

Belarusization, Hybridization, or Democratization?

THE CHANGING PROSPECTS FOR UKRAINE

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In November 2013, when Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych refused to sign an Association Agreement with the European Union at the Eastern Partnership Summit in Vilnius, there was a moment when it was worth pondering the reasons behind his decision. But a brutal crackdown the next night on protesters gathered at the Maidan, Kyiv's central square, revealed the true face of Ukraine's authorities. Yanukovych went to Vilnius not to negotiate a deal but to barter for one. Considering the intransigence of the EU on the question of setting Yulia Tymoshenko free, he decided to extract as much as he could in return: 160 billion euros to "compensate" Ukraine for the anticipated loss of trade with Russia, renewed credits from the IMF and World Bank, EU responsibility for the modernization of Ukraine's gas pipelines, and the lifting of import restrictions on certain Ukrainian goods. One more condition—to bring Russia into negotiations on the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) between Ukraine and the EU—was the last straw for the EU. Nonetheless, in spite of their growing frustration, EU officials searched for a compromise, hoping that reason would prevail in Kyiv. Already in Vilnius, Yanukovych was offered a plan that opened the door to greater financial assistance if Ukraine were to sign the agreement, but it came to naught as Yanukovych demanded a written commitment that the EU was unwilling to deliver. Three meetings with Russian President Vladimir Putin finally sealed his plans; Ukraine was offered a \$15 billion bailout, of which only \$3 billion were actually provided, and a 30 percent discount on natural gas. These were his dubious rewards for not signing the AA.

Yanukovych's style was not well understood in Europe. After the failure in Vilnius and the violence on the Maidan, several things became clear: First, the failure to sign an AA with Yanukovych when he was president was in fact better for the EU and the Ukrainian people than if he had signed it (the EU-Ukraine AA will eventually be signed, just with another elected leader of Ukraine). Second, Yanukovych could have survived at least until early elections had he not tried to violently disperse people from the Maidan. The startling turnover of power has opened the road for democratization, after a period when Ukraine's ruling regime was oscillating heavily between hard Belarusian-style authoritarianism and a softer "hybrid" regime.

Competitive Authoritarianism, Ukrainian-Style

For much of its time in power, the Yanukovych government seemed to be taking on the style that political scientists Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way would call a hybrid

“competitive authoritarian” regime. This theory is based on three variables: the density of ties to the West (linkage), incumbents’ organizational power (the scope and cohesion of state and ruling party structures), and a state’s vulnerability to Western democratizing pressure (leverage).^{*} Analyzing these factors in 35 states between 1990 and 2008 they arrived at the following conclusions: where linkage to the West was extensive, as in Eastern Europe or the Americas, hybrid regimes democratized in the post-Cold War period; where linkage was low, as it was for the post-Soviet states, democratizing pressures were weaker. In these latter states, regime outcomes were driven primarily by the organizational power of incumbents. Where the state and governing party were well-organized and could prevent elite defection and crackdown on protest, incumbents were able to overcome opposition and maintain power. Otherwise, they were vulnerable to even weak opposition challenges. In such states, a third factor, vulnerability to Western leverage often led to regime change. In the absence of high Western linkage, however, such change did not lead to a consolidated democracy. The matrix in Table 1 presents the outcomes of regimes as the result of interaction of Western leverage and organizational power.

Table 1. Explaining regime outcome

	High leverage	Low leverage
Strong power	Unstable authoritarianism	Stable authoritarianism
Weak power	Regime change (not always democratization)	Regime survives

Source: adapted from Levitsky and Way (2010)

Levitsky and Way’s theory cannot account entirely for outcomes, but it is instructive to review its application in Ukraine over time—at the onset of the Orange Revolution and during Yanukovych’s rule (results for 2004 are calculated by Levitsky and Way, and the results for 2012 are calculated by the author).[†] The analysis tell us that at medium values of all three dimensions, the regime is unstable but survives.

