

# Social Media in Ukraine's Euromaidan Revolution

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Social Media is slowly but surely changing the political landscape of the world. An increasingly powerful tool for global communication, it spreads information at lightning speed, uniting people with a common cause. Using platforms such as *Twitter*, *Facebook* and *YouTube* to organise thousands of like-minded individuals, it has been instrumental in enabling movements – and even revolutions. The success of the Libyan Revolution and Arab Spring of 2011 can partly be attributed to social media providing trustworthy news and countering unreliable state-controlled media by showing visuals of official ruthlessness and public protests to both the national and world audiences.

Applying the methodology of the 2011 revolutions, the youth of Ukraine effectively used social media in 2013 to oust their government and change the course of history of their ancient nation. Their initiative is popularly known as the Euromaidan Revolution. For the enabling role of the social media, it is also referred to as the Facebook Revolution.

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## THE BACKDROP

Political activism at the Maidan Nezalezhnosti<sup>1</sup>, better known as just the Maidan (a Persian word commonly used in West and South Asia to denote an open space), has made and demolished leaders. In 1990, before independence from the USSR, student protests resulted in the resignation of the Chairman of the Cabinet of Ministers of the Ukrainian SSR, Vitaliy Masol. The Orange Revolution<sup>2</sup> of 2004 saw hundreds of thousands protesting in the square and nearby streets against electoral fraud committed by the Presidential candidate Viktor Yanukovych, a lackey of the Russians. As the country went into elections, Viktor Yushchenko, a politician from the rural northeast and with no ties to the political clans and business mafias of the Russian-dominated eastern Ukraine, was clearly in the lead. Suddenly, he fell violently ill during the campaign

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- 1 Walking out of my hotel in Kyiv, Ukraine's capital, I exited onto the Independence Square, Maidan Nezalezhnosti. Dominating the square is a majestic sky-piercing column with a glowing Berehynia, a female spirit in Slavic mythology, perched on the top, stretched away to zenith, too lofty to be admired. Another enchanting sculpture is that of Cossack Mamay, the Ukrainian folk hero, playing the kobza, a Ukrainian lute, his sword, representing people's strength, lying next to him, and his muscular stallion, symbolising freedom and fidelity, standing behind him. In keeping with Cossack Mamay's folklore, Independence Square, or the Maidan, has been the centre of people's struggle for freedom and loyalty to the nation.
  - 2 Ukrainians responded to corruption and electoral fraud in the second round of the 2004 Presidential elections with massive protests. Thousands of hardcore activists occupied the centre of Kyiv, where they set up residence in tents and organised sit-ins, strikes, and various forms of non-violent protest to demand a revote in the run-off between opposition candidate Viktor Yushchenko and the ordained successor of outgoing President Kuchma, Viktor Yanukovych. Hundreds of thousands of citizens filled the capital, with the number of demonstrators reaching as many as 1 million on November 27, 2004. As a result of the protests the election results were voided and a re-vote ordered by the Ukraine Supreme Court at the end of December. Yushchenko won 52 per cent of the vote in the new election to become the third president of the Ukraine.

and was taken for treatment to Vienna, where it was diagnosed that he had been poisoned with a dioxin of a strain produced in a handful of countries, including Russia - but not Ukraine. The timely diagnosis saved his life but disfigured his face. Heavily medicated and in excruciating pain, Yushchenko returned to the election campaign, garnering even greater support of the electorate. However, when the official results were announced, Yanukovich had a lead of 2.6 per cent. It was soon discovered that he had rigged the results by tampering with the Election Commission's server. Yushchenko's outraged supporters took over the Maidan, camping in tents for several weeks, enduring the cold and snow – until fresh elections were ordered by the Supreme Court. That election was won sizeably by Yushchenko. Yanukovich, the main target of the Orange Revolution, became, for the second time, the Prime Minister.<sup>3</sup>

Despite a series of controversies in his political career,<sup>4</sup> Yanukovich finally won the Presidential election in 2010 – internationally certified as free and fair – and immediately began to plunder his country. The oligarchs took over, usurping public assets and cornering markets. Parliamentary seats, political offices and directorships in state enterprises were horse-traded; opaque deals were struck and corruption was rampant. The government was robbing the public rather than serving it. Critics were crushed. Courts covered up injustice instead of protecting citizens. Prosecutors perpetrated crimes instead of investigating them. The state had become malicious.

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3 Serhii Plokhy, *The Gates of Europe: A History of Ukraine*, Penguin Books, United Kingdom, 2016, pp. 332-334.

4 Yanukovich's private and public life had been full of infamous episodes. In 1967, when he was 17 years old, Viktor Yanukovich had been imprisoned for three years for robbery and assault. He had reached over the wall of a cabin in a public latrine to steal the fur cap of a person squatting on the toilet. Upon his release, he was again jailed for two years on charges of assault. He was also once convicted for rape – for which he didn't do time.

