Learning from past experience: Yanukovych’s implementation of authoritarianism after 2004

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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that an important concept of authoritarian learning is missing. This is how leaders learn from domestic experience. Using Yanukovych’s defeat in the Orange Revolution, the paper illustrates how he adapted to stop a new Colour Revolution. Through using Party of Regions resources, Yanukovych improved his image, developed Party of Region’s electoral success, controlled institutions and the political system, coerced the opposition, built-up security forces and pro-regime groups and created a family. While the paper finds that Yanukovych adapted to the failure of the Orange Revolution these adjustments contributed to the Euromaidan and the learning from domestic experience resulted in ultimate failure.

1. Introduction

In the lead up to the 2012 Ukrainian parliamentary elections men “of athletic appearance” beat and threatened activists, crashed campaigns and stopped opposition activists distributing non-regime political pamphlets (Oleksiyenko & Lelich, 2012). In the run-up to the 2010 Presidential elections, people started erecting and living in tents in the main squares of Kiev to “protect the results of the voting because voters do not want a repeat of 2004” (Ukrainskaya Pravda, 2010). Both are examples of how the regime of Viktor Yanukovych looked to consolidate and retain power. Each is an example of tactics devised by the regime to counter a new Orange-type revolution. Having lost power in 2004 because of the Orange Revolution Yanukovych began to implement lessons after 2004 to assure that such an event would never re-occur. Bankova, under Yanukovych, had learnt lessons from the Orange Revolution and it is an example of authoritarian learning from a domestic phenomenon. While Yanukovych would have had advisors to recommend ways to maintain power he was a key witness to the Orange Revolution and having lost the presidency in 2004 he would have learnt lessons and implemented practices from this very personal experience to maintain power in the future.

The example of Yanukovych is interesting as it is an instance of authoritarian learning from domestic experience. Currently, authoritarian learning literature has concentrated on learning from international examples, with little space given to learning from domestic experience. All politicians learn, but the lessons taken by Yanukovych after 2004 clearly show the process of authoritarian learning from

1 I refer to the Ukrainian regime as Bankova due to the Presidential Administration in central Kiev on Bankova Street. Like the Kremlin in Moscow, it is the centre of the Ukrainian regime.
provides clarity to this important but maligned aspect of authoritarian learning.

2.1. A missing piece in authoritarian learning?

Currently, authoritarian learning literature analyses learning from international examples. Its main theoretical focus is on adaptability, lesson-drawing, emulation and persuasion. An example of authoritarian learning is seen in how the Kremlin reacted to the Colour Revolutions, particularly after the 2004 Ukrainian Orange Revolution. The Kremlin perceived that the collapse of the Georgian and Ukrainian regimes in 2003 and 2004 was due to regime weakness as both governments allowed relatively free elections and allowed civil society to function. By allowing an opposition and civil society organisations the Georgian and Ukrainian authorities were unable to clamp down when they used electoral fraud to steal elections (Ambrosio, 2009, p. 40). The Kremlin learnt that NGOs and any opposition needed to be constrained. It, therefore, set about pressuring independent civil society through legislation and creating regime-affiliated organisations, or GONGOs, to impinge on the role of non-regime NGOs. The Kremlin also mobilised youth groups (Walking Together, Molodaya Gvardiya and Nashi) and created clone parties to fragment opposition (Horvath, 2013). The learning by the Kremlin from the Colour Revolutions is an example of authoritarian learning and highlights the existing focus on learning from external examples.

Naturally learning happened on a personal level for Putin and other members of the Kremlin after the Colour Revolutions as it was individuals who drew lessons and implemented preventative measures to counter the spread of other Colour Revolutions (Beissinger, 2007, p. 261). But while learning by Russian elites was personal, it is learning from an external event. External learning predominates in authoritarian learning literature which concentrates on learning between states. A notable exception to this is by Dawson and Hanley (2016) who investigate the problem of how central and Eastern European states have begun to renge on European Union (EU) standards once they have become Member states and how these regimes have fallen back on previous internal experience to legitimise this backsliding. But this analysis concentrates on democratic backsliding by EU Member states and not authoritarian learning. Domestic learning remains understudied to a lack of examples and the difficulty of illustrating this learning type. It is difficult to show if person X learnt from a local event whereas it is easier to show if state B implements a similar policy to state A. It is harder to show that person X learnt from an internal event as rarely do they mention such effects contributing to a change in policy or actions. Is doing something similar or dissimilar to previous country-specific events learning? Is the use of similar previous domestic policies learning, or the only way of governing a state? How to determine personal learning from counsel given by advisors? These questions make domestic learning hard to investigate but the example of Yanukovych provides concrete evidence of this learning type. The Orange Revolution was a significant event in the recent past of Ukraine with
Yanukovych as a key actor in the event and therefore it is natural he would take lessons from it.

