Ukraine and the Role of the Security Forces in Popular Uprisings

The recent uprising in Ukraine echoes what happened in the earlier Orange Revolution. Much can be learned by comparing these events and looking at similar uprisings in other countries. This comparison clearly shows the important role played by security forces in determining whether brutal repression or successful regime change will follow. How the security forces react is intimately linked to the tactics employed by civil society.

Brief Points

- Nonviolent revolt is much more likely to succeed. This has been evident in Ukraine and the Arab Spring.

- The actions of security forces largely determine the success of popular uprisings, as seen in Ukraine in 2005 and 2014.

- Successful popular uprisings do not necessarily lead to major liberal democratic reforms. Ukraine's Orange Revolution is a good example of this.

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New elites and old elites

Since the Orange Revolution that ended in January 2005, Ukraine has been dominated by the alternating rule of two groups – those favouring the revolution and those opposed to it.

Two aspects of the aftermath of the Orange Revolution are crucial for understanding the lack of democratization in Ukraine. First, the Orange Revolution did not result in fundamental changes to Ukraine's political institutions. Rather, it resulted in a shuffling of elites. Second, what united the mass popular uprising against the regime was not a shared hope for a more democratic system, but a shared disdain for the sitting regime.

Because of this shared disdain, the ad hoc coalition that came into power in Ukraine in 2005 entered with more legitimacy than the previous regime. The dynamics are strikingly similar to those that played out in the wake of the Arab Spring: A mass popular uprising forces the sitting regime to step down. Democratization is promised, but no fundamental institutional change actually takes place.

On the basis of their promises, and the expectations of the public, post-revolutionary governments in general enjoy a period of greater legitimacy. Consequently, the new government does not have to be as repressive as its predecessor, which establishes a positive cycle. However, this cycle is ultimately dependent on actual reforms. When these fail to materialize, the situation can quickly spiral back to square one. In Egypt, this process took mere months; in Ukraine, it was slower to materialize.

Faced with popular uprising, the government has three options: (1) step down and let someone else from the ruling elite deal with the problem; (2) open up for broader participation; or (3) turn to more repression. The last option is costly. Repression must be financed, and the funds must be reallocated from somewhere else. The old regime's supporters would then have to swallow both the moral and the financial costs of supporting a tyrant.

Crucially, though, turning more repressive does not signal the end of a regime. Contrary to 'common knowledge', turning more repressive, and excluding ever larger sections of civil society from political participation can

stabilize that regime. The security apparatus is critical at this stage in the process.

The role of the security apparatus

Every political leader in the world, from Kim Jung-Un in North Korea to Didier Burkhalter in Switzerland, depends on a coalition to stay in power. The size of this coalition may vary, but in every case the security apparatus is a crucial component. This is especially the case in illiberal regimes that lack legitimacy. In such regimes, the leader is acutely reliant on the support of the security forces to stay in power.

Yet, relationships within the ruling coalition can be shaken by massive popular demonstrations. If the leader and his or her forces stick together and use violence against the civilian population, their relationship becomes cemented. This calculation, of whether to stay loyal to the coalition or defect, is performed by each member of the regime coalition. As soon as large sections of the security forces either defect or shirk from responsibility, the days of the regime are numbered.

In Ukraine in both 2004-2005 and 2014, as well as across the Arab Spring, the defection of the security forces signalled the end of the old regimes.

Whether security forces remain loyal to a regime hinges to a great extent on the tactics employed by civil society. A civil society uprising relying on violent methods will often bolster the alliance between security forces and the regime. Often, the consequence is that violent demonstrators are met by the regime's iron fist. In the wake of such uprisings, regimes typically turn more authoritarian, reversing earlier liberalizations and closing down channels for voicing opposition.

If, in contrast, civil society primarily makes use of nonviolent tactics, a wedge can be driven between the security apparatus and the incumbent regime. Elements of the security apparatus are more likely not to carry out orders to repress the uprising.
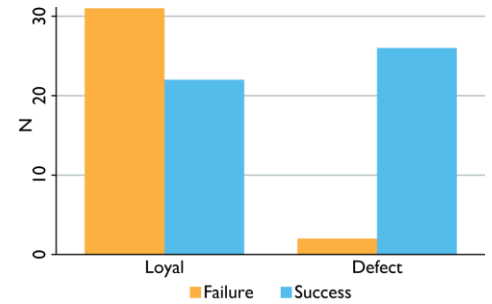

Figure 1: Non-violent campaigns, 1960-2006

This does not necessarily mean that the security apparatus will defect and join the opposition, as was the case in Libya. All that is needed is that members of the security forces decide to stand by without intervening. In the end, such shirking from orders signalled the end for the Ben Ali and Mubarak regimes during the Arab Spring, as well as for the Kuchma and the Yanukovych regimes in Ukraine.

