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Tetyana Lokot

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RESEARCH ARTICLE



Ukraine is Europe? Complicating the concept of the ‘European’ in the wake of an urban protest

Tetyana Lokot

School of Communications, Dublin City University, Dublin 9, Ireland

ABSTRACT

This essay examines citizens’ use of cities as communicative spaces for expressing “Europeanness” – both in everyday life and in moments of mass mobilisation. It critically reflects on the notion of European urbanity as an aspirational, yet problematic ideal and seeks to decentre (Western) Europe as the default source of ideas about what it means to be European by attending to “peripheral” voices at Europe’s edge. It examines the events and symbolism of Ukraine’s 2013–2014 Euromaidan protest and its aftermath as a microcosm that reflects the broader negotiation of Ukraine’s imaginary of Europe and its own place within that imaginary.

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Introduction

The notion of a large-scale protest event erupting over “European identity” may sound quaint. Yet, this is exactly what happened in Kyiv, Ukraine in November 2013, when the capital of the Eastern European country was engulfed in the flames, first metaphorical, and then literal, of mass discontent over the refusal of former President Viktor Yanukovich to sign an Association Agreement with the European Union. Though the protest, known as Euromaidan, grew to encompass many grievances against injustice, police brutality, and state corruption, at its origin was the idea of longing for – and belonging to – Europe. However, multiple notions of Europeanness were at play throughout the protest, and it is important to understand what they were, where they came from, how they were articulated, and how they have shaped the present moment.

This essay examines the concept of “Europeanness” by examining how citizens use cities as communicative spaces for expressing their values, hopes, and concerns – both in everyday life and in moments of mass mobilisation. It offers a critical reflection on the notion of European urbanity as an aspirational, yet problematic ideal and seeks to decentre (Western) Europe as the default source of ideas about what it means to be European by attending to “peripheral” voices at Europe’s edge. My reflections stem from my own ethnographic fieldwork during Ukraine’s Euromaidan protest, which entailed in-depth interviews with protesters, a multimodal ethnography of material (urban) and digital (social media) protest spaces, analysis of visual and textual protest materials,

CONTACT Tetyana Lokot tanya.lokot@dcu.ie

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and protest coverage in the media. I also build on the work of scholars of urban communication and urban protest who have examined how cities are used as a communicative medium for expressing cultural aspirations or a space for claims-making.¹ I consider how the meaning of being “European” or belonging to “Europe” has been imagined and interpreted by urban citizens of a country such as Ukraine, bordering the EU and tied to it with multiple connections, but not a part of the European Union in any institutional sense. The Euromaidan protest of 2013–2014, whose name itself combines the words “Euro(pe)” and “*maidan*” (the Ukrainian word for square, borrowed from Turkish and Crimean Tatar), is a sort of boundary object-event that offers a unique opportunity to examine Ukrainians’ complicated history with and perception of Europe as communicated and expressed by protest participants through their appropriation of public spaces in Kyiv, the Ukrainian capital.

Which Europe?

Europe’s borders have shifted and transformed throughout its history, and its overall shape is hard to grasp all at once. In fact, it often seems that Europe presents multiple visages to the beholder, depending on the angle: here is the problematic colonial mien that most seek to forget, there is the cosmopolitan centre of learning and enlightenment. Look to the side, and the pogroms and concentration camps loom in the distance, ever-present. But let the gaze shift, and the post-Second World War united European project drifts into view. To say these histories are complicated would be modest at best. Despite these trials, the European community has evolved and expanded – though the European imaginary arguably expanded more quickly and prodigiously, paving the way for the expansion of the Europe of institutions. Amid the ongoing geographical transformations of its formal boundaries, the idea of Europe took on a life of its own, and the institution of Europe has struggled to keep up.

Ukraine, as part of the post-Socialist bloc caught up in the latest wave of European expansion, has had an interesting relationship with both the idea and the institution of Europe, given how many times Ukrainian lands have changed hands between various empires at one time or another.² After the fall of the Soviet Union, Ukrainians have been looking both east, to the cumbersome, but inescapable influence of Russia, and west, to follow the developments in the growing geopolitical power that the European Union has become. The idea of continued Russian friendship promised stability and power, yet was soured by the 70-year abusive relationship in the colourful, but troubled Union that crumbled in 1991. Europe, on the other hand, seemed shiny with the promise of change: while equally diverse, it offered a different, more predictable, more prosperous, and possibly more fulfilling quality of life.