2.2. Prospect theory

While authoritarian learning literature has not touched on individual learning, prospect theory analyses personal erudition by evaluating how decision makers formulate a choice using past reference points (Levy, 1992, pp. 179–80), making prospect theory relevant to understanding the Yanukovych case. Each individual weighs up gains and losses of a possible decision. Some may be concerned with achieving the most gains while reducing risk, but others may accept the risk to reduce potential losses (Lebow, 2008, pp. 366–7). The division between loss and gain is determined by each person, as is the willingness of the proponent to engage in risk (Lebow, 2008, p. 537). Individuals who wish to gain power, or achieve a certain end, are more willing to take risks and “are generally willing to embrace risk when it comes to gain because accepting risk is often an essential precondition for gaining honor or standing” (Lebow, 2008, p. 538). To stop possible loss, each person engages in risky behaviour to alleviate potential costs (Levy, 1996, p. 187). Actors faced with prospective losses will use previous experience to assure that possibility and develop new methods to stop future losses (Levy, 2003, pp. 218–19). Yanukovych did precisely this after losing the 2004 presidential election learning from these failures and taking risks to become President in 2010. Prospect theory helps explain the learning process of Yanukovych after the Orange Revolution.

It is possible that Yanukovych did not learn as the Euromaidan ended his presidential term prematurely. Partially this was brought on by regime failings (see Wilson, 2014b) but Bankova was still fighting the last war and a possible Colour Revolution, rather than adapting to a protest similar to the Arab Spring (Dagaev et al., 2014). Bankova was preparing for the 2015 Presidential election and was attempting to consolidate power before that ballot (Skumin & Kovalenko, 2013). This fear of protest was seen in 2010 when Yanukovych instructed supporters to take control of the Maidan square and other key areas of central Kiev in case a new Colour Revolution happened before his inauguration (Interfax-Ukraine, 2009). To understand the domestic learning failure by Yanukovych an understanding of the Orange Revolution needs to be given.

3. The orange revolution

Since 2002 opposition had begun to grow to President Kuchma resulting in regime splits; the most important of which was the rupture between Kuchma and Viktor Yushchenko as Yushchenko united with long-time anti-Kuchma Yulia Tymoshenko to give a viable alternative to Kuchma and unite the opposition behind one candidate (Yekelchyk, 2007, p. 214). Further, splits in the regime were internal as the Donetsks, Dnipropetrovsk and Kiev clans competed with one another to gain the ascendancy. The Donetsk clan eventually won and was able to foist its chosen candidate, Yanukovych, onto Kuchma who due to term-limits had become a lame duck. This ostracised the Kiev and Dnipropetrovsk clans as the Donetsk clan took further power and the other two clans began to work with the opposition to maintain their interests (Wilson, 2005a, p. 83). With the growing regime isolation, Bankova had to use electoral fraud to ensure Yanukovych of victory. On election night Ukrainians went to bed believing that Yushchenko was the victor. They woke the next morning discovered that Yanukovych had won an improbable victory (Wilson, 2015, p. 318). The manner of the vote stealing, coupled with incriminating intercepts of telephone conversations between the electoral staff of Yanukovych who were tampering “with the server of the state electoral commission” started the Orange Revolution (Plokhy, 2015, p. 333).

The Orange Revolution and the failure of Yanukovych to become president in 2004 gave him a range of lessons. The first was that democratic youth groups should not be allowed to function. Groups like Pora had taken ideas from groups in previous Colour Revolutions, notably Otpor (Serbia) and Kmara (Georgia). It copied previous tactics and used them effectively to help the opposition to win the Orange Revolution (Collin, 2007, p. 117). Learning to limit opposition youth groups and the opposition was important. Secondly, regime unity was necessary. Bankova under Kuchma had been divided on using coercion (Reid, 2015, p. 249) and was susceptible to clan fighting. Yanukovych needed to build future regime unity if he wished to keep power. Thirdly, it was important to control institutions as the Supreme Court showed independence in 2004, annulled the elections second round where Yanukovych won and demanded a new third round (Collin, 2007, p. 148). Fourthly, if Yanukovych was to gain power he would need an effective political vehicle and a change of image making him electable.

