

Crimea 2014: Recapping Five Months of Change in Ukraine

Written by David R. Marples

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DAVID R. MARPLES, JUL 23 2017

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From November 2013 to the end of February 2014, protesters gathered on Kyiv's central square, in a series of demonstrations known as the Euromaidan. These protests have involved several distinct stages, culminating in what some analysts have called a national revolution that removed the government and presidency of Viktor Yanukovich. What follows is an attempt at a synopsis of events that encompass this extraordinary period that has turned into a conflict between Ukraine and Russia, and seen the latter country annex Crimea and support pro-separatist movements in various parts of the neighbouring country. As a historian who has followed Ukraine since Soviet times, I recall two earlier civic protests of importance. The first was the occupation of the Maidan by Kyiv's university students in 1990, demanding the resignation of then Prime Minister Vitalii Masol. Though widely condemned by Communist officials, they ended with the removal of the unpopular figure. The second was known as the Orange Revolution, and arose as a protest against the doctored results of the 2004 presidential elections. Ironically, this event served to prevent the same Yanukovich from winning the presidency. He did, however return as Prime Minister under the Yushchenko presidency, and then won the 2010 elections, narrowly defeating Yulia Tymoshenko.

In late November 2013, Yanukovich had signalled his willingness to commit Ukraine to signing an Association Agreement with the European Union at the EU summit in Vilnius. The Europeans had demanded in return that he release Tymoshenko from captivity (she had served 2.5 of a seven-year jail sentence for signing an agreement with Russia on energy prices in 2009, when she was Prime Minister), and initiate constitutional and legal reforms. After a visit to Moscow, where he spoke with President Vladimir Putin, Yanukovich made the decision not to sign the agreement. It seemed once again that Ukraine would remain within the Russian orbit, and would most likely commit itself to future membership of the Russian Customs Union, which is to come into force on 1 January 2015, and currently involves Russia, Kazakhstan, and Belarus, with Armenia a likely additional member.

Within hours, protesters came to the streets, motivated by anger at the change of direction. They were mainly youthful, alerted by social networks and text messages. What occurred was essentially a civic protest on the future of Ukraine and it took the authorities completely by surprise. Though the daily numbers would dwindle, every Sunday saw masses come out on the streets. At its peak, the numbers were so vast that it was impossible to count them. On the whole, the authorities reacted cautiously, deploying the Berkut riot police but without any serious confrontations. But on the night of 30 November and morning of 1 December, the order was given for the Berkut to clear the square by force. The Berkut descended on the Maidan, clubbing and beating demonstrators.

The protests were re-energised by this clumsy and thoughtless assault. The numbers rose again. On 16 December, Putin offered Ukraine \$15 billion in loans and reduced gas prices to offset Ukraine's financial crisis, sparked by the near depletion of its hard currency reserves. More than anything the offer seemed to demonstrate that without

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Russia, Ukraine could not survive. Moreover, the sum was far more than the EU or the IMF was prepared to consider. In truth, it was probably more than Russia could afford.

The situation was exacerbated further by the quasi-legal rushing through parliament of draconian laws – the so-called ‘anti-protest laws’ on 16 January. Their goal appeared to be to curb freedom of speech and assembly, the outlawing of NGOs and the establishment of a dictatorship under Yanukovich. The laws were the brainchild of two MPs from the Party of Regions, Vadym Kolesnychenko and Volodymyr Oliinyk. Though repealed only twelve days later, these laws heralded the culmination of the Euromaidan protests.

The protests were now less about the EU and more about the future of Ukraine. More attention was paid to the innate and grotesque corruption of the ruling regime, of the prevalence of oligarchs who had enriched themselves at the expense of the state, of the lack of legal reforms. These protests had two immediate results. One was the agreement of Yanukovich to sacrifice his Prime Minister, Mykola Azarov (who promptly fled to Vienna on an Austrian passport) and try to make a compromise with opposition leaders.

The Prime Minister’s position was offered to Arsenii Yatseniuk, the former Economy and Foreign Minister of Ukraine and leader of the Batkivshchyna party following the incarceration of Tymoshenko. That of Deputy Prime Minister was offered to Vitalii Klychko, the former world champion boxer and leader of the party Udar, which ran third in the 2012 parliamentary elections. Both refused to take up these posts, possibly because they could detect the growing weakness of the government, but more likely because to have done so would have cost them influence on the square.

In reality, these leaders, and to some extent the third opposition leader Oleh Tiahnybok of Svoboda, had never led the protests. Rather they reacted to the moves on the Maidan. As the situation polarised, both sides changed character and personnel. On the government side, gangs of thugs were bussed into Kyiv from other cities, principally Kharkiv and Donetsk, simply to cause mayhem. They set fire to cars, beat up protesters, kidnapped people, and targeted prominent journalists. On the opposition side, several local militias formed, based partly on rightist groups like Pravyi Sektor. Batkivshchyna formed its own self-defence group.

The average protester, if one can deduce such a thing, was no longer the 20-something student, but more hardened 30 and 40-year olds, not only ready for a fight but unprepared to compromise. Many were from Western Ukraine. In their local regions, the government of Yanukovich no longer existed. They had established their own rulers.

The EU finally returned to active involvement. On 21 February, while it agreed to introduce sanctions against Ukrainian leaders, the foreign ministers of Poland, France, and Germany arrived in Kyiv. Working into the night, they brokered a deal between the government and the three parliamentary opposition leaders. It would have seen a temporary administration, constitutional reforms to reduce the powers of the presidency – returning to the situation as it was in 2004 – and new presidential and parliamentary elections by the end of the year. The stipulation, which was supported by the United States, was that in the interim, Yanukovich would remain as president. That provision proved unacceptable to those on the Maidan.

