

## THE REVOLUTION OF DIGNITY AS SEEN BY TURKISH MEDIA<sup>1</sup>

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### Summary

Euromaidan, also known as the Revolution of Dignity, is undoubtedly an epoch-making event in the history of independent Ukraine. The mass protests, which began in Kyiv as a response to the government's sudden decision to abandon the planned signing of landmark agreements with the EU and a short time later spread far beyond the capital of Ukraine, could not but capture the global community's attention. Numerous media outlets widely covered those historic events. Turkey, whose political life has always been full of contradictions, did not stand aside either. The paper provides a comprehensive picture of how different Turkish newspapers portrayed the Euromaidan events and what they put special emphasis on. The following aspects have come to the fore: a) what caused mass protests in Kyiv's Independence Square (both immediate and remote causes were being explained); b) who were Euromaidan participants, how they looked and behaved, how they described their political views and explained their own motives for participation in anti-government protests; c) what was the character of protests and how it changed over time; d) what forces contributed to the continuation of protests; e) the outcomes of the Revolution of Dignity; f) predictions about what "a post-Maidan Ukraine" will look like in the near future. In total, about 20 newspaper articles from various sources ("Cumhuriyet" – "The Republic", "Milliyet" – "The Nation", "Avrasya Haber" – "Eurasian News", "Özgür Gündem" – "The Free Agenda", etc.) have been analysed. The findings were initially presented at an international conference "The Maidan Phenomenon in Ukrainian Society: Sociological Interpretations" held in memory of an eminent Ukrainian sociologist Natalia Panina (Kyiv, Institute of Sociology of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine, 10 December 2014).

**Keywords:** Revolution of Dignity, Turkey, freedom of speech, civil liberties, independent media outlets, pro-government newspapers, news coverage.

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### 1. Introduction

As we live in a globalised world, key events in a country's social and political life attract the attention of the world's leading mass media and evoke numerous comments. The Euromaidan, which (like the Orange Revolution) was bound to become a turning point in Ukraine's post-Soviet history, is not an exception in this regard.

The paper focuses on how the Euromaidan events were represented in Turkish mass media. There are several reasons for why this issue might be of some interest. First, Turkey keeps strengthening its position on the international scene. Besides, both trade and economic

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<sup>1</sup> For a more detailed version of the article see: Maksymenko, O. (2016.) Ukraine's Euromaidan in Turkish media. *Sociology: Theory, Methods, Marketing*, 2, 162–173.

relationship and cultural links between Turkey and Ukraine have developed rapidly in recent years. Second, particularities of Turkey's integration into the European Union are also worth mentioning: Turkey had signed the Association Agreement with the European Economic Community (ancestor of the EU) as early as 1963; moreover, it has been a NATO member since 1952. In 1996, Turkey concluded the FTA (Free Trade Agreement) with the European Union. Nevertheless, it still remains a candidate country for EU accession. A number of European countries are against Turkey's EU membership since they think that Ankara does not follow the key European standards of democracy. Third, being a social institution the mass media play an especially important role in the society as they are able both to inspire absolute trust and provoke total distrust, both to consolidate and split the society. Another reason for why the author chose this topic is her experience of working as a translator and contributor to a news website "TürkHaber – Ukrayna Haberleri" ("News about Ukraine in Turkish").

Trying to provide a complete picture of the Euromaidan events (and how they were interpreted in Turkish media), the author has analysed about 20 newspaper articles from various sources. All the newspapers mentioned in this article had different political leanings.

## **2. The Revolution of Dignity in Turkish newspapers: the main aspects chosen for analysis**

The analysis of the Euromaidan events, which later were called the Revolution of Dignity, embraces the following aspects: a) what caused mass protests in Kyiv's Independence Square (both immediate and remote causes were analysed); b) who were mainly Euromaidan participants, how they looked and behaved, how they described their political views and explained their own motives for participation in anti-government protests; c) what was the character of protests and how it changed over time; d) what forces contributed to the continuation of protests; e) the outcomes of the Revolution of Dignity; f) predictions about what "a post-Maidan Ukraine" will look like in the near future. Besides, some authors make a comparison between Euromaidan and similar acts of civil disobedience in Ukraine (first of all, the Orange Revolution) and other countries.

