

Bimonthly January-February No 1 (XXV)/2017

20 PLN (w tym 5% vat) | 10 EUR | 12 USD | 7 GBP

www.neweasterneurope.eu


New Eastern Europe




THE ART OF REVOLUTION

Once a protester, always a protester

KATERYNA PRYSHCHEPA



The Ukrainian **Revolution on Granite** began as a student demonstration in early October 1990. It lasted a little over two weeks and directly involved slightly more than 300 people. Unexpectedly, this little-known student hunger strike turned out to be one of the most remarkable events of the late Soviet period. It set a blueprint for the future revolutions in Ukraine.



On October 2nd 1990 a group of students, mostly from Lviv and Kyiv universities, put up tents in the central square of Kyiv. At the time it was still called the Square of the October Revolution, now it is known as Maidan Nezalezhnosti or Maidan for short. The students initiated a hunger protest. Unknowingly they organised the first successful peaceful revolution in the history of post-Soviet Ukraine. They also accidentally established a tradition of Ukrainian tent protests on the square.

The protest had three main coordinators – Markiyan Ivashchyshyn (representing Lviv), Oles Doniy (from Kyiv) and Oleg Barkov (a student of Dneprodzerzhinsk Industrial Institute, representing the east of Ukraine). Initially, there were 40 students and they were later joined by many others. When planning the protests, students were aware of the fact they might be arrested. In response, they organised at least five separate groups that were to be sent to Kyiv, one by one, so that if one group was removed, the protest could still continue with the other ones. In just two days around 150 students went on hunger strike. They were accompanied by about 130 other participants who served as their guards, providing logistical and technical support. The protests continued to draw even more people to Kyiv. It included Maria Burmaka – today a well-known Ukrainian singer, and back then a student

from Kharkiv – and Vakhtang Kipiani – today a leading journalist, and back then a student of the Mykolaiv Pedagogical Institute.

No perestroika, no revolution

Until today nobody has really traced back the origins of the hunger strike. Protests point to the Lviv Students Fraternity, who first invited the Ukrainian Students Union of Kyiv to start protesting together. Putting aside organisational matters, it is also believed that protesters were brought together by a desire to change the country. Being young and determined, they sought ways to transfer their energy into action. The students came from many different backgrounds.

Had there been no *perestroika*, there would have been no revolution. Clearly, the protesters wanted to make the best of the changing tide coming from Moscow. They felt the thaw and thought it was the right moment for their voices to be heard.

Until now nobody
has really traced the
origins of the 1990
Kyiv hunger strike.

However, trust in *perestroika* vanished after a series of clashes with authorities and a series of protests in different Soviet republics. “Starting with Karabakh in 1988 and later: Sumgaiti, Tbilisi, Uzbekistan, and Vilnius we all saw the authorities could not do anything right in the country,” says Kipiani. Inspiration for the young Ukrainians was found in the student demon-

strations in Bulgaria and Tiananmen Square in Beijing. Ukrainian students also adopted the tents and headbands as visible form of protest.

Not everyone liked the idea of a hunger strike though. “I personally did not support that idea,” says Mykailo Svystovych, one of the participants. “The thing was that the hunger strike is such a hard form of protest that if it did not succeed, it would have been hard to think of some other form of protest,” he concludes. Even though he was not in Kyiv on the first days of the strike, he still soon joined them: “Although I was against the idea, I just could not stay away when my friends and colleagues had risked their lives and freedom.”

Svystovych was not alone. Many older activists did not join the hunger strike, although for other reasons. This included the historian (at that time, a doctoral student) Yaroslav Hrytsak and the third chairman of the independent Lviv-based association “Tovarystvo Leva” – an organisation which manned the protest in high numbers. Lev Zakharczyszyn explains why he did not join the protesters: “Unlike my younger colleagues, I did not go to protest in Kyiv. Maybe it was a question of a different approach. For example, groups of older dissidents, those who had just been released from prisons, did not support this movement in the beginning. They



On October 2nd 1990 a group of students put up tents in the central square of Kyiv.

were convinced that there were better ways to oppose the system than an open street-based protest.”

