

“Likes” Don’t Count

Viktor Yushchenko and Yulia Tymoshenko were such disappointments that in the 2010 elections Yanukovich returned to defeat Tymoshenko—whom he then put in prison. Yanukovich’s base of support came from eastern and southern Ukraine; he himself was a son of the east Ukrainian mining region called the Donbas. To many there, Yanukovich was a local boy who had made it in the world. Of course “no one really loves him,” of course he was slimy, ridiculous, and uneducated, a working-class hoodlum-turned-kleptocratic parvenu with appalling taste in art, but still—Jurko speculated—the thinking in the Donbas was that he was *svoi*, one of us. And maybe that was a source of pride. To some he seemed to offer stability, even if of a curious sort, given that under his rule conditions for workers in the Donbas remained abysmal. Yanukovich and his mafia-like “Family” of political allies built golden villas while ordinary people starved and froze and died in explosions at unregulated mines. Gangsters blackmailed small businesses, extracting money in exchange for tolerating their existence. In many small towns and villages it was understood that order was maintained by a local *smotriashchii*—literally, “one who is looking,” a representative of a mafia group who controlled a given area and extorted money. Yanukovich himself offered no grand narrative, no promise of transcendence, no story about a higher purpose of present suffering. He was nakedly, unapologetically a gangster.

(“It’s not just that he’s a gangster,” my friend Ivan Krastev, a political analyst, said to me. “It’s that he’s a *petty* gangster.” To that thought Polish foreign minister Radosław Sikorski responded, “Well, the sums involved were not petty.”)

Ukraine had never had the rule of law. Yet under Yanukovich the kleptocracy was particularly shameless; the judicial system made itself available for private hire; the police functioned according to the principle of arbitrariness. Slava Vakarchuk believed that Ukrainians had gotten what they had chosen for themselves.

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I think that Yanukovich won elections fairly, Slava told me, and we paid a very high price for that. But that was a fair price for Ukrainian society. Because they elected him and they needed to live through this mistake.”

Yet the hundreds of thousands who had taken part in the Orange Revolution did not go back out on the streets. It might have seemed that the time for revolution was over, that people had resigned themselves to this post-Soviet purgatory—until the moment in November 2013 when Yanukovich unexpectedly refused to sign an association agreement with the European Union. Russian president Vladimir Putin was pressuring Yanukovich to join his Eurasian Union, to ally with the *russkii mir*, “the Russian world,” against the West. Even so, Yanukovich’s refusal to sign the association agreement was very abrupt: even while his 2010 victory had clearly represented rapprochement with Russia, the Ukrainian president’s rhetoric had consistently promoted some form of European integration, in particular an agreement to lessen trade barriers and enable visa-free travel for Ukrainians in the Schengen zone. The long-awaited signing ceremony in Vilnius had already been arranged when Yanukovich suddenly changed his mind. The association agreement was far from ideal: it promised no eventual acceptance into the European Union, obliged Ukraine to undertake costly reforms, and was likely to provoke financial retaliation from Russia. Nonetheless it was of tremendous symbolic importance: would Ukraine have a chance to belong to Europe—or not?

In Jurko’s mind, of course the agreement was not fantastic. Of course it was largely symbolic. But it was *something*, a sign that Ukraine would, even if slowly, embark on a different path, that even though Yanukovich might remain a repulsive despot, he would have to submit, for instance, to a reform of the justice system. It would have meant that even this oligarchical regime was conceding to depart from its most ostentatious kleptocratic practices. It would have been “a foot in the door” of Europe.

When on 21 November 2013 Yanukovich refused to sign the association agreement, Jurko’s friends oscillated between a feeling that the end of the world had come and a feeling that no, they would not take this, they had reached their limit. Around eight o’clock that evening a thirty-two-year-old Afghan-Ukrainian journalist named Mustafa Nayyem, who had reported on xenophobia and corruption for the news site *Ukrayinska Pravda*, posted a note on his Facebook page: “Come on, let’s get serious. Who is ready to go out to the Maidan by midnight tonight? ‘Likes’ don’t count.”

Jurko’s eleven-year-old son drew a European flag and wrote on it “Ukraina—Unia.” Jurko took him to the central square in Lviv, the small Maidan, where people gathered around the monument to the nineteenth century Ukrainian poet

Taras Shevchenko. In the beginning they were mostly young people: “Euromaidan” belonged to the students. Perhaps in the short term they had the most at stake: access to Schengen zone visas, scholarships, internships, opportunities to study abroad. Would Europe be open to them, or not?

