Ukraine: Dissident Capabilities in the Cyber Age

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Introduction. A decade’s development in social media since Ukraine’s 2004 Orange Revolution critically enhanced the ability of Ukrainian dissidents to wage the Euromaidan opposition movement against former President Viktor Yanukovych in 2013-14. Social media was used to: 1) rapidly break the government’s monopoly on mass media; 2) proliferate images of regime abuses; 3) recruit and organize a self defense force; 4) supply and sustain thousands of protesters; 5) provide medical and legal aid; 6) disseminate tactical information on internal troop movements; and 7) conduct cyber operations against the state.

The fact that all of these capabilities developed only after a triggering event demonstrates that while social media may not determine where, when, or even whether a population chooses to support a cause en masse, it will play a crucial role in how the movement develops. This is particularly true in the post-Soviet space, where a legacy of institutional corruption will continue to prompt citizens to coordinate efforts outside of formal parties or organizations.

1 “Euromaidan” is a joining of “Maidan,” meaning “public square,” with Ukraine’s European Union ambitions. Kyiv’s Maidan infamously was the central gathering space of the 2004 Orange Revolution and 1991 declaration of independence.
This report summarizes findings from a study of approximately 40 social media networks that actively strengthened the Euromaidan movement from November 2013 to February 2014. It also presents new analysis on the self-described Anti-Maidan information campaign, which has increased in intensity over Ukraine’s Donbas region. Due to the nature of the conflict, interview participants have not been named. Further, due to political sensitivities and access constraints, no interviews were conducted with Anti-Maidan social media coordinators.

Section one provides an overview of social media, Euromaidan and social media usage, and a brief discussion of the legacy of the 2004 Orange Revolution. Sections two through six outline Euromaidan social media networks by functional area: marketing, information sharing, defense, logistics and medical care, information technology (IT) support, and legal advocacy. Section seven examines Anti-Maidan efforts to coordinate and expand an information campaign in social media. Finally, the conclusion offers important points and insights on the capabilities of future anti-government movements.

1. Social Media in Context. Definitions shift over time as technologies develop, but social media generally refers to websites and cellular phone applications that provide a virtual platform for individuals to interact and create and disseminate content. Some of the most powerful aspects of social media are what make it different from traditional media:

- Social media can facilitate the immediate and free self-creation and dissemination of large volumes of content. The variety of content becomes exponential, as does the audience.
- It is interactive. Online discussions give users a sense that their emotions, frustrations, and ideals are shared.
- The ability to co-create content across time and space can expand the pool of activists and resources beyond a defined geographic area.
- The aspect of speed can also yield the element of surprise, potentially pressuring a government to over- or under-react.

Authoritarian regimes too are rapidly learning how to harness social media and frequently use a mix of innovative and traditional methods for countering dissent, to include punitive legislation, blocked access to particular sites or platforms, development of domestic alternatives, mass dissemination of disinformation, and collection of personal data. Social media can actually make it easier for governments to identify and track opponents, particularly as technologies to collect and analyze metadata become increasingly cheap and automated.¹
EUROMAIDAN AND SOCIAL MEDIA USAGE. There are two defining and interlinked features that distinguish Euromaidan as a new form of social movement in the Ukrainian context: 1) it was born on social media, quickly transcending to the occupation of physical space, and 2) no one individual or organization is credited with its birth. Anonymous quasi-official social media accounts spawned dozens of spin-off networks based around capabilities and needs. Further, social media facilitated a central gathering space without the ownership or sponsorship of any one organization or political party—an important distinction from Ukraine’s Orange Revolution. Unlike in 2004, the role of opposition parties and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) was frequently questioned, marginalized, or at odds with each other during Euromaidan, which reflected a general disappointment over the failure of the Orange Revolution and an enduring distrust over persistent corruption.

