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# Foreign Area Observations from Maidan

James Harvey

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### **Author Background**

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## Foreign Area Observations from Maidan

*James Harvey*

### Introduction

*Many experts on Ukraine predicted that on 22 November 2013, Ukrainian President Yanukovich would sign the Association Agreement with the European Union. He did not sign. This agreement would not have guaranteed EU membership for Ukraine. However it would have symbolized the country's intent to part ways with Russia regarding Ukraine's direction and support. As a result of Yanukovich's refusal to sign the agreement, the revolution began. Thousands of upset Ukrainians took to the heart of Kyiv, Independence Square (Maidan Nezalezhnosti). The name is in reference to the closely situated European Square and Independence Square.*

*Much has been written about the revolution, the direction Ukraine is headed, and its precarious relationship with Russia. This paper will not be an attempt to argue or confirm the latest speculation about Ukraine's future. I offer only my observations gathered from being assigned to U.S. Embassy – Kyiv from August 2013-July 2014. I saw the crisis evolve from; pro-EU protests, the annexation of Crimea, to conflict in the east. More than anything, I was impressed by the tactics, ingenuity and civility of Kyiv's 'EuroMaidaners'.*

### Revolution

Ukraine's Orange Revolution of 2004 successfully created an independent Ukraine but failed to establish a Western-style government. President Yanukovich's refusal to sign the Association Agreement ignited the revolution just days prior to the summit in Vilnius. In response to Yanukovich's announcement, angered Ukrainians began holding protests in Independence Square (Maidan). In addition to proclaiming their EU aspirations, the protesters were provided a long-awaited chance to criticize Yanukovich publically. For every pro-EU flag sign on the square, there was also a sign assailing Yanukovich's corruption. It also allowed for other political showings of support. Political parties and figures such as the imprisoned Yulia Timoshenko were supported by mini-camps around the square.

Yanukovich announced that he wanted a three-way agreement, one that included Russia along with the EU. This was shocking to most experts but in a way, brilliant on Yanukovich's behalf. An agreement involving Russia would have forced the EU to decide how to support Ukraine and to what extent. It would also allow Yanukovich to benefit from both Russia and the West indefinitely. Yanukovich's opposition was also angered that he accepted terms with Russia based on the promise of 15 billion dollars in assistance. According to State Department personnel, the first installment of 4 billion

dollars disappeared within 24 hours. Presumably the money went directly to Yanukovich as its deposit to any state fund was not identified.

### **Berkut Clear the Square**

In the early hours of 30 November, Yanukovich ordered his special unit police force, the Berkut, to clear Maidan of any protesters. The Berkut did so by force. The footage of them beating protesters went viral overnight, enraging Ukrainians throughout the country.

On December 1<sup>st</sup>, an estimated 250,000 Ukrainians descended upon Maidan. The crowd was not composed of strictly military-age males but of all generations of Ukrainians. On this day, a protestor was firing up the crowd from the stage in the center of the square. Despite the masses of angry, fed-up protesters, it was calm. Everyone was noticeably reserved, while simultaneously chanting “Ре-во-лю-ци-я!” (Revolution).

As I left I saw thousands of protesters entering Maidan carrying the banners of their respective political parties; Svoboda, Batkivshina, and Udar. They walked together without any provocation of the different parties. As I passed Kyiv’s City Hall, a crowd broke into the building. This being Sunday, the building was vacant. Although they broke in, I witnessed only one window and door actually damaged (which the protesters later repaired). Some protesters sang and played Ukrainian folk songs from the balconies, resembling a celebration rather than a protest.

### **December Stalemate**

By mid-December, it was clear that this protest was more than an intermittent group of upset people. The main street, Khreshatuck, was lined with tents all the way to Maidan, (approximately 1/3 mile). Typically these were Army tents staked into the asphalt. The protesters also built barricades. They were made of sharpened planks, tires, palettes, and just about anything else – a sort of formed junkyard. Only a narrow opening on the sidewalk allowed passage through the barricade. This is how one would enter Maidan from either end. Signs at each entrance read “no alcohol allowed”, a policy strictly enforced by the “Self-Defense Force” of Maidan.

The organization and foresight of Maidan was remarkable. There were multiple “Information Center” tents, aid stations, HQ tents, and soup kitchens. I felt the EuroMaidaners took pride in policing themselves and maintaining the moral high ground. This was in-part reflected by the church. Religion was a central theme throughout Maidan events and Orthodox priests maintained a constant presence. Prayers, symbols, and songs were everywhere on Maidan. The nearby and world-renown St. Michael’s Cathedral served as a collection point for medical supplies as well as sanctuary.

The consensus was that Yanukovich would simply wait for the EuroMaidaners to leave Kyiv’s cold winter streets. Yanukovich however exacerbated the relative calm with his announcement of anti-protest laws. This essentially made all protesters criminals and liable to prosecution. This rejuvenated the EuroMaidaners’ cause and ushered in the first real violence seen on the square.

