

Maidan and Its Contradictions: Interview with a Ukrainian Revolutionary Syndicalist

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For weeks and weeks, we have been looking at Ukrainian events, trying to make sense of what has been happening in Kyiv and other cities. We had read many texts, comments and interviews and discussed about Maidan, but we had been always arriving only at new questions to be answered. Thus, when a possibility occurred to get in touch with Ukrainian comrades one of us tried to use it as best as he could. As a result of that effort and thanks to kindness and patience of Denis from a Kyiv branch of a revolutionary syndicalist group called Autonomous Workers Union the following interview came into existence. Hopefully, it will provide you with many useful insights into the Maidan movement and its context.

(NB: The interview was done before the new phase of protests has begun on February 18th. Still, it gives a broader context for understanding of the recent developments. [\[1\]](#))

Vratislav: Almost three months ago a movement began to develop in the Ukraine which since that time has become really massive and spread from Kyiv to other regions. It involves a longstanding occupation of the Independence square and a surrounding area in Kyiv, riots, occupations or blockades of administration and other official buildings in most parts of the country. It is also notorious for a very strong involvement of far-right organisations and prevalence of a certain traditionalist nationalist ideology among protesters. This movement is called „Maidan“ or „Euromaidan“ after the square occupation and its initial demand that the Ukrainian government ratifies an admission treaty with the EU. However, quite soon this demand became overshadowed by another one; a demand more prominent, pressing and obviously much more able to mobilise large numbers of people: overthrowing president Yanukovich with his government and corrupt state apparatus. Is that a roughly correct picture or is something missing from it? Is the original pro-EU demand still an important and integral part of the struggle against Yanukovich’s regime or has it become a completely secondary one? I mean, if the current ruling clan is toppled, will they be toppled by masses that definitely want to take „the Western road“? Is the Maidan movement in Kyiv and across the country absolutely unified about the question of „ultra-Euro-optimism“?

Denis: Yes, your account is more or less correct. But you should understand that from the very beginning people had a very peculiar understanding of “Europe”. They pictured a very utopian ideal – society without corruption, with high wages, social security, rule of law, honest politicians, smiling faces, clean streets etc. – and called it “EU”. And when one tried to tell them that actual EU has nothing to do with this pretty picture, that people there actually burn EU flags and protest against austerity etc. – they retorted: “So would you better live in Russia then?” So, yes, from the very

beginning the protest was driven by the false consciousness of “civilizational choice”, by nationalist ideological patterns which didn’t leave any room for the class agenda. These are the results of the bourgeois cultural hegemony, in Gramscian terms, and this is the main problem we should fight in this country over next years (or even decades).

But “Europe” was never actually the main aim of the protesters. Anti-government and anti-Russian sentiments were much stronger, so they naturally overtook the pro-EU rhetoric after the police crackdown of December 1, and now most people hardly even remember what the initial cause of the demonstrations was. Many people agree that the very term Euromaidan is already anachronistic. The far right groups, which initially had to hide their traditional attitude to the “liberal decaying EU” in order to infiltrate the protests, now openly state that they don’t care about the EU and only want a regime change. This sentiment is accepted in the wide circles of the protesters.

Although, on the other hand, it is a fact that Ukraine has been historically divided into two cultural/political/linguistic entities. The Southern and Eastern part has more people, almost all industry, speaks Russian and is largely loyal to the “pro-Russian” cultural and political agenda, being nostalgic for the Soviet state. The Western and Central Ukraine is more agrarian and less populous, speaks more Ukrainian and leans more towards West, away from Russia. During last decade Kyiv has shifted politically from the first to the second part. This divide is often exaggerated to the point where the existence of a single Ukrainian nation is even denied; this is not true: I think Ukraine is still a more unified nation-state than Belgium, for example. But still, this divide does exist, and by the way it was the main reason why in Ukraine the ruling class failed to establish an authoritarian regime in the mould of Russia or Belarus: it ensured that no politician has ever had support from the majority of the population. Therefore, they had to balance and make concessions to the weak working class: bourgeois democracy was retained, and welfare state elements are much more generous than in Russia.

Given all that, we can conclude: EU integration is not the central issue of the protests at all, but it is implicitly regarded by the protesters as a natural step which should eventually be taken by the “good” government after the fall of Yanukovich.

Vratislav: Maidan puts forward exclusively political demands. However, the sphere of politics does not exist isolated in a vacuum, it is a moment of a social totality in the same way as economics is. Therefore, Maidan’s political demands are not contingent and I am interested in what kind of socio-economical reality is behind these demands. What kind of general situation in the Ukraine produced precisely those demands for stepping down of Yanukovich and against systematic corruption permeating the state?

Denis: First of all, bear in mind the political heterogeneity of Ukraine which I described above. These divisions were actualized during last years by politicians for their practical purposes. For example, in 2009, just before presidential elections, the Party of Regions which was then in opposition incited huge protests against NATO manœuvres in Crimea. They also promised to make Russian the national language. In 2010, when they came to power, they were OK with the same manœuvres by NATO and nobody did anything in the sphere of languages - until 2012, when they had to win the parliamentary elections. Then they passed a law which defended regional and minority languages, which mobilized both parts of the population: the Russian-speaking people supported Party of Regions, having somehow “remembered” that they are being discriminated against and believing that this law will save them; the Ukrainian-speaking opposition held massive protests against “linguistic genocide”. So, both political camps manipulate with these issues, radicalizing the population when people themselves wouldn’t bother. One year later, nobody remembered about that “hideous” language law anymore.

