



“If we are all dying here, then at least please make sure that Putin is economically isolated and that the Russian economy collapses.”

Odessa on the brink: Ukrainian chess grandmaster Mikhail Golubev tells X Soviet why he has been protesting against Yanukovych and Putin since last November.

X Soviet: What made you personally start going to the Euromaidan protests?

MG: It was on the day when Euromaidan in Odessa began, 22 November... (I would have gone to the mass protests also one or two years earlier as well, but it happened as it happened... people were not ready earlier... nobody knows how it happens that at some point the society explodes).

X Soviet: Why did you want to go?

MG: In 2010 Yanukovych was elected in a quite normal democratic way. And he HAD a chance, in theory, to become a normal democratic president then. But all his key moves after he was elected were anti-democratic and/or anti-constitutional.

X Soviet: Such as?

MG: Beginning with creating in 2010 in parliament a majority for his Party of Regions in an anti-constitutional way. It was not allowed, according to the constitution, to invite/include in the majority certain random people from other fractions; the majority according to law had to be created by fractions as such, exclusively.

Strictly speaking, the Kharkov agreements which prolonged access for Russia to the Sevastopol military base, were anti-constitutional.

Then, the regional elections in the same year 2010 were already terribly anti-democratic, at least in a number of crucial places such as Odessa and Kharkov. The 2012 parliamentary elections were even worse (even if we would not count at all changes in the electoral laws, which suited the Party of Regions...) there were tons of terrible violations of the law and common sense.

Most of the frauds were made in the local electoral commissions. So, they (the Party of Regions) created commissions mainly from the controlled by them, often criminal people. They took control of

commissions to a large extent. Also using spots from the small fake parties, like the Children of War Party, I do not know, all such kind of things.

(I have experience of working personally on a local electoral commission once in 2004. In 2010 and 2012 I just followed what was going on, mainly in Odessa, as closely as one could do it on the internet).

X Soviet: But why then do you think that Yanukovich planned to sign an EU association agreement in November 2013?

MG: Since I do not consider him to be our president any more, I can freely state, that, though he has some strong character traits, he is essentially an undereducated criminal idiot. Whose logic can be unbelievably primitive. I cannot usually explain why my cat jumps to one side, and not to the opposite side. So how can I explain Yanukovich? His background and experience are insufficient to understand the European values enough. He just played some stupid games with all this association agreement.

X Soviet: The Russians claim that the U.S. government provoked the protests. Did the U.S. and/or EU push him into signing the agreement and did they want these protests? Are they controlling everything?

MG: Maybe the US and the EU pushed him to sign the agreement not strongly enough. It's difficult for me to judge. His and his party's behaviour was illogical. Or, the logic was too primitive to understand. Regarding protests: personally I do not need any invitation from the U.S. or EU to go and protest against the deeds of someone like Yanukovich. In theory, I can do it every day.

But there is some irony... Because the thing which turned the protesters on was not an anti-constitutional move like he did before (we should add the imprisonment of Tymoshenko to that, indeed, and other things). No. This time it was only some illogical mockery. And behind-the-scenes agreements with Putin. Generally, and importantly, at the 2004 Maidan (I was locally active also then) people protested against the Yanukovich + Putin "couple". And in 2013/14 it was the same.

X Soviet: What illogical mockery do you mean?

MG: Illogical because Yanukovich and all the Party of Regions spokespersons for months were saying everywhere how good and promising the planned agreement would be. And when the time of signing was close, they changed their attitude completely. This is not anti-constitutional, I think, like his other deeds, it is only a change of policy, but it was done in an insulting way for society: in addition to all that what was before, people started to feel like idiots, or like the Party of Regions was considering society to be idiots and nothing else.

X Soviet: What was the atmosphere like at the protests in Odessa before Yanukovich fled the country in late February 2014?

MG: It is hard to say in a few words... Some Odessa people were protesting in Kiev (not much in comparison with people from other regions), and in Odessa itself the protests were not massive for a long time. Odessa is the most apolitical town among the largest Ukrainian cities.

We had some two or three hundred people on Sundays, and some 100 or 150 people on other days.

Including the activists of the opposition parties!

But, it is my own view, Euromaidan in Ukraine become institutional by the end of December. By the end of December new civil organisations were created by Euromaidan activists everywhere in Ukraine, also in Odessa. It became more or less clear that Maidan will not disappear under any circumstances, because, I repeat, it became an institution by then.

