

Look Beyond the Capital

THE GEOGRAPHY OF POLITICAL OPENINGS IN EURASIA

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In the last decade and a half, the ousters of numerous national leaders and mass street protests in Eurasian and Middle Eastern capitals have taken scholars and policymakers by surprise. Political outcomes are challenging to predict, but by examining events in Kyrgyzstan in 2005 and 2010 and Ukraine in 2004 and 2013, we can see that attention to subnational influences helps. By introducing new leadership or reviving civil society, these events create political openings for greater democracy. By improving their ability to anticipate such events, local and foreign activists and policymakers could be better prepared to take advantage of these openings.

Events outside of national capitals can be precursors and facilitators of national political openings. They can be precursors in the sense that they contribute to later national upheavals. Subnational precursors include early local protests, framing of demands, local elite defection, and local election fraud. Other subnational developments, such as simultaneous local protests and the recruitment and movement of protestors, are facilitators of national political openings. These subnational developments do not precede extraordinary events in the capital but coincide with them and help fuel them. Monitoring concurrent subnational developments may help indicate when events in the capital will escalate into national political openings.

Precursors of National Political Openings

Of the precursors, local protests are particularly important because they can encourage mass demonstrations in the national capital. Combined, local and national protests can revive civil society and possibly remove national leaders.

Consider Kyrgyzstan in 2010. There were local protests in outlying towns before demonstrations in the capital resulted in the ouster of President Kurmanbek Bakiyev. In February, two months prior to the ouster, an estimated 1,500 protestors filled the streets of the remote eastern town of Naryn demanding the government reverse price increases

and plans to privatize energy firms. The numbers had grown to 3,000 by the time people returned to the streets in March. A month later, a protest erupted in the northern region of Talas and demonstrators occupied the regional government building. A wave of demonstrations followed with protestors taking over district and regional government buildings in the regions of Chui, Jalal-Abad, and Issyk-Kul. Protests also spread to the capital Bishkek and Bakiyev fled.

These demonstrations in outlying regions shaped the public's political demands, offering clues as to what might later transpire on the streets of the national capital. As local protests grew in number and size, demands escalated from specific economic solutions to political overhauls. In addition to the economic demands, protestors insisted that the president's son, Maksim Bakiyev, who was widely believed to be profiting personally from his father's rule, be expelled from Kyrgyzstan. Ultimately, protestors called for the president to step down. Before the opposition in the national capital even had a chance to react, protestors in outlying regions had set the trajectory.

The actions of elites outside the capital can also be precursors of national political openings. In particular, local elite defection can portend the ouster of an incumbent regime, as occurred in Ukraine in the Orange Revolution of 2004 and Kyrgyzstan in the Tulip Revolution of 2005. In Ukraine, governments of the capital Kyiv and some western cities refused to recognize then-Prime Minister Victor Yanukovych as the new president, recognizing instead opposition candidate Victor Yushchenko. The fact that major parts of western Ukraine would refuse to recognize the government if Yanukovych took office may have encouraged the regime to negotiate to repeat the second round of the election, rather than try to thwart protestors' wishes. Large protests—300,000 in Kiev; 200,000 in Lviv; 30,000 in Kharkov; and 60,000 in Ivano-Frankivsk—provided additional encouragement. The regime's decision enabled Viktor Yushchenko to win the election and take office.

Local elites also defected prior to the ouster of Askar Akayev in Kyrgyzstan in 2005. The defectors were centrist and pro-government parliamentary candidates whose actions were prompted by court decisions to deregister them as candidates. On flimsy evidence, courts ruled that these individuals had engaged in vote buying and prohibited them from running. The real reason for their ejection from the races, however, was that they were slated to run against candidates favored by Akayev or his allies, including, for example, his wife's sister. The deregistered candidates protested the decisions and mobilized supporters to demonstrate in the streets. The protest in Kochkor was one of the most colorful, with thousands of supporters demonstrating in the streets, setting up roadblocks on the main road to China, and ultimately forcing the regional governor to flee by jumping over a fence and running out of town. The defectors' tactics of blocking roads and removing local incumbents inspired the larger post-election protests that followed. Later demonstrations used these tested tactics to protest the defeat of favored candidates.

Another elite action, local election fraud, can also be a precursor of a national political opening. In this scenario, national government officials test fraud techniques in local elections before using them in a national contest. Ukrainian opposition leaders viewed the government's rigging of local elections in 2004 as a rehearsal for the regime's planned presidential election fraud, according to political scientist Nathaniel Copsey. Whether the local election fraud sparks a national political opening depends, of course, on the response of the masses and any organized opposition.

