

## VOICES OF PROTEST

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### Interviews with Student Protesters in Ukraine, Turkey, and Venezuela

Long before a Tunisian fruit vendor sparked the Arab Spring, student protesters in Paris led a revolt in 1968 that spread to the labor unions and touched off similar protests in London, Berlin, Mexico City, and Rome. The protests took on the pertinent social issues of each city, and it was a turbulent year around the world. Decades later, in the midst of another tumultuous period, university students continue to be a force that sparks and sustains protest culture around the world. The *Journal of International Affairs* spoke with university students in Ukraine, Turkey, and Venezuela who joined the protests in their respective countries. The students spoke about their experiences, the impact of their actions, and their visions for the future.<sup>1</sup>

#### UKRAINE

*Demonstrations began in Ukraine in November 2013, when activists protested then-president Viktor Yanukovich's decision to halt the process of signing a free trade and association agreement with the European Union. After security forces beat protesters and the situation turned violent, protesters called for the president to step down. In February 2014, after the deaths of protesters in Kyiv, President Yanukovich was ousted from power and fled to Russia. The Ukrainian parliament appointed an interim government until elections were held in May 2014. The Journal spoke with Mila Moroz, a 22-year-old student at the National University of Kyiv Mohyla Academy School of Journalism about the protests and their aftermath.*

*Journal of International Affairs: Can you describe what the protests were like?*

**Mila Moroz:** The first protest was in the evening, after the message “Let’s go to Maidan,” was posted to Facebook, which later made Ukrainian journalist Mustafa Nayem famous. Hundreds of people who lived in Kyiv went out to demonstrate

their dissatisfaction with the president's changing policy on European integration to bring Ukraine closer to Europe. Some of the students made an amateur video for online streaming so that everyone could see what was happening. The next day, the protests grew as people came from other cities by trains or buses.

In the first week, the protesters were smiling and friendly. Students and adults danced, sang songs, waved EU and Ukrainian flags, and held posters decrying Yanukovich and his party. Some Ukrainian stars who supported the protests gave

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concerts. Today, different experts say the protests continued for so long in part because of the violence of the regime.

But in the second week, it happened: At around 4:00 a.m., the police violently broke up students who were merely dancing or drinking tea. Fortunately, no one died, but some activists were injured and bleeding or had broken bones. Some were hiding from the police in a nearby church.

There was an unprecedented arrogance and cruelty, which the authorities had never shown before. The next day, the streets were full of ordinary people who said, "We will not allow you to touch our children." In fact, from that night, the real protests began after the beating of students. The first month it was like a peaceful, permanent strike in the center of Kyiv with songs, while living in tents.

*Journal: How did students play a role in the protests, and how did you organize?*

**Moroz:** We organized our own groups to attend the strikes. Of course, we used social media tools such as Facebook, VK [a Russian-language social networking service], and Twitter. It was very useful for us later, when it was necessary to collect a variety of medications for people's health or to call volunteers who accompanied the activists to hospitals in order to protect them from the police.

My fellow group members were not involved in the planning process like the activists; we all went there alone and everybody did different jobs. Some people brewed tea, some people filmed, and some people interviewed people or were on duty at the hospital. Even in the more difficult days of protests, when people died, there was an indescribable atmosphere of unity and cohesion. Perhaps that is why I always wanted to come back. I could not leave the wonderful people who had decided to fight for change while taking on such dangerous risks.

*Journal: Can you describe your feelings when President Yanukovich left the country?*

**Moroz:** When he ran away. I could think about victory no longer than a minute, because then the price we paid became clear. The number of deaths and funerals did not give us time to really enjoy the first result. Moreover, the annexation of Crimea soon followed, and then there were no longer any victory celebrations.

***Journal:** Can you describe what happened after Yanukovych fled? Are students still politically active or organizing protests?*

**Moroz:** Today, students organize a variety of events to raise funds for the war, though officially all war is called “anti-terrorist operations” by the Ukrainian government. Everyone of course speaks about politics, but all activity has moved to the east. Now more people are dying, and, personally, I do not quite understand why. Actually, we have achieved only one goal and that is the nominal change of power in Kyiv. In other cities and in almost all local authorities, it is still the same. Much needs to be changed, but now we are engaged in war, and there is no guarantee that after war anything will be different.

