

Maidan 2013 in Kiev: Revolution in People's Heads

by Kyryl Savin, Kiev

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The banner of a young woman protesting on Independence Square in Kiev said "Maidan¹ is the best thing that could happen to my country". The Maidan has indeed become an island of freedom in the Ukrainian capital, where thousands of free-thinkers gather and where every Sunday at noon several hundred thousand people meet to demonstrate their desire for fundamental changes in Ukraine. Although the people's will to live in a European, democratic and free country is strong, all legal means of pressure on the government and President Yanukovich have already been exhausted and the protests have reached a deep political dead-end. This is what explains the



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profoundness of the political crisis in Ukraine.

The whole story began on November 21st, 2013 when it was announced that the phase of EU integration of Ukraine would be put on hold. This decision by the President meant that

1 Independence Square (in Ukrainian – Maidan Nezalezhnosti, often called just Maidan) is the largest square in the center of Kiev.

the association agreement with the EU was not signed at the Vilnius Summit and that the dream of many, in particular young Ukrainians, to live one day in a European country had been taken away. Therefore, hundreds of civil society actors (as well as journalists, students, etc.) gathered on the evening of November 21st on Maidan Square and organized a small stage, which functioned as the focal point of the protests 24 hours a day. The stage and the logistics associated with it were funded by donations which were collected in large numbers on the square. On November 24th, the first large-scale demonstration occurred in Kiev. Attended by approx. 150,000 people, the motto of the event was "The association agreement with the EU must be signed in Vilnius".

Oppositional politicians set up their stage on the neighboring square (the Europe Square, located approx. 300 meters from Independence Square) on November 24th. Until November 27th there were two stages – one on Maidan Square where students and civil society activists gathered and one on Europe Square, which primarily served as a focal point for party supporters. However, more and more people came to the stage on Maidan Square, which is why the oppositional politicians gave up their stage. This resulted in strong frictions between oppositional politicians and civil society activists on the Maidan, which became increasingly visible.

In the night between November 29th and 30th, Independence Square was cleared by the police with brutal force – allegedly so that the Kiev municipal services could put up a large Christmas tree. These evacuation measures

were absolutely irrational, as the “small student Maidan” was already more or less over after Yanukovych did not sign anything in Vilnius. According to unofficial information, Yanukovych returned from Vilnius in a very bad mood, because several EU heads of state reportedly demeaned him. Yanukovych is said to be very sensitive. Perhaps he took action against the demonstrators on the evening of November 29th to vent his aggression after the events in Vilnius. According to the journalists Sergii Leshchenko and Mustafa Nayyem² he gave the command to completely evacuate the Maidan, that is to take action against the remaining people there.

On November 30th many citizens of Kiev showed their unrestrained solidarity with the students who had been beaten on the Maidan the night before. Approximately 700,000 outraged citizens attended the large demonstration on Sunday, December 1st. Its motto was: “Do not beat our children!” Protesters occupied the city hall and union headquarters. Three oppositional parties assumed the leadership role and organization of the logistic measures for the demonstration: UDAR, Batkivshchyna and Svoboda). Over 10,000 protesters coopered up in tents and occupied houses. Material and monetary donations helped to set up a kitchen, in which hundreds of volunteers worked to serve more than approx. 400,000 portions of food daily. Calls for donations were posted on numerous Facebook pages, while donation boxes were set up in several places on the Maidan.

On Sunday, December 8th another large-scale demonstration with approx. 400,000 protesters took place on the Maidan based on the motto “Presidential and parliamentary

elections must be held!”³ By then, their aims had changed though. It was no longer about the European integration of Ukraine, rather domestic policy demands: the protesters demanded that those responsible for the evacuation measures on November 30th, 2013 should be named and brought to justice. Furthermore, they called for presidential and parliamentary elections to be re-held. During the night between December 10th and 11th, Yanukovych again attempted to clear up the Maidan by force of the police and to free the occupied administrative buildings. However, he failed in doing so due to the unprecedented resistance of the protesters. On December 15th, December 27th, and after the act of revenge against the journalist and activist Tetyana Chernovol on December 29th large-scale demonstrations again took place in Kiev for which hundreds of thousands of Ukrainians gathered.

Citizens from nearly all social strata took part in the protests in Kiev and other large Ukrainian cities (several thousand people even took to the streets in Donetsk and Lugansk). Yet the middle class doubtlessly constituted the main driver of the “revolution in people’s heads”. In Kiev thousands of representatives of the so-called “new creative middle class” joined the activities. They included artists, NGO activists, business people from small and mid-sized firm, students, journalists, etc. and provided inspiration for many creative slogans and activities on the Maidan. They consisted mainly of well-educated people, who had been abroad (in EU-countries) and now were able and willing to assume responsibility and no longer can bear living in

2 <http://www.pravda.com.ua/articles/2013/12/8/7005339/>

3 There are very different estimations of the numbers of participants. The author of this article uses average figures based on estimations in local articles and reports.

contemporary Ukraine without a prospect of EU membership for their children. “We want the walls that separate us from the modern world to fall down”, stated the former political prisoner and Maidan activist Yuri Luzenko recently.

