

Who are the protesters in Ukraine?

The months of Ukrainian protests labelled as “Maidan” have captured the world news media with vivid pictures of shooting, fire and barricades. But who are the protesters and how did it all begin?

Ukrainian revolt started in November 2013 when the protestors, mostly students and professionals from Kiev, protested against the failure to sign the Association Agreement with the European Union. Protesters gathered at the Maidan (in Ukrainian = Square) of Independence in the Centre of Kiev and remained for the rest of the night. The name of the square lent its signature to the months of protest that followed, which became known simply as “Maidan”, or "EuroMaidan". On the 30<sup>th</sup> November a force from the Berkut (internal police) arrived and brutally beat the unarmed students who were sleeping in the square and one was killed. The next day thousands of people came to Maidan of Independence to protest against the violence. They demanded that the assailants should be called to justice and the Minister of Internal Affairs resign. There was no reaction from the Government. The spurious reason given by the authorities for the treatment of the protesters was that they were preventing the erection of the official Christmas tree in the square, something which no-one believed.

From that time onwards the campers on the square started to organise themselves and to escalate their demands to include the release of political prisoners, protection from police violence and the release of Julia Timoshenko (an opposition politician imprisoned by the current regime on charges of tax evasion). The movement became associated with pro- European sympathies.

In the midst of these events, researchers from Kiev International Institute for Sociology together with the Foundation for Democratic Initiatives carried out a sociological portrait of demonstrators by interviewing them<sup>1</sup>. The first survey, which took place on 7-8<sup>th</sup> December 2013 called this the “Maidan Meeting” and found the protesters to be equally divided between men and women and mostly comprising younger and more educated people. 10% were students, 22% were HE professionals, 12% entrepreneurs (small businesses) and 4-5% managers or people from the military. In general protesters were middle class. Only 7% were pensioners and 13% unemployed and casually employed. Half were from Kiev and half from other regions of Ukraine, with more from Western Ukraine than from other regions. Western Ukraine has traditionally been associated with more nationalist movements and is more pro-European in orientation. The distribution of people from rural and urban areas and from different language groups was consistent with the population as a whole with 52% being mainly Ukrainian speaking and 20% Russian speaking and the remainder mixed. The protesters were not in general political, with only 12% supporting any political party. The vast majority of protesters arrived independently at their own expense. Therefore, these were ordinary middle class and educated people who were not otherwise politically militant, showing their opposition to what was going on.

The second survey was carried out on December 20<sup>th</sup> was called the “Maidan Camp”. The difference was that by that time more people had started to live in the square with support from

---

<sup>1</sup> The survey was sponsored by the International Soros Foundation, data is available at the website of Kiev International Institute of Sociology (in Ukrainian) <http://kiis.com.ua/?lang=eng&cat=reports&id=226&page=1>

Kiev citizens. They took over the Mayor's office to provide a base from which to organise the event. They also took over the Trade Union building (for which they paid rent) to set up a hospital and a kitchen staffed by volunteers. The temperature on the square had sunk below zero at this time of year.

In response, the President organised an "Anti Maidan" protest by bussing in people from Eastern Ukraine – some of them were even paid 20 Euro per day. Eastern Ukraine is traditionally the most pro-Russian region of Ukraine. They were not supposed to leave the area of the Anti-Maidan during this period and their movements were controlled by having their names checked against lists as a condition of payment. However, since support services for them were poorly organised (they were left outside in the freezing cold), some of them wandered over to join the Maidan itself for food and shelter. Freelance provocateurs called "Titushky" (after the name of one of their representatives) were also encouraged. These were typically young men from sports clubs in Eastern Ukraine who were encouraged to come to the Maidan Square and Kiev city to attack people who appeared to be Maidan supporters (for example if they carried the colours of the Ukrainian flag).

The next step in the situation happened when a new "anti-terrorist" law was hastily passed by the Parliament on January 16<sup>th</sup>, which meant that if more than 5 people were gathered together, they could be imprisoned and similarly, if more than 5 cars were found together, the cars could be confiscated. This law was passed just by show of hands in Parliament, rather than the usual electronic voting, so it is not known how many deputies actually supported the law. This law was signed by the president and implemented the very next day.

This provoked an angry demonstration against the parliament with more protesters being beaten by police and military, raising the political heat.

After this the Maidan evolved into something more like a military clash. The most active Maidan leaders tried to drive to the residence of the President and the Minister of Internal affairs by car to show him the Maidan requirements. This became known as the "Auto Maidan" and it also spread in the other regions of Ukraine. Before they got there, however, the leader, Dmytro Bulatov, was taken away by unknown people, beaten badly for several days and then left in the forest. He disappeared altogether between 23 and 30 of January 2014. He managed to find his way back to the hospital, but from the hospital he was arrested under the new law as an extremist. Several journalists also suffered violence from the authorities at this time, including a Polish journalist. Even though the journalists wore a bright jackets to identify themselves, they were selected as targets for special beating by the police. Titana Chernovil went by car to the residence of the President, but she was dragged from her car, beaten badly and her car destroyed. It took more than a week for the police to locate the other car protesters and put them in prison. Many cars taking part in the AutoMaidan were identified and later burned and destroyed by the "Titushki".

