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THE ART OF REVOLUTION

Three myths of Ukraine's revolutions

NATALIIA POHORILA



Public opinion polls are a great tool for depicting the motivation of political activity, potential participation in protests as well as new manifestations of public activity. However, people often misunderstand the purpose of **sociological surveys** and how they can be useful. Or else, wrongly assume that polls are supposed to predict future societal outbursts.



Opinion polls play a key role in informing us before any important political event – such as elections, referendum or policy reform – takes place. They are widely used and cited by political actors, journalists, foreign observers and scholars and are usually deemed more important in periods just before and after social outbursts. Consider revolutions, for instance. The truth, however, is that political engagement complicates the interpretation of sociological data, since political actors actively use this information for their own benefit and interpret it in a way that helps prove their point. That is why there is quite a common misconception that sociological surveys are supposed to predict future societal outbursts.

People often misunderstand the purpose of sociological data polls and how they can be useful. Longitudinal studies can demonstrate change, which occurs very slowly. Nonetheless they are extremely important for understanding society. In addition, surveys are also needed for identifying which social groups may become key actors in forthcoming transformative events, or recording what parts of the population think about significant changes in the political sphere. It is important to look at some of the misconceptions with an emphasis on the importance of facts when getting to the core of understanding revolutionary events.

Revolutionary situation

Myth 1: Before any revolution there are growing negative sentiments among the population and dissatisfaction with the authorities which is a result of a prolonged decline in the standard of living and political instability.

This myth is perpetuated by the well-known notion of the “revolutionary situation”, which was first formulated in 1913 by Vladimir Lenin in his article “Mayovka of the Revolutionary Proletariat”. Lenin wrote that “it is not enough for the lower classes to be dissatisfied with the way they used to live for the revolution to begin. It is also vital that the elite cannot live and rule the way they used to”. Whether this is done deliberately or unconsciously, journalists and political scientists often refer to this as, say, “the elite cannot take it anymore and the masses no longer want to” when explaining revolutions. A revolutionary situation can be interpreted as the “seething” of society, driven to despair by the difficult financial situation in a country with favourable circumstances for revolution.

Presumably, this seething is demonstrated in cases where there is a dramatic distrust of government and security agencies and an astonishingly low assessment of the economic situation in the country as a whole. Expressions of discontent are usually dramatic, with such phrases as “impoverishment”, “lawlessness”, “we cannot take it anymore”, or “we have to go to the streets”. The notion that people are driven to despair suggests a development of corresponding trends in the evolution of public opinion. Therefore, when evaluating the situation sociologically, concepts like “masses”, “people”, or “impoverishment” must be taken into consideration in the polls.

This provokes the question: What is the value of the conclusions drawn by researchers since the polls were first taken in independent Ukraine? The longitudinal survey conducted by the University of Sociology at the Ukrainian National Academy of Sciences, beginning in 1992, clearly does not meet the expectations described above. Social attitudes were not the worst on the eve of the autumn 2004 events. The public assessment of the financial situation in the country as a whole, along with the evaluation of one's personal position in society and satisfaction with their standard of living overall, declined around 1998. This was a very difficult year for Ukraine, when payment delays reached the absolute maximum, leading to a financial crisis and default.

Trust in government institutions and authorities was strikingly low, reaching its lowest point in 1998 when no more than seven per cent of the population trusted

The diminishing economic ratings and trust in political institutions as well as the protest moods must be monitored for **several years** prior to the revolution.

the then-President Leonid Kuchma and nine per cent trusted the parliament. In 1999–2000 things began to improve. However, if we stick to Lenin's definition of revolutionary situation, we would have predicted that a revolution would have taken place at the end of 1998 or early 1999. Indeed, no long afterwards there were mass demonstrations as part of the movement "Ukraine without Kuchma", but their scale was not large enough to predict the coming of a revolution.

In the beginning of 1999 public opinion was slowly improving and by 2000–2001 living standards returned to what they were in 1994, and in 2002 they significantly surpassed those levels. Improvement in public sentiments could be attributed to the decisions undertaken by the government of Viktor Yushchenko to stabilise the financial situation. The stabilisation of the public mood might also have been caused by the gradual harmonisation of the private sector. There was a growing satisfaction with more free markets, freedom of movement and self-determination. Statistics indicated a small growth in income as well as a growth in GDP, which continued to rise afterwards. On the level of societal psychology, society was coming to peace with the departure of Soviet norms and accepting the introduction of new principles of national identity. Among sociologists there was a common belief that people were tired of radical change and the need to constantly adapt to a new reality. This idea assumes that time works for the preservation of the regime. Thus, in the case of Ukraine, it became visible that after a certain moment support for the Soviet system became less and less likely.

