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THE ART OF REVOLUTION

What makes a revolution (or not)

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Ukraine and Belarus are **two neighbouring post-Soviet states with similar attitudes** towards the role of their respective governments, authorities and democracy. But why is it that Ukraine has had two revolutions to overthrow the corrupt pro-Russian regime while Belarus has been under the same rule since 1994?



Belarus and Ukraine are two post-Soviet neighbouring states with very different post-Soviet experiences. Ukraine has experienced two democratic revolutions, and Belarus is ruled by the same regime, headed by Alyaksandr Lukashenka, since 1994. Belarus not only suffers because of abysmal democratic ratings, it also faces social and economic structural problems that clearly point to an economic downturn over the last two years. Does the difference between these two states lie in the levels of inequality, political culture, repressions or external interventions? Is there any indication that change could take place in Belarus sometime soon? A comparison of both countries, against a range of factors, can provide some insight when seeking answers to these questions; and most of all to the question: why did a revolution take place in Ukraine, but not in Belarus?

National identity

The most amorphous precursor to a revolution is often found in a newly discovered (or rediscovered) form of national identity. National identity is a broad

concept encompassing a value system as well as political culture. According to the World Values Survey (WVS) Belarusians and Ukrainians share the same basic assumptions about the role of government and democracy. Taking 2011 as our base year – the year after the violent crackdown of post-election protests by Lukashenka, and after Viktor Yanukovych came to power in Ukraine – we see that the response to questions from the two nations were nearly identical. For instance, we can see that Belarusians and Ukrainians endorse democracy as a principle, have

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low aspirations for the performance of government, and are willing to compromise. It is interesting to see that expectations for change remain low in Ukraine so soon after the democratic revolutions.

In 2011 democracy was important (four or more on a scale of ten) for more than 90 per cent of Belarusians and Ukrainians and more than 80 per cent believed it was a good way to govern their country. Choosing leaders in free elections and protecting civil liberties were both seen as essential characteristics of democracy. Answers were somewhat contradictory if we look at another question. 47 per cent of Belarusians and 73 per cent (!) of Ukrainians favour “having a strong

leader who does not have to bother with parliament and elections”. This most likely reflects the disappointment in the democratic process following the political infighting between Yulia Tymoshenko and Viktor Yushchenko after the Orange Revolution. At the same time, Belarusians had more confidence in their government, and both nations have generally positive attitudes towards the current level of democratic governance and respect for human rights. A majority were happy with life and believed they have a rather high to high level of “freedom of choice and control over their own life” and were proud of their nationality.

Why such incoherence? First and foremost, the mode of political governance is a less salient issue compared to economic development – the main priority for nearly 80 per cent of Ukrainians and Belarusians. Neither Belarusians nor Ukrainians were interested in politics in 2011. At the same time, an overwhelming majority – especially among Ukrainians – are inclined to think that taxing the rich and subsidising the poor are all essential characteristics of a democracy. This clearly points us in the direction of a “social contract”, which was described in detail in a study by the Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies (BISS).

Behaving properly

There is something else, though. While the BISS rejected this as an ungrounded explanation, the 2011 World Values Survey shows that both societies are, on average, more inclined towards hierarchical, communal arrangements than individualism. A clear majority support the view that “the government should take more responsibility to ensure that everyone is provided for” and that obeying the rulers is a key characteristic of democracy. This is certainly a by-product of Soviet times, and in Ukraine’s case it reflects not only the inertia of the current reform process, but also society’s ambiguous stance: simultaneously longing for free market capitalism and state control.

On the societal level in Belarus, there is a clear preference for behaving “properly” and in line with others’ expectations. This is coupled with a widespread distrust of others. There is also high level of concern about the prospect of civil war. Even now, while polls show widespread dissatisfaction with economic stagnation and that the president is blamed for the crisis, two out of three people still believe in maintaining the status quo. The Minsk-based Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies recently emphasised this point: “One should not be deluded, taking the growth of diffuse dissatisfaction for real readiness to protest.”

An important factor, however, is the strong sense of national identity and statehood experience. While nationalism was a driving force for many post-Cold war attempts to estrange themselves from Russia and integrate into the European Union, less than one in ten citizens speak Belarusian on a daily basis and Lukashenka himself has long derided the language. Belarusians have had very limited statehood experience over the last number of centuries and Stalin was particularly harsh with the Belarusian intelligentsia. During the Ukrainian crisis, the state paid greater attention to the issue of national identity when the Russian threat became so preeminent that Belarusian TV even turned against the “Orthodox neo-Nazis” luring Belarusian teenagers into the “Russian World”. Basically, the prospect of a national revival was hijacked by the regime for its self-preservation purposes. The Belarusian government, however, is still hard-pressed to break its economic dependence on Russia.

