



Yulia Tymoshenko, Orange Revolution - Credit: Anatoly Medzyk/Getty Images

It's Time! The Orange Revolution and Ukraine's Struggle for Democracy

Vision in Motivation

In November 2004, Ukrainians watched as the official results of their runoff presidential election came in. To no one's surprise, the Central Electoral Commission announced that Viktor Yanukovich, candidate of the establishment and Russia's preferred choice, had won by a narrow majority over the opposition candidate, Viktor Yushchenko.

Though independent exit polls had shown Yushchenko to be the favorite to win, there was never any serious doubt that Yanukovich would be the official winner. In the thirteen years after its independence from the Soviet Union, Ukraine's democratic institutions had become highly corrupt and voter fraud was considered more or less normal.

Despite this precedent, most experts agree that the 2004 presidential elections were "the dirtiest elections held since Ukraine's proclaimed

independence in 1991.”¹

Falsifications occurred with “cynical openness” and opposition figures were threatened, imprisoned, and harrassed, with Yushchenko himself being dramatically poisoned during the campaign.

What made this election worse? As one civic newsletter put it, the choice between the pro-Europe Yushchenko and the pro-Russia Yanukovich, represented nothing less “than a choice as to whether Ukraine will turn to democracy and an active political and economic development that will lead the country back the European family of nations, or whether Ukraine will turn to authoritarian rule and Eurasian cooperation.”² In short, Ukraine’s political future was on the line.

The next morning, Yushchenko defiantly announced that the opposition would not accept the CEC’s result and called on his supporters to meet at Kyiv’s main square, the Maidan.³

Opposition activists from the civic group Pora had begun pitching tents at the Maiden at 2:30 in the morning, having realized the regime had pressed ahead with massive fraud.⁴

The regime had anticipated such backlash and preemptively shielded the CEC headquarters with two lines of heavy metal fence and a 300-strong swat team equipped with riot gear, military vehicles and two water cannons.⁵

To all appearances, everyone was preparing for a fight. Instead, a nonviolent protest by thousands of Ukrainian citizens sprawled across the Maiden and down Kyiv’s main thoroughfare. The protesters were not, as the regime feared, a mob baying for blood, but “ordinary, peaceful people from diverse backgrounds who had risked their safety to defend simple ideals of decency and fairness that were readily understood throughout the world.”⁶ Their unity, determination, and strategic insight, gave birth to the Orange Revolution and overturned the sham election.

1- Bezverkha, Anastasia. *Ukraine's Orange Revolution: a chronicle in PORA newsletters*. PORA, 2005. p.23.

2- Ibid .p5.

3- Krushelnycky, Askold. *An Orange Revolution: A Personal Journey Through Ukrainian History*. London: Secker & Warburg, 2006. p.283

4- Ibid

5- Bezverkha. p.23

6- Krushelnycky. p.2

History of Corruption

In 1994, Leonid Kuchma became Ukraine's second post-Soviet president. During Kuchma's regime, corruption was profuse and political freedom and free speech eroded, making him the target of domestic and international criticism.⁷

By the Orange Revolution, Ukraine was deeply corrupt, with Transparency International's 2004 Corruption Perception Index rating Ukraine at a dismal 128, below Venezuela at 120, Russia at 95, Iran at 88, and Syria at 73.⁸ The regime was deeply oligarchic, far more so than Russia's.⁹

Oligarchs enjoyed close connections with President Leonid Kuchma, had large party factions in parliament, owned media empires, benefited from extensive governmental privileges, and controlled many important officials, including members of law enforcement.¹⁰

Unfortunately, this corruption was matched with repression. Though the 1996 constitution guaranteed freedom of speech and expression, a 2004 Freedom House report illustrated that the government "frequently violated these rights through direct and well documented interference in media content."¹¹

Nationwide television was owned either by the state or pro-regime oligarchs, which meant that opposition figures were given little media coverage and frequently subjected to unbalanced reporting.¹²

Activists and journalists who were openly critical of the regime or reported on corruption faced disproportionate harassment and violence.

The 2000 murder of independent journalist Georgiy Gongadze, in which credible evidence implicated Kuchma, sparked anti-regime mass

7- "Ukraine." *Freedom House*. 2004.

