Ukrainian Protests, Another Round of Battle Coming Soon?

After a long cold winter, the protesters at Kiev’s main square, Maidan Nezalezhnosti, have not only renamed the iconic location to Euromaidan, but have also continued to occupy the main square since the end of November 2013. With makeshift tents complete with heating and food, only one thing is certain: it will take an incredible show of force to make the protesters give way.

After the two-month mark of the protests, Ukrainian president Viktor Yanukovych signed into law some very disconcerting legislation that restricted the Ukrainian citizens’ freedom of speech. These laws against protesting and the media also added harsh penalties that turned many people into criminals in seconds, giving Yanukovych the opportunity to lock up members of the opposition for up to 15 years. As one can imagine, the legislation did not sit well with the Ukrainian citizens. After a brief pause in the protests, in late January 2014, the protesting intensified and became violent.

In the swirling clouds of black smoke from thousands of burning tires and the charred lines between the riot police and protesters, made even more dramatic by stun grenades, Molotov cocktails, and various rocks and baseball bats among other things, this was no place to be for anyone looking for a peaceful Sunday walk through the park. The violence led to multiples deaths, with the counts ranging from three to five, two of which allegedly on account of government snipers with live ammunition. Although the protests have died down again since then, they can gain momentum again at any moment.

Now, what next? After this bout of violence, Yanukovych offered to give opposition leaders spots in parliament, which they declined saying that they will not settle for anything less than Yanukovych’s step down from the presidency. Shortly after revoking the restrictive laws, Yanukovych took sick leave and failed to sign the new bills into power. One of the conditions was that the protesters had 15 days to leave the buildings that they were occupying, with the threat of police intervention if not evacuated within those 15 days. Now those 15 days are coming to an end. With that in mind, it is highly unlikely that the protesters will willingly give up the buildings they seized so get ready for some more action at any time.

What are the effects? Yanukovych’s decision not to sign an association agreement with the European Union and instead take on $15 billion in Russian bailout loans in late November 2013 spurred the whole situation. However, there is currently more than ever at stake because Russia refuses to deliver the loan payouts until Yanukovych can prove that he has control of his people again. Seemingly, Yanukovych is stuck; no matter what he decides, the decision will give him some element of defeat. If he steps down, he loses his position as president and all the perks of being in power. On the other hand, if he uses force again to evacuate the protesters, he risks setting off another round of urban warfare, and faces both much international criticism and much more violence.

After having traveled to Kiev eight times, the city has become a favorite travel destination of mine. Although these protests will not stop me from
going again, it is very sad to see one of the places I love most having such troubles. As far as the future of the current protests goes, I do not see any progress happening anytime soon. Both Yanukovych and the protesters are stuck fighting against each other, and neither party wants to give up. There have been talks of the EU and the US intervening to help find a solution, which seems possible. However, a recently leaked conversation of US government officials bashing the EU might throw their work off balance. That being said, the only option for now is to wait it out and see what happens. With the 15 days that Yanukovych gave the protesters to evacuate the occupied buildings coming to an end, there might be some interesting news in the coming days.

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