

ХРОНІКА

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**BATTLE
FOR KHARKIV**

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Chapter 1

THE FIRST ONES IN UKRAINE

Nobody knew back then that on 21 November 2013 the revolution will begin in Kyiv. A few days before the Vilnius Summit of the Eastern Partnership, the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine decided to temporarily suspend the process of preparation for the conclusion of the Association Agreement between Ukraine and the European Union. This decision was officially announced by the Prime Minister of Ukraine, Mykola Azarov. The protests began in Kyiv as a response to this decision.

Around midnight, after it became known that the Association Agreement process was put on hold, a little more than a dozen activists gathered on Freedom Square in front of the building of the Kharkiv City Council. They stood there with the flags of the European Union and Ukraine till the morning. By noon of the next day, the Kharkiv Euromaidan (which wasn't called that yet) has grown to several dozens of active citizens.

A week before the protests, Volodymyr Chistylin, who later became one of the Kharkiv Euromaidan organizers, wrote about commemorating the ninth anniversary of the Orange Revolution of 2004. "We wore orange scarves back then, and we wanted to gather people for one revolution, and it turned out that another revolution was just about to begin," Volodymyr Chistylin said. "When it happened we organized a small action in solidarity with Kyiv. And back then, in Kharkiv, where the "Everything for the Victory" tent is, people were

chanting, “Revolution!”. I was the key organizer, and starting on 19 November, I was in charge of the first rally. I was in Kharkiv all this time, from the first day till the last one.” Mr.Chistylin remembered that Kharkiv residents were the first ones to go to the rally in support of the European integration of Ukraine, on 19 November 2013.

On the twenty-third of November, the municipal government fenced Freedom Square with the net, allegedly as a part of the preparation for the New Year’s festivities. Right after that, activists started intensifying their movement, and on 24 November, the rally near Taras Shevchenko Monument was attended by nearly two thousand people (later these gatherings will become more regular). On the next day, Hennadiy Kernes, Kharkiv’s mayor at that time, announced a quarantine in Kharkiv due to the allegedly complicated epidemiological situation with the flu. That should have prevented mass gatherings. However, activists didn’t intend to give up.

“After students were beaten in Kyiv on 30 November, everybody realized in Kharkiv that this revolution will take quite a long time,” Volodymyr Chistylin stressed. On 1 December, nearly seven-eight thousand people gathered for a rally near Taras Shevchenko Monument. Since the end of 2013, this place near Kobzar Monument has become a centre of progressive Kharkiv. Every day, a vigil will be held here, followed by the church service and prayer for peace, and politicians, musicians and poets would perform there as well.

On the first day of winter, protesters demanded to impeach President Viktor Yanukovich, dissolve the Cabinet of Ministers and hold re-elections to the Verkhovna Rada (Parliament). In addition to that, they encourage all public and political forces to make everything possible to overcome the political crisis in a nonviolent way, as well as ensure the national interests of Ukraine and resume the European integration process. Also, demonstrators called o332n NATO

to warn Russia not to interfere with the affair of Ukraine. “We had a NATO expert, Professor Oleksandr Heorgiyovich Yushchenko, who said back then, “Do you realize that a war is being in the making?”. We addressed NATO asking to not allow Russian aggression as we were convinced that after we win here, the war will begin. On the first of December, the Kharkiv Euromaidan officially declared it,” Volodymyr Chistylin said.

“The Kharkiv Euromaidan was quite special as it was a political action but without any particular political affiliation. “Svoboda” (“Freedom”) members attempted to “raid” us at the beginning, but we came to terms with them. With Ihor Shvaika (an MP from the All-Ukrainian Union Freedom Ihor Shvaika), we started negotiations and decided, “Let us get rid of all the parties’ flags.” It is not quite typical to do that for the “Freedom” Union, they stood to the side of the square, and we had a normal conversation with them. I was in touch with them daily,” Volodymyr Chistylin reminisces.

