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Euromaidan: A Revolution between the Political Right and the Left

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Translated from Ukrainian by Oleg Naumenko.

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From the first days of Euromaidan in the city center of Kyiv, im- or explicitly right-wing rhetoric was present on Independence Square. It is manifested in political slogans, the writings on posters and facades of administrative buildings, and in the populist, sometimes discriminatory, speeches from the stage. Some slogans have become spread amid protesters and gradually acceptable, but they are also redefined, condemned and sometimes marginalized.

The right-wing groups are involved in protests from the very beginning; their record increases and their actions become legitimate. It is worth to differentiate between different right-wing groups on the Maidan: parliamentary – All-Ukrainian Union ‘Svoboda’ and its informal youth wing ‘Sich/C14’, and extra-parliamentary groups – the ‘Right Sector’, which became the driving force behind radicalisation of the protest, as well as somewhat less active UNA-UNSO, KUN (Congress of

Ukrainian Nationalists) and RUN (Russian-speaking Ukrainian Nationalists).

The presence of Svoboda at the Maidan is inevitable – it is part of the opposition coalition that is pushing Ukrainian integration into the EU. While European far right groups are ‘euro-sceptic’, Svoboda is explicitly in favour of Ukraine joining the European Union and has a decidedly pro-EU electorate. However, the party invites euro-sceptic lecturers. On 15 January, John Morgan, head of Arktos publishing, delivered a lecture in Kyiv City Hall seized by Svoboda activists. Paradoxically, Arktos Arktos publishes works of Russian theorist of Eurasianism Aleksandr Dugin who has spoken out explicitly against the integrity of the Ukrainian state. Morgan’s lecture explained why liberal values should not be tolerated and that the future of Ukraine should not be defined by integrating with any union, whether it is the EU or Russia’s Customs/Eurasian Union.

The following two topics are, perhaps, dividing right-wing groups on the Maidan most: (a) their respective attitudes toward EU integration for which citizens have come out on the main square of the country, and (b) the extent of their support for, and participation in, the radicalization of the protests. For instance, the armed security guards of the Kyiv City Hall, which consist of members and activists of Svoboda as well as men who serve as protectors of the protests from police violence, are not fully radicalized and ready to use force for more than self-defense (yet). They did, at least officially, not join the violent protesters on the barricades on Hrushevskoho Street.

In contrast, the so-called ‘Right Sector’ – a coalition of some minor groups including ‘The Trident of Stepan Bandera’ (Tryzub) and White Hammer (‘Biliy Molot’) - are actively participating in violent actions. In mass media, it has been repeatedly claimed that another extra-parliamentary group, the Ukrainian National Assembly - Ukrainian National Self-Defense (UNA-UNSO), is part of the ‘Right Sector’ too. However, members of both organizations, UNA-UNSO and

the Right Sector, denied this information. The Euromaidan started on 21 November, and the relatively small group 'Right Sector' joined the large movement, two days later. According to their activists, they have seized the fifth floor of the Kyiv House of Trade Unions on 28 November. On the next day, they occupied a spot near the Monument of the Founders of Kyiv, on Independence Square, where they placed a large banner that carried the name of the organisation.

The Right Sector's main goals are a national revolution and the impeachment of President Yanukovych, yet not European integration. On 1 December 2013, activists of this organisation were on Kyiv's Bankova Street, and participated in the attempted violent seizure of the Presidential Administration. After these events, the 'Right Sector' started calling Svoboda 'unreliable' due to its leader Oleh Tiahnybok's announcement that people present on Bankova Street, i.e. also the Right Sector participants of the violent action, were merely provocateurs. Many Euromaidan protesters supported this initial statement of Svoboda leader.

Yet, the situation has changed since the events of 19 January 2014. On that day, an activist of the Automaidan called demonstrators to go to the Verkhovna Rada and the Automaidan convoy was followed by the 16th Group of Hundred of the Maidan Self-Defence Force. Allegedly, the 'Right Sector' activists joined this group only after a certain time period. Analyzing the events on Hrushevskoho Street on that day, it is hard to define who exactly started to radicalize the protest – most demonstrators were full of anger as a result of the laws adopted on 16 January, the so-called 'Black Thursday'. But it seems to be the case that activists of the 'Right Sector' only joined the organised convoy and confrontation after other protesters had climbed over buses and were already prepared to take concrete actions.

Outside observers of the radicalization of the protest, such as the use of Molotov cocktails, burning buses and use of fire-

works by demonstrators, perceive these actions as radical, but they were seen, by the formerly non-violent protesters, as justified in their confrontation with security forces. This is the main difference between skirmishes on Bankova Street on 1 December and on Hrushevskoho Street on 19 January: there was now a sense of legitimacy for the protest's radicalisation. Attempts by Vitaliy Klitschko, one of the leaders of the party-political parliamentary opposition, to calm down the protesters were rejected on the spot or negatively assessed by protesters. This had not happened on 1 December when the leader of UDAR party restrained radicals in their confrontation with "Berkut" riot police forces near the Presidential Administration.

The liberal participants of Euromaidan do not regard right-wing rhetoric as radical any more as there is a lot of it on Independence Square. Left-wing groups are also present, and adhere to different opinions on events in the centre of Kyiv. Some attempted to promote on the Euromaidan left-wing discourse by organizing film screenings about workers' strikes and by anti-discriminatory events; others stayed neutral.

Unexpectedly for everyone, some left-wing activists from 'Narodniy Nabat' (People's Bell) were among those involved in the confrontation on Hrushevskoho Street. This organisation was founded just a year ago and has friendly relations with 'Avtonomniy Opir' (Autonomous Resistance) and 'Volna Zemlya' (Free Land). Its ideology is social anarchism – direct democracy, classless society, protection of animals and ecology. The activists of Narodniy Nabat are sceptics regarding European integration. They do not regard rapprochement with the European Union as a way towards economic prosperity for Ukraine. Speaking on their involvement in radical actions, according to the activists, they were in the front rows of violent resistance, on Hrushevskoho Street. People's Bell activists have criticized the lack of activity of Ukrainian left-wing groups: "Instead of suggesting a plan of action for

the people on the Maidan, they are concerned about what their partners outside Ukraine would say about them."

Today, there is a provisional truce concluded between extra parliamentary right-wing groups and left-wing groups present on the Euromaidan. There was, to be sure, no official act which declared that. But there are common provisional goals, while the final ones remain different. For the Right, this is a national revolution, for the Left, it is a social one. The time frames of this truce are not predetermined. It may remain intact until their common confrontation, with the authorities, on Hrushevskoho Street and the Maidan continues. This is a paradox that could previously be observed only during student protests. For instance, that was the case when center-right and left-wing student youth organizations, which had cooperated during the 'Against degradation of education' campaign or when these youth organizations joined mutual social protests which concerned student affairs. In the opinion of activists from both sides, cooperation in the long-term is unlikely even in case of a success of the current revolution.