

A Report from the Ukraine

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Ukrainian democracy protest fire has not burned out.

On February 18, the week of St. John's University's spring break, I made a decisive decision to spontaneously visit my mother in Ukraine. She was working there for almost two months as a foreign area officer at U.S. Embassy KYIV. Knowing she was by herself and under a lot of pressure, I figured the opportunity would be a perfect chance to spend some time together, while at the same time discover and understand a new part of the world. Little did I know, this would be an understatement.

Ukraine's historic Independence square, Maidan Nezalezhnosti (Independence Square), also known as Maiden Square lies in the center of Kiev. Surrounded by post-communist assembly and city council buildings, the center lies atop an underground shopping mall. On the right side of the plaza is a white screen that covers the Trade Union Building which was burned two years ago in a protest. It has been transformed into a neo-realist movie screen that shows the 2014 protest events hour by hour with documentary precision.

"It reminded me of some of the details I forgot," said one of the protestors. "They were shooting at us from these windows over there," he adds, pointing towards the windows of Hotel Ukraine. Then he looks around at the crowd, roughly 100 people and comments: "this time the young people are afraid to come out."

The weekend of February 22 marked the two-year anniversary of the night the Ukrainian government killed 100 protestors here. My hotel, the Senator Apartments, is right off the infamous Maidan Square. Every morning and every night I saw people gathered in the middle of the square. One warm and rainy Sunday, sick with curiosity, I decided to walk through the square to understand the perspective of the people. As I walked along the square's corners, there were lined blue and yellow memorials for "the Heavenly 100" who died.

Some of the people were withdrawn, while others were eager to share their stories.

There was a military chaplain among them, "He is praying for us," a young university student told me proudly. "Do you like our government?" another asked. "We don't." Added another: "They didn't reform anything for two years. It's impossible to continue to live like that anymore." One cynic quipped that the Ukrainian president had made his own visit to the square earlier in the day "to avoid the people."

Since the days of the Soviet Union, Russia has for a great part of its history always overlooked Ukraine, whether linguistically, politically or economically. In the beginning of 2014, Ukraine fell into an economic depression and at that time the former president, Viktor Yanukovich, rejected a trade deal with the European Union (EU) and instead accepted a bailout from Russia. Ultimately, the rejection resembled the underlying national divisions within the country which led to the protests and set the pro-Western against the pro-Russia sides.

Near, where a Vladimir Lenin statue once stood, there is a piece of graffiti which states, "a free Ukraine is possible if the Russian and Ukrainian proletariats unite; without such unity, there can be no free Ukraine." This statement alone explains the pro-Russian side of the Ukrainian-Russian conflict. On the other side of the statue is another quote painted on the stone cold basalt: "No one can defeat a people determined to obtain self-rule." The irony of the graphitized statue represents two world views and the underlying role of Ukraine in its battle of the West versus the East.

Yanukovich's acceptance of Russia's (\$15 billion dollar) bailout was seen as a betrayal by the pro-West side. A few days following the deal, people started gathering in Kiev's center at Maidan Square to condemn their government's corruption and declare Yanukovich's illegitimacy. The protests did not last long before the Ukrainian Government attempted to stop the rallies with violence from riot police, armed guards, and private army personnel. Eventually, the protests resulted in Yanukovich fleeing to Russia. Petro Poroshenko was elected to take his place and Arseniy Yatsenyuk, the former finance minister, became Ukraine's prime minister.

Two years later, the tents in the upper side of Maidan are less than ten. The 100 protesters camping in the square during the last hours of the evening do not look like "left-wing" forces. All sorts of different military uniforms are worn and as a result the difference between the state police and the people's militia is very