At this time there was a discussion about an amnesty for those in prison. However, the amnesty included predominantly those who had done the beating! Those who are still in prison and have not been sentenced, which include most of the protesters, are not eligible for amnesty. President Yanukovich said he would sign the Amnesty only when the protesters have left Maidan Square and their occupation of the administrative buildings in Kiev.

However, the protests started to spread to other regions. After 16<sup>th</sup> January people in Lviv, Ivano-Frankovsk and Chernivcy took over local administration buildings as well as other Central regions. Even in Eastern Ukraine there were meetings to support the Maidan but in this region there were also anti-Maidan rallies.

This leads us to the last phase of protests, labelled the "Maidan Seich". The sociological survey found that the protesters had changed in character, being now mostly men (88%), in general younger than the earlier protesters, although there was still a strong showing from those in Higher Education (43%). 6% were students and the numbers of entrepreneurs had risen to 17% with 7% pensioners, 4% managers and 3% army and military. Those who camped permanently on the square were mainly from the regions and only 12% Kievans because people from Kiev tended rather to come and go. 55% from Western Ukraine (which is representative) and 60% were Ukrainian speaking. The number of Russian speakers had fallen to 16%. The number political partisans was even smaller with only 3% belonging to political parties. Those who stayed in the Square told researchers that they were motivated to protest against repressions (61%) or were looking to create a better Ukraine (51%). A significant number sought the signing of the European Association Agreement (47%) and 46% wished to change power elite. The numbers who felt that the closer Union with Russia was disastrous had risen from 14 to 20%. Those wanting a dismissal of President Yanukovich and new elections rose from 20% to 85%. Those seeking to free all participants of Maidan and stop the repression rose from 20% to 82%. Returning the Constitution to that of 2004 in order to limit power of President and make Ukraine more Parliamentary received support from 62%. 86% were prepared to stay in the Maiden until these demands were met.

The demonstrators exemplified impressive self-organisation. A Free University of Maidan was set up, with volunteer lecturers teaching about human rights, Wikipedia, history and economy. In a facebook call, books were donated and a library of several thousand volumes were created, which will be donated to community libraries in regions after Maidan. Regular concerts were organised. Each Sunday at 12 o'clock a "Viche" or popular assembly formed to formulate demands and decide on what should happen next. Anyone could come and join the discussion. The popular singer Ruslana (she won the Eurovision in 2004) was very active in this activity and Olga Bogomolets leader of one of the medical institute in Kiev organised free medical care in Maidan. Many citizens of Kiev offered their homes for showers and washing or washed clothes. Clothes were also donated and people brought food and wood for fires.

Within the population in general, 49% supported Maidan and 47% did not (data of the KIIS survey on the national based sample, 24 Jan.2014). How were they divided? Research by the Democratic Initiative Foundation on 10 of Jan.2014, found that 48,9% of Ukrainians support EU integration, 29% do not support it, and 40% support more close integration with Russia and so called Custom Union. And it is very clearly regionally divided: 70% of Maidan supporters live in the Western-Northern and Central regions of Ukraine, whereas 73% of those who do not support Maidan live in Eastern and Southern regions of Ukraine. Why? First, those who live in eastern part of Ukraine have longer and more established connections, relatives and interpersonal communication with Russia, so the visa and closed borders with Russia will immediately be felt by them as a severe loss. 77% of Ukrainian have no foreign passport and never left the region where they are living. Even those who travelled abroad mainly went to Russia, and less than one fourth to holiday resorts in Turkey and Egypt. About 50% of labour migrants from Ukraine go to Russia –predominantly from the

Eastern and Southern Ukraine, whereas the other 50 % of the labour migrants go to the EU (Poland, Italy, Spain, Portugal, etc.) predominantly Western and central Ukraine. So people who do not support EU orientation see this as leading the loss of open borders with Russia and leading to their language disadvantage since they speak only Russian. However, they are also rather isolated from Western developments, watching mainly Russian media.

The sociological research illustrates how the characteristics of the protesters changed as the demonstration moved from one phase to another. However, it is clear that it was generally the middle class, educated and younger people who dominated the protests, feeling that Ukraine was moving in the wrong direction. Anger at the failure to sign the EU Association Agreement and closer association with Russia crystallised the disillusionment with a corrupt and incompetent regime which as thrown money at conspicuously pointless projects and failed to establish the rule of law. The clumsy repressive tactics of the regime encouraged further protest and drew in larger and more angry groups of citizens. In a country thought to be lacking in civil society, the self-mobilisation of different actors was impressive. Will this citizen mobilisation of the emerging middle class continue to ensure that politics is in future more representative of their aspirations? Or will the next round of politicians also lose the trust of key parts of the population without whom a modern society cannot be formed?