## January

In January the protesters became even better organized and adopted a military aspect. The barricades were arranged in-depth around Maidan along with 'hedgehog' metal anti-tank obstacles. The streets of the Maidan area no longer had bricks. They were pried loose and formed into protective walls and stacked as ammunition throughout the area.



Independence Square/European Square. Photo-Author

Molotov cocktails also appeared. Stashes of empty bottles were strategically placed as well as a constant supply of cloth and flammable liquids, creating a sort of assembly line operation.

The first death occurred on Maidan at this time - Serhiy Nihoyan, who died by gunshot. Both the EuroMaidaners and former government blame each other for the shooting. This was just the beginning of the confusion, blame, and propaganda involving deaths on Maidan. Propaganda and blatant untruths were used to blame or justify violence on both sides. There were accusations against the Berkut claiming the use of lethal rounds, kidnappings, torture, and beatings. Yanukovich's regime countered with claims that the EuroMaidaners were using lethal rounds and being trained by the U.S. in the embassy's basement. A turning point in the level of hostility and tactics used by police and the

EuroMaidaners had been reached. The following excerpt from the daily update describes the situation by the end of January:

*“Maidan Protester Update: Dead: 4 (+2 unconfirmed); Missing: 27+; Detained: 175; Journalists Attacked: 116; Medics Attacked: 20+; Other Attacks: 36; Number of Attackers Arrested: 0”*