<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2004/ukraine>

8- "Corruption Perception Index 2004." *Transparency International*. https://www.transparency.org/research/cpi/cpi_2004/0

9- Åslund, Anders. "The Ancient Regime: Kuchma and the Oligarchs." *Revolution in Orange*. p.9

10- Ibid

11- "Ukraine." *Freedom House*. 2004.

<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2004/ukraine>

12- Ibid

demonstrations.¹³ Likewise, contemporary Pora newsletters documented the persecution of independent NGOs through tactics including: information blockades regarding the results of NGO monitoring, the discrediting of NGO activities and the use of force, and even violence, against NGO and civic movement activists.¹⁴

Despite its capacity for corruption and repression, the Ukrainian government was neither stable nor united, and its inherent vulnerabilities contributed to its defeat in the Orange Revolution. Unlike the unified opposition, the regime was as focused on fighting each other as the opposition, rendering them too divided to collude successfully.

Since Kuchma's presidential power was more limited than he desired, his practice had been to extend it by acting as an arbiter. In this he was successful, but it meant state power was not consolidated; both oligarchs and law enforcement bodies watched each other.¹⁵ Increasingly this divide and rule policy worked less and less. The regime came to support an ever shrinking coterie of oligarchs and the brutalization of civil servants, ministers, and politicians created enemies within the state apparatus, as well as among the political and business elite.¹⁶

13- Ibid

14- Bezverkha. p.9

15- Åslund. pp.23-24

16- van Zon. p.379



Clashes in Kyiv, Ukraine. Events of February 18, 2014

The Opposition's Goals and Objectives

The opposition that came together at the Maidan was a diverse group of opposition politicians and ordinary people from all over Ukraine, though largely from the west and center of the country.¹⁷ They were united by a determination to successfully overturn the stolen elections and send a definitive message that the people were no longer willing to tolerate the customary fraud of the old regime. Everyone, in the words of one journalist, “had the same goal in mind – to show the government it could no longer dictate to them.”¹⁸ The intent to fulfill this objective was apparent even before tents popped up on the Maidan. One Pora student activist summed up the determined mood: “We are not going to lie down and accept fake results as has happened for the past thirteen years since independence. We want democracy and to have lives where we are not controlled by the whims of criminals. People will stand up this time.”¹⁹

To successfully contest the fraudulent results, the opposition sought to delegitimize Yanukovich and pursue a policy of deliberate non-cooperation with the regime that supported him. From the beginning, strategic nonviolence was a top priority.

Pora, who took a leading role in the protests, had been greatly influenced by Gene Sharp's book *From Dictatorship to Democracy*, and other successful nonviolent civic groups such as Otpor in Serbia and Kmara! in Georgia.²⁰ Pora wanted to peacefully disrupt the regime, with goals to establish another tent city outside the Ukrainian Parliament (Rada), block off other government buildings, and prevent outgoing president Kuchma from leaving his dacha, or country cottage.²¹

17- van Zon. p.393

18- Ibid. p.302

19- Ibid. p.281

20- Wilson, Andrew. *Ukraine's Orange Revolution*. New Haven, Conn. ; London : Yale University Press, 2005. pp.73-75

21- Diuk, Nadia. “The Triumph of Civil Society.” *Revolution in Orange: The Origins of Ukraine's Democratic Breakthrough*, edited by Anders Åslund & Michael McFaul, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2006. p.81; Demes, Pavol & Forbrig, Joerg. “PORA - “It's Time” for Democracy in Ukraine,” *Revolution in Orange*. P.96; Wilson 2005. p.129



Euromaidan in Kyiv, 19 February 2014. Labor Unions' House on fire. It was reportedly set afire by police, as it was the headquarters of protesters.

