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STUDENT PROTEST AS THE TRIGGER FOR THE REVOLUTION OF DIGNITY IN UKRAINE

The Euromaidan rallies and the Revolution of Dignity in Ukraine in 2013-2014 were both a remarkable and unimaginable event in recent European history. They captured the minds of activists, commentators, and politicians, in addition becoming the topic of often ardent and contentious debates. During the three months when the civic protests evolved into a successful but violent uprising against the then corrupt regime of Viktor Yanukovich, the democratically-elected but increasingly authoritarian president of the country, most of the discussions, however, came to focus either on the international geopolitical perspective, the domestic high politics or the role of the far right in the crisis. Ultimately, following Russia's military intervention which led to occupation and annexation of Crimea and the appearance of a Russian-backed armed separatist insurgency in the Donbas, most of these debates left the original grassroots dynamics of the Euromaidan rallies in the shadow.

By now it has been nearly forgotten how the events started that led to Yanukovich relinquishing power and fleeing to Russia. Nevertheless, it was exactly on the grassroots level that some of the most interesting developments took place such as the appearance of a student protest movement which though short-lived became crucial for the Euromaidan movement as a whole and whose fate paradoxically directly triggered the Revolution. More so, on two previous occasions, during the so-called Revolution on Granite in 1990 and the Orange Revolution in 2004, Ukrainian youth and student protest triggered or played a part in precipitating change in the political leadership of the country. However, on all three occasions the students' initial efforts seemed to have been merely transitory as the momentum shifted to other actors and eventually back to the elites leaving the younger generation seemingly powerless to influence the further trajectory of the country. Therefore, with the benefit of

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hindsight, it is interesting to explore the manifestation of student activism during these events and assess why students were not able -or perhaps not willing- to leave more of a mark and play a more significant role as events unfolded. This text is an excerpt from a broader study and article that will be published in a forthcoming volume of *Critique & Humanism* and it discusses the student protest that ultimately led to the Revolution of Dignity in Ukraine.

Prelude to protest in Ukraine

On 21 November 2013, the Ukrainian government announced that it was suspending preparations to sign an association agreement with the European Union at a summit in Vilnius the next week. It was a shocking policy U-turn provoking outcries of disbelief and anger among the population. Analysts were quick to point to the geopolitical stakes and consequences of the decision as well as its coinciding with the ninth anniversary of the outbreak of the Orange Revolution.¹ However, in comparison to the latter, the international and national framework of Ukraine's politics remained strikingly similar, but the situation on the ground, at the grassroots level, was quite different. In 2004, there was a united and prepared opposition in place that could call upon strong societal support to back the cause of Viktor Yushchenko's presidential bid following a rigged election. One historian portrayed the Orange Revolution as an 'electoral revolution' that was more electoral than revolutionary.² An assessment of its outcome remains ambiguous, but its legacy had lasting effects. The situation in Ukraine in 2013, in particular at the grassroots level of the Euromaidan rallies, was to be quite different.

In contrast to 2004, there was no heightened mobilisation due to planned elections. Therefore, President Viktor Yanukovich's sudden abandonment of a presumed pro-European course symbolised by the government's announcement that the Vilnius summit was dead in the water even before it had started, seemingly caught all protagonists by surprise. EU leaders and negotiators were stunned, the parliamentary opposition was shell-shocked, while Russia and the usual number one bogeyman Vladimir Putin kept a complacent distance. Meanwhile,

¹. A. O., "Politics of Brutal Pressure," *The Economist*, <http://www.economist.com/blogs/easternapproaches/2013/11/ukraine-and-eu-0> [last accessed 12/12/2013].

². See Andrew Wilson, "Ukraine's Orange Revolution of 2004," in *Civil Resistance and Power Politics: The Experience of Non-violent Action from Gandhi to the Present*, eds., Adam Roberts and Timothy Garton Ash, 335-53. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

on various social media platforms calls to protest the government's decision were skyrocketing.³ That evening between 1,000 and 1,500 protesters waving Ukrainian and European Union flags alike gathered on Kyiv's Maidan giving birth to the concept of the Euromaidan. The parliamentary opposition for its part had also caught on. The former world champion boxer and leader of the UDAR party, Vitaliy Klitschko, visited the demonstrators and from a makeshift podium called for a 100,000-strong protest rally to take place in the capital within three days.⁴ Apart from Kyiv, the calls on social media had also brought out up to a few hundred protesters in L'viv, Lutsk, Ternopil, and Donetsk.⁵ Nevertheless, the subsequent sequence of events that would give rise to the mass demonstrations in Kyiv and other cities had less to do with internet-organised protest or appeals of the parliamentary opposition, but with the collective actions of students.

