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Ukraine

Ukrainians fighting for a better society

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In Kiev tens of thousands risk their lives to protect the Maidan from police aggression. A participant in the January protests, socialist activist Ilya Budraitskis, argues that the left needs to be a stronger and more visible force in the movement.

Ilya, you're active in the "Socialist Movement of Russia" and were in Kiev to observe the recent protests. What was the reason for your visit?

We have strong links to the left in Ukraine and I travelled to Kiev two weeks ago in the wake of anti-demonstration laws that rendered Ukraine a virtual police state.

How did the movement respond to this?

It radicalised. There were several clashes with the police and the people stormed the parliament. Several protesters were killed. There were also barricades erected along the border of the city government quarters.

Has the movement seen any victories?

Yanukovych was forced to recognise that repression would not quash the movement and instead attempted to co-opt the movement with offers of positions within the regime. The offer was rejected as one of the conditions was an end to the protests – a retreat the movement was unwilling to accept.

What are your impressions of the movement?

The people are incredibly determined. They've occupied the central square of Kiev for over two months and defended it against constant police attacks. They've constructed four metre high barricades, and occupied key building such as the mayor's house, the trade union headquarters and the city art gallery. Apart from that people in the square have organised food and clothing provision, an information centre and a makeshift medical centre. The self-organisation of the protest camp is very impressive.

Are the protesters afraid?

Not really. The people get around with batons and helmets and if they see a cop, they beat them up. That's why there aren't any more cops in the street! The government knows they have two choices – to provoke civil war or pull back.

What are the political forces in the movement?

The organised political forces are mainly from the right – from the free-market opposition party to the far right, ultra nationalist "Right Sector".

What is the "Right Sector"?

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It's a coalition of far right groups with military like structures. Amongst them are experienced fighters from the Ultra fan clubs of Kiev's Dynamo football club.

How have the protestors responded to the far right?

It's been mostly positive. Not because they support them ideologically but because they seem to be the most combative and militant section of the movement. Then again, there are some that consider them extremists that cast a negative light on the movement.

One of the biggest opposition forces is "Svoboda" …

That's the strongest far right party in Ukraine, with 10% of the vote at the last election. Their rise to prominence was a by-product of the fact that the previous president, Viktor Yushchenko, cultivated ultra nationalist sentiment during his term.

What does that mean?

Well, for example, Yushchenko argued that during the Second World War, the Ukrainian SS were in fact patriots because they fought against foreign domination of the Soviet Union.

Are you kidding?!

It's really only comprehensible if you understand the nature of Ukrainian nationalism. In Ukraine today there are roughly 20 statues of Stepan Bandera. This far right interpretation of Ukrainian nationalism has managed to dominate mainstream politics and it's because of this that parties like Svoboda now occupy such a central position in the movement.

Would you say the movement is fascist then?

I think that's a simplification …

What do you mean?

Fascism arose in the post-World War One period in response to crush a militant and revolutionary workers movement across Europe. Fascists played the role of smashing the workers movement and saving capitalism in places where the democratic state could not. This was the case in both Germany and Italy.

And today?

Today there is neither revolutionary workers movement nor a Fascist movement intent on smashing it. Also, there isn't a crisis of liberal democracy and mistrust between the capitalist class and the state that would push the former to put their faith in Fascism, at least not yet.

What is the nature of the movement then?

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At Maiden, there are people fighting from different oppressed groups in society: workers, unemployed, the poor and students. They oppose the state and the elites. The term fascism doesn't apply because the class composition of the parties is quite distinct.

But there are Fascists at Maiden?

Clearly. The ideology of the "Right Sector" is fascist. And this group is attempting to establish its hegemony within the movement. So far, however, it hasn't worked because the core of the movement has nothing to do with fascism.

What is it about then?

It's hard to define. This movement is the product of a post-Soviet society in which class consciousness and protest had been virtually eradicated. This means protest movements can be extremely heterogeneous and can transform ideologically very quickly – to the left as well as the right.

How did the Maiden protest develop into its current form?

At the moment it has a nationalistic, anti-communist character. This is because the right is best placed and organised to intervene in the movement and because of the disastrous role played by the Ukrainian Communist Party.

The Communist Party got 13 percent at the last election?

Yes. Subsequently, their priority has been to establish themselves within Yanukovych's Regime. For example, they voted for the anti-demonstration laws. Without their vote the laws wouldn't have passed. Unfortunately most Ukrainians associate the "left wing" entirely with the Communist Party.