And when Yanukovich lost hope that his problem will be solved easily somehow, he and his team made the first of their fatal mistakes. It was the 16 January laws, which restricted people's rights to protest severely, that made the situation in some respects worse than in Russia and Belarus. Then public opinion exploded immediately. A few days later there were the first victims in Kiev, and the public opinions exploded again.

I will give you one example, on Sunday 19 January we had the Euromaidan march in the centre of Odessa (in which I participated), with approximately 50 people. This march had several names, one of them The Last Free March (because according to a new 16 January law something like that would have been forbidden one week later...) The law was to be in effect from 20 January as I remember.

So it was a march with 50 people or a bit more on 19 January. Then, some people died in Kiev. And the next Sunday there was the march with approximately 5,000 protesters. For the passive Odessa people, it is incredibly much. One way or other, a hundred times more people came.

Instead of these stupid 16 January laws, Yanukovich/the Party of Regions had all options to make a compromise with the opposition. But they wanted to preserve their almost total power in the country. (They had no control on the municipal level in the western regions, they had not enough votes to write a new constitution in parliament, but everything else, all kinds of power in the country, including the corrupted courts, police - was in their hands. But they did not take into account that millions of people started to hate them completely, after all the insults.)

I understood with a full certainty only during this 2013/2014 Euromaidan that it is Putin, not Yanukovich, who is the main enemy of Ukrainians. And not because Yanukovich is "better" as a person, this is disputable. But simply, in the Yanukovich + Putin pair it was only Putin who could not have been replaced without losing the overall effect. All that happened after Yanukovich fled rather confirmed this conclusion, unfortunately.

X Soviet: Was there any violence in Odessa?

MG: In all these months in Odessa generally was not much violence... comparatively, in comparison with Kharkov and Dnepropetrovsk (two of the big towns which have similar electoral moods), or Zaporozhye.

X Soviet: Were you concerned about your rights as a Russian speaker after Yanukovich fled?

MG: I think that the absolute majority of the Russian speakers in Ukraine does not have any problems with UNDERSTANDING the Ukrainian language (speaking it fluently can be difficult for many). Even in the USSR times, the Ukrainian language was present on one of the TV channels, in schools, in newspapers and books, etc. I am not pretending for any special rights as a Russian speaker, it is my first language which I can use, as I hope, more effectively than most of these puppets in the Russian Duma: they even do not understand the word SOOTECHESTVENNIK (compatriot), because even officially they consider citizens of other ex-USSR countries, like myself, to be their "compatriots", which is insulting both for myself and my country. Putin's and [Russian Foreign Minister] Lavrov's compatriot is [Chechen leader and Putin ally] Ramzan Kadyrov, not me. Well, there are various opinions on these matters, above is my own. For example, my great grandmother was a teacher of Ukrainian language in Odessa, what objections can I have against this language?!

X Soviet: Do you think the Ukrainian government could have reacted differently to the arrival of "little green men" in Crimea?

MG: Regarding Crimea, it is a very complex question indeed, but I am not really sure that our government made any major mistakes in March 2014. So, in Crimea there was the ethnic Russian

majority, the Russian military base in Sevastopol, the mythologised history ("Sevastopol = a city of the Russian glory" albeit not everyone understands why), Crimea became a part of Ukraine later than other regions, Russian presence and propaganda were especially strong in Crimea all these years, while the Ukrainian state's politics was not effective, since 1991 and until 2014 many Crimeans really did not start to feel they were Ukrainians politically. Actually, already in 2006 I wrote in a chess forum that Russia wants to make a war against one of the neighbouring countries, and that "protecting the Russian-speaking" in Crimea is a possible scenario. So, it was not impossible to predict, for many people, that something like this would happen.

(The ethnic Russian people from Russia do not understand much Ukrainian for the first time when they come, but for people who live here it's different. So, Russian citizens usually overestimate the "threat" which Ukrainian language represents, which probably additionally inspires all their ugly propaganda). It happened that they attacked Georgia first, in 2008. After saying all this, I have to confess that Russian actions in March were a complete shock for me, because in my view there was really no reason, not even the slightest justification for what they did. What I personally expected that could happen in Crimea sooner or later was more like we now actually see in Donbass (Donetsk and Lugansk regions), where Russia, using all kinds of dirty methods, is trying to obtain some justification for a direct massive military involvement.

X Soviet: But now what should the government be doing about eastern Ukraine? Presidential candidate Oleg Lyashko says it should be fighting.

