

Andrey Kurkov. *Ukraine Diaries. Dispatches from Kiev*

London: Harvill Secker, 2014. ISBN 978-11846559471. –263 pp.

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As the saying goes, “No news is good news.” Apparently, for Ukraine, suddenly becoming the center of international attention at the end of 2013 was bad news, very bad news, indeed. The bloody clashes of the supporters of the EU Association Agreement with Yanukovich’s government, which after years of promises backed off at the final stage of negotiations, the subsequent flee of the president and Russian annexation of Crimea, separatist uprising in the East turning, with Putin’s “help,” into a disastrous military confrontation, destruction of economy, and thousands injured, crippled or dead. So much bad news within such a short period of time ...

But time goes on and public attention has turned to other matters of concern for the world community, such as the European immigrant crisis and ISIS threat. Even the issue of unlawful annexation by Russia of the Ukrainian territory, Crimea, which prompted various international sanctions against the aggressor, is receding into the past annals. The sanctions still stay but some very authoritative geopolitical reference editions, such as *National Geographic*, Oxford University Press, *Google* and others have released new editions of maps with Crimea shown as a part of Russia. And soon, I am afraid, there might be people who will consider recent Yanukovich’s appeal to the European Court of Human Rights legitimate instead of handing the criminal fugitive to the Ukrainian legislation. But there is one thing that can help justice prevail and the Ukrainian Revolution of Dignity win - it is a clear understanding of causes and effects of the events and the role certain personalities and parties played in them. One of the sources that can facilitate such understanding is the book by Andrey Kurkov *Ukraine Diaries. Dispatches from Kiev*.

The best-selling internationally acclaimed modern Ukrainian writer Andrey Kurkov is the author of 20 books, which have been translated into 35 languages, and 20 scripts for movies and documentaries. *The Guardian* (17 Aug. 2014) calls him “a strange Ukrainian,” as he was born in Russia, speaks Russian as a first language and writes in Russian. He is also a member of the British PEN Club and a chevalier of the French *Ordre national de la Légion d’honneur*. He lives in Kiev with his wife and three children, just five hundreds yards from the Maidan Nezalezhnosti, Ukraine’s Independence Square, which saw the most violent clashes of protesters with the government forces, and his diaries is a first-hand, eyewitness account of the start of the political crisis in Ukraine.

In its praise for *Diaries*, *The Guardian* (ibid.) notes:

Putin has described Ukraine’s revolution as one led by fascists inspired by hatred of all things Russian, so Kurkov is a particularly valuable guide for anyone seeking a more nuanced explanation of why so many people took against ex-president Viktor Yanukovich and the system he created.

In autumn of 2013, Kurkov was preparing a series of essays about Ukraine for the Austrian

publisher Haymon Verlag, but on November 21st this task no longer seemed possible. Instead, he wrote this diary, which recorded the development of EuroMaidan events from the very first day, Thursday 21 November 2013, until Thursday April 24 2014, when Ukraine was getting ready for new presidential elections. The book is not a propagandist manifesto, neither it is a revolutionary thriller, but being faithful to the facts and loyal to his people, Kurkov makes his diary a thoughtful, absorbing and emotionally engaging narration.

Consider the beginning of the diary when the author makes an astounding connection between the fall of a meteorite on Sevastopol, the most Russian city in Ukraine, and a sudden declaration by the former Prime Minister, Mykola Azarov, announcing the suspension of preparation to sign the Association Agreement with the European Union. After months of widely publicized campaign of ‘heading toward Europe,’ when EU flag had been flying next to the national one on all administrative buildings in Kiev, the renunciation of Ukraine’s Association with Europe was certainly Putin’s victory. The meteorite in Sevastopol, the only Russia’s navy base in the Black Sea, had a symbolic, and alarmingly mystic, significance for the writer.

