

# Docudays UA: a Festival in the Heart of a Citizen's Revolution

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Docudays UA was held for the very first time in Ukraine in 2003, organised by the Centre for Modern Information Techniques and Visual Arts. The festival is held annually in Kyiv in the last week of March. The main purposes of the festival are to improve the quality of Ukrainian documentary films, to promote an open dialogue on moral problems in our society, as well as human rights and human dignity and to create the foundation for a democratic future of the country. It aims to inspire the citizens of Ukraine to become active, competent and responsible actors for human rights protection and the prevention of authoritarianism and dictatorship.

In addition, the organisers aim to unite dozens of human rights organisations with the festival's activities. This collaboration promotes the development and strengthening of a network of human rights defenders, able to counteract the powers that infringe on rights and freedom.

The festival presents both Ukrainian documentary films and a selection of the best docs from the international human rights film festivals. Every year, Docudays UA

organises a filmmaking workshop, a film retrospective and many special events, such as conferences, roundtables, thematic sections, master classes by leading experts in documentary filmmaking and human rights, discussions, seminars, workshops and photo exhibitions. Entrance to all film screenings is free of charge.

## **Travelling Festival**

Once the festival activities conclude in Kyiv, Docudays UA traditionally continues around Ukraine. The films travel to 236 cities and towns of Ukraine and attract over 130,000 visitors. The screenings and debates are not only held in cinemas and cultural centres, but also in cafes, schools, universities, libraries and military units. Local partners choose the films from the festival selection themselves. This way, film selection is tailored for local audiences.

Travelling Docudays UA also includes a special programme in Penitentiary Institutions. We screen festival films and conduct discussions on human rights with human rights activists in fifty-one juvenile detention centers and twelve prisons throughout the country. We also organise screenings in schools for future employees of the penitentiary system.

The educational programme to promote human rights for youth, students, school children and teachers was introduced in 2013. Our experience has shown that the average Ukrainian high school student does not get enough information on how to engage in civic activities, nor on how to defend their own rights, the rights of fellow citizens, and of their community. Subjects at school such as “law” do not provide any practical skills or examples of how rights can be exercised by school children.

Therefore, as part of the Travelling Film Festival, we organised a pilot project called “Documentary Films in Schools: Lessons of Legal Awareness and Civic Engagement”. Through the programme we offered 130 lessons in 64 educational institutions. In total, 4,500 students took part in the project.

To better equip our regional partners to organise film screenings and discussion programmes, in September 2013, prior to the start of the Travelling Festival, we organised a three-day seminar on how to organise the film screenings.

The seminar included workshops about different aspects of organising the Traveling Film Festival such as film selection, the organisation of discussions at the screenings, promotion of the screenings through the Internet, etc. One session focused on the organisation of documentary film screenings at schools and another looked at how to organise a Docudays UA festival for penitentiary institutions.

## Political Challenges in 2013: EuroMaidan and the Travelling Docudays UA

Organising the 2013 travelling festival proved to be a challenge. In November 2013, public protests demanding closer European integration began in Kiev’s Independence Square (also called the Maidan Nezalezhnosti). This was the start of Euromaidan, a wave of demonstrations and public protests leading up to the 2014 Ukrainian revolution.

Authorities in many regions tried to disrupt the festival screenings. They mostly did so by putting pressure on venue owners, sometimes by cutting the electricity at festival locations; in one city, Ivano-Frankivsk, there was even a false bomb threat.

The screenings in Ivano-Frankivsk were planned for the 12th of November at the KinoBum cinema. The local organisers were activists from a regional NGO known as “Moloda Prosvita”. They planned to screen *Children Behind Bars* and *Enough! To Freedom...*

The first film, *Children Behind Bars*, depicts the current problems of the criminal justice system for juveniles in Ukraine by telling the true stories of children in conflict with the law. *Enough! To Freedom...* describes the events on the 19th of December, 2010, when so-called presidential elections took place in Belarus, leading to protests that ended with the massacre of peaceful protesters.



