

# DANYLIW RESEARCH SEMINAR



## The Invisible Radicals: How Leftist Politics Shaped Maidan and Went Unnoticed

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Ukraine's EuroMaidan is recognized as a multi-faceted phenomenon: it began as a small gathering on Maidan Nezalezhnosti in Kyiv on November 21, 2013, and was initially organized around a demand for President Viktor Yanukovych to sign an Association Agreement with the European Union. The mobilizations shifted focus after violent attacks on sleeping protesters on the early morning of November 30, and protests continued through the winter, escalating in January and February. With demands ranging from the resignation of Yanukovych to the lustration of all former members of the government, Maidan was a space for established organizations and political parties to grow, and it also gave rise to myriad new organizations of various stripes. Many discussions have recognized the complexity present throughout the mobilizations, but one essential group of participants has so far been ignored: the Ukrainian left, made up of various groups of socialists, anarchists, and social democrats, among others.

Organized leftist columns participated in every aspect of Maidan; they were present from the first inklings of protest. They were often the targets of attacks based on their posters and banners promoting tolerance and equality; free transportation, education, and health care; and transparency and accountability in government. But leftists were also central organizers in multiple Maidan-based initiatives, including the Hospital Guard (*Варто у лікарні*), the Women's Brigade (*Жіноча Сотня*), and the Student Assembly (*Студентська асамблея*) and the subsequent occupation of the Ministry of Education. This paper will discuss how leftist groups responded to shifting attitudes on Maidan to go from being marginal participants against whom violence was acceptable to being central players in several essential and broadly-supported initiatives. I had begun the main phase of my dissertation research with these groups in September 2013, so I used my rapport with these activists to maneuver through the various shifts on Maidan from November to June. However, my research with leftist groups began long before Maidan, so I contextualize their activism and its dynamism within a long history of marginalization from mainstream political participation.

I will suggest that there are two reasons for the erasure of leftist voices from Maidan. One is the focus on right-wing groups and their potential to influence the future of Ukrainian politics. This is not to say that these groups should be ignored; rather, I suggest that studies of the right must also recognize that a left must exist in a given context in order

for the “right” to have meaning.<sup>1</sup> The radical right and radical left have shaped each other since before Maidan (and research about the radical right was growing before Maidan, as well), but because of the advancement of several prominent right-wing organizations on Maidan (particularly Right Sector but also Tyahnybok’s Svoboda and its paramilitary wing C14 and Lyashko’s Radical Party), mainstream media has focused exclusively on the radical right. Academics have largely ignored the participation of leftists, which may be because leftist participation was not as visible, but it may also simply not occur to researchers to study such groups in a critical way because of their small size and their non-threatening positions to Ukrainian governmental institutions. However, the relationship between the right and left must be recognized in order for those designations to have meaning.

The second reason leftist groups have been ignored is that internal disagreements among the role of leftists on Maidan mean that there is no united leftist front to present to media or researchers. There is not even a single, agreed-upon definition of what the left is and what leftists should do in Ukraine (and in the world more broadly). This paper considers the contributions of self-identified leftists to Maidan without suggesting that they represent any kind of unified “Left” in Ukraine. In other words, I use the term leftist because my interlocutors use this term. Both they and I recognize that leftism is itself very complicated, and these leftists are constantly engaged with the changing definitions of the left. As an ethnographer, I use the example of left-identified activists’ participation on Maidan, which has been almost entirely ignored in the Western press, to complicate the picture of Maidan and to attempt to place these activists within a broader picture of a social movement on the margins of Europe. My research has encouraged me to suspend strict notions of “left” and “right” as unified identities and movements in order to see broad strokes of opposition all that rejected the Yanukovich regime in its entirety. My close proximity to leftist organizations allowed me to examine their participation on Maidan as it unfolded, but my role as an anthropologist required me to understand the positions of those attacking leftists as well as those who were willing to set aside political differences in order to create a stronger opposition.

