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Kiev Protesters Get Support and Body Armor From Lviv

By The Moscow Times

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Lviv resident Lorianna Opanashchouk sewing adjustable straps and recycled felt to shin pads made of drainpipe. **Laura Mills**

LVIV, Ukraine — Young designers, their eyes glued to a television showing live scenes of protests from the Ukrainian capital, stayed up late one night to work on a pet project — not a chic gallery opening, but making battle armor for protesters.

Marianna Kvyatkovska and her friends used hunks of plastic drainage pipes to craft shin and elbow pads to protect the demonstrators from police truncheons in Kiev, where anti-government protests have gone on for two months. While largely peaceful, violent clashes with police broke out last week in which at least three protesters died.

Although Kiev is the epicenter of the demonstrations calling for President Viktor Yanukovych to step down, Lviv is a buzzing entrepreneurial engine of support.

This western city 480 kilometers from Kiev, near the border with Poland, is the heartland of Ukrainian nationalism, where an overwhelming majority of the people resent Russia's former occupation and current strong influence. Support for the pro-Russian Yanukovych is almost nonexistent and residents in this city of 730,000 want their future clearly tied to Europe.

"This is a country that is killing the middle class, of which I consider myself a part," said Andrei Kit, owner of an agricultural business.

Employers in Lviv, known for its thriving small-business community, have tacitly encouraged their employees to take part in the protests. Kvyatkovska, who makes a living as a tapestry restorer in a local museum, said despite working in a government institution, her boss was in favor of her going.

"At work there is an unspoken agreement — they sign a paper and say 'Go, go!'" she said.

Lviv's tilt toward Europe has long roots. Its quiet cobblestone streets and snow-capped Belle Epoque buildings make it hard to conceive that it was Soviet territory until recently. For centuries, Lviv traded hands between Poland and the Austrian Empire until the Soviet occupation.

Although the economy of western Ukraine is poorer than the Russian-speaking east, home to Ukraine's major industries, Lviv's people regard themselves as more cultured than easterners. The city is especially proud of its burgeoning small-business sector, from chic cafes to respected tech companies.

"Western Ukraine is avant-garde," Kvyatkovska said.

Residents of Lviv have been holding demonstrations throughout the crisis that began in November when Yanukovych shelved an agreement to deepen ties with the European Union and signed a bailout deal with Russia instead. This month, hundreds stormed the governor's office and forced him to sign a resignation letter. Over the weekend, the regional parliament declared a parallel government, a move that has little practical value but considerable emotional resonance.

Yet many believe that Lviv, which has long been a bastion of pro-European sentiment, is less significant than the fight raging in Kiev, where opinions are still divided.

"It is more important to be there than here, because there is nothing to fight for here," said Kit, as he headed to the capital over the weekend. "Kiev is the front line."

With that view, residents and businesses are making extensive efforts to support the Kiev demonstrations. Employees swap shifts so they can attend the protests, while others sew warm clothes or prepare food for the demonstrators. One of the city's most popular cafes sent a van to Kiev to provide coffee for protesters braving the fierce winter cold.

People traveling to the capital gather at a cafe downtown that serves as a distribution site for donations and a bus depot for demonstrators.

"Every day the demand for things people can use for defense — helmets, shin pads, elbow

pads — is growing," said organizer Mikhail Senko. "People fear more and more for their safety."

He said the site sent 537 protesters in buses to Kiev on Saturday and collected hundreds of donations.

Kvyatkovska and her friends handed their homemade shin-and-elbow pads to someone boarding the bus. They had spent the day bending the pipes into the right shape before sewing on recycled felt and adjustable straps to make the gear more comfortable. As a final flourish, Kvyatkovska penned the slogan of the protest movement — "Glory to Ukraine!" — on the bright orange plastic.

She had taken part in protests before. But as events in the capital turned violent and deadly, she decided she could no longer leave her 9-year-old son in order to take part and figured the defensive armor was a good way to stay involved.

Marta Grybalska, who works at a local IT company, said about 100 employees started a Facebook group to coordinate contributions to the protests. She said the group also functioned as a safety mechanism, so people would know who was in Kiev if anything went wrong. But it also helped people swap shifts and juggle work assignments so they could go to the capital.

"In our kind of work, there is no need to sit around the office," she said. "So work must be done on time and it must be done well, but people are needed to fight [in Kiev]."

Senko said he had coordinated with dozens of business owners who have been a backbone of support for the protesters.

"It is not some kind of PR campaign," he said. "They just know that they are the first ones to have something taken from them, whether that is land or property or their homes."

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