

Peace Talks After Maidan Revolution For Dignity

Three activists from Maidan meeting three members of disbanded special police unit " Berkut" to talk about their experiences at Maidan (the square of Independence), the consequences, and a way forward in cooperation. 11th may, 2014, Ukraine.



The situation: Between 30 November 2013 and 20 February 2014 activists and riot police Berkut clashed numerous times. The events culminated in deadly violence between 18-20 February, before Yanukovich finally fled from office as president. During this time at least 110 activists and 16 policemen were killed.

The response: On the initiative of Carl Plesner and Olena Hantsyak-Kaskiv, former activists and members of Berkut were invited for a meeting aimed at supporting mutual understanding, dialogue and reconciliation. In the months following the revolution Carl and Olena laid the initial groundwork to prepare this meeting.

The perspective: Carl and Olena work from a belief that when people involved in violent conflict meet and are given the support they need to communicate with and listen to each other, something important happens: they start to develop mutual understanding and empathy for one another.

Violence cannot grow out of mutual empathic connection: Instead, compassion and a will to cooperate take its place.

From left: Carl Plesner, Volodymyr Biloshkursky, Olena Hantsyak-Kaskiv, Bohdana Babych, Yanek Falkevych, Elena Vyshnevskya, Boris Yeghiazaryan and Slava (Slava wished to be anonymous in this document).

Below you can read the participants' experiences, learnings and conclusions about the meeting:

Volodymyr Biloshkursky | 34 years old | Berkut officer

Before the meeting with the Maidan activists I felt uncertain whether they would understand my perspective. But I was ready to talk and I understood that they were not enemies. Throughout our communication there was no feeling of aggression. Moreover, I even noticed that they not merely wanted, but they were striving and trying to hear us. They also needed help and we were ready to help them. We were heard. We found a common denominator.

Perhaps in some cases we do not agree with each other and our views differ on some issues, but we are on the same road. One could feel a shift toward a shared vision of Ukraine, in relation to the authorities, and we can act together now.

Bohdana Babych | 34 years old | political psychologist, co-founder SpilnoTV | wounded at Maidan

I have a lot of personal grudges against Berkut policemen. My eleven colleagues from SpilnoTV and I were wounded at Hrushevskoho street, and Berkut burned down our studio together with all of our equipment.

However, this meeting allowed me to see the complete picture and my attitude towards Berkut changed a lot. I realized that I had had a rather one-sided understanding of the events which took place on the other side of the barricades. Back then, I tried to interview Berkut officers, but they were stubbornly silent.

From psychologist Elena I learned that Berkut did not have a press secretary and there was no one to communicate with reporters. The lack of information created a distorted view which, combined with the emotional images of wounded journalists, provoked us in a very short period to create an image of Berkut as monsters who ought to be destroyed.

An aggression breeds another aggression. Emotions turn off your mind and result in a confrontation.

In order to speak justice, we must understand the different sides of the process. For that, we need to communicate with each other.

I am very grateful to Carl for this opportunity. We cannot change the past, but we can model our future. And I think this meeting will help us to understand each other, to reconcile the different sides and to work together for the development of our country.



Yanek Falkevych | 40 years old | electrician, volunteer journalist for SpilnoTV | wounded at Maidan

The meeting was very important for me as I met specific people: Slava, Volodymyr and Elena. They are unique and they are my brothers and sisters in Christ, with their particular characters, facial expressions, smile and anger, with their different emotions, aspirations, mentality, values, and they are no longer blurred images of mythical Berkut police wearing masks.

In a dialogue one could see their hearts, their endless and eternal peace, founded by the Father God and their limitations inherent in a sinful human nature. When seeing a particular person one can feel specific emotions toward her and to love him or her in a special way with a brotherly love, given by the Holy Spirit.

