

# Address on unfolding situation in Ukraine, 10 March 2014

March 14, 2014

*The author's view of the strength of the right is not universally shared among UK progressives. – DL*

I am Zakhar Popovych a member of the Left Opposition initiative, and I have been on the Maidan under my red flag from the very first day of its emergence. I don't sleep there in tents but I have been visiting the square virtually every day during these months.

## **Euro-Maidan is mass popular and grassroots movement, not a manufactured one**

And this is the red flag we raised up on the 24th of November at the first mass rally of Euro Maidan. I never saw so many people demonstrating in downtown Kiev since 2004. No political rally or public event had attracted so many people during this past decade. Rallies of right-wingers could possibly be some thousands people strong last year, but they were never ten thousand, not even on the Ukrainian Insurrection Army Day. The first Euro Maidan rally was at a minimum fifty thousand strong; such a movement could not be simply a manufactured one. It is clear that it was a mass mobilization of mostly Kiev citizens angry with corrupt, ineffective and greedy government. It was against the government of oligarchs, who are robbing the people of Ukraine.

The economic and political system of contemporary Ukraine was manufactured by oligarchs perfectly to make this robbery as legal and as intensive as possible. The political system, which is totally controlled by oligarchs, supplied them with legislation that made tax dodging an absolutely legal and common practice. If you are a Ukrainian oligarch you will pay no profit tax at all – this is the rule of the Ukrainian economy. The greatest taxation pressure is on the workers and small business owners, even if we are talking about income tax where we formally have a flat rate. In fact the rate is regressive. Workers' wages are affectively taxed by up to 40%, when wealthiest guys are paying only a "flat" 17% from their shareholders' dividends.

For most of the people the Europe means justice, social justice to be more precise. I met on Maidan many workers and unionists. Miners from Luhansk (the very eastern region of Ukraine) told me they are on Maidan because they want the courts to be just. "We want the courts to act!" Volodymyr Sokolov, leader of the Independent Miners Union in Roven'ki, Luhansk region, told me. When our union activists face illegal firing it takes up to three years of trial proceedings to reestablish them in their jobs. Actually, it means that an employer can fire anybody and not be concerned about the union's demands. We want to stop such practice! We want the reform of the court system. We want to secure the rule of law in our country. An Association Agreement with the European Union includes the obligation to reform the courts – and we demand the government to signs it.

That is why our Left Opposition initiative called for Association without a Free Trade Agreement. The political part of the Association Agreement also includes some contradictory points, but in general it can help to make Ukraine more democratic and free minded, and it can help us to secure the rule of law. And the Labor Law in Ukraine is still the Soviet one; in most cases the law is on the side of workers, not employers. The Soviet labor code in Ukraine was preserved, not canceled as it happened in Russia. And we want Soviet Labor Code to be enforced in Ukraine!

## **Radical right-wingers systematically tried to clear the Euro-Maidan from the Left but that successfully**

It is true that the Euro Maidan movement was initiated by the right-wing opposition. And it is also true that the most organized and influential part of these right-wingers is the far right Svoboda Party. I consider this party as one trying to develop itself in the Hitlerism tradition. It is not just the mere assertion and "Argumentum ad Hitlerum." Some of its leaders are busy popularizing the heritage of Hitler and Göbbels into the Ukrainian language. For example, the main theoretician of Svoboda Mr. Mykhalchyshyn personally translated Dr. Göbbels' Das kleine ABC des Nationalsozialisten and published it in a collection of articles together with NSDAP 25-point programme and Ernst Röhm's Why exactly the SA? All together with Mr. Mykhalchyshyn explanation of the actuality and topicality of all this Nazi rubbish for contemporary Ukraine. For example, he personally is the author of the text called Revolutionary National Socialist.

It is no surprise that as soon as the huge mass demonstration was finished, the density of Nazis per square metre rose dramatically. On November 27 the flagstaff of this red flag was broken by C-14 militants affiliated with Svoboda.

As you can see the flag was chewed up, even a bit masticated but it was not eaten. Unfortunately, many of our banners were eaten. Definitely no pieces of them left. In the latter days of Maidan dozens of leftists and union activists were attacked by far right militants.

In the evening of November 29 it seemed as though the Euro-Maidan was over. Just a few hundred radical students were left on the square. But, as you all know, the violent police attack in the early morning hours of 30th November caused the level of protests to rise up again.

