

Interview with human rights activist, chairman of the NGO "Center for Civil Liberties" Oleksandra Matviychuk (OM). Interviewer: Katarina Novikova (KN). Recorded on 16 November 2016. Record Location: Kyiv.

KN: Ms. Oleksandra, what are the most important stages of your life - events, meetings or books that shaped your approach to life?

OM: I might miss something but to me the most important was the time I spent at the Ukrainian Humanitarian Lyceum. I was born in the village of Boyarka and studied in a small school. That is why studying in the capital and in such a prestigious high school was of great importance.

KN: When did you start attending and what was so special about the lyceum?

OM: It was in 1998. First of all, it had a quality educational process and there was also a Ukrainian-speaking environment (contrary to my native Boyarka where majority speaks Russian). We developed new ideas about literature and history. We could learn foreign languages, visit groups by interests including poetry. Often times we had guests who would come to meet with students. I remember one of them who told us: do not be half and half, discover ways to realize your potential in as many as possible fields.

KN: Do you remember the Granite or the Orange Revolution?

OM: I do not remember the Granite Revolution as I was at school but during the Orange Revolution, I was the Chairman of the Student Government. I started to wear an orange ribbon before the mass demonstrations and elections begun. I was thinking: "I am wearing the ribbon, there are not many of them around, so I will look great and others will follow my example". During the elections, I was an observer at a polling station. We finished late. I lived far away in Boyarka and there was no transportation so I stayed at a colleague's of mine who

was employed by a communal voting station. In the morning, when we turned the television on and saw that Yanukovich won, we began to cry. Then I heard that people were preparing for protests and I thought: “Now I know what to do!”. I participated in the Orange Maidan movement as an ordinary member. However, we brought to the demonstration the whole of our legal faculty because I was the head of the Student Government of the Taras Shevchenko National University. As reelelections went on, I chose Luhansk, the most critical location for my trip as observer. I found the headquarters in Kiev and asked them to take me to Luhansk but after their refusal I went there on my own. On arrival, I found the local headquarters and was gladly accepted: though young and inexperienced, I had some legal background.

KN: What was the aim of the Orange Maidan?

OM: I find it difficult to compare the two Maidans because during the first one I was an ordinary member but the Euromaidan I understand completely. During the Orange Maidan I did not perform any organizational tasks. The context was clearly political, people were protesting against electoral fraud and at the same time there was one candidate who they staked on. After that Maidan people returned to their usual lives and it looked to them like this: “We said yes to Yushchenko and now please perform your presidential duties and deliver your promises. You have to realize the Maidan slogans like “The guilty to prisons!”, “Freedom is unstoppable!” “East and West together!” and others and we are coming back to our day-to-day lives as we did everything we could”.

After the Euromaidan we had completely different attitude despite the Russian aggression. First of all, this Maidan was not organized by politicians, political forces were only a part of it and it really united the initiatives of various self-organized groups. The authorities pressurized the opposition as if they were controlling something though they had no real power. After Maidan people did not disperse because even if we elect angels (and those are absent in Ukrainian politics), without public oversight their halos tend to disappear and they grow horns.

Transformation of the government lay down on the shoulders of hundreds of thousands of people who have been working hard for three years since then. It means that people i.e. about forty thousand public activists felt that no one would do their job and took the responsibility for their country, their towns wishing to be agents of change.

KN: How did your family reacted to your participation in Euromaidan?

OM: The attitude of my family was polarized as my father belonged to the Ukrainian Orthodox Church - Moscow Patriarchy (UOC-MP). I think everything is clear [smiles]. The UOC-MP ran a strong campaign for Yanukovych and my dad believed that priests could not lie. We can see how Russia has influenced people abusing their religious views. My mother, on the contrary, was clearly "Orange" but very afraid for me. She used to say: "Stay home, send out information (we tried to get in touch with people in other countries) and I'll replace you at the protest". Since the topic was sensitive my parents avoided discussing it.

KN: And what about during Euromaidan?

OM: Their attitudes did not change. Now my parents are divorced. Mom has been to Euromaidan. She took an active part in common activities like breaking ice.

KN: What about your friends and colleagues?

OM: Our whole faculty visited the Orange Maidan. I remembered the words of one of my colleagues: "We are now standing for Yushchenko and it would be nice if we would not have to later demand his dismissal". I was among the people sharing same ideals. We had different people in the Faculty of Law of the Shevchenko University, not only children of superiors. Students took an active part in the protests. When the Euromaidan began I had already worked in the human rights field for several years.

KN: Did you see any symbolic moments during Euromaidan?