Table 1 lists a few popular uprisings that are comparable to the events in Ukraine. In Burma, the communist regime had been prepared to grant concessions to the opposition when the military carried out a coup. In Iran, a paramilitary wing of the president's party provided the necessary manpower to successfully suppress the protesters, despite a largely idle army and police force. In Belarus and Uzbekistan, the security forces stood with the regimes.

The nature of nonviolent campaigns

The nonviolent nature of the Orange Revolution played a major role in its success. In contrast to what has often been assumed, nonviolent campaigns are more likely to succeed than their violent counterparts. Owing to lower moral, physical, informational and commitment barriers to participation, nonviolent campaigns are more likely to mobilize large numbers of people than are violent campaigns. About half a million Ukrainians joined the opposition movement and demanded that power be handed over to Victor Yushchenko. Only rarely do violent campaigns achieve such levels of support.

Two reasons in particular make large, popular campaigns more likely to succeed. First, the larger the campaign, the greater the legitimacy costs inflicted on the government. Second,

large nonviolent campaigns are more likely to generate cracks within the regime. The larger the campaign, the more likely it is that some sort of kinship ties exist between members of the movement and members of the security forces. The existence of such ties makes members of the security forces more reluctant to use force against the popular movement, and more willing to shift sides. Figure 1 shows, using the Nonviolent and Violent Campaigns and Outcomes (NAVCO) data, the number of non-violent movements that succeed and fail when the security apparatus either stays loyal to the regime or defects.

The security forces shifted sides during the uprisings in Ukraine in 2004 and 2014. Unlike 2004 the protests in 2014 included violence. Violent groups brought bats and guns to the scene and set fire to tyres. In contrast to the protest in 2004, the security forces did not refuse to use violence against the protesters. While the Orange Revolution claimed no casualties, more than 75 people died in 2014. Nonetheless, despite the violence in 2014, the protests were mainly nonviolent. Many of those killed by the security forces bore no weapons. Following the killings, remorseful riot police kneeled at a rally in Lviv, begging for forgiveness for their actions. Such an apology would not have taken place had the protests mainly been violent.

Surprising uprisings in illiberal regimes

Mass popular uprisings leading to regime change often appear to happen with no forewarning, catching experts by surprise, yet in retrospect they may appear to have been inevitable. Commentary on the Arab Spring in the early 2010s and on the uprisings across Eastern Europe in the early 1990s all echoed this view.

By their very definition, illiberal regimes lack legitimate channels for voicing opposition. They lack a free press, they lack representative institutions capable of aggregating opinions, and most of all they lack a functioning opposition. Moreover, a vibrant civil society is an anathema to illiberal regimes. Such regimes are marked by a distinct distaste for criticism.

Simply voicing opposition to regime policies in public can be dangerous. While extremely oppressive regimes will imprison, torture and kill critics, less repressive regimes, such as

that of Ukraine generally employ more modest forms of intimidation. As a consequence, we never really know how popular or unpopular illiberal regimes are – nor do the regimes themselves. There simply is no way of reliably gauging actual support for the regime.

Timur Kuran coined the term 'preference falsification' to characterize this phenomenon. Preference falsification occurs when individuals hold one view of the regime in private but, out of fear of prosecution, profess a different opinion in public. Preference falsification underlies both the surprising stability of some regimes and the sudden mass mobilizations that bring them down.

Crucially, preference falsification creates a pressing need for 'first movers' – people willing to take great personal risk in order to challenge the regime. The actions of first movers, and their immediate followers, are critical in setting in motion a process by which more and more people realize that the view they hold of the regime in private actually is a view held by many, if not most, people.

Only at this stage is it possible for hundreds of thousands of people to take the risk of going to places like Tahrir or Maidan Square to participate in anti-regime protests. This does not at all depend on a common vision of what is to come next: all that is needed is a shared disdain for the sitting regime.

The future for Ukraine

The extent of the popular uprising in 2014 took Yanukovych by surprise. Popular uprisings do not automatically dictate the end of illiberal regimes, as Table I highlights. Under different circumstances, the Yanukovych regime might have been able to either repress the uprising or to wait it out. The final blow to the regime came the moment the security forces no longer followed the regime's orders. At this point, Yanukovych was a leader in the name only.

The most interesting question now is whether Ukraine will see real democratization this time around. That is certainly possible, but at the moment most factors point in the same direction as they did after the Orange Revolution.