In a similar manner, the whole book is written not as a blunt account of events by a reporter, but as a detailed narration of a writer, a citizen, and a father. It is highly objective, as the events described were widely reported in mass media and social networks, but it is also personal, as Kurkov also writes about his family, their friends, trips, various events in the life of his children, and so on. What makes this narration even more personal is emotional involvement of the writer, who is not a detached observer but an intellectual overwhelmed with concern, often anguish, for the fate of his country, his people and his family. And as such, the diaries are full of questions many people are still asking, doubts about where certain decisions might lead and legitimate criticism of the actions taken by the government, parties and key politicians.

For instance, it is easier to appreciate the state of shock the Ukrainian people and the whole Europe felt, when Yanukovych’s government suddenly denounced the European Association, with Kurkov’s question: “Did Yanukovych really have to spend six months announcing that ‘we are walking towards Europe’?” Did he really have to test his party members’ loyalty by asking them to ‘walk’ with him or stay behind? And it is easy to understand Kurkov’s reaction to the Foreign Ministry announcement the same evening, when a crowd began gathering in the center of Kiev, that it was no longer dangerous to travel to Egypt, instead of Europe: “Who cares if you get massacred, accidentally or on purpose, by local Islamists or other revolutionaries. This makes me feel sick.” Both announcements of that day are the facts of the record, but it is left for Kurkov to notice their implicit malevolent co-occurrence.

There are few and between people who are capable of connecting different developments, not overtly related and reported separately, into a scheme revealing a hidden agenda. This thoughtful processing of the happenings, this weaving the canvas of the crisis, makes the forte of Kurkov’s diaries. Consider another example from the book: when Crimea was occupied by Russia it was presented by Putin as a ‘legitimate referendum’ expressing the ‘free will of the Crimean people’. On March 27th, the Russian Minister of Defense handed out medals ‘for reintegration of Crimea’, which, Kurkov promptly noted, reproduced almost exactly the Soviet medal of 1944 for the

'liberation of Crimea from fascist German invaders'. On April 22nd, when Russian authorities finally revealed both sides of the medal Kurkov made another interesting observation: the dates of the operation to annex Crimea engraved on the medal, 20-02-2014 – 18-03-2104, showed that "Russia began this operation while Yanukovych was still in Kiev, before he started planning to flee, before the protesters in the Maidan were massacred. And so the secret is revealed!"

At the time when the diaries were written the civilized world refused to recognize Crimea as an integral part of Russia, which was one of Putin's major concerns. Kurkov comments on the matter: "Usually, one is proud to show off a new diamond in public, but when that diamond has been stolen, it tends to be hidden away and looked at only in the confines of a dark room." The writer evaluates a possible scenario Putin would use to augment this situation, and concludes: "There is only one way to resolve this problem: foment a civil war in Ukraine and encourage pro-Russian activists – armed, of course – to march on Kiev, accompanied by their Russian comrades." Half of this scenario has been already realized; the other prediction still stay a gloomy possibility, which, hopefully, will never come true.

My favorite part of the book is the writer's unreserved criticism of Yanukovych and his actions, accompanied by some background information well known to most Ukrainians but probably not to the Western readers of the book. For instance, Kurkov recalls that in 2010 presidential campaign, all the posters of Yanukovych were emblazoned with his political credo: *I will listen to each of you!* Kurkov comments on this: "In the space of three years, he has clearly not heard anyone or anything." On November 29th, Yanukovych went to the European summit, where he did not sign anything. Kurkov ironically remarks: "So why did he go to Vilnius? To be photographed with Angela Merkel?" Later on, Yanukovych left for China to participate in a 'forum of representatives from Chinese and Ukrainian business interests.' "While his house is burning down, - Kurkov writes, - he's being invited for dinner and making his plans for the future!" And later on: "Yanukovych, we have learned, does not want to come home. He has landed, not in Kiev, but in Sochi, where he is drinking tea with Putin." From there he headed to Malta for an official visit and, as we learn from the book, was turned away since the Maltese government refused to receive him. And all these sprees at the time when protests and violence against them were accelerating, when thousands of protesters demanded in front of the president administration to "Get the jailbird out!"

It is a public knowledge that Yanukovych is a jailbird indeed, and Kurkov does not fail to mention it: "He was convicted twice in his youth, allegedly for rape and definitely for assault and battery." But none of this (Kurkov's footnote) can be proved any longer since all documents about arrests were destroyed while Yanukovych was the governor of the Donetsk region.

