

Hi, my name is Assia Ivantcheva, and I'm here to talk to you about the amazing time of the winter of 2004 in Ukraine when the Orange Revolution took place.

When I arrived in Ukraine in September 2003, a year in advance, for my first posting as a Foreign Service Officer with USAID in Kyiv, the city seemed grayish and restless, still shaking off the long shadow of the Soviet past, and yet full of young people on the streets. I was managing democracy support programs, assisting civil society and independent media, as well as electoral processes, the kind of daily work that rarely makes headlines, but shapes the very foundation of democracy. I also didn't know that within a year, I would watch Ukraine's democracy teeter on the edge of collapse, and then come back in a way that would inspire generations to come.

Like many others, I was inspired to be in Kyiv, to help Ukraine to advance further on its path toward democracy and reaffirm its sovereignty from the Soviet Union, which it gained in 1991. For me, this had special meaning, since I come from the generation of East Europeans whose entire lives were changed because of the fall of the wall, and who hold their freedom dear. To be in a position to help Ukrainians with their reforms, on behalf of the US government, actually felt like a blessing.

Democratic reforms at the time were not an easy task. Under the government of Leonid Kuchma (who not only suppressed free press, but was even caught on tape, and hence, personally responsible for the killing of a prominent journalist whose body was found beheaded near Kyiv), while there was some space for opposition activity, political dissent was very limited and dangerous. Ties with Vladimir Putin's Russia ran deep.

So, when the former head of the central bank, Viktor Yushchenko, began campaigning as an opposition candidate, along with the charismatic political leader Yulia Tymoshenko, against the government-anointed candidate, Prime Minister Viktor Yanukovych, this was a daring act. Yanukovych was a convicted criminal as well for a violent attack that he committed in his youth. Of course, he tried to downplay it, but this triggered popular indignation. The opposition quickly started gaining popularity, despite the mainstream media censorship, and then the government showed its true face.

Yushchenko was poisoned at the dinner with the security services in early September. The government, of course, denied any wrongdoing. This was a moment of national awakening, as it stripped away any lingering illusions that the government would conduct a somewhat decent electoral process. Against all odds, Yushchenko survived. Government-controlled media tried to downplay what happened, having a doctor on state TV making absurd statements, that it was probably due to indigestion, as Yushchenko apparently ate too many pancakes.

Pro-governmental members of parliament started mocking Yushchenko, saying that he had eaten fancy sushi that had poisoned him, and advising him to stick with the Ukrainian beloved salo. This is traditional food, salt-cured pork fat. In response, Yushchenko told them that each of them would be next if they disobeyed orders.

His face became worse over time. It was poked and swollen. Yet, this was the face of resistance and resilience that inspired a growing civic movement for freedom, rule of law, and accountability. Not only did he miraculously recover despite the pain, but he also became even more popular.

With the stage in Kyiv's central square (called Maidan, a Turkish word for square), the United opposition began delivering passionate speeches against corruption and urged people to vote. In fact, the opposition was made of three leaders, Yushchenko, Tymoshenko, and Oleksandr Moroz, the head of the Socialist Party. They had all started separate campaigns, and then decided to join forces, later endorsing Yushchenko's candidacy. Touring Ukraine, despite the constant surveillance, Yushchenko met ordinary people, spoke the truth, and showed them care and courage they had not previously experienced.

His opponent, Prime Minister Viktor Yanukovych, leader of the Party of Regions, not only represented the Industrial East, but also close ties with Putin and local oligarchs and organized crime. So this was not just the contentious election for power. It was a moment when Ukrainians had to decide whether they would continue living under the post-Soviet oligarchic regime, or take a brave step towards a freer European future with no guarantees for success, and despite the huge risks.

The pre-election campaign was dramatic, fluctuating between the tragic, the farcical, and the absurd. At one point, Yanukovych pretended that he had survived an assassination attempt. Later, when footage aired on the only independent TV channel, Channel 5, he was mocked for collapsing on the ground after someone had thrown an egg at him. He also managed to alienate many voters by calling Yushchenko's supporters various insulting names, which backfired and, in fact, inspired creative responses and lots of jokes.

