



The Next Ukrainian Revolution Are You Ready For It?

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Ukraine is a regular source of “black swan” events—unexpected surprises that appear obvious in hindsight but are impossible to predict. This is because in the 27 years since Ukraine gained its independence, it has yet to develop a stable political system. Instead, it is in a constant state of upheaval, and experiences regular bottom-up regime change. The paradox of revolutions is that they appear impossible until they occur, after which they appear to have been inevitable. Ukraine has, in effect, been in the throes of an unfinished revolution since 1991. Each stage of this evolving process has surprised the world.

The unfinished Ukrainian revolution is only getting more dangerous. Since Russia annexed Crimea in February 2014 during the midst of yet another episode of political upheaval in Kyiv, and then launched a proxy war against the Ukrainian government, using the so-called “separatist republics” in Donetsk in Luhansk, Ukraine has mobilized for war. Ukraine now has the largest armed forces in Europe after Russia and Turkey, and its soldiers and veterans have been hardened in brutal combat against separatist forces back by elite Russian units. They remain angry at their political regime. And today they are armed and dangerous.

All of this started in October 1990, when local students of Kyiv National University organized a protest in downtown Kyiv [demanding](#) free elections, nationalization of assets belonging to the former Soviet Communist Party, and the resignation of Vitaliy Masol, then head of the Council of Ministers of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic. After a few weeks of protests and hunger strikes, local authorities began implementing the protestor’s demands. Masol resigned. The next year, on August 24, 1991, the Ukrainian parliament voted for independence from the collapsing Soviet Union. Student protests in Ukraine—which were called the “Revolution on Granite”—were among the first, largest and most significant in the entire Soviet Union during that tumultuous time.

The 1990s, however, failed to bring political reform. In September 2000, Ukrainian investigative journalist Georgii Gongadze disappeared. His dead body was later found near Kyiv. Gongadze had been kidnapped and tortured by police officers because of statements he made critical of the Ukrainian government. Several months later, an ex-bodyguard of

Ukrainian President Leonid Kuchma [released](#) an audio tape of Kuchma ordering his subordinates to “get rid of Gongadze.”

The release of the tape sparked another massive protest movement called “Ukraine Without Kuchma,” which called for an end to his authoritarian regime and its pressure on journalists and civil society. The rallies resulted in violent skirmishes in downtown Kyiv between protestors and riot police, but Kuchma remained in office. In 2003, Kuchma tried to designate Viktor Yanukovich as his successor as president, to be elected in 2004. His attempt to rig the election and pressure opposition leaders failed, however. The result was the Orange Revolution of November 2004, in which Yanukovich was defeated and pro-European candidate Viktor Yushchenko of the “Orange” opposition group ascended to the presidency.

In 2012, however, Yanukovich was elected president and began to again pressure civil society and opposition groups. His main competitor, opposition leader Yuliya Tymoshenko, was brought to trial on trumped-up charges of embezzlement and corruption. In 2011, she was [sentenced](#) to seven years in jail.

Tensions boiled over again in 2012, when Yanukovich [bowed](#) to Russian pressure and refused to sign a widely population Association Agreement with the European Union that would have brought Ukraine further from Russia’s orbit. Hundreds of protestors gathered on the main square in Kyiv, called the Maidan. On November 30th, Yanukovich ordered riot police to disperse the protestors, who brutally beat many of them. The next day, he faced even larger protests across Kyiv in response to the violence. It was the beginning of what has been called the Euromaidan Revolution.

Yanukovich knew he could not totally repress the population. In February 2014, after hundreds of protestors had been killed in bloody fighting across Kyiv, Yanukovich fled Ukraine and settled in Russia. He began blaming the opposition—and the escalating violence—on Western provocateurs. Russia took advantage of the uncertain political situation in Ukraine to seize control of Crimea, which they then annexed.

The remarkable thing about the Granite Revolution, the Orange Revolution and the Euromaidan Revolution is how un-revolutionary they have been. None of them succeeded in breaking down Ukraine’s entrenched political system. While the executive leadership has changed, the state remains repressive. As a result, Ukrainian civil society remains frustrated and upset with the lack of real reform.

