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Wireless World: The 'Orange Revolution'

by Gene J. Koprowski Chicago (UPI) Dec 27, 2004

The court-ordered election rematch in Ukraine this past Sunday, featuring opposition presidential candidate Viktor Yushchenko and Prime Minister Viktor Yanukovich, probably would not have happened were it not for mobile phone technologies.

The technologies - text messaging services in particular - enabled hundreds of thousands of youthful demonstrators to coordinate their activities and take to the streets of Kiev to contest the November election results, experts told UPI's Wireless World.

The most significant aspect of this thing is the mobilization of the population, said Lubomyr Hajda, associate director of Harvard's Ukrainian Research Institute in Cambridge, Mass. It led to the birth of a civic nation, not an ethnic nation.

In Kiev's central district, young college students employed the short-messaging service text-messaging tool on their mobile phones to tell a dozen friends to bring their friends to Independence Square.

It's called smart-mobbing, said Bob Ewald, senior director of product marketing for Nextel. Text messages are sent out to folks and they all come to a specified location.

The technologies were sold by an array of European and



Supporters of Viktor Yushchenko celebrate during a jubilation rally, 27 December 2004 at the main square in Kiev, a day after Ukraine's presidential elections. Yushchenko won Ukraine's presidency 27 December after a historic and wrenching election in which he vowed to steer the strategic former Soviet republic on a new course toward the West and away from Russia. The opposition leader had received 52.29 percent of the vote compared with Prime minister Viktor Yanukovich's 43.92 percent on a turnout of 77.22 percent. AFP PHOTO / Dimitar DILKOFF

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American developers, including Zi Corp., which makes short messaging service software for 43 different languages and more than 600 mobile phone handsets.

Ukrainian is one of their newest offerings, said a Zi spokesman in New York City.

Technology and democracy experts said Ukraine's Orange Revolution, as the movement is called, is the second democratic uprising in just three years empowered by mobile phone technologies.

In the Philippines in 2001, a spontaneous crowd enabled by text messengers converged on the city square to protest President Estrada's corrupt government and ended up bringing it down, said Gloria Pan, a spokeswoman for The Media Center, a think tank at the American Press Institute in Reston, Va., that concentrates on the intersection of media, society and technology. Talk about exercising democratic rights.

The popularity of text-messaging software in Europe is based on a number of factors. In the United States, the calling party pays for a mobile phone call, but in Europe, the receiving party pays the fee.

It's cheaper to send text messages rather than call someone, Ewald said. Billions of messages are sent on a monthly basis in this way.

Text messaging also is faster and more convenient than leaving a lengthy voice-mail message.

The technologies are favored particularly by U.S. and European college students, said Kristin Wallace, a spokeswoman in Atlanta for Sprint. We started offering text messaging in January of 2004. It's very popular among college age people and teenagers.

The story is quite similar in Ukraine, which has seen a number of youth uprisings recently.

What happened in November did not happen out of the blue, said Hajda, who recently participated in a seminar on the Orange Revolution and factors that facilitated it at the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government. It has not been noticed by the people writing about the election.

Pan said blogs were the big news of 2004. The next big story will be mobility, she said.

Hajda, who is Ukrainian and was trained as a historian, said there were regional protests this past summer, stirred after the government instituted a policy that increased the expenses of students. Eventually, the government rescinded the decree.

Another protest about two years ago drew between 50,000 and 100,000 to Kiev. A protest in 2001 drew 20,000 and sparked government violence against the protestors.

An important part was played by the youths, Hajda said.

Other factors included a national religious revival among the Ukrainian Orthodox Church and the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, as well as a burgeoning, society-wide free-speech movement.

The government reportedly stopped many trains from running to the capital in Kiev, attempting to prevent the protesters from massing. There have been estimates reported in the international media that upwards of 500,000 pro-democracy protesters met in Kiev after the disputed presidential election, with youths taking to the streets wearing orange garb - which spawned the name Orange Revolution.

They came and went in small groups, Hajda said. They were not there all at the same time, with many sleeping in sprawling tent camps along the main street of the city.

Mobile text-messaging technology allowed the demonstrators to coordinate shifts to keep the pressure on the Parliament and the courts.

There was a lot of talk about technology, Hajda said.

Text-messaging in the United States probably will approach by next year levels of usage currently experienced in Europe, Ewald said. Mobile phone carriers, including T-Mobile, Sprint and Nextel, last year signed an interconnect agreement that allows messages sent from a mobile phone on one carrier's network to be received on any carrier's network. A message is transmitted by sending it to a person's phone number, where it is presented to the recipient on the screen display.

If Yushchenko wins the Dec. 26 ballot - as preliminary results indicated Monday - he has promised to seek European Union membership for Ukraine. The country culturally already is quite close to Europe in some ways because of its reliance on mobile technologies.

I was in Scotland last year and television programs and ads regularly incorporated text messaging, said Mark Pruner, vice president of RD Legal Funding LLC, in Englewood, N.J., an international legal consulting firm. You could vote for who was the better singer, who should get kicked out of a reality TV show, enter contests or send in comments. In Portugal (short messaging services are) very common. In the United Kingdom, it is even used to meet people in bars.

Now, in Ukraine, the technology has been used to choose a new president.

Wireless World is a weekly column examining how mobile telecommunications technologies are transforming society, by Gene J. Koprowski, who covers technology for UPI Science News.

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The off-the-record session is for informational purposes only, but down the street from the high-rise office tower where the meeting is being held, a security team in a van with a plumber's logo on it is monitoring the meeting on video screens.



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