Deputy of the Kharkiv City Council from the “Batkivshchyna” (“Motherland”) Party faction, one of the organizers and a member of the coordinating council of Kharkiv Euromaidan Ivan Varchenko, has joined Kharkiv Euromaidan from the very beginning yet understood later that everything would be decided in Kyiv. “Local guys got the hold of the situation pretty quick,” he said. “And I released that, at the end of the day, the faith of Ukraine will be decided in Kyiv, so I focused mostly on Kyiv Maidan. We needed to share our energy there and send a message that the Kharkiv Oblast, the East of Ukraine was in this together with the Central part of Ukraine. That’s why I involved my friends and together we created the so-called “Kharkiv town” there, near the “Globus” (“Globe”) mall, — “Under the Globe.””

“After the students were beaten in Kyiv, the permanent Maidan began in Kyiv. On the second day of this perma-

ment Maidan, I arrived in Kyiv and asked where people from Kharkiv were. And I found out that there was no place where Kharkiv residents gathered. They've been scattered here and there, blending in with the rest of the people. In the beginning, we rented half of the tent from the Lviv guys. Then we raised some funds with friends and purchased a bigger military tent. Later we bought five more military tents, only smaller ones. I was thinking to myself, "These are the good tents, they will serve long." Later these tents were burnt when Molotov cocktails were thrown from the "Globus" roof during the protests. The entire "Kharkiv town" burnt to the ground. I was more focused on the Kharkiv Maidan in Kyiv. We were sending the signals there that Kharkiv was together with Kyiv. It worked on the information level, and it resonated with people, especially with the people from the West. And it was good. I saw it was needed," Ivan Varchenko said.

On the night of December 7th to 8th, 40 cars with the flags of Ukraine and the EU departed from the Freedom Square in Kharkiv heading to Kyiv. The motorists were delivering food and warm clothes and blankets for the Euromaidan activists. "People donated honey, home-made jam, and the most important is that people shared their warmth with Kyiv demonstrators and sent a clear message that this who stayed in Kharkiv will definitely support Euromaidan tomorrow, with a concert and their presence during the Euromaidan rally to be held in Kharkiv, at noon," Ivan Varchenko told his comments for the media. According to him, it was important for the Kharkiv activists to send a signal that East and West were together and that Maidan was not an invention of some Western or pro-American Ukrainian politicians but the will of the civil society.

Chapter 2

«A BURST OF CREATIVITY»

According to Volodymyr Chistylin, from the very beginning, Euromaidan in Kharkiv had a certain artistic and intellectual fleur, as in addition to political slogans musicians and poets constantly performed there. All December long, concerts and performances were held near Taras Shevchenko Monument almost every day. Along with reciting Taras Shevchenko and contemporary Ukrainian authors' poetry, there were also rock concerts held there in support of Kyiv Euromaidan. Music bands, authors and poets from different cities and regions of Ukraine would join local Kharkiv artists.

On the twenty-second of December, there was an attempt to symbolically rename Lenin Avenue into Lennon Avenue. As a part of the "Thank you, grandpa Lennon, for our happy childhood" campaign, iconic Beatles songs were performed live by Kharkiv rock bands. A prominent Ukrainian writer and poet Yurii Andrukhiovich also spoke in front of the audience. After the concert, Euromaidan protesters held a solemn procession from the Shevchenko Monument to Lenin Avenue past the stele with a large national flag, chanting "Glory to Ukraine! Glory to the Heroes!", "Kharkiv, stand up!" and "Lenin, goodbye!". Passing by the building of the regional state administration, the procession participants chanted "Down with the gang!". As suggested by a Ukrainian writer Serhii Zhadan, people sang a "folk Liverpool song" "The Red Viburnum" and "All You Need Is Love". On the house located on 1 Lenin Avenue, the procession participants attached

a symbolic memorial plaque — a sheet of paper with a portrait of the musician and the inscription that read, “The avenue is named in honour of the outstanding musician, poet, composer and fighter for peace John Winston Ono Lennon (1940–1980) from grateful Kharkiv residents”. Zhadan expressed the opinion that the temporary memorial plaque should be later replaced by a permanent one. “This plaque is temporary, I’m sure it should be replaced with a permanent one. My only fear is that our authorities will now consider John Lennon a collaborator and a fascist as well. I think that it’s worth changing Kharkiv government is that is what’s needed for this memorial plaque to stay here,” Serhii Zhadan said, quoted by media. At the end of the procession, those present sang the national anthem of Ukraine and arranged a photo session with the “Lennon memorial plaque”.