So, there is always a large part of population which hates the current president and they only need a trigger to start protesting against him (especially since Kyiv, the capital, is in the “opposition” part). This time there was a trigger: an EU hysteria provoked by the government itself! For the whole year 2013 they were constantly talking about how Ukraine is going to sign that agreement with the EU. They’ve roused the expectations of the “pro-European” part of the population, and then, when suddenly they made a U-turn, people were extremely frustrated and angry. That was the initial impulse.

But, obviously, there are very real reasons for people to hate the government, too. When Yanukovich became president in 2010, he started pushing for unpopular neo-liberal steps. The natural gas tariffs were growing; the government launched medical reform which will eventually lead to closure of many medical institutions and to introducing the universal medical insurance instead of the unconditional coverage; they pushed through extremely unpopular pension reform (raising pension age for women) against the will of more than 90% of population; there was an attempt at passing the new Labour Code which would seriously affect workers’ rights; the railway is being corporatized; finally, they passed a new Tax Code which hit small business. But eventually this assault wasn’t very successful, and the government had to back off. The tariffs of natural gas, electricity, heating, water are frozen at a level which is one of the lowest in Europe and ex-USSR; the Labour Code is buried in the parliament; the next stage of the pension reform (introducing compulsory pension saving plans instead of the solidarity system) is halted. They saw they can’t move on with such low levels of support. But still, the welfare of the working classes, as well as the general state of the economy leaves much to be desired, and people have all legitimate reasons to demand better living standards. Sadly, these grievances are dressed in the false consciousness of nationalism.

Finally, there’s one more important detail. Since 2010, Viktor Yanukovich, who had initially been just a puppet of powerful oligarchs, has become an ambitious businessman himself. His elder son has accumulated vast powers; “The Family” occupied important positions in the government, monopolized control over capital flows, and started fighting with Rinat Akhmetov, Dmitry Firtash and other oligarchs who had been their sponsors previously. Naturally, the traditional oligarchic clans didn’t like this, so the current protest has also an elite dimension.

Vratislav: Now, is it possible to summarise Maidan’s demands? I mean demands coming from within the movement and effectively unifying and generalising it. Are there any such clearly and universally articulated demands? Or are those political demands we can see and hear only supplied by opposition parties, because the Maidan as such is rather a chaotic array of individual grievances that nevertheless identify Yanukovich’s corrupt and increasingly authoritarian state as a common source and enemy and therefore are able and ready to speak in one voice with the parliamentary opposition?

Denis: As far as I understand it, there’s only one demand that is shared by virtually every person active in Maidan: get rid of Yanukovich. That is indeed the gathering point which can unify all social strata and political camps present there. Of course, most people would say that they don’t want to stop at that, that they want total purge of all government structures so that some “new people” could come and so on. If we look closer, we’ll see a vast spectre of different viewpoints, often mutually contradictory. So, I think you’re right that the opposition is capitalising on the fact that currently all hatred is focused specifically on Yanukovich.

Vratislav: I think I can imagine, what would the European free trade agreement and IMF structural adjustment programme cause in the Ukraine. However, it is a mystery to me what would integration with Russia lead to? What is this Customs Union with Russia, Byelorussia and Kazakhstan about? I read an article written by a Ukrainian leftist journalist who claimed that economic and social policies in Russia are currently strongly

neo-liberal? Is that correct? If that is the case are those policies going to unify the „EurAsia“? Perhaps, plus an authoritarian form of state, given the character of regimes in Russia, Byelorussia and Kazakhstan?

Denis: Well yes, so far the situation of the working classes in Ukraine is significantly better than in any of the countries you've mentioned – because of the reasons I've described above. And the integration into the Customs Union will mean only bad things for workers: the screws will be tightened both in the sphere of political freedoms and in the sphere of living standards of workers. Actually, the statutes of the Customs Union demand unification of the labour laws – that's just one example. The government will get cart blanche to establish more authoritarian regime and lower living standards.

In the macroeconomic dimension such integration will be an opportunity to renew the cooperation links in hi-tech industries – these links were broken in 1990s. So, eventually this can possibly bring about a stronger economy – but at the terrible cost, and not only to workers, but also to the Ukrainian bourgeoisie. Our national bourgeoisie is much weaker than their Russian counterparts, and integration into the Customs Union will mean their virtual extinction. Therefore this idea is quite unpopular among the Ukrainian ruling class!

Objectively, the optimal scenario for Ukrainian economy would be to continue the old policies of geopolitical “neutrality”, without decisive integration into Western or Eastern structures. Any “choice” will be a severe blow to Ukrainian exports and to the well-being of people. The only question is, how much time is still left for such neutrality? It looks like both Russia and the EU want Ukraine to stop wriggling and make her mind finally.

Vratislav: I would say that there is not much time left. It seems that the global crisis has erased any possibility for the capitalist society in the Ukraine to go on existing somewhere in between the West and Russia. The fact that the Ukrainian economy got into a recession and the state has been on the verge of defaulting for more than one year points out that any government will have to make a “geopolitical choice” in order to obtain more credit. Even if the Ukrainian capitalist class and its political representatives could find a new “middle way” (accepting loans by both Russia and the IMF), it seems to be obvious, from what you have just said, that in any case such a “middle way” would be based on “neo-liberal” restructuring. The time has probably elapsed for being overcautious and slow with imposing structural reforms in order not to alienate the electorate. What do you think about that? Could you tell us some more about the effects of the crisis in the Ukraine?

Denis: I wouldn't rush with the doom-and-gloom predictions just yet. From my point of view, the ruling class will be able to continue with their current “Bonapartist” policies if the global economy allows that. Even in 2009, when the economy was sinking very deep, incomes of the population took a hit, too, but the government did their best to alleviate it (because of the upcoming presidential elections!). The minimum wages and pensions were raised several times during that year.

