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Lessons for the Future of Civic Resistance: Georgia and Ukraine

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Following the successes of the peaceful revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine, experts are examining these movements for insights into future prospects for nonviolent civic resistance. They hope to find lessons in these successes that might hold significance for nonviolent political change in other non-democratic countries.

Six of these experts gathered at the U.S. Institute of Peace on October 11, 2005, to discuss the Rose and Orange Revolutions at the event "Peaceful Transition: Lessons Learned from Georgia and Ukraine." Panelists were Anika Locke Binnendijk of the Fletcher School at Tufts University, Alexander M. Gupman of Freedom House, Giorgi Kandelaki of Kmara (Georgia), Taras Kuzio of The George Washington University, Sergiy Taran of PORA (Ukraine), and Cory Welt of the Center for Strategic and International Studies. Daniel Serwer of the Institute of Peace moderated the event. The following USIPeace Briefing summarizes the views expressed by the panel. They are not the views of the Institute, which does not take positions on policy issues.

Setting the Stage for Revolution

Leaders of nonviolent movements in Georgia and Ukraine capitalized on opportunities offered by their situations. Some of the enabling factors mentioned by the panel were cracks within the political and military institutions, mounting popular dissatisfaction with government corruption, and public outrage at evidence of election fraud. As Binnendijk noted, the leaders' ability to identify and target regime vulnerabilities proved critical to the success of the movements.

The speakers emphasized that both Georgia and Ukraine were run by semi-authoritarian regimes, in which some political freedoms were tolerated. No political figure had absolute power, including over security and military forces. Independent media existed to some extent, opposition political parties offered citizens an alternative political elite, and civil society groups (including the student protests groups Kmara in Georgia and PORA in Ukraine) were permitted to form.

Economic conditions played a role in both cases, although they were very different. Georgia was experiencing an economic crisis that hit its peak around the time of the contested parliamentary elections. This increasingly dismal economic situation encouraged the opposition in Georgia. On the other hand, in Ukraine it was the improving economy that drove people to the streets, said Taran and Kuzio. Ukrainians did not trust the regime candidate for president to continue the progress. In both countries, corruption was rampant, causing serious distrust of government officials.

While these conditions set the stage for massive street protests, evidence of electoral fraud proved a significant catalytic factor in both cases. Parallel vote tabulations and exit polls revealed the extent of election fraud in Ukraine's presidential and Georgia's parliamentary elections, giving the opposition a rallying cause and setting the wheels of revolution in motion.

Gathering a Critical Mass

In both Georgia and Ukraine, the opposition political leadership understood the importance of gathering a critical mass—a number of protestors in the streets that would be difficult for the regime to attack. They actively appealed to those who were disenchanting with the regime. In Georgia, this

proved to be the youth and provincial voters, who were apathetic or antagonistic to the current political parties, said Kandelaki; thus, Kmara's strategy of distancing itself from political parties proved to be a draw. The Ukrainian movement appealed to a broad range of sympathizers who included youth, small and medium businessmen, socialists, and those in favor of European integration. Political parties and the civil society youth groups played a vital role in the successful mobilization of these groups.

Both movements were confident in their chances of success. In Ukraine, parallel vote tabulations in the first fraudulent election showed that the opposition candidate could win if elections were held again. Kmara "bluffed" its way to importance in Georgia, according to Kandelaki, giving the public, political leaders, and security forces the impression that it had a large popular following in the beginning. Not only did this show of confidence attract new supporters, but it also intimidated and confused political leaders. In Ukraine, there was a snowball effect, said Kuzio, and the same appears to have been true in Georgia; as the masses in the streets grew and remained untouched by authorities, more people were encouraged to join. The use of humor put potential protestors at ease. Satirical demonstrations and cartoons encouraged people to laugh at the regime leadership, thus reducing fear and making it easier for people to join mass demonstrations.