Table 2. Linkage, Leverage, and Organizational Power

Dimension	2004	2012
Linkage	Low	Medium
Organizational Power	Medium-low	Medium-high
Leverage	High	Low/Medium

^{*} Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes After the Cold War*, Cambridge University Press, August 2010.

[†] A detailed explanation of the 2012 scores is provided in Yuriy Matsievsky, “Western Leverage vs. Organizational Power: sanctions and the prospects for the Ukraine’s regime survival,” submitted to the inaugural issue of the *Journal of Ukrainian Politics and Society*.

In fact, in Ukraine two pathways seemed possible until Yanukovych's fall: "Belarusization" and "hybridization."

"Belarusization"

After his refusal to sign the AA, the former Ukrainian president attempted a "hard" Belarusian scenario. However, the use of excessive force only emboldened the protests. He tried some sort of middle ground, attempting to retain power by making some concessions to the West, the opposition, and the public. But this also failed. Had he succeeded in dispersing the protestors, Yanukovych doubtlessly would have tried to co-opt, corrupt, and blackmail the opposition and use "administrative resources" and "political technologies" to secure his grip on power until 2015 and beyond.

"Hybridization"

For a while, Yanukovych was trying to wear the protests out by openly ignoring those at the Maidan while trying to intimidate the public. Unlike many more overt authoritarian regimes, the Yanukovych regime was lacking in levels of legitimacy, natural resources, skillful security personnel, and a professional bureaucracy. In a hybridization scenario, the regime might thus have relied on informal rather than formal instruments of power. He might have used his vast patronal network and shadow funding from the "family," made some decorative changes to the cabinet, engaged in wily social and political maneuvering, abused more administrative resources, and used bribery and blackmail to secure victory in the next election.*

Western Leverage

Despite these scenarios, Western leverage was actually larger than might have been expected, given Ukraine's poor economic performance, growing debt pressures, and the potential for change in Western policies (from engagement to punitive action).

Personalized sanctions, for instance, might have tipped the balance in favor of the West and put Yanukovych's survival under threat. For this leverage to be effective—to make Yanukovych abstain from violence and potentially abdicate—at least three conditions would have had to been met. First, personalized sanctions had to be applied when the regime was at its most vulnerable position (*timing*). Second, sanctions had to be extensive, targeting not only the president but also the ruling "family." The threat of extending the "black list" to the oligarchs might also have pushed them to defect to the opposition, which, in turn, could have undermined the unity of the regime (*scope*). Three, sanctions had to be coherent; they should have reflected the unified position of the United States and the EU (*cohesion*).

Personalized sanctions were eventually announced in the aftermath of violence, but these were not key to changing the government's behavior. If sanctions had been applied immediately after the *Ukrainian* parliament passed a package of "laws on

* See: Y. Mostova, "Battle time" (*Chas boyu*), *Dzerkalo Tyzhnia*, available at: <http://gazeta.dt.ua/internal/chas-boyu-.html>

dictatorship “(on January 16), they might have encouraged defection and prevented almost one hundred deaths in the streets of Kyiv.

Why Did Yanukovych Finally Lose Power?

During almost three months of protest, Yanukovych appeared immune to “people power.” He managed to prevent any significant defections from within three key pillars of his regime: the Party of Regions parliamentary faction, the “oligarchs,” and the security sector. With the West imposing no sanctions and Putin at his side, Yanukovych virtually neutralized structural democratizing pressures. All this indicated that Yanukovych could have survived until the next presidential election, whenever it was to be held.

The fall of Yanukovych was caused by several factors. First, the regime lost the “information war.” Throughout the three-month crisis, there were at least three national TV channels (Channel 5, News 24, and Espresso TV) and three online TV channels (Hromads’ke [Public TV], U-stream, and Spil’no TV) that were permanently broadcasting from Kyiv’s central square. Though disrupted, mobile and Internet connections allowed protestors to maintain constant communication.