After that, there was a certain economic recovery, but in the middle of 2012 Ukraine entered a new stage of the crisis because of the falling prices at the foreign markets. The recession has been around for a year and a half. During this period, the government has managed so far to keep tariffs on previous levels and to raise the minimum wages. The national currency has been devalued only last week. These policies required squeezing the legal profits of capitalists, even so that last year the government took some steps to curb expatriation of profits by the big business.

Also, the government had to start borrowing heavily. They obtained some money from the IMF in 2008 but then refused to implement the unpopular demands. Still, they made use of the beneficial

trends at the foreign money markets and borrowed on commercial terms in 2010-2013. Right now it looks as this opportunity is fading away because of the tapering of QE by the US Fed.

They managed to get money from Russia without any obvious conditions. If the agreements with Russia don't break down before the 2015 elections, there's no doubt that the current policies will last at least until then. But eventually everything depends on whether the situation at the global markets becomes favourable for Ukrainian economy, deeply dependent on exports and imports. If the recovery comes in 2014, the ruling class may be able to wriggle their way through and continue business as usual. Otherwise, they will have to take some drastic steps towards lowering standards of life for the working class and neoliberal adjustment of economy in order to restart industries and to pay back the mounting pile of credits. So, in the pessimistic scenario, the Ukrainian "welfare state" of sorts will have lived exactly ten years: 2004-2014. Will Ukrainian bourgeoisie be strong enough to persevere that crisis and not be subjected to Russian or EU "colleagues"? That's a question which has no answer so far.

Vratislav: If I try to look at the Maidan movement and understand it, I am always curious about its class and political compositions and how they have evolved during the two months. I think you said somewhere that the initial pro-EU protesters were middle class. Were you talking about the students? Middle class is currently quite a fashionable and at the same time very vague category. Could you, please, specify a little bit more what do you mean by that in the Ukrainian context?

Denis: Depends on what period you are referring to. Initially, yes, the protesters were mainly students and urban "middle classes": petite bourgeoisie, bohemian circles, office workers. Right now, the class composition of the protests has definitely shifted to the more universal one. I'm not sure about the exact proportions but it's doubtless that the protest has become more "proletarian" - although the share of workers is still low, and when they are present, they are there as "Ukrainians" or "citizens" but not as "workers". Also, in Kyiv per se life goes on as usual, nobody is on strike etc. Generally, the protest has a cross-class nature: it includes unemployed people as well as the CEO of Microsoft Ukraine.

Vratislav: Media commentators initially described those original November protesters as being politically liberal, standing for democratic pluralism, multi-culturalism, etc. Do you agree with this description?

Denis: Definitely not multi-culturalism! I think today everybody is already aware about the role of the far-right in the protests. They are not as ubiquitous as one may think but the fact is that their ideology has really become more acceptable in the mainstream (which had initially been leaning to the right!). For example, just recently Vitali Klitschko (who is the most liberal of all the three opposition leaders) has proclaimed a campaign called "Don't be afraid, you're a Ukrainian!" Of course, most protesters really say they want political pluralism, bourgeois democracy instead of the creeping monopolization of power by one party, as the thing look now. But at the same time the crowd at the Maidan revives some deeply buried pre-modern, medieval social practices like whipping post, lynching, reinforced traditional gender roles. This scary readiness to slip into barbarism is born from the general disenchantment with parliamentary politics and the ubiquitous nationalist mythology about the golden past, imposed in schools and media. Mind you, the same things are going on in the opposite camp: social networks of the riot police officers in the internet are full of the same shit.

The original Euromaidan agenda in November was a right liberal one, standing for the EU, "economic liberties" and bourgeois democracy. But even then the issues of multiculturalism, LGBT rights, workers' rights and freedoms were severely repressed by the politically conscious far-right

activists who had joined the protests even though their own political programme had always included critique of the EU's "liberal fascism". Actually, the very name "Right Sector" originated after one of such violent clashes. The attackers didn't represent the majority of protesters, but the majority was very susceptible to their political agenda which they had been aggressively pushing through.

Vratislav: Can we say that following the first police assault, the working class people entered the Maidan? I can imagine all kinds of proletarians are frequenting the Maidan once their working or studying hours are over: people with stable jobs, precarious workers, young and old, men and women. Does any such category compose a majority of the Maidan now? And who are those people inhabiting the Maidan permanently? Are they unemployed, casual workers, who are jobless during the winter, or homeless?

Denis: First of all, you can't say that "the working class entered Maidan". Yes, the number of working-class representatives increased, but, as I said, they don't consider themselves a class, for them it is an irrelevant category. So, there's no "class-for-itself" at Maidan. And the majority of the working-class population in Kyiv is still apathetic - I mean, you can't be sure that someone you've met in the street supports Maidan. As I said, the class composition is now "universal". The majority, I think, is still represented by students and petite bourgeoisie plus proletarians from the Western regions of Ukraine. That's especially true for those who stay there permanently. Homeless people are naturally attracted by the free food and heating but they are frowned upon by many activists.

Vratislav: How that limited "influx" of proletarians (if we identify them on the basis of their position in the capitalist relation of exploitation and not their consciousness) transformed the political landscape of the Maidan? They changed it into an anti-government struggle I guess. But what else? Are they also the most numerous supporters of nationalism and far right ideologies and thus greatly boosted the influence of Svoboda and other fascist organisations within the movement?

Denis: Yes, the protests became more anti-government and pro-democracy, especially after the laws of January 16. Most people were appalled by the authoritarian threat that was their main concern. And no, I'd say that still the most numerous supporters of nationalism and far right forces are not proletarians. It's intelligentsia and especially students. Therefore, the "democratization" of the class composition of protests led to a temporary weakening of the Nazis, not strengthening them. Although in the long run the rightist political hegemony is being reinforced even though the numerical proportion of hardcore Nazis may now be less.

