

## EuroMaidan in Lviv: a View From the Inside

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The EuroMaidan movement began when angry Ukrainians all over the country started to protest against the government's decision to abandon the process of Ukraine's European integration. My fellow students and I joined a rally at Lviv's central square on the first day of the protest. We could not imagine then that the protest movement would reach such a scale and that the whole world would support the demands and hopes of Ukrainian people.

### MAIDAN FOR THE FUTURE

I learned the news about the government's U-turn on Ukraine's EU integration from the internet. My friends and I were shocked. It became clear that instead of the promised EU standards Ukrainians could get a USSR 2.0. version. We had a feeling that we, Ukrainian students, had been suddenly deprived of a decent future; that everything had been decided behind our backs. We could not stand it any longer. On the same evening we gathered at our student dorm to discuss how we could influence the situation. In some cities people were already filling up their central squares to show their protest against the government's actions. Without wasting time, we got ready,

took the flags of Ukraine and the EU and made our way to Svoboda Avenue. We also brought with us a self-made poster "People of Kiev – all to the Maidan!" – realizing that main events would take place in the capital. On our way to Lviv's Maidan we were inviting our friends to join us straightaway (although it was kind of late for a rally at 10 p.m.). In two hours the number of people grew from 14 to 200. Some of the active participants came out with the idea of a flash-mob – it took us only a



Maidan in Lviv © Pavlo Ostrovs'kyj

few minutes to form a huge human circle and the letters EU. We realized the importance of making the voice of young Ukrainians heard, but we could not imagine that we were taking part in historical events. Our act of civil resistance lasted for more than four hours; we



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parted with the decision to meet again the following night.

The second day of the protests was remarkable for its massive student protest rally which gathered thousands of students in front of the regional state administration. Young people moved along the streets of Lviv in huge columns chanting "Ukraine is Europe", "Join us!" and "Revolution". In the evening the first mass rally took place in Svoboda Avenue. Lviv's mayor Andriy Sadovyi called on the city residents to take part in the event. Well-known public figures took to the stage to express their disagreement with the government's decision and to demand the signing of an association agreement with the EU. During the rally the activists were putting up tents, for the protest was announced as an indefinite action. The tents were supposed to become a centre of the European movement in Lviv. The authorities did not approve of the tents and tried to ban them through court. But they did not succeed.

Every day the Maidan in Lviv saw between 10 and 30 thousand participants. At the beginning those were mostly young people. University administrations allowed their students free attendance so that they could partic-

ipate in the protests. To keep the protesters in high spirits, the organizers put up a stage and invited to the Maidan singers, bands, public figures and other speakers. A field kitchen opened near the main tent to provide food and drink to everyone.

Why did all those people come out? They did it because their dream about a decent life in a European Ukraine was stolen. They were frustrated by a sudden change in the country's geopolitical course and hoped to influence the president into signing an association agreement in Vilnius. But the 29th of November brought another disappointment – the agreement was not signed. And on November the 30th a few dozens of students remaining in the Maidan in Kiev were violently dispersed by the special police unit Berkut. Even those who tried to escape were badly beaten. Ukrainian and foreign journalists were also among the victims.

#### A NEW QUALITY OF THE MAIDAN

A violent crackdown on a peaceful protest outraged the Ukrainians – in the evening of November the 30th thousands of people joined a mass protest rally in Lviv. They came to protest against the brutal dispersal of the students in Kiev. The Maidan in Lviv announced general mobilization – every day thousands of people from Lviv left their city for Kiev to support the protests in the capital. One of the tents in Svoboda Avenue was turned into a headquarters where those who cared could bring money, warm clothes and food for the protesters in Kiev and Lviv.

From the first days of EuroMaidan like-minded demonstrators in Kiev started to form various interest groups. Thus, Maidan's Civil Sector would organize creative actions – they worked with the police force persuading them

to take the people's side and treating them to hot tea; they made newspapers and carried out public awareness work. The initiative EuroMaidan SOS united human rights defenders and all those who wanted to help the victims of Berkut's brutality. Car drivers joined the Automaidan movement and organized pickets near the residences of the most odious government officials. There were dozens of similar associations in EuroMaidan, who co-existed in a relative peace.

Lviv's Maidan saw the formation of its own civil movements. One of those was an association for an "Economic boycott of the Party of Regions business interests". The idea was to exert economic pressure on the Party of Regions deputies. Volunteers of the boycott movement would stand outside the shops belonging to members of the ruling party and distribute flyers with the calls to boycott their products. The argument was quite simple – every hryvnia paid to the pro-government businessmen would be used to strengthen Yanukovich's rule and his authoritarian regime. As a result of the numerous pickets and public condemnation, the PR fraction in Lviv city council and the regional administration voluntarily dissolved. The remaining loyalist members of the ruling party continue to count losses.