The Ukrainian government has many good excuses for not reforming. After seizing Crimea, the Russian Federation began to provide clandestine support to Russian-speaking rebels against the Ukrainian government in Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts. Despite intermittent ceasefires, Ukraine remains embroiled in an undeclared war against a global power. It has used Russia’s undeclared war as an excuse not to institute promised European reforms, fight corruption, dismantle the oligarchy, and generally fulfill the promises it made during the Euromaidan revolution and subsequent elections in 2014.

Moreover, it has a powerful new tool to undermine opposition. Those who gather in the streets to protest today are automatically labelled “Kremlin agents” who are “seeking to destabilize the country from within.” These arguments provide the current regime with immunity from revolution. Moreover, since the regime is almost by default consider “pro-Western,” it has an easy time ignoring pressure from abroad.

The promise of the Euromaidan Revolution has not been fulfilled. Instead, it has been postponed, to be fulfilled after the Russian invasion of the Donbas is dealt with. And most Ukrainians today have shifted their energy and attention to addressing this external aggression.

Nonetheless, another Ukrainian uprising could happen at any time. According to [recent polling conducted](#) by the International Republican Institute, 67% of Ukrainians think that their country is headed in the wrong direction. 54% say they are [ready to take the streets](#) again if nothing changes soon.

The next Ukrainian uprising could well be more violent than the Euromaidan Revolution. Ukraine is now awash in seasoned combat veterans who were hardened in the brutal fighting in Donbas. Many are now struggling to support themselves on meager pensions, and received pitiful support from the government.

They are already organizing. In March, Semen Semenchenko, the founder of a “Donbas” volunteer battalion which has fought in eastern Ukraine against pro-Russian separatists, [announced](#) the formation of “Ukrainian defense forces” in order to “defend the Ukrainian people from pro-Russian collaborators, violations by police, and clean the country of corruption.” Before this, in 2017 Semenchenko and his battalions organized a [blockade](#) of Ukrainian trade with the separatists, who retain economic ties with the rest of Ukraine.

Last fall, a group of veterans also organized a [protest camp](#) before the Ukrainian Parliament. They demanded changes to electoral laws, and that Ukrainian lawmakers be stripped of immunity from prosecution. The protestors were [dispersed](#) with brutal force by Ukrainian police.

Since then, the “Ukrainian defense forces” have only become more organized. These veterans groups are likely to become the next main force of civil resistance to the Ukrainian political forces and their riot police. They are already behind many of the most effective protests in Ukraine.

Given Ukraine’s recent history and political situation, another uprising is inevitable. It could easily be sparked at the regional level. There are countless incidents today in which noble veterans are humiliated by local politicians and policemen who dodged service in Eastern Ukraine and have become even more corrupt since.

Just once such incident, widely publicized, could foment another revolution if spread through the network of hundreds of veterans organizations. Neither the riot police, nor even the National Guard, would be able to confront these veterans successfully. They are seasoned soldiers and many of them are armed with modern assault weapons smuggled from the front

in Eastern Ukraine. Venal local authorities are unlikely to risk their lives to stay in power: like Yanukovich, they will flee.

Of course, such an upheaval could prove catastrophic. Russia would surely not pass up an opportunity to take advantage of Ukraine. They might seize Mariupol, giving them a land bridge to Crimea. Or they might intervene in Ukraine's domestic politics in a more serious way.

Whatever the results, the next Ukrainian uprising won't be as peaceful as the last three. It will not be a stage performance. It is likely to be fast, bloody, and not involve thousands of protests. It will look more like a *coup d'etat*.

Ukrainian [civil society](#) will be a key actor in the next revolution, too. It is well organized, fearless, and popular with the Ukrainian people.¹ It stands in stark contrast to the Ukrainian political leadership, who continue to crack down on reasonable dissent by activists, veterans and journalists. Its ongoing repression could also spark the next revolt.

Nonetheless, we will not likely be able to predict the exact course of Ukraine's next revolution. It is inevitable, but it will also be unpredictable. It will have huge consequences. It is a true "black swan."

¹ <https://www.kyivpost.com/ukraine-politics/ukrainian-society-remains-split-progress-army-poll-shows.html>