

Dear Christopher,¹

So the first anniversary of our last ‘Maidan’² has passed and slipped into history. We marked the occasion, remembered the heroes and carried on. Nearly two months after the parliamentary elections, parliament has finally started to function and we have a new Government. Winter has arrived and Ukraine’s future depends to some extent on this season’s weather and to some extent on Putin’s mood.

Superficially, life in Kiev seems little different from how it was ‘before the Maidan’. However, there have been changes and they are not of the most positive kind. I see that ‘For Sale’ signs have appeared on the balconies of several neighbouring apartments and, while Kiev has seen an influx of rich business people from the Donbass region,³ there is a steady flow of young, middle-class families leaving and heading abroad. My youngest son Anton faces a sadder time at school now having just said goodbye to his best friend, Daniel, whose parents are taking him to live in Canada.

In the centre of town, a number of restaurants and cafes have closed down. There’s less money in Kiev now and many more poor folk, including thousands of families who, having fled the fighting in the East of country, are living in barrack conditions. A less welcome type of refugee from the Donbass are the criminals. They have fled for two reasons: there is nothing left to steal. That is to say, only the new ‘authorities’ have the right to expropriate and ‘nationalize’ whatever they like. The second reason is connected with the first; the separatists shoot anyone they catch carrying out a crime of a more traditional nature. The separatists’ battle with the local criminal classes began back in April when they shot a whole gang of known drug dealers.

In Kiev, the number of burglaries and muggings has risen alarmingly. My neighbour’s apartment was burgled the other day and now we are talking about building a metal cage to prevent unwanted guests from accessing our floor. It reminds me of the early 1990s when everyone who had a bit of money invested in a metal front door. The main thing is to get the cage built before Christmas. It will be a kind of present to ourselves! Also we will feel less anxious

about going away during the holiday.

The festive season is nearly upon us and neither economic nor military problems will prevent Ukrainians celebrating wherever they are. One of the next convoys of 'humanitarian aid' sent into Donbass from Russia will include a Christmas tree – a gift from the Russian Government – together with a huge number of presents from the children of Moscow to the children of the Donbass. At the moment most, if not all, Moscow school children are making cards and writing letters of support for their contemporaries in Donetsk and Lughansk⁴ and in Donetsk and Lughansk the children are making cards for the 'freedom fighters', that is the people fighting against the Ukrainian army. At the same time, children living in Kiev and other areas of Ukraine are hard at work on patriotic drawings to send as gifts to the Ukrainian army and volunteer forces.

One day examples of this artwork by children on both sides of the front line will hang side by side on display in one museum. But that is not likely to happen any time soon, certainly not this year.

All good wishes for the New Year and Christmas!

Kind regards,
Andrey Kurkov

¹ The 'Christopher' to whom this letter is addressed is Christopher Maclehose, who at one time ran Harvill Press, Andrey Kurkov's first publisher in the UK. Maclehose is the founder of Maclehose Press, and during his career has been responsible for introducing UK readers to writers such as WG Sebald, Raymond Carver, Javier Marias, Jose Saramago, Richard Ford, and Stieg Larsson. We will, of course, pass Andrey's letter on to him.

² Variations of the word 'maidan' are used in a number of languages to mean 'square' or 'park': notable examples include Midan Tahrir in Cairo, Tavisuplebis Moedani in Tbilisi, Maydan al Shajara in Benghazi, and Taksim Meydani in Istanbul. Astute readers will recognise these as the locations for recent protests and uprisings, for even in an age of digital activism the occupation of central public spaces is still a key element of any popular movement. The writer is referring, in this instance, to Maidan Nezalezhnosti in Kiev, where a series of escalating street protests between November 2013 and February 2014 culminated in the occupation of parliamentary buildings and removal of the president, Viktor Yanukovich. The aftermath of these events was complex, to say the least, and street protests have continued.

³ The Donbass region, in eastern Ukraine, has seen armed conflict throughout 2014 between pro-Russian separatist groups and Ukrainian government forces. There is currently a ceasefire in place, although violations are common on both sides.

⁴ Donetsk and Lughansk together make up the Donbass region.

Andrey Kurkov is a Ukrainian novelist and essayist, perhaps best known in the UK for his 2001 debut novel, *Death and the Penguin*. He has published twelve other novels, and his work has been translated into twenty-five languages, and he probably wishes people would stop saying he is best known for his debut novel. His collection of essays about recent events in his country, *Ukraine Diaries: Dispatches from Kiev*, is published by Harvill Secker and highly recommended to anyone who found the above footnotes a sketchy and inadequate guide. Kurkov is Vice-President of Ukrainian PEN.

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Audrey Kuhn