Our struggle was also inspired by the unprecedented levels of support from the city's business community and ordinary citizens. Representatives of local businesses contributed to organizing bus transportation to Kiev. It was also a pleasure to see automobile points serving free hot tea and coffee to everyone in Lviv's Maidan. Mobile network operators in Svoboda Avenue offered free top-up service, while city hostels provided free rooms to the activists. Hundreds of city residents brought food and warm clothing to protect the protesters in Kiev and Lviv from the cold weather.

#### **NO ACCESS TO POLITICIANS**

Another characteristic of Lviv's Maidan is its wary attitude to politicians. In the first days of the protests students would not allow politicians on to the Maidan stage. Thus, a Svoboda deputy Yuriy Mykhalchyshyn who sneaked to the stage and made a disparaging comment about the students who guarded the stage from politicians was booed by the crowd. This episode is quite remarkable also for the fact that Svoboda won the 2012 local elections in Lviv and Mykhalchyshyn became a deputy in one of the city constituencies. After the crackdown of November the 30th politicians were allowed access to the Maidan's stage, but the number of people in the square began to fall. The current situation is different from the Maidan 2004 when Ukrainians pledged their hopes with one politician. Now most people understand that ordinary citizens and politicians have different goals and they can rely only on themselves and the like-minded comrades. Thus, one of the main tasks after EuroMaidan's victory would be the creation of the efficient mechanisms of public control over politicians and government officials.

#### **A HOT TIME**

In January the numbers of protesters in Kiev's and Lviv's Maidans grew smaller. While the attendance was higher on Sundays, on weekdays it largely fell. At this point, however, the authorities added a generous helping of fuel to the protest fire – the Party of Regions and communist MPs at the Verkhovna Rada in what was a clear violation of Parliament's voting procedures passed a number of laws which significantly restricted civil rights and were primarily directed against the participants of mass protests. The manner in which the laws

were passed deserves a special attention. Pro-government MPs voted for themselves and for their absent colleagues. Although there was slightly more than a hundred deputies present in the assembly, the electronic voting system showed 239 yes-votes, with the 226 needed. When the opposition MPs tried to stop the illegal voting by removing the electronic cards of the missing deputies, parliament's vice-speaker Igor Kaletnik proposed a hand vote. All present pro-government MPs voted by a show of hands and without even bothering to count them, Volodymyr Oliynyk, a member of the counting committee, announced the adoption of the laws by 235 votes. The adopted laws were even more brutal than the violations of the parliamentary procedures that took place. Thus, they introduced criminal liability for libel and extremism. These concepts were given such a wide interpretation that any potential criticism of the authorities or calls to resist the state despotism could lead to serious prison sentences. The laws also introduced a ban on car processions of more than 5 vehicles and a possibility of blocking internet sites by state officials. Moreover, all civil society organizations obtaining grants from abroad were supposed to be registered as "foreign agents". These are only a few from the list of absurd legal norms introduced by the controversial laws. They sparked uproar in Ukrainian society and were dubbed by journalists as the "dictatorship laws". In their comments on the new laws, however, state officials argued that similar provisions existed in many European countries.

On January 19th, the Epiphany festival in Ukraine, there were massive protest rallies in many Ukrainian cities; protesters in Kiev's EuroMaidan expected from the opposition an action plan against the dictatorship and the name of a leader of the resistance move-

ment. When Arseniy Yatsenyuk, the leader of Batkivshchyna, declared in his speech that the only protest leader is the Ukrainian people, EuroMaidan took his words as mockery. The anger spilled over, especially among the most radical protesters. Right radicals clashed with the police lines on their way to parliament in Hrushevskoho street. Protesters, led by the "Right sector", threw Molotov cocktails; the police responded with fire from traumatic weapons. From time to time, fighters of riot-police Berkut would leave their lines to snatch and violently beat a protester. In response, the radicals set on fire several police buses. A few hours into the confrontation, a water gun was brought from the side of the Verkhovna Rada and started to spurt water on the protesters. Considering that the temperatures in Kiev were well below zero, such government's actions amount to torture in accordance with the international law. Later police officials claimed that the water gun was used to put down the fire of the burning bus. In actual fact, however, the bus had completely burned down long before that.

#### **A POPULAR GAME: "BLOCK BERKUT"**

The government called for additional police forces and Berkut units from all over Ukraine to reinforce its positions in the capital. The protest movement responded with a surprising efficient self-organizing measure. The information about the police mobilization quickly spread in the regions, with people all over the country organizing blockades of the police units and Berkut bases, and coordinating their activities through social networks. Roads and exits from military units were effectively blocked. This campaign helped to obstruct the movement of police forces in Lviv, Volyn, Rivno, Ivano-Frankivsk, Ter-



nopil, Odessa and Transcarpathian regions.