A similar attempt to rename the avenue was already made in 2007. Back then, the activists of the local organization of the “Reforms and Order” Party tried to change its name by attaching paper stickers “Lennon Avenue” on top of the real “Lenin Avenue”.

Characterizing the Kharkiv Euromaidan, Serhii Zhadan said that it differed from the Kyiv one in the absence of party flags and politicians. “It was truly a social movement for us,” he said. “All this was started by a handful of activists, and we did not have party flags until the very end, up until February. When the party members would come to us, we would ask them to remove their party flags. It was really an extremely important issue for Kharkiv residents.” He noted that initially one to three thousand people gathered for protests in Kharkiv, five thousand people at the most, but “a new community was organized.” “New people appeared. For instance, I remember very well how this mythical “Right Sector” was formed. Two young men joined the rally and just announced, “We are the “Right Sector.”” To be honest, I don’t know what kind of

authority from the Right Sector they actually had. A group of people gathered quickly around them. These people were mostly Kharkiv Ultras, in other words, young Kharkiv residents. I still see these people today. Many of them continue working as volunteers, and activists, some of them went into politics, the others continue representing Euromaidan. I remember many of them,” the writer would say many years after the Revolution of Dignity.

Chapter 3

THE FIRST ATTACKS

On 2 December, a group of youths attacked a peaceful rally near the Kharkiv Regional State Administration. About a dozen athletic men wedged themselves into the ranks of protesters and began throwing firecrackers and explosive packages at people's feet. The police response to the attack was extremely indifferent. The people themselves detained several provocateurs, recognizing them as the same persons who attacked people earlier in the towns of Chuguyev and Vesely. That was the first attack of the aggressive Maidan opponents.

Within a week, unidentified people started setting on fire the vehicles of the local MPs and Euromaidan activists. On the twelfth of December, at around one o'clock in the morning in Chuguyev, unidentified persons set ablaze a car of Ihor Shvai-ka, a Ukrainian MP from the All-Ukrainian Union "Svoboda" ("Freedom"). The vehicle burnt completely. The politician regarded the arson as an act of revenge for the activities of the nationalist association in the Kharkiv Oblast. On the next night, at around two o'clock, unidentified individuals burned a minibus rented by the Kharkiv Euromaidan. It happened in the yard of building No. 17 on Sumska Street (where the Salamandra Insurance Company office is located). This minibus helped deliver daily the equipment and warm items donated by Kharkiv residents for the peaceful protesters in Kyiv. According to the organizers, the minibus did not have any identifying signs of Euromaidan. According to the organizers, the minibus didn't have any signs that would mark its con-

nection to the Euromaidan. There was no equipment or any other valuables inside the minibus at the moment of the fire.

Ivan Varchenko said he was ready for such a scenario for his vehicle. “Once, when I was on my way home from Kyiv, in the peaceful times... I mean, we can call it “relatively peaceful” times, right after the students were beaten in Kyiv... When people still hoped that this political issue could have been resolved in a peaceful, European way, with joint efforts... I took my kids: my nephew, my godson, my son and my godfather’s son, and I told them, “Let’s go to Maidan, guys, I want you to see it! There are boys of ten, twelve, fifteen years too there. Ukrainians have to defend Kyiv.” They wore these metal helmets and we headed to Maidan. In my car, someone unscrewed the bolts on the front and the rear wheels, on the right side. I noticed it by accident. We hit the road at around 6–7 a.m. so that we could arrive in Kyiv at around 12–1 p.m.

