



First Anniversary of the beginning Euromaidan, honor march of Euromaidan Self-Defence troops.
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EUROMAIDAN REVISITED: CAUSES OF REGIME CHANGE IN UKRAINE ONE YEAR ON

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A year has passed since mass protests on the Maidan in Ukraine's capital Kiev culminated in bloodshed and president Viktor Yanukovich unexpectedly fled to Russia. Since then, Ukraine has plunged into a bloody civil conflict and a war by proxy with Russia. Relations between Russia and the West are continuing to worsen, and Europe has come to the brink of a large-scale interstate war for the first time since World War II. The Maidan protests have already catalyzed one of the most momentous geopolitical crises of the fledgling 21st century.

Despite their importance, there are more questions than answers about what happened over the course of these protests. Why did police use such extreme force very early in the protests, but held back from completely crushing the Maidan in the final days before Yanukovich's departure? How well coordinated was the protest movement, and did it have explicit and consistent political aims? What explains why the government responded so haphazardly and ineffectively to protesters' demands? Why did Viktor Yanukovich flee the

capital on the same day that he finally secured an agreement with leaders of the opposition? What was Russia's role over the course of these events? In exploring this set of questions I will draw on interviews with 22 leading Ukrainian politicians and civil society leaders that I conducted in Kiev in June and July 2014 and on broader knowledge of a country where I was born and which I have studied closely over the past decade. Of the twenty-two interviewees, fifteen were present on the Maidan almost daily, beginning in late November 2013, and several either worked directly for Yanukovich or had regular access to regime insiders.

My conclusion is that the regularly cited causes of regime change in Ukraine—public support for European integration, continued police brutality, or the size of the protest movement—are not the main reasons for the implosion of Yanukovich's presidency. Regime change is not a product of protest dynamics alone. In fact, mass protests are rarely successful at overturning governments. Regime change is caused by inadequate government response to mass unrest. In the case of Ukraine, the president's inner circle, raised in an environment of Soviet authoritarianism and incomplete post-authoritarian transition, understood the protest movement as a major challenge to regime stability but also as lacking grass-roots support and therefore easily suppressible. The institutional structure of Yanukovich's regime was generally characteristic of countries transitioning from authoritarian rule: a small circle of informal advisors competing with one another for the president's favor. This structure restricted the president's ability to adequately assess information and weakened the link between mid-level government personnel and senior decision makers,

given that members of the informal inner sanctum of government—referred to as “the Family” in Ukraine's case—were chosen for their loyalty to the president and not their professional qualifications. What this meant is that Yanukovich's regime failed to properly assess the nature of the protest movement, to make concessions when these were necessary, to leave the movement alone when it was waning, or even to adequately gauge the mood of the security establishment when police were beginning to turn against the regime.

The Causes of Euromaidan Protests

One common misperception is that protesters were primarily motivated by a pro-European agenda, and that the mass protest movement was largely a violent public reaction to president Yanukovich's last-minute refusal to sign the Association Agreement with the European Union (EU) on 28 November 2013. This view has been advanced by media outlets in the U.S. and Western Europe² and also by opposition parties who successfully branded the protest movement as *Euromaidan*. As it happens, Yanukovich ran his presidential campaign in 2009 on a platform of balancing between Europe and Russia. Over the course of 2013, he began to veer increasingly toward the EU. Yanukovich changed his mind after Russia threatened to cut trade ties with Ukraine and offered a \$15 billion aid package—ostensibly with few economic strings attached.

Notably, the presidential administration did not make that decision lightly. In its monthly nationwide monitoring of public opinion in November 2013,³ concluded on 25 November, the presidential administration fielded detailed questions to evaluate



Days of national mourning for killed defenders of Euromaidan. Photo credit: Kiev.Victor / Shutterstock.com

the state of public opinion on Ukraine's relations with Russia and the EU. The basic takeaway from that exercise was that the government had a great deal of leeway to do as it deemed fit. The public remained deeply divided over Ukraine's geopolitical course. While 45 percent supported the signing of a trade accord with the EU, 35 percent opposed that initiative. In response to a direct question about the impact of non-signing of the Association Agreement on respondents' attitudes toward Yanukovich, 53 percent said that their attitude toward the president would not change, 13 percent reported that it would improve, and only 22 percent stated that their opinion of Yanukovich would worsen. The potential for protests remained unchanged since June 2013; about 38 percent of respondents expressed willingness in principle to participate in protests.