OM: The first was certainly a post on FB calling to go out in the street. I replied that I would come and I came. There I saw several hundred people, many welcomed me, some of them I had known and some I knew through friends. I thought so many people would be enough for a peaceful protest, but not enough change the country. The turning point was the beating of students. Though previously we had had similar events e.g. events in the village of Vradiievka but then they did not provoke such a massive uprising. Perhaps now the last drop was shed and on the 1 of December hundreds of people came out to protest against the lawlessness. Fact is that I could not predict that. It was the first phase. The second phase was when so-called "prisoners of Bankova" were released except for two of them and we went to the detention center to celebrate the New Year (2014). We shouted to them: "The walls will fall and freedom will come."

By the way, I forgot to say that on 30 November the "Euromaidan SOS" initiative, the head of which I became, was founded. We provided legal assistance to all those who were persecuted, beaten, tortured and searched. We worked with the families of the missing. So the creation of this initiative was our response to the beating of students. It was not the time for despair but for work. During that time we responded to 13,000 phone calls. Of course not all of them were asking for help. We also worked as a help desk. We provided information, sent out instructions on how to place the wounded into hospitals, how to send people abroad for treatment and more. Those were typical activities of the "Euromaidan SOS" initiative.

When in December all but two "prisoners of Bankova" were released, people had the impression that everything came to a standstill. However, after the New Year a wave of persecutions of the Automaidan members began. We did not foresee the development of events. Then the calls to the Autonaidan members started off with pretext of vehicle registration. It went on with the events on the Hrushevsky street and the first deaths of Zhyznevsky, Nigoyan and Senyk. I have a problem evaluating what happened later [tears]. We slept for two - three hours a day and always worked setting our jaws. At that time, I had stopped sleeping at home because I did not feel safe any longer. No doubt, the tragic events of 18-19 February were important days for the Maidan movement.

When they began to kill in the Maidan square, sending out lawyers did not make any sense and we just registered deaths. We did not know what would happen in an hour and what was going to happen with the dead bodies, they could potentially get rid of them. Then people from Crimea began calling in (we were the first group who started working with Crimea). We monitored the situation in Crimea and Donbas. However, later on for safety reasons our mobile group left Donetsk reporting that the train station was under fire. Now our group is working on the liberated territories.

KN: Now that we can see the difference between the Orange Revolution and the Euromaidan, how did the idea of creating your initiative group come about?

OM: Our human rights organization "Center for Civil Liberties" which I led, held a seminar on November 30th. At the seminar I delivered a welcome speech. Our regional representatives who we did not meet before came around. We in our organization stood against repressive laws. As we followed the situation in Russia and other countries in contact with their human rights activists, we began to notice that the repressive laws adopted in Russia gradually began to emerge in our Parliament. So we started to fight against them. Before that we used to go to the Maidan but did not stay there on the permanent basis. However, the project lead called me and asked me to look what was going on FB. I was shocked, some people felt confused. We decided to act. I had an idea: we should all go to Mykhailivska Square. We had already had experience of working on Bolotnaya Square in Moscow and in Belarus when the crowds were forced to disperse. We had an idea of how this normally happens. Nevertheless, we were not fully prepared to what happened next. So we thought it was necessary to start an initiative to protect people and that we should call it "Euromaidan SOS". We then created a page on FB and wrote the first post: "If you have been hurt or arrested (4 people were arrested), if you have been beaten or if you have witnessed the above call us and we will provide free legal assistance." It was a gamble because I was a lawyer but not a defense lawyer and we did not have any defense lawyers among us. Then we wrote another post: "If you are a defense lawyer and you want to help people who have suffered, call us." It worked. We received calls.

To my surprise our posts got reposted and the topic was picked up by journalists. That was how we started off.

KN: You mentioned responsibility. People were beaten and a protest against that began. What values motivated all those people and kept together in the Maidan?

OM: I have read in some studies that on December 1 people came out to the Maidan square not to support Euro Integration but with the demand for safety and against police beating people. In fact it is the same. The flags of the European Union were flying over the Maidan square but for ordinary people they did not mean joining a political union but something with which the EU was associated: honest rules of the game, civil society plays an important role, the government is accountable to citizens instead of manipulating economic rules and building helipads for themselves while impoverishing its population. They stood for the independent and lawful court. People came out to defend their democratic choice. For me personally, the rejection of the European Integration course was the rejection of democratic model of society and returning to the Customs Union with Russia. Trade wars and Yanukovich's meetings with Putin had already taken place. People expressed their protest.

KN: Were there moments of frustration, particularly regarding achieving those goals?