Vratislav: Well, that is really interesting what you have just said about students and educated people in general being the principal followers of Ukrainian fascists and ultra-nationalists. Could you explain reasons of this phenomenon a bit?

Denis: I think it fits the classic Marxist analysis of fascism quite well, doesn't it? Indeed, in Kyiv intelligentsia and petty bourgeoisie are main social forces supporting Ukrainian nationalism. In the Western regions of Ukraine Svoboda has a proletarian electoral base, but in Kyiv they gained the record number of votes in 2012 due to intelligentsia's disenchantment in the "systemic" parliamentary opposition and eagerness to try something more "radical". And since the basic "common sense" had long ago been established on the nationalist fundamental assumptions, the radicalization goes only further in that direction. Meanwhile, working class is still partly apathetic, partly trusting the major bourgeois populist parties.

Vratislav: Actually, quite recently I have read an analysis of the Maidan protests written by a Czech left-wing ukrainist. He claims that they are "first and foremost middle class

protests”, i.e. protests of “relatively educated and successful people”, while “the radical Right represents the voice of poorer strata of the Ukrainian population”. He also says that “a narrow stratum of intellectuals, writers and artists, who otherwise represent the most vociferous voice of protests, has no influence on” the ultra-right. Nevertheless, your account suggests a complete opposite - at least as far as fascists are concerned - doesn't it? What about explicitly characterising the Maidan movement as “first and foremost middle class”? In your view, would this be a correct description?

Denis: I would agree that the “middle class” definitely plays a leading role in the protests - posing as the “voice” of protesters, even if not dominating numerically (I'm not sure about numerical proportions these days; there has not been serious sociological research since the beginning of December). Anyway, Kyiv bourgeoisie and intelligentsia claims to speak not only for itself but also for everybody else, and there's no-one around to protest their claim.

Do they have influence on the ultra-right? Vice versa, actually. As I've been trying to explain, the ultra-right didn't fall upon us from the sky, they are a logical product of objective historical factors and of the policies of the ruling class understood in a broad meaning. Today they have evolved to a point when they are a self-sustained political subject, able to dictate their own agenda and to broaden their cultural hegemony.

In the Western regions Svoboda is considered to be “the” proletarian party, a political voice of the working class. I guess that's what your author was writing about. This is confirmed by the results of the last parliamentary elections. In the Eastern regions, such “proletarian party” is the “Communist” Party of Ukraine. Of course, neither actually represents the working class in any way, it's just a picture of subjective political sympathies of workers.

Meanwhile, Kyiv is a “transitional zone” between the two macro-regions. Here, in the capital, no one expected the tremendous success of Svoboda at the 2012 elections. And the main electorate of Svoboda turned out to be the “clean public”: educated and relatively well-off “middle class” which hates the current state of affairs and associates it with “communist” residues. Which thinks of EU as some fantasy land where personal virtues are rewarded with material success. Which talks about “internal occupation” by some anti-national elements. Which often speaks Russian but is still devoted to Ukrainian nationalism.

Those people are new to politics, they just “know” they are rightists and nationalists. And therefore they trust the more politically experienced leaders to express their views and formulate their programme for them. It just so happens that those leaders are nationalists or even Nazis. And they shift the centre of the political discourse even further to the right.

This is the political portrait of the middle-class majority of the Maidan. That's what happens when you don't have developed left movement and your liberals are too corrupt and ugly!

Vratislav: You have already mentioned that there is also an important percentage of petty bourgeois and even bourgeois people involved. All those parliamentary opposition leaders and their oligarchic cronies. Thus, at the end of the day we get quite an interclass movement with a numerically minoritarian working class component, right? Now, how are political views distributed among this mass? I read that the ultra right activists are a minority within the movement, however an important one. Could you possibly make an estimation how big this minority is and explain what gives them such an importance? And what about liberals? How numerous they are and what is their importance in the movement? I mean even in terms of practice.

Denis: Ukraine has a big problem with liberals - they don't exist as a self-sufficient strong political

trend. Both political camps are dominated by right populist ideologies – a wild mix of conservatism and nationalism. That’s the main problem, because the actual number of the ultra right activists is not that big, it’s even tiny compared to the crowd which at some times consisted of 100 thousand people or even more; while the full mobilization potential of fascists from all Ukraine is approximately 1-2 thousands. But, first of all, their ideas are welcome among the apolitical crowd; second of all, they are very well organized, and also people love their “radicalism”. An average Ukrainian worker hates the police and the government but he will never fight them openly and risk his comfort. So he or she welcomes a “vanguard” which is ready to fight on their behalf; especially if that vanguard shares “good” patriotic values.

Nevertheless, there is a certain distance between Nazi fighters and “normal” protesters, even the physical one. The former are now mostly gathered at the Grushevskogo street, at the barricades, while the regular “citizens” are staying at Maidan.

There is a certain (quite small) number of liberals who don’t support the far-right. Some of them even staged a protest against the Bandera torch march. Other liberals stand behind the opposition party leaders but the opposition is quite unpopular among protesters. I would say that the general mood is patriotic, even nationalist, but many people don’t support Nazis and consider them provocateurs.

Vratislav: From all you have said it seems that the bulk of protesters is somewhere between right-wing populists, disguised as liberals, and fascists; they do not identify themselves with neither of the two poles of the so called national democratic opposition, but at the same time they feel to be both pro-national and pro-democratic and all the three political currents are united on the basis of being anti-Yanukovych. Is this the case or not?