4. Yanukovych the learner

But how did Yanukovych implement the lessons learnt from 2004 and what were the practices used? An analysis will be made of the practices devised to stop a possible new Orange Revolution. Yanukovych became Prime Minister in 2006 and President in 2010. While as Prime Minister his implementation was limited due to constraints on Prime Ministerial powers but some changes could be applied both before becoming Prime Minister and when he reached this office. For instance, Yanukovych would have known that his image was tarnished and an image change for himself and Party of Regions was essential if he was ever to get elected. Party of Regions had the financial backing of key oligarchs like Rinat Akhmetov, and so when Yanukovych became Prime Minister it had the financial backing to coax members of opposition parties to join Party of Regions. But by becoming President in 2010 Yanukovych could really begin to instigate lessons from 2004. Even before his inauguration supporters were tasked with stopping possible protests in central Kiev by controlling the likely streets and squares for a protest. Control of the judiciary gave Yanukovych the opportunity to bring back the 1996 Constitution which gave the President greater powers than the 2004 document. This allowed Yanukovych
the powers to control state institutions and the judiciary which helped his consolidation of power. The electoral playing field was tilted to help Party of Regions dominate Parliament. Regime youth movements were created and the numbers of security personnel were increased. The placing of state institutions and state assets in the hands of close allies meant that the Bankova did not have to manage the interests of disparate clans.

4.1. Improving a tainted image

Naturally, Yanukovych had advisors and the need for image transformation would have been one of their top priorities. Allies and Yanukovych wanted power and the changing of a tarnished image for Yanukovych and Party of Regions would have been a necessary first step. As the main rival, Tymoshenko was photogenic with her peasant braid. The image change was a crucial necessity. The learning process began with acknowledging that Party of Regions and especially the image of Yanukovych needed detoxification. Not only did Yanukovych have previous criminal convictions for theft and assault and beating a man (Byrne, 2010; Krushelnycy, 2006, p. 190) and during the Orange Revolution, Yanukovych had urged the use of force to clear the protests (Wilson, 2005a, p. 136). These were the reasons for the tainted image of Yanukovych and needed to be overcome if he was to get elected and implement his lessons from 2004.

The first step was accepting the Orange Revolution, or at least seeming to acknowledge that it had been a popular protest and highlighting the democratic will of the people and the strength of democracy in Ukraine (Yekelchyk, 2007, p. 224). His sudden conversion to democratic values and the portrayal of himself as a converted democrat was by itself insufficient to win an election, so American image consultants were hired, producing a less error-prone person comfortable in cheaper suits (Wilson, 2015, p. 342). While south-east Ukraine remained the heartland of Yanukovych, the image change increased his vote in central and western Ukraine in the 2010 Presidential elections (Miroshnichenko, 2010). Having, at least rhetorically, accepted the Orange Revolution, Yanukovych used the frustrations of Ukrainians at the regime especially when the coalition began to fragment (Kudelia & Kuzio, 2015, p. 253), but on the other hand, it was centralised behind Yanukovych and constructed to promote the interests of oligarch supporters. By developing it as the party primarily of south-east Ukraine Yanukovych was assured an electoral base and he learnt from the failure of the dominant party project of Kuchma. For a United Ukraine, Kuchma had relied on a coalition of parties and had had to accommodate different interests which weakened the regime especially when the coalition began to fragment (Way, 2014, p. 102). Yanukovych learnt from this as a party with only one figurehead was less likely to disintegrate (Bondarenko, 2008). By relying on the Donetsk oligarchs for resources, and managing to be both an umbrella party and a vehicle of south-eastern interests, Party of Regions won two elections after 2004, giving Yanukovych power and the chance to implement lessons from 2004. With its success and ability to raise funds, Party of Regions enticed smaller parties into a coalition which increased the number of deputies in Parliament (Kudelia, 2014, p. 20). As Party of Region was highly centralised it was not susceptible to factionalism which created a unified entity “for consolidating authoritarian control” (Way, 2015, p. 49) and it became a “refuge for all former government officials threatened by the new authorities” (Kudelia, 2014, p. 21). With financial backing from oligarchs like Akhmetov and popular support in most regions Party of Regions became a powerful political vehicle able to give Yanukovych power.