As the death toll among protesters increases in January 2014, Kurkov starts to doubt his own and everyone's sanity:

We have all lost our minds. I don't know what normal is. Is it normal to despise a president who cannot write without making spelling mistakes, who knows nothing about anything, and who,

apparently, never studied anywhere¹. Except perhaps during his two terms in prison as a young man. In other words, a president like Yanukovich cannot be normal. So it is normal to despise and reject him. The protests are the most direct form of this non-acceptance and non-love. That too is normal.

The writer further speculates that throwing stones and Molotov cocktails at the police happens in other countries, in Greece, for example, or in Germany. And maybe it is normal there too, “but in those countries, strangely enough, a person with a criminal record cannot become president!” And yet another entry: “This country has never had such a stupid president before, capable for radicalizing one of the most tolerant populations in the world!”

Black humor is Kurkov’s trademark noticed by critics in his other books. He does not fail to reveal it in *Diaries* as well, especially since there are so many personalities involved who definitely deserve it. Take, for instance, the entry about former Prime Minister Azarov telling the Parliament that there was no more money in state’s reserve due to the pro-European protest movement. “How strange! - Kurkov remarks. – Before, he always said it had been his predecessors who were to blame: Yushchenko and Tymoshenko.” Or another entry about the Russian Prime Minister Medvedev’s visit to Crimea, which he started by promising to send daily planes full of holiday-makers from Russia. Why thirty-three exactly, - Kurkov muses, - “One plane for every year spent on earth by Jesus Christ, perhaps?”

Kurkov notices a lot of things happening around him, and not just political or social but also cultural, which nevertheless are still defined by politics. Thus, he was among the first to indignantly react to the Russian propaganda starting using the words “Nazi” and “fascists” with regards to the Ukrainian protesters. When he learned that one Russian writer declared that, in protest against ‘Ukrainian fascism’, he was banning all translation of his books into Ukrainian, Kurkov called that person “seriously schizophrenic” and wrote a sarcastic letter inviting him to get in touch with his “literary colleague Victor Yanukovich”². He also could not miss ridiculously absurd developments in the cultural life of Moscow, where in the staging of Gianni Rodari’s work *Cipollino* the story of the discontented vegetables’ revolution against Prince Lemon was deleted and substituted with a petition demanding reforms. Further more: Lyudmila’s solo from Glinka’s opera *Ruslan and Lyudmila* was scrapped on the basis that the text included the words ‘Dnieper’ and ‘Kiev’. With his acute sense of humor, Kurkov finds “surprise and delight” in even more hilarious developments: the new mayor of Sevastopol posted a list of people banned from swimming on the town beach. These bathing sanctions applied to Barack Obama, Catherine Ashton, and practically every politician in Ukraine.

It is difficult for a normal person to believe all this insanity, but Kurkov, with his long-standing reputation of a respected commentator on Ukraine for the international media, is to be trusted. I

¹ Despite this, in the later period of his term, Yanukovich claimed to have a title of Professor, which he spelled “proffesor” in one application form (among 12 other mistakes he made in 90 words). (IA)

² Yanukovich “wrote” and presumably published 4 books under his name for which he got astronomical honoraria from a publishing company in Donetsk. The “books” never saw any circulation and were hard to be found. (IA)

personally testify to his sentiment about being a Russian in Ukraine now: “I am a Russian myself, after all, an ethnically Russian citizen of Ukraine. But I am not ‘a Russian’, because I have nothing in common with Russia and its politics. I do not have Russian citizenship and I do not want it.”

As I was rereading the *Diaries* for this review, I bookmarked the entries I wanted to share with my readers. But at the end the bookmarks were so many that it would be impossible to report on all the places of interest without copying much of the book. Therefore, I’d rather stop here in hope that my readers will be interested to read Kurkov’s book themselves. At least I can strongly recommend it to all those who are concerned about what happened in the largest country of Europe and what brought about the developments latent with unforeseeable outcomes not only for Ukraine but for the rest of the world.