Growing hope

To be sure, signs of positive change ought to be analysed prudently and cautiously. Overall, between 1994 and 2004 evaluation of living standards and the degree of trust in politicians was very low. Yet starting in 1999 the indicators stopped deteriorating. First of all, it was clear that people began giving less negative responses to surveys. The number of those who anticipated that their financial situation would deteriorate also decreased for the first time. As Sergey Makeiev noted in 2003, there was a "slowdown in the steady fall" of public attitudes and a transition from the strategy of "survival" to "accommodation" emerged. The irreversibility of this trend underlines the continuous decline of fear and anxiety that was so widespread in the 1990s (i.e. fear of hunger, being without heat, the rise of crime and unemployment). As for political sentiments, many people found political actors – parties and political leaders – they could entrust. There was also a visible trend upwards in those who primarily identified themselves as Ukrainian than who primarily identified with their local region or showed Soviet identification.

By autumn 2004 Ukraine was no longer a country “forced into despair”, but one whose population, for the first time since 1998, had substantially seen an increase in hope for a better future. So why does Lenin’s formula not apply when trying to explain those “pre-revolutionary sentiments”? Why did the illegitimacy of the regime not reveal itself in the empirical studies?

First of all, as the history of undemocratic regimes shows, the recognition of illegitimacy of the regime alone is not sufficient for a revolutionary eruption. According to Adam Przeworski regime may exist without legitimacy, if no coherent alternative is politically organised. Secondly, opinion polls are too rare, and it is only by sheer chance that some occur before a revolutionary event takes place. For this reason, the events causing an uprising and the reaction to them appear practically unnoticeable to sociologists. Only if surveys are conducted on a regular basis and before a particular event can it be possible to expose a “fracture” in a nation’s sentiment.

Does all of this suggest that the study of public opinion is useless and cannot explain revolutions? Undoubtedly, the results of surveys are helpful – although not in predicting the precise moment of a mass protest – but they do offer a better understanding of protestors’ motivations. The protests of 2004, for instance, occurred at a time of growing interest in politics and an increased awareness of difficult political questions, such as whether Ukraine should join the European Union and NATO. Because of improvements in the financial situation and growing interest in politics, the Orange Revolution cannot be called a hunger riot, a pre-paid event, or something that was fuelled by pragmatic aspirations. Those changes indicate far more important processes than simply fluctuating ratings of politicians. These shifts signalled changing values in society.

This motivation – the protection of personal interest, the right of political participation and the right to receive honest and objective election coverage – does not exclude the fact that many indicators were very low before and after the Orange Revolution. These indicators included trust in security institutions, courts, disbelief in one’s own power and ability to change the unlawful authority’s decisions and approval of principles of the free economy. Since the Orange Revolution, some indicators, such as the disapproval of the privatisation of public services and attitudes towards joining NATO, deteriorated. What must also be taken into consideration is the disparity of public opinion: pro-market, democratic and pro-European orientations have increased mostly among the better educated, younger and wealthier members of society, those who are usually referred to as the winners of transformation. As Makeiev noted, the “slowdown of the steady fall” was taking place at a time when the gap between rich and poor was growing. In addition, regional differences were becoming more noticeable, especially with regards to

attitudes towards foreign policy. These trends were signalling the next outburst, but trying to predict it with the polling data was extremely difficult.

Mobilisation myth

Myth 2. Before events there are growing protest sentiments and a readiness to go to the streets to defend rights.

This argument is beloved by politicians who compete with each other and use it to justify their positions. They often operate with phrases like “the tension in the population has reached its limits”, “society has awoken”, “the wave of the public’s resentment”, “millions are going to the streets”, “mass movements”, and so on. However, there are two things that should be questioned.

First, whether opinion polling can determine the growth of protest sentiments, considering the fact that many demonstrators themselves would not be able to say whether they would be participating in strikes within a month or even a week of it happening. The biggest problem for sociologists is that it is almost impossible to predict what will be the reason for the outburst and what kinds of internal and external factors will be present. The mass mobilisation myth is reinforced by data of participation in national elections and the accelerated growth in the number of supporters of a particular party or candidate.