Usurping vast acres of protected forest land in the outskirts of the capital Kyiv, Viktor Yanukovych built himself a chalet surrounded by Roman statues, fake French antiques, fancy light fixtures, chandeliers, a private zoo, an underground shooting range, an 18-hole golf course, tennis courts, bowling alley, a fleet of modern and vintage cars, motorbikes and a luxury boat.<sup>5</sup> It is estimated that the President and his associates embezzled USD 40 billion<sup>6</sup> during his corrupt rule.<sup>7</sup>

Yanukovych paved the road towards a dictatorship from the first days of his Presidency. His approach was: everything needs to be controlled. In 2010, right after his election, Yanukovych saw to it through the Constitutional Court that the form of governance in the country was changed from parliamentary-presidential to presidential. This gave him the power to appoint ministers and to control the army and all law-enforcing departments. In addition, he also controlled the majority in Parliament (which is a separate branch of governance) while exercising control over the deputies of the opposition. Yanukovych also cruelly got rid of his staunch opponents, such as the leader of the opposition, Yulia

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5 Benjamin Preston, “Viktor Yanukovych’s Car Collection Was a Private Automotive History Museum”, *The New York Times*, February 26, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/27/automobiles/viktor-yanukovychs-car-collection-was-a-private-automotive-history-museum.html>.

6 Tanya Kozyreva and Jason Leopold, “Here’s How Ukraine’s Ousted Government Got Away With \$40 Billion”, July 12, 2018, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/tanyakozyreva/ukraines-ousted-regime-made-40-billion-disappear-and-no>.

7 There used to be a popular joke in Ukraine: Two destitute vagabonds were collecting empty beer bottles to exchange for money. One of them was wrapping every bottle in old newspaper and rags. When the other asked him why he was doing so, he got the reply – Yanukovych will hear the tinkling of bottles and take the business for himself.

Tymoshenko, who was jailed on what many believe are false charges.<sup>8</sup>

The stage was thus set for a people's revolt against Yanukovych and his government.

In November 2013, defying the will of the people, President Yanukovych refused to sign a political association and a free-trade agreement with the European Union (EU). Ukraine had requested an unreasonable USD 27 billion in loans and aid. The EU offered a paltry 3 per cent of the amount – USD 838 million – and demanded major changes in Ukraine's laws and regulations in return. Russia, keen to retain Ukraine within its ambit, offered USD15 billion, cheap gas – and wanted no changes in law.<sup>9</sup> Yanukovych<sup>10</sup> was obviously inclined to accept Russia's easy money and political protection. But young Ukrainians, keen to shake off the post-Soviet legacy of corruption and human rights violations, wanted to distance themselves from Russia and integrate with western Europe. They wanted a Ukraine that respected democracy, freedom, rule of law, and its citizens, and were infuriated by Yanukovych's decision to dump the EU and align with Russia. Nobody wanted 'Back in the USSR'. Students, particularly, had much to gain from the signing of the deal, known as the European Union Association Agreement. They saw their futures tied with European Union integration and viewed European-style

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8 "Ukraine's 'Revolution of Dignity' for People and Business", *The Wharton School*, University of Pennsylvania, January 31, 2014, <https://knowledge.wharton.upenn.edu/article/ukraines-revolution-dignity-people-business/>.

9 Jamila Trindle, "The Loan That Launched A Crisis", *Foreign Policy*, February 21, 2014, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2014/02/21/the-loan-that-launched-a-crisis/>.

10 He is the son of a Russian mother and Polish-Belarusian father, former governor of the ethnically Russian Donetsk region.

political reform as a way to combat the corruption that plagued Ukraine.<sup>11</sup>

Ukraine ranked 144 out of 177 countries on Transparency International's Corruption Index in 2013, tying with Nigeria, Iran and the Central African Republic. And according to a Gallup poll, 21 per cent of Ukrainians wanted to leave the country to improve their standard of living that year.<sup>12</sup>

Several surveys of the protest participants conducted in early December 2013 and again at the end of January 2014 suggested that the two driving factors of the protests were anger at President Viktor Yanukovich as well as a desire for Ukraine to enter the EU. Notably, the most unifying factor seemed to be opposition to Yanukovich's efforts to crack down on protesters.<sup>13</sup> Thus, the student protest quickly evolved into a mass nationwide movement against the government. In a way, the rapid and dramatic expansion of the civil resistance was due to the enormously critical attitude of the people towards the policies that were being implemented by those in power, as well as the authoritarian misuse of power.<sup>14</sup>

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11 "Ukraine's Euromaidan Revolution", *The Henry M. Jackson School of International Studies*, February, 2018, [https://jsis.washington.edu/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Ukraine\\_Euromaidan\\_CCP\\_ii.pdf](https://jsis.washington.edu/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Ukraine_Euromaidan_CCP_ii.pdf).