Ukraine, clearly, is a very different story. First and foremost, its identity is not uniform – largely due to the ethnic layout of society. The western, mainly Ukrainian-speaking population has always been more pro-Europe, while the eastern, mainly

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Russian-speaking population has naturally been more pro-Russia. This makes any political choice in Ukraine a complicated issue that has already led to two revolutions. There is a predominant view that the EuroMaidan and the consecutive occupation of Crimea and the war in Ukraine's east have all help strengthen national identity. The question, however, is whether this is an irreversible process or will the disappointment in democratic reforms and economic development lead to a return of the previous state of affairs?

Social contract

If a social contract is of paramount importance we should look at how both economies have functioned in this regard. Lukashenka's policies in Belarus have seemingly been aimed at maintaining a Soviet-style economic and social structure: full employment and social guarantees with stability ensured through the predominance of a state-controlled sector. After the initial "shock without therapy" of the early 1990s, Belarusian society was eager for at least minimum guarantees, and Lukashenka has, to date, guaranteed basic stability by finding subsidies in Russia coupled with loans from international financial institutions. Belarus together with Azerbaijan is far wealthier than other Eastern European states. It has faced difficulties however because when income levels dropped so did social guarantees. The national economy is currently experiencing another difficult period. Yet Lukashenka has managed to avoid radical reforms by manoeuvring between Russia and the West, catering to key constituencies like pensioners and convincing Belarusians that they should be happy with what they have. While his "social contract" slowly erodes, it has not reached a point to spark a revolution.

The Ukrainian story is rather more complex. Since regaining independence from the Soviet Union, the national economy has been largely controlled by regional oligarchs. Some of them obtained their wealth as so called "red directors" or from gas import schemes, while others through links with organised crime. Ukraine is a large country, rich in natural resources and agricultural land, and it has high levels of education. It has all the preconditions for good economic development. Yet this development has stalled since the 1990s as oligarchic interests have been focused on maintaining the status quo (which allows embezzlement, rent seeking and profit skimming).

As a result of the revolution in 2014 and the pains of the reform process, the national economy suffered a heavy recession (6.6 per cent decline in GDP in 2014, and 9.9 per cent in 2015) and inflation grew by 48.7 per cent in the past year alone. The predictions for 2016 are hopeful: projecting a moderate growth of 1.5 per cent

and 12 per cent for inflation. The economic situation in Ukraine and the state's inability to tackle corruption in the legal system has already resulted in the resignation of anti-corruption figures as well as some anti-government demonstrations. These demonstrations are believed to be organised by the old corrupt elite and party's affiliated with Yanukovych and Tymoshenko. However, we should keep in mind that poverty and economic recession are preconditions for greater support of populism and authoritarianism.

Opposition and oligarchy

As the previous two points show, other factors are needed to account for the failure of a Belarusian revolution. Repressive institutions, an overblown security apparatus and a rigged political process are frequently cited as the main reasons for the opposition's inability to gain power. Four people disappeared in Belarus between 1999 and 2000, more were held as political prisoners, and protests after the 2010 elections were dispersed particularly violently. The state exercises many other subtler mechanisms of control such as widespread internet surveillance. Yet according to independent polls, most Belarusians have expressed satisfaction with law enforcement agencies.

Is this control sufficient for preventing a revolution? Undoubtedly, the stability of the Lukashenka regime can be partly explained due to the weakness of the opposition itself. Yet the Belarusian opposition is relatively well off compared to other repressive regimes. It has western support (not only moral but material) and relatively safe harbours nearby (a lot of democratic forces operate from Lithuania). However, it is an atomised opposition in an atomised society: there has been no strong coalition and no charismatic personality around which Belarusians could unite. Moreover, revolutions are truly successful only if someone has a clear plan for the aftermath – and the opposition have failed to come up with any viable alternative.