## *“Tolerance is a European Value”*

When I stood in the middle of Maidan with a radical leftist companion on November 22, I first heard the nationalist slogans that would dominate the protests and become common greetings among Maidaners (Слава Україні, героям слава!/Glory to Ukraine, glory to the heroes in particular; Україна Це Європа/Ukraine is Europe was also a popular slogan on this first day). Leftists are often critical of this kind of nationalism because it so easily links with exclusionary ideologies which base the “nation” on an ethnic identity of Ukrainian-ness rather than on an idea of civic participation and diversity.<sup>2</sup> This exclusionary kind of nationalism tends to reject Ukraine’s Soviet past, because it sees that this history was always detrimental to Ukrainian nationhood. Adherents to this nationalism associate all “left” with Communism because of the residual influences of the Soviet economy and social structures. Current forms of leftism, usually enacted by young political activists who are often students, are included with this association of “left” with Communism, making the contemporary Ukrainian context a challenging and often dangerous place to be an overtly leftist person. In other words, it is easy to condemn the current left because it is not distinguished from state socialism in the minds of most people, even though most of today’s leftists do not support an imagined return to the Soviet Union or even participation in Russia’s Customs Union. But, as others have noted (journalist Andriy Movchan made this point at a “Left and Maidan” conference in Kyiv in April 2014), Maidan was not just nationalist but anti-Communist at its heart, and many participants saw the mobilizations and the overthrow of Yanukovych as the final step in freeing Ukraine from Russian/Soviet tethers. Any possible representation of Communism – including contemporary leftist slogans and ideas – was unwelcome on Maidan. As leftists are almost always associated with Communism, their initial presence on Maidan was condemned and even attacked.

Despite their criticisms of overt displays of nationalism, leftist activists used the massive mobilizations on Maidan to express their ideas as well, tentatively recognizing the importance of leftist participation in what might become a mass movement because of the possibility to use it as a platform for their own ideas. As November came to a close, leftist activists used mass marches as a space to present their campaign for free municipal transportation (a campaign that began before Maidan and continues to be discussed as the new government consolidates), free and accessible education, and a world without

borders. These ideas were more or less ignored, however, because they appeared alongside slogans about equality, tolerance, and feminism, which not only drew attention away from economic campaigns like transport and education, but there were also several direct attacks on those holding signs with these latter themes. Activists promoting feminism and against homophobia were attacked with lead pipes and pepper spray, and they were continually verbally abused by many passersby and protesters.<sup>3</sup>

On one particularly disastrous evening, a large leftist group appeared on Maidan with similar signs, some promoting tolerance and equality. Others criticized the capitalist economic structures of the European Union that would not be beneficial to most Ukrainians while attempting to still participate in pro-Europe discourses (as suggested by slogans like *Солідарність з Євронародом, боротьба з Євробосами/Solidarity with the people of Europe, struggle with the bosses of Europe; Відкриті кордони замість відкритих ринків/Open borders instead of open markets*). These signs and their creators also stood against clericalism and corruption as well as in support of labor unions and strikes. The signs presented no unified project or goal but were complicated slogans that were easily interpreted as anti-European; a few red and gold EU flags that activists had made did not help distance themselves from these negative interpretations. This same evening, participants carried pro-gender equality slogans, and one made a poster that read “Europe is Tolerance” (in English), with “tolerance” being written with rainbow stripes, evoking an LGBT agenda.<sup>4</sup> It was this poster that started what became an intense attack on the leftist group. Ultra-nationalists with red and black Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA) flags and buttons asking for a “Clean Ukraine” (*чиста Україна*) smashed and ripped leftists’ signs, surrounding the group and pushing them down the steps. This is not to say that attacks on leftists were entirely unprovoked (although I am hesitant to use the word “provoke” because of its weight and constant use on Maidan) as the slogans did not present any kind of unified political project that could have helped leftists engage with others on Maidan, even while being critical of nationalism and EU policies. However, this kind of attack suggested that many Maidan participants were only interested in one agenda, which promoted an ethnically-based, heteronormative understanding of Ukraine as essentially Europe without engaging with either of those concepts in a critical way.