What's their attitude towards the Maiden movement?

They criticise the nationalism but not from an internationalist perspective. Rather, they counter-pose Russian chauvinism! It's despicable.

What is the real left doing?

The left has had a mixed and ambivalent response to the movement since the beginning. Some maintain that the movement is foreign, far right and argue against participation. Others have participated and attempted to push the political terrain to the left.

Is that challenging?

Yes. The far right confronts the left activists. They take their leaflets and flags and sometimes beat them up.

So there's no room for the left?

Of course there is! Precisely because of the dominance of the right …

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You want to argue with Nazis?

Maybe with some, but the main thing is that the vast majority of the protesters are politically active for the first time and aren't ideologically committed to any side yet.

Why is nationalism such a big part of the movement?

It's bound up with the way that Ukraine was founded as an independent nation – through the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. That's why nationalism is such a popular ideological persuasion. The mentality is like that of a former colony. Most Ukrainians think that the most important thing is not to be dominated by a foreign power.

But isn't the movement strongest in West Ukraine?

Yes, well, Ukrainian politics is very divided between east and west both culturally and economically. In the east most people speak Russian as their first language. Even Vitali Klitschko speaks Ukrainian with a heavy Russian accent.

And in the west?

... Mostly Ukrainian is spoken. In one of the poorest countries in the whole of Europe there are clearly more poor and jobless in the west than in the Industrial areas of the east around Kharkov and Dnipropetrovsk. West Ukranians emigrate to Czech Republic and Poland, because the wages are substantially higher than in their homeland.

Also, in the west, is the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Kyivan Patriarchate. The church split in 1991 and now its Priests are speaking on the podiums in Maidan square, whereas in the east the Ukrainian Orthodox Church is more common and their Priests are normally support of Yanukovych.

What does this mean for the movement?

In the west 99 percent of people support the protests. People have taken buses to Kiev so they can live in Maiden square and partake in the protests. They are worried about being controlled by Russia and are prioritising the fight against Yanukovych, whom they see as returning the Ukraine to a Russian colony.

Do you think this worry is unfounded?

Not necessarily. The Russian state tries constantly to make the Ukraine dependent on it, for example, by turning the natural gas off in winter. You can't really blame the Ukrainians for having no confidence in Vladimir Putin.

So the alternative for the movement is the EU?

The movement is directed particularly against the Yanukovych government and the question of the EU is secondary to this. It also naturally appears to be the only achievable alternative to the Russian orientation. In addition to this many Ukrainians believe in the illusion that the approach to the EU would bring with it the prosperity, freedom and democracy that exists in other states that are members of the EU.

Who is it that is arguing for the Ukraine to become part of the EU?

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Some oligarchs that have control over a few of the oppositional parties are making promises that it would be good for business. But in the negotiations there was no talk of your average person and the issues they want to see addressed, neither the fight against political corruption nor for political and social reforms. It was above all about allowing EU interests access to the Ukrainian market.

Could an alliance with the EU not reduce the economic crisis of the Ukraine?

The destiny of our East European neighbours speaks against it. Take the example of Romania and Bulgaria, incomes there have not risen but the prices have. There are ever more young people emigrating to find work in and around Western Europe, where they work for the lowest wages and are used to force down the wages of the people that live there already. The excitement about entry into the EU was short lived in these countries because even though all countries in the EU are supposed to be equal, some are more equal than others.

Why does Ukraine have such strong illusions in the EU then?

The trigger for the protests was that Yanukovych decided not to sign an agreement with the EU at the last moment in November last year. Up until then not only the opposition parties but also the government campaigned for the Ukraine to become part of the EU.

An unsigned agreement led to a mass movement?

Yanukovych had not prepared any propaganda for his change in strategy. Literally overnight the whole government’s position changed from that of saying that the only way to save the Ukraine from the position it was in was to sign the agreement to the position that the EU contradicts profoundly the national interests of the beloved nation.

A serious PR disaster...

... This was decisive, for the spontaneous outbreak of the protest. Everyone thought that Yanukovych was leading the Ukraine in the direction of the EU and then suddenly, Putin whipped out his credit card and made an offer that couldn't be refused. It was also so similar ...

... and the opposition parties have used this cleverly ...

Because the oligarchs that control them stand to make more profits. It is, however, crucial that the oligarchs and their parties have had difficulty steering the movement. It has become its own political centre of power, around which it would pay the left to fight for.

Are the east Ukrainians all on the side of Yanukovych?

