent fair in European Square, the centre of the city's EuroMaidan. Even those, however, give an impression of a nominal, half-felt way of demonstrating their loyalty to Kiev. Protesters have free access to European Square, while sellers at the fair (read: street vendors sent here from elsewhere in the city) are always on the standby to pack up their wares and give way to a few thousands of protesters.

The authorities' talent and preparedness to bring a situation under control has been proven in other cases of public protest. A strike initiative by the metro construction workers and employees of a local electrical transportation company quickly died out on its own, although it is not entirely clear what lay behind - promises and deals with the strike committee or the authorities' skillful pressure on the strikers.

A lack of serious confrontation between the community and the elite creates a peaceful atmosphere in the city. On the other hand, it significantly reduces the residents' protest potential. In Dnipropetrovsk, like the rest of Ukraine, mass protests against the suspension of an EU agreement were galvanised by the government's use of force on the night of November 30. In other words, there should be a

real visible conflict to make the reluctant Dnipropetrovsk residents join street protests.

EuroMaidan in Dnipropetrovsk remains a "weekend rally". Sunday rallies, called People's Veche by the opposition, gather a few thousands participants (the largest, of around 7 thousand people, was on December 8). The rest of the time the city's tranquil atmosphere belies any presence of protest feelings.

A useful comparison can be made here with the 2004 protests of the Orange revolution. Although they were not bigger in numbers, the protests' symbolic presence in the city was more evident. Orange ribbons on trees, flags flying from private and office balconies, badges and ribbons on people's clothes, cars decorated with orange symbols - the whole city so openly manifested its solidarity with the protest that the dry figures of the polling stations and their protocols looked like a complete nonsense. Now car drivers are happy to greet the protesters' march - an already traditional component of all Sunday rallies - with their horns, but are less enthusiastic about decorating their cars with the protest flags.

What may be the reason behind such passivity, considering that the residents' level of dissatisfaction with the authorities and their response to the recent events is very high? It should be admitted that, regretfully, Dnipropetrovsk proved unprepared to spontaneous civil activity and self-organisation. The 2004 protest took place under the leadership of the concrete political parties and had a well-defined goal - the annulment of the rigged election results and, if possible, the opposition candidate's victory in a new vote. The current protest, by contrast, is spontaneous, ambiguous and without a clear vector to the future. It requires from its participants a very high level of self-awareness and self-organisation. Party leaders - at least in Dnipropetrovsk - do

not support the movement with money or organisational effort. Although a positive thing in many respects, this has clearly proved too difficult a challenge for the city residents.

Perhaps, in spite of their cherished sense of individualism and independence, the people of Dnipropetrovsk still experience a stronger influence of the lingering consequences of the totalitarian system than their compatriots in Kiev or Lviv. They have a weaker belief in their own strength and a bigger hope for a “strong leader” and command from above. This may help explain why Dnipropetrovsk felt a deeper frustration after the Orange revolution failed to radically change Ukraine’s society and the state. I often hear that - despite the general anger against the authorities and their policies such as tax increases - representatives of Dnipropetrovsk’s business community justify their passivity in the current protest movement by saying: “We have already protested once. What did we get from it?” Indeed, current level of participation in the protest movement on the part of local small and medium-size entrepreneurs is incomparable to 2004, when this social category was very actively involved in the protests.

Oleksandr Blyuminov, a left-leaning blogger, wrote in his entry “Why will Maidan win?”: “What is Ukrainian society today? It is split. But not in two opposing camps with their own goals and values, as we are being wrongly convinced by dumb propagandists. No, Ukrainian society is split between those who have developed a higher sense of subjective self-awareness and those who have not”. This observation does sound reasonable and can be equally applied to Dnipropetrovsk. Recent events have clearly demonstrated that individualism of the type “my cottage is at the edge” (*moia khata skraiu*), typical of Dnipropetrovsk identity, does not amount to subject-

tivity. To be a subject does not mean to simply keep one’s distance and care about own’s proper interests; it is primarily to learn to take responsibility for one’s own life and for the world around. This awareness is something that the residents of Dnipropetrovsk definitely lack; the result, to quote a favourite phrase of the independent Ukraine’s first president, being “we have what we have”: we have a high degree of anti-government criticism in daily life conversations and a low degree of public protest.

These factors, in my opinion, to a large extent determine the current low level of public support for the protest movement, despite the presence of a high degree of anti-government sentiment in Dnipropetrovsk society. The city is not so much pro-Russian, as it is damaged by the legacy of Russian and Soviet power. It is less pro-government than it is disillusioned and indifferent.