## **3. What exactly triggered the protests in Kyiv's Independence Square?**

As a matter of fact, the main reason for starting protests in Maidan was Viktor Yanukovich's (who was the President of Ukraine at that time) refusal to sign the Association Agreement with the EU at the Eastern Partnership Summit, which would be held several days later, on 28–29 November 2013, in Vilnius. The "Türkiye" newspaper interprets these events in the following way: "Kyiv has suspended preparations for European partnership, since there is no sign that the European Union will make up losses that could be inflicted on Ukraine (in case of accession to the EU)" ("*Avrupa Birliği'nden Ukrayna'nın zararlarının telâfi edileceğine ilişkin bir işaret alınamamasından dolayı Kiev Avrupa ortaklığı sürecini durdurdu*"). Certainly, there is no point in citing the entire article (the same is true for other articles mentioned here); otherwise, the paper will be too long. It would be more useful to focus on the most significant points. First, Ukraine's trade relations with Russia and other CIS countries have weakened considerably over the last four months (from August to November 2013); as a result, Ukraine's economy has incurred substantial losses, which are being deliberately neglected in order to

distract public attention from the problem. Second, Ukraine is likely to incur even more losses if the government continues rapprochement with the EU: industrial enterprises will certainly be closed down, and unemployment will increase (*Türkiye Gazetesi*, 2013)<sup>2</sup>.

The Resolution of the Cabinet of Ministers on suspending the process of preparation for concluding the Ukraine-EU Association Agreement evoked strong discontent among most Ukrainians, while Russian political elites expressed their approval. Numerous media outlets reported that Moscow was satisfied “with Ukraine’s decision to develop cooperation with Russia and other CIS countries”<sup>3</sup>. It was also emphasised that the European Union was disappointed with Ukraine’s decision to freeze all efforts towards signing the Association Agreement, and if the decision was implemented all the Ukrainian people would be disappointed. However, “the ball is still on the Ukrainian side” (*“top Ukrayna'nın sahasında”*), so Ukraine has the right to choose which way to go. Another article (from the same website) begins with the words: “European countries exert pressure on Ukraine and try to blackmail it”. This is an excerpt from the answer given by the President of Russia Vladimir Putin to a reporter of the “Interfax” news agency at the press conference following the Fourth Meeting of the High-Level Russian-Turkish Cooperation Council<sup>4</sup>: “We have really heard intimidation from our European partners towards Ukraine – even to the extent that they will instigate mass protests. This is pressure and blackmail” (*“Aslında, Avrupalı ortaklarımız tarafından Ukrayna'ya yönelik, kitlesel protesto eylemlerini teşvik etmeye kadar varan tehditleri duyduk. Bu bir baskı, bu bir santajdır”*). Vladimir Putin also stressed that Russia is ready to participate together with Ukraine and the EU in trilateral talks on trade and economic cooperation and called these talks a test for European partners.

#### 4. Economic dimensions of the Euromaidan events

Deniz Berktaş, the author of the article “Is it the New Orange Revolution?” (*“Yeni bir Turuncu Devrim mi?”*), analysing the causes of the new Maidan, brings to the forefront an economic aspect of the problem: after the 2008 world economic crisis Ukraine experienced considerable deterioration in quality of life, so political life did not interest Ukrainians as much as before. However, they kept cherishing hopes for “a better European future”, believing that joining the EU would put an end to long-lasting economic hardships. Therefore, Ukraine’s sharp turn on the eve of the Eastern Partnership Summit meant for most of them collapse of all hopes and expectations.

In the 2004 presidential campaign, Viktor Yanukovich was an antagonist to pro-Western (“orange”) forces and so prevented their coming to power. However, he managed to win the presidency in 2010. Analysing the factors that could help him gain victory the elections, the author draws the reader’s attention to political quarrels, which often occurred within the ruling coalition after the Orange Revolution and eventually led to political instability. Besides, as a result of the 2008 global economic crisis, many Ukrainians suffered a considerable decline in living standards. Those were the reasons why they had lost interest in politics at all. Even voters from Western Ukraine, who never liked Yanukovich anyway, seemed to reconcile themselves to the existing state of affairs. “Come what may,” they said. So, neither the arrest and imprisonment of

<sup>2</sup> The newspaper published an excerpt from the speech of the former Vice Prime Minister of Ukraine Yuriy Boiko in order to confirm that idea.