OM: During the Orange Revolution I remember an amazing sense of boundless love and happiness. You are standing among the people and they are all lovely, polite. I do not normally like crowds but it was not a crowd but a living organism that was rather friendly and helpful. People were better at these moments than in everyday life. That was my impression about the Orange Revolution. At the Euromaidan I was not an ordinary member and it was flowing differently. Someone has asked me if we then believed in victory and I recalled how we slept for two - three hours, how we extinguished thousands of fires. We did not know what was going to happen to us, we had neither time nor opportunity to think over likely scenarios. There were thousands of things that had to be done and we honestly tried to do our job.

KN: Is mass protest a good method of reforming a country?

OM: This is just a stage of the process that is not over because not all the demands of the Maidan have been satisfied. It is a unified human rights Maidan in the post-Soviet Union countries because its slogan was “Human rights above all!”. It is clear that after its victory the judges and police could not become fair and honest overnight. So the next stage of the revolution was reforms and change. However, the problem of Ukraine was that after the victory neither the system restart nor change of the political elite happened. The opposition that came to power was better than the Yanukovych’s regime but we had seen them in leadership positions before so I did not have high hopes for them. They were corrupt, they had problems with management and respect for human rights. Nevertheless, such a transitional authorities are in line with the transition period we have now.

KN: Do you think that the protest stage was necessary to start off reforms and change?

OM: Unfortunately there was no other way. On the eve of the Maidan we were preparing a report on persecutions for political views and stated that repressions had grown. One person even ended up in a psychiatric hospital. We thought that before the elections Yanukovych would probably send there the rest of his enemies similarly to what had happened in Russia where any opposition became too complicated after a campaign to discredit it. We could not do anything.

KN: Now the politicians who have previously been in government came to power. How can they lead the country to the phase of change?

OM: It is necessary to implement electoral reforms because we have new political forces in need of open ways. They get organized differently i.e. they are not sponsored by oligarchs and therefore absent in the media space. They appeared in local communities and has demonstrated the first results. Just look at the outcome of local elections. They made themselves noticeable and there is a demand for real political powers, not pre-electoral

projects and fan clubs to one person. These new forces are already there. However, there is no infrastructure for them to act on a greater scale. Current MP's do not approve a new electoral code to block their path because when they come the old elite will be forced to change. Also, the current system suits many people. Another important task is to work with people so that they understand that if they want to have their representatives they should support them financially. One hryvnia per month will keep a new party afloat e.g. have its secretariat.

KN: During your work on Euromaidan you had contacts with foreigners. What role do you think foreign politicians were playing?

OM: I got an impression that everyone came to terms with the fact that Ukraine was a zone of Russia's geopolitical interests. However, the Euromaidan showed that Ukrainians disagreed. At the diplomatic level, no one will fight for those who does not fight for themselves and will not help those who do not help themselves thus being worthy of support. I think that for many politicians Ukraine during Euromaidan became a subject of political life. Now fatigue from Ukraine and the challenges that our country presents is growing. It is not only about the regional conflict between Ukraine and Russia. One country has declared its right to become a democratic country and the other one tries to stop her. Now we are talking about the mere possibility to have such a right. If Ukraine manages to achieve democratic transformations, this will have an impact on the entire post-Soviet area. Russia understands that very well and that's why the war began. The issue is a complex one and does not involve only those two countries and that is not only a problem of the militarized Russia and its zombie-like population. It is primarily about the region where gray areas pop up. Crimea and Donbas are not the first ones. International politicians are not ready for that, they want to distance themselves from that and be reelected in their own countries.

KN: What questions did foreign journalists ask you more often when you worked for the "Euromaidan SOS"? What did they discover and what did they not understand?

OM: I will use the words of a colleague of mine that seem to me very symptomatic. He has years of experience in an organization that investigates phenomena of racism, xenophobia and discrimination. This is what he said: “December - first arrests began and I received calls from international journalist community about the rights in the Maidan square. January - the peaceful protest was stopped because of provocations and fighting in Hrushevsky street began, first deaths and hundreds of people persecuted throughout the country but I was asked about the role of right-wing radicals in the Maidan square. February - some protesters had been killed, mourning in the country but again I was asked about the role of Nazis and radicals at the Maidan.” My other colleague, Vyacheslav Likhachov who is also working in this field demonstrates using data the technology of creating myths about radicals. In other words, there was an attempt to portray the protesters as radicals and justify the violence against them.