Denis: That’s right!

Except for the parliamentary liberals: rather they are trying to disguise themselves as left populists. Otherwise you just can’t win any support from the working class. Therefore, every major parliamentary political force has a right liberal wing, which always argues for austerity and liberal reforms, and a left populist wing, which demands more government handouts to the impoverished population. The first ones usually get the upper hand when their party is in power and no elections are in sight; the second ones are prominent when their party is in the opposition or during electoral campaigns. The resulting vector of these parties of large bourgeoisie is a ridiculous manoeuvring: for example, during one meeting at Maidan Arseniy Yatseniuk from Batkivschyna party said that Ukraine should urgently accept all the demands of the IMF. A week later he says that now that Russia gave a natural gas discount Yanukovych must cut the equal percentage off the (already heavily subsidized) natural gas tariffs for the population.

Vratislav: It is obvious that conservative views play an important role within the consciousness of a large part of the Ukrainian population. Where shall we look for historical and social sources of such conservatism?

Denis: Yes, I’ve already written about the creepy archaic patterns that are being revived at Maidan. Also, about the reasons: during the last 20 years the humanitarian policies of the state were in the hands of nationalists. And they managed to raise a generation which doesn’t see any problem in phrases like “Ukraine for Ukrainians” or “Ukraine is above all”, in a notion of “gene pool of the nation”. Also, the traditions and the “heroic” past is also considered as something a priori good. Denying the current state of affairs and the Soviet experience, being afraid of all the progressive elements of EU ideology (like tolerance for LGBT, popularity of leftist ideology) they are gladly embracing all the invented traditions they were taught in schools.

Vratislav: Would it be plausible to identify as a reason of this conservatism also the fact that after the initial “shock therapy” in the 1990’s, the capitalist restructuring lost its momentum and since then the Ukraine has tended towards becoming a “world for itself” and preserving a certain social-economic status quo, perhaps, in order to avoid an explosion of so many contradictions (class, national, geopolitical, economical, etc.) that intersect each other in the Ukrainian society? In such a context of a defensive withdrawal from global liberalisation processes, strong and widespread conservative nationalism, with its unquestioning celebration of the “glorious” past, would seem to make sense.

Denis: I don’t know much about how this restructuring went in the “exemplary” countries like Czech Republic; didn’t you have a certain resurgence of conservative values and nationalist “invented traditions”? As far as I know, that has been the case not only in Ukraine and Russia, but also in such countries as Poland, Hungary, Romania, former Yugoslav republics.

I would rather explain it in another way: the crash of the “real socialism” also brought about the crash of the progressive values which had been officially promoted in that society (atheism, feminism, internationalism). The gap has been promptly filled by the wild mixture of nationalism and conservatism (and New Age charlatan philosophy, for that matter). This shift was eagerly supported by the state ideological apparatus. Actually, in many universities at the beginning of 1990s the departments of “scientific communism” were rebranded into “scientific nationalism”! Later they became the departments of “political science” though.

So, this situation is in many ways similar to the wave of conservatism and Islamism which came to the Middle Eastern countries after the downfall of the modernizing bourgeois dictatorships and of the opposing socialist ideology. My hypothesis is that the severity of this process may correlate to the level of urbanization in a given country: the larger the part of urban dwellers, the less the probability of such slide back to conservatism and the depth of this slide.

It’s true that there was a period of certain dominance of Western liberal ideas in the 1990s. But it ended when the state regained its positions and the society stabilized after the initial shock.

Vratislav: Now, let me get back to the ultra-right elements. How much pro- or anti-European is Svoboda? So far I have seen quite contradictory information. Is Tyahnyboh and his MPs really determined to co-manage IMF austerity programmes in case the movement will overthrow Yanukovich and today’s parliamentary opposition will form a new pro-Western government? Would not such a policy possibly alienate their rank and file members?

Denis: As I’ve already said, they treat the EU integration in a purely pragmatic, populist manner. It contradicts their programme, but they (Svoboda) will support it as long as it’s important for masses. In the case the opposition wins over, the right liberals will impose austerity measures while Svoboda will probably criticize their partners. Normally, they are quite sensitive to the social-economic issues, “defending” the workers. But at the end of the day, it’s the old dilemma of Hitlerists versus Strasserians. And there’s no doubt that the former will defeat the latter. Actually, there was already one generation of Strasserian activists in the ranks of Svoboda who were recently expelled; now they are fighting with Svoboda in Lviv. Obviously, if Svoboda at some point in history wins over the country they will follow the examples of their historical predecessors.

Vratislav: While looking at the Ukrainian movement, I can’t escape an impression that it combines some important characteristics of two different moments in the global processes of class struggle. On one hand, I can’t help recalling Hungarian riots in 2005 and 2006. That was before the beginning of the global crisis, but Hungary experienced a financial

collapse at that time and young fascists expressed a movement that at the end of the day led to installation of Orban's neo-liberal government, backed by Jobbik. On the other hand, there are also similarities between the Maidan movement and Indignados, Occupy or Arab Spring movements, both in terms of their forms and contents. Proletarians are getting agitated by social and economical grievances, but they do not struggle directly on that basis. They seem to bypass social reality of their lives and only come together on a political terrain, as upset citizens or angry national community or something in between. What do you think about that picture, based on your direct experience from within the Maidan?