Following this attack, the participants recognized the problems associated with this kind of presence on Maidan. Despite this extremely antagonistic atmosphere, leftist activists continued to be present on Maidan. Much of their focus turned to ideas about self-organizing and non-partisan politics. From its first days, Opposition politicians from the parties *Batkivshchyna*, *UDAR*, and *Svoboda* claimed to represent the protesters on Maidan. Leftist activists passed out informational fliers and carried signs day and night suggesting that protesters reject political agendas of those parties and organize their own politics. The ideas of self-organizing became a more viable solution as the Opposition candidates continually proved themselves to be unable to satisfy protesters' demands. At the same time that leftists stopped being present in large groups in the center of Maidan and instead participated in mass marches on the peripheries of the square (for their own protection as well as in order to criticize the central narratives of most protesters), their language began to be understood as more relevant to the changes happening on Maidan.

Leftist ideas became even more essential to Maidan after the night of the 30<sup>th</sup> of November, when police violently attacked protesters sleeping on Maidan in order to make room for the New Year's Tree. Following November 30, slogans among non-leftists were largely focused toward Yanukovych. "Ukraine without Yanukovych" (*Україна без Януковича*) was a popular poster on Maidan, evoking the 2000 Ukraine without Kuchma protests. But here, leftists began to assert their relevance, because instead of simply blaming one person for the violence, they were already well-versed in language critical of a police state and linked this language to the Yanukovych regime. This allowed them to fit into criticisms of Yanukovych but with a broader language that condemned more than just the president but the entire system holding him up. Protesters responded positively to language about human rights and non-violence, presented by leftists at mass marches throughout December. At a march in early in the month, a leftist group hung a huge banner with the slogan, "We are against a police state" (*Ми проти поліцейської держави*) on the main street leading to Maidan, the banner was later relocated to the occupied City Hall, where it was flanked, ironically, by Opposition party flags. The language of the police state and the protection of human rights from the hands of state violence were formulated largely by leftist activists and were adopted into the rhetoric of others on Maidan as part of their criticism of the governing regime.

## *A Student-Organized Occupation*

The role of this shift in language may not be recognized as a leftist move in itself. However, the notion of self-organizing and standing against state violence led to leftist-influenced developments that would otherwise not have been possible. For example, after the occupation of the Ukrainian House in late January, a central location for assorted self-organized Maidan groups, like AutoMaidan and the Maidan Library, students claimed a space in the building. This space, known as Student Assembly, was used as a meeting point for general assemblies, at which students pursued various campaigns through working groups, like picketing courts and supporting economic boycotts of oligarch-owned companies. The students worked with other organizers in the Ukrainian House to schedule lectures and film screenings, which were attended by activists and protesters of all backgrounds. The Ukrainian House was vacated after the violence of February 18-20, but after the new transition government was decided and the president began to name a cabinet, students occupied the Ministry of Education for one week at the end of February. Like the Ukrainian House and City Hall occupations, the students had a medical point, a kitchen, places to sleep, and their own self-defense brigade who guarded the gates and only let student card-holders into the building. At the Ministry, they held massive student assemblies, elected a presidium to represent students, chose three student-approved candidates for minister (Mykhail Zhurovs'kyi decided not to accept the students' nomination, but the other two came to the Ministry to encourage students to support them; students decided to support both Serhiy Kvit and Lilia Hrynevych), and created a "road map" of demands for the improvement of higher education. When Serhiy Kvit was named the new minister and the Ministry re-opened for work, students meticulously opened each office in turn, followed by a livestream, showing that they had not damaged possessions or stolen documents during their occupation. By February 28, Kvit had accepted the students' road map.