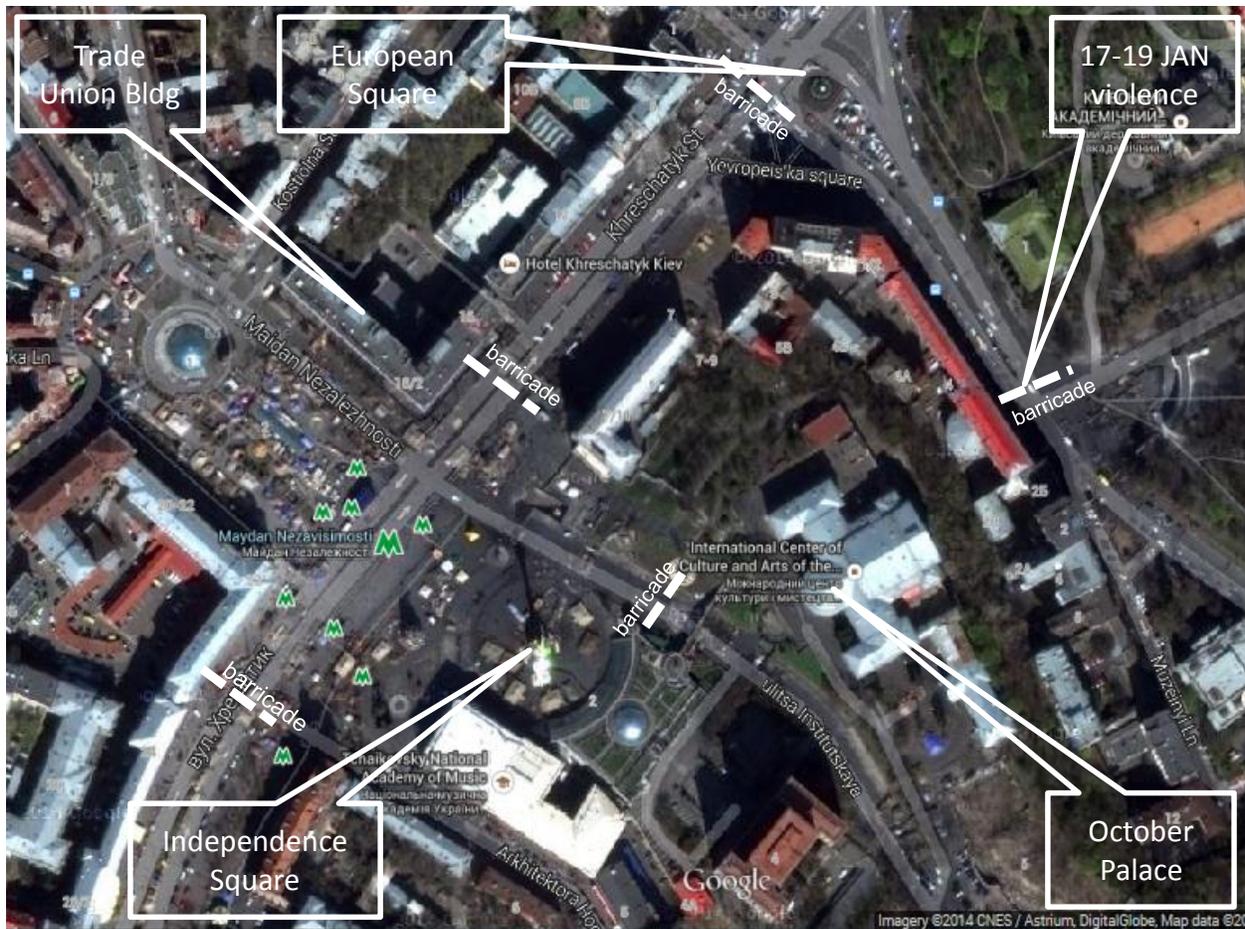


Hrushevskoho Street, outside Dynamo Stadium: 17 January 2014, photo – Author

Maidan was filled with all walks of Ukrainians, willing to endure harsh conditions for their cause. Despite the cold and ice, I saw elderly EuroMaidaners working to clear the street gutters of any debris. They did this so the police’s water cannon run-off wouldn’t stagnate, turning European Square into an ice rink. Just yards from fighting, families viewed a make-shift memorial of flowers and uprooted street bricks. They were paying their respects to the first protester killed on Maidan just a day before. The area was filled with protesters as well as patrons of shops and cafes, the majority of which remained open.

### **Localized Protests, not Widespread**

News coverage of the revolution, gave the impression that the entire city was in chaos, but this was not the case. You could walk one block in any direction from Maidan and, except for the noise, never know a revolution was taking place. One particular January night was a good example. Everything seemed relatively normal. Upon turning a corner however, the scene was total chaos. A wall of fire, Molotov cocktails, and various explosions occupied the space directly in front of Dynamo stadium. I could see through the thick tire smoke that there was a line of police beyond the fire. They were using a water-cannon in a vain attempt to stop the fire. I also saw what appeared to be police throwing Molotovs back at the protesters.



Independence Square Area: Site of the vast majority of protests and deaths of the revolution. Photo – CNES/Astrium, Digitalglobe, Map Data © 2014, <http://wikimapia.org/#lang=en&lat=50.450051&lon=30.523973&z=18&m=b&search=kyiv>

As I made my way out, the wrought iron gate of an alleyway flung open. A team of men emerged, pulling what appeared to be a catapult. It had been assembled and welded in a make-shift metal shop down the alley. It was successfully tested on site and placed at the front line behind a barricade on Hrushevskoho Street.

At this stage of the protests, the Maidan Self-Defense Force was completely functional. It was comprised of several sub-units which worked in shifts. From home we often saw squads with home-made battle gear headed to or from their shifts on Maidan.

### February Escalation

It was clear now that the status quo of the protests could not be maintained. Yanukovich would either step down or end the revolution through extreme violence. On 18 February the rarely heard-from President gave the protestors a deadline to clear Maidan by that night. Immediately following this ultimatum, roads into and out of Kyiv were blocked. The metro was also stopped, and some Pro-Maidan TV stations were taken off the air. Over the next 48 hours approximately 70 people were killed on Maidan. The majority of deaths occurred in the Trade Union Building; a EuroMaidan-owned HQ, sick bay and

gathering point. The deaths resulted from a fire which both sides blamed the other for. The bulk of the other deaths came as EuroMaidaners fought their way uphill on Instikutskaya Street. Despite up to 15 protesters already being killed there by sniper fire, protesters continued uphill. The morning of the 20<sup>th</sup> saw no police presence in the square. Only smoking debris remained from the last stand between the EuroMaidaners and the police.



Trade Union Building: 20 February 2014, photo – Author

Yanukovich fled during the night, making his way to Rostov, Russia to “...visit a friend.” He took with him all of the incriminating records he could carry. Those he couldn’t carry were tossed into the river, retrieved later by authorities. During the next 72 hours, many embassy family members, including mine, were evacuated to Europe.

## Summary

Over a year later, the EuroMaidaners are still waiting to witness the fruits of their efforts. Though it appeared the EuroMaidaners won, they remained on Maidan. They remained in order to ensure free and fair Presidential elections which were scheduled for May. This is testament to their desire to see the revolution through, to “get it right this time.” Maidan has since been cleared of debris and become a memorial to ‘The Heavenly Hundred’ – those killed during the revolution. On 22 February an acting President and Parliamentary figures were chosen. I was fortunate enough to observe the elections and from all accounts, they were executed freely and fairly.

The convictions that were forged on Maidan still exist in Ukraine’s fight against the rebels. Despite escalating violence and military challenges, President Poroshenko has constantly pleaded for restraint from his troops. This reflects Ukraine’s horrible dilemma of defending the country against its brethren. It also reflects Ukraine’s intention of fostering a good relationship with the West.

MAJ James Harvey, Chief-POW/MIA Office, Moscow

Ukraine enjoyed overwhelming Western encouragement during the revolution but now experiences uncertainty and reluctance regarding assistance. Ukraine's leadership has reiterated its commitment to the West in both dialogue and its management of the conflict. For the majority of Ukraine's citizens, choosing the West versus Russia was never a dilemma. Russian ties are strong with many Ukrainians, but so is the desire to maintain a unified country, free of threats to its sovereignty.



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