Denis: Yes, as a matter of fact it's a very accurate description. The parallel with Hungary-2006 is a good one. But I wouldn't compare Ukrainian protests with the Spanish indignados because in Spanish society there's a center-left cultural hegemony, unlike Ukraine. The same goes for Occupy: that movement was quite ideologically confused but still the mainstream there was left liberal. One good parallel is Egypt: we saw how the progressive revolutionary impulse brought about the fall of Mubarak, but then Islamists took over the protests, monopolized the revolution and split the masses. Eventually, they scared the population back into the hands of the old regime. Ukrainian Svoboda and other fascists are similar to the Egyptian Muslim Brothers and other Islamists in many ways. They are "the" opposition to the hated regime; but they cannot (hopefully) unite all protesters under their banner. The protesting people, on the other hand, are very angry but they lack their own language to express themselves, and they borrow the language of the most prominent group. They are not ready to organize themselves along the class lines, they present themselves as a "nation" (or "Umma", as in Egypt). Except that Egypt is more homogeneous, it didn't have "the other half of the country" loyal to Mubarak.

If we forget about the existence of South and East, then in the terms of bourgeois politics the situation resembles the Hungarian one even closer. Central and Western Ukraine are mostly in favour of right liberal populists (Batkivschyna) who have smaller and more radical allies (Svoboda) - complete parallel to Fidesz and Jobbik.

Vratislav: It seems that a struggle against corrupt rulers and/or corrupt businessmen is something what links the Maidan with other square movements. I guess that fighting against Yanukovich's „family“ usurping the state, against the police protecting and itself embodying the corrupt regime and for an ideal of „West-like“ democracy is the Ukrainian way of fighting for „real democracy“? Is that right?

Denis: Roughly so, yes. I don't even know what else to add.

Vratislav: The Maidan as a social body has to tackle its own reproduction, to organise its own infrastructure, defence, etc. as the Oakland Commune or Tahrir had to do. It would be great if you could talk a bit about this important aspect and describe how is Maidan's internal life sustained and organised.

Denis: As far as I understand, all the potential self-organization at Maidan is substituted by the organizational structures of the rightist political forces. Svoboda, Right Sector and Spilna Sprava occupy buildings and manage the everyday life. The parliamentary opposition also has its voice in these matters; anyway, everything is strongly dependent on leaders who represent the already established political structures. For example, there are sotnias - "hundreds", defence units. Formally they are all under command of Andriy Parubiy - once a founding member of Social Nationalist party of Ukraine which is now called Svoboda, but now a member of Batkivschyna. In reality, there are units which don't obey Parubiy or even Svoboda (like the Right Sector), but anyway the existence of "not sanctioned" units is doubtful. The same goes for other issues: food, firewood, petroleum, makeshift weaponry. You can walk around and collect money for these purposes but you must give

away 70% to “bosses” who will know how to spend that money. There is some space for self-organization but it’s very limited. Vital things just “appear” for an ordinary person there, rank-and-file activists don’t take any part in decision-making. Although if you belong to a certain “sotnia”, it can be quite autonomous in managing its own funds and resources. Then everything depends on the structure and relations inside that particular unit.

Vratislav: So, while for instance Indignados tended to exclude political parties from occupations, in case of the Maidan opposition parties are present in its very heart and Maidan’s self-reproduction is dependent on Batkivshchina, UDAR, Svoboda and their own structures and resources. Moreover, elsewhere you said that there are no assemblies taking place at the Maidan. During two months of being and struggling together at the Maidan participants have not produced their own separated moment of collective decision-making. Why is it so? Because decisions are in fact made by the opposition leaders and their hierarchies? In some other interview you also pointed out that there is a kind of dichotomy between “the crowd” and politicians. How does this dichotomy come into existence and expresses itself?

Denis: I think I’ve partly answered your question above. Yes, the opposition parties are not exactly popular among people at Maidan, they are considered to be opportunists pursuing their own interests and ready to betray the protest movement. But still they are indeed managing the infrastructure of Maidan and are the ones who make actual decisions. Indeed, there haven’t appeared any assemblies or other instruments of collective decision-making. Maybe in certain respect this paradoxical situation is a reflection of the society as a whole with its paternalistic attitudes and social passivity: it’s convenient to hate bosses but to let them do the things!

Vratislav: However, from a short analysis published by Byelorussian anarchists on the Revolutionary Action website it seems that in regions outside Kyiv, especially Lviv and Sumy, the dichotomy between protesters and politicians is much deeper and more articulated. Very briefly they talk about an elaborated conception of an “apolitical protest” (without primacy of politicians over citizen activists). They say there was an assembly in Sumy electing so called regional “National Council” and establishing district National Councils in order to control local politicians and investigate corruption; and organising “citizen militia” units. They describe the same process taking place in Lviv and quote a local “commander Sokolov” who said the National Councils are taking over and are about to elect their executive committees, while politicians will be excluded from them, because people do not trust them anymore. Could you possibly explain more about this tendency and analyse it a bit?

Denis: As far as I know, those “National Councils” usually consist of self-appointed party activists and deputies of local and regional councils. They’ve promised to hold elections but so far no transparent elections have been organized. The optimism of the Byelorussian comrades is based on wildly exaggerated assumptions. These “National Councils” didn’t dare to take on any real powers, they didn’t do anything which could be considered “usurping of power” and hardly broke any law! Here is a news piece about the situation in Lviv [\[2\]](#). The head of the Lviv “National Council” who is, incidentally, also the head of the Lviv regional council and prominent member of Svoboda, requested protesters to leave the building of the regional state administration. Andriy Sokolov, the commander of the “militia” that you’ve mentioned, promptly complied and cleared the building. So, the “revolutionary” National Council has in effect died, not having done anything at all.

