Ukraine Update, Part 1: “The only thing that is certain now is uncertainty”

When Ukraine’s one-time president, Viktor Yanukovych, decided in late November 2013 to scrap agreements that would bring the country into closer partnership with (and possibly lead to eventual accession into) the European Union, it is certain he was naïve to the eventual consequences. The sequence of consequences began with a peaceful and festive pro-EU and anti-Yanukovych protest in Kiev’s Maidan Square, resembling in many ways the 2004 Ukrainian Orange Revolution—a political protest movement inveighing against the shady electoral practices of, who else, Yanukovych. Over time, however, decisions made by the government in dealing with the protesters, along with escalatory measures taken by some factions within the protest movement itself, led the cauldron of the EuroMaidan to overflow: an unstable truce between the Yanukovych government and regime opponents broke down last week, leading to dozens of deaths and hundreds of serious injuries. Fearing for his liberty, if not his life, Yanukovych has fled, and armed oppositionists now control the palatial, ostentatious presidential palace. The only thing that is certain now is uncertainty.

Ukraine (nee “the Ukraine”) is an often-overlooked country with a geographical location that has placed it in the middle of much of the important action in Western history. In fact, the name “Ukrayina” [oo-kra-yi-na] can be translated to mean “borderland,” suggesting Ukraine's historical position at the intersection of powerful multiethnic empires, including the Russian Empire and Austro-Hungarian Empire at the start of the 20th century. Ukraine today is, in geographical terms, larger than European powers such as France and Germany, and occupied by close to 45 million residents, more than Canada or Australia.

The politics of Ukraine since the fall of the Soviet Union, in 1991, can be argued to be more or less salutary (more open than its neighbor to the north, Belarus, but quite a bit less so than the Baltic countries, the most politically “reformed” of the 15 post-Soviet states). The former Soviet apparatchik Leonid Kravchuk was elected the country’s first president in 1991. He was followed in 1996 by Leonid Kuchma, known for supporting the creation of a new Constitution along with various forms of oligarch-aiding and electoral corruption (and notorious for the “Cassette Scandal,” in which he is heard on a recording to order the disappearance of a troublesome journalist who was later found lacking a head). As alluded to above, the fraudulent results of the 2004 election for president, between Western Europe- and western Ukraine-leaning Viktor Yuschenko and Russia- and eastern Ukraine-leaning Yanukovych led up to the peaceful Orange Revolution, and Yuschenko’s eventual taking power and a period of rule that was seen by some as favoring one region of the country and one grand historical narrative (“Ukraine as victim”) over all others.

Both the Orange Revolution nearly a decade before and the as-yet-unpigmented contemporary revolution point up important divisions in Ukraine at large. Most divides map onto a regional split between western (and to some extent central) Ukraine and southern Ukraine. Contemporary western and central Ukraine is characterized by relatively widespread usage of either the Ukrainian language or the Ukrainian-Russian hybrid termed...
surzhyk. Further, the economy of this region seems to be upwardly mobile, or at least moving in the right direction, with Lviv serving as a burgeoning IT hub and Ukraine's capital, Kiev, a focal point of commerce. The east and south of Ukraine, most particularly the autonomous region of Crimea (the present-day location of the Russian navy's Black Sea fleet), are largely Russian speaking, with many having closer ties to Russia than they do to Ukraine or “Europe,” as it is now discussed. The economy of this region might be compared to our own “rust belt”: a once-thriving area of heavy industry now characterized by poverty and hopelessness among many of those who cannot or will not leave for greener pastures. While the differences between these two regions do not of necessity predict unrest or, as some have suggested, partition of the country, the outcomes as regards these divisions are contingent upon the actions of the new political regime. Anecdotally, the Verkhovna Rada (Ukraine's parliament) very recently removed Russian as a state language alongside Ukrainian, an inflammatory move that has brought criticism even from cooler heads in the west of the country. The new regime must practice diplomacy in order to maintain stability, even after their momentous victory over the corrupt and authoritarian Yanukovych regime.

Beyond regional differences, Ukraine as a whole is suffering from monumental economic woes. Indeed, Yanukovych's initial decision to drop talks with the EU was bought by Russia with the promise of cheap energy flows and a $15 billion loan, few (explicit) strings attached. With the ouster of Yanukovych, Russia has halted its economic largesse and the new head of the Ukrainian National Bank has announced that his main goal will be to secure a loan from the Western-oriented International Monetary Fund (IMF). Officials have suggested that the country needs close to $35 billion in order to turn the economy around. Even if such a loan is granted, the IMF will doubtless require significant cutbacks in expenditures and other austerity measures, which will decrease the popularity of any new government rather expeditiously. Arseniy Yatsenyuk, of newly-freed Yulia Tymoshenko's Fatherland Party and one of the favorites for the position of prime minister, suggested that for this reason anybody playing a key role in the new government would be “committing political suicide,” perhaps going some way towards explaining the delays in forming such a government. Further pain may follow, as Russia has the option of pressuring Ukraine economically both through increased energy prices and trade sanctions: Russia remains Ukraine's most important trading partner, making up a greater portion of Ukrainian trade than the European Union as a whole. While there is hope that the long-term outcome of the Maidan protests is in the hands of those who have sacrificed so much to change the status quo in Ukraine, there is much to suggest that Ukraine's domestic and geopolitical fate lies substantially outside of its own control. On the one hand, Ukraine can accept the immediate and clearly-delineated sacrifices that accompany an IMF loan and eventual closer relations with the European Union. Many in the country do in fact feel themselves to be “European,” but how much are they willing to give up in order to join the club? If it were not for the country's dismal economic state, Ukraine might choose to “go it alone,” pragmatically navigating a middle course between the EU and Russia. With this being an impossibility, the most likely outcome is Western patronage and domestic austerity, with all of the reactive tumult that this might entail. The most that the new regime can do is try to soften this blow as much as possible with inclusive social policies (e.g.,
allowing Russian as a second state language), a program of reducing state corruption, and persistent reminders that the struggles will be “worth it.” The Putin regime, it should be said, will quite rationally be waiting to take advantage of any backlash these likely hardships might produce. We should expect a great deal of propaganda spouting forth suggesting a conspiracy against Ukraine and the idea that Ukrainians, as a part of the historic Slavic family of “Kievan Rus,” should never have trusted “the West” in the first place. All of this entails that to guide Ukraine into Europe will be a more than normally difficult task, and the EU, along with the US, will need to take into consideration the possible consequences of pushing Ukraine and its people too hard and too fast. For now, though, we can be thankful that there is peace on the Maidan.

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