Ukraine has been in a state of turmoil since November 2013, when President Viktor Yanukovych refused to sign an association agreement with the European Union. The refusal to sign the agreement served as the catalyst for ongoing mass protest and revolt in Kyiv, and across the country.

On February 14, the Russian, East European, and Eurasian Center, the European Union Center, and Pi Sigma Alpha co-sponsored a roundtable discussion concerning the protests and the greater political situation in Ukraine. The roundtable was comprised of three speakers: Carol Leff (Associate Professor, Political Science), Oleksandra Wallo (Lecturer, Slavic Languages and Literatures) and Kostas Kourtikakis (Lecturer, Political Science).

Carol Leff began the discussion by providing an economic, political, social, and transnational context for the situation in Ukraine. Economically, Ukraine has been in a state of sustained economic crisis and under performance. Due to a lack of international trade and international investment, Ukraine suffers from low GDP and GNP. Professor Leff espoused that this economic failure was also a political failure.

Politically, Ukraine is divided between Western Ukraine and the Eastern Ukraine. These divisions have created distinct orientations towards Western Europe and the European Union, or towards Russia and the Customs Union. The political divisions also echo regional and linguistic divisions, i.e. the Ukrainian-speaking West and Russian-speaking East. The East/West orientation was clearly seen in the 2004 Orange Revolution and in the 2010 Presidential Elections.

The political and social division of Ukraine is important in understanding the protest trigger in November 2013. As Professor Leff explained, Yanukovych did not sign the Association Agreement with the European Union because he was facing immense pressure from Russia to join the Customs Union. His stated reasoning behind not signing was to protect the national security of Ukraine and trade relations with Russia. Russia also guaranteed a $15 billion loan to Ukraine in return for not signing the Association Agreement. Western Ukraine, and those Ukrainians oriented towards Western Europe and the European Union do not share Yanukovych's belief in a Russian-oriented Ukraine.

When the protests began in November 2013 they were primarily concerned with the issue of joining the European Union. As the protests intensified and the police began to violently crackdown, people began to fight and protest concerning the larger issues at hand (such as the rampant corruption of the Yanukovych regime).

Oleksandra Wallo spoke on the protests specifically, and addressed the questions of who is protesting, how are they protesting and resisting, and the popular attitudes of protesters.

Dr. Wallo explained that the initial protest was mainly students. Other people rapidly joined the protests in response to the crackdown upon the
students, and to relieve the Orange Revolution. The protests are made of men and women, and have generally been a younger, university-educated demographic.

The protesters took over many buildings, including the Kiev Central Administration Building, which served as a sort of headquarters for the protesters. There has also been an elaborate systems of barricades erected by protesters to their territory from police attacks.

Dr. Wallo described the protests as a “self-organizing” organism. Doctors have volunteered medical services, chefs have volunteered to cook food for protesters, and a Self Defense Unit was created to protect the protesters. Artists and musicians have also been involved with protesting, providing inspirational art and music.

Dr. Wallo also explained the method of resistance the protesters undertook. A barricade system has been in place as a means to protect protesters, and deter the police from attacking. During the more violent clashes with police, protesters have started large fires and burned tires. To actively defend against the police, protesters have utilized Molotov cocktails, slingshots, and cobblestones.

Kostas Kourtikakis was the last speaker, and he discussed Ukraine and the European Union from the perspective of the European Union. He focused on the current relationship between the EU and Ukraine, the future of the EU’s relationship with Ukraine, and the implications for other countries.

He began by explaining the two frameworks (bilateral and multilateral) that the European Union uses in creating relationships with countries. Bilateral agreements include an Association Agreement to promote economic integration into the EU. Multilateral frameworks include the European Neighborhood Policy and the Eastern Partnership. Professor Kourtikakis explained that the countries that have these types of agreements with the EU are usually never going to be full EU members.

The European Union has a strategic interest in Eastern Europe. They want to create stable political environments around EU member states, increase trade, and keep gas pipelines from Russia flowing. However, due to the current situation in Ukraine, there is a changing discourse on the possibility of Ukraine’s membership in the EU. The future of other countries’ Association Agreements are now also on hold.

Russia has a vital interest in Ukraine, and Professor Kourtikakis stated that Russia is essentially competing with the EU for Ukraine. Although Russia would greatly prefer that Ukraine join the Customs Union, along with Belarus and Kazakhstan, instead of signing an association agreement with the EU, it seems doubtful that Ukraine will join the Customs Union.

At the time of the roundtable, protesters were still fighting in the streets. On February 18, massive street battles broke out between protesters and the police, with estimates of 70-100 killed and hundreds wounded. Within several days, protesters re-took key buildings, Parliament voted to return to the 2004 Constitution, Yulia Tymoshenko was freed from prison, elections were scheduled for May, and Viktor Yanukovych was chased out of Kiev with a warrant for his arrest.

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