Elena Vyshnevskaya | 25 years old | psychologist for Berkut

There were some worries and tension prior to the meeting. I was thinking about how the communication would go and what we would say. The first thing that removed the fears was that Bohdana and I both gravitated toward the piece of paper with the word "Trust" on it and Slava and Boris both reached for the one with the word "Cooperation". It was an eye-opening moment.

The meeting, which was intended to last for 1.5-2 hours lasted 5 hours. And we did not finish it. We talked and agreed on common steps for the future. In total, we talked for 8 hours. So long! We had been silent towards each other for a long time.

I thank Carl Plesner for this experience and opportunity.

Slava | 23 years old | Berkut sergeant

It was so meaningful to me that I was heard and that I could say what disturbed me and that our interlocutors understood it. I wanted the Maidan representatives to recognize some of their errors too.

I was struck by the fact that they offered further assistance to our wounded guys. I was pleasantly surprised!

Thank you for this experience!

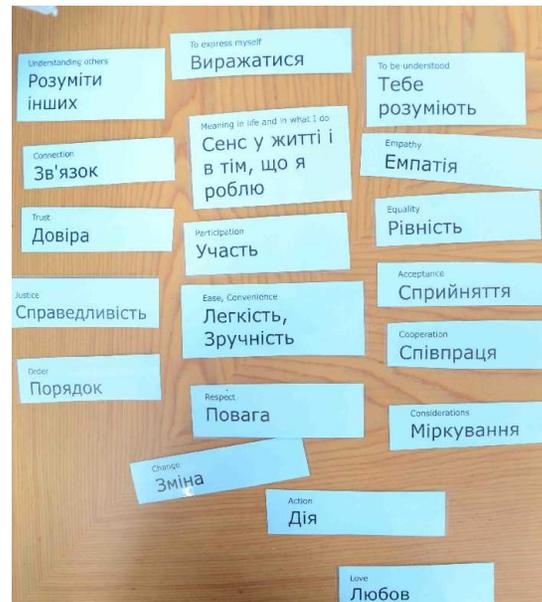
Boris Yeghiazaryan | 57 years old | artist and activist | wounded at Maidan

This was a very important meeting. We, three persons from Maidan, and three people from Berkut met. I was surprised that Slava and Volodymyr did not feel themselves to be free citizens of a free Ukraine.

Volodymyr was convinced that he defended order in the state of Ukraine. Slava was looking for understanding, why he was treated in an inhumane way by activists and what we together have to do next.

My conclusion after talking to the three Berkut representatives is that the authorities used them to restore order, while they were denied access to the complete truth. None of them see that they were not just a part of the state system, but that they were a part of the regime. They do not fully realize that the regime used them. They fairly feel that injustice was done toward them in that situation, but this injustice is most likely perceived by them as one committed by Maidan activists.

They do not have this stimulus which we call Patriotism. Thus, as a result, they are patriots of their own team, they are ready to protect each other and to pay with their lives (a kind of corporate patriotism). This all is due to the fact that they suffered a big injustice from the previous authorities.



The participants reported these values being met by this meeting:

Understanding others, to express myself, to be understood, connection, meaning in life, empathy, trust, participation, equality, justice, ease, acceptance, order, respect, consideration, change, action and love

My impression from this meeting is that all three of them are people with a sense of dignity; they are professionals capable of helping their country and of serving their society.

It was a meeting of three people with other three people. We shook hands, one by one, all of us.

But what about the thousands and thousands of other people?

In my opinion there is a serious problem, not only for each of these personalities whom I see as very dignified people after talking to them. It is a serious psychological problem of our society and our country. And it should be solved by our society, embedded in the state - the society that won at the Maidan.

My conclusion is that we have to expand and deepen the process of understanding. Every person in our country is very precious and worthy of respect, and it should be among our country's first priorities to nurture respect for each person and his or her dignity and to consolidate society on this basis.

P.S. I believe that Carl and Olena should continue this important work in Ukraine and that new people should be invited to take part in such meetings, even those who are more radical and those who are experiencing more pain.

If you wish to support the continuation of this work please contact Olena or Carl:

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