

Andrei Kurkov

The Ukrainian author noted for the black humour of his novels on post-Soviet life talks to Agnes Frimston about the state of his homeland

What would you like to see happen to your country?

The Ukraine that existed before the events of last year was very peaceful, very tolerant, very quiet – maybe a bit too tolerant to hopeless and corrupt politicians. But now, we have a society that has been radicalized, and in the next parliamentary elections, we will have a lot of new radicals in the parliament. This is partially good because they will fight against corruption, and they will put pressure on the government and the president to carry on the reforms that were promised.

Do you feel that Ukraine has been abandoned by Europe?

Well Ukraine was abandoned at the beginning of the occupation of Crimea. In the three weeks that it took Putin to occupy Crimea, there was no reaction from the European Union or the United States, and that gave Putin the sign that he could continue and take even more territory. So in this sense, yes. If the price of oil goes down and stays down, then the recent sanctions will work in two or three years' time.

Is Putin scared that Ukraine could prove that revolution can force political change?

This is one of the reasons he got so crazy about Ukrainian events. But I think the main reason was that these events brought his big geopolitical plans to a halt. His Russian World project was about Ukraine, Belarus and Russia uniting all Russian speakers and people of Russian culture around the world. It was actually started by the Orthodox Church as a cultural project, but it very quickly became a geopolitical one. Kiev was supposed to play the spiritual capital.

Is the current ceasefire agreement just giving in to Putin?

The situation is quite hopeless, and Putin has nowhere to go except carrying on playing macho. The only support he has is that of his population, and to keep this he has to play aggressive, and someone of whom everyone is afraid. This is why he is saying things like 'Kazakhstan was never a real state', and sending the Russian air force into Swedish, Finnish, Japanese and Alaskan airspace. Russian soldiers are still in Ukraine and these so-called humanitarian convoys are bringing

nobody-knows-what into this territory and taking nobody-knows-what away.

Putin seems to be drawing Russia in on itself, with controls on the media.

They are going back to Russian imperial times, with censorship and total control of thoughts and opinions. To stay in power, Putin needs to show Russians that around Russia, there are only enemies. Russians are now so proud that the world is afraid of them, even Sergey Lavrov [the Russian foreign minister] in New York said: 'Well, we are proud to be the second most dangerous country in the world'. Putin has somehow resurrected the Soviet mentality in the Russian people, and again, like in the Soviet times, America has become the main enemy. It has become a geopolitical clash between America and Russia, for Russians.

What is the role of the writer in nation-building and revolution?

In Ukraine, the intellectuals didn't play much of a role in Euro Maidan, unlike during the Orange Revolution, because once there is actual violence then intellectuals are silent. In Russia, writers were always part of the establishment, especially if they wanted to be happy and well-fed. The only Russian writers who didn't sign the letter of support for Putin are those published abroad, and they are gradually leaving, partly by choice, and partly due to pressure. Vladimir Sorokin is now in Berlin. Ten years ago Putin's youth organization, Nashi, burnt his books in Red Square.

How does Ukraine suffer from Russia's cultural and linguistic hegemony?

During the Orange Revolution, you had lots of foreign journalists posted to Kiev from all around the world, and the reports they filed were mostly very objective. In this Euro Maidan time, we had lots of foreign journalists coming to Kiev from Moscow, because the foreign media wanted to save money, and so asked their correspondents from Moscow to come and cover the events. People who stay in Moscow fall in love with Russia, and become Russophiles, and so they reported the events from the Russian point of view. They quite often had no sympathy for Ukraine.

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