New Eastern Europe

THE ART
OF REVOLUTION

New tools of the revolution

ROMAN ROMANYUK

It seems that one of Viktor Yanukovych's biggest mistakes was not believing that Ukraine in 2004 and Ukraine in 2013 were two completely different countries. The fundamental difference between them was the role the internet and social media played. Due to social media, the Ukrainian protests of 2013–2014, which were later dubbed the Revolution of Dignity, could begin and be organised in an unprecedented fashion.

"There is a Ukrainian tradition of having a revolution every ten years." This was one of the most popular jokes heard in Ukraine during the autumn of 2013. Back then the peaceful protests in the centre of Kyiv were escalating into yet another revolution against Viktor Yanukovych. After the previous one, the Orange Revolution of 2004, Yanukovych managed to re-enter politics and even became president in 2010. He tried to draw conclusions from the 2004 protests, but instead of becoming a democratic leader, he started to tighten the screws on politicians and law enforcement agencies and to buy up all the available media.

5 Kanal, a TV channel which is still owned by the current president, Petro Poroshenko, played a key role during the Orange Revolution. In 2004 the whole country watched the news on 5 Kanal, which was probably the only unbiased source of news during the Maidan.

Official media and TV channels, owned by oligarchic media holdings, tried to present the protests in Kyiv as an anti-state revolt and to discredit them in every

possible way. Yet one single unbiased TV channel was sufficient to ensure "the victory of the revolution". For this reason, after taking office in 2010, Yanukovych began to gradually take total control of Ukrainian media through his cronies, the so-called Family.

The revolution summoned via Facebook

By the time Ukrainians took to the Maidan to protest against Yanukovych's refusal to sign the Association Agreement with the European Union, the Family gained leverage over practically every media organisation in Ukraine. Some media was purchased for Yanukovych by "the new oligarchs", like the notorious Serhiy Kurchenko, who bought out one of the most successful and influential Ukrainian Media Holding (UMH). The media owned by the oligarchic groups were controlled by Yanukovych's people through arrangements as well as having high bargaining power. By the time the EuroMaidan began there remained only a few online media outlets in Ukraine, like *Ukrayinska Pravda*, which was able to openly criticise Yanukovych.

It seemed that with such controls in place the regime would exclude the mere possibility of a revolution. However, Yanukovych's team omitted one important detail. Ukraine in 2004 and Ukraine in 2013 were two completely different countries. The fundamental difference between them was the role the internet played. Due to social media, the Ukrainian protests of 2013–2014, which were later dubbed the Revolution of Dignity, could begin and be organised in an unprecedented fashion.

"Let's meet at 10:30pm near the monument to Independence. Dress warmly and take along your umbrellas, tea, coffee, good humour and friends". Those were the words written by the famous journalist Mustafa Nayyem on his Facebook profile on November 21st 2013. It was his reaction to the decision by the government, led by Mykola Azarov, to suspend the process of signing the Association Agreement with the EU. It is generally assumed that the EuroMaidan began with Nayyem's message.

A few hours later several hundred people gathered at the Maidan. The way the EuroMaidan began illustrates its several essential features. Firstly, the protests were much more mobile than they were in 2004. During the Orange Revolution, organisers had to literally go to people in order to pass out leaflets and they struggled to get their voices heard on national media (which was controlled by the government); in 2013 these same goals were achieved through social media. Secondly, the very essence of organising protests changed fundamentally. In 2004 everything depended on the parties and their regional chapters. Party leaders who stood on the stage during the Orange Revolution were responsible for the entire

organisational process. By contrast, the EuroMaidan was a phenomenon of self-organisation. It was guided and organised by the opinion leaders.