At the outset of Euromaidan, internet penetration in Ukraine was approximately 42 percent. While roughly half of Euromaidan participants said they learned how and where to protest from traditional media, 37 percent received information through Facebook, which outpaced its Russian competitor VKontakte (VK) for the first time, largely due to Facebook’s ability to reach a wider international audience and concerns over Russian government surveillance and harassment in VKontakte. Twitter also increased in popularity, particularly following the outbreak of street riots in Kyiv in mid-January 2014.
2. Marketing Euromaidan. Promotion and outreach are fundamental features of most social movements in order to mobilize followers, gain international attention, and increasingly in the age of social media, crowdsourcing the movement’s needs. Multiple public relations (PR) and advocacy networks arose to add “brand recognition” to Euromaidan. Euromaidan PR and the associated Euromaidan Press were active in disseminating press releases in multiple languages via social media, as well as maintaining a core physical presence on the Maidan for easier access to journalists and officials. The social media networks Maidan Needs Translators and EuroMaidan As It Is also expanded international outreach by providing nearly 3,000 rapid English translations. #Digital Maidan was a North American diaspora network dedicated to organizing Twitterstorms. A PR tactic, Twitterstorms can garner an audience far beyond one’s typical followers. Digital Maidan successfully held the top place in worldwide Twitter traffic in January 2014, reaching an estimated 3.7 million Twitter users who collectively saw the hashtag more than 11.6 million times.

EUROMAIDAN TIMELINE: NOVEMBER 2013–FEBRUARY 2014

NOV 21: On the anniversary of the Orange Revolution that stripped Viktor Yanukovych of a fraudulent election win in 2004, his government suspends signing the EU Association Agreement. A peaceful demonstration is held on the Maidan, while the Euromaidan Facebook page is established—anonymous.

NOV 30: About 80 protesters on the Maidan are beaten by police. An estimated 500,000 to 800,000 subsequently rally in protest after viewing images in social media. Government buildings are seized and barricades established on the Maidan.

FEB 18: Clashes with riot police ensue as an estimated 20,000 protesters march toward parliament. At least 26 people are reported killed, including 10 police.

FEB 20: Protesters counter-attack in an attempt to regain lost territory. Government snipers are deployed to the Maidan and kill nearly 75 protesters.

FEB 21: In an attempt to defuse the situation, Yanukovych signs a deal with opposition party leaders, which many Euromaidan supporters subsequently reject.


FEB 23-24: Newly elected speaker of parliament Oleksandr Turchynov is declared interim president. The European Commission accepts the new government as legitimate.
3. Information Sharing. One of the most powerful aspects of Euromaidan was the ability of dissidents to widely and rapidly share tactical information through live streams and video. Multiple activists, journalists, and ordinary citizens used mobile phones to upload round-the-clock live video feeds into social media, which provided demonstrators and the international community visual access to events as they happened. Commercial drones were also used sporadically. Further, a proliferation of “how to” or training videos rapidly appeared for everything from how to make a Molotov cocktail to what to do if tear-gassed.

Euromaidan is as much a story of the impact of social media as it is the emergence of independent, online, live Ukrainian television via social media. This capability provided the domestic population and international community needed veracity and context to understand developments. The rise of independent online TV via YouTube, UStream, and other social media platforms populated quickly through ventures like Hromadske TV. Hromadske actually announced itself as a crowdfunded, online TV network a few months prior to the first Euromaidan protest. The plan was for a soft launch on November 18, but the November 21 start of Euromaidan immediately brought Hromadske to the fore. On the first mass protest, Hromadske received more than 760,000 views as the public went online for information.

4. Defense. SELF-DEFENSE FORCE. The Euromaidan’s self-defense force (SDF) defended protester-occupied territory. Social media was used frequently to brand, organize, and recruit members into units. Approximately 12,000 SDF volunteers had been organized by early February with an on-call capacity of 25,000. Social media was ideally suited for these self-organized units, allowing individuals to create an immediate virtual identity, while soliciting new members and donations, and promoting activities. The infamous unit 23 Right Sector, for instance, was prolific in social media. Often credited—and criticized—for taking a leading role in clashes against police following the January 16 “dictatorship laws,” Right Sector used multiple platforms, including Facebook, VKontakte, and YouTube. Members particularly turned to Twitter in the heat of the riots exclusively for the purpose of disseminating tactical information.