*A festival team full of brave and committed people. Photo by: Sergiy Khandusenko.*

Two hours prior to the screening, the owners of Kino-Bum cinema reported an electricity shutdown on their premises. When organisers arrived, they encountered a closed door with a note saying that there were ongoing repairs. The owners did not respond to phone calls from the organisers, journalists and visitors. It was the third time that one of the events of Docudays UA Travelling Film Festival in Ivano-Frankivsk was disrupted.

The next day, another cinema called Lumiere was to screen a compilation of short documentary films called *Almanac Open Access*. The films dealt with access to information and corruption in Ukraine. One film, *Mezhyhirya*, was about the Ukrainian President's controversial residence at Mezhyhirya.

However, none of the screenings took place. When confronted about the reasons for the cancellation, cinema employees helplessly said that they had never heard of such an event.

The local organisers decided to move the film screenings to another venue called Prosvita and invited the audience there. But after the first part of the screening, the police stormed into the room and announced that there was a bomb threat in the premises of Prosvita; everyone was asked to leave the room. Residents of Ivano-Frankivsk stood in front of the building with cries of "Shame!"

The police promised to check the room and allow people back into the theatre to continue with the

screening. However, after waiting for about an hour, the activists decided to screen the movie in the middle of the street. It was projected onto the wall of a school next to Prosvita, which allowed the police to become de facto spectators.

Earlier, in several other cities around Ukraine, this same strategy of a false bomb threat was used to force the cancellation of the screening of the film *Mezhyhirya*.

In the Crimea, officials from the Ministry of Culture demanded that the festival provide all the films ahead of time, evidently with censorship in mind. After watching the films, they "advised" regional partners not to screen the film *Almanac Open Access* and two other films. However, despite threatening phone calls from unidentified people who promised to disrupt the screenings and beat the organisers, one of the festival partners screened the banned films in their office.

In the Rivne region, the travelling festival coincided with protest events all over Ukraine, including Rivne. Therefore, school representatives did not want to show the festival films.

In Kharkiv, the Security Service of Ukraine paid close attention to institutions where festival events were to be held. Their interpretation of the concept of *human rights* as an expression of opposition resulted in permanent conflict between the festival organisers and government officials. Despite the fact that the original

plan was to organise the screenings in cooperation with the local officials, all screenings were cancelled.

However, all the local officials that opposed our screenings could not avoid the fact that the festival received support by the State Film Agency of Ukraine, which sent two letters of support to the regional administrations and cultural managements.

Despite the tremendous difficulties and obstacles it faced this year, the travelling festival offered 1,240 screenings and 824 discussions, and it reached 134,000 visitors. It also held thirteen roundtables and seven theatre performances on human rights, as well as conferences, street performances and many photo exhibitions. In partnership with the Association of Ukrainian Monitors on Human Rights Law Enforcement, we held three workshops called “You and the Police: What to Do to Avoid Becoming a Victim of Police Arbitrariness”.

## **Docudays UA 2014: a Festival in the Heart of a Citizen’s Revolution**

We prepared for Docudays UA 2014 under exceptionally difficult conditions. The festival took place from the 20th to the 26th of March, 2014. The EuroMaidan protests reached their peak in mid-February. On the 21st of February, after heavy clashes between protesters and the police, President Yanukovich fled the country. The next day, the parliament impeached Yanukovich and replaced the government with a pro-European one.

Our festival office was just a couple of steps from the Maidan Square, where the citizens’ protests took place. It became a shelter, a warming place, a night’s lodging for journalists and documentarians from various countries who had come to us because they wanted to sort out what was happening in Ukraine. Their heroic efforts contributed to a more balanced media coverage on the Maidan worldwide.

Due to the political circumstances we decided that the main theme for our festival should be: “There is a Choice!”

Our festival is apolitical; it is about human rights and about the fact that each of us has a choice: to accept a dictatorial regime or to fight for the victory of democracy. In our communication we added, “Today the future of Ukraine depends on everybody’s choice. Therefore Docudays UA is with the EuroMaidan”.

Members of our team did many things to support EuroMaidan. They organised documentary screenings on the Maidan stage in Kyiv and other cities: they handed out tea on the square, provided first aid, patrolled the streets with a politically active group of drivers—the so-called Automaidan—and they shot the most striking footage on camera.