***Journal:** Some protesters in other countries who are dealing with corrupt leaders look to Ukraine and see an example of a protest that worked. How do you feel about this? Do you think that, overall, your protests were successful? Are you satisfied with your efforts?*

**Moroz:** The complicated situation in eastern Ukraine, created by Vladimir Putin, has prevented us from finishing this job. No, we are not happy with the result because we all dreamed about a transformative change across the judiciary, law enforcement, and other areas of government, politics, and society. Likewise, we began to understand that politicians who came to power as a result of the Maidan protests now do not want to carry out this change.

## TURKEY

*The Turkish government’s planned demolition of Gezi Park, one of the few green spaces left in Istanbul, incited a series of protests in May 2013. The park’s demolition quickly emerged as a symbol of then-prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s authoritarian rule. Hundreds of thousands of Turkish citizens joined demonstrations around the country, and images of violent clashes between police and protesters spread around the world. Protests quieted in August 2013, though there have been small resurgences in the past year, particularly in the aftermath of a mine explosion near Soma, a town 150 miles southeast of Istanbul, that resulted in the death of 300 miners in May 2014. Prime Minister Erdoğan was elected president of Turkey in August 2014. Efe Koç, 23, a film student at Istanbul Bilgi University, spoke with the Journal about the origins and shortcomings of the protests.*

*Journal of International Affairs: How did you get involved in the protests?*

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**Efe Koç:** I was working on my dissertation project, and I met up with my friends, who said there was a protest about the park and everyone was going. This was before everything started; it was just a peaceful protest. And then suddenly, more and more people started to come and there was dancing and singing, like a festival. It was really fun and sweet. That night, I was not feeling well and I went home around 2:00 a.m. When I woke up, I heard the news: Around 5:00 a.m., the police had come in and kicked everyone out with tear gas.

The next day, someone shared a Facebook event, “At 5:00 p.m. we are all gathering around the park to protest.” So we went to buy face masks—amateur ones that doctors use. I knew that it could get nasty but I was not expecting it to be as bad as it was. The police cancelled buses and made it difficult to even get to the park. When we arrived there were barricades all around and lots of cops trying to push us away. Around 9:00 or 10:00 p.m., they started firing tear gas and water cannons at us. It was kind of exciting; we knew that we could not get in the park but we still tried. The more they fired at us, the angrier we got. It continued like this for twenty days. I was very active the first fifteen days.

The thing about this protest is that it was not organized—it was 100 percent spontaneous. Turkey is a place where there is lots of ethnic and cultural diversity. The culture here is very hybrid. But when you are in the park, everyone is the same; everyone is your friend. There is no difference or prejudice or hatred. We created these human chains to move around provisions, such as water, food, and fruit juices—whatever we needed to stay in the park. We could not leave the park unattended; otherwise, the cops would just come in and try to take it over. And they tried every day. We had stolen buses and used them as barricades. People were tearing up sidewalks and using [the concrete] as barricades—using everything we could get our hands on. It looked like a battle, but it was not. We had nothing.

After a while, they started sending undercover cops into the park. They were easy to spot. The undercover cops threw stones or fireworks at the cops so they had an excuse to fire at us. The police took thousands of people into custody. Several people died, not just then in the park but afterwards. We had some minor protests during the year because of police brutality. None of those were as big as the ones in the park, but they were like aftershocks to a big earthquake.

*Journal: Did you have any specific goal when you joined the protests?*

**Koç:** No, we did not have a goal at the beginning. I did not even know there would be a protest. Our city is very large: It is all concrete, and there are no more trees around. But the government was ripping out the rest of the green spaces to build new spaces. They are doing their best to make more money—building residences and shopping malls—because the country is in a lot of debt. The main reason behind the protest was that we only have this single park in the center of the city, and they were trying to take that away, too.