Keeping the Peace

Gathering large crowds was essential, but their presence alone would be insufficient. Organizers knew the protesters' commitment to nonviolent discipline was essential to success, but were also prepared to respond to violence by the security forces. Both Binnendijk and Kandelaki emphasized that the protest leaders were highly disciplined and had had rigorous training in nonviolent methods, though they were not pacifists. They encouraged people to remain calm and organized, discouraged retaliation to provocation, and kept a close eye on volunteers.

The organizers also made concerted efforts to dissuade the security forces from resorting to violence. Intense coverage by independent media ensured that any violence against the protestors would be broadcast worldwide, giving credibility to the claim that individuals within the security forces would be held responsible for any bloodshed. The organizers sent clear messages of their nonviolent intent to the security forces, according to the experts. In Ukraine in particular, networks were established between military and opposition leaders, and private connections and assurances were made.

Measuring the International Community's Influence

The influence of the international community on the revolutions' success is hard to measure, according to the speakers. Kandelaki divided Western assistance in Georgia into two categories: long-term efforts to promote the values of democracy and direct support to nonviolent resistance. Kandelaki suggested that a significant portion of Western funding for "democratic values" projects was wasted because local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) were ineffective in educating the public. As for support for the revolution, Western diplomats tended to discourage rather than encourage the protests. Like many Georgians, they remembered the country's violent political struggles in the past.

Welt agreed that it is important to distinguish between assistance and diplomacy, but argued that perhaps Western assistance was not as useless as Kandelaki believes. There are areas where it seemed to make a difference, such as funding of exit polls and parallel vote tabulations and creating networks with military and security leaders, while for more long-term programs, it may simply be too soon to judge, he said. Gupman stressed the importance of local organizations, expressing concern that "international groups are prone to take too much credit." Although some foreign aid might help local groups with technical training, it is vital that the struggle is accurately viewed as an internal event.

Kuzio pointed out that, both in Georgia and Ukraine, the West hesitated to commit to the revolutionary cause until it was in its political interest to do so. While Western support did not help the opposition in Georgia, it played an important role in Ukraine by becoming a mediator and pressuring "the authorities and Yanukovich camp to approve a plan for peaceful resolution" in the third round of elections, said Taran.

Lessons for Future Nonviolent Conflict

The panel was hesitant to draw conclusions from the experiences of Georgia and Ukraine for the future of “color revolutions.” Several panelists noted the challenges involved in mounting mass protests within highly authoritarian states; Kuzio mentioned the bloody suppression of Uzbekistan’s recent uprisings and China’s Tiananmen Square protest. Welt believed that to increase the chance of revolution, one must first degrade the regime in question from highly to semi-authoritarian. An audience member noted that nonviolent resistance has worked against highly repressive regimes in the past and that it wasn’t the degree of repression but how skillfully a movement engaged the regime that was the key variable. However, as Gupman pointed out, Freedom House has been examining these regions for over 30 years and no one predicted the Georgian and Ukrainian revolutions, implying that the success of nonviolent strategies can take even experts by surprise.

Predicting the outcome of conflicts between civilian-based movements and nondemocratic regimes is difficult. Welt used Kyrgyzstan as an example of a nonviolent revolution that did not have elements important in Georgia and Ukraine; it did not have parallel vote tabulations or a critical mass of protestors in the capital city, yet it peacefully overthrew the existing political regime. Welt emphasized that both foreigners and local revolutionaries must understand the risks that accompany this “fragile process.” In deeming a country ready for a peaceful revolution, Welt warned Westerners that “we’re playing with fire.”

Related Resources:

- [Georgia's Rose Revolution: A Participant's Perspective](#)
Special Report, July 2006
- [Peaceful Transition: Lessons Learned from Georgia and Ukraine](#)
(Institute Public Forum, October 2005)
- [Research Centers in International Relations on the Web: Ukraine](#)
- [Georgia Peace Agreements Digital Collection](#)

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