Party of Region was prepared to work with Orange coalition parties who had gained power after 2004 which increased its popular support as it emphasised that it had learnt from the Orange Revolution (Kudelia & Kuzio, 2015, pp. 260–1). By forming coalitions with other parties Party of Regions improved its vote in regions other than its south-eastern heartland, thereby increasing its share of representation in Parliament. Once it had achieved this and gained control of a region it would “sideline these partners with the objective of taking full power in the region”. This left other parties with a stark choice; be consumed by Party of Regions or face electoral oblivion (Kudelia & Kuzio, 2015, p. 262). In Parliament, Party of Regions worked with individual parties of the Orange coalition using divide and rule tactics to weaken the coalition (Haran, 2013b, p. 76) which it achieved, playing on the divisions in the coalition which further enhanced its electability (Kudelia, 2014, pp. 20–1). After 2004, the Orange coalition began reforms which improved the access of political parties to the media. With the resources at the disposal of Party of Regions Yanukovych was able to buy media advertising and get his message to more voters. This message contrasted with the infighting between Orange coalition parties and the inability of the alliance to deal with the economic recession which hit Ukraine in 2008 (Haran, 2011, pp. 95–6).
4.3. Buying and blackmailing support

After becoming Prime Minister, Yanukovych used the extensive resources of Akhmetov and other oligarchs to coax members of Our Ukraine Bloc and Bloc Yulia Tymoshenko (BYuT) to join Party of Regions (Mostovaya, 2006b). Kuchma had used the oligarch’s resources to buy the allegiance of the opposition and Yanukovych continued this trend to assure enough support in Parliament (Way, 2015, pp. 64–5). While this lesson was drawn from before 2004, Yanukovych would have known the necessity of consolidating power, which would require a broad coalition, so it was essential to buy the allegiance of other parliamentarians to achieve that majority. Reforms instigated by the Orange coalition had expanded Prime Ministerial powers and Yanukovych was fortunate enough to become Prime Minister as these new powers became law. This gave him extensive powers to offer resources to entice opposition politicians into supporting him (Kudelia, 2012, p. 424).

Yanukovych was fortunate to become Prime Minister just as this institution’s powers were increased which gave him control of key ministries allowing him to use institutions like the tax revenue bodies to blackmail other politicians by threatening to publish their tax returns and corrupt practices (Mostovaya, 2006a). This extortion helped increase his support and kept those who might waver onside. Control of the Interior Ministry and Prosecutor General continued the coercion of the opposition by prosecuting opposition politicians (Kudelia, 2012, p. 424). Under the new powers, Yanukovych could appoint allies to key positions, which he did by placing a supporter as head of the SBU (Ukrainian Security Services), which allowed Yanukovych to extensively and easily monitor the opposition (Mostovaya, 2007b). He continued to appoint allies to other key state bodies so that he could undermine the decrees of President Yushchenko (Mostovaya, 2007a). With Party of Regions having a majority in Parliament legislation was passed to reduce the number of parliamentary committees held by the opposition and access to state-funding for political parties (Tychina, 2006). While fortunate to become Prime Minister as its powers increased, it helped Yanukovych implement lessons from 2004.

4.4. Using pro-regime protestors

During the 2010 presidential elections, Yanukovych implemented another lesson. Fearing that the opposition might protest against his likely victory, Party of Regions organised party supporters to sleep in tents in central Kiev and at the central electoral commission to stop possible protests occurring (Ukrainskaya Pravda, 2010). Rather than allow potential demonstrators to gain control of the streets as had occurred in 2004 Yanukovych had learnt the necessity of controlling the streets in case such an occurrence happened (Gessen, 2010).

4.5. Perfecting authoritarian institutions

Institutions let Yanukovych down in 2004 most obviously when the Supreme Court called for a third electoral round which Yanukovych lost (Wilson, 2005a, p. 149). Yanukovych was determined that this should not re-occur and on becoming President, he quickly tried to gain control of the central electoral commission (Haran, 2013a) the SBU and the judiciary (Lavrik & Butkevych, 2010).

No previous Ukrainian President had tried to control the Supreme Court (Wilson, 2005a, p. 147) but Yanukovych achieved it with surprising alacrity (Pastukhova, 2011b; Veremko, 2010). But the main prize was control of the Constitutional Court which would allow him to implement learning. Using the new Prime Ministerial powers Yanukovych had been able to appoint judges. Upon becoming President he had friendly judges who owed their position to him. This allowed him to quickly get the authorisation of the Constitutional Court to return to the 1996 Constitution, which increased presidential powers to the detriment of Parliament and the Prime Minister (Kudelia, 2013, p. 175) which gave Yanukovych independence from Parliament and control over the Cabinet of Ministers, SBU and the Prosecutor’s Office (Kudelia, 2014, p. 21).

An agreement between Yanukovych, the Communists and the Lytvyn Bloc changed the law on Parliamentary procedures which had stopped politicians from changing parties and forming coalitions. This enabled Party of Regions to buy other deputies to get a parliamentary majority. Having gained the presidency Yanukovych now had the largest parliamentary party, allowing him to pass legislation and recall the standing Tymoshenko government. Dispensing with Tymoshenko, Yanukovych appointed his chosen Prime Minister, the more compliant Mykola Azarov who was a member of Party of Regions and therefore supportive of Yanukovych (Kudelia, 2014, p. 21). A coalition which gave Party of Regions a large majority in parliament and a pliant Prime Minister allowed Yanukovych to control parliament (Haran, 2011, p. 97). Control of institutions was a direct lesson from 2004.