Ukrainian philosopher Volodymyr Yermolenko offers a different, more contained representation of the multi-faceted nature of Europe, which he presents as dual-aspect. One, he argues, is “a more or less emotionless face of rules and regulations,”³ the very picture of orderly life grounded in institutional procedures. The other is “spontaneous and emotional, the Europe of faith” – and this, Yermolenko posits, is the vision, the ideal that Ukrainians, like many other countries of the former socialist bloc, identify with.⁴ For Euromaidan protesters who risked their lives, Yermolenko says, Europe was “a far-off ideal, in which we have faith” and which we might be ready to die for.⁵ This

was evident from the many evocative slogans communicated through posters and graffiti in the central Independence Square (Maidan Nezalezhnosti) where the protesters had set up camp. Slogans such as “Ukraine is Europe!” “You cannot give us Europe; we are Europe” dominated in its early days, and the more affect-laden and existential “It is not about (EU) integration, it is about our freedom!” took over towards the end of the protest in February 2014.

But to my mind, the daily urban communicative practices in Ukraine offer evidence that the Europe of rules and regulations is also something Ukrainians find attractive – and an ideal that Europe itself has propagated for some time as part of its “normative power,”⁶ however faltering. This Europe is about the standard of living, about a basic benchmark of what is acceptable as “up-to-scratch.” In Ukrainian urban spaces, the qualifier “euro” is routinely attached to things as a sign of quality, of something reliable and sturdy, well-made, or even luxurious. “Euro-remont” is a buzzword for a top-class renovation effort in an urban dwelling: cramped Soviet-era apartments are studded with ceiling spotlights, gilded wallpaper, and mirror wardrobes; heated floors and air conditioning are a must. Those wishing for a more soundproof and energy-efficient home might install “euro-doors” and “euro-windows” (code for triple-glazing). One of the most popular top 40 hits FM radio stations bears the name Europa Plus. Everywhere you look in any Ukrainian city, the signs and billboards offer you “euro”-this and “euro”-that: EuroPharmacy, EuroTires, EuroMall. There is something almost religious about how much Ukrainians want to believe that the symbolic act of naming something “Euro-pean” will magically grant them that imagined higher level of existence, that higher quality of urban life. That, at least, is not so different from the Euromaidan posters proclaiming an affinity for – and a connection with – Europe and the EU (Figure 1). This symbolic communicative act of Euro-naming also seems to collapse the duality proposed



Figure 1. Collage: Euromaidan poster photo by Artem Kononenko (CC BY-SA 3.0); other images – public domain.

by Yermolenko, as the affect-laden faith fuses with the desire for rules, regulations, and predictability.

Emerging in the liminal spaces between the daily grind of city life and a spectacular urban protest event such as Euromaidan, the communicative practices and symbolic meaning-making of Ukrainian city dwellers offer a rich canvas for critical examination of how the imaginary of “Europe” and the construct of “European identity” can be at once inspiring and limiting for a people struggling to define and defend their own national identity. Individuals and communities existing in the geopolitically fraught space of multiple geographical delineations often experience Europe as a different kind of duality: they perceive themselves as part of it and at the same time see themselves as being on the outside, as “the other.” In the streets of the Ukrainian capital, there is today still a sense of unworthiness, of not-quite-there aspiration of a late-blooming Eastern European democracy-in-progress as it seeks to cover up the ugly scars of its Soviet past by placing high-shine glass-and-plastic facades over what’s left of its decaying ancient Kyivan Rus foundations. At the same time, as you travel across Ukraine, there are unmistakable traces of Europe everywhere, from Lviv’s Austro-Hungarian architecture to the origins of the Donbas industrial complex, much of which was founded in the nineteenth century by Welsh and British engineers in what is now eastern Ukraine. Ukraine’s own treasure trove of urban intellectuals – polyglot writers, composers, artists, philosophers – stretches back in history as undeniably European and an inextricable part of European literature, music, art scene, and thinking. We founded one of the oldest universities in Europe, the Kyiv-Mohyla Academy, back in 1615 – and we’ve been scoring consistently high in the Eurovision Song Contest. How much more European, cosmopolitan, and urbane can we be? And yet, Ukrainians continue to grapple with a notion of Europe that seems just beyond their reach, some holy grail that is always already out of sight.