The students' occupation of the Ministry of Education presents an interesting conundrum for leftists on Maidan: while its success was clearly based on progressive ideas like self-organization, transparency, accessibility, and consensus, and while the leftist student union was prominent in organizing and supporting the occupation, many students present identified with right-leaning, nationalist ideas. Serhiy Kvit, while considered to be much more in touch with modern Ukrainian education than Dmytro Tabachnyk,

the previous minister, was not the first (or second) choice of leftist groups. He is known for his own nationalist ideas and often condemnatory attitude toward active leftists and leftist spaces.<sup>5</sup> While he has certainly been amenable to student demands in his first days in office, whether he will continue with these progressive actions remains a concern. Many leftist student activists have considered the adoption of Law 1187-2 on higher education to be a success, but others are not fully satisfied with such legislative changes, as they do not represent systemic changes in the system of governance in Ukraine.

### *Leftist “Success” on Maidan*

It is unclear whether leftist students who participated in the Ministry occupation can and should consider the realization of their demands as a success for the left. That a tactically radical move like occupying a government building continued until students elected to leave the building suggests significant student support, from left- and non-left-identified students. On one hand, this has brought student issues to the forefront of the new education minister’s concerns, and student issues have been a central focus of leftist organizations in Ukraine (in part because many leftists are students themselves). On the other hand, the broad support of the Ministry occupation and the participation of multiple organizations has meant that the possible influence of leftist activists has been minimized, because their political identification marginalizes them. Considering the latter, is it effective for leftists to continue to participate in a movement in which, no matter how essential they are in its organization, their fundamental ideas are constantly devalued?

Many leftist activists have attempted to participate on Maidan with a certain distance. This translated into their participation exclusively in the areas where they could have a significant impact without having to be overtly nationalist in their participation. This allowed them to be part of the mobilizations without having to critically engage with those who had previously threatened and attacked them. In the beginning of this paper I mentioned the Hospital Guard, which followed ambulances and injured participants to help get people safely into hospitals and care without harassment from police or others. The Hospital Guard was started by leftist groups but, as the violence on Maidan expanded, the project relied on the efforts of any volunteers and was not an exclusively leftist initiative. The initiative itself is not a leftist project, but it allowed leftists to participate on Maidan



without having to conform to the nationalist beliefs they criticized and also without having to maneuver through negative attitudes toward their politics.

The Women’s Brigade was a second site of leftist intervention which became extremely popular with international media. As paramilitary brigades became more organized and present on Maidan, women who were tired of simply playing supporting roles formed their own “Sotnya” as a more active mechanism of participation. Many of these women came from leftist backgrounds or engaged with leftist activists and students in other capacities. The Women’s Brigade was not necessarily a leftist initiative, but many of its participants were feminists and presented the organization as part of a dialogue about feminism in Ukraine. This group garnered attention from multiple English-language news websites,<sup>6</sup> which allowed discourses about women and gender discrimination to be part of dialogues about Maidan. Some feminists, however, were critical of the Women’s Brigade, as it reproduced militarized hierarchies and mirrored heroic masculine roles, thus not actually contributing to feminist discourses.<sup>7</sup>

Similarly, the occupation of the Ministry of Education mirrored nearly exactly the organization of Maidan: while all needs, including food and health care, were provided, it relied strongly on a militarized protective structure to guarantee the well-being of participants. Criticisms about this type of militarization and the hierarchies it can reproduce – in its own organization as well as between militants and “civilians” – were not part of the discussion. In other words, the structure of the Ministry occupation did not create space for multiple voices, similarly to the way Maidan excluded these participants in its early days. However, the Ministry occupation did require many participants to set aside stark political differences in order to have an influence on the newly forming government, allowing for a non-partisan opposition that challenges assumptions about “right” and “left,” while not entirely eliminating their undertones.

### *Is There a Future Left?*

These three examples show the ways that Maidan has influenced leftist discourses because of the ways leftists engaged with the protests, despite their criticisms. Whether this constitutes a “success” of some kind is still unclear. On one hand, it was very produc-

tive for leftists to participate on Maidan by trying to fit their ideas within the more acceptable rhetorics that already existed among protesters. This led to adoption of widely-supported education legislation, to new discussions about gender equality, and to a highly useful medical initiative that was crucial to many participants' safety and care. While leftist groups are not necessarily recognized in their roles in these aspects of Maidan, they can be proud of this participation in such a historic moment.