Another common misperception, and one that Yanukovich's entourage appeared to believe, is that Ukraine's opposition parties—*Batkyvshchyna*, *Udar*, and *Svoboda*—were primarily responsible for successfully mobilizing the mass of protesters. In fact, opposition parties largely failed in providing much-needed effective leadership for the protest movement, formulating a clear set of goals, or

managing the public's anger. Simply put, political parties of all stripes were largely irrelevant over the course of Euromaidan. According to surveys of Maidan protesters fielded by the Kiev International Institute of Sociology [KIIS],⁴ only 5 percent of those on Maidan on December 7-8, 2013 joined the protests because of solidarity with opposition parties. That number dropped to only 3 percent by February 3. While seasoned politicians waged a covert war in the halls of power ostensibly over who would be the next president, marginal groups—hodge-podge extremists like *Pravyi Sektor* (Right Sector) and *Spilna Sprava* (Common Cause) among others—were able to temporarily hijack control of the protest movement at important strategic moments. This inevitably resulted in violent clashes with police, radicalization of mainstream society, the mass of ordinary protesters, and civilian casualties.

On the night of Saturday, November 30, police in riot gear attacked and beat several dozen peaceful and unarmed student protesters who were spending the night on the Maidan. More than any other factor, it was this act of police brutality that mobilized the mass unrest that followed. KIIS surveys demonstrate that the overwhelming

majority of protesters—69 percent in early December 2013 and 61 percent in early February 2014—came to the Maidan as a direct reaction to police brutality on November 30. All interviewees agreed that the police brutality against ordinary students, who usually keep at a distance from politics in Ukraine, shook society to its core.⁵ In the words of Vitaliy Portnikov, an influential Ukrainian freelance journalist, “Ukrainians had never been beaten [by police] before.” Ihor Lutsenko, a prominent civic activist and member of the Kiev city council, concurred and noted that in those rare instances when police did use force against protesters historically, officers would selectively target only committed civic activists with an established record. Police brutality against “innocent children” fomented a psychological counter-reaction among ordinary citizens, which then manifested itself in the 800,000-strong protest in central Kiev on December 1 and subsequent events.

Use of Force by Yanukovich’s Regime

Why did police show such unusual lack of restraint on the night of November 30? Who authorized the violent attack on student demonstrators and why? Hennadiy Moskal’, a retired police general and Batkyvshchyna deputy at the time of the interview, and Inna Bohoslovs’ka, a prominent Party of Regions deputy who left the party shortly after the mass protests began, both contend that the order could only have come personally from Yanukovich.⁶ On balance, it seems that the outbreak of police brutality was a product of internal rivalry among Yanukovich’s close associates. This is the view shared by many interviewees. According to this view, the anti-Yanukovich protests organized by the civil society on the Maidan (as

opposed to a smaller protest led by opposition parties in the nearby European Square) had been carefully orchestrated and largely controlled by the presidential administration and its head, Serhiy Lyovochkin. These protests were supposed to be permitted to die down slowly in the early hours of November 30. However, Lyovochkin’s competitors within Yanukovich’s inner circle—notably Andriy Kliuiv, secretary of the National Security and Defense Council, and his deputy Volodymyr Sivkovich—favored a show of force that would demonstrate to protesters that public disobedience would be severely punished. In short, during these early days the management of the pro-European protests became a field of competition to curry favor with the president. disproportionate use of force would send a signal to protesters that the government was determined to prevent mass unrest, while simultaneously discrediting those within the presidential administration who favored non-violent engagement with civil society. In the end, police attack on students massively backfired by mobilizing the otherwise politically indifferent Ukrainian society.

Every time that the protest movement began to weaken, the government would re-energize it through its ill-conceived attempts at suppression. All such moves—notably, the security operation to clear the Maidan on 11 December and the anti-protest laws of 16 January—would enrage the citizenry, attract ever more supporters to the protesters’ cause, and swell the ranks of demonstrators in central Kiev. Public calls in December 2013 for dismissal of the Minister of the Interior, a civilian who was a member of “the Family,” went unheeded. To surrender a senior advisor under pressure from protesters went

against the rules of the system. This refusal to meet protesters halfway, to show “weakness” in the public eye, characterized the government’s position throughout the standoff.

Even after Yanukovych’s circle internalized the fact that outright violence would backfire, it remained bent on continuing to suppress the opposition by other means. On December 11, police unsuccessfully attempted to peacefully reduce the physical area occupied by protesters. Then came targeted violence in the form of a series of kidnappings and brutal beatings of prominent activists like Tetiana Chornovol, Ihor Lutsenko, Dmytro Bulatov, and others. Mass court-mandated punishments of protesters followed. Next came a series of laws on January 16, 2014 restricting civil liberties. The first deaths in the standoff between police forces and protesters were reported on 22 January. At that moment, with first blood spilled and lives taken, the point of no return had been reached—many protest leaders now felt for the first time that early presidential elections would be the only viable solution to the ongoing crisis. In his interview, Danylo Klekh, head of Euromaidan’s information center, stressed how the composition of the protester camp changed substantially following these first deaths: what had been a mass of older people and students was replaced by men in their 30s and 40s, who were determined to bring the fight to government forces.