4.6. Tilting the electoral playing field

Having described how Yanukovych rode roughshod over the 2004 Constitution (Wilson, 2014b, p. 50) bought off opposition politicians, consolidated control and overturned the electoral system (Pastukhova, 2010b), further analysis will be given about how he ousted Tymoshenko and changed the electoral system. Knowing that a powerful opposition would hinder his consolidation of power, Yanukovych used Party of Regions resources to buy the allegiance of enough Parliamentarians to oust Tymoshenko in a no-confidence vote (Pastukhova, 2010b). Rather than find a compromise with Tymoshenko and maintain the pretence of democracy Yanukovych forced her out (Riabchuk, 2012, p. 11). Having reduced the threat of the opposition by creating clone parties and gaining control of Parliament Yanukovych could implement lessons from 2004. Once power was consolidated, Yanukovych excluded his coalition partners as the system had been constructed to insure the dominance of Party of Regions (Fisun, 2011).

A small far-right party, Svoboda, was used to tarnish all opposition parties as neo-fascist. State media publicised the actions of Svoboda, especially their violent demonstrations. Svoboda was also to be used for another purpose. Yanukovych had seen that Kuchma in 1999 had stood against...
the Communist party leader, Petro Symonenko for the presidency. People saw Kuchma as the least bad option. It was a trick that Bankova wanted to use again in 2015, using the leader of Svoboda, Oleh Tyahnybok, as such a despoiled alternative that Yanukovych would be the least bad option (Kramer, 2013). By tarnishing all opposition as in league with Svoboda, Yanukovych solidified support in the south-east and increased backing in central Ukraine too (Riabchuk, 2012, p. 29).

Yanukovych realised the importance of marginalising the opposition to consolidate power. The fear of a new Orange Revolution led Yanukovych to devise methods to constrain the ability of the opposition to compete in the 2015 Presidential election (Kuzio, 2015, p. 101). It is one reason for the failure of Bankova to adapt to the Euromaidan. The Euromaidan was largely leaderless and the opposition played a bit part role. Unable to locate and thereby restrict the leaders of the Euromaidan, Bankova was unable to adjust to the Euromaidan protests (Dagaev et al., 2014).

Political technology has a long history in Ukraine (see Wilson, 2005b). Yanukovych as Prime Minister under Kuchma would have been aware of effective methods of political technology. Party of Regions continually used political technology successfully in its south-eastern heartland from 2002 to maintain regional power (Tizhden.ua, 2010). Yanukovych when president used the Presidential Administration to create parties to take votes from the opposition (Pastukhova, 2010c). Throughout the presidency of Yanukovych, Bankova developed tactics for refining administrative resources, winning elections through fraud and reducing the presence of the opposition in Parliament (Balan, 2010). By using political technology Bankova gained control of Kiev and other regions (Oleksijenko, 2013). Political technology tools helped stifle the opposition and led to increased central and regional control.

After 2004 the Orange Coalition changed electoral legislation to make it easier for political blocs and smaller parties to access parliament (Haran, 2010). Yanukovych dismantled this. The electoral system became semi-majoritarian, with a 50:50 split between party-lists and majoritarian districts. This helped Party of Regions as it could use its extensive resources to advertise in the media and get its message to more people thereby increasing its popular support. At election time it was also not averse to using extensive fraud and fraudulent methods like voting multiple times to win many majoritarian constituencies (Kramer, 2012). The parliamentary electoral threshold was raised from three to five percent. Political blocs were banned and the regime created clone parties to take votes from the opposition. Political technology was used in single-mandate districts to assure Bankova victory. Unlike counting in the proportional districts, which was done quickly, the tallying in the single-member districts took days, with electoral officials inflating the count (Danilova, 2012). In single-mandate districts, Party of Regions used two candidates to assure victory. This involved having an official candidate, while also promoting another independent candidate to make certain that at least one got elected (Kramer, 2012, pp. 7–9). Bankova also mooted the possibility of creating a state-wide party, rather than rely just on Party of Regions, but in the end, it used clone and scarecrow parties to leech votes from the opposition (Haran, 2013b; Karasev, 2010; Riabchuk, 2012, p. 11; Wilson, 2011; Yakhno, 2011).