At the same time, Maidan did not give leftists an opportunity to solidify themselves as a unified political voice that could be presented as a counter to radical right-wing attitudes. The mainstreaming of these attitudes<sup>8</sup> is not balanced by a mainstreaming of leftist ideas, and it is even possible that leftists will be even more marginalized than they were before Maidan because of the wide acceptance of right-wing and anti-Soviet stances. While leftists have provided extensive critical commentary about the events on Maidan that consider the influence of austerity measures on social welfare programs in Ukraine and the lack of systemic change that came with new elections, such ideas have, as yet, not been put into practice.

Education-based activism continues to be the one place that leftists have seen success, which is in part because this sphere does not demand a radical restructuring of institutions but instead considers legislative changes, like the law on higher education that was recently signed by President Poroshenko, a success. But other social changes suggested by leftists are not taken seriously by mainstream political institutions. Some leftists are attempting to build party-like structures in order to gain representation on the Kyiv City Council, for example, but as far as I know these attempts have seen little success. It seems to me that there is a growing distinction among leftists between those who think political representation is a success and those who do not. As the aftermath of Maidan becomes the consolidation of a new government through several elections, the particularities of smaller political organizations with little representation, such as leftist groups, might get lost in the fray. As studies of the radical right become more expansive and more necessary, I suggest that tracking these possible paths of leftist groups should be a parallel engagement for scholars concerned about current situation so we can honestly represent the multitude of political voices present in Ukraine today.

## Endnotes

1. Bobbio, Norberto. *1996 Right and Left: The Significance of a Political Distinction*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
2. Kuzio, Taras. *2000 Nationalism in Ukraine: Towards a New Framework*. *Politics* 20(2):77-86.
3. Not every participant on Maidan rejected these ideas; in one particularly vivid counter-example, an older gentleman standing near the Ukrainian House and European Square engaged in a lengthy conversation with several female activists about feminism and even posed for photos with a sign reading “Feminism is a European value.”
4. I would welcome a conversation about the role of such slogans being deliberately provocative in a certain way. Given the usual negative attitudes in Ukraine to LGBT and women’s rights demonstrations, I would suggest that the activists who drew these signs did know that they would garner a negative response.
5. Kvit censored an exhibition by the Visual Cultural Research Center and later banned the organization from the campus of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy, where he was rector before being named minister. See, for example, the VCRC’s petition for support following these events: <https://www.change.org/petitions/serhiy-kvit-the-president-of-national-university-of-kyiv-mohyla-academy-petition-for-support-of-the-visual-culture-research-center-at-naukma>
6. Karbowska, Natalia. 2014 “The Untold Story of the Ukrainian Revolution: For and By Women.” <http://m.theepochtimes.com/n3/541082-the-untold-story-of-the-ukrainian-revolution-for-and-by-women/>. Accessed October 24, 2014; Moss, Rebecca. 2014 “Women Stand at the Frontlines of the Euromaidan Protest in Kiev.” <http://www.elle.com/news/culture/womens-opposition-euromaidan-protest-kiev>. Accessed October 24, 2014; Trach, Nataliya. 2014 “EuroMaidan Women Warriors eager to fight injustice, sex discrimination.” <http://www.kyivpost.com/guide/people/euromaidan-women-warriors-eager-to-fight-injustice-sex-discrimination-336806.html>. Accessed October 24, 2014.
7. Mayerchuk, Mariya. 2014 “On the Occasion of March 8<sup>th</sup>/Recasting of Meanings.” <http://krytyka.com/ua/community/blogs/do-8-bereznya-pro-pereplavku-smysliv>. Accessed October 24, 2014.
8. Ishchenko, Volodymyr. *2014 Ukraine’s Fractures*. *New Left Review* 87:7-33.