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The Artistic Community Responds to Events in Kiev

By John Freedman

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A Russian-speaking Ukrainian nationalist camping in Kiev during ongoing Euromaidan anti-government protests. **Mikhail Kaluzhsky**

When the going gets tough, as we have seen repeatedly in recent years, the tough take to Facebook. At least that's what they do in this part of the world.

So it has been with the events in Kiev — call them protests or call them a revolution in the bud. My Facebook news thread is bursting with posts and reposts of articles, photos, videos, arguments, comments, wishes and outrage in regards to the dramatic events taking place mostly around the centrally-located Maidan Square and Vulitsya Hrushevskoho.

Below I pull together a few comments from various writers, artists and theater people. Facebook is a mosaic of interests, opinions and attitudes and I allow that to come through by presenting comments with a bare minimum of my own commentary. I work backwards, from Sunday to earlier in the week when things just began to get hot.

Referring to Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych's surprise offer of government positions to several of the opposition leaders, playwright and translator Sergei Task early Sunday morning commented on an article he reposted: "Yanukovych's move didn't fly. Ukraine wants to be free."

Responding to a post by Russian-language, Ukrainian playwright Natalya Vorozhbyt stating that she henceforth would accept only supportive comments from "friends of the neighboring state," director Dmitry Yegorov wrote on Sunday: "Natash, boldly trash everything you do not like. Because, in fact, there is no objective reality whatsoever in the neighboring nation. Everything has been given an accent by someone for some reason. No matter how much I read, I understand nothing and I do not understand who to believe. Anyway, civil war is one of those things, in which the truth can never be understood. The main thing is to remain human beings in so far as that is possible. The rest is politics and it is never clean. Peace to your house ..."

On a lighter note, gallerist Marat Guelman wrote on Saturday: "This is going to be funny, although the laughter is bitter." He then shared the following text: "The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine recommends that Ukrainians avoid traveling to Thailand because of the mass protests going on there."

On Saturday actress Larisa Paris-Shinova wrote, "In Kiev it is very cold but it is hot."

Mikhail Kaluzhsky, a journalist and director who has created and staged several political theatrical events at the Sakharov Memorial Center, wrote on Saturday: "Pretty much the main thing I want to say after spending five days in Kiev is this: What a pity that in Russia there are so many pointy heads who know nothing whatsoever about what is happening in Ukraine and, at the same time, can't shut their mouths."

The director and playwright Mikhail Ugarov wrote on Saturday: "I was stunned by the video of Berkut riot police mocking the naked man in the snow while here, when we see a naked actor in the theater, we are compelled immediately to make a complaint to the prosecutor's office. Something in our heads is not right in regards to our sexual organs, something larger links them to our psyche. And when I see the Kiev video I really do not want to know what it is."

On Friday the writer, poet and humorist Lev Rubenstein wrote: "Dear Russians! Well, all right, so the fate of our nearest neighbors does not interest most of us, to put it lightly. So be it, that is par for the course. All the more so since your own fate does not concern you much. Because the people in charge know best and there's plenty of buckwheat in the stores. But the fact that the people in charge, those same ones who know best, are frittering away your money on some other guy in order to shore up a cemetery-like stability — does that really not bother you?"

Also on Friday the leading Ukrainian novelist Yury Andrukhovych published a detailed public announcement about the events taking place on Maidan Square and Vulitsya Hrushevskoho. The text, intended to respond to the enormous number of requests for commentary that he was receiving from journalists, went viral quickly, showing up repeatedly on my Facebook wall by way of numerous posters. The text deserves to be quoted in large part. I provide about half of it here.

"... In a term of less than four years, Yanukovych has unleashed extreme tension on his country and society. What is worse, he trapped himself in a dead-end whereby he must hang onto power eternally and by any means. Otherwise, he will face severe criminal responsibility.



Mikhail Kaluzhsky / Novaya Yevropa

Protesters equipped for battles with the police resting on a snowy day.

The scope of his thievery and usurpation exceeds all conceptions of human greed. Only this can explain why this regime is now in its third month of whipping up 'combined' escalating violence in response to peaceful protests: attacks on Maidan by police special forces are combined with the individual harassment of opposition activists and unaligned protesters — spying, beatings, burnings of automobiles and homes, invasion of living spaces, arrests and conveyor-like trials.

The key word is intimidation. But since it is not working and the protests are growing bigger, the authorities are toughening repressions. The 'legal basis' for that was created on Jan. 16

when parliamentarians, who have complete independence from the president, ran roughshod over protocol regulations, voting procedures and, ultimately, the Constitution, and 'manually' (!), in the span of a few minutes (!), voted for a series of legal changes that effectively established dictatorship and a state of emergency in the country without even declaring the latter. For example, by composing and distributing these lines, I already run afoul of several criminal statutes involving 'slander,' 'hatred' and the like.

In short, if we accept these 'laws,' then we must accept that in Ukraine everything is forbidden unless allowed by the authorities. And the authorities have allowed only one thing — to obey them ...

I do not want to frighten you. We have a revolution of the young. The authorities are conducting their undeclared war primarily against them. At dusk in Kiev unknown groups of 'people in civilian dress' begin roaming the streets, catching up, primarily, young people, especially those wearing the symbols of Maidan or the European Union. They kidnap them and take them into the forest where they strip them and torture them in the bitter cold.

For some odd reason the victims of these detentions increasingly are young artists, actors and poets. One gets the impression that 'death squads' have been unleashed in the country and that their task is to destroy all that is best ...

To sum up: Crimes against humanity, for which the current authorities bear responsibility, are in full swing in Ukraine.

If there really are any extremists in this situation, it is the highest leadership of the country ...

Finally, sympathize with us. Think about us. We will be victorious anyway, no matter how they rage.

With no exaggeration we can say that the Ukrainian people are defending European values of a free and just society with their own blood.

I very much hope you appreciate that."

Last week, on Jan. 22, the director Konstantin Bogomolov responded to early events in Kiev with this short text: "Many in Russia despise Ukrainian statehood, language and the desire for independence. There is much fear. I, however, have great respect for the nation of Ukraine. For the Ukrainian language. For the amazing strength and energy of this people. And for its love of freedom. And let us do without comments."

Whatever happens between the two countries, it is clear that the artistic communities of Moscow and Kiev are as close as ever, and the ongoing strife only seems to bring them closer together.

Contact the author at jfreedman@imedia.ru

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