The road was good, so we could develop quite a speed. And that was how I drove for about 70 km, with half-unscrewed bolts. Suddenly I felt something weird: as we passed a bumpy stretch of the road the car started shaking noticeably, and then the vibration intensified a lot. I didn’t understand at first what was happening so I stopped the car immediately. I told my boys, “Jump out of the car, guys! Something’s rattling, I don’t know what that is.” They jumped out of the car. I got out of the car too and saw that the wheels barely stayed on, on the right side of the car, one screw was already missing, and the rest of them still held, but barely. It was obvious that the wheels weren’t balanced anymore. I looked under the car whether there was something that stuck to the car underneath, then I screwed and tightened these wheels, and we proceeded with our trip. We haven’t been preparing for the war back then...” In Kyiv, his friends explained to him that if he drove at 110–120 km/hour speed or if he would try to pass someone on the highway his vehicle would easily roll over a few times.

In the meantime, the Head of the Kharkiv regional state administration, Mykhailo Dobkin, declared that the Kharkiv Oblast “ignored Maidan sentiments of the capital and Western Ukraine”, while the Kharkiv Euromaidan was deemed to be “non-existent”.

On the 20th of December, the so-called “titushky”¹ became active in Kharkiv (the fact that civil servants of the law enforcement agencies and special services used the help of criminal gang formations of “titushky” against the democratic rally of Euromaidan was officially recognized). On the twentieth of December, at four o’clock in the morning, “titushky” attacked the building of the Kharkiv “Prosvita” where the headquarters of the Kharkiv Euromaidan was located. The building is on 18 Rymarska Street. On the first floor of the building, a few windows were shattered, and the paint was spilled at the entrance. They also covered the façades of the headquarters building and adjacent buildings with slanderous inscriptions against the supporters of the European integration direction of Ukraine. The night watch did not have time to detain the attackers but noticed that the attackers were two young men of athletic build. The “Antikor” (“Anti-Corruption”) website would announce later that one of the “Prosviyta” attackers was Anton Bestayev, one of the leaders of “titushky” gang formation. Bestayev was repeatedly seen raiding apartments

¹ “Titushki”, “Titushkas” — this term appeared for the first time in May 2013 and is derived from a family name of an athlete Vadym Titushka. The term gained popularity since November 2013, during Euromaidan. It’s a collective name for mercenaries, often lumpenized criminal elements, thugs, young men, in particular athletes, who were used by Ukrainian authorities during Yanukovich era to use physical force and participate in mass clashes; in particular, to hinder the activities of the opposition activists and to take actions against street protests through provocations, throwing cars on fire, intimidation, beatings and dispersal of demonstrations.

and residential buildings together with his subordinates. During the Maidan, Bestaev would attack activists and protesters with weapons in Kharkiv, and in the spring of 2014, Arsen Avakov would report that Bestaev, together with his gang of bullies, cut off the heads of activists in Mariinsky Park on February 18–20.

Another Euromaidan-affiliated car was set on fire in the yard of a residential building located at 54a Novooleksandrivska Street, building 6. It happened on the twenty-fourth of December at around three o'clock in the morning. On the same day, at around nine o'clock in the evening, one of the Kharkiv Euromaidan organizers, Dmytro Pylypets, was attacked by two men. He was beaten and stabbed several times on Ivanova Street.

The next day, the mayor of the city, Hennadiy Kernes, denied the involvement of the authorities of Kharkiv and the region in the attacks on Euromaidan activists and their property and suggested that the attack on Dmytro Pylypets could have been committed by the opposition themselves. On the next day, the city mayor Hennadiy Kernes denied any involvement of Kharkiv and Kharkiv Oblast authorities in the recent attacks against the Euromaidan activists and their property and assumed that Dmytro Pylypets could have been actually attacked by the opposition forces. Earlier Hennadiy Kernes also commented on his Instagram on the events that happened on 24 December. He wrote there, “If you, idiots, have wings — then go ahead and fly, if you got urine — go ahead and drink it, and these “Euros” may have a lot of desires.” He left this comment in the Russian language. The head of the Kharkiv regional state administration Mykhailo Dobkin declared that members of the “Svoboda” union may have been allegedly involved in the attack against Dmytro Pylypets that caused him knife wounds. Member of the National Resistance Headquarters Ivan Varchenko reported that Kharkiv Euro-

maidan was expecting provocations to discredit Euromaidan activists and emphasized that Euromaidan remained a peaceful rally and that its participants didn't intend on seizing either the city or the regional council buildings or any other administrative budding in the Kharkiv Oblast.