They were the iPhone generation who—unlike Jurko’s generation, who had seen the Soviet Union fall in their twenties, who had ushered Yushchenko into the presidency in their thirties—had not yet had their chance at revolution. They were tired of politicians and political parties. (“It’s interesting,” said Katia Mishchenko, a young Ukrainian translator of Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno, “because no one is waiting for Yulia.”) They were “indifferent to political parties, but not to politics,” explained Taras Dobko, a philosopher in his early forties who was vice-rector of the Ukrainian Catholic University in Lviv. Many of them were his own students. One of them was Markiyan Prochasko, Jurko’s nephew.

Markiyan, like his uncle, had soft, unkempt hair that fell into his eyes. There was something delicate about him—he was thin and kind and looked even younger than his age. On 21 November Markiyan read Mustafa Nayyem’s Facebook appeal, and late at night got on his bicycle and rode from the outskirts of Lviv to the Shevchenko monument in the city center. He and other students stood in the circle, held hands, and shouted “Ukraine is Europe!” Some of the students had come with the young university lecturer Bohdan Solchanyk, who told them that night: you’re shouting “revolution,” but you can’t make a revolution in one day. The next day they came back.

Markiyan spent the following three nights on this small Maidan in Lviv. On the fourth day he decided to go to Kiev, several hours away by train. Student groups were organizing trips, but Markiyan wanted to go alone. When he arrived in Kiev the Maidan seemed sad to him, terrible in a way, not very many people were there, and he despaired that nobody cared about the situation in Ukraine. A few hours passed. In the evening he saw that more and more people were coming, and then he felt happiness—that they were there, that he was there.

Jurko did not feel the same happiness that his nephew did. “I experienced no excitement,” he told me.

None. When I went to the revolution on the Maidan, whether I went to Kiev or here in Lviv, there was no euphoria and no desire. I didn’t shout anything . . . I was simply silent. I always understood it as hard, unpleasant, draining, but necessary work. Simply work. I didn’t like freezing, I didn’t like standing, I don’t very much like crowds. . . . I knew that I had to do it, although from time to time I would ask myself: what am I, an old guy, doing here? Why am I taking their revolution from them? It’s important that they have their own revolution.

Jurko's colleague, thirty-nine-year-old Serhiy Zhadan, was a very different kind of writer. "When I was fourteen and had my own views about life, I first loaded up on alcohol," begins his novel *Depeche Mode*, "Up to the gills. It was really hot and the blue heavens swam above me, and I lay dying on a striped mattress and couldn't even get drunk, because I was only fourteen and simply didn't know how." His novels are filled with lost young people, with vodka, sex, and rock and roll—none of which is sexy. (This is in contrast to the novelist himself. One Polish journalist who attended Serhiy Zhadan's poetry reading in Warsaw commented that he had never seen so many young women wearing short skirts in March.) There was something in his novels akin to the Beat Poets, characters from towns in post-Soviet eastern Ukraine reminiscent of Jack Kerouac and Neal Cassady. Notwithstanding their very different literary sensibilities, Serhiy had the same feeling as Jurko did when the students began demonstrating in November.

"It's good," Serhiy told a friend in Poland, "that they've taken the matter in hand, that they've organized themselves. For them we belong among the old irons, we're worn out, we've exhausted our use. This is their chance and their revolution."

The political scientist Mykola Riabchuk's son, Yuri, a punk rock drummer in his mid-twenties, looked exactly like his father, uncannily so. Yuri had gone to the Maidan in Kiev that first week just to see what was happening there. Some activists got in touch with him: could he loan his amplifiers to the Euromaidan? Yuri talked to his father: he was young and did not have much money, the amplifiers were expensive. Mykola offered paternal support—and insurance: if the amplifiers got destroyed, he would replace them.

Some activists got in touch with Slava Vakarchuk as well, although not to ask for amplifiers. They wanted him to give a speech: Slava was a rock star, people would listen to him. He agreed to the speech, although he did not want to talk about the European Union. For Slava, being part of Europe had little to do with Yanukovich's signing or not signing an association agreement. Being a part of Europe, he told the young people, was a question of values: the value of freedom of choice, the value of dignity.

"Don't give up, everything is only beginning." These were Slava's last words to them on 28 November.

"Unfortunately," Slava told me much later, "not only good things began after that."