12 "Understanding the Outrage in Ukraine", *The Wharton School*, University of Pennsylvania, December 9, 2013, <https://knowledge.wharton.upenn.edu/article/understanding-outrage-ukraine/>.

13 Keith Darden and Lucan Way, "Who are the protesters in Ukraine?", *The Washington Post*, February 13, 2014, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2014/02/12/who-are-the-protesters-in-ukraine/>.

14 Yuriy Shveda and Joung Ho Park, "Ukraine's revolution of dignity: The dynamics of Euromaidan", *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, Volume 7, Issue 1, 2016, p. 85.

**PEOPLE MOBILISE – PEACEFULLY**

On the morning of November 21, 2013, at 09:02 hours, after it became known that President Yanukovych had refused to sign the agreement with the European Union, Mustafa Nayem, a popular Ukrainian journalist, posted on *Facebook*:

Okay, let's be serious. Is there anyone who is ready to go to the Maidan today until midnight? 'Likes' do not count – only comments under this post with the words 'I am ready'. As soon as there are more than a thousand, we will organise. We will meet at 22:30 at the Independence Monument. Dress warmly, bring umbrellas, tea, coffee, a good mood and friends. Reposts of every kind are welcome.

This post had a much larger impact on subsequent political developments than others that preceded it. Frustrated with Yanukovych's rule, a few thousand congregated at the Monument. And then the numbers began to swell, to become the largest protest gathering since Ukraine's independence.<sup>15</sup>

This people's movement, a leaderless and nameless revolution of historic scale for the fight for citizens' rights and freedom, conducted mostly through social media, lasted three freezing winter months, and brought the government to its knees. The bulk of the protesters were Ukrainian speakers from Western Ukraine and members of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, the largest Eastern Catholic Church in the world. Solidarity with the protesters was expressed by the Crimean Tatar population of Crimea and almost all other major religious denominations, except for the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC). The protests by businesspersons upset over

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15 Megan MacDuffee Metzger and Joshua A. Tucker, "Social Media and EuroMaidan: A Review Essay", *Slavic Review*, Volume 76, Number 1, 2017, p. 169.

the tax policy (the so-called Tax Maidan), students against the policy in education, and demonstrations against the arbitrary Police actions in Vradiyivka (arrests and detentions), were just the tip of the nationwide civil resistance.<sup>16</sup>

The Euromaidan Revolution demonstrated the power of social media in organising political activism and mass mobilisation. Activists named the movement “Euromaidan” to express their desire to identify Ukrainian society with Europe.<sup>17</sup> The messages posted by the protest participants and witnesses reflected their emotions, intentions, hopes, joys and pains. Some of the posts, extensively photographed by me from the displays at the exhibition on the ‘Facebook Revolution’<sup>18</sup> that

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16 Yuriy Shveda and Joung Ho Park, 2016, op. cit.

17 “Ukraine’s Euromaidan Revolution”, 2018, op. cit.

18 Zoryan Shkiryak was the first to comment on Mustafa Nayem’s post: *“The idea is appropriate and timely, it is supported. We need to roll out. Let’s try. Let’s jump.”*

At 2113 hours, Yuriy White commented: *“And you know... in my opinion this is a second chance. If we now intercept, this will be for many years. This is also a fundamental loss of free thinking. Now if you grab the gills (I don’t know how it’s done), the head will not be able to ask for ‘brotherly help’ to quiet the ‘lost nation’. In six months – it is very likely to see the riot police (OMON) from Russian city of Riazan on the streets of Kyiv and Dnipro. I treat Russians well – but their policies – no. And I do not want their national-fascist policy to become a part of my country. And now you understand how to ‘raze’ without blood and violence.”*

Vasiliy Kucherenko at 2117 hours: *“Come on, friends!!!!!! I will ask around Sumy for what to bring. If we succeed – wait for I will soon be in Kiev.”*

Oles Romanyuk at 2119 hours: *“On the Maidan there are webcams that live stream on the Internet everything that is happening. I discovered that, today at 18:00, for some unknown reason, there was no signal, no webcams were working. I have somehow to establish a broadcast through a laptop and give the address of a webcam here.”*

Yevhen Brahinets at 2141 hours: *“Instead of political flags I propose carrying only the flags of the European Union and Ukraine. To make it*



was being held at the Maidan, find mention in the narrative that follows.

Even before the designated time of 22:30 hours, people poured in streams into the square. Kyivians steadily changed their *Facebook* status to “I’m going to Maidan’ or reported their arrival at the venue. For the next nine days 50,000 to 200,000 protestors showed up at the Maidan, walking elbow to elbow. Throughout the night the Maidan was packed with protestors. Volunteers distributed hot tea and sandwiches. Popular musicians set up stages to entertain the crowds. Taxi drivers offered free rides to those joining the protest. There was no turmoil. Everything went on harmoniously, as if conducted by some invisible leader.