The strategic use of technology enhanced their capacity to disrupt. The opposition, and especially Pora, was “adept at using new technology that its mostly young and well-educated members exploited expertly and imaginatively.”²²

Being significantly more effective at using the internet than the regime, the opposition quickly established an effective information network, which was vital because the regime controlled all but one of the major television stations.²³

In addition to straightforward information sharing, the opposition effectively satirized the regime with jokes, cartoons, videos, photographs, and songs.²⁴ As Pora and the others were delegitimizing the regime with satire, Yushchenko was doing so by symbolically taking the presidential oath of office. “We believed that we had to send a signal to society and voters that the declaration of the results in favour of Yanukovych was false”, Yushchenko later explained. “There were not yet that many people on the Maidan and we had to demonstrate to millions of people that we had enough strength, power and faith to do everything possible to overturn the falsification and win elections fairly.”²⁵

Sustaining the tent city on the Maidan, especially as protesters swelled to the hundreds of thousands, was also critical for success. To do this, all levels of the Ukrainian opposition coordinated and collaborated with each other. Small and medium sized enterprises, as well as richer citizens, ensured continuous supplies of food, tents and clothes for the demonstrators, while different student, youth, and civil society groups cooperated with each other to help with the practical logistics of feeding and housing the protesters.²⁶

For example, activists went door to door asking whether families could provide accommodation and then, using mobile phones and computers, they compiled databases of available places to house people.²⁷ At the tent city, a routine was quickly developed around the demonstrations to make

22- Krushelnycky. p.301

23- Ibid

24- Ibid; Wilson 2005. pp.129, 132

25- Krushelnycky. p.289

26- van Zon. p.387

27- Diuk. p.81



A police officer attacked by protesters during clashes in Kyiv, Ukraine. Events of February 18, 2014.

them smoother and more effective.²⁸

An early breakfast prepared in field kitchens was followed by a joint Catholic and Orthodox mass. A deputy from Our Ukraine, the Yushchenko-supporting electoral bloc, would often be the first person to address the crowds with a summary of overnight events and an agenda for the day, with other politicians appearing later. Ukrainian musicians, often among the most famous and popular, provided daily concerts. Foreign politicians and musicians would also take to the stage erected in the Maidan to offer their support.

Leadership

The symbolic leader of the opposition was their presidential candidate, Viktor Yushchenko. However, it would be wrong to suggest that Yushchenko was the only leader of the Orange Revolution. Although undoubtedly popular, Yushchenko himself did not exhibit strong leadership.²⁹ Instead, a division of labor existed among the different elements of the opposition with each taking charge of a distinct leadership role which cumulatively made the revolution a success.

Though Yushchenko was not a forceful or commanding leader, he was a natural figure around which the previously fragmented opposition could unite. Economic reforms combined with pension and wage repayments during his term as prime minister made him easily one of the most popular politicians in Ukraine.³⁰ During the Orange Revolution, he employed a more restrained and pragmatic role based on taking the moral-political high ground. Though his restrained style meant there were a few “sticky moments” when the revolution seemed to be in danger of losing steam, it proved wise in retrospect. Yushchenko was mindful that the enormous numbers on the Maidan meant that his own supporters had been joined by “hundreds of thousands of other protesters who were more concerned with the threat to democracy in general.”³¹

28- Krushelnycky. p.293

29- van Zon. p.397

30- Ibid. p.381

31- Wilson 2005. p.128

With Pora at their core, Ukraine's youth served as the leaders driving the revolution forward. They were the effective vanguards of the Orange Revolution, whose efforts were indispensable to setting up and running the enormous Maidan camp, providing for its residents' well-being, and distributing the clothes, food, and warm shelter provided by Kyiv locals.³²

Outside the Maidan, Pora was primarily in charge of coordinating street protests, blockades of state administration locations, and a second tent camp near the Rada.³³

Key to Pora's success was their effective organizational capacity and thorough preparation. Pora, though deliberately non-hierarchical, was rigorously organized during the protests. The tent city adopted the organizational structure of the Ukrainian Cossacks: an overall "commandant", followed by several sotnyky in charge of a group of one hundred desyatnycky, who were then in charge of ten people, and so on.³⁴ In terms of preparation, Pora had taken concrete steps to train and develop its human resources well in advance of the elections.

