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Kiev Designer Leads 2nd Life on Maidan

By The Moscow Times

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Igor Skiliarevsky gives signs to volunteers at an information center in Kiev's Independence Square camp. **Vasily Fedosenko**

KIEV, Ukraine — By day, Igor Skliarevsky works as a graphic designer. By night, he is an anti-government protester, sometimes manning the barricades in Ukraine's snowy capital.

The 36-year-old delivers maps for fellow protesters, directing them to medical posts or kitchens. He also set up a website coordinating food, warm clothing and other supplies for those camped out on Kiev's Independence Square.

The demonstrations began over the government's decision to spurn a trade deal with the European Union but grew after Nov. 30, when police beat young protesters with batons. Now they are campaigning to oust President Viktor Yanukovych and his team.

"If we do not stand up to this, the people in power will cement themselves there for years, jail opponents and dissenters and there will be no fair elections, nothing. This is not about Europe anymore, it is a matter of survival and human dignity," Skliarevsky said.

Protesters want Yanukovych to go because they fear, having turned away from the EU, he will "sell" Ukraine to Russia for money to pay Kiev's debts.

Skliarevsky was among many who brought gloves, clothes and food to the Maidan, the nickname now given to the square where protesters are camped out in freezing temperatures.

He quickly set up a website, galas.org.ua, to bring together requests from the Maidan with people outside ready to offer their resources and time. It has up to 10,000 users and ensures 10 tons of firewood are delivered every day.

The square — actually an oval-shape covering about 1.5 hectares — is also dotted with signposts he has made in yellow and blue, the colors of Ukraine's national flag.

Skliarevsky usually goes to the protests straight after finishing work at about 7 p.m. He was there with his wife when riot police tried to reclaim part of the Maidan at night on Dec. 10, the peak of tensions between the protesters and the state authorities so far.

"Police sirens woke me up ... I woke Igor up, there was no time to waste," his wife Yelena, 32, said.

That night women gathered in the center of the square while men moved from one barricade to another in expectation of an all-out confrontation with riot police. The officers withdrew in the morning and have been seen little since.

The barricades have grown higher and stronger since then, the biggest one is now more than 4 meters high, constructed of wooden benches, pieces of plastic Christmas trees, bags with sand and trash and topped with ice.

Critics say the Maidan protesters are lazybones eager to skip work while they sweat to make a living and keep the troubled economy going. They denounce the protests as managed by Western governments wanting to disrupt the city center.

Skliarevsky has been behind with work lately, dedicating more and more of his time to the protest. He works as the artistic director for a software startup which employs nearly 60 people in Kiev and the U.S. He makes about 10 times Ukraine's average monthly salary, about $400.

The two founders of the company asked that it not be named in this article over fears of repercussions from the state, though they approve of what Skliarevsky is doing.

Since the protests began, Ukraine's hryvna currency has fallen to its lowest levels in more than four years as talks between Ukraine, the EU and Russia failed to produce a solution to Kiev's economic problems.

The life of the Skliarevskys has also changed. They get less sleep and scrapped plans to go abroad for New Year's. He dropped his English classes and she stopped attending piano lessons.

What keeps them going is a feeling that the protest is at the heart of a battle for Ukraine's

future, a fight for their dream of democratic rule of law and freedom from corruption.

"Unfortunately, I do not think these rulers will be dismissed very soon ... But what is plainly clear is that there is no going back to how things were before," Skliarevsky said.

"I am not for any of the opposition politicians at the Maidan. But this is not that much about any single politician. This is about values, setting rules of fair play, laying down foundations for the future of the country."

They also feel there is no turning back because, should the protest wind down without securing any major political changes, the authorities could persecute the protesters.

The Skliarevskys favor talks between the rival sides that would lead to Yanukovych's resignation, as well as sanctions against state officials who use force against the protesters.

They first met by accident five years ago in a cafe in Kharkiv in eastern Ukraine, a mainly Russian-speaking area with stronger historic ties to Moscow than in the country's west.

Although Skliarevsky grew up there speaking Russian and learned Ukrainian only when he moved to Kiev at the age of 20, Igor travels with his wife to the EU several times a year and dreams of life in Ukraine becoming more like that in the West.

"The EU is our chance to enforce changes in Ukraine, force the authorities to play a clean game and, in the longer-run, help Ukraine become a more civilized country," he said.

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