<sup>3</sup> A quote from the news published on the website of the “Voice of Russia”.

<sup>4</sup> The meeting was held in St. Petersburg on 22 November 2013.

the former prime minister Yuliia Tymoshenko nor other dramatic events were able to make such a large number of people went outside on the streets. But once Ukraine's economy slumped, support for the ruling party decreased a lot. Notwithstanding all these difficulties, both the party of power and the opposition kept talking about a promising future for Ukraine as a potential EU candidate, describing the "European choice" as a panacea for Ukraine's ills (*"her derde deva"*). But no sooner had Ukraine stepped back from the declared political line than thousands of people took to the streets. Thus, the reins of Ukraine's domestic policy fell into Brussels' hands.

In the author's view, the further course of events depends mainly on external forces: "Those who organised the Orange Revolution could achieve their aims, because Western countries overtly supported the Ukrainian opposition. The same is true for today's protests. Whether they will continue or subside depends more on the outcome of negotiations between Kyiv and Brussels sector (or rather, between Kyiv, Brussels and Moscow) than on Kyiv itself" (*Berktaş, 2013*).

"Why are both the West and Russia so interested in Ukraine?" asks Murat Çakır, a columnist of the "Ozgür Gündem" newspaper (the article under this title appeared on 1 February 2014). First of all, Ukrainian seaports Odesa and Sevastopol are of great importance to Russia; the latter, moreover, is a strategically important base for Russia's naval fleet. However, Ukraine is attractive to the European Union too, because of being a transit country: 80% of petroleum and natural gas, transported from Russia and Central Asia to Europe, passes through Ukraine's pipeline network. Besides, Ukraine is rich in natural resources. There are about 109 billion tons of coal and natural gas in Donbas. Eastern Ukraine, whose population consists mainly of ethnic Russians, is a huge great granary. In fact, Ukraine is the world's third biggest cereal exporter (after the USA and all EU countries put together). Some big agricultural corporations and food companies such as "Monsanto", "Cargill" and "Kraft Foods" took a keen interest in Ukraine long ago. Moreover, iron ore, granite, graphite and salt deposits have always been arousing the appetites of European steel manufacturers, porcelain companies and chemical firms. So, this information is sufficient for understanding why Ukraine evokes such a strong interest (*Çakır, 2014*).

The author also emphasises that ordinary Ukrainians are experiencing impoverishment and social injustice, which have reached their peak (*"Halkın yoksullaşması ve adaletsizlik had safhada"*). Of course, it was quite natural that people poured into the streets to demand democracy, social justice and civil liberties. However, one can hardly say that the majority of those who came to Maidan represented a real "people's" opposition (*"gerçek bir halk muhalefeti"*). The author argues that there were representatives of ultra-nationalist and fascist parties, who only made a lot of noise and thus diverted attention from the people's just demands (*"Aşırı milliyetçi ve faşist partilerin çıkarttıkları gürültü, halkın haklı taleplerinin üstünü örtüyor"*). The current situation plays into the West's hands since the latter is striving for "regime change" in Ukraine (*"Ve bu durum, 'rejim değişikliği' peşinde olan Batı'nın işine geliyor"*). Eventually, Ukrainians become victims of the war of interests that is being waged between the major imperialist forces (*"Sonuçta Ukraynalılar emperyalist güçlerin çıkar savaşlarına kurban ediliyor"*).

Murat Çakır's another article "Ukraine as the epicentre of inter-imperialist rivalries" (*"Emperyalist çelişkiler odağı Ukrayna"*) focuses attention on a serious conflict between the USA and the European Union (especially Germany). Proving this, the author cites a fragment of the leaked phone conversation between Victoria Nuland, the Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs at the U.S. Department of State, and Geoffrey Pyatt, the United States Ambassador to Ukraine, in which Ms Nuland expressed the hope that the UN will help the United States to "teach the EU a lesson".