Vratislav: I see. So even in the regions we get the same picture as in Kyiv: the movement’s distrust towards political parties doesn’t really translate into any serious attempts at forming self-organised bodies that would be able to authentically articulate movement’s

content. Recently, I read that there was also an attempt of various citizens' associations and initiatives involved in the Maidan to organise the Citizens' Council of the Maidan as a direct expression of the movement. However, oppositional politicians were able to effectively discredit and abort this attempt. Could you possibly tell me more about this development? Who were the people behind this Citizens' Council? How and why they could fail so easily?

Denis: The "Civic Council of Maidan" was formed by several prominent human rights activists, lawyers, celebrities and NGOs who don't particularly like parliamentary opposition and are not very fond of nationalists. As far as I know, the Confederation of Free Trade Unions of Ukraine also joined them. They've tried to create a liberal (partly even left liberal) alternative in the movement, stipulating the importance of human rights, civic freedoms, horizontal decision-making, grassroots initiatives etc. But somehow they failed to develop into any serious force. The initiative is mostly virtual, without any considerable number of rank-and-file activists on the ground. Why is that? The reason, I think, is not the cunning strategy of the opposition, but the objective conditions, namely, the state of public discourse. If a person is interested in oppositional activity, she will most likely join the "stronger" current with brave nationalist machos and powerful politicians. The number of people who are earnestly interested in such alternative "civic" movement is quite small, indeed; in this field everything has been eaten up by the opposition in December, after the "civic" Maidan (initially at Maidan per se) was merged with the "political" Maidan (initially at the European Square). After that, politicians said many things about how you can't do anything without their support. And to a certain extent they are right! Indeed, today Maidan consumes lots of material and human resources provided by parties.

Vratislav: In an interview for LibCom you explained how the opposition parties attempted to transfer the Maidan beyond its territorial borders by proclaiming a political general strike and how they failed quite miserably. The reason you gave was that they do not have any workplace structure to do that. However, the Maidan has been able to spread from Kyiv to other regions, but it seems that once again only as a movement of occupations and riots. You also talked about a protest of Kyiv public transport company workers that did not find its way to the Maidan and vice versa. And you mentioned that Ukrainian people are not used to striking. In sum, does it mean that the Ukraine (as most other Central and Eastern European countries and many other regions of the world) is characterised by a striking lack of workplace struggles? In your view, what are the reasons?

Denis: Yes, that's right. There are plenty of theories to explain the labour weakness in the Eastern Europe. One of the most convincing is the legacy of Soviet political culture where you had bosses who did everything for you and instead of you. There is a huge institution left from the USSR, Federation of Trade Unions of Ukraine. Officially, it has millions of members, but it is in no way a militant organization which defends workers' rights. They have good lawyers and bureaucrats who take part in the procedures of social partnership, honestly trying to win as many concessions as they can, but they see themselves as co-managers of the corporatist economy, not as representatives of workers. As for other, truly independent, militant unions - well, there are virtually none.

Why hasn't the workplace militancy developed during post-Soviet time? Partly because of the long and painful economic crisis. You can't unionise and strike when you're about to be kicked out into the streets, and your factory is about to close. There were massive strikes in 1990s, to be sure, but they were mostly organized by management of non-privatized enterprises as an instrument of pressure on their bosses. So, new structures and institutions which could become a base for an independent workers' movement simply did not appear. The old pattern of delegating your struggle to the bosses was thus confirmed. And the economic boom of 2000s turned out to be too short for

changing that attitude.

Vratislav: Now, could you possibly explain what other struggles have been going on around the Maidan and if there were at least some attempts to link them with the Maidan? We have just mentioned a protest of public transport workers in Kyiv. I also read something about a student strike in Kyiv-Mohyla Academy. Could you perhaps also explain what is the relation of the Ukrainian ultra-left towards both the Maidan and other struggles? What is its role and activities in them? I assume it must be very difficult to be involved in the Maidan, given the influence of fascists and ethno-nationalists. Nevertheless, I read about anarchists and feminists being present and active there.

Denis: The far left have been divided to some extent in their relation to the Maidan. A smaller part declared the protests as utterly reactionary and declined any support at all. The problem is that such position pushes them into the ranks of government supporters! The logical outcome is the situation where a member of one such organization, Borotba, defends the regional state administration in Odessa from the siege by opposition activists. True, the siege was led by neo-nazis, but there were neo-nazis among the defenders as well! Namely, local "Cossacks", paramilitary pro-Russian units.

Another part of the left repetitively tried to join the movement, even after they were repetitively kicked out of it. Some of the "euro-enthusiastic" leftists came to Maidan in November with red (instead of blue) flag of the EU, with banners for free healthcare and education, and with feminist slogans. They were brutally attacked by Nazis. Then there was an episode when the far-right attacked the tent of the Confederation of Free Trade Unions of Ukraine near the Maidan. A man on the stage said that there were some "provocateurs" and said that "men know what to do"; as a result, a mob of Nazis has broken ribs of the trade union activists, tore their tent with knives and stolen their property. The victims hadn't been doing anything "leftist" per se, but they were members of the left movement, known to their political adversaries, and that was enough.

Anyway, most of the left activists understand that it's not their war. After the "dictatorial laws" were passed, they decided to join the movement - not so much as political activists, more as common citizens whose political freedoms were at risk. Many leftists joined forces to institute the "Hospital Watch": guarding injured people in hospitals so that they are not taken away by the police. Of course, this is an infrastructural, "humanist", not political project. Other people tried to organize an all-Ukrainian student strike. They started from the Kyiv-Mohyla Academy but eventually failed: everything was over when the university was closed for winter vacations anyway.

Now there is also another group of people who are often confused with the radical left. I mean organizations like "Narodniy Nabat" and several other initiatives who call themselves anarchists but actually have a very conservative political agenda full of machismo and xenophobia. After the protests have begun, they shifted to the right dramatically; they reached truce with the nazi groups and showered Molotov cocktails at the police together. Eventually, they parted ways with left movement finally.