Students and the outbreak of the Euromaidan protests

On the day following the government's decision not to sign the association agreement, a series of events took place in L'viv, the unofficial capital of western Ukraine, which determined the course of the subsequent days. In many ways, this was not surprising as L'viv possesses strong historical and cultural links with the rest of Central Europe and compared to other major cities in Ukraine it lies geographically close to the European Union, the Polish border being but a mere two hours drive away. Having been part of the Soviet Union since only after the Second World War, it has a much weaker relation with the Russian-speaking part of the country and with Russia.⁶ If anywhere in Ukraine there was a perfect breeding ground for a revolt against the Yanukovich regime it was in L'viv.

There, on the morning of 22 November, a group of over a hundred students gathered in front of the provincial government building to protest the government's decision of the day before. The students had improvised EU flags and chanted pro-European slogans. After a

³. Vitaliy Moroz, "From Facebook and Twitter to the streets: Ukrainians protest of ceased EU deal," *Grassglobal*, <http://grassglobal.com/2013/11/22/from-facebook-and-twitter-to-the-streets-ukrainians-protest-of-ceased-eu-deal/> [last accessed 12/12/2013].

⁴. "На Майдан прийшло близько 1500 обурених зупинкою євроінтеграції," *Ukrains'ka Pravda*, <http://www.pravda.com.ua/news/2013/11/22/7002691/> [last accessed 12/12/2013].

⁵. Moroz, "From Facebook and Twitter to the streets."

⁶. See William Jay Risch, *The Ukrainian West: Culture and Fate of Empire in Soviet Lviv* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011)

while, they decided to turn their gathering into a street demonstration calling upon students - while passing other institutions of higher education- and other passers-by to join their protest. Within a short space of time the demonstration had grown to a few thousand. The protesters then proceeded to the Taras Shevchenko monument in the city centre. The students announced the formation of a strike committee and the L'viv Euromaidan was a fact. Counting about 10,000 participants the L'viv rally by far outnumbered those in the rest of the country. More so, the academic authorities of the city's universities and colleges declared their support for the students and were joined by the city's mayor, Andriy Sadoviy, and the municipal council in condemning the national government. Though this gave the students some guarantee of protection, they insisted on keeping their own specific student organisational committee, calling for the Euromaidan to be a symbol of civic action and void of political insignia.⁷

The mobilisation in L'viv was incessant and soon took on a national scale as the Euromaidan became a way station for thousands of L'vivians heading for the capital -day and night- in time for the planned rally on 24 November. In part, the coordination effort was managed through social media networks and the Euromaidan news feeds that had started to appear and were administered by the more tech-savvy protesters in a nearby cafe. The Kyiv rally was a stunning show of massive mobilisation in the capital, while about 20,000 protesters had gathered simultaneously in the centre of L'viv. In Kyiv, the leaders of the parliamentary opposition addressed the protesters, but in L'viv the students of the Euromaidan watched vigilantly over the civic spirit of the protest. One of the student leaders in L'viv, Andriy Tkachuk, explained the students' wariness of politicians and political parties very bluntly. "We came out without banners or symbols of any political parties, to demonstrate our independence from the parties. We, the students, we are coming out as an independent part of society. We do not have to march under party banners. You can guess how those kind of

⁷. "Студенти мітингують під стінами облради: 'Ми хочемо в ЄС!'," *KuPol*, http://www.cupol.lviv.ua/index.php?id=28&backPID=15&tt_news=89676&cHash=15c0c53398 [last accessed 12/12/2013]; "Студенти закликали не піднімати партійних прапорів на мітингу у Львові," *KuPol*, http://www.cupol.lviv.ua/index.php?id=28&backPID=15&tt_news=89688&cHash=83ea383f25 [last accessed 12/12/2013]; "На Євромайдан у Львові вийшли близько 10 тисяч осіб," *NBnews*, <http://nbnews.com.ua/ua/news/105993/> [last accessed 12/12/2013]; "У Львові кілька тисяч студентів вийшли на вулицю," *Ukrains'ka Pravda*, <http://www.pravda.com.ua/news/2013/11/22/7002737/> [last accessed 12/12/2013].