## 5. The difference between Maidan in Kyiv and Gezi in Istanbul

A reporter of the independent online newspaper “T24” (who writes under the pen name “Ex Libris”) calls the Euromaidan events “manifestation of nationalists” (*‘milliyetçi’*), happened as a result of Ukrainians’ longing to be free from the Russian rule. The article begins with the words: “Anyone who is not jumping loves Russians” (*“Zıplamayan herkes Rusları seviyor”*). The word “nationalist” is put in inverted commas. “Ukrainians, who are considered the poorest nation in Europe after Kosovans and Moldovans, ended up deciding whether to become Europeans or to be like sheep driven by Moscow” (*“Hâlen Avrupa’nın, Kosovalılar ve Moldavlardan sonra en fakir halkı sayılan Ukraynalılar, Moskova tarafından koyun misali güdülmek ile Avrupalılaşılmak arasında bir tercihle karşı karşıyalar”*), notes the reporter. She catches sight of placards depicting a portrait of Yanukovich together with Stalin and Hitler, thus symbolising “the old system” (*“eski düzen”*) – in other words, Russia’s age-old hegemony over Ukraine, which Ukrainians want to get rid of. Meanwhile, the author seems to be surprised by the fact that adherents of Ukraine’s integration into the EU (she thinks that Tymoshenko’s sympathisers are among them too) stand on the same side of the barricades as the far-right “Svoboda” (“Freedom”), which has got many fascist-like features (*“faşizan çizgiler”*). “There are quite a few rough-looking, brawny guys in Maidan, who are strolling through the protest camp, holding chain whips and cobblestones in their hands”, says the author (*Ex Libris, 2013*).

The article “Gezi’s followers in Maidan” (*“Gezi’ye özenen çocuklar Maydan’da”*), published on 15 December 2013 on the website of the “Hürriyet” website, also pays special attention to the protesters’ characteristics, comparing them to Gezi’s participants. The author underlines that most protesters in Istanbul’s Gezi Park could speak English (or even multiple languages) fluently, whereas only few of Maidan’s participants (despite the fact that the majority of them were young people) spoke good English. In general, their knowledge of English was quite poor. The protesters could hardly tell what they were expecting from Ukraine’s integration into the EU (*Özyurt, 2013*). “We want to live a better life, we want the same freedom as Europeans have” was all they were able to say (*“Gençler sadece ‘Daha iyi yaşamak istiyoruz, Avrupa’daki gibi özgürlük istiyoruz.’ diyorlar*). However, the author takes a great deal of pride in Ukraine, who, like Turkey, “has demolished the wall of fear” (*“korku duvarını yıktı”*).

Mustafa Yalçın, the author of the article “Istanbul – Gezi, Kiev – Maidan...”, also makes a comparison between the events which took place in Kyiv’s Maidan and in Taksim Gezi Park. The government’s controversial renovation plan for the city centre, widely known as the “Taksim pedestrianisation project” (along with building a new shopping mall), seemed to be the main cause of the protests in Gezi Park. People gathered there to stop developers from cutting down trees in the park, as it was the only green area in that district. However, there were deeper causes underlying the Gezi Park protests. First of all, Istanbulites were complaining about increasingly autocratic style of Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who held the office of the Prime Minister of Turkey then. Besides, not a few people were concerned about Islamisation of Turkey, which has been a secular state since 1928, due to Atatürk’s political reforms. So, the government’s encroachment on Turkey’s secularism was perceived rather negatively, especially by those who shared secular views.

The protest wave in Taksim Square began on 28 May 2013 and continued until the end of August, spreading to other Istanbul’s districts and then to almost all major Turkey’s cities. Trying to demolish the protester camp, the police used tear gas and water cannons against the activists.