On the other hand, there were people who understood everything that was going on. They came to here and they talked to our people. At that time their support was very important though they could not do much. I remember December 10-11 when we were waiting for an assault on the Maidan. These were not some abstract people, we knew who they were - our volunteers and colleagues. The assault on the Maidan meant disappearances and arrests so immediately we got ready to protect people. “We are sitting and watching live [tears]. And here come messages on FB: Italy with you, France with you, Germany with you [tears]. You feel that you are not alone. Late at night someone is watching and feels”.

We understood that the task was to destroy the peaceful Maidan that the police, the courts, the government, the MP’s were working in a team. So one could ask - What was the point of fighting when you were destined to be destroyed? What sense does it make to talk to the court that was not independent? We acted as if the justice was there. Our lawyers defended the detained and the heroic effort of our lawyers and volunteers brought us from the judicial to a symbolic level. We created an illusion of security. Anything could happen to any one of us, no one was secure but everyone was sure that he or she would be fought for. It was a

symbolic moment. So I came to the conclusion that we should continue our effort and then from symbolic level we could go to the reality and then something could actually change.

KN: Do you feel the continuity of these revolutions?

OM: Short after the Orange Revolution I was at a lecture by Miroslav Marynovych who was asked what the revolution gave us because things had gone worse, Yanukovych came to power and so on. He then replied: “Ukraine as a small child is learning to walk and falling down. She will be falling as long as she needs to learn how to walk. Every time she falls, a new quality emerges”. It is my wish to avoid these difficult times and you can see how hard it is for me to speak about that now even after some time has passed. It's not something people could wish for. However, these times make people reveal their best qualities. During ordinary times they are fairly capable of something but in difficult times they notice that they are able to help each other, stop being afraid and do really wonderful things.

As for the continuity of the revolutions I can say that we are currently studying the court cases for crimes committed during Euromaidan. I have listened to the conversation with a mother of a young person, her son who died in the Maidan Square. She found his backpack with candy wrappers. He piled them in to avoid throwing garbage on the street [tears]. As a mother, she did not want to let him go to the Euromaidan but she remembered how ten years ago she herself took part in the Orange Revolution [tears] and therefore had no moral right of stopping him. For me, it is evident that if we do not bring the case to the end, we would not get out of turbulence which we are constantly in. This is the best example of continuity of the revolutions and my children might be forced to go out in this square to stand for their rights.

KN: Can you recall from the history what could be a background for such behavior of Ukrainians?

OM: There is something one can notice throughout Ukrainian history and that is respect for dignity and love of freedom. This I give as an example when I feel unease and self pity. There were people who fought in secret places and really could not do anything. On the contrary, I

have many more opportunities to act. Even those who live in the occupied territories have better conditions than those for which our ancestors fought. They won something for us and gave us a start. We will do the same for those who come after us.

KN: I have heard some people compare the Euromaidan to Sich ...

OM: There were many women at the Euromaidan [laughter]. So I would say it had a spirit of Sich. As I recall Sich mandated common rules for everyone. Instead the Euromaidan was a center inside a center. Sich had military units - kishs and there was a commander of ten kishs. At the Maidan there was many centers. It worked like this: there was a lack of medicines and people organized themselves through social networks to supply what was necessary, though no one of them had seen each other before. This is a horizontal, self-organized system. I do not know if that was possible in other times. Indeed, people did not coordinate their initiatives between each other. For example, we as the "Euromaidan SOS" group did not coordinate our actions with anyone. In other words, we had contacts e.g. doctors who we sent the victims to and we never coordinated our decisions. Our organization was very horizontal. If I had to obtain an approval for my every decision, I would not be able to promptly assist and inform. Such a course would even be dangerous because then it would be enough to remove one person and everything would fall apart. Our people were taking operational decisions on the spot and at their own discretion and most importantly we were all united by common goal. Everyone was free to follow his or her ways but we perfectly understood what everyone wanted.

KN: So what was it that everyone wanted?

OM: At the level of our group we defended the members of the peace protest. To achieve that we had to go to the hospital and hand out business cards or keep a close watch on district police departments. So understanding the goal everyone took decisions on the spot and assumed responsibility for them. The demands of the Maidan developed: first we demanded to punish the perpetrators and later on the dismissal of authorities. When the so-called "three

heroes" came out in the Maidan Square after talks with Yanukovych and announced a peace treaty with authorities, Maidan sent them away. However, the change of powers was not a goal in itself but a way to go to the path of evolution. Of course, people wanted that to happen soon but it could not be that way.

KN: What about the leaders and enemies of the Maidan?

