

Ukraine or Malorossia?

Written by Nienke de Deugd

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NIENKE DE DEUGD, MAR 18 2014

In a previous contribution to *E-International Relations* I wrote about the ongoing protests at Kyiv's euromaidan, about Russia's attempts to keep Ukraine securely within its own sphere of influence and about the options that were available to the European Union to try and persuade president Viktor Yanukovych to change his ways.[1] Now, about a month later, the situation has changed dramatically.

Following a week of unprecedented violence that cost the lives of approximately 100 Ukrainian citizens (now dubbed 'the Heavenly Hundred') the European Union stepped up to the plate in an attempt to bring an end to the bloodshed. On 21 February 2014 the French, German and Polish ministers of Foreign Affairs, together with a representative from the Russian Federation, brokered a deal between Yanukovych on the one hand and the three leaders of the opposition (Arseniy Yatsenyuk from the *Batkivshchyna* (Fatherland) Party, Vitaliy Klitschko from the Ukrainian Democratic Alliance for Reform (UDAR) and Oleh Tyahnybok from the *Svoboda* (Freedom) Party on the other hand.

Among the most important terms of the treaty were a return to the 2004 constitution (which granted considerably less authority to the president, in favour of the powers of parliament) and early presidential elections. Those early presidential elections were supposed to take place no later than December 2014. However, given that the regular presidential elections were scheduled for February 2015 anyway, this did not satisfy the demonstrators at euromaidan. On the contrary: the opposition leaders were booed off the stage when they came to present the agreement.

With the protests showing no sign of abating, in the early hours of the morning of 22 February 2014 Yanukovych fled Ukraine and, after taking something of a detour through the eastern parts of the country, in the end turned up in Russia. While Yanukovych to this day continues to assert himself as the legitimate ruler of Ukraine and has even said that he intends to return to Kyiv, the events on the ground say otherwise.[2] Parliament has ousted him from power and has instead confirmed Oleksandr Turchynov as the country's interim-president. In a flurry of activity, Yatsenyuk has been confirmed as prime-minister, a new cabinet has been installed, people who were arrested for their participation in euromaidan have been released and negotiations with the European Union on the adoption of the Association Agreement have resumed. There is even talk of signing the political section of the Agreement as soon as 21 March 2014.[3] What is more, on the very same day that Yanukovych fled like the thief in the night that he turned out to be, Yulia Tymoshenko was released from prison. She lost no time in returning to Kyiv and using the stage at euromaidan to announce her candidacy for the presidential elections; presidential elections that are now scheduled for 25 May 2014.

While many of the demands of the demonstrators have been met, the situation in Ukraine is far from stable. The task that the new government is faced with is enormous, to begin with in the economic sphere. The country is in dire straits now that the discount on the price of natural gas that was offered by Russia to Ukraine in December 2013 is off the table and other forms of financial aid that Moscow had wanted to bestow upon Kyiv when it still seemed as though the latter would do the former's bidding have equally been suspended. The United States have pledged 1 billion dollars in an attempt to shore up the Ukrainian economy, the European Union is equally devising aid measures and the International Monetary Fund is currently investigating what types of reform are needed, but this does not disguise the fact that the Ukrainian economy is in shambles. That prime minister Yatsenyuk is convinced that he will need to take so many harsh measures that he has termed his cabinet 'a kamikaze cabinet' is a powerful testimony to

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the challenges that await.[4]

Apart from economic difficulties, Ukraine is plagued by political problems. The opposition leaders that were united in their struggle to bring an end to the Yanukovych-regime are already starting to fall out among themselves. Not only will Timoshenko run for president, but so will Klitschko, thereby potentially splitting – and weakening – the opposition. Also, many citizens in the eastern regions of Ukraine are suspicious of the new government, which they believe to have come to power illegally and with the help of bandits and fascists.[5] Overcoming that distrust will prove a strenuous job; but an incredibly important one if Ukraine is to preserve its unity and avoid calls for federalization of the country.

After all, the territorial integrity of Ukraine is threatened enough as it is. In a move that was perhaps years in the making, the Russian Federation needed only a couple of days to effectively take over control of the Crimean peninsula. Given away by Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev in 1954 as a sign of the eternal friendship between Ukrainians and Russians, the Crimea is the only region in Ukraine where a majority of the population is of ethnic Russian descent. These Russians are particularly distrustful of the recent changes in Kyiv, and are very fearful of possible attempts to infringe upon their rights. This is not to say that the inhabitants of the Crimea are faced with acute threats or that they attempt to flee the country. Still, such nuances are lost on Russian president Vladimir Putin, who has repeatedly emphasized his willingness to come to the aid of Russians or Russian-speakers who believe themselves to be in danger.

On 16 March 2014, the people of the Crimea voted in a so-called referendum on the future of the peninsula. With the Tatars and the Ukrainians abstaining from the vote – due to the fact that the referendum was not in line with the constitution of Ukraine and therefore actually illegal – there was little doubt as to the outcome. What the annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation will imply for some of the eastern regions of Ukraine – where unrest is brewing due to the aforementioned distrust of the new government in Kyiv (and probably also due to the actions of Russian provocateurs; although these reports are still unconfirmed) – is an open question.

Equally open is the question what the response from the West should be. In 1994, the Russian Federation, the United States and Great Britain signed the Budapest Memorandum, in which they agreed to respect the independence, sovereignty and borders of Ukraine. With Moscow clearly not upholding its end of the bargain, it remains to be seen what Washington and London will do. Sanctions against Russia have already been imposed, and there is talk of tougher measures to be taken in the days ahead. Still, if Putin were to be forced to give up on his designs for the Crimean peninsula, he would not only lose face, but also – and more importantly – a source of leverage. I wonder what it will take on the part of the West for Putin to come to terms with the fact that Ukraine is an independent country and not Malorossia, or little Russia.

[1] Nienke de Deugd 'Brussels to the Rescue' *E-International Relations* (18-02-2014).

[2] 'Yanukovych Vows to Fight On, Denounces New Ukrainian Authorities', 'Yanukovych Vows To Fight On, Denounces New Ukrainian Authorities' *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty* (28-02-2014); 'Yanukovych Insists He's Still Ukraine's Leader' *Voice of America* (11-03-2014).

[3] 'Yatseniuk: Political section of EU-Ukraine Association Agreement will be signed on 21 March 2014' *Kyiv Post* (15-03-2014).

[4] Daisy Sindelar 'Who's Who in Ukraine's 'Kamikaze' Cabinet' *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty* (27-02-2014).

[5] An interesting article on divisions that Ukraine is faced with: Roman Goncharenko 'Friends, Families divided over Ukraine crisis' *Deutsche Welle* (15-03-2014).

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