

Revolution Is Contagious

INTERVIEW WITH MAREK KAPUSTA

Marek Kapusta was the director of the “Rock volieb” (Rock the Vote) campaign in the 1998 Slovak elections, which was part of the OK’98 campaign led by a coalition of nongovernmental and civic groups. Rock volieb was successful in dramatically increasing youth participation in the elections, which was a key factor in defeating Prime Minister Vladimír Mečiar and ushering in a coalition government led by the reformer Mikulaš Dzurinda. After the election, Kapusta worked briefly at the Pontis Foundation in Bratislava and then traveled numerous times to Yugoslavia and to Ukraine to assist their youth activists in attempting regime change, linking up with ultimately successful groups such as Otpor, the Freedom of Choice Coalition, Pora, and Znayu!, among others. In this interview, Kapusta reflects on the campaign that ousted Slobodan Milošević in 2000, the Orange Revolution, Slovakia, Belarus, Georgia, and the Bulgarian, Romanian, and American sources of his inspiration to enter democratic activism. Prophetically, he spoke about Yushchenko’s weaknesses. The interview took place in Mexico, where Kapusta had been invited by the “Sociedad en Movimiento” civic group to share his experiences in mobilizing youth for elections.

Demokratizatsiya: After the Slovak breakthrough in 1998, what did you do for the Ukrainians?

Kapusta: I got involved in Ukraine in 1999, which became our first Rock volieb export project, besides Croatia. It was a difficult case because Ukraine at that time did not have very good prospects for change or any good candidates, so from the beginning we understood that those elections were a lost cause. Nevertheless, our success in Slovakia was a big inspiration for NGOs in Ukraine, so they decided to at least improve the quality of elections and to create a coalition of NGOs. At that time we cooperated quite a lot with the Freedom House office in Kyiv, and with a lady named Lyuba Palyvoda.

There was an organization of young people who created something called the “Election Hotline Project” and the Freedom of Choice Coalition, which during the course of the campaign turned out to be the biggest coalition of NGOs that was ever built in Ukraine. So we tried to support them and show our positive experience, letting them know that they indeed can make a big difference if they unite, if they use proper tools.

Demokratizatsiya: Did you notice any familiar faces in the Orange Revolution of the people you helped train back in 1999?

The interview was conducted in Morelos, Mexico, on October 22, 2005, by *Demokratizatsiya* founder Fredo Arias-King. Copyright © 2007 Heldref Publications

Kapusta: Back in 1999 a lot of good work was done, even though it did not change the outcome of the election. But these people learned by doing, so I was not too surprised when some of these faces popped up again before the Orange Revolution. Those who had been in the Freedom of Choice Coalition became leaders in the Pora movement, people such as Vladislav Kaskiv. Although he is somewhat of a controversial figure, whenever something was happening, he was there. So when I visited this spontaneous tent city in Maidan, I was not surprised to see Vlad as a sort of “mayor” of this Orange tent city, organizing food supplies and everything else. There were others, of course.

Demokratizacija: You feel that if Ukraine had not done this training in 1999, would they have been able to achieve what they did in 2004?

Kapusta: Maybe yes and maybe no. I do not think they would have been as effective. This time around, election monitoring was critical, since Viktor Yanukovich and the regime did everything possible to manipulate the election’s results. The efforts of the Committee of Voters of Ukraine were very important in making sure that these manipulation attempts were monitored, making it all that more difficult for the regime to steal these elections.

Demokratizacija: I know that you and other democracy activists were basically satisfied with how Mikulaš Dzurinda conducted himself in power after the breakthrough, but less so in Yugoslavia, since many of those that obtained high government posts in the “new” government after October 2000 had been the same oppressors under the Slobodan Milošević regime. You mentioned that some of your Otpor friends were complaining that some of the police officers that repressed them actually received promotions after the revolution. How are things turning out in Ukraine?

Kapusta: Difficult to say, but it is already noticeable that some of the people brought aboard by [President Viktor] Yushchenko were the wrong people, people from the power structures. But maybe he has some debts to pay to these people, who knows. I am afraid that Yushchenko will be weakened by this and will not have the power to start the reforms that are necessary.

Demokratizacija: There is debate as to how much Pora contributed to the October 2000 revolution. Some say that they were not that crucial, others say that it was basically their revolution, etc. What is your opinion?

Kapusta: I think they were a very important part of creating the atmosphere of change and in organizing the protests, which were a critical factor for these elections. I think they played a very important role.

Demokratizacija: How would you compare both Ukraine and Yugoslavia in terms of their respective youth movements, Pora and Otpor?

Kapusta: I think that in Ukraine Pora was crucial in creating that atmosphere and was important in getting people mobilized for the protests. But Otpor was more critical in Yugoslavia, since the change was to a larger extent than in Ukraine a product of this mobilized youth phenomenon, in this case of Otpor. They built the whole civil disobedience.

Otpor was absolutely critical and key in bringing about the change, while in Ukraine there were more actors, more players, that shared that role.

Demokratizatsiya: Such as Znayu! and others?

