

What happened in Odessa? Maidan, the Government, the Movement on the East

Only the workers' movement can stop flaring up of war in Ukraine

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On May 2014 more than 40 people were killed in Odessa during the brutal clashes and fire in the "House of Trade Unions". The violent actions came from both sides of the confrontation and there is no excuse for this. Very careful investigation is needed to find out the true story of events.

We can speak only about our first impressions now. It looks as if the so-called pro-Russian activists provoked violence by blocking the route of the rally for "unified Ukraine". This blocking of the route was definitely the aggressive step, because before 2 May neither side made attempts to prevent opponents from holding demonstrations in Odessa. Never previously were routes of pro-Russian demonstrations blocked. When two demonstrations approached each other hard cobblestones and paving blocks were thrown from both sides.

The witnesses we have at the moment indicate that first shooting was from the side of "pro-Russians". Even the "Borotba" organization which is at the moment the integral part of this pro-Russian movement in Odessa did not affirm that shooting did not begin from their side. It looks like the most of guns were automatic rifles but there were also some shot guns.

For the moment we have no firm witnesses of shooting from the "unified Ukraine" demonstrators on Sobornaya square in downtown Odessa during the blocking of their route by "pro-Russians". But we have evidence of machine gun fire, first killings and severe injuries there. Witnesses say the shooting came from the "pro-Russians", behind the police and under their protection. It is important to stress that most witnesses were involved in clashes and have a very emotional perception of events. Some impartial and unprejudiced investigation of events is absolutely needed.

On the other hand after the shooting, the "pro-Russians" were subject to brutal beating from the "pro-Ukrainian" opponents. Many of them were severely injured and some possibly killed. Moreover the "pro-Ukrainian" crowd ran wild smashing the camp of "pro-Russians" on the Kulikovo Pole square near Odessa's main railway station. The tents were burned down in minutes. At that moment we also have the first firm witnesses that the "pro-Ukrainians" also used guns. Then "pro-Russians" holed up in the "House of Trade Unions". The building was burned by "Molotov cocktails" thrown from outside of the building (the theory that the fire began inside the building is very questionable). But of course we cannot exclude the possible role of provocateurs whoever they could be.

Many people died in the fire from suffocation and burns. Some jumped from windows and died on the ground. Some escaped using fire ladders and ropes. There are witnesses who indicated that

“pro-Ukrainians” come to their senses and tried to save people from the fire. They put ladders to some windows, tried to put tires in front of some windows to make a softer landing.

But there is also evidence of clashes between the people saved from fire with ladders and those who put these ladders. It seems that “pro-Russians” saved from fire did not want to surrender and tried to fight for escape. Some witnesses also claim that some “pro-Russians” who did not resist were also beaten. Testimonies are contradictory and it is hard to be sure what happened without an unprejudiced investigation of events.

Nevertheless, what we can state for sure is that the radical left activists who participated in joint actions a year before, were now involved in events on both the sides killing each other. Andrej Brajevsky, a 27 year old programmer, a member of “Borotba” organization was killed in the “House of Unions”. He was in a pro-Russian “Odesskaya druzhina” para-military unit. Another young man from the “anti-fa” football fans movement was shot on Sobornaya square.

It appears that left activists became the infantry, the cannon fodder in the war which clearly has nothing to do with the class interests of Ukrainian workers of all nationalities and ethnic origins. Leftists were killed in Kiev fighting for Maidan against the Police (remember the 33 year old anarchist Sergii Kens’kyj shot dead on 20 February on Instytuts’ka street). Now leftists fighting on the anti-Maidan side were also killed.

The fact is that workers do not participate in either antagonistic movement, and because of that both movements are progressively turning away from an agenda of social and class struggle to a ethno-cultural, nationalistic and finally chauvinistic one. The question of the justification of the existence of the Ukrainian state turns to much more important for both sides than all the issues of social security and labour rights.

Where workers participate they allow no violence. And it happens in all parts of Ukraine, no matter whether it in the East or West.

When anti-Maidan forces in Kryvyi Rig (Dnepropetrovsk oblast) tried to use paid militants to attack and beat the Maidan activists in this industrial city, miners’ self-defense units easily found the way to pacify provocateurs and nobody was killed.