Well, finally, Election Day came—October 31st, 2004. As a member of the embassy's observer mission, I went to Sumy, which is close to the Russian border and is the region where Yushchenko comes from.

There was a huge effort to coordinate international electoral monitoring efforts, bringing together the US, EU, Japan, and a host of other countries. And of course, OSCE/ ODIHR sent a large election observer mission.

Sumy felt tense. Every billboard and every cafe conversation carried a political charge. I'll never forget how enthusiastically people voted, lining up patiently outside schools, converting into polling stations, old women in scarves, students, young people, factory workers with faces toughened by the winter. I sensed quiet determination, but also fear that their votes would be stolen. And they were right. There were several concerning violations on Election Day, from reported pressure on voters to carousel voting and busing of voters. In the Ukrainian context, carousel voting occurs when voters sell their votes by entering the polling stations with an already pre-filled ballot, using it to vote, then receiving a new blank ballot to hand back to the violators outside. And then this whole thing is repeated. Ironically, the same rigging technique,

quite popular in the region, has different names depending on the country. It is sometimes called Armenian or Bulgarian Train.

Well, somewhat to my surprise, the last polling station we visited for closing in a small village in the Sumy region did quite a good job tabulating results without violations. While we were all exhausted, we followed the ballot boxes late into the night to the Territorial Election Commission in Sumy. Then around 3 AM, in front of my eyes, and in the presence of other observers, the head of the Territorial Election Commission blatantly changed the results on the final election protocols for the entire region, switching Yushenko's and Yanukovych's results in favor of the latter.

With just one move, she stole the votes of many citizens and completely distorted the diligent work of the poll station commissioners. When my colleague tried to ask a question, as politely as possible, given the obvious fraud, we were ordered to leave the election commission for disturbing public order, and even the police escorted us out.

Reports of irregularities in intimidation began circulating even before the ballots were counted, but still, there [was] a flicker of hope. Yushchenko was leading in some regions. We thought maybe this time it will be different, but no. Amid uninvestigated reports of serious violations and fraud, the Central Election Commission eventually declared that there would be a second round, as no candidate had reached 50%.

The disputed runoff was scheduled for November 21st. I was observing in Dnipropetrovsk, in the east of the country this time. This is the industrial stronghold of the government candidate. The atmosphere there was heavy.

Posters of Yanukovych blanketed the city, and his campaign staff exuded the confidence of people who already knew the outcome. On election day, I saw serious irregularities. Groups of men in black traps suits escorting voters, police officers lingering way too long around and inside polling stations, suspicious groups of voters arriving in buses, some of those without license plates. Yet, it was also comparatively calm, and the actual tabulation went smoothly.

The polling station we closed had voted in favor of Yanukovych. At the same time, my phone buzzed endlessly. Friends and colleagues from across the country who were observing reported all sorts of irregularities, concluding with the same word, fraud.

Donetsk had [a] ridiculous percentage of voter turnout for Yanukovych, close to 99%. This sudden massive increase of voters in that particular part of the country was one of the most disturbing signs, since nothing but manipulation could explain it. And, in fact, it did skew the results.

As my train arrived back in Kyiv, I saw the first tents on the main street towards the square, with traffic blocked. Apart from the orange flags, there were many others, yellow and black for the

youth group PORA, the Ukrainian national flag, and even some Georgian flags in solidarity. Clearly, the opposition had been preparing.

Everything was in place. Tents, food, water, mobile toilets. Yet, in the end, it was all about the people who wanted to defend their vote. In the first 24 hours, it was not clear how many people would show up to protest in this freezing cold, yet soon, hundreds of thousands flooded the square, draped in orange, chanting, Yushchenko, tak. Yushchenko, yes. Shame, Kuchma, out.

