



Oksana Zabuzhko

Ukraine's Solidarity

Ukrainian author Oksana Zabuzhko walks the streets of Kiev and witnesses an unprecedented upsurge of national solidarity. "To put it simply," she writes, "'they' are the power – the most widely hated power in Ukraine since Soviet times. And 'we' – we are the people."

On Saturday afternoon, I was going by taxi past the Central Election Committee headquarters. The grand edifice was surrounded by two rows of steel fences, the construction, ironically, copying "maximum security" prisons. Inside, in the courtyard, there are camouflaged armoured vehicles, waiting. For what?

"Here they are," said the driver with a wry smile. "Barricaded against us. They must be scared like sh–t now, what'ya think?" He turned his head and gave me a companion's wink. "Their last days are coming!"

There's no need now in Kiev to explain who "they" are, and who "we" are. "They" sit in "their" fortresses, in the government and presidential administration buildings on the downtown core's high hills. "They" stop traffic to let "their" motorcades of black BMWs and model Mercedes 600s rush across the city, and treat "us" as dirt – or, more precisely, as a cheap labour force enabling "them" to sell "their" steel abroad at the most favourable price for "their" benefit. "They" own the police that beats protesters, the national TV channels that pour tons of lies on "us," and the tax service that pumps money out of "us" for "their" needs, until "we" are left naked as a worm. (Last week, for example, my publisher received an urgent demand from the local tax service to pay, out of the blue, 44,000 extra hryvnas, or about 7,000 euro, and was happy to conclude from this that "they" must have exhausted "their" financial resources for the electoral campaign, and were now panicking.) To put it simply, "they" are the power – the most widely hated power in Ukraine since Soviet times. And "we" – we are the people.

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And that's what we are. Never before – even 13 years ago, on the eve of the collapse of the Soviet Union – has Ukraine witnessed such a massive upsurge of national solidarity. People who've always remained politically indifferent and had missed voting in all previous elections, were disseminating self-printed leaflets from the Internet (*samizdat* is back – any piece of information was voraciously devoured on the spot!) in public places, and volunteering to monitor the elections on behalf of opposition candidate Viktor Yushchenko. At a peasant food market a merchant first asked who you're voting for – the right answer (with which you could count on a generous

discount) was "Yushchenko," while incumbent Prime Minister's Viktor Yanukovych's supporters were more than likely simply refused service. In the playgrounds children were playing a game called "Yushchenko beats Yanukovych." To quote my seven-year-old neighbour, "in our class Irka alone stands for Yanukovych, and no one wants to play with her." The slogan chanted by protesting students at demonstrations reads in English as "We're together! We're many! We won't fall!" And just how many of "us" there are, one can easily see in the streets. These days Kiev, as well as other major Ukrainian cities, is defiantly demonstrating its political sympathies by wearing orange, the campaign colour of opposition candidate Yushchenko.

A special term has come into use – "The Orange Revolution." It looks like people have dragged all shades of orange, from yellow to vermilion, out of their wardrobes and adorned themselves with them simultaneously – vests and sweaters, scarves and purses, coats and umbrellas. Orange ribbons flutter everywhere – on trees, fences, lanterns, and cabs. Drivers joyfully beep to each other, and pedestrians (traffic police included!) salute them with smiles and raised fists. It feels like the capital of three million has been transformed into a sea of brotherly love! The windows of shops are lavishly decorated with things orange. Among my favorites is the stunt of my neighborhood coffee shop – its windows glow with pyramids of oranges!

Much of this may sound childish. But some call it the awakening of the nation. And the authorities didn't find it childish, either. Every night criminals brought to Kiev by special trains to provoke disturbances slash tires of orange-ribboned cars. On Saturday night, a day before yesterday's runoff, people adorned in orange were attacked. A friend of mine, wearing a ribbon on his coat, was knocked down in a dark alley with two blows – to his head and kidneys. His even bigger shock, though, was to hear the bandits calling him, in Russian, "a dirty Jew" (my friend is Jewish, and looks unmistakably so) – the words which seemed to have been long forgotten during 13 years of Ukrainian independence. "Rats," he commented afterwards. "They ran away before I was able to fight back – just disappeared into the darkness."

That's the way it goes: Days are "ours," nights are "theirs." In the daylight of Oct. 31, we went to the polling stations and voted for the first time in this presidential race – that is, those of us who managed to wade through all the mysterious "irregularities" in the voters-lists, because of which around three million Ukrainians were denied their right to cast a ballot. This appeared to be good training for a nation striving for democracy. Yesterday, the second time, we arrived at the polling stations far better prepared to protect our rights while in the daylight. By the time I voted, hundreds of multifarious "irregularities" (like, say, busloads of people with absentee coupons running from polling station to polling station to cast multiple votes, people with files of ballots pre-marked for Yanukovych caught red-handed, cases of gunfire and arson at polling stations, etc.) had already been reported by voters calling hotlines from all over the country. I had to wait in line for my ballot for a while: The place was overcrowded, yet somehow strangely silent, and the tension in the air was more than palpable. Everybody knows that the ballots will be counted at night, and that thus "our" part in the elections doesn't exhaust itself with putting a ballot in the box.