We ourselves became familiar with the batons of the riot police, tear gas, and rubber bullet wounds. Luckily, we endured, but we won’t forget those who were less lucky.

Every day, during the most dramatic last months before the festival started in March 2013, we doubted whether it was possible to hold our festival at a time when, we thought, our audience needed a hot broth, medicines and tires more than documentaries. It was not an easy choice to undertake one of the biggest movie events of the year in a very short period of time and under extremely difficult conditions, and implementing that choice was even harder.

Today, with great pleasure, we realise that we succeeded one hundred percent. Our festival venues, from the Hall of the House of Cinema, to the Cinema Panorama and the Kyiv Cinema were overcrowded with a grateful audience.

For this festival we cancelled the opening film and screened a compilation of the best shots showing the Ukrainian protest. Episodes of upcoming films about EuroMaidan formed a kaleidoscope of the revolution. The opening film was a chronicle of the Ukrainian protest called *Euromaidan. The Rough Cut: Three Months of the Revolution*. It showed demonstrators with pots on their heads, wearing body armour. It showed the joy of victory and the mourning of our lost ones. It showed the revolution as an explosion of awakened dignity, as the euphoria of freedom, and as a painful awareness on the birth of Ukraine's modern history.

During the festival we held many discussions and presented master classes by leading directors from dif-

ferent countries. And despite doubts, misinformation and even fear, sixty-three foreign guests flew to Kyiv: directors, producers, experts, advocates and others.

The festival held a campaign to protect Ukrainian human rights activists and journalists who were victims of illegal actions by police, prosecutors and courts. This was organised by the Legal Aid Foundation and the Ukrainian Helsinki Group for Human Rights. A panel discussion took place within the campaign's framework called: "Advocates of the Maidan: What the Mass Media Didn't Write". Speakers included lawyers who provide legal aid, people who became victims during the protests and representatives of human rights NGOs.

During the festival week Docudays UA was visited by thirty-eight thousand visitors. With few exceptions, the festival audience halls were at or over capacity.

The active participation of the audience and guests of Docudays UA in discussions, film debates, educational events and human rights actions signalled that the festival reached its goal—to become a platform for dialogue for Ukrainian citizens who care about human rights, democratic values and, above all, the future of their country.

The team is confident the festival has helped thousands of Ukrainian citizens to make a better-informed choice in favour of democratic values and active citizenship.

Natalia Ligacheva, chief editor of the online publication *Telekritika*, stated:

*I believe that the festival provides an opportunity to present Ukrainian citizens not only the world's best documentaries, but also to invite them to become more active citizens willing to defend their rights. For me personally, this festival is important not only because it gives the opportunity to see quality films, but also because it really allows you to see how citizens in many countries actively and proactively, with enthusiasm, and—most importantly—successfully, defend their rights. And I think that the most important thing is the fact that the festival is challenging Ukrainian citizens to build on their self-confidence. We can do a lot without any help from officials or the aid of powerful authorities, but only with a great hope for ourselves.<sup>1</sup>*

In the aftermath of the EuroMaidan protests, Russia annexed the Crimean Peninsula in March 2014, the start of the *Crimean crisis*.

## Filmography

*Almanac Open Access* (dir. Volodymyr Tykhy, Dmytro Konovalov, Serhiy Andrushko, Zhanna Dovhych, Dmytro Tiazhlov, 2013).

*Children Behind Bars* (dir. Olena Lypejkyna, 2013).

*Enough! To Freedom...* (dir. Andrei Kutsila, Viachaslau Rakitski, 2012).

*Euromaidan. The Rough Cut: Three Months of the Revolution* (dir. Volodymyr Tykhyi, Andriy Lytvynenko, Kateryna Gornostai, Roman Bondarchuk, Yulia Gontaruk, Andrey Kiselyov, Roman Liubiyi, Oleksandr Techynskyi, Oleksiy Solodunov, Dmitry Stoykov, 2014).

*Mezhyhirrya* (dir. Volodymyr Tykhyi, 2013).

*Ukraine* (this is one of the short films from *Almanac Open Access*).

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<sup>1</sup> <http://goo.gl/Jx5fMj>



*Docudays UA has very creative visual style. Photo: Archive of Docudays UA.*