OM: There were people who we perceived as coordinators for different initiatives i.e. those who made decisions. They were not the leaders of the Maidan, public knew nothing about them, press did not write about them, they were so to say invisible people. Initiatives were so plentiful that one could not possibly be aware of every one of them. I personally know someone who organized a network of clandestine hospitals but few know about it today. There was an awareness of who we could expect troubles from. We passed by all state representatives, as we had heard hundreds of stories where people were beaten because they resembled protesters. Concerning enemies, I recall the way I regarded Pshonka, Zakharchenko and Yanukovych. They gave orders and the rest were executing them. At the time I did not think of them as enemies, I thought they were criminals. Is criminal an enemy? It seems so.

KN: Do you think there have been changes in the country? I mean real changes?

OM: The brightest event was the energy of the Euromaidan. Here I can refer to the Freedom House annual research. They stated in their report that despite the war the trend for democratization in Ukraine is stable and in line with the entire former Soviet Union region. In other countries of the region democracy and populist trends roll back while in Ukraine the idea of democratization still attracts people. That happens not due to government efforts but due to capacity of the civil society. The second thing is that there is no more East-West civilization controversy. Number of the EU supporters is growing. Our president won elections in all the regions and that showed that Ukraine was united. Third - the idea of the norm has changed. I'll explain. It is not really about the millions of Ukrainians but about

activists. Indeed, it is the minority who determines the country's development and not the passive majority. In 2014 I spoke with the Prime Minister of Norway. She told me how five years ago a group of Ukrainian journalists (and probably not the worst journalists) came around for a study visit. They questioned her about her wealth and they did not believe her. The comment was that it seemed too modest for a person in such a position. She was amazed. I explained to her that now that had changed. In older times it used to be normal. Now we have seen that the luxury in the electronic declarations of our officials and MP's provoked a wave of mass resentment. People no longer believe this is the norm. A change of consciousness has taken place. Fourth - a birth of a civil nation. On the Maidan Square representatives of LGBT and radicals, left and right, centrists and anarchists, believers and non-believers stood together, there was the Jewish hundred, the Russian and Ukrainian speaking. All together. It was a choice of the civil society. Most important for all was to be citizens of Ukraine.

KN: Did you see religion play a specific role?

OM: Naturally, there were representatives of many Churches over there except for UOC-MP.

KN: What was the role of the wealthy at the Maidan rally?

OM: I divide people into villains and the honest ones, and perhaps the indifferent. Once I ran into the store where Jingle Bells was on. I was so amazed that there were people who lived very different lives, then I sat down, got my breath back but still I could not recover from the experience. I escaped from the apocalypse but here everything is familiar and quiet! In three blocks people were beaten and they were watching that as a show after work! Once someone called us and asked if any food for our volunteers was needed (we did not collect money). We said perhaps some fruit and mint to help people relax. Finally a very expensive car arrived, vegetables, dill and parsley were unloaded from the trunk [laughter]. That's how he interpreted our request for mint. Then each volunteer carried home a bunch of dill and parsley. People stayed divided in their attitude towards the challenges of the Euromaidan.

KN: You are telling that the Euromaidan continues because its demands have not been met but what happened to the initiatives that were launched there?

OM: At the “Euromaidan SOS” there were hundreds of volunteers and defense lawyers. We continue to work. Now the number of volunteers has dropped but we still continue to teach and work with those who stayed. There are those who are engaged in humanitarian assistance and work with immigrants and here the experience of self-organization helps. Many of our colleagues are in this field. We have some mobilization potential. We have shifted to solving other issues including help and treatment to wounded soldiers, released prisoners, documentation and statistics. This way the civil society performs state functions. Those who were active became three times more active. So we launched a new educational program: we train skills, tactics of public action and control. We teach those who are able to start working in a few years time. The source of the Euromaidan energy is new people. As some are exhausted and sick, someone else has to take their place.

KN: Does anyone monitor how the demands are satisfied?

OM: A lot has been done. The Association Agreement with the EU was signed, the 2004 constitution was withdrawn i.e. a number of things have moved forward. Human rights above all! For the implementation of that the quality of democratic institutions should be built. That unfortunately may take a long time. The problem is that we do not see the current government’s commitment to building them, rather to keeping the old system alive. People are quite annoyed that they have to sacrifice a lot, they have to get involved in charity despite low incomes. They expected that the new authorities would support high level of self-sacrifice. I have no illusions; that is what annoys people today.

KN: A way out?

OM: The new political forces are emerging in the regions. We need to build such institutions that would force even dishonest judges to follow the rules and laws.

KN: Do you see any potential?

OM: Some people have gone from the NGO's into politics and government institutions. Such seeds will bear fruit provided democratic structures have been built.

KN: Let's hope for the better. Thanks for the interview.