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ONLINE REVOLUTIONS: PREVENTING FUNDAMENTALISM TO TURN TO EXTREMISM

TIMO HELLENBERG

126

EXPERT OPINION





საქართველოს სტრატეგიისა და საერთაშორისო ურთიერთობათა კვლევის ფონდი
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When a peaceful demonstration turns to extreme violence on both sides

After living in Kyiv from 2011 to 2014 and observing the Maidan revolution as a foreigner, I still pose some questions for myself as a person who has been involved in international crisis management throughout his professional career.

Whenever a country faces a conflict, a civil strife, emergency conditions or any exceptional situation involving and affecting its citizens, there needs to be a ready-installed full-cycle crisis management mechanism in place, including a systematic, holistic and objective investigation to be conducted at the roots and the routes of the particular situation. In the early weeks of 2014 in Kyiv, during the strongest Maidan upheavals, this process was not seen but it surely was requested - and the process is still underway. The next upcoming Maidan anniversary in February 2020 - half a decade later - should be a reminder that a country considered to be built on European standards should never again allow its citizens – both civilians and law enforcement officials – to be injured, slaughtered and kidnapped without a proper and an immediate investigation. This is needed now more than ever before when the country's new President Zelinsky has proposed new peace negotiations with the Russian Federation about the raging war in eastern Ukraine.

Living it forward, learning it well

I have worked for the last 20 years writing about various crises and their management. From an academic point of view, the unique uprising began on 21 November 2013 when President Yanukovich made a U-turn and decided not to sign the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement despite the opposite rhetoric. The demonstrations lasted for three months and the clashes ended up with President Yanukovich's escape from Kyiv on 21 February 2014. This was preceded by a very violent period which is still under investigation but the only concrete fact to emerge is that no investigations have been completed. This is despite the fact that a massive amount of foreign research has been conducted and resources are available. So, what is up? Why, for example, were the militia stations in Mariinsky Park cleaned up day after day without any analysis or recording

of evidence? It can be said that about 300 people have lost their lives. This makes about three people a day according to basic math. It should be borne in mind that the events were limited to a small area on the Maidan; that is, Independence Square, the surrounding streets and Mariinsky Park which is adjacent to the Parliament. These few acres in the western center of Kyiv a number of human victims. The shooting of unarmed and mostly peaceful protesters by snipers and militia shotguns is not justified by anyone. On the other hand, standing for a month on the receiving end of fireballs and heavy catapults would take any country's safety machines to the extreme and they would respond with force. As such, it can be considered a miracle that only a small number of deaths occurred in an intense urban struggle lasting three months.

Countless books and movies have been made about the Maidan. One who sees the Maidan may find many of these interpretations authentic. An interesting aspect is the use of snipers on 20 February 2014 and the precedent chain of events on Institutska Street. There have also been speculations about the planned construction of the "killing field" on Thursday on Institutska Street. This is not the case. The situation unexpectedly disappeared at that time just like the day before and the day after and again carried further by new incidents.

Having lived on the Luteranska Street between the President's administration and the Maidan, I could testify on a daily basis how both the militia's special departments and the protesters' hard-nosed troops were led very unprofessionally. There was no talk of tactics and there was a continued lack of a comprehensive situational picture, not to mention the situational awareness which was non-existent. Information was not shared between agencies and not gathered at the strategic level and situations quickly grew into uncontrollable and devastating human streams of hundreds of people through the whims of charismatic group leaders. The killing, breaking and destroying of everything was turned into a self-serving beast. I remember the words of my friend, who was one of the leaders of the Maidan, when we meet once in the midst of the local buzz: "We no longer control this. We are afraid of what follows."

In the aftermath of the Maidan, the European Union's intelligence leadership later stated that the Ukrainian crisis came as a surprise to them. But anyone living and working in the country had seen this development

inevitably leading to a collision. Few, however, believed in such a timeline. However, I predicted for a couple of years earlier that things will not go smoothly. I had already illustrated this at the NATO-Ukraine seminar in Kyiv in 2012.

The European Union did not necessarily fully understand that Russia wanted to keep Ukraine as a partner to Russia rather than to allow Ukraine to commit to Western structures. The EU recognized that Russia reacted negatively but underestimated Ukraine's strategic importance to Russia. The European Union has a lot of excellent principles and techniques but its machinery lacks the perception of power politics. Here, of course, the Member States should be responsible for being aware of the problems and thinking about the solution. Could Europe have done more to support Ukraine since the Orange Revolution so that it would not have become a nest of corruption and a playground for the oligarchs? It is clear that Ukraine or any other country should decide themselves what kind of future they want to their countries be euro-integration or something else.

What is there to be learned?

At least 45 people were seriously injured on 21 July 2019 at the Hong Kong railway station as a rampaging mob of men in white T-shirts attacked protesters and passengers. No police officer was in sight as dozens of men stormed into the Yuen Long MTR station at around midnight. The same concept of using hired thugs was seen in Kyiv in January-February 2014 and also later in Caracas when government forces hired criminal gangs to disperse demonstrators after weeks of a locked situation. Violent radicalism and extremism is always connected to organized crime and this symbiosis is one of the factors which should serve as an early warning signal for external intervention, something not often seen even though it is happening.

Recent crisis management cases in different parts of the world such as Kyiv, Hong Kong, Catalonia and, for instance, Caracas are all unique but they have a common denominator; namely, fundamentalism supported with violence against innocent soft targets which is turned "online extremism" to seek more anti-governance destruction and hazardous pain. These are just some of the recent examples where violent radicalism

with fundamentalist support has used methods of extremism to generate more volume and societal impact for its terror actions through online sites – turning itself to a new beast, *online extremism*.