Facilitators of National Political Openings

In addition to subnational developments that are precursors of national political openings, there are also subnational factors that facilitate these openings. Even when local protests coincide with, rather than precede, national ones, events outside the capital can broaden the revival of civil society across the state. The spread of protest also signals to national leaders that the crisis they face is not limited to the capital but is, in fact, countrywide and thus more serious. Consider events in Ukraine that resulted in Yanukovich fleeing the country in February 2014. After the national government passed anti-protest laws, demonstrations escalated in Kyiv but even more so outside the capital. Between January 24 and 26, protestors took over eleven regional administrations and forced a wave of resignations of government officials. Police typically retreated quickly when buildings were being stormed. Such contentious activity spread from opposition strongholds in western Ukraine into the east of the country. Where governments fell, opposition executive committees formed and challenged Yanukovich's authority.

The regional government takeovers likely encouraged Yanukovich to offer a concession, albeit an ineffective one, on January 25. The occupations signaled to him that he was losing control of parts of the country—not only those historically more sympathetic to the opposition but also those he thought supported him. Yanukovich reacted by offering to share power with opposition leaders Arseniy Yatsenyuk and Vitali Klitschko by appointing them to the posts of prime minister and vice prime minister for humanitarian affairs, respectively. The concessions failed to mollify the protestors, however, as the government takeovers had signaled to the opposition that its position had strengthened. By rejecting the power-sharing agreement, Yatsenyuk, in fact, indicated as such.

Outlying areas can also influence national actions by sending demonstrators to the capital. In Ukraine in 2004 the influx to Kyiv of protestors from outside the capital appears to have helped the demonstrations there succeed. The numbers of protestors grew to nearly one million in Kyiv with hundreds of thousands thought to have come from outside the capital. The protest grew large enough that it discouraged the regime from using force to quell demonstrators because of its fear of heavy bloodshed. Likewise, in Ukraine in 2013 thousands from most regions of the country joined protests

in Kyiv on November 24 after the government's reversal on agreements to integrate with the European Union. Following the November 30 Berkut crackdown, approximately half the protestors in Kyiv came from outside the city, according to a poll of 1,037 demonstrators in early December by the Ilko Kucheriv Democratic Initiatives Foundation, a Ukrainian nongovernmental organization. Providing further indication of the geographic diversity of the demonstrators were the signs they held bearing the names of their hometowns.

Active mobilization of demonstrators from outside the capital can increase their impact. This was especially evident in Kyrgyzstan in 2005. As political scientist Scott Radnitz has described, wealthy individuals who lost in the first round of elections provided transportation from villages so that their supporters could protest the electoral losses in regional capitals. Their campaign teams were redirected to mobilize demonstrators. Villagers were responsive, in part, because many of the losing candidates were their patrons, providing them assistance and the promise of assistance. After several regional government buildings were taken over, the losing candidates organized protests in Bishkek. They provided buses so that their supporters could demonstrate in the capital and ultimately these protests, coupled with the events in the regions, resulted in Akayev's ouster. The failed attempts of major opposition coalitions to mobilize people in Bishkek earlier underscore the importance of the regional patrons' mobilization efforts. National opposition leaders did ultimately direct the protests in Bishkek that toppled the regime, but by then the government had lost control in the south, and the regime was likely already close to collapse. Moreover, the national opposition was not responsible for most of the mobilization, which had made the effort successful.

National opposition leaders acknowledged the importance of this subnational mobilization in 2005 when they planned protests against Bakiyev's regime in 2010. These leaders reached out to regional elites and organized provincial protests, according to political scientist Kathleen Collins. However, their plans were nonetheless overtaken by subnational developments, namely the spontaneous demonstrations that took place in Naryn months before the planned protests.

Subnational mobilization of protestors has played an important, but less significant, role in Ukraine. In the 2013 events, an estimated 92 percent of protestors came to Kyiv on their own, rather than being organized by a political party or other organization, according to the Ilko Kucheriv poll. In 2004 national organizations were important to recruiting protestors from the provinces, but they did not need to rely on subnational elites as much as their Kyrgyzstani counterparts did. These groups reached out through their own organizational structures to recruit demonstrators from outside of Kyiv. This was particularly true of the Ukrainian youth organization Pora, whose leading activists were from Galicia and which had cells in all provinces except some in the south and east. The aim of the national organizations was to recruit at least 100,000 individuals from each western province as well as a large number from Yushchenko's home region

Sumy in northeastern Ukraine, according to political scientist Taras Kuzio. The western city Lviv served as a recruitment and transportation hub for the protests in Kyiv. Subnational protestors, whether recruited or acting on their own, helped fuel the protests in the capital city.

Looking beyond the capital can help local and foreign activists and policymakers be better prepared for national political openings. With greater lead time, they can more effectively provide assistance that will foster democratic outcomes. What are the telltale signs in outlying regions that a national leadership change may be on the horizon? Observers would be wise to monitor the demands of local protestors and shifts in those demands over time, the availability of infrastructure and networks to mobilize citizens from outlying regions to protest in the capital, and the defections of subnational elites. Political outcomes are difficult to predict, but an eye to subnational developments can help activists and policymakers be better prepared to nurture democratic initiatives.

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