HACKTIVISM. There were multiple cyber-related efforts against the Yanukovych government that can broadly be described as “hacktivism”—the use of computers and computer networks to promote an ideological or political goal. Tactics included information theft, website defacing, and distributed denial of service (DDoS) attacks. Social media was used as a critical conduit of self-promotion and the sharing of targeting information. As during the Arab Spring, the hacker network, Anonymous, frequently used Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube to interact with hacktivists inside Ukraine to obtain insights. An #OpUkraine Twitter hashtag was launched on November 21 to advertise operations, such as a DDoS attack against the presidential website, the Ministry of Interior, and other government portals. Anonymous announced it had taken down or defaced as many as 42 governmental websites on February 18 alone.\(^4\)

\(^{iii}\) The laws essentially made most forms of public protest illegal and allowed trials in absentia, which immediately provoked violent street riots in central Kyiv. The laws were rescinded due to public pressure on January 28.
AUTOMAIDAN. Automaidan formed in social media on November 24 to take the Euromaidan movement outside the bounds of the Maidan with vehicular “marches” directly to the homes of the elite. Automaidan made wide use of social media to recruit new members, coordinate with other activist networks, and seek donations. Initial donations were enough to pay for fuel and flags; by March, Automaidan had raised an estimated $100,000.

5. Logistics. The self-organized Logistics Headquarters appeared in social media to meet an urgent need to house protesters, particularly for the thousands suddenly arriving into Kyiv. Responding to housing needs was quickly followed by the coordination of transportation to and from the Maidan and donations of food, medical, and other supplies. Facebook was used to recruit volunteers and man a 24-hour virtual call center. The involvement of volunteers located abroad via social media was also a critical asset; the difference in time zones allowed exhausted Kyiv-based volunteers a chance to recharge, which was an important part of the network’s long-term success. Notably, by the end of February, Logistics Headquarters had facilitated shelter for more than 20,000 protesters.
6. Medical, IT, and Legal Capabilities. NARODNIY HOSPITAL (PEOPLE’S HOSPITAL). A handful of volunteers saw a need to supply the growing number of medical clinics, mobile brigades, and underground hospitals that had arisen in Kyiv. Public hospitals had become danger zones for dissidents due to kidnappings and arrests. According to one of the coordinators, “social media provided us with a huge collective opportunity to easily communicate, network, and organize in order to become a real power.” Donations came in from across Ukraine and abroad, amounting to an estimated $120,000 used to obtain sophisticated medical equipment.

IT SUPPORT. IT Namet (tent) served as a single point of focus for those needing IT support, Wi-Fi access, or simply a place to warm up while their devices charged. Within hours of launching a Facebook page, IT Namet received 4,000 likes, several volunteers, and more than a dozen internet-capable tablets anyone could borrow. Their Facebook presence helped to advertise activities and share IT-related information, while the physical presence of a dedicated tent was an important aspect of success.

LEGAL ADVOCACY. One of the most well-known, Euromaidan SOS was a network of lawyers that provided legal assistance and protection for those arrested, beaten, or harassed. Within hours of its first post advertising Euromaidan SOS as a resource for legal help, its Facebook page had been “liked” 10,000 times, and three newly established 24-hour hotlines fielded 300 calls from people seeking assistance.