A little later Serhiy Zhadan reminisced, "During the winter, Kernes was pressuring us quite a lot, and his "Oplot" was after us all the time as well. A few of our people were attacked with knives and even injured, and, when we held the Euromaidan congress in January 2014, it was pretty tough. They would simply chase us in the streets, attacking us."

On the twenty-seventh of December, at around three o'clock in the morning, another vehicle that belonged to one of the Kharkiv Euromaidan activists was set on fire in the yard of the house on 31 Danylevskoho Street. The fire spread to the car parked nearby. Both cars burned to the ground.

"A week before it happened, I knew that they would eventually burn my car and that my car would be the next, as they've already burned two or three cars belonging to our Euromaidan activists," Ivan Varchenko said after the night of 28 December to 29 December, when his car was burned to the ground as well. Actually, a week before the arson happened, he hesitated whether he needed to get an insurance package for his car because he wasn't quite sure how he would possibly explain it at the insurance company office that he was convinced his car could have been set on fire, so it had to be insured. Finally, he decided that he still needed to insure the vehicle. "On Monday I was supposed to head to the insurance company office," Ivan Varchenko said. "And on Saturday they burned my car. In the night from Saturday to Sunday." According to him, it was done by the special forces units that "possibly weren't sent directly by the political leadership of the city of Kharkiv, but they clearly acted in their interests," he added. "They would determine their field of interests, they

would understand who was in the way, and sometimes they wouldn't even coordinate their activities with their leadership and their financial donors. They would often take the measures they saw fit against the people who, in their opinion, interfered. It was clear that Euromaidan in Kharkiv was in the way, especially since it was the biggest one after the Kyiv Euromaidan, and it remained this way during all that time. And it was also clear that people who were involved in the organizing of the Euromaidan, or simply people who participated in the protests, were interfering as well.”

Chapter 4

EUROMAIDAN FORUM

On 11 January, a crowd gathered in front of the Taras Shevchenko Monument where local Euromaidan activists usually gathered, in support of the course of Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich. According to the estimates, there were several thousand people there. The vent participants with the state flags and the flags of the “Party of Regions” lined up on both sides of Sumska Street from Svobody Square to the Kharkiv Academic Theater of Opera and Ballet. People also held posters with the slogans, such as, “You can’t fill the budget with the Maidan”, “Kharkiv is for President Yanukovich”, “Stop loitering on Euromaidan. Go back to work!”, “The course of President Yanukovich is the course of development”, “There is no Euromaidan, but there is a peaceful life!”, “You want Maidan — go beyond Okruzhna Street!”, “No to fascism!”. These people were brought to Sumska Street in organized groups. The main group of demonstrators gathered around the monument to Shevchenko, next to which a stage with sound amplification equipment was built overnight. There were mostly workers from state-owned factories and budget institutions among the participants of the Anti-Maidan. Representatives of several well-known pro-Russian organizations were also present, including “Ukrainian Vybor” (“Ukrainian Choice”), “Union of Citizens of Ukraine”, “Trudovaya Kharkivshchyna” (“Workers’ Kharkiv Oblast”).

“We are waiting for the representatives of the Maidan, and we would like to share with them our thoughts regarding

their sit-in and their rallies during the last two months. We are employees of the “Turboatom” factory, and we only got two days off in total, yet we came here to meet Euromaidan activists. Our factory used to work intensely, from the beginning of January, we would work without days off and holidays. We don’t have time to relax and do nothing, we are working for our country,” said a “Turboatom” representative in her interview, quoted by Radio Liberty.

The decision to hold the Euromaidan Forum was made on 27 December during the All-Ukrainian Euromaidan Conference. On the morning of the first day of the Forum, the participants were only aware of the place where they would need to show up to register. It was in the building of the independent cultural centre “Indi”. Meanwhile, supporters of the pro-Russian course for Ukraine were trying to block this building. They blocked the downtown with their vehicles. The Forum delegates, journalists who got accredited for the event, and observers were taken in a taxi to the unknown address. The destination was an automobile and road technical school on the outskirts of the city.

