

## Gender, Nation, and Revolution: The Rise of Women in the Euromaidan Protests

“In the Maidan it was possible for women to fulfill roles that challenge Ukrainian gender norms,” said Tamara Martsenyuk, a professor of sociology at Kyiv Mohyla University and the University of Toronto, who spoke at the Harriman Institute on February 10<sup>th</sup>. During her talk, “Gender, Nation, and Revolution: The Rise of Women in the Euromaidan Protests,” Martsenyuk accentuated the importance of women to the movement, not only in supporting roles, but also on the front lines.

According to Martsenyuk, the mainstream perception of the Euromaidan both in Ukraine and abroad centered on the actions of heroic (or villainous, depending on your point of view) men, and on the actions in Kyiv’s Maidan Square, the movement’s epicenter. “Of course,” she allowed, “these actions happened, and these people were involved. But this was only maybe 5 percent of the revolutionary activity.”

Martsenyuk explained that nationalist movements have a long history of ignoring women’s contributions, and tend to define their struggles in gendered terms that reinforce traditional roles for women. In billboards, posters, and graffiti images, Ukraine is portrayed as a woman, vulnerable to Russia’s male power. Martsenyuk described a billboard with “Russia—Hands off Ukraine!” blazoned across the image of a curvaceous woman in Ukrainian peasant garb. “In the traditional narrative,” said Martsenyuk, “men are heroes, while women are the mothers of the nation. Their bodies become symbols.” Despite this portrayal, she contended, “Maidan was not a homogenous phenomenon. Women did fight. They did negotiate.”

Behind the scenes in central Kyiv and in the open in cities all over Ukraine, nationalist movements involved many women, and those

women openly took leadership roles. Even in Kyiv, the movement started with equal participation from men and women. Indeed, women constituted 44 percent of the crowd at the initial Euromaidan protests. They provided medical support, confronted police on the streets, and started social media campaigns during the movement. These contributions, although they were not in the foreground of media reports, created a space for women to assert themselves as leaders and innovators in the new Ukraine. However, when the protests became militarized, the number of women declined. Martsenyuk argued, citing personal communication with protesters, that this drop in female participation at the barricades was not because women left of their own accord, but because their male counterparts pushed them out. “When the Molotov cocktails came out,” she said, “it was not ‘women’s work.’”

“Unfortunately,” lamented Martsenyuk, “feminism has gained a very negative, radical connotation.” In the post-Soviet space, any view that smacks of feminism is often discarded. Ukraine, she noted, is in 114<sup>th</sup> place among nations in terms of female participation in parliament. “I am an optimist, though,” she said, noting that the number of female lawmakers has increased since the post-Maidan elections, and reminding her audience that Ukraine was an early adopter of equal-rights legislation and laws that combat domestic abuse. Despite the significant obstacles to Ukrainian women, Martsenyuk said, the Euromaidan provided them the opportunity to break free, if only a little, from their societal straightjackets.

*Reported by Matthew Van Meter  
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