The 2012 parliamentary elections were an opportunity for Bankova to test new and refine old tactics maintaining the learning process. Bankova used a system of mushrooming to construct parties to represent different electoral sectors (Wilson, 2005b, p. 163). Such created parties were Forward Ukraine and the Radical Party (McPhedran, 2014; Ukrainskaya Pravda, 2012). The emergence of the Ukrainian Democratic Alliance for Reform (UDAR) as another opposition party in the already contested centre ground perhaps pointed to the hand of the regime as UDAR took votes off Batkivshchyna the party of Tymoshenko (Vasylyev, 2012). Party of Regions also played the opposition off against each other, creating discord with the opposition competing during elections on separate tickets which only meant that they took votes from one another which assured Party of Regions of victory. Tushki was a label used to explain parliamentarians who were bribed to join Party of Regions after the election, which reduced the parliamentary numbers of the opposition (Wilson, 2012) which in turn created a more pliant Parliament dominated by PoR.

Party of Regions and other pro-regime parties enabled Yanukovych to control the central and regional electoral commissions. Legislation gave the most representatives on each commission to the biggest party. As Party of Regions had the most parliamentary seats Bankova had control of the electoral commissions. When Party of Regions was combined with other pro-regime parties the number of representatives in the commissions gave Bankova an even larger majority (Haran, 2013b). Control of electoral commissions and new Prime Ministerial powers to appoint regional governors meant that Bankova controlled the regions, strengthening Yanukovych’s “vertical of power” (Kudelia, 2014, p. 22). The new majoritarian system was used at the regional level giving Party of Regions control of oblast and raion councils (Haran, 2013b, p. 80).

4.7. Limiting the third sector

During the 2004 protests, civil society had galvanised the public and Kuchma lost control of the media and NGOs (Wilson, 2005a, pp. 135, 138–142, 146–147). Yanukovych realised that media and NGOs needed controlling. Within weeks of becoming President, Bankova restricted media freedoms, dictating information to be shown on state television as the regime knew that most Ukrainians get their information from television (Rafael, 2010). Media outlets were pressured into supporting the regime Bankova and the SBU began to devise then implement Internet controls which attempted to stop people finding alternative information. Through growing Internet controls Bankova could effectively limit the potential for the opposition to organise protests using social networks (Syumar, 2010). Bankova successfully gained control of the National Television and Radio Council, while the head of the SBU became the main shareholder of Inter, the biggest television channel in Ukraine (OSW, 2010).

The remit of NGOs was restricted with the tax administration being efficiently used to monitor them. NGOs were asked to provide information on who they worked with and
who their employees were, which helped Bankova deduce which organisations worked with foreign organisations. New laws stipulated the sectors of society that NGOs could operate in with the human rights and democracy areas becoming off-limits (Pastukhova, 2011a). The SBU was given the task of monitoring NGOs for subversive activities as well as harassing independent journalists (Riabchuk, 2012).

4.8. Enhancing the security forces and using thugs

Knowing and fearing Ukraine’s time-honoured protest culture, Yanukovych built a strong security force to counter a new Colour Revolution (Lavrik & Butkevych, 2010). To solidify control over the SBU, Yanukovych deposed its chief and replaced him with an ally and allies also became Interior Minister and Head of the special police force, the Berkut (Menon & Rumer, 2015, p. 57). If a person wants to remain in power indefinitely a standard requirement is an effective security force able and willing to crack the heads of protestors (Bueno de Mesquita & Smith, 2011, p. 139). During the Orange Revolution, the SBU had been divided in its support for Kuchma (Wilson, 2005a, p. 135). Yanukovych learnt that he needed an effective security force answerable to him, so he placed an ally as head of the SBU, strengthened the Berkut, constructed the Titushki, a pro-regime mob, and developed pro-regime youth groups. This was all ongoing in the build-up to the 2015 presidential elections.

The Berkut was a special security force originating in the last days of the Soviet Union. Under the presidency of Yanukovych its numbers were increased (Jacobs, 2014). An example of the effectiveness of the Berkut was during the 2011 winter protests when demonstrators were quickly removed from the Maidan and their attempted tent-city destroyed (ZN, UA, 2011a). Yanukovych relied on the Berkut to quell protests allowing it the leeway to use repression when required (Tregubov, 2011). Like the SBU, the Berkut went after journalists in an attempt to stifle independent media to limit any opposition (Masalova, 2010).