“Well, we know Gezi, as we were not far from it. We have gone through it”, emphasises the author. “The government must resign! Tayyip must resign!” demanded the protesters. Then he adds, “Well, what really made us come there to protest? Love for the environment. Trees. Yes, that was true!.. But the real reason was the President’s position ‘I decide everything myself’; the fact that he ignored the thoughts and feelings of the city inhabitants, whom he called ‘the rabble’ (“*ayak takımı*”)... So, there was an outburst of democratic anger” (“*Demokratik öfke buradan patladı*”).

Thus, Turks bitterly resented the fact that the Prime Minister made decisions without any regard for ordinary people’s opinions while Ukrainians wanted to get rid of Russia’s control and turn towards the West; in other words, Ukraine’s geopolitical realignment was brought to the forefront. In the author’s opinion, “ordinary people” were the main driving force behind the Gezi Park protests whilst Euromaidan came into being due to pro-EU Ukrainians and supporters of the former prime minister Yuliia Tymoshenko (*Yalçiner 2014*).

## 6. Key figures and victims during the Revolution of Dignity

The “*Hürriyet*” newspaper also focuses on some Maidan’s key figures like ethno-pop singer Ruslana, who threatened to burn herself alive unless the government met protesters’ demands. The article appeared on 7 December 2013 – just a week after a special police unit “*Berkut*” had violently dispersed protesters and torn down their camp (*Hürriyet Gazetesi, 2013*).

*Berkut*’s assault on the protester camp initiated the next phase of Euromaidan, which was described in detail by Yunus Erdoğan, a news reporter of the “*Cihan*” agency, in the article “Police interference in Ukrainian Euromaidan” (“*Ukrayna’da Euro Meydan’a polis mudahalesi*”). Another article by the same author “Euromaidan must go on until the year 2015” (“*Meydan, 2015 yılına kadar devam etmeli*”) is also worth mentioning. The author cites an excerpt from Arsenii Yatseniuk’s<sup>5</sup> speech in Maidan. From the politician’s viewpoint, the protest actions in Euromaidan must continue until 2015, that is to say until the year of the next presidential election in Ukraine: “We have a whole year to prepare for the election. Hundreds of people from Maidan will work as election observers; millions of voters will go to the polls and defend Ukrainians’ choice on election night... The actions taking place in the city centre are to be continued, as they are a symbol of freedom in Ukraine. We will win only when these actions engulf Ukraine from the West to the East” (“*Bir senemiz var seçimlere hazırlanmak için. Meydan’daki yüzlerce insan seçimde komisyonlarda, gözlemciler olarak çalışmalı ve oy sayımının yapılacağı gece milyonlarca seçmen seçim bölgelerine gidip Ukraynalıların seçimini korumalı... Kiev’in merkezindeki eylemler Ukrayna’da özgürlüğün bir sembolü olarak kalmaya devam etmeli. Yalnız bu eylemler ne zaman tüm Ukrayna’yı, Batı’dan ve Doğu’ya kadar kuşatırsa biz o zaman kazanacağız*”).

Unfortunately, Ukrainians have won at the cost of many lives. “The first Maidan ended without casualties, whereas about 100 people were killed in the second one”, underscores Deniz Berktaş in the article entitled “Discussions about a new revolution in Ukraine” (“*Ukrayna’da ‘yeni devrim’ tartışmaları*”).<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> At that time, he was at head of the opposition party “*Batkivshchyna*” (“*Fatherland*”).

<sup>6</sup> The article was published right on the first anniversary of the Revolution of Dignity.



The “life after Maidan” turned out to be even crueller than the Maidan reality. The armed conflict in Donbas, which broke out in the spring of 2014, has grown into a large-scale war. Civilian death toll climbs past 1,000, and almost a quarter of Ukraine’s population has already been displaced. Moreover, the number of crippled fates is incalculable.

## 7. Conclusions

Needless to say, media play an extremely important role in society if they are a source of impartial and reliable information, free from emotional biases; otherwise, they will create a distorted view of reality. Being able to critically analyse all the information received from newspapers, TV or from the Internet, to compare and contrast different points of view, is also of great importance. We should not forget the words of Malcolm X, an American human rights activist: “If you are not careful, the newspapers will have you hating the people who are being oppressed, and loving the people who are doing the oppressing”.

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