Ten years after the Orange Revolution, Ukrainians lost faith in the words made by politicians. People could only be motivated to protest by those who they trusted and who would not use them in their political games. Therefore it was a symbolic moment when journalists, civic activists, musicians and bloggers were the first to come to the Maidan. Since a large proportion of national media was controlled by Yanukovych's government, social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter functioned as the main platform for "the voices of the Maidan". These platforms were not controlled by Yanukovych's government, and as a result they were very efficient tools for the revolution. Social media in Ukraine has always been politically engaged. In the 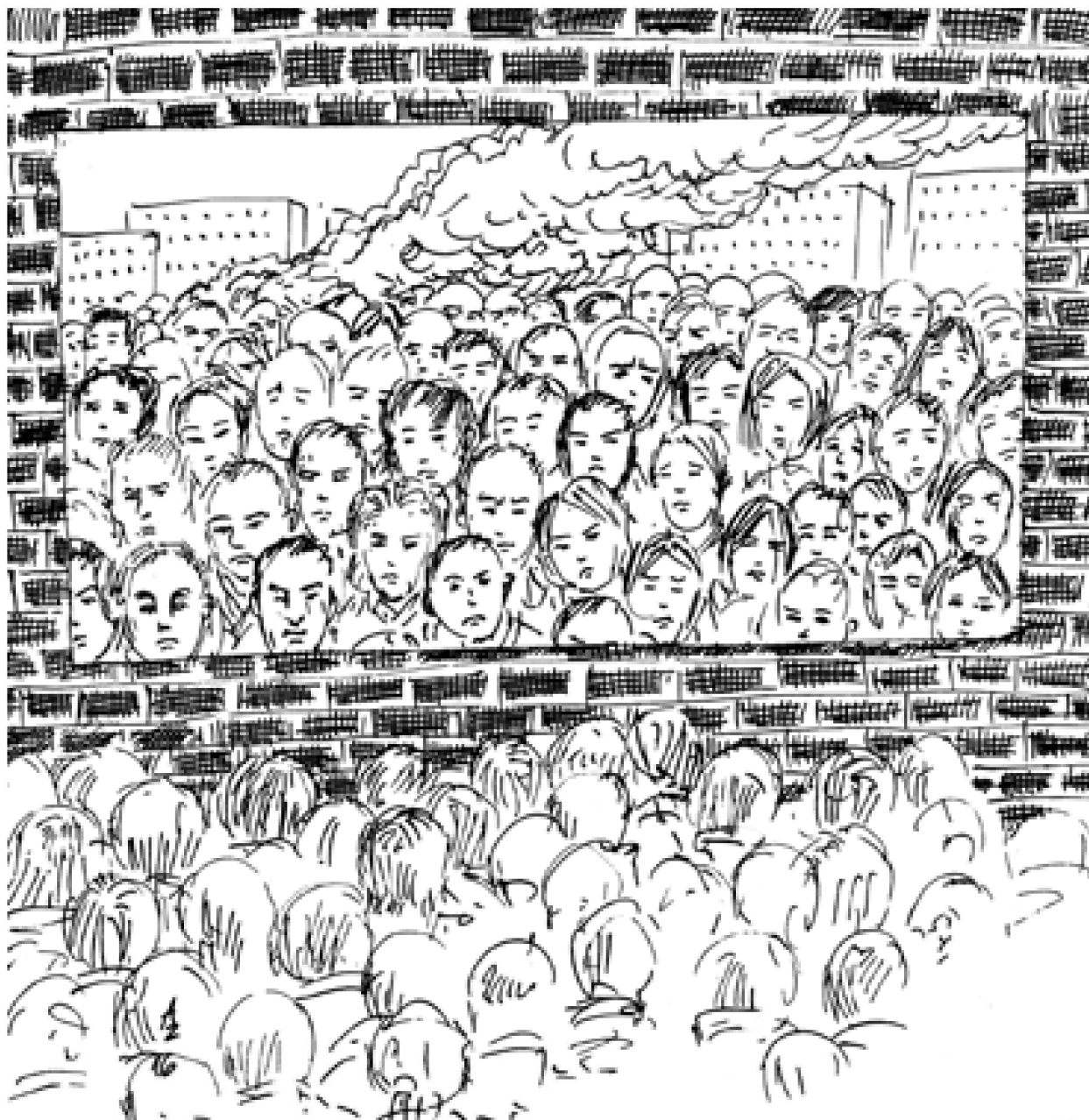West social media functions as a communication tool, first and foremost; but in Ukraine, Facebook has always been a vehicle for political struggle. Using Facebook for this purpose intensified during the EuroMaidan.

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Virtual organisation

There was another side to the focus on receiving information not from official media, but directly from the people participating in the events. Anyone could become a blogger within minutes. If you happened to be in the right place at the right time, your Facebook or Twitter post could receive hundreds of thousands of shares in no time. And this social elevator worked very quickly. A number of "opinion leaders" quickly emerged from the protest environment, whose names meant nothing to ordinary Ukrainians just a few months earlier. Furthermore, social media served as a platform for expressing opinions for many journalists who had retired from mainstream media companies after they were bought by Yanukovych's cronies.

Various volunteer "units of the Maidan", who were responsible for organising different aspects of the protests, were also co-ordinated through social media. By visiting their profiles, anyone could learn where to get a cup of tea, what medicines were needed, or which service was in need of volunteer help. A special mention should be given to the civic project *ЄвроМайдан-EuroMaidan* – a group of activists from this project actually became "the official representative of the Revolution of Dignity" on Facebook. Its profile was used for prompt gatherings and it published all the important information on the needs of the Maidan. They posted up-

to-date information of events in Kyiv, as well as the political situation in Ukraine and elsewhere in the world. In addition, the activists performed the extremely important role of verifying reported information, which was vital in the context of spreading false stories in the Ukrainian media space. It comes as no surprise that the *ЄвроМайдан-EuroMaidan* project was shortlisted for the Sakharov Prize in 2014. Generally speaking, Facebook was the main communications platform and command point for protests of the Revolution of Dignity.