Nobody was killed when the workers of Krasnodon (Lugansk oblast) went on strike and effectively took the city under their control during the uprising. Workers did not allow either anti-Maidan or pro-Maidan forces to use them. They did not join the “pro-Russian” movement. But they also did not allow themselves to be used in support of Timoshenko or any other bourgeois candidate in the Presidential elections.

But the workers are in Kryvyi Rig and Krasnodon, and there are no organized workers in the streets of Odessa, Donetsk, Lugansk and or of Slov’jansk and Kramatorsk. Workers are, as a rule, not involved in the movement. And while we saw some signs of involvement of independent unions in central Ukraine we have seen no signs of involvement of workers’ unions in the movement in the East. And this is the key to the tragedy of civil war that is now flaring up in Ukraine.

The Ukraine is much more homogenous than one might think. There are many ethnic Russians and ethnic Ukrainians in all parts of Ukraine. And setting them at loggerheads will mean ethnic conflict in all parts of the country. There is no point in speculation about the social composition of Maidan and anti-Maidan, or as some call it “pro-Ukrainian” and “pro-Russian” movements. It looks like it is mostly the same. And working people were present in both of course, as well as lumpen and petty bourgeoisie elements.

In the cities where more workers live more workers individually participate in both Maidan and anti-Maidan.

And there are also many right-wingers and a very weak workers' movement. Soviet Stalinism destroyed the tradition of workers' self-organization in our country and an independent workers' movement is only now making first steps. But these steps are significant and have already shown that a general strike can change the agenda of protests.

And the only force that can stop this war is the workers' movement of solidarity around the demands of social justice and removing of oligarchy from power. This is the only chance for Ukraine to survive.

As we see that the police demonstrate in Odessa a lack of the capacity and even will to protect anybody, we call on workers to form their own independent self-defence units under the control of strike committees (like in Lugansk) or independent trade-unions like "Miners" hundred of Kryvyi Rig.

Difference between Maidan and the Government of Ukraine

We have never supported this government.

We can put up with it temporarily but not support it. It is another question that we cannot consider it a military junta. Not yet. Unfortunately, the junta is not in Kiev, but in Slov'jansk. In Kiev you can easily have demonstrations with red flags and distribute leaflets of any kind. The May Day demonstrations showed this explicitly. All liberal freedoms are available in Kiev, but not in the Donetsk Peoples Republic. You probably heard about regular kidnappings of journalists and ordinary people. At Easter people armed with machine guns searched and undressed me in Slov'jansk because I had Kiev registration. I was saved by local residents who bailed me out. Some my friends are still somewhere in the basement of Slov'jansk SBU building. It looks like they use administrative buildings just to make prisons of them.

But as for the central government in Kiev, it not only represents nobody in Eastern Ukraine, it is not in fact trusted much in Western and even central Ukraine. Maidan was a mass movement inspired by the idea of justice, social justice as the first necessity. When we had public discussions on Maidan in January and February people were sure that as soon as Janukovich was removed we would stop corruption and increase social standards.

People were angry with the idea that the new government could impose austerity measures and social cuts, just as Janukovich did. Nobody believed it, but it is exactly what government is trying to do now to receive IMF loans.

The government is now switching its attention to national security. But this nationalist hysteria has nothing to do with the Maidan movement as a whole.

This government was at one moment accepted by Maidan and it was definitely the worst thing Maidan could ever accept. But it is no more pro-Maidan. Unfortunately the Maidan movement as we know it in the winter of 2013/2014 no longer exists.

The government is now trying to move away from Maidan's agenda of social justice but I think that the only force capable of drawing it back to the real essence of Maidan – will be the new Maidan, the workers' one. And in this case it would be another government.

I don't think that at the moment the "Pravyi sector" controls the National Guard units or even plays a significant role there .

Some individual members of right parties can participate in the National Guard but they are in a small minority in these units up to now. The "Pravyi sector" is a very small party that exists mostly on Russian TV channels. But it is also true that moving to the nationalist agenda of "defending ethnic Ukrainians from invasion of Russians" will make radical right-wingers more and more significant, and among the military as well.