A notion afloat: the post-protest moment

Even if we accept Yermolenko’s premise of a mostly affective, faith-based desire for the idea of Europe, the visual and linguistic landscape of aspirational Europeanness in the aftermath of Euromaidan in Kyiv and other cities across Ukraine makes it clear that there are different and sometimes clashing interpretations of what that idea entails. To some extent, the protest emerged as a microcosm of a cosmopolitan European city centre plaza that was open to all sorts of visions and ideas, making room for what Wilson calls “multiple maidans”⁷ (*maidan*, the Ukrainian word for “square,” has gradually come to signify both the place and the act of protest) and therefore, for multiple imaginaries of what an “ideal” European urban space ought to look like.

In his essay “The Right to the City,” Harvey argues that “the question of what kind of city we want cannot be divorced from the question of what kind of people we want to be,”⁸ implying that the broader political views and aspirations of the people protesting in the city are closely intertwined with the kind of change that they seek to achieve in the urban space they use to communicate their protest claims. Euromaidan participants were visibly embedding their aspirations of Europeanness in the urban environment and putting them into conversation with the existing symbolic practices of Euro-naming that predated Euromaidan. By changing the material and visual spaces of the city using

protest posters, street art, and public claims, Kyiv denizens also expressed their agency in defining their own ideas and meanings of “Europe,” exercising “the freedom to make and remake” themselves, their country, and their city in line with their aspirational imaginaries.⁹

In a foreword to a 2015 post-protest collection of essays titled “What Does Ukraine Think?,” Ukrainian writer Andriy Kurkov captures the collapsed binary of idealism and pragmatism in Ukraine’s European aspirations that I alluded to earlier:

Is Ukraine dreaming of Europe? You could say so. But for Ukrainians, the “European dream” is not about becoming a member of the European Union, but about the advent of the rule of law and, as far as possible, freedom from corruption. The average Ukrainian also feels that the word “Europe” carries the idea of European social standards and European democratic values.¹⁰

In their ethnographic work during and after Euromaidan protests and the ensuing military crisis in Ukraine, sparked by a Russian incursion, Vjosa Musliu and Olga Burlyuk found several persistent and conflicting meta-narratives that came to characterise how Ukraine imagines itself. These variously imagine Ukraine as a liminal category between East and West; Ukraine as Russia or non-Russia; Ukraine as Europe or non-Europe; and, finally, Ukraine as Ukraine.¹¹ The clashing imaginaries are not surprising: after all, not everyone supported Euromaidan, and those who did had different reasons for doing so. My own interviews with protesters conducted during and after Euromaidan attest to similar identity struggles: for all the Ukrainians who joined the protest in the central city square to stand for what Ukraine was, many others saw it as an opportunity to proclaim what it wasn’t.

Taking a more critical view of the multiple “Europes” contained in Euromaidan imaginaries, William Jay Risch agrees that the Euromaidan protest as a whole was far removed from a monolithic ideal of “Europe ‘of the spirit,’” but was instead a “floating signifier” that “meant different things to different people.”¹² Risch is especially critical of the presence of nationalist and far-right elements among Euromaidan protesters’ ranks and notes that these citizens in particular “did not want integration with the EU as much as a national revolution for Ukrainians as an ethnically homogenous nation.”¹³ But, it seems disingenuous to argue that this kind of nationalist sentiment is entirely alien to European sensibilities. It may not be *the* European ideal, but it is *a* European ideal, and one that is becoming increasingly popular, if the results of several recent European elections are anything to go by. The torch-lit nationalist marches cropping up across Ukrainian cities are driven by the same ideas as the anti-migrant rallies taking place in urban centres across many EU countries, and the xenophobic graffiti sprayed across urban spaces bears the same recognisable symbols, no matter the city or the language.

