EuroMaidan: Experiences of a Ukrainian-American

I remember how horrible I felt when I first saw on my Facebook feed the news that the Ukrainian government suspended work on the EU Agreement. As one of many Ukrainians who had hoped that the government would follow through with its promises, I not only felt deceived but was also very concerned about the future of Ukraine. Late that evening, my friends and I headed over to Lviv's center, where about 50 people were already demonstrating with Ukrainian flags and posters. A little while later, a girl arrived with an EU flag, and we all applauded. I stayed for about half an hour, talking with the other people, most of whom were students, about further plans, including the picket that was being organized the next day outside the regional administration building. Some of my friends went even later to demonstrate and said that there were up to 100 people out.

This happened the night of November 21. During the next month that followed, my life was consumed by the revolution. I spent every free moment on the Lviv EuroMaidan or watching HromadskeTV (Ukraine's first public TV channel, which was launched early to cover EuroMaidan). I translated articles about the situation and took two trips to Kyiv. I posted updates and pictures, and shared articles about EuroMaidan on Facebook. Many of my friends abroad were very grateful that I was keeping them updated as the events were not always well covered by international news outlets. In a way, everyone who was writing about their experiences on Facebook was acting as a journalist, and these individual efforts, as well as the EuroMaidan Facebook groups that were created, helped keep people in Ukraine and around the world informed.

As Facebook has been an important tool during EuroMaidan for sharing news and coordinating efforts, I thought that in describing some of my EuroMaidan experiences, I would include my Facebook statuses to capture the exact sentiments I was feeling as the revolution unfolded.

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The Sunday after the announcement that the government suspended talks on EU integration, thousands of people gathered in Lviv, in the snow. The following day, November 25, I wrote:

“So wonderful to see that still so many people from Lviv are going to Kyiv, to hear about all the people and organizations and restaurants who are allowing people to come use their facilities, drink some tea, warm up, organize, to see how people are helping each other, to see all the people out in the cold, to see that people are spending the nights outside, to see no party flags flying, and so much more…. it is really quite an amazing time to be in Lviv.”

On Wednesday, before I left for the overnight train to Kyiv, I took a walk to the Lviv EuroMaidan:

“Wow, the center of Lviv right now is amazing. Despite it being the coldest night yet, there are thousands of people on the EuroMaidan, Cherry Band is playing, there is a huge group of people waiting near the Grand Hotel for buses to take them to Kyiv, all the cars that drive by have Ukrainian flags attached to them and they are all honking their horns as they drive by, there is a screen next to the stage with contact information for help finding a place to stay or warm up in Kyiv, and other useful information about Kyiv and the movement in general. I’m about to leave for Kyiv,”
and know so many other people who are going there tonight or tomorrow night. These next two days will be historic and I am so happy that I can be part of it and right in the center of it.”

After spending Thursday in Kyiv, I wrote:

“It's hard to believe that exactly one week ago I stood with about 50 Lvivians near the Shevchenko monument in Lviv in support of Euro integration and that a week later I am in Kyiv with thousands of other Ukrainians supporting Ukraine's European choice and that there are people standing with us on EuroMaidans in cities all over the world. When we first got to the maidan today in Kyiv, we were disappointed at how few people were demonstrating, and most people were in fact from Lviv. Fortunately, thousands of Kyivian students joined us later as did thousands of other people. I witnessed a little scuffle and a little tear gas was sprayed but in general it was calm. However, we have been warned that tomorrow anti-European integration agitators will be on maidan (and being paid for it by the ruling party) but asked to stay peaceful and not be provoked into conflict. Tomorrow is the last day of the summit so it is likely to be the biggest and most important demonstration yet. Today ended on a great note for me to the performances of DakhaBrakha and Dakh Daughters, the musicians of which have been big supporters of EuroMaidan. We even sang the national hymn with the members of DakhaBrakha. It was surreal to be listening to my favorite band live on the maidan in Kyiv with so many people who have a come to stand in the cold and fight for a better future for Ukraine.”

The next morning was the day when Ukraine was supposed to sign the agreement. We all knew what was going to happen, but nevertheless it was depressing to wake up to the news. That day there was a pretty big turn out in Kyiv. My Facebook post from the following morning:

“Woke up to calls and messages from concerned friends. I’m OK. We left EuroMaidan around midnight. After we left we heard that special police forces surrounded the maidan and that a few journalists were beaten. But then things calmed down and the demonstration continued so we went to bed. Woke up to the news that they attacked everyone who was there and that dozens of people were injured and arrested. This is unbelievable. This shows that our government does not care to be a democratic country as they beat and disperse peaceful demonstrators who just want a better a future.”

That brutal night changed everything. EuroMaidan was no longer just about European integration, but against police brutality, corruption, and the lack of democracy, rule of law, and human rights in Ukraine. The actions of the officials that night only released the pent-up anger and disappointment that so many Ukrainians had with the government. Now the demonstrators were demanding the resignation of the president and the government. Now people who had previously been indifferent or passive were prompted to take to the streets.

On Sunday, December 1, back in Lviv, I wrote:

“Lviv’s center is packed. In Kyiv there are now more than 700,000 people on the streets. Kyivans have taken back the EuroMaiden and have stormed the Kyiv city council building. Today I again have hope in this revolution…”

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A lot has happened since December 1. There have been more clashes and journalists and EuroMaidan supporters have been severely beaten. But it’s now the middle of January, and people are still occupying the Maidan. The number of demonstrators has decreased somewhat because some people have lost hope, feel that the chance to change something was lost, that more extreme measures should have been taken. However, even if people eventually leave the protest camp, EuroMaidan will not end because the movement will continue in other forms. People are getting organized, informed, are realizing that if they want the country to change they need to start with themselves, and that they can’t wait for the people in power to do it for them. EuroMaidan started a movement for a democratic, brighter future for Ukraine; as a consequence, I think Ukraine has changed more in the last few months than it has in the 20-plus years of its independence.

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