actions end."⁸ When the local leader of the ultranationalist party Svoboda, Yury Mykhalchyshyn, tried to address the crowd at the rally, the students intervened and started chanting "bez politykiv [without politicians]."⁹

The next day, L'viv students proclaimed a student strike and set up headquarters in a tent camp at the site of the Euromaidan. The call to strike was heeded by 10,000 students with the full support of their professors. Similarly, in a show of support, L'viv university rectors promptly cancelled all lectures thereby exonerating the students from any possible sanctions. Other cities in western Ukraine followed suit with thousands of students boycotting lectures and walking out to protest on city squares in respective Euromaidan rallies.¹⁰ At the same time, groups of students were continuously heading for Kyiv to reinforce the protesters in the capital and strengthen the student presence there.

Students mobilise in the capital

Following the 24 November rally and the influx of students to the capital, students in Kyiv took the next step. Student groups who had met at the Sunday protest rally decided that it was time for students to act in a concerted way. Representatives from various Kyiv universities formed a strike committee and on 26 November a first student protest rally took place in the capital with 2,000 students gathering in Shevchenko Park.¹¹ The following day, the students handed over a petition at the presidential administration office in Kyiv demanding that Yanukovich sign the EU association agreement. By then, thousands of students were present on the Maidan itself, while their peers were attending Euromaidan rallies in other cities *en masse*. Despite the media focusing on the speeches of the leaders of the parliamentary opposition, it were, in fact, the students who constituted the driving force

⁸. Ярослав Іваночко, "Студенти не мають виходити під партійними прапорами, бо ви знаєте, чим може це закінчитися, - Андрій Ткачук," *iPress*, http://ipress.ua/articles/studenty_ne_mayut_vyhodyty_pid_partiynymy_praporamy_bo_vy_znaiete_chym_mozh_e_tse_zakinchytysya_andriy_tkachuk_33911.html [last accessed 12/12/2013].

⁹. "Lviv students prevent Svoboda leader from addressing 20,000-strong rally," *Zik*, http://zik.ua/en/news/2013/11/24/lviv_students_prevent_svoboda_leader_from_addressing_20000strong_rally_441901 [last accessed 12/12/2013].

¹⁰. "Lviv students want EU deal signed," *KyivPost*, <http://www.kyivpost.com/content/ukraine/lviv-students-want-eu-deal-signed-332427.html> [last accessed 12/12/2013].

¹¹. Olena Goncharova, "Students go on strike to call for Ukraine's European future," *KyivPost*, <http://www.kyivpost.com/multimedia/photo/students-protest-332474.html> [last accessed 12/12/2013].

behind the Euromaidan rallies.¹² The student strikes, which they simultaneously initiated, marked the birth of a large-scale grassroots student protest movement.

Moreover, the striking students enjoyed the support of professors and in many cases even that of the university administrations though lectures were not suspended.¹³ However, the students' actions have been taking place beyond the universities' premises. Denys Tymchenko, a second-year economics student from Kyiv, explained the reasons for the absence of a university-based course of action. "I was going with friends to the Maidan for a few hours. When the student strike started, students from one university marched to the others and called upon the students to leave the buildings and join them outside. Universities in Ukraine do not enjoy autonomy and extraterritoriality. Riot police can enter university premises. There is no protection there for students."¹⁴ The students took to the streets, skipping classes and staging demonstrations involving at times even tens of thousands of students, and set up specific student sectors at the Euromaidan rallies. Nevertheless, this was so far a spontaneous grassroots movement that lacked a formal structure and informal organisation and mobilisation was key and exemplified the spirit of the movement. It opened space for student initiatives to sprout which addressed various aspects of engaging in political action such as law students from the Kyiv-Mohyla Academy providing legal assistance and advice for the striking students and civic activists vis-à-vis the authorities.¹⁵

Despite lacking the protection of their academic institutions and an organisational structure, the fledgling Ukrainian student movement was bound together by generational characteristics that manifested themselves socially and then served to fuel the students' politicisation. As the prominent Ukrainian historian, Yaroslav Hrytsak, commented: "We are now witnessing a generational rift in Ukraine. Young Ukrainians resemble young Italians, Czech, Poles, or Germans more than they resemble Ukrainians who are 50 and older. This

¹². "Studenti stayut providnoyu siloyu Evromaydanu," *Tyzhden*, <http://tyzhden.ua/News/95038> [last accessed 12/12/2013].