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7. Anti-Maidan. Although the Yanukovych regime was likely more comfortable with traditional means of countering protests, such as stricter legislation, intimidation, and heavy use of security forces, an Anti-Maidan information campaign in social media grew in sophistication as the crisis persisted. Approximately 70 self-described Anti-Maidan social media networks emerged by late January, roughly 75 percent of which were dedicated to regions outside Kyiv, particularly Crimea, Donetsk, Odesa, and Kharkiv. Most not only remain active, but the frequency of posts has since multiplied in support of pro-Russian forces in Ukraine’s Donbas region.
ANTI-MAIDAN. A main Anti-Maidan social media page appeared in VKontakte on November 24. Anti-Maidan boasts a significant VK following of nearly 580,000 followers, with 57,000 posts as of July 2015. As protests became more violent in January 2014, so too did Anti-Maidan content in VK and Twitter, which increasingly featured shocking images intended to disgust and disparage. Despite the “Anti-Maidan” designation, about 10 percent of posts occurred before Yanukovych’s ouster in February 2014, which highlights the growing role of social media in the Donbas conflict.

ANTI-MAIDAN COORDINATION HEADQUARTERS. The Anti-Maidan Coordination Headquarters was focused almost wholly on coordinating information operations. Launched in VKontakte on January 22 during the riots, organizers advocated the importance of social media activism. Coordinators called on those with cameras to “shoot something more truthful.” Organizers particularly emphasized the need for multiple separate, yet related Anti-Maidan social media pages. Within a month, the Coordination Headquarters boasted nearly 70 related networks.
Conclusion: What Is Now and What Is Next? Even with less than half of Ukraine’s population accessing the internet in 2013-14, and little to no planning or even experience using social media, Euromaidan supporters nevertheless rapidly used social media to promote the movement and self-organization of entrenched defense, aided by an extensive logistical network including transportation, shelter, medical care, legal aid, and IT support.

The creation of an anonymous Euromaidan social media presence at the very outset of events remained the most popular hub of information, dissemination, and coordination throughout the movement’s development—probably because it existed outside of traditional political and activist institutions. This virtual gathering space critically aided the ability of thousands to self-organize around capabilities and needs.

Access to live streaming video via social media had an immediate and enduring impact on the ability to see—unedited, interactive and real-time—what the Yanukovych regime was attempting to hide. The parallel development of an independent online media added needed veracity and context, while volunteer networks provided rapid translations to broaden outreach.

Social media was ideally suited for organizing a self-defense force, allowing individuals to create a virtual identity while soliciting new members and donations. As violence escalated, social media further provided a unique platform for sharing tactics, techniques, and procedures, as well as for morale-building. Videos via YouTube, for instance, provided instructions on how to make a Molotov cocktail, while the medieval-inspired catapult used during the riots was constructed from tweeted internet drawings. Amusingly, the catapult even had its own Twitter feed.

A virtual defense of hacktivists under the guise of Anonymous used social media to coordinate and promote cyber attacks against the state. While Anonymous can be unpredictable, members frequently carry out activities in support of freedom of speech and will likely take part in future movements where censorship is a concern.
Wide-reaching volunteer networks coordinated and sustained the Euromaidan’s everyday needs, including the supply of food and clothing, shelter, transportation, mobile medical brigades and underground hospitals (including volunteer ambulances), IT and communications support, and a legal defense for those arrested, beaten, or missing.

The remaining question of how far social media can enable future mass movements will depend on the capabilities and objectives of their governments. Euromaidan represented a particular window of opportunity. But as authoritarian states are increasingly demonstrating, social media can be exploited as a tool of harassment, surveillance, and disinformation. Nearly all those interviewed for this study experienced some level of offline and online harassment. Further, the creation of social media networks by Anti-Maidan elements was only a taste of Russia’s mass proliferation of disinformation, often unverifiable, intended to create an information space of no set rules, reality, or solid verification.

Social media is what is now and what is next. The global market is increasingly demanding more mobile features and better privacy online, which can correspondingly aid dissident movements. Authoritarian governments are increasingly expending resources to dominate the information space, but their ability to do so will vary, often erratically and unpredictably. Rapid technological advances, combined with social media’s ability to link dissidents to experts anywhere in the world, will continue to provide windows of opportunity for those seeking to challenge their rulers. Future opposition movements will thus continue to shift, innovate, and revolutionize—as they have throughout history.


4 See #OpUkraine Twitter posts, November 21, 2013, to February 24, 2014.