At the same time, in both Ukraine and other European countries, access to urban space is also being contested by queer activists and feminist collectives, cyclists and urban gardening enthusiasts, migrant groups and people of colour. Murals on the walls of Kyiv high-rises take pride as national icons and commemorate fallen protesters, but also promote ideas of peace, unity, and equality.¹⁴ The voices resonating in Ukrainian streets in the aftermath of the Euromaidan protest are diverse and, while some are inward-focused, others are optimistic and hopeful for a Ukraine – and a Europe – that

is constructive, inclusive, and cosmopolitan, where integration and co-existence are possible without erasure or alienation.

A sense of becoming

As a not entirely objective observer (I am, after all, Ukrainian), it was fascinating to see how taken the European public seemed with Ukraine's Euromaidan events and how avidly they absorbed the sight of EU flags visible amid the smoke from the burning tyres in downtown Kyiv. Perhaps, as Yermolenko notes, this was a revelation of sorts. He sees the events of Euromaidan as "opening up a new world for other Europeans" and "showing them that the European idea extends well beyond the formal frontiers of the European Union."¹⁵ In a more quotidian sense, we can see this "opening up" mirrored in the explosion of global interest in Ukraine in recent years, as more low-cost flights, educational exchanges, and promotional campaigns have put Kyiv and other Ukrainian locations on the map of the European continent. It has been particularly interesting to see Ukrainian cityscapes become a regular backdrop for flashy Western music videos, swanky perfume and car ads, and even Hollywood films, following in the footsteps of other European cities before it. Ukraine now at least passes for Europe, but the faith in an orderly way of life that contains multitudes, inscribed onto the urban spaces and surfaces by Euromaidan protesters, stands in contrast to European scepticism which has taken root in most EU capitals.

As other Europeans encounter the rich tapestry of Ukrainian history, writing, cuisine, folklore, intellectual and social change, as they sample the dazzling variety of urban landscapes, architectural forms, and public spaces from Kyiv to Odesa to Ivano-Frankivsk, they are surprised at every turn by the glancing reflections of the social, political, and cultural struggles and triumphs that have, over time, contributed to the European imaginary. As journalist Peter Pomerantsev notes, "Ukraine has been negotiating the paradoxes of being a non-linear nation for much longer,"¹⁶ and its people, streets, and city walls may in fact know more about dealing with the push and pull of global forces on their identity than they let on. Ukraine has always been a polyphony: of cultures, of languages, of climates, of memories, of different pasts, presents, and futures. Its urban scenery encodes this multiplicity: it is equally at home in futuristic thrillers and nostalgic post-socialist dramas. Like most other European metropolises, the site of the Euromaidan protest in Kyiv today combines memorials to fallen protesters and quaint architectural marvels with traffic jams and mass market retail chains. Kyiv itself is exactly as messy and multifaceted as any other big city anywhere else in and outside the porous European borders. It is its own unique assemblage of the expected global mundanities and the wildly unexpected local treasures: yes, fast food kiosks and racist slurs scribbled on an underpass wall, but also a whimsical Art Nouveau residence studded with fantastic beasts or a cage full of pet ravens in a shadowy courtyard just off a historic street – and now, a mural in their honour on the wall just above them.¹⁷

Is Ukraine Europe? Yes, it is, in more ways than one, problematic and wonderful ways, but also maybe not quite Europe yet, and at the same time too much Europe, perhaps – in its own, unique, Ukrainian way. After all (to quote Pomerantsev, again), "what makes Ukraine so exciting is the definition of Ukraine in a state of becoming."¹⁸ The

Euromaidan protest served as a focusing device for this becoming as its participants took over urban spaces to communicate their European aspirations, but also to complicate the very idea of what Europe could or should be. Such “peripheral” voices and imaginaries deserve closer scrutiny by urban communication scholars as they dislodge staid ideas of what life in European cities could or should look like, and who deserves access to these urban spaces – and the power to decide what “Europeanness” entails. Here, then, is a more profound question: what is Europe becoming? And how will Ukrainian (or Georgian, or Serbian) urban citizens help shape that?

Notes

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18. Pomerantsev, *Ukraine in Histories and Stories*, 13.

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ORCID

Tetyana Lokot  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-2488-4045>