Second, after the parliament adopted the “laws on dictatorship” in mid-January, eleven regions effectively left government control. This duality of power, severe political crisis, massive mobilization, and subsequent split of elites indicated that the crisis was turning into a revolution.

Third, the power structure eventually cracked after a third attempt to violently disperse the Maidan failed. Despite the reshuffling of the leadership of the armed forces, there was a constant danger that the officers would not obey orders. After one unsuccessful attempt to engage the armed forces, the military stayed out of the conflict. Meanwhile, the Party of Regions faction shrunk by almost 40 percent, from 205 to 127 deputies. One of the first acts of the new parliamentary majority was to repeal the so-called “anti-terrorist operation,” which lifted the burden of the security forces to support the regime.

Finally, the spirit of protesters was higher than that of the entire security apparatus. The protestors’ “insistence on truth” played a decisive role in the victory of the Maidan. European mediators reached a compromise with Yanukovych and the opposition, but the people at the Maidan refused to accept it in the wake of massive bloodshed.

Challenges to Democratization

This paper was drafted in the immediate wake of the Vilnius summit, when there was a “stalemate” between protestors and the Ukrainian government. I thus focused on the above two scenarios in which the regime survives. A third scenario, democratization, appeared to be irrelevant as Yanukovych distanced himself from the West and drew closer Russia’s orbit. However, the new transition government reclaimed the AA as a top priority of Ukraine. Signing the agreement, as Levitsky and Way’s theory suggests,

will enhance Ukraine's linkage with the West, which makes the third scenario—democratization—relevant again.

Both “Belarusization” and “hybridization” have failed. Now Ukraine is entering the second phase of its revolution—reestablishing the monopoly on the legitimate use of force and regaining control over the state's territory. Even though Ukraine has moved toward a “democratization” phase, however, several real challenges—including but not limited to Russia's military intervention in Crimea—may prevent the new government from returning to the path of democratization.

Russian leverage, military or otherwise, will play a significant role in the short- to medium-term. Putin could hardly miss an opportunity to destabilize Ukraine, while preparing the ground for annexing Crimea. Ukraine cannot maintain its territorial integrity without support from the West. It is imperative that the West not make mistakes and constructively contain Russia from further destabilization. While the West was watching rather than acting, Putin acted. Now it is the turn of the West to prove that liberal and democratic values still matter.

The second challenge is the need to provide for political and economic stabilization. This requires not only free and fair presidential and parliamentary elections but also the passage of a “stabilization package” that could curb corruption, restore the rule of law, and improve the business climate. The transition period will be painful, because long-delayed systemic reforms may increase social discontent.

Third, the new government has to tackle cultural challenges: to develop and implement consistent ethnic, linguistic, and identity policies. None of these areas have been seriously addressed in the past.

To sum up, Ukraine needs a total “reset.” It is now to be seen whether the society is mature enough to sever itself from destructive legacies and find the strength to move forward.

Conclusion

If Yanukovych had signed and implemented the AA, he could have solved the problem of his personal political future while opening the door for Ukraine's democratization. However, the risk of losing power made him abort the deal, which resulted in a severe political crisis and his subsequent loss of power. Ukraine's crisis turned into a revolution.

Despite toppling Yanukovych, internal security and territorial integrity remain the most urgent issues for the new government. There is a high probability that military action and violence will persist, which can endanger the country's path of democratization. To prevent instability, the United States and the EU should offer Ukraine some sort of “Marshall plan” to assist its systemic recovery. Moreover, Ukraine should be provided an explicit EU membership perspective after it signs the AA.

In a sense, Ukraine has returned to the starting point. While there is a huge potential and willingness of Ukrainians to get out of its corrosive state of hybridity, where Ukraine has remained for most of its independence, the magnitude of the

challenge is huge. Ukrainians have demonstrated how much they cherish freedom. Now it is a time for the democratic world to help Ukraine join the community of free nations.