“Only two people asked where everything would be held. They wouldn’t give us the premises, so we tried to rent a restaurant, like for the wedding. However, our plans somehow became known, so we were refused by the restaurant owner.

Another option we had was to organize it all as if it was a gathering of some sect members (*for instance, to rent a space on behalf of the religious organization of Jehovah’s Witnesses*). But they would find out about it too. Later we had an agreement with the Milk Industry College, but they refused us last minute as well. So, the Kharkiv Human Rights Group had some locations, it was Ukrainian centres that already existed, we just helped them spread. We had no space, but we had a lot of people, and we would give them the ride, as people were

chased down the streets. We came to Marynychak's¹ church, and we had a short mess and a prayer there. We were even thinking of holding our Forum right in the church, at least the plenary meeting, The groups were separate," Volodymyr Chistylin reminisces. In his opinion, on that day, the Kharkiv Euromaidan influenced the course of the entire Revolution of Dignity significantly.

Representatives of over 50 Ukrainian Euromaidans, 119 delegates from 21 regions and Crimea were able to start the forum with a two-hour delay.

The event was opened by the prominent writers Serhiy Zhadan and brothers Vitaliy and Dmytro Kapranov. "We had seven locations and seven groups," Volodymyr Chistylin reminisces. Activists from all over Ukraine met at the forum, and together they coordinated the work of the protest movements and developed the further Euromaidan strategy, and action plan, as well as worked on the issues of consolidation of various movements within Euromaidan (removing usurpers from power and preventing usurpation of power in the future by creating public mechanisms, levers of direct people's power and development of self-government). Due to security measures, the Forum organizers advised activists to move around the city in groups.

After staying in the Church of John the Baptist for about an hour, the activists proceeded to the St. Dmytro Church of the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church, where the Forum began its work in the refectory hall. Right at the church doors, clashes erupted between the Kharkiv Euromaidan self-defence groups and a group of some unknown young males. The Maidan participants gathered in the church and almost four dozen of young men ran to

¹ Father Viktor Marynychak, the abbot of the John the Baptist Cathedral of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine.

the gateway near the church, received their “instructions” and started storming the church building. Maidan activists succeeded in repelling their attack and didn’t let “titushky” inside the cathedral. After the provocateurs’ attack, fighters of the “Griffon” special forces unit arrived on the scene. The police detained eighteen persons.

“There was information that “titushkys” were approaching,” Volodymyr Chistylin said, remembering the events. “And they really headed to get us. I was the last one to leave. “Titushky” were walking along the street, and all the cars were driving away. We all went to a different cathedral, to bishop Ihor Isichenko. There is a temple of the autocephalous church there, and we went there. There is a photograph where I was standing surrounded by TV cameras, and journalists were asking me, “What’s next?”. Everybody headed to the cathedral. I told them we intended to continue our gathering, even though the “titushky” would most likely come here as well. I went inside the cathedral, we locked all the doors, and then I heard that they started storming the church.”

After the meeting, the Forum delegates and observers left to work in working groups, in seven directions. Around five o’clock in the evening, fifteen to thirty youths broke into the “Ye!” Bookstore, where the civic education group was working, fired tear gas at them, beat the guards, smashed the bookcases’ glass doors, and quickly escaped the store. One of the members of the Kharkiv Euromaidan, Oleg Kolotii, suffered the attack worst, as his nose was broken and his eye was injured.

In the evening, Euromaidan protesters started gathering for the traditional rally. As it was impossible to hold the rally near the Taras Shevchenko monument anymore, people started gathering near the monument to the ball, and from there, the convoy headed to the Hryhoriy Skovoroda monument. A little later, Euromaidan protesters spotted the flags of the

“Party of Regions” near University Street. Euromaidan set up a safety perimeter consisting of several men aimed at ensuring safety during the rally. The rally went on, but then the electricity was cut. Anti-Maidan participants approached the Euromaidan demonstrators, and the police cordoned them off quite quickly. Special forces units appeared on the scene. About ten minutes later, a car arrived from the direction of Freedom Square, with the loudspeakers playing music. The rally ended with a large convoy marching to the Central Market subway station, surrounded by “titushky”. The electricity would cut off from time to time.

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