As soon as a new wave of mass movement flooded the squares Nazis systematically found themselves in a small minority with little ability to influence the movement. Propaganda of left socialist ideas was possible each time it was a really big rally. And it was possible at any time outside the Maidan.

In the first days of December we organized a number of public leftist events outside Maidan, mostly in downtown Kiev. One of them was a two hundred people strong march against police violence. Unfortunately, the authorities were not notified according to the appropriate legal procedure, because it was very hard for us to submit an application to Kiev City Council, then occupied by Svoboda. But nobody attacked us, neither the police nor Nazis. We had absolutely no security problems.

On the big Sunday rally of the 9th December we made a successful intervention on the Maidan using the separate "Free microphone" stage with absolutely new banners and posters. But you can be sure that the content of our agitation was of the same socialist character.

### **The movement changed after the introduction of emergency laws - people heard the Left voice**

Days and weeks passed by. And, as you can imagine the zero reaction of the government was making people more and angrier. We felt cold and tired, and that made us even angrier. The government was just waiting for us give up and disperse, showing no sign at all of willingness to negotiate, even with opposition leaders. When the number of protesters began to decline significantly the government decided to smash the remaining ones.

The emergency laws of January 16 passed through parliament and were introduced by January 19. Protesters now became very angry with the government and an insurrection began. People moved from the Maidan square and attacked the police on Hrushevsky Street on the approach to Parliament.

The first attacks against the anti-riot police of the Berkut were organised mainly by the neo-Nazis of Pravyi Sektor, who are still more radical than the far right Svoboda movement. But it is also true that in the following days, many ordinary and very different people entered the struggle. Thousands of them brought tyres and oil to feed the huge fire. Among the activists, I saw very different people, mostly Russian speaking, and many youth from the suburbs of Kiev. This was very different from the people on Maidan square, who were mostly Ukrainian speaking people from villages in western Ukraine.

After the introduction of the emergency laws most of the citizens of Kiev were very angry. And after the killing of the activists, even more so. The Maidan square, frequented on a "normal" evening by a few hundred people, was invaded by several thousand people, who stayed all night. This mass mobilization probably saved the Maidan from an attack which was clearly being prepared by the police.

Everybody believed that the police would take the Maidan by storm. Everybody was sure that the Berkut would attack. According to the new laws, the demonstrators were all considered criminals. Among them far right groups were present, but also some left radical groups (mainly anarchists). Most demonstrators were critical of the opposition and the xenophobic far right. Many stones and Molotov cocktails were thrown against the police, with several of them being injured. Unfortunately, many young people behaved as if it was a game, even after some of them had been killed. Nonetheless, it was a mass revolt of Ukrainians of different nationalities and ethnic groups for democracy in Ukraine. The far right were certainly present, but in the context of a much broader movement.

There was no lack of resources. You can imagine elderly people in queues passing stones and automobile tyres to fighters. Old women helping grandchildren to fill Molotov cocktails. As a journalist I was personally present there on the front line and was immediately engaged: Take your cocktail, friend! I was welcomed by a courteous boy in a balaclava. It was very hard to resist but I managed myself. The boy noticed my hesitation and my press card and did not persist any further.

Confronted with such an impressive mass mobilisation, the government decided not to use force against the demonstrators. Any attempt to evacuate the square would have ended up with many wounded and perhaps even deaths. However, this mass action, which had prevented the introduction of new anti-democratic emergency laws, also gave impetus to the most anti-democratic elements of the Maidan movement. After the first battle against the police, far right neo-Nazi groups strengthened themselves and felt strong enough to proclaim themselves leaders of the movement.

### **The Left in the occupation of the "House of Ukraine" and Ministry for Education and Science**

But the Left also strengthen themselves! This revolution is very different from the Orange revolution of 2004. ***This revolution is loud!*** There are many places where public discussions are constantly going on. Not only on the main stage of Maidan, but also on the "Open University" stage, the "Open microphone" stage, in the open air. And, of course, many, many discussions were held in the rooms of occupied buildings.

Soon after the battle of January 19 on Hrushevsky Street, *the leftist students assembly succeeded in occupying a part of Ukraine House* and managed to organize systematic agitation there. Despite a difficult situation the left was accepted on the Maidan, much more than before, and we intervened systematically at the Ukraine House in a student centre mainly organized by left and progressive activists. Left books and leaflets, including thousands of copies of our 10 point manifesto, were distributed here and we participated in the public debates.