The situation in Ukraine remains different. Even during Leonid Kuchma's regime, political and economic powers were distributed among various actors. The oligarchy, in this sense, is both Ukraine's main problem and its guarantee for political freedom (albeit in a limited sense). During the Orange Revolution and Maidan the oligarchs, who were not satisfied with the ruling political force, were the ones behind the revolutions (though less so at the inception

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of Maidan, which started off as a student protest). The oligarchy has surprisingly always opposed the ruling party to some degree (of course, primarily in its own interest). For example, Yanukovych once attempted to adjust the constitution in a way that would increase presidential powers. Ultimately this did not succeed. But the oligarchic support for political opposition places Ukraine in a constant limbo as the state is inefficient due to political infighting and constant changes. Furthermore, it also endangers any reform process. The oligarchy is not really interested in any actual revision of the rigged legal and law enforcement systems, which are essential for maintaining the status quo.

Catalysts and influence

On reasons for success or failure of revolutions, political scientist Robert Dix wrote that “revolutions are only likely to succeed where sufficient regime narrowing takes place to push otherwise non-radical elements of society into a loose negative coalition with a core of revolutionary militants”. There has been no such catalyst in Belarus. In fact, Lukashenka has played the “divide and rule” policy with the opposition and, to an extent, the general public (especially by focusing on pensioners as main benefactors and loyalists). In the end, as the WVS data shows, some two-thirds of Belarusians still believe their rights are catered for.

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Ukraine’s political system, as mention above, is much more plural than the one in Belarus. This is not a good thing in itself, as it is largely based on the interests of oligarchs than an actual willingness to promote reform. However, it should be noted that political plurality has resulted in a strong civil society, which has remained active since the EuroMaidan. Ukraine’s media has also remained pluralistic after the Orange Revolution despite Yanukovych’s attempts to implement authoritarian rule.

Active public engagement and media diversity were the main driving forces behind both revolutions, where the catalyst was the ruling elite’s corrupt modus operandi.

External influence is critical for Belarus and Ukraine. Russia, for instance, has been offering political and economic support for authoritarian governments. The EU, the US and other western donors have promoted reforms through political support, technical assistance, training, and networking. One of the reasons for Lukashenka’s success has been his ability to play one actor against the other; the

Ukrainian crisis in fact saved the Belarusian president, who through the Minsk talks, strengthened his international position yet again.


As the journalist and writer Cristina Odone points out, European states have not all been equally critical of the Lukashenka regime – as attested by the provisions of Swedish surveillance equipment, British weapons, and the lucrative trade deals that appeared on Belarusian activists' bank accounts which were handed over by the Lithuanian authorities. Furthermore, there have been some misgivings expressed towards western policy. Research carried out between 2006 and 2011 show that the bulk of international funds went to the government or its international proxies.

External influence has meant the regime in Belarus has remained stable, but in Ukraine it has caused the complete opposite. This brings us back to the issue of national identity, as the western part of Ukraine has always been more pro-European and the Eastern part more pro-Russian, with Kyiv dangling in the middle. There is no doubt that Ukraine's historic, ethnic, business and criminal ties to Russia give the latter a considerable leverage over the former. Simultaneously, Russia's use of economic tools for pressuring Ukraine, in particular political decisions, gives place for western nations to expand their impact through providing an alternative. In fact, it is no news that Ukraine has been balancing between these two economic and political alternatives since the Orange Revolution. It is too early to say if the EuroMaidan will be successful this time and result in an irreversible move towards the EU; – especially when we take into account that the EU has not shown much interest on the prospect of Ukraine becoming a member state.

Revolution vs status quo

Despite citizens in Belarus and Ukraine sharing similar views, there are some intrinsic differences between the two, which have led to a repeated democratic revolution in one and a long lasting status quo in the other. Firstly, Belarus's economic dependence on Russia is a clear reason why the regime is unwilling to change and it does its utmost to maintain the status quo. The lack of plural voices within the political elite is a necessary precondition for Lukashenka to maintain the existing order. Meanwhile, Ukraine's oligarchy has always had a present within the political opposition and no government has remained unchallenged. In addition, both of the revolutions (especially the EuroMaidan), spread from civil society movements (one sphere that is highly developed in Ukraine), while the non-government sector in Belarus has been atomised and quiet since the failed protests in 2011.

Lukashenka's unchallenged rule and his ability to maintain the balance between western and Russian influence have resulted in a strong authoritarian regime where

there is not enough space for the proper development of an alternative political identity or a strong civil society. Meanwhile, Ukraine's plurality in terms of the economy, politics and media, and the prevalence of a strong, active civil society have resulted in two revolutions since 2000. It remains to be seen, however, if the EuroMaidan will bring about the results we all want. 

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