

# Ukraine returns to violence: Squaring off at the EuroMaidan?

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After two weeks of relative calm, violence returned to the streets of Kyiv on 18 February 2014. Leading up to the new outbreak of violence both sides had used the lull in the storm to prepare for a prolonged partisan conflict. While protesters strengthened barricades on the central streets, politicians of all colours sought allies for their cause. Will the situation deteriorate further or stabilize?

Ukraine has had a turbulent winter. Peaceful protests had started on 21 November 2013 following the decision of President Viktor Yanukovich to “pause” the negotiations on the Association Agreement, including a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area, with the European Union (EU). These largely spontaneous and non-partisan protests, staged mostly by pro-EU students in Kyiv, were at first concentrated on the Maidan Nezalezhnosti (Independence Square), the main scene of the 2004 Orange Revolution, and quickly got the label “EuroMaidan”.

After a week the initial protests began to die down and could have fizzled out completely had it not been for the crackdown on the few remaining protesters on the Maidan by the Berkut riot police on 30 November. Instead, the protest movement regained momentum, gathered ever more people and became better organised. Protesters occupied central buildings in the capital. Clashes between protesters and Berkut followed, particularly on Hrushevko Street on 21–23 January. The protests also spread to most regions of Ukraine, especially western Ukraine, where protesters occupied regional government administration buildings. By 1 February, at least six people had been identified as killed in demonstrations and hundreds of police and protesters had been injured in the clashes. According to protesters’ medical service, at least 25 more protesters and policemen were killed since violence renewed on 18 February and at least 250 people have been injured.

The core of the protesters is made up of diverse groups, which vary in degree of radicalisation, but have a common goal: the resignation of President Yanukovich. Even if the majority of the protesters are still ordinary citizens not connected to any right-wing or extremist organisation, the radicals are well organised and for the moment seem to be setting the agenda.

The parliamentary opposition has lost most of its support among the protesters in the streets. According to a poll conducted on 3 February by the Ilko Kucheriv Foundation, only 1 per cent of the protesters support the idea of opposition leaders leading the government. A clear majority of the Maidan activists who participated in the poll (62 per cent) were against all negotiations on participation in government while Yanukovich remains the president of Ukraine. This means that if the political opposition were able to strike a compromise deal with the authorities, this agreement would not be accepted by the protesters on Maidan.

The two biggest opposition parties – UDAR, led by ex-boxing champion Vitaliy Klytchko, and the imprisoned former Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko’s party Batkivshchyna, led by Arseniy Yatseniuk – are cooperating while remaining rivals. Both are proposing the reintroduction of the 2004 constitution, which would strengthen the position of the parliament and weaken the presidency, but differ on how the constitution should be amended. They are also proposing different strategies on how to manage the next presidential elections, scheduled for 2015. While Batkivshchyna would like to see several opposition candidates enter the first round, UDAR insists that the opposition must agree on a single candidate well ahead the vote. Klytchko remains the strongest contender

for the president of Ukraine, according to recent polls. Pro-government forces have therefore started a campaign against him in parliament. They want to declare his candidacy invalid because of his tax residency in Germany.

President Yanukovych is under pressure from all sides: Russia, the West, the political opposition and the Maidan protesters. During the first two months of protests, he refused to compromise even on symbolic issues. But from late January he gave in to some of the opposition's demands. On 28 January, Prime Minister Mykola Azarov and his government resigned and the infamous anti-protest laws (accepted by the parliament on 16 January) were annulled. On 17 February, a law on amnesty came into effect, which drops criminal charges against the protesters for violations committed between 27 December and 2 February. As a conciliatory gesture, the protesters ended a two-month occupation of Kyiv City Hall. Nothing, however, suggests that Yanukovych will give in to the protesters' most explicit demand, his own resignation.

Yanukovych is being pressured in particular by Russia, which is against any deal with the political opposition and is increasing its pressure on him to use force to suppress the protest movement. Russian politicians, for instance Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov at the Munich Security Conference, have accused the West of financing the Ukrainian protests in order to secure a regime change in Ukraine. Regime security is a major Russian concern; the demonstrations in Moscow in 2011–2012 intensified the fear of domestic unrest and demands for political change.

Russia is pressuring Ukraine by suspending the economic support it announced for Kyiv. After the meeting between Yanukovych and Putin in Sochi on 7 February, Russian Minister of Finance Anton Siluanov stated that the purchase of a second tranche of Ukrainian treasury bonds for 2 billion USD (from the pool of total 15 billion USD promised on 17 December) will not be concluded until Kyiv pays its debt for Russian gas of over 3 billion USD. There are, moreover, signs that Russia is trying to mobilise the pro-Russian sentiment in eastern and southern Ukraine

and in Crimea, resulting in appeals to Russia for protection and support as well as calls for a federalisation of Ukraine.

Although Russia temporarily reduced its official pressure on Ukraine after the start of the Winter Olympic Games in Sochi, the demands that Yanukovych should end the protests are likely to return now that violence has re-occurred.

The political crisis in Ukraine has demonstrated the EU's inability to act pre-emptively or even to elaborate and coordinate a position on an issue on its own border which affects the basic interests and security of the EU. The EU did not predict (or failed to act on predictions) on how Russia would use its political influence and economic leverage on Ukraine to make it abstain from signing the Association Agreement. The EU was unable to find a formula for negotiations with the Ukrainian government and could not, in contrast to the US, agree on the introduction of sanctions against Ukrainian officials or protest leaders in the event of widespread violence. The EU's inability to act has frustrated the US, as became evident in early February when a telephone conversation by Assistant Secretary of State Victoria Nuland and Geoffrey Pyatt, the US ambassador in Kyiv, was made public on YouTube. The conversation disclosed both the fact that the EU and the US differed on the desired future resolution of the situation and the US aspiration to shape the future cabinet of Ukraine.

At first, the Winter Olympics in Sochi seemed to provide a breathing space for conflict-torn Ukraine. The Russian political leadership did not want the situation in Ukraine to disturb its prestigious Olympic project. However, today's development underlines that Russia cannot control the situation in Ukraine. The resolution of the situation in Ukraine will have fundamental consequences for the security architecture in Europe.

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