

In Russian-speaking Odessa, a call for calm as Putin advances

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Last December the fight was between the people and Yanukovich. We thought that the revolution had won when Yanukovich left but then came the Russian intervention only a few days later.

After Putin's aggression in Crimea as it seems, moods have changed significantly.

On March 2 there was the biggest demonstration in modern Odessa history — an anti-war and anti-Putin demonstration. About 10,000 people marched for eight kilometres and 2.5 hours to the Russian consulate to protest strongly against any possibility of war.

There are also pro-Putin demonstrations in Odessa but much smaller. It seems that the majority — at least the majority of active people — are supporting the new government of Ukraine and are against Russia's military involvement. Yanukovich has almost no support nowadays; even pro-Russian people see Yanukovich in a very bad light and the Russian government is only supporting him in order to justify intervention. Soon they will drop him too.

We are not feeling safe in Odessa. A border with Transnistria — the region encouraged by Russia to break away from Moldova in the early 1990s — is only 50 kilometres away. I am not convinced that Transnistria is controlled 100% by Russia but it is a very bad example for Odessa — the result of the fight with Kishinev (Moldova's capital) is that the people are very poor and it is run by a criminal regime.

However it seems that the Kiev government stabilised the situation. Now we can see that the police in Odessa are on the Maidan side; just 8 days ago [during the big demonstration] this was not certain.

The Maidan opponents, who have strongly pro-Russian sentiments, are perhaps mainly the old people, who for some reason have particularly good memories about the Soviet Union, and also the poorer people who are hoping that Russia will bring a better life for them. But, indeed, not all the old people and the poor people share these views.

Russian propaganda has very painful effects. People here are losing friends, even losing contact with relatives, because their relatives live in an alternative reality. The Russian government are trying to make the Russian-speaking citizens afraid, that they are in danger in Ukraine.

The anti-Semitism propaganda is just nonsense, and they call us fascists. In my view, for many years Russia can be described as a fascist system. When I compare Putin to Mussolini I see many common features. **In Putin's Russia you can see facets of fascism in a pure form — against liberty, democracy and human rights.**

The reality is that there are nationalists here, especially in West Ukraine, but Russia has many more problems with nationalists. (Speaking personally, a colleague, International Master Sergey Nikolaev, a Yurkut, was killed in a racist attack in Moscow not so long ago.)

Ukrainian nationalists are involved in Maidan; the Maidan movement has two legs, a liberal democratic one and a nationalistic one.

There are crazy people on both sides. Personally, I don't like any nationalists — but pro-Russian nationalists are more dangerous because they can invite their friends from Russia!

Crimea, which will see the Russian forces oversee a referendum about joining Russia next weekend, is a special case; it only became part of Ukraine 60 years ago. Yet it is worth pointing out that Ukraine had agreements with Russia, both in 1991 and the Budapest Memorandum of 1994, when Ukraine gave up their nuclear weapons and the Russians guaranteed our safety and territorial integrity.

Apart from Crimea there are two other heavily *[pro-]*Russian areas in Ukraine — Lugansk and Donetsk. Crimea is a resort but they are mining regions. It is impossible to say what will happen but generally in the south and east of Ukraine considerable pro-Russian protest groups exist. I hope other parts of Ukraine will be able to resist the Russian pressure.

So, we are hoping that the situation, at least here in Odessa will stabilise. In December it was protesters against Yanukovich — now it has morphed into a fight between loyal Ukrainian citizens and Russian aggression.

For months we are living without knowing what will happen the next day. I am hoping Odessa can remain in Ukraine; why should we belong to Russia?