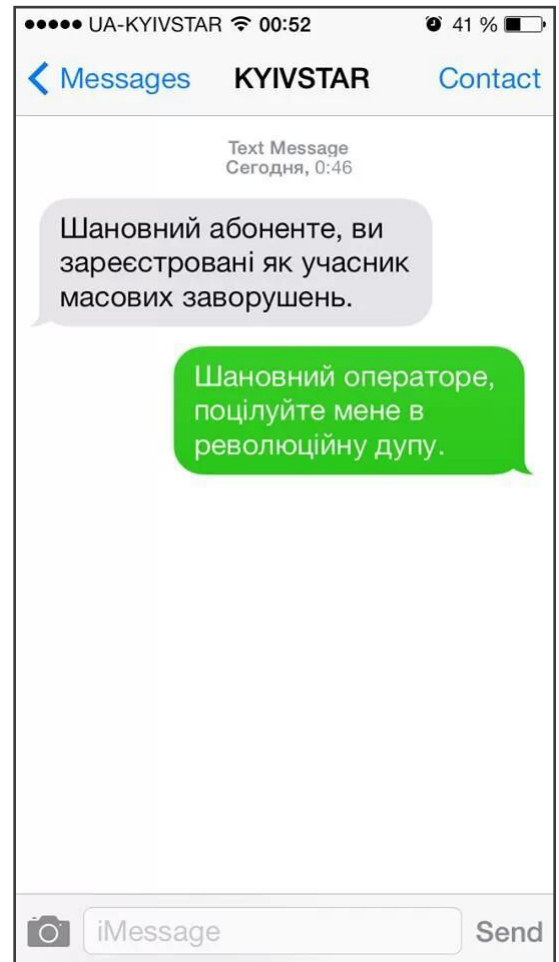
I was lucky to take part in a night shift at a police base in Lviv. All the exits from the base are blocked with car tires; every block post has its own kitchen and a fire to keep warm. The posts have radio connection; if necessary the activists can move from one post to another. Since the weather is cold, volunteers join the blockade for two-three hours. And concerned Lviv residents bring them hot drinks, soup, sandwiches, hot bottles and warm gloves. The atmosphere at such block posts is incredible – people easily get along together for a common goal. They realize that their task is not to let through police reinforcement units who will use force against the protesters in Kiev.

The ten block posts are constantly manned by around a hundred people who feel honoured to sacrifice some of their personal time for the success of the revolution. The city council building is decorated with a meaningful slogan “A free place for free people”.

#### THE REVOLUTIONARY ADMINISTRATION

After the news of the first deaths in Kiev, Lviv announced a strike. Local people gathered in front of the regional administration and made their way inside to demand answers from the head of Lviv regional administration Oleh Salo, appointed by Yanukovich. Under the pressure from the infuriated citizens, Salo submitted his resignation. But the protesters decided to stay in the building and keep it under control. The entrance to the government building is obstructed by a barricade and is guarded by civil and party activists. Recently they had an argument about the division of control in the building, but managed to sort it out. The overtaking of Lviv state administration had a domino effect – it was followed by similar occupations of state institutions in

a dozen of Ukraine’s regions with low pro-government support. On January 30th the activists responded to the request of the head of



Every participant at the Kyiv Euromaidan received this message on his cell phone: “Dear customer, you are registered as a participant of a mass riot.” “Dear operator, you may kiss my revolutionary ass.”

the regional council of deputies and vacated the buildings. However, the administration remains under control of the People’s council, which was formed by the Maidan.

It is quite clear now that the struggle will go on, and the residents of Lviv will have a strong role in it. Although the Verkhovna

Rada scrapped the dictatorship laws, the president was not in hurry to sign this decision into law. The newly adopted amnesty law for the arrested activists has been labeled a "hostages law". Local people are also outraged by the fact that two of their compatriots from Lviv – Yuriy Verbytskyi and Roman Senyk – were killed in the past few days. The tension is high in Lviv, as it is in Kiev. Arseniy Yatsenyuk's words on the Ukrainian people as the only leader of the resistance turned out to be prophetic. The nation is tired of waiting for European sanctions and decisive actions from the politicians. Ukrainians have dramatically taken the process of building a new country in their own hands. Their main principle is self-management. EuroMaidan has self-defense units – a prototype of a military and police force; medical volunteers, a kitchen, a group of its own lawyers. If necessary, it will find its own economists, financial specialists, diplomats and tax officials. EuroMaidan has made clear one simple truth: it is possible to function without official state institutions, which makes life only better. When needed, people can form their own self-management institutions and provide them with official powers.

*translated by Vladyslava Reznik*