

Ukrainian Sniper Victim Sees Few Signs of Optimism

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Olesya Zhukovska, a 21-year-old hospital orderly from small-town Ukraine.

The scars are fading now. The exit wound, a narrow, pink line that curves down the left side of her neck, is often hidden by her tangle of dark hair. The entry wound is smaller than a bottle cap.

And the young woman who became a symbol of Ukraine's protests — who tweeted "I am dying" after a sniper's bullet tore into her on a cold February morning, and was suddenly the focus of international attention — sometimes wonders just what it all achieved.

"So little has been accomplished," said Olesya Zhukovska, a 21-year-old hospital orderly from small-town Ukraine. She moved to Kiev when the protests broke out in late 2013, and spent months working as a volunteer medic in the sprawling protest camp that sprang up in the heart of the capital. "The blood that was spilled here, I really do not want it to be wasted. Because people are starting to forget."

"I'm a realist," Zhukovska said, struggling for a way to describe how she sees her country

today.

It can be hard to be an optimist these days in Ukraine.

The economy is a wreck. The military and the police often seem completely powerless. Crimea, the Ukrainian peninsula that juts into the Black Sea, has been annexed by Russia. Thousands of people across the Russian-speaking east voted in a chaotic weekend referendum to break away from Kiev. Pro-Russian gunmen have seized control of government buildings in some eastern cities and clashed sporadically with Ukrainian forces.

Zhukovska is particularly furious at Ukrainians who have demonstrated against Kiev's rule.

"They should probably have their citizenship revoked," she said. "If they want to live in Russia, they are free to pack their bags and move to Russia."

Just a few months ago, things had seemed so clear, so hopeful.

In late February, as Zhukovska was recovering in a Kiev hospital and reading thousands of messages of support, Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich fled to Russia as his internal support crumbled. Interim leaders pledged to root out Ukraine's crippling corruption. Yanukovich's mansions — cliched strongman monuments filled with polished marble, gilt fixtures and car-sized chandeliers — were opened to public view.

The protesters, most of them from the country's Ukrainian-speaking regions, were sure change had arrived. In polls conducted earlier this year — before the separatists' referendums and spasms of violence in Russian-speaking regions this month — most Ukrainians said they were more hopeful than during Yanukovich's rule.

"We gained a lot," said Anton Lubyanytskyi, a hometown friend of Zhukovska's, who also was shot during the protests. "It was a revolution against apathy."

Zhukovska was working in a small hospital in western Ukraine when the protests began. Energized by what she saw on television, she took her basic medical training — she has a junior college nursing certificate — to Kiev's Independence Square. Demonstrators had taken over the streets there, holding nonstop protests against Yanukovich's decision to freeze ties with the European Union, his human rights record and his moves to seek financial assistance from Russia.

She volunteered as a medic, doing everything from rushing bandages to people injured in clashes with police to giving aspirin to those suffering from colds.

She quickly found a community amid the dozens of tents, making friends as she warmed herself around the old barrels that protesters used to keep fires burning. But on the morning of Feb. 20, as she was sorting medical supplies in a quiet area on the edge of the square, she was shot in the neck. At first, she did not know what had happened.

"Only when I looked down and saw the blood did I realize I had been shot." Quickly, people around Zhukovska helped her walk to an emergency first aid station, and then to an ambulance.

And along the way, as had become her habit, she grabbed her phone and sent a quick tweet: "I am dying," she wrote. She smiles now at the drama of her message. While still causing her some pain, the shooting left no lasting, major injuries.

"I thought that was it," she said of the moment when she sent her tweet. "I thought it was the end."

These days, she travels between her parents' house in western Ukraine and Kiev to see her boyfriend, whom she met during the protests. Her tweet, sent as the world's attention was focused on Ukraine, made her an instant — albeit brief — celebrity. For a few weeks, she was interviewed repeatedly by reporters and met government officials. She went to France to talk about what had happened to her and about the more than 100 demonstrators who died, most killed by snipers.

She is trying to map out her future, hoping to stay in Kiev and get a nursing degree. But she seems a little forlorn that it all passed so quickly.

"Now people are not writing very often," she said. "Mostly there are no messages anymore."

As for Independence Square, it has the feel of a half-abandoned carnival camp. Many protesters have left, and some of their encampments have been taken down. But dozens of ragged green tents remain staked to the streets, and a handful of barricades are still in place, with tires and twisted metal piled high in the air. It's more about nostalgia, though, than any real need to keep back attackers.

Spring has finally arrived in Kiev and the stink of burning rubber, which hung over the protesters all winter, is largely gone. The Maidan, as Independence Square is known, has become a destination. Families gawk at the handful of remaining burned-out cars. Young men dressed as animals — a zebra, a bear — hustle for handouts and flirt with passing girls. Dozens of sidewalk stalls sell memorabilia tied to the protests, with shoppers offered everything from T-shirts to hair bands to flip-flops proclaiming love for Ukraine.

The stores — Independence Square is in the heart of a prime Kiev shopping district — long ago reopened. You can stroll from the barricades to pick up a pair of pre-ripped Arizona Super Slim jeans at Mango (\$39) or a Hawaiian shirt at Gap (\$52). You can eat ice cream while listening to a trumpeter play U.S. easy-listening hits like "I Just Called to Say I Love You" on a recent afternoon.

Standing amid the remaining protesters, Zhukovska insisted that her efforts had not been wasted. Even if she sounded as if she was trying to convince herself.

"We suffered a lot, and I believe it was not just an empty gesture," she said. "Everything will be good."

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