Indeed, the “radical youth” that gathered in independent student organisations did not see eye-to-eye with the older generation of Soviet dissidents, who were advocating for the use of more formal methods of protest. For that purpose they wanted to use the parliamentary opposition group “Narodna Rada” that was established after the March 1990 election to the Supreme Council of the Ukrainian Social Soviet Republic. Although the group was a clear minority, it was still able to voice oppositional views during parliamentary debates. That, however, was not enough for the youth.

Good organisation, no planning

Preparations for the protests were not well planned – they were rather hasty. As Natalia Klymovska illustrates: “On the next day after they went to Kyiv, the guys called us in Lviv, asking for someone to come over and bring some things which they needed but forgot to take along. So I immediately volunteered and went to the capital.” Not much thought was put into the organisation of the hunger strike either. “We came to the strike right after Markiyan Ivashchyn’s wedding. We were still finishing some food on the train to Kyiv, just right before the start of the

hunger strike. Not the best health strategy, if you ask me today,” says Mykhailo Kanafotskyi, who was among the first to protest. Despite the lack of strategic planning, the organisation was very good once it was under way. The protestors were highly disciplined and special “services” operated within the camp. Doctors and medical students supervised the participants of the hunger strike. A security team guarded the tent area and enforced internal discipline. Donations were collected and transferred to a special bank account.

It remains unclear why there were no repercussions from the authorities towards the protesters or why nobody tried to stop the strike. Clearly, KGB informants were among the protesters and the secret services were informed. One of the participants, who later joined the SBU (Ukrainian special services), explained that in that atmosphere of perestroika and uncertainty, the Soviet KGB officers were afraid of taking responsibility; hence they avoided making any serious decision. Instead they preferred to let the events unfold in their “natural manner”. This, of course, does not mean that there were no unexpected threats, such as the poisoned tea that was once brought to the protesters. There was also an attempt to throw explosive devices (with metal shrapnel) at the protesters.

The tactic of the high-level officials at the time, however, was to wait. Thus, the visit paid to the protesters by Leonid Kravchuk, at the time the head of the Supreme Council of the Ukrainian SSR, in October brought little results. The hunger strikes continued and reached about 180 participants by October, piquing the interest of Kyiv residents. On the first day of strikes the students released a list of demands for the Ukrainian SSR authorities, which included the following: not to sign the amended version of the treaty on creation of the USSR; pre-term elections to the Supreme Council of the Ukrainian SSR, with access for all existing parties; return all Ukrainian military personnel and drafted soldiers from the other Soviet republics, and ensure that military service duty is served within the territory of Ukraine; nationalisation of the property that is owned by the Communist Party of Ukraine and Komsomol; and the resignation of Vitaliy Masol, the chairman of the Council of Ministers of Ukrainian SSR.

October 15th 1990 was the day of the mass strike. Students from the Taras Shevchenko University seized the campus while others got into the building of the Supreme Council. They managed to install a few tents in front of the council building, thus widening the territory of the hunger strike. They were supported by workers from some of the key enterprises in Kyiv who declared their readiness to join the strike. Two days afterwards the Supreme Council of the Ukrainian SSR adopted a resolution on “the claims of students conducting a hunger strike in Kyiv since October 2nd 1990”. It was passed by a vote of 314 deputies for and 38 against. The resolution declared the intent to satisfy all five requirements. However

no strict deadlines were assigned, thus allowing the authorities to avoid any real commitment to the requests. In the end, only two demands were met: the demand regarding military service and the resignation of Vitaliy Masol. As a matter of fact, the Ukrainian SSR never signed the amended Treaty of the USSR.

A revolution or not?