Secondly, there is a common belief in the overwhelming character of protest, which can be disproved by polling data. In 2005, for example, only 12 per cent of respondents admitted they participated in the demonstrations of autumn 2004. In 2004 the indicators for protest sentiments were even smaller than in 2003. The proportion of protest sentiments increased in March of 2005, after the end of the Orange Revolution when there was no apparent reason for it. In other words, the strikes of 2004 demonstrated to the Ukrainian public what they can actually achieve. For many the revelation was that mass strikes are, indeed, possible, and that is why opinion in favour of them became more popular. That is to say, it can be argued that it was not the revolutionary sentiment that caused the revolution, but that the revolution itself became the underlying reason for a shift in the national consciousness.

Myth 3. Shortly after the revolution comes disappointment.

The myth about the disappointment after the revolutionary events of 2004 and 2013 was actively picked up by journalists and analysts who often used the term “betrayal”. The topic of disappointment was discussed and debated often after the Orange Revolution and the disintegration of the Orange coalition (and basically

every discussion and attempt to analyse the post-Orange period) were described as a time of the preparation for the next outburst. The rhetoric of the press predominantly operated with phrases such as “complete disappointment”, “deceived nation” and “betrayed revolution”. Sociological studies conducted in 2005 and 2006 confirm the presence of some disappointment and discontent among the public, similar trends are now seen since 2013. However, the empirical data have never shown overall disappointment with all aspects of political life.

Frustrated progress

Indeed, the data showed that after the escalation of enthusiasm in 2005 there was an obvious decrease in many indicators, such as trust in politicians and political institutions, assessment of the economic situation, interest in politics and national pride. A special case was a progressive decrease in trust in the Ukrainian parliament, the president and the authorities in the years 2005, 2010 and 2014. The indicators for trust in political institutions had fallen to the level of the 1990s. However, not all political assessments followed the same trajectory. For example, the evaluations of economic performance were largely influenced by the global financial crisis of 2008.

Interest in politics returned; assessment of the overall satisfaction with living standards and identification with Ukrainian state did not decrease. Fear of social and economic deterioration did not increase. At that time, there was also no increase in the desire to protest. Hence, an assessment of the likelihood of future strikes, along with other forms of political activity, did not allow for a prediction of a political change in near future.


In other words, even though the data suggested a certain level of disappointment with the Orange coalition, and its ultimate split in 2006, it was not sufficient to foresee what would blow up in 2013. Rather there was a stabilisation of public opinion in 2005. As a matter of fact, March 2005 saw a marked surge in people's trust towards public institutions and politicians, national pride, optimism and citizen identification. Hence, it must be taken into account that the drop happened right after this surge and not after 2004.

So how are the changes reflected in the polls related to the revolutionary events? When Ted Gurr, a theorist of political conflict, described the causes of revolution

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from a sociological standpoint, he largely relied on the assumption of a separation of value expectations – the level of development people expect from value capacities – the functional capacity of the system itself to satisfy those expectations. He outlined different types of revolutions: rising expectations, withdrawn benefits and frustrated progress.

In my view, the revolutions of 2004 and 2013 evolved rather in accordance with frustrated progress, than any other expectation. This suggests a situation where economic growth and political liberalisation slow down while the expectations of future development rise, relying on the stability of growth. That is, the economic stabilisation at the beginning of the 2000s, and the liberalisation of political and cultural life since the time Ukraine gained independence, provided people with ground to expect and wait for subsequent development. There was a belief that living standards would eventually reach western European standards and that it would coincide with a greater protection of human rights, more transparency in the electoral process and a better image of Ukraine to the outside world. Yet, the events after 2005–2006 led to a delay and break in the development process. That is why there was a split between the people's expectations and the actual events in the state. This is how we can explain the absence of concrete critical trends in public opinion polls. The naming of the 2013 revolution as “The Revolution of Dignity” illustrates this. It was a protest of those whose hopes for continued growth and development were crushed and left unfulfilled.

Despite their limitations, opinion polls serve as a useful tool for depicting the motivation of political activity, potential participation in protests and new manifestations of public activity. But in predicting revolutionary moods, certain caveats need to be taken into account. Being aware of the abovementioned myths with regards to opinion polls can help us get to the core of truly understanding the causes of revolutionary events. 

Translated by Viktoria Chaban

Nataliia Pohorila is a professor of sociology at the Ukrainian Catholic University in Lviv.