The protests grew because these guys have ruled us for twelve years. People were fed up. The ruling party tried to ban alcohol and anything that was against Islam, and no one could do anything about it. We, as the opposition, are the minority. And in the rest of the country, especially in the east, people do not know what is going on. They are misinformed or not informed at all. They do not read the newspaper; they just watch TV.

*Journal: Why do you think the protests died out?*

**Koç:** Well, I think it went on for longer than expected. The protest in the park went on for twenty days. The first fifteen days were the hardest, and then the purpose began to get lost. People wanted to go home. Most of the people would go to their jobs and then come back to the park at night and sleep there, or not sleep at all and then go to work again and come back. There was this constant rotation. The park was never empty and there were new faces every day. Not everyone could fit inside the park, even though it is quite big, so they spread out into the other parts of downtown. The government also made several promises that they did not keep. But these promises might have eased people and helped calm things down. The prime minister said, “We are halting the construction, nothing is going to happen—do not worry,” for example.

*Journal: Do you think the protests have helped create any change in the country?*

**Koç:** Not much has changed. We kind of felt united during the protests, because in recent years a lot of people had become polarized into two opposite camps: the religious types and the secular types. These people used to live together, but today they have kind of become adversaries. There are street fights that happen. Like in a religious neighborhood, if you drink a beer, you might get punched in the face, let us say. When I was a kid these fights did not happen, but when I was twelve or thirteen, the government came into power, and it changed.

The ones who are in power right now have tried to turn back the clock on the reforms that have been made since the early years of the Turkish Republic to make Turkey more of an Islamic nation today. For twelve years, they were doing these types of things and people did not react.

People wanted to react, but there was not a big push behind them to do something as big as what happened in Gezi. It is not just the park that caused the protests, but everything that happened in the past twelve years that we could not do anything about. All these rights were being taken away from us. The park was the final trigger.

**Journal:** *What is your reaction to the prime minister likely being elected president?*  
[Editors' note: At the time of this interview, Erdoğan had not yet been elected president.]

**Koç:** That is the most obvious sign that the protests have not changed anything. It is not that I have faith in the political system—I still voted. Each vote counts. As I mentioned, most of the people in the east do not even know what is happening. Erdoğan is sending food, water, and coal to the villages, and in return he gets their votes. And 90 percent of the country is very Islamic, so he adds “Islam, Islam, Islam” to his platform and they give their votes to him. And the opposition is very worthless. They complain about the prime minister but do not bring any new suggestions, and that is why they are failing in the polls all the time.

## VENEZUELA

*Students in Venezuela founded the Movimiento Estudiantil in 2007 in opposition to the socialist government of Hugo Chávez. President Nicolás Maduro, elected in March 2013, has largely continued Hugo Chávez's policies. Students continue to play a major role in Venezuela's protest movements, including in a recent spate of protests beginning in February 2014. Sparked by the sexual assault of a student in San Cristóbal, near the Venezuela-Colombia border, these protests launched broader demonstrations around the country against high crime rates, inadequate security, inflation, and shortages of basic goods. The Journal discussed the goals and effects of the protests with Alfredo Graffe, 20, a Universidad de Simón Bolívar student.*

**Journal of International Affairs:** *Can you describe what roles students have played in the protests and how other groups have become involved?*

**Alfredo Graffe:** It is called the *Movimiento Estudiantil*, or “Student Movement,” and we organize meetings and protests weekly or daily at moments of high pressure. Here in Caracas, we have more than ten universities involved. Around the country there are more than fifty universities that are part of the movement. There are representatives from all of the schools, but they organize by state, or areas, of

Venezuela. We also have had two national meetings in the last five months.

Our goal for this movement was always to not just involve the students but the whole society. The student movement has power because we are organized. Many other civil society groups have come under attack, and the government has broken them. For example, the labor unions are not as strong as they were ten or twelve years ago. If you go to any other organized group you will not find the same organization it had years ago, because the government has a policy of squashing them. The last examples of organization here are the political parties and the student movement.