This included broadening their volunteer network, organizing training camps on nonviolent handling of conflict situations, and preparing complementary manuals on topics such as, "How to Inform the Public", "Rights during Arrest", "Violations of Electoral Law" and "Internal Communication and Coordination of Action."³⁵

While Yushchenko served as a symbol and Pora as a vanguard, many others took important and unique leadership roles during the protests. For instance, Yuriy Lutsenko became the Maidan's "political DJ."³⁶ Lutsenko's youth and energy were complemented by his blunt and upbeat speeches and sense of humor, which dissipated feelings of despair in the crowd.³⁷

Yulia Tymoshenko also quelled feelings of despair, and served as one of the revolution's most important leaders. She was the leader of her own substantial opposition bloc. Her firebrand speeches and impassioned

32- Demes & Forbrig. p.96

33- Demes & Forbrig. p.96

34- Diuk. p.81

35- Demes & Forbrig. p.92

36- Ibid

37- Krushelnycky. p.267

eloquence at the Maidan “enthralled the crowds and provided a rousing complement to Yushchenko’s more restrained style.”³⁸

As a leader she was the prime rabble-rouser calling on crowds to seize power, but, crucially, she was prepared to back up her rash style with deeds. When protestors surrounded the presidential administration she agreed to go inside to meet regime representatives.

Having “confronted the beast in its own lair,” Tymoshenko emerged, beaming and triumphant, to a tremendous cheer from the crowd. On another occasion, she approached the line of black-clad interior ministry troops that surrounded the Maidan and attached an orange rose to one of their large gray shields.³⁹

Message and Audience

The driving message behind the Orange Revolution was that the Ukrainian people were no longer willing to tolerate the status quo of political corruption, repression, and routine subversion of the democratic process. This was expressed several times by the ordinary protesters at the Maidan. In the words of one:

I was a teenager when Ukraine became independent and we all hoped there would be a great future.

We were disappointed and the governments cheated us and tried to fool us. We kept quiet and maybe they thought we would always keep quiet. They were wrong. We don't want a country run by bandits. We want a normal country where we can work and we can be free and have a government that works for us.⁴⁰

There was not only a feeling that things could not remain as they were, but that the need for a truly fair and accountable system had been long overdue. At the Maidan, Yushchenko told the crowd, “I am even more convinced than before that what we are doing in this freezing cold now should have been done in 1991.

38- Ibid. p.304

39- Ibid

40- Krushelnycky. p.295

Because this world isn't always fair, you always have to pay a price. Perhaps today we are paying for the fact that thirteen years ago this was not done." Pora encapsulated this sentiment. The word "Pora" directly translates to "it's (high) time"⁴¹ and the organization's logo was a clock at the eleventh hour.

The unity of the protesters was demonstrated by the chants and slogans of the Maidan, which included, "we are together" and "together we are many."⁴²

The opposition did not miss the opportunity to compare their message of transparency and rule of law against Yanukovich's well-known criminal record, "and exploited it to symbolize the general corruption of the regime as a whole."⁴³ Together, they emphasized the need to put Ukraine on a new path and symbolized this through the color orange.

Orange was a color "free of past political connotations such as red for the Communists, the blue and yellow of the flag, which would put off ethnic Russians, and the red and black colours of Ukrainian nationalism."⁴⁴

This orange-laden, united and determined protest showed no signs of backing down or inviting repression through violence, which exacerbated divisions in the regime, with more and more individuals defecting to the opposition everyday. Soon, three of Ukraine's biggest cities, some regional governments, as well as army and police units, recognized Yushchenko as president.⁴⁵

Army and intelligence officers mounted stage at the Maidan to declare "they would refuse orders to attack peaceful protesters."⁴⁶ Kuchma and his closest associates were made painfully aware that a substantial part of the security services and military intelligence were now out of their control, which effectively cancelled out the threat of a concerted violent crackdown.⁴⁷

41- Demes & Forbrig. p.97

42- Wilson 2005. p.129

43- Ibid. p.96

44- Krushelnycky. p.299

45- Krushelnycky. pp.289-290

46- Ibid. p.298

47- "The man who survived Russia's poison chalice." *The Age-Australia*. 23 January 2015. <https://www.theage.com.au/world/the-man-who-survived-russias-poison-chalice-20050123-gdzf3h.html>



Euromaidan in Kyiv, 19 February 2014. Labor Unions' House on fire. It was reportedly set afire by policemen[1] as it was a protesters' headquarters.