### STATE REACTS – VIOLENTLY

Amidst the ongoing protests, Yanukovych officially walked away from the agreement with the EU, which he was expected to sign at a summit in Vilnius, Lithuania, on November 28, 2013, and accepted the multibillion dollar “bailout” package from Russia, further infuriating the protestors. With growing support for the movement and no end to the agitation in sight, the government decided to act. In the wee hours of November 30, the brutish Berkut, a special Police unit, attacked and dispersed the protestors using tear gas and stun grenades. Fleeing activists were chased, and those who fell were kicked and pummelled with batons.<sup>19</sup>

At 0412 hours on November 30, Inna Nerodyk@nerodyk posted on Facebook: “*Friends say they wept*

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*clear to Europe that we ourselves make the decisions in our country and who we should join, and not this muzzle. Who is ready to print them?”*

19 “A New revolution on Maidan Square”, *The Economist*, December 7, 2013, <https://www.economist.com/europe/2013/12/07/a-new-revolution-on-maidan-square>.

*when they saw protestors surrounded and being beaten, when unconscious girls were being dragged across the asphalt by their legs by Berkut #euromaidan.”*

Twenty-two minutes later she followed up with another post: *“People at #euromaidan are being removed quickly. At exactly 4:00 a.m. the Berkut started clearing out the territory. People were unable to resist, they were sleeping, or simply sitting.”*

TarasMalyi@TssMals posted at 0457 hours: *“#Euromaidan #Kyiv has been cleared. Call your friends as we are searching for ours. There is information that not only were people beaten brutally, but there were also shots fired in the air.”*

At 0501 hours Darya Lameshko@Lemesh posted: *“the Maidan is empty, the police has cordoned it off. Official version: people were trying to steal a Christmas tree. #euromaidan”*

The Berkut also raided St. Michael’s Golden-domed Monastery where 50 activists, many of them injured, had sought sanctuary. Refusing to be intimidated, the activists held a spontaneous meeting at St. Michael Square. By 1600 hours, 5,000 people had gathered at the square that resounded with shrill cries of ‘Revolution!’ and ‘Won’t forgive!’ By nightfall, their numbers swelled to 10,000 – with another 10,000 on their way from Lyiv to join the agitation in Kyiv. A government decree banned all protests. To defy the ban, the activists planned a protest march from St. Michael’s Square to the Maidan the next day, December 1.

Gathered at St. Michael’s Square, the activists began a movement that brought together half a million citizens back to Independence Square. The same day, a group of activists occupied the Kyiv City State Administration Office, and

skirmishes took place on Bankova Street in central Kyiv.<sup>20</sup> While opposition<sup>21</sup> leaders called for a nationwide strike and prolonged peaceful street protests to demand that the government resign, several thousand people broke away and marched to Yanukovich's nearby office. A few hundred of them, wearing masks, threw rocks and other objects at Police and tried to break through the Police lines with a front loader. After several hours of clashes, riot Police used force to push them back. Dozens of people with what seemed to be head injuries were taken away by ambulance. Quite a few journalists, including some beaten by the Police, were injured in the clashes.<sup>22</sup>

The second stage of the protests saw changes not only in the nature of Euromaidan but also its demands. If the main slogans of the first phase were fixated on signing of the Association Agreement with the EU and returning to the European integration course; the second stage was to demand the resignation of Yanukovich and his cabinet.<sup>23</sup>

## MASS PROTESTS

Throngs of 100,000, some say 350,000, chanting 'Kyiv is Ours!', 'Out with the thugs!' and singing the national anthem,

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20 Yuriy Shveda and Joung Ho Park, 2016, op. cit.

21 The opposition was represented by three parties: Batkivshchyna, a party headed by the imprisoned Yulia Tymoshenko; UDAR, headed by Vitaliy Klychko, and Svoboda, headed by Oleh Tiahnybok. In December 2013, these party heads became the formal leaders of the Maidan, the movement named after Kyiv's central square, which has become the focal point for the protests.

22 Maria Danilova and Yuras Karmanau, "Massive anti-government rally in Ukraine turns violent", *CNBC*, December 1, 2013, <https://www.cnbc.com/2013/12/01/massive-anti-government-rally-in-ukraine-turns-violent.html>.

23 Yuriy Shveda and Joung Ho Park, 2016, op. cit.

took to the streets leading to the Maidan. For kilometres there were rivers of people. It was a moving spectacle. They came prepared with ski and motorcycle helmets. Some had stocked jerrycans of petrol, firecrackers and crowbars for scooping cobblestones in the boots of their cars. Thick rows of Policemen, in riot gear and gas masks, stood helplessly as the crowds either rebuked them or reminded them of their oath to serve the people. Venting their frustrations, the mobs turned riotous. They broke into and occupied the City Hall and the Trade Unions' Building. An attempt was made to storm the President's office with a bulldozer. Grossly outnumbered, the Police were on the run. Maidan was retaken. Overnight, a tent city was established in the historic square. At night, the Maidan became a quivering lake of flickering bonfires. Tapping into the public anger, the shrivelled opposition leaders came out of their shells to join the protest.

