

Edinburgh Councillor Blogs – Councillor Jim Orr on protests in Ukraine



Councillor Jim Orr, the Vice Convener for Transport and Environment, contributed several articles to The Edinburgh Reporter during 2013 and it appears he is starting off how he means to go on this year. Prior to being elected as a councillor he worked across Eastern Europe, particularly in Romania. He visited Ukraine over the Christmas holidays and wrote this first hand account of interviews with pro-democracy protesters from Independence Square in Kiev, known as Maidan, for us.

Access to Maidan is easy on foot. Security exists but it is light touch and barricades of mud, ice, fencing and other materials would make access by vehicle much harder. The footways to the underground system are used, for example, to permit access on foot. Large parts of the streets within the barricades are tented, and have a faintly military air, and tea stalls and braziers proliferate. In the centre of the square is a stage with constant speeches, music and TV reports all projected onto a huge adjacent screen.



Tamara and Tim

Asked why he is there, Tim, who is involved with camp security and who studied in the UK, said in excellent English that he wanted to help protect the rights of the people. He explained that although the student demonstrations of 30 November had been violently suppressed, no one in government had been held to account. He also wanted transparency around elections and

pointed out that continuing electoral fraud was “obvious”. As well as the removal of the President and Police Minister, Tim wants to see political prisoners released, particularly students and others recently arrested.

Tim then translated for Tamara who was watching our discussion with interest. Originally from Cherkassy, south east of Kiev, she first said she was present because of the suppression of small businesses via tax laws and other punitive measures. Ordinary people in villages and farms were struggling, while corruption and profiteering were rife elsewhere. The beating of the students was also a trigger point. Tamara had been at the camp since 2 December and said she was determined to stay “till the end”. I later saw Tamara distributing tea to visitors and fellow protesters; a smiling graceful presence but, as can be seen from her photo, committed and determined.



Main stage at Maidan

Part of the protest is the “Free University of Maidan”, a series of open air lectures behind the main stage. Asked why he was there, one of the volunteers, Alexei, spoke of the way Ukraine as a country and society had not developed institutions and progressed as it should since independence in 1991. The Free University was their attempt to fill this gap in knowledge and awareness, and provide an alternative platform for the protesters, one without opposition politicians. The EU debacle, and corruption in public life, had also motivated him to volunteer.

What was conspicuous from my discussions with protesters (admittedly a fairly small sample) was that none of the well-known opposition figures were mentioned. And corruption and lack of political accountability on the whole were bigger factors than specific examples such as the recent arguments over EU v Russian alignment. If the protesters I spoke to are

“for” anything, I would say it is real democracy, not just alternative politicians, and this I found heartening. If they are “against” anything, it’s what they regard as a corrupt, self-serving government and political elite.



Plinth where the statue of Lenin stood till late last year

The protest itself appeared very democratic and all voices were welcomed. Tim even invited me to address the crowds from the main platform with a few words of support; something which I later did in borrowed Ukrainian and quite late in the evening with only a few thousand people present.

But this was a real honour and I felt it was important that the crowds knew that people were watching their protest from all over the world. Ukraine may already be independent, but we in Scotland have much more control over our own destiny, whichever one we choose. We do not need to camp out in sub zero temperatures, under threat of reprisals, to win the right for a decent standard of political representation. We can choose what we want.

Councillor Jim Orr is SNP councillor for Southside/Newington Ward.

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