In the centre of Kyiv, the situation began to resemble the final scene of *Les Misérables*, with barricades piled high, burning tyres that set off thick black smoke, and the accumulation of a variety of weapons – mostly Molotov cocktails, but some guns and clubs. The struggle was now for control of Ukraine. It ended as we know with carnage and bloodshed, as the government – Yanukovich and Interior Minister Vitalii Zakharenko bear the main responsibility – ordered troops to fire on protesters using live ammunition, situating snipers on rooftops who picked off targets at will. The government had begun to slaughter its own people. It was the moment of no return. The numbers of dead approached 100; hundreds more were wounded, many severely. But the assault, remarkably, failed and the protesters remained in place.

The immediate outcome has been the flight of the president and most of his Cabinet. The government of Ukraine fell on 22 February 2014. Yanukovich fled to Russia, where he has remained, used alternatively as a symbol of Russia’s position that the government in Ukraine is illegal, and as a pawn in Vladimir Putin’s strategy for the neighbouring

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country, but not one that is considered a likely catalyst of anything decisive. Putin has never had much time for Yanukovych.

Ukraine has a temporary president, appointed by a parliament in which many deputies of the Regions Party have abandoned their affiliation with the former president. The acting president is the new parliamentary speaker, Oleksandr Turchynov, a 49-year old economist from Batkivshchyna. Yulia Tymoshenko is free and is running for president. New elections have been brought forward from December – as agreed to in the deal between the old government, the opposition, and EU leaders – to 25 May. The frontrunner is an oligarch who according to Taras Kuzio is a political chameleon, chocolate manufacturer Petro Poroshenko.

In contrast to the Orange Revolution, the government has been overthrown. Ukraine has entered a new phase in its development. Russia, initially, was left on the sidelines, seemingly preoccupied with the Sochi Olympic Games. The EU and the United States also failed to influence the course of events in the later stages. The provisional government is making up rules as it proceeds. Some of the militants from the protests, for example, took over the Ministry of Internal Affairs. Threats from anti-Maidan elements to split the country initially proved futile. The Right Sector, an integral part of the more violent aspects of the Euromaidan, has been removed from central Kyiv by the Ukrainian police.

Revolutions are complex phenomena. This one is no exception. The innocence of the first days of Euromaidan was very different from 20 and 21 February, the most violent days in the history of independent Ukraine. The country removed some of the legacies of 1991 – a Donetsk-based regime of apparatchiks and gangsters, with their own private mansions and assets abroad – but it was by no means clear that the interim government could offer unity and compromise. The financial crisis in mid-April is much worse than was the case in late November. Ukraine badly needs help today as it mourns its victims.

Euromaidan entered a second phase on 27 February, when armed units in uniforms without markings took over the Crimean parliament and government buildings in Simferopol. They installed a new prime minister, Sergey Aksionov, whose party had received only about 4% in the most recent Crimean elections. Troops, who were supplemented by the 25,000 sailors of the Russian Black Sea Fleet, took over government buildings and military installations, forcing the surprised Ukrainian units to surrender.

The Ukrainians did not respond with force, and the attackers (now clearly identified as Russians) did not suffer any losses during the takeover. The annexation of Crimea was solidified by a referendum on 16 March, during which it was reported that over 95% supported the peninsula joining the Russian Federation. The alternative on the ballot, confusingly, would have led to the re-adoption of the Constitution adhered to briefly in 1992 (asserting Crimea's autonomy).

Russia and Ukraine then engaged in a war of propaganda about what was happening. The Ukrainians, backed by most of the democratic world and the UN, maintained that Russia had invaded their territory, violating international treaties signed in Budapest in 1994 and Kyiv in 1997, the latter a treaty of friendship and cooperation between the two states that agreed to existing boundaries. This treaty had been revised by the 2010 Kharkiv Accords, which extended Russia's lease on the Sevastopol base for the fleet for a further twenty-five years (i.e. from 2017 to 2042). Russian president Putin has officially revoked the 2010 treaty. The Russian version of events is that an illegal pro-Nazi junta has taken over Ukraine and is persecuting Russians and Russian speakers.

Aside from sanctions and travel bans, however, the Western response to events has been somewhat subdued. US president Barack Obama ruled out any form of military response to Russian intrusions into Ukraine. Russia has amassed a large military force on Ukraine's borders and is believed to be behind mass disturbances in several Ukrainian cities. Russian political leaders have expressed their support for a 'federal system' in Ukraine, including in talks with the United States. Ukraine's richest oligarch Rinat Akhmetov has supported this position, with the proviso that Donbas remains in Ukraine. It might be termed a form of 'Finlandisation'.

Thus, Ukraine at present is in a critically unstable position and the threat of a Russian invasion is quite serious. Its

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interim leadership has acted cautiously and timidly, albeit insisting that Russia has no right to make demands on Ukraine as to its form of government. Though in the long term, international sanctions may imperil Russia's energy-centred economy, in the short term, there is no doubt that Putin's position is the more powerful. Already Russian prices for gas sold to Ukraine have risen to \$485 per thousand cubic metres, from the earlier \$268, and Ukrainian authorities have stopped payments for Russian gas pending talks.

The West is simply unable to predict Vladimir Putin's next move and NATO is belatedly bolstering its position in the eastern borderland member states. But there is no doubt that the Russian president has the initiative and the West is responding to his manoeuvres awkwardly. The third stage of Euromaidan approaches and may well be the most critical one in the history of Ukraine.

About the author:

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