The protests continued through all of December and January, 2014. The Maidan remained occupied and government buildings were blockaded. Hordes of people had left their homes to camp in the biting cold. By mid-December, there was no space left to pitch another tent. Barricades were placed along the perimeter of the square to keep the Police away. Cameras provided live streaming of the agitation. Meanwhile, negotiations continued between the government, opposition leaders, representatives of the civil society and the European Union. Soldiers bustled about, guns in hand, finger on the trigger, ceaselessly trying to dislodge the protest camps. The agitators, with veterans from the Afghan War joining their ranks, countered with vigour and energy and held their ground. With social media becoming instrumental in organisation of the protests, the Berkut raided offices of opposition parties, ransacking and confiscating their computers, cameras and servers.

## Social Media and Ukraine's Euromaidan Revolution

In the early hours of December 11, with the temperature at  $-13^{\circ}\text{C}$ , the Government sent in riot Police and bulldozers to clear the Maidan of the 5,000 or so protestors who were camping there. As the word of Police action spread through *Facebook* and *Twitter*, another 25,000 activists, undaunted by the weather, descended on the Maidan with chattering teeth, forcing the Police to withdraw. Later that morning, after cutting off the power supply, the Police made an unsuccessful attempt to recapture the Kyiv Town Hall. The activists, having made the steps of the building slippery with ice and cooking oil, beat them back with fire hoses, smoke bombs and firecrackers.

The internal security forces and Berkut made one more attempt to clear the Maidan forcibly, pressing and beating protesters – most of whom did not even resist – with batons. Law enforcement officers pulled out people from the crowd and escorted them behind the line of attack, where they were arbitrarily beaten by the Berkut. Dispersing the crowd was tough because of the 50,000 people who poured into the square at night using all possible means of transport. According to official data, at least 49 people, including 11 law enforcement officers, were injured as a result of the special Police force attack.

After the effort to disperse Euromaidan failed, the Government initiated negotiations with the oppositional leaders, wrongly assuming that they were the ones coordinating the protest. Those negotiations resulted in passing the so-called amnesty law on December 19, 2013.<sup>24</sup>

Fedor Sivtsov posted on *Facebook*:

*Today, three things happened to me. 1. I believed in God. When the Berkut broke through behind the*

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24 Human Rights in Ukraine, “Euromaidan Events and Human Rights”, 2014, <http://khpg.org/en/index.php?id=1432629035>.

*barricades and began to press the people, when women and children were gathered on stage, and those who could not fit there – were around the stage. And people prayed and held onto every ounce of strength – so they would not cry out from either weakness or fear. Then suddenly in the night there was a bell ringing. And that ringing meant hope. At that moment I believed in God. 2. I became a nationalist. When I saw these soldiers – my compatriots, those who should personify the law, those who should protect the law in my country. Fulfilling a stupid monstrous order that defends the interest of only one person – the president of a neighbouring country (president of this country is not recognised by anyone) they went after peaceful demonstrators – children, women, old people, and they did not care. Then a shout came from the stage – ‘They heard us! People from all over Kyiv are coming!’ When I looked back into the wasteland, I saw an endless stream of people – Ukrainians, not indifferent to the fate of their fellow citizens. Simple compatriots who came to the defence of civilians. At that moment, I became a nationalist. 3. I was free from fear. When they surrounded the square from all sides and pressed us. When their strength gave out, we joined crowd and were able to rebuff them, and if not oust them, then at least stem the flow of these animals. At that moment, I was free from fear. Believe me, I am far from being the most courageous or reckless man in this country. But today I will go out again to the Maidan. For this night, for these people, for the pride of being one unified nation – for the pride we defended tonight. And I encourage you to get rid of your doubts and fears and come out with me. God is with us, honour and strength are with us, PEOPLE are*

*with us! With us – with Ukraine. Together – to victory!  
And once again – Glory to Ukraine!”*

### SAINT AND SINNERS

Three days later, on December 14, Okean Elzy, a popular Ukrainian rock band, gave a concert at the Maidan to an audience of 100,000, dedicating the event to the injured activists. The performance became a strong emotional charge for all the protesters and the largest and most remarkable live music performance in the history of Ukraine. There was a mass celebration of Christmas and New Year at the Maidan. On New Year's Eve, a massive number of people gathered to show their solidarity with the core group of activists. Unable to confront the crowds, the Police began picking on individual leaders and activists who, brutally beaten, went around with broken jaws and noses, and fractured hands and legs. Despite the state's ruthlessness, the protests were getting more entrenched, the mood more defiant.