¹³. "How Kyiv universities react to Euromaidan," Euromaidan explained, <http://euromaidan2013.wordpress.com/2013/12/13/kyiv-universities-react-to-euromaidan/> [last accessed 12/12/2013].

¹⁴. Interview with Denys Tymchenko.

¹⁵. "До уваги студентів вищих навчальних закладів України!," *Національний університет «Києво-Могилянська академія»*, <http://www.ukma.edu.ua/index.php/news/1053-do-uvahy-studentiv-vyshchychkh-navchalnykh-zakladiv-ukrainy> [last accessed 12/12/2013].

generation has a stronger desire for European integration and fewer regional divides than their seniors."¹⁶ The current student generation also has little or no first-hand recollection of the Soviet past. Widespread divisions between Ukraine's western and central regions on the one hand and eastern and southern regions on the other hand are less determining. Instead, students are more concerned about their future. "They are a new generation with quite a different set of values. This explains to a large extent what is happening in the country," Hrytsak noted. The students "are trying to articulate their values and raise their voice," he further explained "because their career opportunities are handicapped, arrested, or curtailed."¹⁷ Their revolt targeted the corrupt political class and was therefore ultimately about changing the state and the manner in which it functions.

The movement radicalises

Within a week from its outbreak, tens of thousands of students from around the country had joined the protest movement. However, the initial trigger that spawned the protests -the government's U-turn regarding the signing of the EU association agreement- soon lost its rationale. The Eastern Partnership summit in Vilnius which took place from 28 to 29 November passed *en mineur*. President Yanukovich had not been moved by the protests and -citing pressure from Russia and raising additional demands- did not change his mind about not signing the agreement. Having returned from Vilnius empty-handed, the parliamentary opposition was left dumbfounded not having any clear plan on how to proceed. There were calls for the dissolution of parliament, for government resignation, for the impeachment of Yanukovich, and, alternately, to force him to sign the association agreement by 15 March of the next year. A rally was called for the next Sunday, 1 December. After addressing the crowd, Klitschko stepped down from the stage on the Maidan and mingled with the gathered students and protesters. "Vitaliy, do something! We are relying on you!" a woman shouted at him. "Vitaliy! When are you going to define a single opposition candidate?" a student asked. Klitschko looked embarrassed while he tried to have a discussion

¹⁶. "In Ukraine, Protests Highlight 'Generational Rift'," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, <http://www.rferl.org/content/ukraine-protests-generational-divide/25182439.html> [last accessed 12/12/2013].

¹⁷. "How the social drivers of EuroMaidan differ from the Orange Revolution," *KyivPost*, <http://www.kyivpost.com/content/ukraine/how-the-social-drivers-of-the-orange-revolution-differ-from-euromaidan-333171.html> [last accessed 12/12/2013].

with the students. He stated that the opposition had started discussions on uniting behind a single candidate at the summit in Vilnius, but that they had not reached any agreement on the issue. Then, just after 8pm, Klitschko together with Arseniy Yatseniuk, and Oleh Tiahnybok, the other opposition leaders, decided to leave the 10,000 strong demonstration at the Maidan where the students and civic activists had been staging their protest meetings.¹⁸

Nine days of protest propelled by students had ended in defeat. Yanukovich did not come back on the decision not to sign the EU Association Agreement in Vilnius. The Sunday rally supposedly would be the beginning of a campaign to unite behind the parliamentary opposition in light of the presidential elections of 2015 in order to elect a candidate who would then presumably reverse the incumbent's decision and set Ukraine on 'a path to Europe'. Meanwhile, the protesters who had gathered on the Maidan that evening decided to call an end to the protest and go home. A few hundred students nevertheless remained in their improvised tent camp and would leave the following morning. For all intents and purposes the Euromaidan protests seemed to have come to an end. Then, something unexpected and in fact unimaginable during the previous 22 years of Ukrainian independence happened. In the early hours of Saturday morning, around 4:30am, when only a few hundred students and activists remained on the Maidan, the *Berkut* special police moved in with brutal force to clear the square of the last peaceful protesters. As a result of this unprecedented violence, hundreds were wounded and dozens of severely injured were transported away to hospitals in the capital.¹⁹