When the Central Election Commission announced Yanukovich as the winner, even though exit polls showed Yushchenko ahead, this only energized his supporters. Enthusiastic, hopeful, courageous people from Kyiv and across the country continued pouring in[to] the city to defend their rights and protect their vote. And thus began the massive, persistent protest known as the Orange Revolution.

When people say revolution, they often imagine an uprising, usually a violent one. But this was the opposite. A tense city within the city, it wasn't just a place, it was a community of hope, warmth, friendship, mutual support. Every night, there were massive peaceful protests and concerts on the main stage, right after the political speeches, with dancing and cheering. Old and young, even children, were there every single night. This was a peaceful, old-ages Ukrainian movement for Ukraine's future.

I had to get special permission from the embassy to be on the square to observe it and report, but of course, I did not participate. I couldn't wear anything orange or any other color that might signal partisanship, so I dressed mostly in black and stood on the side. Of course, I felt the massive, joyful spirit of the Ukrainian people in my very bones. In fact, Maidan had become the center of the world for me at that time.

I was there every single night, straight from the office, and then meeting other colleagues and friends in a small pub off the main square. The pub was called Baraban, "the drum."

We were all trying to keep positive and laugh at the absurd state propaganda. The government tried to portray Yushenko as a Western puppet. Protesters were said to have been bribed, and to have been given oranges, injected with drugs. That's why they were so happy. And other similar nonsense.

The protesters in turn responded creatively, giving flowers to the police, writing and singing songs, and ending every rally with the Ukrainian anthem. So many iconic images came from that time. An old lady with flowers standing on top of a tank, young people dancing, kids waving the Ukrainian flag, and ordinary citizens with hope in their eyes, cheering their leaders.

Not that that period wasn't frightening at times. Of course it was. Kuchma's regime was trying to cling to power and make Yanukovich president.

Yanukovych tried to rally his supporters, many of them young men suspiciously resembling thugs, to block institutions and push him into office. There were many tense moments in and around the Central Election Commission, in front of the presidential office, and the Parliament. One time, I recall, I had to hide under a chair.

I was in the Parliament at the time when Timoshenko lifted the barrier, inviting the protesters in the parliamentary building to show the members of Parliament what people really wanted. This situation, that could have been potentially very dangerous, thankfully got resolved peacefully. In fact, we, all the diplomats observing the parliamentary developments, were escorted out of the building through one of the Soviet-time underground security passages that led us to a completely different part of town.

There were also so many deeply emotional moments. I vividly recall a scene from Maidan when a group of policemen bravely resigned from their positions and joined the protests, announcing on stage that they wanted to protect the people from harm.

Behind the scenes, the tensions were incredibly high. The US and European Union diplomats worked tirelessly and urgently to prevent violence. There were credible reports that the Interior Ministry troops were mobilizing to clear the square by force.

American and European envoys, including the Polish President Kwaśniewski and many other East European leaders, members of Congress, members of the European Parliament, shuttled between Yushchenko's and Yanukovych's camps, talking to Kuchma, pressing for restraint.

In the US, support for the peaceful resilience of the Ukrainian people was bipartisan and very strong. Republicans and Democrats alike issued statements warning against violence, visiting Kyiv, holding high-level meetings, reaffirming support for free and fair elections.

U.S. officials warned that the electoral fraud would have consequences for U.S.-Ukraine relations and encouraged cooperation. We received hourly updates, troop movements, statements, even rumors indicating that while Kuchma considered the use of force, he feared being held accountable by the international community, and he was not quite sure that the army would follow his orders and shoot. Importantly, at the time, Yushchenko's team pursued legal action based on evidence collected by his supporters, party observers, and election monitoring groups. The case went all the way to the Supreme Court of Ukraine.