There were many discussions, lectures, and movies shown. We also had a presentation of a new issue of our ***Spilne*** magazine, and it was very successful. *I personally began my presentation declaring myself a communist and summed up with the demand of social lustration: that is, the immediate removal of oligarchs and the wealthiest from all positions in power.*

I want to stress that all ten points of our Left Opposition program of social change received sincere support and applause. There in the hall of Ukraine House were people from Western Ukraine that consider themselves as anti-communist, and people from East considering themselves as anti-Banderites. But all of them believe social justice is needed! All of them support a radical program of social lustration! The idea of social justice could unite Ukraine; this is the only idea that can.

Our proposals, including workers' control and the deprivation of electoral rights for all millionaires, got a good reception.

This presentation was on February 17; on the 18th there was new massive attack. We were removed from Ukraine house and unfortunately lost their all our equipment. Equipment but not faith! We recaptured Ukraine House a week later but nothing was left.

### **Ministry for Education and Science**

Another example of the Left on Maidan: soon after President Yanukovych ran away radical students occupied the main building of the Ministry for Education and Science. And what is important - Svoboda people were not allowed to enter. The position of the Minister of Education and Science is in Svoboda's quota in the new government, but they decided not to appoint a radical party member like Ms. Farion but rather to support the relatively moderate Mr. Serhiy Kvit, chancellor (rector) of the University of Kiev Mohyla Academy.

And before Mr. Kvit was allowed to enter his new office, he had to defend his program for education and science in front of the students' assembly and to answer many questions that were not always so polite. Moreover, he signed a road-map plan prepared by the students. And we are now moving forward on the steps of this road map. It is not forgotten and the students' assembly still controls its implementation.

My comrades and I from the Left Opposition are now personally involved in in an open-data project. The brilliant automaton expert Ms. Kejova is now deploying a new accountancy automation system in this Ministry and we will publish on the internet all raw data of the general ledger (all postings). First deputy minister Ms. Inna Sovsun is giving much consideration to this project and I am sure that it will be published no later than April 1. And beginning from that moment it will be published daily, on each work day.

So I invite everybody to download our raw data and analyze it; probably some British experts could advise us on some optimization of the Ministry business? The next Ministry we plan to open is the Ministry for Culture.

### **Workers in Kryvyi Rig supporting Maidan**

The more significant point that convinced me about the democratic and social character of this Ukrainian revolution is the role of independent workers' Unions in it. Kryvyi Rih is a big industrial city on the South-East. It is a mostly Russian-speaking Ukrainian city—typical in that sense.

It has approximately one million inhabitants. Most of them are industrial workers employed by industrial enterprises: miners and metallurgists who are producing iron ore and steel. Many cities of Eastern Ukraine were deindustrialized and declined after the crises of 1990s, but not Kryvyi Rih. As

you know, we suffered a huge decline in machine building and metallurgy, but not in raw materials production. This city is the capital of Ukrainian iron ore mining. Even the dust in the streets is red.

Maidan here was also initiated by small business and traders, but the role of workers is now very significant. The Maidan saw an enormous mass mobilization here. There were frequently more than five thousand protesters. By way of comparison pro-Russian events attracted up to one hundred participants, two to three hundred maximum – and most of them are citizens and agitators from the Maidan trying to find out who are these people and why are they raising this Russian tricolor in their city. The trick is that nobody in the city knows these pro-Russian guys. No one of them was active in civil society, in unions or even political life. There are some bikers, the kind Putin likes to meet with... but nobody knows who the rest of them are because nobody saw them in the city before. Now approximately ten pro-Russians are still standing in a picket line near the local government building.

The leaders of Independent Union of Miners are among the dozen representatives elected to the Rada Maidan (Maidan Council). The coordinator of the Miners Union, comrade Jurii Samoilov, is the commander of “Miners hundred”, the major unit of Maidan self-defense forces. Self-defense is important because the administration of the mines headed by Rinat Akhmetov and owned by Russian oligarchs had organized their own paid paramilitary *titushki* units. These units attack protesters and burn offices of opposition party leaders. Maidan self-defense units were formed only after such attacks began.

Now the ‘Miners hundred’ is busy in joint patrols of the city with the local police force. At the beginning of the Maidan the miners told me: We support it in general but it is not our revolution. Now they feel it is. We do feel it is our Revolution, they say. At least in Kryvyi Rih.

