

Comparing Ukraine's Maidan 2004 with Euromaidan 2014

Written by David R. Marples

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Several analysts have examined the links between the so-called Orange Revolution in Ukraine of 2004 and Euromaidan in 2013-14. There were also other earlier mass protests in the Maidan, including one by students in 1990 that played a role in the removal of the then Prime Minister Vitalii Masol. Thus there was something of a tradition of using the Maidan for a mass protest. Both 2004 and 2013-14 focused to some extent on corruption, particularly in the office of the president, though it had reached a much higher scale under Viktor Yanukovich than under Leonid D. Kuchma. There are, however, more differences than similarities, indicating a lack of continuity rather than a revival of past animosities, and I would single out in brief the following points.

First of all, the Orange Revolution was not really a revolution at all. It was an uprising that brought about a change of president through a more accurate counting of votes but not a change of government. That Viktor Yushchenko was such a failure as president derives from several reasons, not least his own incompetence, but there was also a second factor that emphasises the contrast.

In 2004, the European option was a distant hope rather than anything tangible for Ukraine, whereas in November 2013 it appeared to offer a serious alternative to the Russian Customs Union and a common economic space with Russia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan. European unity on Ukraine after Euromaidan did not last and whether the Association Agreement offered a viable alternative is a moot point. Nonetheless, that option was at least on the table.

In 2004, the protests focused on many things but there was always an elite alternative to the government of Kuchma in the persons of Viktor Yushchenko and Yulia Tymoshenko. In 2014, there were no discernible leaders and patently the parliamentary opposition leaders remained marginal figures. Rather there were factions that came to the fore at different times. Essentially there was a total rejection of the leaders within the existing government, as well as significant antagonism to parliamentary parties such as the Regions and Communists.

In 2013-14, the protests were marked by outbursts of extreme violence on the part of both the government and the demonstrators, culminating in the massacre of 21 February 2014. Though there have been exhaustive studies of the influence or non-influence of militant rightist forces in Euromaidan, and clearly these groups were negligible in terms of electability, there seems no doubt that at crucial times they were prepared to force the issue during the periods of confrontation. In this respect, the lessons of 2004 may well have been a factor behind the militancy, i.e. the failure of the Orange events to change fundamentally the power structure of the country.

In Euromaidan, in contrast to the Orange Revolution, the protests outside Kyiv outpaced those in the centre. In various parts of Ukraine pro-Yanukovich local governments and leaders were removed from office.

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Russia was a factor in both 2004 and 2013-14. In the earlier events, Vladimir Putin had attempted to influence the outcome of the presidential election and had fully endorsed Yanukovich's campaign beforehand. In 2013, Russia offered an alternative to the Association Agreement and advanced the offer of a substantial loan to Ukraine. The direct intervention of Russia in Crimea followed the removal of Yanukovich from office and Putin insisted that he was protecting Russian language speakers in Ukraine. The question why Russia was prepared to intervene in 2014 but not in 2004 is easily answered: in 2004, while Russia disapproved of the uprising, it did not necessarily signal a complete change of direction in Kyiv and the potential 'loss' of Ukraine to 'Russkiy Mir'.

There was no obvious oligarchic involvement in 2004, perhaps because these personalities were less entrenched in society than a decade later. In 2014, however, several oligarchs supported the cause of Euromaidan and subsequently. The Donbas magnate Rinat Akhmetov ultimately did so as well, and the allegiance of Ihor Kolomoisky in Dnipropetrovsk was vital in ensuring that that city remained on the Ukrainian government side when rebels began to take over administrations in the east. And an oligarch politician (hardly a rarity in the parliament), Petro Poroshenko, became the fifth president of Ukraine.

On both occasions, Western powers supported the protests in Ukraine as a progressive and pro-democratic manifestation of the popular will. The extent of US involvement in both uprisings is debatable, but it was manifested much more overtly in 2014 than in 2004 through the appearance in Kyiv of government officials and maverick individuals such as Senator John McCain.

In 2013-14, unlike 2004, social media played a vital role at various times: summoning people to the square, communication – locally, nationally, and internationally – and not least the organisation of factions, sections, military 'hundreds', and relaying information about government responses.

In 2013-14, representation on the square was wider and subject to changes. Analysts detected a youthful pro-European element initially, but after the end of November, and even more so after the short-lived so called dictatorship laws of 16 January 2014, the makeup of the protesters was older, more varied, with significant representation from the centre and east, as well as western Ukraine.

The scale of the 2014 protests was broader and the numbers in the streets significantly higher than in 2004 though they varied between weekdays and weekends.

The Orange Revolution lasted for roughly five weeks. Euromaidan continued after the departure of Yanukovich, though it reached its climax on 21 February 2014, which was thirteen weeks after it began. Regarding contemporary analogous events, it was far longer than the 2011 Revolution in Egypt but shorter in duration than the Libyan civil war of 2011, with which it has sometimes been compared. On the other hand one could make the argument that Euromaidan has not yet ended and may see further revivals as a result of military shortcomings in the war in the east, the failing economy, and not least the sluggishness of the Poroshenko-Yatseniuk leadership in unraveling corruption in society. Clearly the outcome has not yet been determined.

About the author:

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