Demography of the rallies deserves a special attention. The base of any public protest in Dnipropetrovsk is usually composed of a specific category of people, the so-called “Hurrah-patriots” or “professional patriots”. It is essentially a “protest substratum” consisting of older people who entered the independence period with a significant background experience of fighting against the system. They have carried on their fight for all 22 years of the independence, in the difficult context of the Russian-speaking and - to an extent - Soviet-minded Dnipropetrovsk. These people speak exclusively in Ukrainian, under no circumstances switch to the interlocutor’s language, profess nationalist views and perceive themselves as inhabitants of a ghetto rather than equal citizens. As a result, they are hardly able to do anything more than express discontent in different ways. This category of people is helpless in the conditions of a spon-

taneous protest, when a community's creative potential and its ability to formulate a strategy and identify its goals acquire paramount importance.

On the other hand, participation of students, young business people and young professionals in the protest movement remains very low, at least on the local level. It is worth noting, however, that it is impossible to assess a real level of the protest potential in Dnipropetrovsk on the basis of the numbers and demographic composition of the city's rallies. Lots of local residents have left for Kiev's protests or travel there regularly to attend Sunday rallies. Obviously, those are mostly young, strong and active people. Perhaps, the demographic composition of EuroMaidan in Dnipropetrovsk is also determined by this factor - the departure of the youngest and most active protesters for the capital.

Moreover, Dnipropetrovsk residents are weary of the ongoing radicalisation of the problem of "two Ukraines", as a result of the events in Kiev. In a moment of crisis, Ukrainians' perceptions of the civilisational and ideological differences between Eastern and Western Ukraine become more acute (these differences exist although they are less dramatic than when presented by the advocates of separatism on both sides). For many residents of Eastern Ukraine, including Dnipropetrovsk, the protest movement embodies the values and meanings of the west of the country, which they do not share. Hence, their feeling of estrangement. And although EuroMaidan brings up many problems acutely painful for the whole Ukraine - such as corruption, the defacto elimination of independent courts, the transformation of police force into the authorities' personally controlled security services, and the economic downfall - these issues do not receive nearly enough emphasis to be able

to unite Ukraine's East and West in the search of a solution and a common movement. By contrast, nationalist slogans of the "Svoboda" party and its followers, as well as the protesters' general animosity towards the East as the president's stronghold, sow a feeling of alarm among rank-and-file city residents.

In an article "How to make sense of our senseless situation", Ukrainian historian and publicist Yaroslav Hrytsak argues that to foster a new Ukrainian nation the already existing union between Lviv and Kiev has to be extended to include a third component, engaging the country's eastern and southern regions. He writes: "For me personally the most suitable candidate for this role is Dnipropetrovsk - not the first city, but neither a second by far". Regretfully, he only makes a brief mention of this idea, without explaining further what makes Dnipropetrovsk worth the role.

I, for one, am ready to agree with the idea even without an explanation. Dnipropetrovsk does seem to be a suitable third pillar to powerfully support the fight for a transformation of the system. Donetsk and Lugansk have been subject to the pressure of the pro-government oligarchs and the informational blockade for far too long to provide such a reliable platform. Besides, the inhabitants of these regions have suffered an even more profound damage to their subjective self-awareness than their compatriots in Dnipropetrovsk, aggravated by years of the economic crisis. The third pillar, however, is to be chosen from these three symbolic cities which are invariably named as the supporting base for the incumbent authorities and the pro-Russian or - indeed - pro-Soviet sentiment.

What is clearly needed now is a sufficient motive for Dnipropetrovsk residents to cross the borderline between individual discontent and public protest. Should all the unhappy cit-

izens make their criticism public, this would surely come as a big surprise for the power vertical. For now, however, Dnipropetrovsk remains relatively disengaged from the protest. It is true that the maximum numbers of people attending EuroMaidan rallies in the city are comparable with other Ukrainian cities and are much higher than in other regime's "strongholds" such as Donetsk or Lugansk. It is also evident, however, that under certain mobilising factors the protest movement could grow much stronger.

To achieve this goal, it is in the first place necessary to locate Dnipropetrovsk's "launch mechanism". What can compel its citizens to start voicing their criticism actively and loudly? What can accelerate the evolution of the city's individualism into proper subjectivity? Alas, for now the questions remain unanswered.

translated by Vladyslava Reznik