

Interview

## **Maidan (Ukraine): “It was a real revolution”**

Monday 10 March 2014, by [AGUITON Christophe](#), [BULLARD Nicola](#), [CHEREPANYN Vasyl](#) (Date first published: 6 March 2014).

**Vasyl Cherepanyn is the Head of the Visual Culture Research Centre in Kyiv and editor of the *Political Critique* magazine (Ukrainian edition). He was one of the organisers of the Post-globalisation Initiative conference held in Kyiv in June 2013, in preparation for the counter G20 in St Petersburg. Recently, he participated in a debate with “indignados” activists in Madrid.**

**Christophe Aguiton and Nicola Bullard interviewed him on 6 March 2014.**

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### **Christophe Aguiton and Nicola Bullard: Tell us about your involvement with the Maidan movement?**

Vasyl Cherepanyn: Visual Culture Research Centre has been involved in Maidan since December. We have helped organise an education programme at the Open University of Maidan for people living in the square called “Global Protest” which located the Ukrainian uprising in the broader context, in particular the Arab Spring, indignados and Occupy. We knew that police were taking injured protestors from the hospitals to the police headquarters, so we organised a big network of people to guard those in hospital.

Leftists and social activists were involved in many different activities, including medical services, SOS Maidan — a kind of alternative media, legal aid and information hotline for the Maidan movement.

### **We hear a lot about the presence of neo-Nazi and fascist groups in the Maidan. Can you tell us who was there?**

VC: First of all, let me say that there is a real Western blindness about the Ukrainian situation. The context is somehow beyond the Western imagination. Yes, the far Right was there, but it was a real revolution, and in a real revolution all the oppositional forces are present. Everyone was there — except, of course, the oligarchs and the small elite of super rich.

To contextualise the role of the far Right it is important to remember the sequence of events. The so-called “Euro Maidan” started on 21 November 2013. The pretext for the mobilisation was the President’s refusal to sign the trade agreement with the EU and in the early days there were journalists, students — and the far Right who joined in a typical parasitic fashion. The neo-Nazi Svoboda Party was the first parliamentary party to join the movement, which gave them a certain visibility. Then on 29 November there was a crackdown. This only enlarged the protests and after that we could see that all the social sectors and opposition political forces were there. This was

when the Euro Maidan became the Maidan and as the protests grew, the role and influence of the far Right decreased.

I know that for some in the Left it is impossible to be part of a movement if the far Right is also there. But reality is not as pure as political theory and, in my opinion, the role of the Left is to participate and engage. As a final detail about the far Right, there is now a competition between the Svoboda Party and the Right Sector, a new group formed in Maidan that includes radical nationalist organisations and a some of the football hooligans.

The most important point is that the engine of Maidan was the people not political parties or organisations: ordinary people who came out to the square and who stayed until victory. Some paid with their lives.

### **Another criticism from some left organisations in Europe is the prohibition of the Communist Party in Ukraine?**

VC: The Communist party was not forbidden. There was an initiative to forbid both the Party of Regions, Viktor Yanukovich's party, and the Communist Party, when they voted together on 16 January this year to ban demonstrations and to control NGOs and independent media. This initiative didn't go through, and of course no party will be forbidden. But you have to know that the Communist Party is communist only in name: its only program is nostalgia for the Soviet Union welfare state. There's nothing communist in that!

### **What about the role of the trade unions?**

VC: The official union federation was on the side of the authorities, however the independent federation was with the protests. In fact the head of the federation was in the Maidan Council. There was an effort to organise a general strike but this proved impossible: oligarchs own the factories and industries and they cracked down immediately on any attempts to organise strikes. There were some strikes in central and western Ukraine, mainly in the white-collar sector. I believe if we had succeeded in organising a general strike, the protest would have been even bigger and less violent.

### **The situation in Ukraine has been characterised as pro-Europe versus pro-Russian, with the country divided in two. Indeed, talk of federation and the new parliament's decision to not recognise Russian as an official language give the impression of a country deeply divided.**

VC: First of all, the 2012 parliamentary decision to make Russian an official language is unconstitutional, as the Constitution says clearly that Ukrainian is the official language. However, even through the 2012 decision was unconstitutional, I think the recent decision of the new parliament was a mistake and they are now stepping back from that decision. It's important to remember that almost 50 per cent of the people at Maidan were Russian speakers.

Speaking more generally, the discourse about "two Ukraines" was popular in the 1990s, just after independence, when some intellectuals theorised the historical division of Ukraine, the west having been part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and the east of the Russian Empire. However, by the 2000s this idea didn't pass the test of reality: Ukraine stayed as one country and Maidan proved this.

Maidan happened across the country, not only in Kyiv but also in Odessa, Kharkiv, Donetsk, and even in Sevastapol in Crimea. In January, there was a wave of actions to seize administrative buildings, all over Ukraine. In the east, where Yanukovich's party, the Party of Regions, controls all the state apparatus, the repression was very harsh: activists were attacked by special police and

criminals and there were kidnappings, shootings and torture.

I see the talk of federation as a sign that the regime was losing control: this was a desperate attempt to hang on to power. The reality is that Ukrainian people are more concerned about economic and social problems than about cultural myths that are used as propaganda against our unity.

### **And how do you see the situation now in Crimea?**

VC: The history of Crimea is specific. It has the status of an autonomous republic within Ukraine and it is of tremendous strategic value to Russia. For many years the Kremlin has funded pro-Russian organisations, including some who present themselves as leftists and use leftist discourse to spread propaganda.

Basically, though, the military occupation by Russia is a putsch: a counter-revolution against the protests. What happened in Ukraine is Putin's worst nightmare: he needs to use all his means — both military and propaganda — to discredit political alternatives in Ukraine (including the leftist one) and by extension, in Russia. But the reality is that the Ukrainian situation is now out of Russia's control.

### **What should the Left in Europe (and elsewhere) do now?**

VC: As usual, the EU and the West have been too late to act. We needed sanctions in December, but better late than never. And the Left too has been slow to act. We expected international protests to support Maidan and to put pressure on the EU and the US to act in a more decisive way, but there was nothing. There was no real international solidarity.

But we can see that Maidan also threatened the EU. Maidan was for an alternative Europe and we found the way to fight for rights in a real, radical and democratic way. Maybe this is why the EU was so slow to act.

The Left needs to be more active and more informed. It should not be repeating Putin's propaganda that fascists occupied Maidan. The Left needs to pay more attention to the context and understand that Maidan was a real social protest, and that Ukraine had a real revolution.

### **What about the Left in Ukraine?**

VC: There is now a new political space where the Left can be more visible and influential. Before the political landscape was occupied by the neo-Nazis and the oligarchs. This has partly changed.

Now the most active force is the Ukrainian people. Maidan was a proof that the masses are the real engine of revolution and progress. The Left cannot go on as before — elitist and sectarian. Now we have to be more inclusive and to work with the broader masses. We have to open our perspectives, to keep it real, and to engage in all possible social issues. Rather than the content, the form of our activity is important.

Of course we need to build new platforms such as social centres and to institutionalise some of the Maidan initiatives. But most of all, the Left needs to go outside and listen to people. Every defeat of the Left is a victory for the far Right. We need to listen to what people want, and not only pay attention to our idols of the past. The absence of political practice creates theoretical hallucination.