Young and old contributed to the Euromaidan Revolution. Elina Slobodyanyuk wrote on Facebook:

One grandmother jostles about an electric train for three hours to bring goods to the Maidan: everything that can be collected from her neighbours/friends of her sleepy town... Long ago, she brought her meagre pension to the Maidan. She brings heavy bags several times a week. She shakes her provincial dreamy kingdom and explains the importance of the Maidan to her fellow countrymen, better than any politicians do. She involves people in helping. But for her, this is not enough. On her last visit, she rushed to wash the toilets of the Ukrainian House. Her name is Mariya. In my opinion, she is a saint...”

The Maidan movement thus became an archetype of a state, incorporating those values which all Ukrainians and the successors of the post-communist system dreamt of. It was a self-organised structure, where everyone, from an artist to a plain villager did that which most suited his or her knowledge, capability and vocation. And whenever there was danger or the threat of an attack, the Maidan mobilised itself and protected the demonstrators. It acted as one organism. Good managers organised work; cooks fed the people; doctors provided medical care; the stout and brave assured order; and the imaginative and inventive forged new initiatives.<sup>25</sup>

### SOCIAL MEDIA INITIATIVES

While of course no one can claim that Nayem's original *Facebook* post was the sole cause of all that followed for Ukraine, the Euromaidan protests may be the first where we can point directly and unambiguously to social media as a pivotal moment of organisation.<sup>26</sup> The protests, especially those in November 2013, had two different ways of using social networks. The rally on November 24 was organised using already established party institutions; it was coordinated from "above" by several opposition leaders; furthermore, the rally was planned ahead and had a long-term strategy. In other words, it was an example of classic "collective action." On the other hand, November 21, was marked by a considerable spike of online activity prior to the protests, signifying that social networks had anticipated the events and were being used as a tool of mass mobilisation. The civil unrest was sparked by a *Facebook* post that did not feature any political demands or slogans and did not provide any long-term strategy. People organised themselves on a horizontal, voluntary basis, with

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25 "Ukraine's 'Revolution of Dignity' for People and Business", 2014, op. cit.

26 Megan MacDuffee Metzger and Joshua A. Tucker, 2017, op. cit.



no leaders involved. The whole process of organisation was from the grass-roots, with no participation of established institutions. And it was spontaneous, as nobody knew about it until a couple of hours before the event.<sup>27</sup>

During the ensuing protests and demonstrations, a *Facebook* page, 'Euromaidan SOS', was launched for locating casualties, listing names of the wounded, missing or detained by the Police. It soon evolved into an information service: reporting movement of the Berkut; sharing images of Police violence, wounded protestors, volunteer medics assisting the injured; news updates; maps showing locations of free tea and sandwich stalls and warm areas where firewood burned in oil barrels; narrating individual accounts and experiences; and providing links to live streams of the protests. At least 250 volunteers, worked around the clock on the page, searching for the missing and keeping a direct telephone line open to the protest organisers. The use of social media, primarily *Facebook* and *Twitter*, and other communication tools for crowdsourcing were critical for sustaining Euromaidan over a long period. Activists used crowd mapping technology to envisage Euromaidan needs and connect those willing to fill them with protesters on the ground. Euromaidan SOS had more than 76,000 followers in just 8 days, and over 200,000 within the first 10 weeks of the protests. People interacted with this information and within the first two weeks, 2,000 updates posted on the page garnered almost 50,000 comments and over a million likes; and their content had been shared over 230,000 times.<sup>28</sup>

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27 A.M. Zaezjev, "Understanding Political Mobilization Through Social Media Content Analysis: Facebook and Vkontakte in the First Days of Euromaidan Revolution", *Dialogue*, 2018, p. 10, <http://www.dialog-21.ru/media/4558/zaezjevam.pdf>.

28 Tetyana Bohdanova, "Unexpected Revolution: The Role of Social Media in Ukraine's Euromaidan Uprising", Volume 13, Number 1, June 2014, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1007/s12290-014-0296-4>.

By posting in English, the ‘EuroMaidanPR’ *Facebook* page turned an ostensibly regional issue into an international one. Another *Facebook* page provided legal assistance to protestors. One Kyiv-based NGO collected donations through the Internet to help keep protestors warm and fed. Websites like ‘Don’t Ditch Maidan’ kept protestors keyed up, ‘Euromaidan Civic Sector’ promoted the Gandhian ideal of non-violent civil resistance; ‘Strike Placard’, run by a group of designers, created and circulated free Euromaidan posters; and ‘I’m A Drop in the Ocean’ designed posters and videos about Euromaidan.

Musicians kept the protestors entertained, while an initiative called ‘Open University of Maidan’ had university professors and academicians giving lectures three to five times a day in the open air or in the underground passages of the Maidan. A total of 295 lectures were held during the three-month period. Other civic initiatives included: Maidan Self-defence, a group for maintaining order within the tent camps and protecting areas controlled by the tenacious protestors from the persecuting authorities; ‘Automaidan’, which had motorists creating constant noise and nuisance outside the homes of the President and his ministers, maddening them with blasts of their horns and the roar and thunder of their engines, magnifying their misery by not letting them sleep at night, and the ‘Maidan Museum/Museum of Freedom’, which collected artefacts, documents, photographs and oral stories that later formed the basis for the National Memorial to the Heroes of the Heavenly Hundred and Revolution of Dignity<sup>29</sup> Museum.