Four days after the tents went up on the Maidan, the regime was beginning to lose its unity, as well as its nerve.⁴⁸ At Ukrainian TV stations, staff rebelled in unprecedented numbers, refusing to keep lying on behalf of the regime.⁴⁹

Outside Ukraine, 150 Ukrainian diplomats around the world defected from their own government to issue and issued a statement: “We cannot remain silent and observe a situation which could call into doubt Ukraine’s democratic development and destroy the efforts of many years to return our country to Europe.”⁵⁰

Success

Before and during the Orange Revolution, both the pro-democracy, west-centered opposition and the pro-Russia, east-centered regime conducted outreach and collaboration with their respective partners and patrons. On the opposition side, pro-Orange NGOs and think tanks received funding and assistance from groups including Freedom House, the National Democratic Institute, and the Open Society Foundation, as well as several western governments.⁵¹ During the protests themselves, the American and European governments provided important diplomatic support by making it clear in official statements that they would not accept the result of fraudulent elections. This transatlantic consensus proved even more decisive when an official EU delegation, with American support, successfully conducted dialogue with the regime and a compromise ‘packet’ including a new runoff election was proposed in a series of round table discussions.⁵²

A runoff was eventually held on December 26. Yushchenko won and Tymoshenko became his prime minister.

Yushchenko took the oath of office in January 2005 and would serve for 5 years. Their mission a success, Pora’s election campaign officially closed

48- Wilson 2005. p.130

49- Ibid. pp.130-131

50- Krushelnycky. p.291

51- Wilson, Andrew. “Ukraine's Orange Revolution, NGOs and the Role of the West*,” *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 19:1. 2006.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/09557570500501747>. pp.24-29

52- Wilson 2005. pp.138-140

that same month. Thereafter, a number of organizations rooted in Pora were established, including the Pora political party.

“Common to all of them is a concern for the longer-term development of democracy in Ukraine.”⁵³

Unfortunately, and despite the high hopes of the Orange Revolution, the Yushchenko presidency was to prove a disappointment. Democratic norms improved slightly but stability and prosperity stagnated. Ukraine's previously growing economy would be among the worst hit by the 2008 recession, exacerbated by bad leadership and lingering corruption.⁵⁴

The Yushchenko-Tymoshenko alliance proved unstable and quickly gave way to infighting.

Yushchenko was massively unpopular when he ended his term in 2010. Worse still, his attempts to undermine Tymoshenko, described by a close aide as bordering on the “paranoiac”, were seen by many observers as having helped the old ‘villain’ of the Orange Revolution, Yanukovich, win the presidency in 2010, after beating Tymoshenko by less than four percent.⁵⁵

It might seem then that the Orange Revolution failed, but this is not the case. The Orange Revolution shifted Ukrainian society. Since 2004, the people of Ukraine are no longer willing to accept anti-democratic and corrupt Russian-style patrimonialism.

Ukrainians, especially the young, have a demonstrable preference for “real democracy, however rough-and-tumble, to the more superficially stable example of authoritarian capitalism next door.”⁵⁶

Yanukovich's efforts to revive Russian-style authoritarianism ended with his ouster during the mass protests of 2013. The initial triggers for the Orange Revolution and the 2013 Euromaidan Revolution differ, the

53- Ibid. p.99

54- Owens, Matthew. “Viktor Yushchenko's Star Has Fallen.” *Newsweek*. 13 March 2009. <https://www.newsweek.com/viktor-yushchenkos-star-has-fallen-76515>

55- Feifer, Gregory. “Unloved but Unbowed, Ukraine's Viktor Yushchenko Leaves Office.” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*. 24 February 2010. https://www.rferl.org/a/Unloved_But_Unbowed_Ukraines_Viktor_Yushchenko_Leaves_Office/1967436.html

56- Owens

former being electoral fraud and the latter an international pivot from Europe to Russia, but both were underscored by calls to defend the rights and democratic future of Ukrainians.⁵⁷As one Euromaidan leader put it, the latter protests “showed the Orange Revolution was not a one-time fairy tale, but a feature of Ukraine.”⁵⁸ Ukrainians will no longer wait on the sideline berated by disappointment, but instead flood to the streets and demand democracy.

57- Onuch, Olga. “Who Were the Protesters?” *The Maidan and Beyond*. Journal of Democracy, 25:3, 2014. p.48. <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/sites/default/files/Ukraine-25-3.pdf>

58- Way, Lucan. “Civil Society and Democratization.” *The Maidan and Beyond*. p.35

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