At the beginning of the EuroMaidan, a new star of social media emerged. On the first night of the protest Ukrainians learned about Oleksandr Baraboshko. The thing he did on the night of November 22nd seemed amusing at first, but in the long run it completely changed the very essence of covering events of the Revolu-

tion of Dignity. Baraboshko live-streamed from the Maidan. His cheerful, and at times provocative and unprofessional transmission was carried out using an ordinary iPhone. It generally had nothing to do with journalism or documentaries, but it illustrated two extremely important points. Firstly, traditional media now lagged behind. In the autumn of 2013, television and print media lost a lot of its significance, as they were overtaken by social media commentators who could now easily produce and publish exclusive content. In today's fast-paced world, "old" media cannot demonstrate such flexibility. Their focus on "high-quality images" and "setting up light", for instance, made them slow and unable to react to the key events during the EuroMaidan.

The very first escalation took place on the night of November 30th 2013, when the Berkut forces violently dispersed protesters at the Maidan, demonstrated that traditional media lagged behind. Not a single TV channel or newspaper was present that night. The country learned about the dreadful events from the participants themselves, those who managed to take photos and record videos with their phones. These participants were the first to actively exploit online technologies and spot the trends of protests shifting to social media. In order to cover the whole range of events during the Revolution of Dignity, each media outlet would need to employ several hundred reporters. However, there were hundreds of thousands of reporters already there. Since everyone who was present at the Maidan had a phone and Wi-Fi access, they became journalists by default. This is the second important point which started with Baraboshko's stream.

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Digital volunteers

The media stopped emphasising the exclusive character of their information, instead focused on its prompt transmission. Due to social media, editors of websites, newspapers and TV channels learned about events in different places in Kyiv – the country was literally in online mode. Thus, they managed to simultaneously track several dozens of trials of activists in various cities, cover clashes across Kyiv and follow the political battles in parliament. News about some event was often published on a major websites seconds after they happened. During the most intensive days, Internet media broadcasted live online, thus replacing television.

The online newspaper *Ukrayinska Pravda* was among the leaders. Its editors rapidly adjusted to the new realities. On the Maidan's most critical days *Ukrayinska*

Pravda was read by up to 22 million viewers per day. Furthermore, the first project of independent online television in Ukraine *Hromadske TV* was launched during this period. It brought together most of the pro-opposition journalists who did not fit in the oligarchic media. This channel became the main source of information for all critical points during the Revolution of Dignity. Unlike traditional media, *Hromadske* focused not on quality of images, but on promptness and completeness of coverage. For the first time in Ukraine's history, hundreds of thousands of viewers simultaneously watched the revolution online.

However, even this was not the largest change in Ukraine. The main achievement of the EuroMaidan was the volunteering. New groups of people, who dealt with ever more challenging tasks, emerged almost on a daily basis. Again, social media facilitated the co-ordination of efforts and availability of such initiatives. As the protest movement developed, its needs developed as well. Initially day-to-day issues arose, such as supplying food, providing accommodation and security co-ordination. In the course of time, the tasks became more challenging. That is how cultural residences, or the Open University, emerged at the Maidan. Those projects were organised by people who accidentally met at the protests and decided to do something together.

Among the most illustrative examples is the story of the creative group of filmmakers Babylon'13. They met by chance after the first forceful dispersal of students and decided to shoot real-time documentaries about the Maidan. In just a few weeks they turned into one of the symbols of the cultural revolution and Maidan.

SOS

There were, however, more down-to-earth problems that needed to be addressed as well. Virtually every day security forces detained and arrested activists across Kyiv and Ukraine. In order to inform about each case, and to ensure the right to counsel for each detained protester, a volunteer network called Euromaidan SOS was created. The Facebook profile of this project connected the people who were in trouble with activists who would try and help them. Euromaidan SOS had a whole database of volunteer lawyers – up to 500 people at times – who would defend arrested activists in different cities free of charge.

The AutoMaidan was another symbol and example of protest organised through social networks. This movement brought together activists who had cars; they were in charge of delivering supplies and transportation. Among the symbols of the Revolution of Dignity were huge convoys, organised via the AutoMaidan groups, who blocked a passage to Yanukovych's scandalous residence in Mezhyhirya. Un-

like other volunteer movements, the AutoMaidan co-ordinated its work not entirely through social media. Its participants maintained operational communications through Zello, a free walkie-talkie app.

These are only a few of the flagship movements without which the Revolution of Dignity probably would not have been possible. However, there were many others: psychological assistance volunteers and medical service to the IT-community. Everyone did his or her part – however it is unlikely that all those people would have been able to organise a revolution without modern technology. Yet no technology could do it alone. NEE

Roman Romanyuk is a Ukrainian journalist with *Ukrayinska Pravda*.

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