### **New government with Svoboda - recognition but no support**

It is true that new government incorporated neo-Nazi minded leaders of Svoboda party: three out of 20 ministers. These people are really crazy about establishing a New Reich for racial Ukrainians. The slogan they shouted on the Maidan is just a translation into Ukrainian of “Deutschland über alles.” This Reich, they have dreamed up is to be equipped with nuclear weapons and intercontinental missiles. And, believe me, Ukraine has enough resources to do it. The missile plant in Dnepropetrovsk is ready to produce them immediately. Newly appointed Dnepropetrovsk governor and notorious oligarch Kolomoisky just inspected this missile plant. Kolomoisky is a leader of the Ukrainian Jewish Congress, but this doesn’t prevent him from being right wing and anti-worker.

But being willing to behave like Nazis don’t mean you automatically are a Nazi. Under circumstances of pressure of the mass movement they can’t push their rightwing war and xenophobic agenda. The problem is that if Ukraine were to go to the war with Russia this fascist agenda could probably be accepted in society. But at the moment we still have no actual war. And we have a chance to prevent it.

At the moment the government has completely forgotten the social slogans of the Maidan. Instead of dividing government and business we have oligarchs appointed as governors in Dnepropetrovsk and Donetsk regions. Instead of the Maidan demand that oligarchs should be taxed at 10 percent of their wealth (so the wealthy will share with the poor), we hear no word at all about taxation of big business and the very opposite declaration of absolute agreement for all the demands of the IMF. Yet, we accept this government as a legitimate one. It was clearly formed on the wave of a really mass grassroots mobilization of the Maidan. And it declared its responsibility to the Maidan. We appeal to all governments of the world and to Russia among others to recognize this government.

But we do not support it politically. We do practically support it in some local initiatives like the open data project, but we don't support its backing destruction of monuments or its language legislation initiatives. Using the threat of war as an excuse, the new government is backing extremists who destroy soviet monuments and incorporate far-right militants into the police and war force. Generally we do not support its chauvinist and anti-communist hysteria which they are trying to inflate using the war threat. And, as a back-loop, they are inflating the war threat by this hysteria.

To stop the inflation of war hysteria and prevent actual war we should find a way to re-unite the country politically. And this is possible, not on the grounds of radical nationalism, but around a social justice agenda. It is true that many people in the East and South of Ukraine do not trust the new government very much. I do not think they trust Putin and pro-Russian extremists either. But you should notice that the fast change of mind of the Party of Regions' members of parliament led voters in the Eastern and Southern Ukraine feel betrayed and excluded from the government. Formally, the Ukrainian Parliament is absolutely legitimate, but the former majority of it, I mean Party of Regions MPs, are now representing just nobody. Voters in Crimea are very angry with them. And this fact is systematically used by separatist propaganda, for example by Crimean Parliament speaker, who declared himself a new leader of Crimean Party of Regions

**Therefore to press Ukrainian government to call new elections of Parliament as a priority!**

Reelection of the Rada is the only way to make it representative for both East and West Ukraine. And I am sure that in the present situation it would be very hard to falsify the vote, and the composition of Parliament would change much in favor of representatives who are really trusted by people. And I am also sure that the social justice agenda will be pushed to the front.

**Second but no less important is to press Russia to withdraw troops from Crimea.** This is a prerequisite for any legitimate referendum and even recognition of independence. Otherwise Crimea remains a not recognized country in hard economic crisis. No air connection, no water supply, no tourists, etc. And this semi-war situation will be used by Ukrainian far right to suppress democracy and social justice agenda. We appeal to European left not to back Russian intervention in Crimea. I will say it even more strongly - you should firmly oppose it! And of course, international observers are needed in Crimea - as much as possible.

**And of course Ukrainian civil society and even some government institutions need your technical support.** I mentioned the open raw data initiatives to eliminate corruption in Ministries of Education and Science. We hope it will spread to all governmental institutions soon. The British have significant experience in open-data project. You are welcome your advice and help!

Please support the independent workers unions. Most of them are locked in industrial regions and has very little influence on the big politics of Ukraine. Help them to build their institutions. They realize they need their own Labor Party separate from oligarchs. But they have very little experience in building of such institutions.

Finally, it is of course important to show **zero tolerance for the far right**, which is present in the Ukrainian new government!

And of course European activists and personalities are strongly welcome in Kiev to talk about these problems. It is still possible to speak there freely and I am sure it would attract significant audience.