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29 With good reason, the Euromaidan Revolution in Ukraine has been named the “Revolution of Dignity”. Standing right next to simple workers are wealthy individuals, and the middle class stands shoulder to shoulder with students and workers, protecting the right for the very survival of their nation.

The Maidan Field Post, a postal service complete with its own stamps, enabled those living in the Maidan's tent city to communicate with each other through letters, while 'Civic Sector of Maidan' provided information and logistical support to the activists. The 'Artistic Hundred' comprised protestors who documented the historic movement through installations, art and photographs.

We may not yet comprehend the full impact of social media or the exact mechanisms through which it was impactful, but it is clear that social media was a vital tool used for organising and sustaining the protests, and that at least some of the efforts organised online would have been incredibly difficult using traditional means. The ability to accept donations online, to organise carpools across long distances, and to receive widespread shows of support from around the world are all hallmarks of the digital nature of this movement. The Euromaidan was largely leaderless, but not disorganised, ideologically varied but not uncooperative.<sup>30</sup>

### THE TIDE TURNS

On January 19, 2014, Ukraine's Verkhovna Rada (Parliament) surreptitiously passed sweeping anti-protest or "dictatorship laws", criminalising all the methods employed by the activists at the Maidan. This provoked a further surge in protests, even as riot Police began to violently crack down on demonstrations. Protestors responded by throwing bricks and Molotov cocktails, leading to days of violent clashes and the death of three protestors.<sup>31</sup> Some 200,000 people, concealing their faces with masks and hard hats, gathered at the Maidan to demonstrate against the draconian laws. Noticing the winds

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30 Megan MacDuffee Metzger and Joshua A. Tucker, 2017, *op. cit.*

31 "Ukraine's Euromaidan Revolution", 2018, *op. cit.*

of change, senior government and defence officials began resigning from their posts. A former naval chief appealed to defence personnel not to follow orders of the criminal regime, and promised that those who were dismissed for insubordination would be reinstated once the new government took over. Riots erupted as crowds descended upon Parliament. By now, many activists had added Molotov cocktails to their arsenal. In the bitter cold, the Police repelled them with powerful jets of cold water.

The first death occurred on January 21, the 61<sup>st</sup> day of the protests, when a man fell from a 13-metre-high colonnade<sup>32</sup> either fleeing the Police or pushed by them. Bloody clashes occurred on January 22, at Hrushevskogo Street near the Presidential Administrative Building. Two more activists were killed in Police firing, further infuriating protesters. Some of the injured protestors admitted for treatment in hospitals started disappearing. The government made counter-allegations, accusing protestors of kidnapping, torturing and killing servicemen. Clashes continued for several weeks amidst international efforts to restore calm. But if the authorities were hoping to intimidate the protestors, they failed.<sup>33</sup>

On February 18, a day after Russia announced that it would be releasing the next tranche of USD 2 billion of the USD 15 billion loan offered to Ukraine, 20,000 protestors stormed Parliament. Security forces and the protestors engaged in violent skirmishes. In an ugly confrontation, Police and protestors fired at each other and the fighting continued all night. Stun grenades and pump-action shotguns were used by the Police. The protestors responded with Molotov cocktails.

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32 “History of the Revolution of Dignity in Ukraine”, *112.International*, November 21, 2016, <https://112.international/ukraine-top-news/history-of-the-revolution-of-dignity-in-ukraine-11253.html>.

33 Yuriy Shveda and Joung Ho Park, 2016, op. cit.

By morning, 26 people, including 10 Policemen, were dead and over 1,100 injured. Earlier, around midnight, several protestors were killed when the House of Trade Unions, which served as a revolutionary news centre and hospital, was torched by security forces. The Berkut, assisted by provocateurs deployed by the government, also made an unsuccessful attempt to storm the Maidan encampment. Though many tents were set on fire<sup>34</sup>, the protestors still controlled the square.<sup>35</sup>

On February 20 someone – no one still knows who – ordered snipers positioned on the roofs around the Maidan to open fire into the crowd. The massacre was filmed by professional and amateur journalists and widely disseminated on the Internet. More than 100 protestors died, and thousands were injured in the gunfire and ensuing melee. President Poroshenko later claimed there was evidence that Russian President Vladimir Putin's aide, Vladislav Surkov had organised and directed a team of foreign snipers that shot at the protestors on the Maidan.<sup>36</sup>

On February 21, the Euromaidan participants rejected an agreement between the opposition politicians and the President

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34 Ivana Kobernik posted that night on Facebook: *"Night. Frost. Hrushevskyyi Street. Frontline. Shouting. The sound grenades thunder, and further away, Molotov cocktails burn. In the corner sits a completely charred dude in camouflage, a bat on his knees, a mask on his face, a helmet on his head, mittens on his hands. He covers his ears with his hands and screams into his phone: 'Transfer the meeting from ten to twelve – move it to one. And call (some surname) and say that the signing of the contract is postponed until Wednesday... in the evening, no... in the evenings I am busy.' He looks around and sighs 'I do not know. I will do it when I am free.'"*

35 Wikipedia, 2014 Ukrainian Revolution,

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2014\\_Ukrainian\\_revolution#18\\_February](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2014_Ukrainian_revolution#18_February).