Yanukovych’s Escape

Euromaidan protesters and television viewers alike had been presented with the picture of security forces as a well-armed, ruthless, and disciplined monolith throughout the standoff.

At no time—including during the final hours of Yanukovych’s regime—did protesters believe that they had physical or strategic superiority on their side. The reality, in fact, could not have been more different. Yanukovych’s regime imploded because security personnel had abandoned it. Moskal’ characterized the mindset of security forces from late December 2013 until Yanukovych’s flight from the capital two months later as a state of “moral paralysis.” As time went on, the paralysis spread from ordinary soldiers to mid-ranking officers. From the perspective of ordinary policemen, the turning point came on February 20 when snipers shooting from buildings around the Maidan began killing police personnel. Deaths of their colleagues presented interior ministry troops with a choice: use live ammunition as per government’s orders or withdraw. Psychological and physical fatigue was by then so widespread among mid-ranking officers and the rank-and-file that sniper fire on the Maidan was the spark that sent a chain reaction through the whole security establishment. Within hours, police personnel had fled from the government quarter, leaving it undefended. Yanukovych had been abandoned. Now protected only by a political agreement with the opposition, he rightly feared for his life. The game was up.

Russia and Other International Players

All interviewees who had access to regime insiders confirmed that Russian security officials and representatives of Vladimir Putin’s presidential administration had been constantly present on the ground in Kiev and elsewhere in Ukraine since December 1, 2013. Beyond that basic fact, what role precisely Russian officials played in the events is a matter of controversy. Many civic activists

believe that the government's efforts to suppress the opposition were directed from Moscow. More likely—and this is the version of events advanced by General Moskal'—Russia lent substantial support to Ukraine's security establishment in drafting operational plans, but did not necessarily recommend putting them into effect.

As to the West's response to Euromaidan protests, it was exceedingly slow and not particularly robust. Most interviewees agree that had targeted financial sanctions been imposed against "the Family" and its backers—all of whom had assets in Western Europe and, notably, in Austria—in December 2013, just weeks after the initial police attack on students, then Yanukovich would have been much more likely to dismiss senior security officials. In an institutional environment where information signals were not getting through to senior decision makers, robust financial sanctions would have helped regime insiders to realize the seriousness of the situation. Dismissal of the interior minister Vitaliy Zakharchenko would likely have been sufficient any time before January 16, 2014 to diffuse the protest movement. The point of no return from the perspective of regime change was likely reached only on January 22, 2014, when first deaths were reported. Up until then, sizeable government concessions would likely have neutralized the threat of violent regime change.

To conclude, more than the size of the protest movement or the nature of its grievances, it was the government's inability to address what were originally moderate requests that ultimately brought about violent regime change in Ukraine,

the loss of Crimea, and subsequent conflict in the eastern provinces. The regime's inability to neutralize the protests was a direct product of institutional arrangements at the apex of power. The combination of weak rules governing regime change and an informational vacuum at the center of power led to the implosion of Yanukovich's rule. There were many windows of opportunity to diffuse the situation. From a policy perspective, rapid and decisive targeted financial sanctions against regime insiders could have forced the government to make the necessary concessions to the protest movement. Speed and timing would have been of the essence. One can only hope that the lessons of Euromaidan will be heeded elsewhere in the post-Soviet space and beyond. Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Russia are all among possible future cases where these lessons might become useful in due time.



Protest in Ukraine against the president Yanukovich.
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Endnotes

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2. e.g. Matt Kaminski. "In the Protest-Filled Square of Kiev: A police crackdown failed to oust the Ukrainians seeking closer ties to Europe," *Wall Street Journal*, December 11, 2013.
<http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052702303932504579252572042249400>.
3. Data shared graciously by Socis, one of Ukraine's leading public opinion firms. Nationally representative survey of 3,200 respondents conducted on 14-25 October.
4. Data provided by the Kiev International Institute of Sociology and the Il'ka Kucheriv Democratic Initiatives Fund.
5. From here on all references to interviews are interviews conducted by the author in Kiev between 25 June-2 July 2014.
6. Yanukovych denied giving such an order in a rare interview to a Russian daily on 24 December 2014 and blamed Serhiy Lyovochkin: http://www.aif.ru/euromaidan/viktor_yanukovich_eksklusivnoe_interview (in Russian).

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