

YouTube Made the Maidan

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In August of last year, Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili was cruising to what looked like an easy election victory. Today, he travels Europe, cut loose from Georgian politics after one decade as president.

What made the difference? Just before last year's parliamentary elections, video clips circulated like wildfire on the Internet showing Georgian prison guards sodomizing prisoners.

Two weeks ago, Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich seemed to be weathering protests over his decision to back away from signing a free-trade pact with Europe. Then, more than 300,000 protesters were suddenly on the streets. They moved like a human river through Kiev.

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What made the difference? Video clips had circulated like wildfire of riot police clubbing peaceful protesters in the pre-dawn darkness.

In the old days, prison guards could sodomize prisoners and riot police could savagely attack sleeping protesters — and get away with it. Now, everyone has a mobile phone with a camera. And that is changing the political rules.

Within hours of the riot police attack on protesters, Ukrainian journalist Mustafa Nayyem posted on YouTube a video of the riot police rioting. Within 48 hours, the clip had been viewed more than 780,000 times. Literally overnight, a Sunday afternoon protest march that was expected to draw 10,000 people, drew several hundred thousand.

But that night, on Dec. 1, Ukrainian authorities were still on autopilot, still playing by the old rules. Riot police rioted again, whacking everyone in sight, including 43 journalists.

This violence generated a fresh round of videos, a fresh round of outrage and an opposition movement that dug in its heels in a fortified downtown encampment.

I spoke with Nayyem on Wednesday and asked him what had changed. He said the conflict in Ukraine was between the Soviet-era television generation and today's Internet generation.

"It is not a conflict between West and East," he said referring to Ukraine's rough linguistic divide, between Ukrainian speakers in the West and Russian speakers in the East. "It is between the new generation and old generation."

Nayyem said Yanukovych, 63, believes that by controlling television and newspapers, he controls the thinking of the nation's "Soviet generation."

"But if you can't hide things anymore," Nayyem said. "Even if you try on television, the Internet will show it."

Gromadske.tv and Spilno.tv are two new Ukrainian Internet television channels that are streaming live coverage from the protests.

Nayyem, an Afghan-Ukrainian, is credited with jumpstarting the protests by sending out Facebook appeals for protesters on Nov. 21, the day Yanukovych backed down from signing the European Union pact. That evening, about 1,500 people responded to his appeal.

Nayyem says he chose Facebook over its Russia-based rivals, Vkontakte and Odnoklassniki, because Facebook in Ukraine is used by the elite, the opinion-makers.

Facebook, he said, is democratic because it allows for instant, horizontal communication

among people who trust each other and who consider themselves social equals. By contrast, television is better suited for the kind of Soviet-style, top-down, vertical communication that politicians of Yanukovych's generation are comfortable with.

In Russia, an Internet-fueled opposition movement gathered tens of thousands of people into the streets of Moscow in the winter of 2012. But President Vladimir Putin held the day, winning re-election on the shoulders of the television tribe, then still the nation's majority.

In Ukraine, Yanukovych may be able to restore order in time to mount a serious candidacy in the March 2015 presidential elections. And after last weekend's police violence on the Maidan, or protest square, the government now is showing that it can adapt.

On Wednesday, Ukraine's interior minister formally ordered police to not use violence against protesters. On Sunday, hundreds of thousands of Ukrainians again appeared on the streets of the capital to protest the Yanukovych government and to demand that Ukraine orient itself toward Europe. As of Friday, weekend protest plans were hazy.

But on Friday night, the news hit Kiev that Yanukovych had met in Sochi with Putin. Immediately, the call went out on the Internet for a million-man march. Organizers may not hit their target, but they once again demonstrate the mobilizing power of the Internet in Ukraine.

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The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

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