MG: Oleg Lyashko, the leader of the Radical Party, is a very special politician, funny and so on. His statements very often reflect the trend (but are not making the trends, he is not so influential). Well, the trendy opinion amongst the LOYAL Ukrainian citizens is that we de facto gave up Crimea without fight, but should give no more, and kill the armed invaders once they come to other Ukrainian regions. To "kill" was not a popular word in the vocabulary of the Ukrainian citizens, unlike Russia we had no wars for a long time. But we are already getting used to operating with this word. In case if Russia will invade, making another Afghanistan looks like a better option than to surrender - for the loyal Ukrainian citizens, I must repeat, because we have Putin's fans here as well.

X Soviet: Some people say that cultural and sporting activities should be immune from politics. Do you think that, for example, chess players should boycott events in Russia or do something else to express their position on this situation?

MG: Generally I do not expect chess-players to act in an especially moral and principled way. Perhaps, [World Chess Federation President] Ilyumzhinov is responsible for the present atmosphere in the chess world... Basically, I do not understand such players who 1) came to Libya in 2004 to play in the World Championship under Gadhafi's patronage, but then 2) after or before Gadhafi was killed, they did not say a single public word in his defence. I just do not understand such behaviour of these players. Perhaps they are considering themselves to be someone's clowns, and perhaps it's true. So, I do not want to discuss much boycotting chess events in Russia. Maybe there will be a few people (some Ukrainians?) who will decide not to play there, and that's all.

X Soviet: What is the situation like in Odessa now?

MG: In Odessa, the number of the active Anti-Maidan and Maidan people is comparable. Both sides were able to attract five to ten thousand people for the most massive peaceful actions. The number of radicals on both sides is much less. Practically all episodes of violence here in Odessa in the last five months were actions (usually by unknowns) against the Euromaidan people. Since none of us was killed until now, maybe it is not necessary to enter into much details.

Some burned cars, homes, offices... beaten citizens, journalists... the grenade explosion on the checkpoint, seven wounded.... still much easier than in Donbass as of now!

X Soviet: But Putin has talked about Odessa. Clearly he has it in his sights. People in Odessa have set up checkpoints to stop Russia. How are you personally feeling now?

MG: Putin was mentioning Odessa, and I think that he was also directly lying about Odessa. I have been monitoring the Euromaidan-related Odessa news for five months (sending news on Twitter, for example, to inform people better). But I do not remember that anyone threw eggs at veterans, as Putin claimed. Russia is overly sensitive about anything related with World War Two, so to throw eggs at a veteran can be certainly worse than a crime in Putin's view, but as far as I and other activists know, nothing like this has happened in Odessa during the Euromaidan period.

There were a number of opinions, including my own, that Putin was lying in his statement about Odessa, but these days the lie from Russia about Ukraine is something that we have to deal with all the time.

Now, about the general situation in Odessa. The absolute majority of the Odessa people are not involved in politics, but our police, secret services and army are all weak and unreliable. So, though this is a town with on million inhabitants, some 200 additional armed people from each side change the overall balance of forces significantly, and indeed we are depending in many ways on what is going on in other parts of Ukraine, and indeed Transnistria, the unrecognised republic, a part of Moldova, which is full of the Russian forces, is only 50 km from here, and also a Russian attack in the Odessa region from the Black Sea is not totally improbable, so generally I do not see any chances for a calm life here, at least until Putin dies.

X Soviet: So aren't you scared?

MG: I think that we got used to these sort of things. Some people started to compare the life in Ukraine with Israel. Still better than Afghanistan in respect of security.

X Soviet: What do you think the West should do?

MG: I will answer this as seriously as possible. I think that the West is doing strategically the right things. If we are all dying here, then at least please make sure that Putin is economically isolated and that the Russian economy collapses.

X Soviet: Should we seriously wonder if he will use nuclear weapons?

MG: Well, if the Western countries will attack Russia militarily, I expect him to use nuclear weapons with, say, 90-percent probability. He is crazy. He lost his dream country, the USSR, he will be angry about this forever, he is not the Russian patriot really, he is the USSR patriot. It was really the geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century that Yeltsin's "family" made such a wrong, tragic choice and Putin came to power.

X Soviet: Well, he is combining some of the worst aspects of the USSR with the Russian Empire and the Orthodox Church.

MG: Yes, what they are doing ideologically is that they are making a cocktail from all these things, calling it Our Great History. It can be said that this is something that had never been seen before, but generally it is just a form of fascism.