Kapusta: Yes, more decentralized. In Serbia, Otpor took that initiative, and were extremely smart in communications, very well organized in terms of the regional structures, and the regime was unable to confront the communication. So it was a matter of time when they would create a critical mass. It was their revolution, not the revolution of the political parties.

Demokratizatsiya: You mentioned that the Yugoslavs improved upon the model that you brought from Slovakia by adding humor to it.

Kapusta: “Slovak model” is something that many people do not like to hear, and I do not think it is really fair. Certainly our success was an important inspiration, and it was a factor in getting things started, but they had their own campaign, which was quite different from what we had done. But in any case, the way they used humor in fighting against this brutal regime and fighting the extremely negative mood in society was unprecedented and was the strongest weapon they could use. Over the course of their actions, they completely ridiculed the regime, which was completely unable to defend itself.

Demokratizatsiya: Do you think they did this in Ukraine too against Kuchma and Yanukovich?

Kapusta: Not really, I did not see it. I think it was quite different. It was more like masses in the streets and people throughout the country protesting. I did not really see that level of humor. Serbian humor is an original concept. It is like British humor is British humor, Serbian humor is Serbian humor.

Demokratizatsiya: Can you give your favorite example?

Kapusta: When the regime was trying to catch Otpor bringing new equipment and funding from foreign sources. Otpor would then start this rumor that they were bringing new stuff to their Belgrade office at some specific time. Then in broad daylight they would bring a truck with boxes and start unloading these boxes. Journalists and police would be waiting, on cue. But when the police stormed them and opened these boxes, they realized it was just a scam. Inside these big boxes were just smaller boxes and again smaller boxes. So the police ended up looking like total idiots. The media recorded it.

Another was “dinar for change,” when the regime was trying to label Otpor as NATO-sponsored terrorists, Otpor started throughout the country this game with metal barrels in the downtown areas throughout the country with a portrait of [Slobodan] Milošević, and people could beat up that picture if they paid a dinar to support the campaign. Many people happily paid even more, so there was this drumming sound resulting from this.

Demokratizatsiya: In the Velvet Revolution of Czechoslovakia in 1989, the adults finally got involved when the police beat up their kids protesting on November 17. Those students, led by Martin Mejstřík, had for the first time come out and united themselves with the dis-

sidents. Did you notice in your cases this same “trading up,” of kids starting revolutions and the adults getting involved later?

Kapusta: I think this was not so much in Slovakia in 1998, but in Serbia certainly. As I mentioned earlier, Otpor’s activity was absolutely critical, and more and more the regime was trying to portray them as terrorists. But the more it did this, the more young people would get involved, even fourteen- and fifteen-year-old children. So when the regime attempted to label these kids as terrorists, a lot of the parents realized the regime and the system they were living under was very wrong. So that is when they also got engaged.

Demokratizacija: What do you know about Georgia? I know your students were involved in Georgia but not you directly.

Kapusta: The Otpor guys helped train activists from Georgia. The first factor was that they managed to defeat this brutal regime back home and shared stories on how they did it. Second, Georgian activists took very deep inspiration from the resistance movement itself, including colors, logos. To a large extent they copied what happened in Serbia, and it worked well.

Demokratizacija: Where did you get your inspiration? I hear it was from the Bulgarians.

Kapusta: Definitely yes. At the beginning, we did not know what to do, even though there was a project written about the campaign, but we could not really compare it. So we tried to look at others’ experience and the Bulgarians and Romanians were the key inspiration for us. The fact that they succeeded was important, but they also came to Slovakia to share their very detailed experience with the way they prepared the campaign. And some of their advice was critical to us.

The second area of inspiration was the Rock the Vote organization from the United States; the whole idea came from a Peace Corps volunteer who knew this organization, and [Rock the Vote] were extremely helpful to us at that time, giving us materials, manuals, printed stuff, but also these videos that were so great. Expert organizations such as the International Republican Institute and the National Democratic Institute were also helpful since they trained many of our people in get-out-the-vote skills, media monitoring, election monitoring, and other critical skills that turned out to be so important in the campaign.

Demokratizacija: What do you think of Belarus? Which of those youth groups has a chance? What are they doing right and wrong?

Kapusta: I have not visited Belarus for a long time, so I do not have the most up-to-date information, but every time I went there I had the impression that the more established organizations are stuck in the middle and do not know how to reach out to people, were too negative in their communication, and were not addressing new people. But there were newer organizations that were reaching out to a new part of society. These people are sort of competing with each other, not cooperating, similar to what is happening at the level of political parties. This infighting has devastating effects. That is why people did not trust them so much, why they have been unable to secure a critical mass of people or to fight against the regime’s media blockade and communicate effectively with the common people. They spend more time and energy infighting than was necessary. The impression I have now is

that they have realized that and that there is more cooperation going on. I heard that they have this new candidate of the joint opposition forces, so I hope it is better than in 2001 when they also had a so-called common candidate, but it was not really the case. So hopefully this time the candidate has been selected through some kind of democratic process and enjoys the respect of the democrats in the country and that they are ready to fully back him even if that means sacrificing a bit of their own identity or aspirations.