A week ago they, together with some actual leftists who wanted to "act", decided to form an "anarchist sotnia" in the Maidan self-defence. In order to do that, they were prepared to give an oath to Andriy Parubiy. But when they formed their ranks to do this, they were met by approximately 150 Svoboda fighters with baseball bats and axes. The fascists accused them of being racially impure and politically irrelevant and forced them out of Maidan. Now, the funny thing is that the next day those macho-nationalist-"anarchists" said that the reason for their bad relations with the Svoboda paramilitary was that some of our comrades draw anti-nationalist graffiti around Maidan [3]. So they threatened to beat them up for distorting their friendship with the Nazis!

The most reasonable strategy for the left, as for me, is to try to build a “second front” against the government as well as the far-right. This should be done from outside of Maidan, not from inside of it. We should not be afraid of saying who we are and what are our ultimate political goals; only in this way we can build a strong political coalition with other forces who are in the same position right now (namely, with left liberals who are also excluded from the movement). Right now we are planning a campaign against political dictatorship, stipulating that the weakening of presidential powers actually does not correspond to the interests of any political parties. This can be a rallying point for a broad coalition, and then we can start developing a critique of bourgeois democracy per se. Another important direction is preparing for anti-austerity campaign if the government faces budget crisis later this year. But anyway, we must understand that we cannot reverse the fundamental trends and achieve cultural hegemony overnight. We have a lot of hard work before us, there will be years before we will have our own revolution.

Vratislav: What are the latest developments? I have heard about a possibility that the military could step onto the stage and about amnesty for arrested protesters being ratified by Yanukovich. However, the government keeps on insisting that the EU admission treaty would be an economical disaster for the Ukraine, while Klitschko keeps on proclaiming that there is no other way but the pro-European one...

Denis: The probability of military stepping-in tends to zero. Unlike Egypt, in Ukraine the military are chronically underfunded and inefficient, they are also not considered to be a political actor at all.

The amnesty - well, last week the parliament passed a very strange law which says that all the political activists will be pardoned and won't be hunted by the police if during next 15 days the Prosecutor General publishes on his website the news release that all the buildings of power structures are emptied from the protesters, and that protesters have moved back to Maidan from other streets they had recently occupied. Right now this is a matter of discussion - whether these conditions will not be altered, because people are not happy with such prospects and are not ready to back off.

Anyway, right now the main discussion goes around new Cabinet (how many opposition politicians it will include) and the possibility of the return to the previous version of the Constitution, with stronger parliament and weaker president.

About the EU treaty - I don't think it matters much to anyone right now. Of course, EU and Russia will each try to force through their own interests in Ukraine during the solving of the conflict, but for now it will go unnoticed by the general public. Anyway, it's likely that the EU treaty won't be signed during next few months.

Vratislav: On February 7, Andriy Parubiy announced a plan to transform the Maidan Self-Defence into a “united revolutionary army” called the Ukrainian Self-Defence League and expand it throughout the nation. He talked about a need to increase the number of its fighters from current 12.000 to 30.000-40.000 volunteers “who could get to Kyiv and efficiently oppose the regime”. His deputy commander Andriy Levus added: “Beginning today, every self-defence fighter is not only a guard, but also revolutionary political soldier.” How do you interpret these words and intentions? It seems like the opposition leaders grouped in the National Resistance Headquarters decided to prepare for a final showdown by facilitating themselves with a sizeable fighting force that could help them to seize the power by any means necessary.

Denis: At least they are heating up their rhetoric. Theoretically, this could make sense. The military can't be counted upon; the riot police force is approximately 5 thousands; also, recently the government has taken steps to legalize “self-defence units” - loyalist thugs operating as an auxiliary

force at the command of police officers. So, if it comes to open violent conflict, such force - 30-40 thousands of anti-government fighters - can realistically be gathered and can probably organize an effective resistance. But as it looks right now, the government is not ready to stage direct physical assault for a number of reasons. Therefore, I think these calculations will remain on a purely theoretical level.

Vratislav: Is there something else you would like to say about the Maidan movement or about the current situation; or, perhaps, about possible prospects of the whole movement across the country? Is there something you need anarchists and communists abroad to do in order to support you?

Denis: I think the best form of support from abroad would be campaigning against the "leftist" arm of the Ukrainian governmental coalition - the so called Communist Party of Ukraine - and institutions which are related to it. Here's a brief text on why this should be done [4]. In this way communists and anarchists sympathizing with the oppressed workers and left activists will not be showing any support to the far right, liberal and patriotic elements dominant in the protest; the far-left nature of the solidarity action will be clearly pronounced.

Vratislav: Thank you very much for the interview and good luck in your struggle!

Denis: Thanks for interviewing us, and let's keep in touch!

Vratislav: Surely, we will!

P.S.

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<http://avtonomia.net/2014/02/20/maidan-contradictions-interview-ukrainian-revolutionary-syndicalist/>

* Source:

<http://pratelekomunizace.wordpress.com/2014/02/19/maidan-and-its-contradictions-interview-with-a-ukrainian-revolutionary-syndicalist/>

Footnotes

[1] See also the statement of the AWU Kiev branch. - avtonomia.net:
<http://avtonomia.net/2014/02/19/zayavlenie-ast-kiev-o-situatsii-v-ukraine/>

[2] <http://control.zik.ua/news/view/10812>

[3] <http://nihilist.li/2014/02/10/novy-e-graffiti-v-tsentre-kieva/>

[4] Available on ESSF (article 31251), [Open Letter to the European Left on the situation in Ukraine](#).