Even though the name Revolution on Granite implies that the 1990 protests were revolutionary in nature, some historians, like Yaroslav Hrytsak, are careful with this term. “This was a breakthrough moment, no doubt. For the first time there was evidence that the system could give in and this was the first time the authorities accepted something. But I would not call this a revolution,” Hrytsak says. Terminological disputes, to be sure, do not put into question the significance of the strike. Many observers and direct participants admit that it was one of the events that was responsible for the fall of the Soviet Union.

Initially, the protest’s influence was rather limited, mainly due to the students’ lack of experience. Most stayed away from politics in independent Ukraine. Only a few – like Volodymyr Chemerys, Vyacheslav Kyrylenko and Oles Doniy – were elected as MPs, and some held local government offices. Vyacheslav Kyrylenko, Pavlo Rozenko and Ostap Semerak held ministerial positions. The Tyahnybok brothers and Andriy Parubiy were involved in setting up radical parties. The rest kept things private. Even though they maintained an informal network, no structure was officially set up. Klymovska, reflecting on these developments, said: “Maybe we should have gone into politics more actively but we did not see it that way back then. We thought we were only students and it will be others who will continue our work on the political level.”


But once a protester, always a protester. Indeed, a majority of the 1990 protesters participated in the 2004 Orange Revolution and the 2013–2014 Euro-Maidan – and to a lesser extent, the 2000–2001 protests. Despite its limited size and initial impact, the Revolution on Granite set an example for subsequent protests in Ukraine over the next two decades. Not surprisingly, they all began with protesters occupying the central square in Kyiv. They all showed a certain degree of disconnect – between the active protesters and members of the political establishment. In 1990 the parliamentary opposition called the hunger strike a “radical

Many observers and direct participants admit that the Revolution on Granite was one of the events that helped put an **end** to the Soviet Union.

idea” and the parliamentary opposition leaders in 2013–2014 participated in talks with Viktor Yanukovych, while protesters on the streets were calling for Yanukovych’s resignation.

Also characteristic was the inability to form a political organisation which could put pressure on the establishment in order to fulfil all the declarations made during or after the protests. This was partly because the protests attracted people widely across the political spectrum and they did not all necessarily share a common vision at a time of peace. That is why even active members of all three protests (1990, 2004 and 2013–2014) did not seem to have mid- or long-term plan of action. They assumed, rightly or wrongly, that politicians will respond to popular demands and that everyone would get back to their daily life. Time has proven that such tactics do not work. “We’ve been tricked by the politicians in 1990, in 2004 and in 2014,” many of the protest participants admit bitterly.

Looking at the Revolution on Granite 26 years on, and having lived through the disappointments of the Orange Revolution, and the challenges that Ukraine has faced since 2014, the hunger strikers are divided when it comes to assessing the effectiveness of mass protest as a form of political change. Some like Mykhailo Knafotskyi or Mykhailo Svystovych fear that the next large protest may lead to violence on an unprecedented scale, and thus should be avoided at all costs. Others, like Oleg Barkov, think that citizens will try to avoid any repetitions of the protests as long as the war in Donbas continues, and any form of public discontent with the Kyiv authorities could undermine Ukraine’s statehood. More pessimistic voices, like Volodymyr Chemerys, are convinced that economic hardship, corruption and lack of positive change may again bring people to Kyiv’s streets; sooner or later.

There is no doubt that until today that participants of the Revolution on Granite form an outstanding group of people. They are the true makers of Ukraine’s modern history. This modest group of about 300 people have created a few ministers, pop singers, prominent civic activists, successful business men and women, writers and social figures. Most of them continue to be involved in public life through their work, volunteering and social activism, or personal and social influence. We cannot but see high value in these contributions. 

This text is based on interviews conducted within the framework of the research project
Three Revolutions (3R) conducted by the College of Europe Natolin campus.

Kateryna Pryshchepa is a PhD student at the Graduate School for Social Research (Institute of Philosophy and Sociology of the Polish Academy of Sciences). She previously graduated in European Interdisciplinary Studies from the College of Europe and Philosophy at the University of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy. As a journalist in Ukraine, she covered Ukraine-EU relations, among other issues.