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Here I have to clarify one important point. A widespread cliché used by many Western journalists to describe the major collision of our dramatic elections is

that the establishment candidate, Viktor Yanukovych, is "pro-Russian," and that opposition candidate, Viktor Yushchenko, is "pro-Western." This version has as little to do with the feelings of an average Ukrainian voter as with those of the belligerents of the Trojan war. Mr. Yanukovych is perceived not so much as being "pro-Russian," but as, first and foremost, being "pro-criminal" – a Ukrainian Al Capone, who has under his belt two prison sentences for robbery and assault, and publicly uses criminal argot compared to which even the boorish tongue of retiring President Leonid Kuchma sounds as innocuous as a school textbook. A former governor of Donetsk, Mr. Yanukovych in power represents the so-called "Donetsk fellas" – a business clan with a notorious criminal background. That the latter have close ties with similar mafia clans in Russia seems to be the most immediate explanation for the pre-election outburst of a passionate love between Russian and Ukrainian leaders, an affair of which Yanukovych-as-president had been designed as a mutually satisfying offspring.

I doubt whether we'll ever know exactly how many million Russian petro-dollars were spent on this project, yet it's been afflicted by one crucial fault from the very beginning. It failed to take into account the possibility of a free will being manifested by the people of Ukraine. This is the problem of all authoritarian rulers. After a while, they lose touch with their people, and never really know who they rule.

Leonid Kuchma's presidency has been extremely unpopular. During his last year he has never enjoyed more than 10 per cent of the people's support. His choice as his "successor" of a prime minister with prison terms and 15 spelling mistakes on his CV, with an accompanying uncurbed propaganda campaign by the national media, was taken by only too many as a brazen act of national humiliation not to be borne – as a sign that the "shamelessness" of the corrupted establishment had reached rock-bottom. It was from my hairdresser – a Russian-born and Russian-speaking girl – that I first heard, about a month ago, this *vox populi*, boiling with genuine wrath. "Who do THEY think WE are?" she kept lamenting while doing my hair. "What do THEY think THEY can do to US? What am I going to tell my son if this gangster makes it to the presidency – go ahead, sweetie, rob, steal, and rape, and one day you'll become the president of your country?"

One shouldn't play jokes with millions of indignant mothers. A nation with its dignity so deeply wounded constitutes a force not to be ignored. The first round has already proved this. The fraud committed was probably one of the biggest, and the most elaborate in modern history. None of the applied falsification techniques, however, could provide outright victory for Mr. Yanukovych. What the real figures in the first round were, we'll never know. The official result, meant to show the country as "split" between the two men, has only annoyed people more. If you think that of the nearly 12 million of the officially recognised Yushchenko supporters in the first round at least 10 million have never had a chance to see him on TV other than in an outrageous defamation campaign, clearly modelled after old Stalinist (or Goebbelsian?) techniques, you can easily imagine to what extent Ukrainian authorities have lost their credibility with the nation. It was primarily the "if-THEY-hate-this-man-so-much-then-he-must-be-right" logic that has given the Ukrainian revolution its orange colour.

The "harsh scenario" implemented by the authorities for the second round leaves little room for hope that the elections will be everything but fair. A week ago, in the long-awaited live TV debate between the "two Viktors,"

Yanukovych addressed Yushchenko with a statement sounding like an undisguised threat: "The new power has already arrived (!), and you won't squeeze us out!" And it looks like "the new power" means it, no matter what the cost. The pre-election week alone has provided enough material for dozens of horror writers (and for some 15,000 complaints about the violation of the electoral law now in courts!). News reports read like those from an invaded country under the boot of an occupation regime: Arrests and detainments of public activists (over 200 of them), tear gas and clubs used against protesters (with a police promise that "next time we'll use bullets"!), blackmail and assaults (with bullets included!), committed upon representatives of the opposition candidate, the replacement of administrators in "pro-Yushchenko" areas with "obedient" ones, blatantly promising (as in a village in the Sumy region) that "everyone who voted for Yushchenko will be shot by the police," and many other things, more and more reminiscent of Germany back in 1933.

There is, however, one crucial difference. Them "Bavarian fellas" from 70 years ago were also armed with an ideology, which, however pernicious, after all, addressed "the people." The present-day "Donetsk fellas," apart from money, have at their disposal nothing but guns. And it's known that humans, not guns, decide the outcome of any war.

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This fall, history has turned Ukraine into its unique playground, to check whether this truth is still valid in our brave new world. Thirty-five thousand civilians have volunteered at opposition headquarters to guard polling-stations on the night of vote-counting. This seems to be the only way to make sure that the opposition's landslide victory (the most professional exit poll suggests 58 per cent of the votes for Yushchenko and 39 per cent for Yanukovych) won't be turned on its head the next morning.

Such "civil control" proved to be quite effective a strategy in the first round. Wherever electricity was "inexplicably" cut off, people turned on their car headlights to light up polling-stations, so that election committees could continue their work. No ski-masked attackers risked appearing in well-lit, crowded places, in the flashes of cameras. So far, "they" have stuck to the darkness – however burning "their" desire is to emerge from out of it and fully establish themselves in the open light on Monday morning.

While I'm writing this, my boyfriend is packing his backpack for the night. Crackers, chocolate, water, a thermos of coffee. Camera, a set of batteries. Candles, matches. Flashlight.

We'll be keeping our place lit. It's beautiful, our place. Never before have we realised how much we loved it all these years. And what a painfully powerful, orange-blazing thing wounded love can be.

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