Once more, the protesters are united in their disdain of the regime, rather than in a shared

preference for democracy. And, again, the key players emerging on the political stage look eerily similar to the ones they are replacing. Yet another reshuffling of elites therefore seems most likely.

As before, and as in the Arab Spring, these new elites will enjoy a surplus of legitimacy in the short run, but it is far from clear what their plans for the future are. So far, no serious plans for a fundamental revamping of Ukraine's political institutions have been proposed.

Case	Security apparatus	Outcome
Philippines 1986	Defect	Regime change
Burma 1988	Loyal	Regime prevailed
Yugoslavia 2000	Defect	Regime change
Georgia 2003	Defect	Regime change
Ukraine 2004	Defect	Regime change
Uzbekistan 2005	Loyal	Regime prevailed
Kyrgyzstan 2005	Defect	Regime change
Belarus 2006	Loyal	Regime prevailed
Iran 2009	Loyal	Regime prevailed
Kyrgyzstan 2010	Shirk	Regime change
Greece 2011	Loyal	Regime prevailed
Bahrain 2012	Loyal	Regime prevailed
Egypt 2012	Defect	Regime change
Ukraine 2014	Shirk	Regime change

Table I: Illustrative cases

As an added complication, the new regime now has to deal with a potential long-term Russian presence in Eastern Ukraine. The full annexation of Crimea by Russia already appears to be a foregone conclusion, but what remains to be seen are Russia's plans for Eastern Ukraine. For the new regime, this could create a 'rally around the flag' effect, especially in the Western part of the country.

This effect, however, is going to be more than offset by the dynamics in Eastern Ukraine, which sees mixed but generally strong pro-Russian sentiments. The new Ukrainian regime could easily use this situation as a pretext to stall democratization, arguing that their grip on power is necessary to preserve order and stability in turbulent times.

Lessons learned

The role of first movers is critical, but first movers will not be successful if they are acting in a vacuum. They need a valid pretext and a potential base of support (second movers). Both were present in Ukraine. This time, the pretext was the decision not to sign the negotiated agreement with the EU. In 2004, it was a fraudulent election.

Fraudulent elections often act as focal points. Elections serve two distinct and important functions. On the one hand, a botched election signals to the public at large that the regime is not as popular nor as in control as it might appear. This, in turn, creates a situation where first movers can be much more effective mobilizers. The lesson learned is that even rotten elections might lead to political change.

The Arab Spring demonstrated convincingly that contagion plays an important part in understanding popular uprisings. The successful uprising in Tunisia signalled to Egyptians that a seemingly stable dictatorship, like their own, could be ousted. Popular uprisings, as a consequence, have a tendency to come in waves. Moreover, there is a learning aspect to contagion. Movements in different countries learn from each other, allowing dissemination of best practices from one movement to the next.

Learning, however, is not limited to civil society. Autocratic regimes also learn from each other. During the Arab Spring, regimes attempted to quell popular uprisings by shutting down mass communications – crippling Twitter, Facebook and other social media. This strategy had only limited effect. The Iranian government, in contrast, effectively used Twitter to spread misinformation in the aftermath of the 2009 elections.

The Yanukovych government learned from the Iranian case and used Twitter in an attempt to spread misinformation, thus poisoning civil society networks and generating fear. The tactic did not succeed in Ukraine, but the international community should take note of these regimes' use of such tactics. At the very least, the international community needs to realize that social media do not always and exclusively play a constructive role in popular uprisings.

Speculations

The annexation of Crimea will have unanticipated effects for both Russia and Ukraine. Ukraine will not see another leader as pro-Russian as Yanukovych for some time. Instead, future Ukrainian leaders will look to Europe. This will lead to a deepening of ties with the European Union. Moreover, it will, in the end, result in exactly what Russia is attempting to forestall – the end of Ukraine as a buffer between Russia and Europe. Indeed,

contrary to current media commentary, the mere willingness to use force – which Putin undeniably has – does not in any way, shape or form by itself equate with strategic foresight.

Removing a large swathe of Russian-leaning voters from the electorate changes the political landscape. Prior to the annexation of the Crimea, Ukrainian voters were more or less evenly divided between pro-Western and pro-Russian parties. The balance now tips to the pro-Western side.

Pro-Russian supporters in the eastern provinces of Ukraine could feel threatened by the overall shift of the electorate. Furthermore, paramilitary thugs who had been operating in Crimea now are returning to their eastern provincial homes, where they are already starting provocative actions.

The threat of Russian intervention in Southern Ukraine cannot be ruled out. The response from the West has been limited, and indeed few realistic options were on hand. In the light of recent events, the Russian military may be called upon, for instance by seperatists, to act to provide stability in the region. ∎

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