

Crackdown on freedom sparks fears for Ukraine

ANDY HUNDER paints a bleak picture. A place where protesters are hauled away by police to a forest, stripped naked, beaten, tortured and then left for dead in sub-zero temperatures. Only the lucky will find their way to a road and be rescued. "It's getting worse by the day," says the 42-year-old director of the Ukrainian Institute in London. He is commenting on the peaceful street protests in Kiev which started in November last year when the president of Ukraine, Viktor Yanukovich, backed out of a trade deal with the European Union in favour of closer ties with Russia. Much has changed since then. "People come knocking on your door if you have been active in the *Euromaidan* (protest movement in support of European integration) and arrest you," he adds. "The government is showing real analogues of Stalin's times."

The situation hit home when he heard that a man he had trained with for the priesthood in Rome had just been arrested. Andy studied at the Ukrainian Pontifical Minor Seminary in Rome and then theology at the Pontifical University of St Thomas Aquinas (*Angelicum*). "We were not in the same year as he was older than me," he says.

Fr Mykhailo Dymyd was due to appear in court last week accused of failing to stop his car for a police officer as part of a protest in the form of an *Auto-maidan* – a convoy of cars heading towards the presidential residence at Mezhyhirya, though he says he was in a different location, near the *Euromaidan* in Kiev. For Andy, it's just one more attack on the Church.

Andy still keeps in touch with

PROFILE

Andy Hunder tells Tony Leliw of his growing concerns for the future of his family homeland



Andy Hunder – 'Ukrainian people are standing up for human dignity, for values, because the system is so corrupt. It is a real cancer that is killing the country. People want freedom.'

various bishops and has real fears for the Church's future in the current turbulent climate. He refers to a threatening letter from the Ministry of Culture on 13th January, saying that the legal registration of the Ukrainian Catholic Church could be withdrawn because priests are supporting the protest movement by holding public prayer services.

Although he did not become a priest, he is quick to defend the Church. "The priests came out as peacemakers – they set up a tent which serves as a chapel – it promotes peace and prayer. The ministry letter made clear they would outlaw the Church if they did not stop praying at *Euromaidan*."

Andy, who grew up in Perivale, north-west London, starts to recount the Church's long history of persecution from Russian Em-

pire days to Soviet Union times. In 1946 Stalin banned the Church and it was only in 1989 during President Gorbachev's *perestroika* (restructuring period) when it became legal again. Ironically, this year marks the 25th anniversary since the Ukrainian Catholic Church became legal.

With anger mounting among the estimated 50,000-strong Ukrainian community in Britain, and calls for support from Ukraine, two days after the street protests began in Kiev, Andy and others started to organise similar protests in London.

On 23rd November last year the first protest took place outside the Houses of Parliament. Further demonstrations have taken place outside the Ukrainian and Russian Embassy. Of particular significance has been the picketing of the Knightsbridge home of the richest man



Solidarity – Frs Josafat Lescesen and Mykola Matwijiwskij join crowds to offer prayers by the statue of St Volodymyr, outside The Ukrainian Institute in London
Pictures: TONY LELIW

in Ukraine, Rinat Akhmetov, who is the financial backer of the current president. He reportedly paid £136.4 million for his flat and office at One Hyde Park. He is better known for being the owner of the football club Shakhtar Donetsk.

Other spontaneous protests have appeared in Manchester, Leeds, Wolverhampton and Nottingham. Three *Euromaidan* protests in Edinburgh outside the City Chambers were organised by the newly-appointed Fr Vasyl Kren, who looks after all of Scotland and the north of England.

Andy says the goals of the protests is to show solidarity with *Euromaidan*, calling for an end to the bloodshed and finding a peaceful solution. "We have an eclectic mix of people coming to our street protests – from wives of the millionaires living here, bankers, lawyers, old diaspora, university students from Oxford and Cambridge, to labour migrants. On average a couple of hundred people turn up."

Andy says that like in Ukraine the Church in London supports its people. "Bishop Hlib has been attending some of our protests," says Andy with gusto, "and two priests – Fr Irineu Kraiczyl and Fr Mykola Matwijiwskij – were present at the handing over of a 6,500 petition to Downing Street calling for sanctions against Ukraine".

Last Sunday the Ukrainian Catholic Cathedral in Duke Street, London, held a 24-hour prayer vigil asking God to help Ukraine and its people with this very difficult situation, seeking peace and a positive solution. The Church has also started a prayer rosary after evening Mass and needs more people to attend.

Although there has been no visible pressure on Ukrainian nationals by authorities back home for supporting the street protests, Andy is sure from various sources that his protest outside Mr Akhmetov's flat has been monitored.

"It is having an effect on their reputation, particularly when there are 150 people standing outside showing photographs of people beaten up and calling for him to stop the bloodshed," he says. "It is not very comfortable. The oligarchs themselves are in fear of the Russians. New trade sanctions are being introduced by Russia again, like we had with chocolate and other consumer goods last year."

Scroll back a few years and after Rome, Andy spent time in Ukraine. He worked in communications and public relations for such companies as Magisters, Pleon (now Ketchum Pleon) and GlaxoSmithKline.

He met his wife Orysia, who was chief of staff to the first lady of the former president Viktor Yushchenko. He was the president poisoned in a failed assass-

ination attempt. He won the presidential election a decade ago, following street protests known as the Orange Revolution, through a repeat run-off election with the current president, because of widespread electoral fraud in his favour during the original vote.

I asked Andy how those protests in 2004 compared with today's. Having been on one London protest myself outside the Ukrainian Embassy in Holland Park a week earlier, where the deputy ambassador, Andrii Kuzmenko, came out to speak to protesters, I sensed the mood of anger against the Government had ratcheted up since those days.

Andy is quick to explain: "Well, during the Orange Revolution there was no murders, no people put in prison and no beatings. But now we have seen the humiliating beating of a protester stripped naked down to his socks and shoes and police taking shots of him on their mobile phones."

"This is George Orwell 1984, a dystopian society where the future is a boot stamping on a human face forever. This is literally what is happening. The riot police with their foot on the face of a protester."

The protests appear to be gaining momentum – now spreading to the east and south of Ukraine – traditionally strong areas of support for the president. As

Andy says, it is no longer a question of whether or not to join the European Union, but something much wider.

"People are standing up for human dignity, for values, because the system is so corrupt," he says with a passion. It is a real cancer that is killing the country. People want freedom."

Andy fears the Government is really going to start clamping down on journalists, non-government organisations and anybody receiving financial aid from the West, including the Church. The Ukrainian Catholic University will be one of its targets.

As to the future, Andy is not too optimistic: "The West doesn't seem to know what to do. During the Orange Revolution there was a single candidate – now there is no one candidate. There is a possibility that Vitali Klitschko (the former heavyweight boxer) may become this one candidate but there is now a law introduced banning him for running for the presidency."

Andy recognises that his name is now well-known in government circles for being outspoken. But that doesn't hinder him. He quotes Dante Alighieri: "The darkest places in hell are reserved for those who maintain their neutrality in times of moral crisis."

For Andy, the future of a nation is at stake.



Dear Catholic Times Reader,

Unbelievably it's the time of year to start thinking about Lent again – a time for sacrifice and reflection. **It's also unbelievable that there are still 6000 people a year sleeping rough on London's streets.**

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Sister Evelyn Gallagher
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