What is the ultimate goal of a radicalized person aiming at conducting an extreme act against our societies? Is it total destruction or constant fear? Or would it be to disturb the vital functions of societies by multiplying the collective harm caused?

As long I can remember, the online world of the internet has served the servants of good – as a tool of prevention, response and consequence management against all kinds of threats and disasters whereas terror, extremism and new forms of symbiosis of organized crime and fundamentalism have been its main target. Lately, however, things have turned deeply ugly and our lives have switched towards this new evil – extremism online.

Will there be a way back from this kind of *online extremism*? Numerous initiatives and alliances have been created in the short run to encounter the attacks which means a move forward. But could we also learn from the past?

The Maidan massacre, Venezuelan clashes and the Hong Kong demonstrations all underline a new trend in extremist atrocities while not being the first of their kind in this type of usage of cyber space in order to reach wider societal goals. These attacks were designed to be broadcast on the internet and livestreamed in order to maximize their impact and wider consequences. The goal of the peaceful demonstrations and actors all too often vanishes and is hindered by violent radicalism aiming to cause societal disruptions and exceptional conditions, challenging both the law enforcement and civil society at large. Challenge here remains, how we can contain violence at its early stages, not giving up to those forces benefiting from wider clashes and societal destruction in the name of freedom of expression and speech.

Less promises of everlasting enlargement, more emphasis on securing the neighborhood

The European Union's internal security cooperation has an essential and guiding role within the civil security mechanisms of the Member States.

More than ever, there is now a need for tactical-operational interfaces to prevent the changing tides of online radicalization and cyber extremism. Administrative, legal and operational reforms are already underway to improve national civil security measures but are too often hindered by the tendency to preserve sovereignty (or individual privacy) at the cost of better interoperability. European early warning, prevention and intervention mechanisms are needed wherever European interests – European values – are at stake.

Most of the new kind of emergency situations that occur as civil strife and later as full scale clashes between demonstrators and law enforcement officers are different from traditional civil security interruptions which are already at the response stage when the first signals arrive instead of needing preventive actions. They also have such wide-ranging impacts and political significance that they require a timely policy coordination and response at the EU political level. This could result from the number of impacted Member States or the cross-sectoral nature of the crisis or from a combination of these factors. The need for an EU policy and response coordination led to the creation of the EU Emergency and Crisis Coordination Arrangements in 2006 which are currently being implemented. The EU Integrated Political Crisis Response (IPCR) arrangements have contributed to improvements in the European Union's ability to make rapid and efficient decisions when faced with major emergencies which require response at the EU political level. Furthermore, the Integrated Situational Awareness and Analysis (ISAA), developed by the European Commission and the European External Action Service (EEAS), provides the capability to determine the appropriate procedure to be adopted to ensure political coordination and to prepare policy options for the Council's decision making when facing crisis situations.

Multiple efforts of online radicalism reduction within the intergovernmental relations create the basis for the foundation of cooperation but there is too much stress on overlapping agreements and inter-agency cooperation organs. It is important for the development of a response strategy to keep the whole spectrum of crises and emergency management measures in mind. There are general, functional and regional aspects which should be observed and of concern.

There is also a need for new pre-standardized and multiagency approaches involving all relevant front-line actors (such as local authorities, civil society organizations, social and youth workers, law enforcement and community police officers) to improve the effectiveness and the efficiency of detection and preparedness vis-à-vis these new and complex man-made threats against European societies. Often these actors become actual first responders to confront and lead the immediate actions at the scene. As such, they should be well prepared and fully equipped to confront the wide range of new complex challenges, including the convergence of radicalized violence and the symbiosis between organized crime and extremism.

What is now needed is a three-fold intergovernmental and public-private action plan (1) to produce a final handbook detailing aspects of the containment of online extremism in turbulent areas of world and (2) to ascertain whether a series of stakeholder workshops in all Member States, which bring together academics and government officials, can be of significant benefit for understanding these new faces of cyber extremists and further (3) to test and evaluate the value of table top and live exercises with first responders and (4) to further disseminate findings in all available internet operators worldwide.

We need to develop European research and mapping, generate objective tests (table top and live exercises) and empower (pre-standardized final guidelines and white paper) the societal and human detection capacities of first responders in confronting (becoming aware) of those weak signals of online radicalization and cyber extremism and, as such, this project would move the administrative boundaries and operational obstacles towards a more effective and efficient first line *response*. This would develop first responders (including citizen) resilience and enhance their shared (inter-agency and cross-sectoral) situational knowledge about online and web rooted radicalization to enable faster and more effective responses against radicalized groups and violent extremism. It equips first responders to become first line responders. Finally, this process would produce some practical and theoretical knowledge base which can be used to develop comprehensive national strategies to tackle hostile and systemic information campaigning. Special focus is in the usage and manipulation of violent radicalization, extremism and ethnic minorities as tools by organized crime against governmental structures and system.

We need to give less thin promises of the endless enlargement of the European Union and focus more on securing, stabilizing and empowering the neighborhood. That is the first step toward containing violent radicalism and keeping demonstrations and revolutions peaceful – hopefully transparent evolution. The way to prevent and respond to these new forms is both strategic-political and tactical-operational, long term and short term, and looking at all types of hazards and their sectoral specifics.