The Movement on the East

It is definitely less massive and less loud than Maidan in Kiev. For example, during the last months they have failed to organize a single mass rally that is more than 1.5 thousand people strong in Donetsk. There are very few leaflets and newspapers, virtually no discussions. You could hardly find a place for public discussion in Sloviansk and Kramatorsk even during the mass demos a month ago, now under the military regime of DPR there are definitely no such places. Instead of discussions they organized public places for watching Russian TV by satellite.

Russian citizens and even organized armed groups are definitely present. But most active participants are of course locals. For example, in Kramatorsk two major local criminal gangs are playing the leading role in "self-defence" militia. In the "green man" unit in Sloviansk many are Russian citizens, some are veterans of Russian security forces. Are there any actual Russian officers in service? Of course we don't know exactly but we see for sure the coordination with the Russian authorities.

On the other hand it is clear that the main organizing force from the beginning was not the Russian government but local oligarchs. It is hard to say to what extent it is coordinated by Yanukovich, Mogilev, Pshonka and others, but it was definitely begun with the knowledge and agreement of Akhmetov who is the major Ukrainian oligarch, and they say the "Master of Donbass".

And of course the leadership of DPR and especially of the military coup in Sloviansk are right-wing chauvinists. The military commander of DPR is Mr. Strelkov (former Russian FSB officer Girkin) who is a conscious monarchist and big fan of Denikin. All these people think that independent Ukraine is just a mistake of history to be corrected. Which as you understand is not acceptable for most Ukrainians, even in Donbass.

Unfortunately we cannot call this movement anti-fascist at all. It is not less fascist as the Maidan movement. And it seems to me that at the moment it looks much more fascist in the way it acts. Let's remember the violent attack of this "anti-fascist" demonstration on the "pro-Ukrainian" demonstration in Donetsk a week ago. Three hundred people well-armed with metal sticks attacked the pro-Maidan demo which was approximately 800 strong but not armed at all. Twelve people were badly injured and are still in hospital, more than a hundred and fifty were beaten, all on the pro-Maidan side. When these "anti-fascists" disperse "maiduns" as they call them and finish beating, they just go back to the DNR headquarters, they do not even try to hide themselves.

The leftist sthat join this movement back up this chauvinistiagenda and fail to push any internationalism. At the moment they justify themselves with the argument that Russian imperialism is less evil then American, and because of that "we should support Russian imperialism" - a shameful logic.

The balance sheet of the Conference “Left and Maidan”

The so-called “Euromaidan” movement in Ukraine was complicated. What is going on now is even more complicated. To sort things out about Maidan we even organized the conference in Kiev on 12 April. [1] Of course we did not reach a final decision on all points. But I can try to summarize the main things in two words:

- “Maidan” was definitely not Left but very sensitive to the ideas of social justice and social change, essentially left ideas. Many people on Maidan supported very radical left slogans not only progressive taxation of oligarchs, open accountancy and direct democracy, but also of workers’ control and even the limitation of electoral rights of bourgeoisie (to be more precise we proposed banning wealthy people from being elected or appointed to government positions).
- The main problem of the Left seems to be its inability to present its ideas adequately. The Leftists have been dispersed. Some radically distance themselves from the mass movement, others mostly dissolve into it.

The main failures were because of lack of coordination. For example, the same time as Borotba activist Denis Levin was beaten by neo-Nazis on Maidan there were two other Leftist events there - 300 meters away from the point in the very center of Maidan 30 students from the union “Direct action” - were making the presentation about students’ self-organization. Five hundred meters away other leftists and anti-fascists had a demo of 200 activists against police violence. No surprise that neo-Nazis attacked Denis Levin who was virtually alone with his trade-union leaflets. His Borotba organization did not support him. And when we joined him it was too late.

Zakhar Popovych, Kiev, 8 May 2014

P.S.

* <http://www.internationalviewpoint.org/>

Footnotes

[1] This conference for “left wing organizations and initiatives that condemn national chauvinism, sexism, homophobia, xenophobia and that equally condemn the Russian intervention and any violent action against leftist or trade-union activists or unarmed protesters” brought together 80 activists, from different including some miners from Krivyi Rih and Dnepopetrovsk, belonging to the confederation of Free Trade Unions. Catherine Samary, IVP collaborator, was also present.