Surprisingly, Yanukovych's team hurt its own case, as some witnesses offered self-incriminating testimonies. The evidence of fraud was overwhelming, yet the judges, many of them seen as Kuchma's people, were under immense pressure. So when the Supreme Court finally announced the fraudulent results on December 3rd, 2004, and ordered a new vote for December the 26th, the sense of triumph and relief was overwhelming.

Still, the struggle was not over. Under the existing electoral setup, without changes, fraud was easy to repeat. So after much horse trading, the opposition finally agreed to limit the power of the presidency in exchange for electoral reforms.

Well, I spent Christmas in Kirovograd for the new election. My family, luckily, was fully supportive as they understood the gravity of the moment. On December the 26th, Ukraine held its third extraordinary election.

It was in one of the polling stations in Kirovograd during the previous elections that one of my young female colleagues had experienced firsthand the nature of the regime. Unidentified gangsters entered the polling station. Electoral workers fled, abandoning the ballots. The remaining people locked themselves in a side room. A team of observers had to lie under the table, hiding, and they found themselves lying next to the ballot boxes. At one point, they even heard loud gunshots, which luckily only hit the ceiling, and then the thugs left as quickly as they had appeared. So, my colleague and the team had literally guarded the integrity of the ballots with their own bodies.

Yet in December, the voting was completely different in this same polling station. And then and there, I knew that it was game over for the old regime. The intimidation had faded, it was replaced by an almost reverent calm. And I watched an elderly couple hold hands as they cast their ballots, thrilled to be making history.

When the result came in, Yushchenko victorious, Ukraine exhaled. And then fireworks burst over Kyiv.

While Yanukovich's legal claims, which were ultimately rejected, kept the Central Election Commission from announcing the final results until January 10, 2005, the celebrations began immediately after this extraordinary election. Yushchenko had won with almost 53% of the vote.

I'll never forget the sense of triumph, pride, patriotism, and excitement I witnessed on the square on New Year's Eve. I stood surrounded by Ukrainians singing the national anthem again, tears streaming down their faces.

Years later, when I think of that winter, I remember the light. Not just from the fireworks, but from the faces of the ordinary Ukrainians who refuse to surrender their future. The joy was not just for the victory, but for the rebirth of a nation. A moment when ordinary people refused to give in to fear.

I thought that this is what democracy feels like. Not perfect, not permanent, but dynamic, bright, and bold.

This was a moment of fragile triumph. Triumph achieved not through violence, but through persistence, law, and faith. Yushchenko had become a hero, speaking of truth and dignity. The international community, including USAID, rushed to provide technical assistance and support to

ensure that much-needed reforms, countering corruption and strengthening democratic institutions and [the] free market, would have a chance to succeed.

In the first days of 2005, I also remember thinking that this felt like a spiritual battle between good and evil, that everyone had given it their best. And I was also wondering, when would people go back to their normal selves, to being just humans?

Well, regrettably, the Orange Revolution, while changing Kuchma's regime, did not manage to change or dismantle the oligarchist system or fix the broken governance structure amid the energy pressure from Moscow and internal political infighting among former allies.

In fact, Yanukovich and his party managed to return to power on false promises, and then tried to turn Ukraine away from democracy, and from its chosen pro-EU path.

Yet that geopolitical turn did not succeed. It was met by the organized and very resilient generation of 2014 who overturned it. And Russia lost its influence, as a result of which it invaded Ukraine.

Fast forward in 2025, with Russia's full-scale invasion, and the war in its fourth year, Ukrainians are experiencing incredible suffering and daily attacks. Yet again, they're fighting to defend their sovereignty and their freedom. I worry deeply these days about the future, our collective future, and how just peace can be reached. Yet I'm convinced that the same incredible spirit that carried Ukraine through the winter of 2004, against all the odds, will help it emerge from this brutal and senseless war. Wounded, but stronger and even more resilient.

Even now, 21 years later, I can still hear the echo of those days, the drums in the square, the chants Yushchenko Tak!, and the sound of church bells mingling with the cheers of freedom. What a gift that was.

Dyakuyu and Slava Ukraini!