Even in the east, if there was a vote about a union with Russia, most of the people would vote against it. They also have no faith in the Russian government. Nevertheless, Yanukovych still has backing in the east.

Is his government remaining stable then?

No. What is weakening Yanukovych, apart from the mass movement in the west, is the oligarch system itself. Some

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sponsors of Yanukovych's party of the regions demand his resignation now internally. If the oligarch's should make this position public, the president would also lose his remaining support in the population quite quickly. According to a current survey Klitschko would get a large majority with a ballot against Yanukovych for the presidential office. That means, basically, many Russian speaking east Ukrainians would vote for Klitschko.

Is Klitschko also the star of the movement?

What the media mostly conceal is that the movement is basically extremely critically towards the politicians and other self appointed leadership figures. Klitschko is one of the few who is barely booed when he speaks at Maidan square. But this definitely does not make him into the star of the movement.

Where does the criticism of the other oppositional politicians come from?

Many opposition politicians, for example, the imprisoned Julia Timoschenko, have already proven that they are corrupt. Klitschko, not yet. Nevertheless, he depends on the same economic bosses as the other politicians.

You speak over and over again of the “oligarchs”. What makes them so different, compared to say multi-millionaires somewhere else?

An “oligarch” does not only have a lot of influence over the economy and society, but also direct control over one or more political parties. Hence, an oligarch can move their finance capital into direct political power.

Which Parties are controlled by the oligarchs?

All parties in the parliament are financed considerably by oligarchs. Even Svoboda wouldn't have been able to become so influential without the oligarchs.

What do the media have to say on this?

The oligarchs own all the big television broadcasting stations and influence directly their contents. Thus politicians from Svoboda were already invited on to important talk shows even though the party only reached 0.8 percent of the vote. At the same time, it is inconceivable that there would be any left winger invited to speak.

To what extent does the conflict in the Ukraine take place between different parts of the ruling class?

The elite always try to abuse mass movements for their own benefit. If we, particularly in Eastern Europe, wait for a movement that is free from the influences of capital and is led completely by the working class, we would be waiting forever. To have any of these movements develop we need a different form of society to what we have now.

A “different society”, so that there can be a movement?

Exactly. Since every protest movement reflects the contradictions of the society in which they are fought. We have strong nationalism and extremely mighty oligarchs on one side and no tradition of self organisation and class consciousness on the other side. What sort of protest should we expect to originate from this?

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Is there no perspective?

Yeah, there is, but first we must discuss the left: How can we act under these circumstances? Should we condemn the movements because they are too difficult for us to work in? Should we go home because at Maiden Square the demonstrators allow the national flag to wave everywhere and sing the national anthem?

What is it that you suggest the left do?

Plainly speaking, if you say at Maidan Square that you are a Marxist, you run the risk of getting bashed. But the program and the character of the movement are to a large extent in being developed. The people taking part in the struggle change politically enormously fast and they are very open to politik.

What has given you this indication?

Even in December, much more people had faith in Klitschko at that time. No one could even imagine the battles that they would be fighting in January.

Where can the left build?

The majority of the people at Maidan Square want to organise. They want direct democracy and no negotiations behind closed doors. It is these ideas that the people are fighting against the police for, even though the other day some of their comrades-in-arms were murdered. This is the place where the left must bring their ideas

How could the left in Kiev do things better?

We have to learn to engage more with the concrete situation. Slogans have to relate to where people are at. Also, it’s irresponsible for some on the left to abstain.

Irresponsible?

Yes. Since, if we stay away, we leave the people to the “right wing “ that we so severely hate. Nobody will thank us for it if we do not go where the right wing extremists are, except the right wing extremists themselves.

Practically speaking, is this possible?

Of course. It means that I may have to leave my beloved red flag at home because it doesn't get a good reception. So what? I want to come into political contact with people, radical is what brings success. The fact that a red flag is unpopular lies not with us, but with the communist party. Nevertheless, we must acknowledge this fact and react to it sensibly.

Is it possible for the movement to win?

It depends what you mean by win. The movement can succeed in bringing down Yanukovych. Sooner or later he will lose his power. But many demonstrators want to change the society and the political system. This cannot be achieved by this movement.

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Then is everything in vain?

Not at all. Many will be disappointed, but they will also gain experiences on which they can build. Some will recognize also that a social fight is necessary to improve their life. If it achieves this in the next little while, then it would be a great success.

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*Source: This interview was originally conducted for the German site **marx21**. It was translated into English by **Red Flag** (Australia).*