The wish of the Ukrainians to move closer to the EU was only one motive for the protests (surveys in October-November 2013 showed that over 60% of all Ukrainians were in favor of an association with the EU). For several months, Yanukovych and his government carried out an information and propaganda campaign for a closer association with the EU in Ukraine. A week before the Vilnius Summit in November 2013 a 180-degree reversal took place, which even some of the parliamentary deputies from the Party of Regions (Ukr. Partiya Regioniv) could not comprehend. However, after the protests on November 30th it was no longer about the EU, rather about changes to the system within Ukraine itself.

Fundamental democratic transformations in Ukraine are long overdue – essentially since 1991. After gaining independence no fundamental transformation and de-Sovietization processes took place, which could have assured the long-term democratic development of the country. Instead, the elite at that time quickly turned into “democrats” and continued to control the government of Ukraine. The oligarchs are the (financial) backbone of all Ukrainian presidents. The Ukrainian political elite (both the governmental as well as the oppositional camp) imitates democratic processes (including elections) and has succeeded in creating a credible democratic façade towards the West. Yet Ukrainian democracy today remains just a façade.

An increasing number of citizens of Ukraine have come to understand that they do not need a fake or imitated democracy, rather

an authentic democracy, the rule of law, and a market economy. The events on the Maidan 2013 showed that there is a broader wish among the Ukrainian people for fundamental changes to the political system – and not just for the replacement of political actors. Thus, the protests of November 2013 indeed constitute a “revolution in people’s heads”. Memories of the Orange Revolution of 2004 play an important role in this process, as many Ukrainians had a positive experience with mass protests for the first time nine years ago. Now it has become clear to many protesters that the mistake made in 2004 was that the protest activities overly focused on Yushchenko as a person and not on changes to the system. The Ukrainians learned from their own negative experience that civil society must monitor both opposition politicians as well as governing politicians.

When the Maidan protesters expressed their demands for a closer association and integration with the EU, their movement received great support in all parts of the country. However, when they began calling for the overdue fundamental democratic transformation of the country and new elections after November 30th, divisions in the public opinion in Ukraine immediately became apparent. South-eastern regions quickly remembered their “us and them” instincts (Unserer-Fremder) and tacitly threw their support at the relatively unpopular President Yanukovych and his chief of staff Asarov, who were at least “two of their own.”

The “Russian brothers” from the Kremlin are also happy to feed fuel to the Ukrainian fire time and time again. The Euro-Maidan 2013 indeed sheds light on two important dimensions: in addition to the above described domestic political dimension, there is also an important foreign policy – or more precisely

– geopolitical dimension. In 2013 Ukraine became the battlefield in the cold war between the West and Russia and (thanks to his clever tactics) Putin can celebrate yet another geopolitical victory after previous successes in Georgia, Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan and Kirgizstan. Yanukovich weighed both offers (from Russia and the EU) and decided that dependence on Russia is a lesser evil. After all, he is primarily concerned with maintaining power and his victory in the presidential elections of 2015. The price that Yanukovich would have to pay for this played almost no role at all.

The Euro-Maidan 2013 will most likely remain without any visible political success: as a democratically elected president, Yanukovich is clearly trying to buy time and is consistently ignoring all demands of the protesters. He also by no means wishes to make any obvious staffing changes to his cabinet under pressure from the protests. Like the seemingly unsuccessful 2000-2001 protest movement “Ukraine without Kuchma”, the Euro-Maidan 2013 will however impact further domestic political developments in Ukraine in the long-term. After all, a revolution in people’s heads is taking place to the extent that they now know what they want, are no longer fearful, and by and large have almost nothing more to lose.

It is paradoxical: the 2004 Maidan and the successful Orange Revolution (Yushchenko became the President of Ukraine) will probably be of lesser importance to the history of Ukraine than the currently unsuccessful Euro-Maidan 2013, because an active Ukrainian civil society has emerged during these cold November and December days on Kiev’s Maidan Square. The next heightening of domestic and geopolitical tensions in Ukraine is already programmed – the presidential elections in spring 2015. Until then, the Ukrainian civil society, opposition as well as the EU will have to de-

velop clear strategies. After all, Yanukovich cannot afford to lose the 2015 election, as he and his political companions will lose everything and likely have to go to prison if he is defeated and has to turn over power.

translated by Michael Dobbins

About the Author:

Dr. Kyryl Savin, born in 1976. Studies in international relations at the State Taras-Shevchenko University of Kiev (Ukraine). 1998 – Master in international economic relations at the State Taras-Shevchenko University of Kiev. 2000 – PhD at the State Taras-Shevchenko University of Kiev (Ukraine) on the topic “Marketing Management in Banks of EU Countries (case study Federal Republic of Germany)”. 1997-2000 – several study and research visits at the Merseburg Applied Sciences University and the University of Münster. June 2000-August 2001 – German Economic Advisory Group for the Ukrainian government / Institute for Economic Research and Political Consulting in Kiev. September 2001-February 2002 – International Parliamentary Internship in the German Bundestag January 2003-September 2007 – German Embassy in Kiev, political consultant Since October 2007 – Director of Office of Heinrich Böll Foundation in Ukraine. Publications: Numerous publications on the current political situation in Ukraine in the web dossier “Ukraine on the path to democracy” at <http://www.boell.de/ukraine>

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e-mail: kyryl.savin@ua.boell.org