36 Borislav Bilash II, "Euromaidan Protests – The Revolution of Dignity", *Euromaidan Press*, February 20, 2016, <http://euromaidanpress.com/2016/02/20/the-story-of-ukraine-starting-from-euromaidan/2/>.

and stormed the Presidential Palace again, demanding the ouster of Yanukovush, who fled the capital, realising the dire situation. On February 22, the Verkhovna Rada, or Parliament, accepting the demand of the citizens, removed him from the position of President of Ukraine, and elected an acting Prime Minister and acting President who promptly declared they would sign the association agreement with the European Union.<sup>37</sup> This date is important, as it marked the logical end of the ‘Revolution of Dignity’.<sup>38</sup>

Having achieved their aim, the protestors withdrew from the Maidan, leaving behind scorched buildings, smouldering fires, streets covered with grime, shattered barricades, the lingering pungent smell of burnt rubber and more than a 100 dead. There was no sense of triumph amidst the quiet tears.

The Euromaidan Revolution, an uprising for dignity, was over.

## AFTERMATH

Days later, from my perch in an Italian café, I looked down at the flowers and wreaths, some fresh, some dried, placed in front of the long row of photographs of the Heavenly Hundred who died during the struggle, and a granite memorial and individual plaques inscribed with the names of the martyrs. Despite the Maidan being full of people lazing, loafing, chatting and enjoying the spring sun and warmth, a heavy atmosphere of disquiet and gloom prevailed.

In late January 2014, the Ukrainian Government stepped down and by the end of February, Yanukovych fled to Russia.

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37 Steven Pifer, “Ukraine: Looking forward, five years after the Maidan Revolution”, *Brookings*, February 22, 2019, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2019/02/22/ukraine-looking-forward-five-years-after-the-maidan-revolution/>.

38 Yuriy Shveda and Joung Ho Park, 2016, op. cit.

## Social Media and Ukraine's Euromaidan Revolution

Following elections in May, Petro Poroshenko became President, presiding over a coalition of democratic and Ukrainian nationalist parties promoting greater independence from Russia and a pro-European, reform agenda.

Pro-Russian forces in eastern Ukraine and Crimea opposed these developments, and in March 2014, Russia annexed the Crimean Peninsula, while armed conflict erupted in two eastern Ukrainian provinces between Russia-backed and government forces.

This had four major consequences. First, the successful revolution and subsequent Russian aggression fostered a wave of patriotism and Ukrainian identity, and raised hopes that reforms could stem emigration and the related loss of manpower, skills, and brains.<sup>39</sup>

Second, western nations slapped sanctions on Russia – their relations hitting a post-Cold War nadir.

Third, Ukraine became an EU associate member, its citizens given visa-free entry into the EU countries, and the EU-Ukraine Trade Agreement substantially increased commerce between the two regions.

And finally, a flourishing civil society saw 50 Maidan protestors become members of the 450-seat Ukrainian Parliament.

Poroshenko won by a wide margin in the elections that followed in October 2014, and spearheaded some impressive reforms over the next two years. These included reviewing and revamping government finances, pension reforms, an

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39 Franck Düvell and Irina Lapshyna, “The Euro Maidan Protests, Corruption, and War in Ukraine: Migration Trends and Ambitions”, *Migration Policy Institute*, July 15, 2015, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/euromaidan-protests-corruption-and-war-ukraine-migration-trends-and-ambitions>.

e-declaration system requiring that officials declare their wealth, an e-procurement system for government purchases, energy sector and price reform (thereby wiping out a huge subsidy cost for the government), and weaning the country off natural gas from Russia.<sup>40</sup>

Euromaidan had been the longest protest in recent memory, lasting uninterrupted for 92 days. In comparison, the 1989 Velvet Revolution to overthrow the communist regime in Czechoslovakia lasted 42 days; and in Romania, the protest that culminated in the execution of their dictator Nicolae Ceaușescu, lasted a mere 11 days.

As this is written, the Hong Kong demonstrations against China's Extradition Law Amendment Bill have overtaken Euromaidan as the longest lasting protests. In Hong Kong, too, the protestors have used social media to mobilise support, organise gatherings and document the movement. The Chinese authorities are not far behind in actively applying this modern tool to influence public opinion – showing that social media is a double-edged sword that can also be used by repressive governments to suppress opposing views.

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40 Steven Pifer, 2019, *op. cit.*