During the Orange Revolution, the SBU had not used force (Wilson, 2005a, p. 135). Yanukovych feared that protests could occur again as in 2004 and precipitate his demise. On becoming President, Yanukovych used his now compliant Parliament to pass new protest legislation. Courts were given the power to determine if a protest would harm the state or public and if it was deemed so then the protest was banned. The definition of harm was deliberately ambiguous allowing the courts to ban most protests (Pastukhova, 2010a). In 2013 new laws stipulated that protest leaders needed to know exact numbers or the police could disperse demonstrators (Skyba, 2013). In 2012 protests against allowing Russian to become a regional language occurred, but the security forces quickly dispersed protestors with tear gas and batons (Elder, 2012). Yanukovych learnt that when protests occurred having a pro-regime rent-a-mob would allow the regime to counter any protests (Michelson, 2011). While a rent-a-mob is a common tactic for all authoritarian regimes, Yanukovych having seen the protests of 2004 would have ascertained that a pro-regime group to counteract such demonstrations was necessary to ensure regime survival. This was seen in the build-up to the 2010 presidential elections when PoR supporters lived in tents to stop a possible Orange Revolution (Ukrainskaya Pravda, 2010). The Yanukovych rent-a-mob was far from honed as Bankova was working towards the 2015 Presidential elections (Rudenko, 2014) but it was necessary to have a mob to be called on whenever required.

Another lesson from the Orange Revolution was the need for a pro-regime youth group like Pora. While Pora was not the only youth group in the Orange Revolution it was the most prominent (Wilson, 2005a, p. 75). Bankova created a Party of Regions youth wing, Young Regions, to claim the streets before protestors could and if necessary beat up opposition youth wings and journalists (ZN, UA, 2011b, 2013). Having a pro-regime youth group allowed Bankova to increase legitimacy with young people and stop them joining the opposition. But Young Regions was often ineffectual; particularly regarding violence and Bankova also developed a regime mob known as the Titushki. They were “tracksuited thugs, a mixture of football hooligans, fight club members and petty criminals, given small cash handouts to rough up and intimidate” (Reid, 2015, p. 265). They were more of a swarm than a mob. Like the Berkut, the Titushki rose to prominence during Euromaidan but had a longer history of regime-sponsored violence (Fakty i Komentarii, 2013). At times their remit involved acting as agents provocateurs in demonstrations, instigating violence to provide a justification for the Berkut to violently disperse protests (Mazanik, 2014; RFE/RL, 2013). The Titushki were first used to “attack the opposition and journalists” during May 18, 2013, marches in Kiev to protest the presidency of Yanukovych (Shekhovtsov, 2013). To further protect itself Bankova used hired thugs, mainly from sporting clubs, to protect Party of Regions rallies and attack opposition (Salem & Stack, 2014). The use of thugs and the Titushki was part of the preparations by Bankova for the 2015 elections. To alleviate the growing unpopularity of Yanukovych and to increase regime preparedness for the 2015 presidential election Bankova began to train ‘anti-fascist’ groups (Michelson & Velichko, 2013; Tizhden.ua, 2013). Although these groups remained unused, their existence shows that Bankova was preparing for a possible Orange Revolution scenario. Yanukovych learnt that control of the security forces and pro-regime youth factions would help his counter-revolution.

4.9. Choosing your own family is always better

Kuchma had relied on an uneasy alliance between business clans, primarily from Donetsk, Dnipropetrovsk and Kiev (Wilson, 2015, p. 194). By 2002 the Donetsk clan, through steel wealth, had become the most prominent and imposed Yanukovych on Kuchma, as his successor. But this imposition and general thuggish culture alienated other clans, who turned to supporting Yushchenko (Wilson, 2015, p. 316). Yanukovych would have seen how the regime of Kuchma fragmented into competing elite factions (Harman, 2012) and realised that he needed trusted close allies to run the state.

For regime survival, the ruling coalition must be built on three things: loyalty, loyalty and loyalty. Authoritarian leaders try to surround themselves with friends and family, to improve their survival (Bueno de Mesquita & Smith, 2011, p. 58). Yanukovych saw that a large coalition of competing
Learning the wrong lessons

While one could contend that Yanukovych did not learn due to the Euromaidan this event was different to the Orange Revolution. The Euromaidan quickly came to resemble the Arab Spring (Dagaev et al., 2014). Yanukovych learnt lessons to counter an Orange Revolution, failing to adapt to the Euromaidan. He was preparing for the 2015 Presidential elections and the possibility of a new Orange Revolution (Skumin & Kovalenko, 2013). Indeed, Bankova used Orange Revolutionary lessons to deal with the Euromaidan. The regime repression was directly taken from the counter-Orange Revolution (Wilson, 2014b) playbook which had been devised after 2004 by the SBU. But this coercion only hardened the resolve of the protestors. The tactics devised by Yanukovych to counter a new Orange Revolution, in part, contributed to the Euromaidan. Primarily, the creation of a family undermined the support of the regime among its main backers. Having learnt to control a new Orange Revolution, Bankova did not have the necessary knowledge to react to the Euromaidan, leaving the regime floundering. But Yanukovych’s learning from 2004 is an example of authoritarian learning from domestic experience and is an example of this understudied aspect of authoritarian learning.