But if we think the student movement, or any other youth movement, will lead the country and will organize 30 million people, we are misunderstanding the national situation. The political parties, the workers' unions, and the students each have their respective roles. And if we understand and coordinate, and work in social networks—not social networks like Twitter or Instagram, but actually building connections between social groups in the streets—we will find a way to overcome this crisis.

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*Journal: Can you describe the backlash from the government against the student movement?*

**Graffe:** The government has two ways of going against us, and the first way is the violent way: they repress us and attack us when we march and protest. The other way is really peaceful, which is easier for them. It is a matter of not recognizing our power, and recognizing other students instead. So for example, even though I am the vice president of my university's federation of student centers, if the government wants to give some money, or maybe develop a project in at my university, they will not call me. They will call another student who supports them instead.

*Journal: How has the movement changed since protests died down in June?*

**Graffe:** Well, we have changed our protests because the government detained many students. In the last protest we held, more than one hundred students were detained, so we do not think it is worth it for them to risk their lives and free-



doms. We are now working in the slums, where we talk to people and explain the economic situation.

There is a different reality in the slums. You have groups called *colectivos*—paramilitary groups or guerrillas—that attack anybody who protests and are supported by the government. You might see a public speech or statement from Nicolás Maduro and from Francisco Ameliach, the governor of the state of Carabobo. Once he sent a tweet saying effectively, “It is time for the *colectivos* to go to the streets

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and attack.” Two or three hours later, many people were injured, and one student was killed. So you can see the connection from the government to these groups. There are pictures and videos of the *colectivos* shooting at unarmed people, but the government does nothing.

The real problem with Nicolás Maduro is not the violence, though. It is a lack of capacity to solve economic problems and the problems of the poor.

So if we talk with people, and explain how the economic policies of Chávez and Maduro have affected the reality of the nation, we will be able to create changes in Venezuela, rather than simply asking for Maduro to quit.

*Journal: Is the ultimate goal to convince Maduro to resign?*

**Graffe:** No, because we had Hugo Chávez for thirteen years—a person who we knew was really bad for the country—but after he died, the problems were still there. So the problem is not about a name. The problem is not about Maduro or Chávez. The problem is about the whole country, which needs deeper solutions.


I think our role as students is to pose this question to Nicolás Maduro. Maduro, you have two choices: You can defend Chávez’s legacy and do what he did, and you will have a broke country in the next few months. Or you can go against Chávez and change the economic and political policies. Neither of these is a good scenario for Maduro. But that has to be our public statement, to show the failure of *Chavismo*, but also to show the need for change. And we need to involve people who support Chávez, and who perhaps also support Maduro. This is not a project for only half of the country. You will not build a country with only one half. You need both of them.



**Journal:** *Have you seen any signs from Maduro that he is interested in making changes to economic or political policies?*

**Graffe:** Maduro is sandwiched between many pressures. There are two groups inside *Chavismo*: one that believes in the legacy of Chávez and wants to defend it at all costs and another that does not necessarily believe in socialism. The latter group wants to keep power, even if it means going against Chávez's policies by opening up the country to international investments and protecting private property.

Some days, Maduro thinks the country needs changes; he might talk about creating some investments, or he might talk with entrepreneurs and the private sector. But another day you will hear Maduro say there is no private property in Venezuela, and he tells people to go to any supermarket or electronics store and to take all the electronic devices they want without paying for them. So, when Maduro speaks on national television, it is a joke among us. We ask which Maduro is speaking: the one who believes in socialism and who thinks he is Chávez's son, or the governor who actually understands the country's problems and wants to change the [bad] policies and find a solution?

Nicolás Maduro is not able or capable of understanding the reality. Proponents of *Chavismo* repeatedly declare how they are the government for the poor and humble. Yet, they are the ones that hold political power and control over institutions. Their party rules in every organization and institution of the Venezuelan state, and yet the problems persist. So they cannot run the country. They cannot bring the changes the country needs. And even worse, they will not support making Venezuela a country with opportunities for all its citizens. I have a friend from this protest. He is from one of the slums, and he says that in Venezuela, opportunities should be for everyone. But nowadays, only problems are for everyone. 

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> These interviews were conducted by the *Journal of International Affairs* and have been edited for clarity and length.