The corrupt Yanukovich regime, angered by the spontaneous protests of the young generation and still vengeful for the Orange Revolution, showed its true face. With its crackdown on the students the regime had drawn first blood. Supposedly, it had hoped by resorting to disproportional repression to nip any further resistance in the bud. Yet, things were to turn out quite differently. After the violent escalation, some 200 students and activists fled and barricaded themselves in the Mikhailovsky monastery -just over a kilometer from the Maidan square- where they were visited by members of parliament and other Kyivians. The

¹⁸. "EuroMaidan rallies in Ukraine - Nov. 29 coverage," *KyivPost*, <http://www.kyivpost.com/content/ukraine/euromaidan-rallies-in-ukraine-nov-29-coverage-332729.html> [last accessed 12/12/2013].

¹⁹. "Battle for Ukraine: Crackdown in Kiev," *The Economist*, <http://www.economist.com/blogs/easternapproaches/2013/11/crackdown-kyiv> [last accessed 12/12/2013].

young activists, though frightened and in shock, stated that they wanted “to stick it out to the end,” though they didn’t quite know what 'the end' meant.²⁰

With the benefit of hindsight, we now know that the violence unleashed by the Yanukovych regime against the students in the night of 29-30 November 2013 triggered the beginning of the 'Revolution of Dignity'. Hundreds of thousands of Ukrainians of all ages rallied in the capital and other cities around the country, outraged that the 'regime was beating their children' and set up elaborate self-organised protest camps modeled on the original Maidan. In less than three months, the protests -which unfortunately saw further escalations and a spiral of violence ending in the deaths of dozens of protesters- led to Yanukovych abandoning the presidency and fleeing the country. In reaction, Russia invaded and occupied parts of Ukraine, annexing Crimea and feeding a separatist insurgency in the Donbas resulting in a bloody war that continues (despite several formal ceasefires) to this day and has killed thousands. Certainly, this is not (yet) 'the end' that the students had imagined taking to the streets and city squares in protest in late November 2013. The question remains of what this 'end' will be: a truly modern European future for Ukraine?; a return to the old corrupt ways of Ukraine's political elite and oligarchs?; more Russian aggression and interference in Ukraine's domestic and international politics? At this point it is still too hard to tell.

Nevertheless, what is clear is that it were students and young Ukrainians who played a significant role initially, setting in motion a chain of events that would eventually lead the Euromaidan rallies to turn into the Revolution of Dignity. The situation may have changed drastically and not taken the course the students could have imagined, but for the third time in the past quarter century it was the younger generation that with its actions opposed the country's political elite and stood up for change. In 2013, when the Euromaidan protests broke out in Ukraine, students protesting austerity measures in Greece, Italy, Spain, Sweden, and the United Kingdom were poised against their countries' elites, while in Bulgaria students were embroiled in a broader struggle against a corrupted political class and influential oligarchs.²¹ Here, one can detect a similar generational component and a shared rising distrust of the

²⁰. Andrey Chernikov, "Ukraine's Black Saturday," <http://www.opendemocracy.net/od-russia/andrey-chernikov/ukraines-black-saturday> [last accessed 12/12/2013].

²¹. See Tom Junes, “Students Take Bulgaria’s Protests to the Next Level. Can They Break the Political Stalemate?” *Tr@nsit Online*, <http://www.iwm.at/read-listen-watch/transit-online/students-take-bulgarias-protests-to-the-next-level-why-the-student-protests-could-break-the-political-stalemate/>.



powers that be. Commenting on the Euromaidan rallies in December 2013, the then President of the European Commission, José Manuel Barroso, rejoiced that "those young people in the streets of Ukraine, with freezing temperatures, are writing the new narrative for Europe."²² While Mr Barroso juxtaposed the Ukrainian protest with the contestation of European policies of austerity, he ignored the fact that this new narrative is also being built in the European Union itself. Ultimately, the protesting students' version of this European narrative might differ from the one that the president of the Commission imagined. Years from now, historians will assess the student protest movements and perhaps impart on them the same quality.

²². "Statement of President Barroso on the current situation in Ukraine," *Europa.eu Press Releases Database*, http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_MEMO-13-1116_en.htm [last accessed 12/12/2013].