5. Conclusion

I set out to assess the understudied topic of domestic learning in authoritarian learning. Of course, Yanukovych had advisors telling him what to do but Yanukovych would have learnt from 2004 without needing to rely exclusively on advisors. The example of Yanukovych highlights learning from a domestic source which has only been given a limited discussion in the literature. All people learn, but so far authoritarian learning has concentrated on learning from external examples, missing domestic learning.

Through referring back to the Orange Revolution some lessons learnt by Yanukovych could be explored. Firstly, he learnt the importance of controlling young people and placing them in regime-controlled organisations so stopping them joining both the opposition and organisations like Pora, which had been prominent during the Orange Revolution. Secondly, divisions within the regime contributed to its weakening and eventual collapse when confronted by the pressure of consistent and large protests, so unity was paramount. Thirdly, institutions had been too independent under Kuchma and Yanukovych upon gaining power in 2006 and more so in 2010 set about constraining these. Fourthly, Yanukovych realised his image had been tarnished by the Orange Revolution and if he was to gain power and implement other lessons then an image change was mandatory.

As Prime Minister and especially as President, Yanukovych could implement his learning from 2004. The first lesson applied was the evolution of his persona. Suddenly Yanukovych became a converted democrat which made him electable outside his south-east powerbase allowing him to become Prime Minister. Party of Regions also underwent a change making it an electable party and it began to work with other parties which eventually helped make it stronger and electable. Party of Regions managed to be both a wide umbrella party encompassing social and regional cleavages and also centralised around Yanukovych and centred on south-east Ukraine. This made splits unlikely. Strengthening the party into a party-of-power was a direct lesson from the failure of Kuchma, allowing Yanukovych to consolidate power as Prime Minister. He was fortunate to become the first Prime Minister with new legislative powers which allowed him to place allies in key positions further implementing his control. Yanukovych was able to use the financial backing of oligarchs to buy the allegiances of politicians. With increased Prime Ministerial powers and allies in key positions, he could blackmail opposition politicians.

Even before becoming President, Yanukovych implemented another lesson. To stop his likely electoral victory from being kidnapped by protests, Yanukovych had Party of Regions members take control of key areas of Kiev to stop demonstrations. But it was on becoming President that Yanukovych really began to implement the lessons of 2004. The main necessity was to increase the size of his electoral coalition so Yanukovych bought the allegiance of parliamentarians. Having successfully got a paid for majority in Parliament he could pass legislation to bring back the 1996 Constitution which increased his powers, thereby allowing him to implement his lessons. By renovating the electoral system to a semi-majoritarian system Bankova had a significant advantage and this assured Party of Regions of a majority of seats. Having learnt from Kuchma the importance of political technology, Yanukovych continued it and through alliances with other parties, Party of Regions could control both regional and the central electoral commissions making it easier to control the electoral system. Civil society and NGOs had been integral to the Orange Revolution. Yanukovych used legislation and the SBU to curtail their activities. Bankova was particularly harsh in dealing with protestors. The Berkut were strengthened and a new
rent-a-mob created. This was the Titushki and their purpose was to claim the streets and clear opposition protests. The creation of a family was another lesson learnt. Rather than rely on clans which under Kuchma contributed to regime fragility, Yanukovych chose to use trusted allies but this alienated the oligarchs who were less than enthusiastic in supporting Bankova when it faced the Euromaidan.

I was concerned with analysing authoritarian learning from a domestic source which was achieved. But the failures of Bankova were also highlighted in reacting to the Euromaidan. Having learnt from the Orange Revolution and fixated on it, Bankova could not adapt to the different challenges of the Euromaidan. The methods Bankova had its disposal were sufficient for overcoming a new Orange Revolution, but the Euromaidan was something different. Bankova could not adjust to it. Unable to adapt and having alienated too many people Bankova often overreacted during the Euromaidan which had the effect of solidifying protestor unity. The example of Yanukovych is relevant to understanding learning failure as Bankova was still dealing with the past and a potential new Orange Revolution. It failed to adapt to new protests. But the example of Yanukovych is relevant to our understanding of domestic learning and unsuccessful learning regarding authoritarian learning. Having devised tactics to win a new Orange Revolution and victory at the 2015 Presidential elections, for Bankova the Euromaidan came out of the blue. Still fighting the last war, the regime was unable to adapt to the new protest type.

Conflict of interest

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