

UKRAINE: CAUGHT IN A TUG-OF-WAR BETWEEN EAST AND WEST

In 1991, after seventy years as a Soviet Republic, Ukraine declared independence and in the intervening years has struggled to find its sovereign identity free of Moscow's or any other occupiers sway. In an attempt to bolster relations with its neighbors, the Europe Union (EU) has sought to engage Ukraine to help stabilize the country and strengthen Ukraine's weak economy through ties with the European market. On November 29, 2013, President Viktor Yanukovich, pressured by Russia, walked away from the EU summit in Vilnius without signing the Association Agreement (AA), a highly anticipated treaty that sets up the framework for cooperation between the EU and Ukraine.

Perceived as a betrayal, thousands of protesters took over Kiev's Independence Square in bitter temperatures, effectively paralyzing the capital, and calling for Yanukovich's resignation. In the following weeks, violent clashes with heavy-handed riot police, condemned by the national and international community, resulted in the mayor's suspension. While critics believe orders to use force came from higher in the chain of authority, this acknowledgement of wrongdoing may be the best they get. Undeterred, protesters

rebuilt barricades as quickly as police disassembled them as their numbers swelled. As of December 14, thousands of eastern Ukrainians traveled to Kiev in support of the president. Riot police now find themselves responsible for keeping the two protest groups apart. Divisions run deep over economic and political ties in an internal battle that stems from the country's geographic split.

The northwestern portion of the country is primarily composed of ethnic Ukrainians, many of whom would like to strengthen ties to Europe—or any trade partner other than Russia. Popular with tourists, the skylines of its cities show the elegant lines of European architecture—relics of past Polish and Austria-Hungarian control. The southeastern portion of Ukraine is primarily composed of Russians and Russian-speaking Ukrainians, many

Where Europe and Russia Collide



who would rather continue in an economic union with Russia and other former Soviet Republics to avoid the repercussions of being flattened by Russian's economic interests. Factories and industry are centered in eastern Ukraine and are dependent on the Russian market. Eastern Ukraine became home to Russians after millions of Ukrainians were killed in a famine engineered by Communist authorities in the early 1930s, and the uniformity of their concrete cities harks back to the Soviet era. The only thing Ukrai-

nians seem to agree on is the need to be part of something bigger—perhaps too many years occupied has left them unsure what to do with their freedom and the responsibility it brings.

However, policy-making takes place in Kiev, in western Ukraine. Three years after independence, Ukraine declared that integration into the EU was their main foreign policy objective. They signed a Partnership and Cooperation Agreement, which focused on social and political reforms that would lead toward guaranteed rights for its citizens and press. While the EU states that it wishes for a closer relationship with Ukraine, it has also been wary of treading on Russia's toes by moving into post-Soviet space. The EU has been put off by Ukraine's struggling economy and outraged by the imprisonment of former political leaders. Yulia Tymoshenko, former Prime Minister of Ukraine, and Yuriy Lutsenko, former Minister of Internal Affairs, in 2011 and 2012 respectively, remain jailed on trumped-up charges.

Despite Yanukovich walking away from the EU Summit in November, the EU was prepared to welcome them until Yanukovich's repeated reassurances that he would sign the AA while working on trade agreements with Russia prompted EU second guessing as well. On December 15, the New York Times reported that Brussels had confirmed putting talks on hold with Ukraine. The following day, the report was denied.

Notwithstanding Ukraine's well-documented corruption, signing the Association Agreement would have likely secured Yanukovich's re-election in 2015, but now hundreds of thousands are calling for him to step down, shaking his presidency to the core.

Historically, Russia and Ukraine have had a twisted relationship, and the Kremlin has a knack for exploiting divisions within Ukraine that deepen

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mistrust and suspicion. Russia also has no problem using strong-arm tactics, which makes it difficult for Ukraine to escape Moscow's shadow. Russia is a major producer in the natural gas trade and depends on Ukrainian pipelines to get their product to market but also supplies Ukraine with gas, creating interdependency. 58% of the natural gas that Ukraine consumes comes from Russia and 66% of the Russian gas imported into the EU enters the EU by way of these strategic pipelines in Ukraine. Prior to the Vilnius Summit, Russia hiked Ukraine's gas prices, embargoed Ukrainian chocolate and put customs delays on other products totaling \$50 million a month, all in the hopes of strangling Ukraine's economy and forcing them to join Russia's 'Eurasian Union' that has reduced other former Republics to near-dependent status.

Russian interest in Ukraine stems not only from Russian pipelines that cross

Ukraine and their access to the Black Sea, but also from a national defense perspective. As George Friedman noted, Ukraine is Russia's soft underbelly. Controlling the Carpathians and protecting their southern border is something that Russia will never willingly give up. Ukraine is important to Russia and negligible to Europe. Because of these factors, EU leaders refuse to offset Putin's trade wars, or offer the immediate financial help necessary to counterbalance Russian reprisals on Ukraine's dire financial situation.

Ukraine owes \$10 billion in principal and interest payments in 2014 and has the third-highest default probability in the world. While addressing his decision to suspend negotiations with the EU, Yanukovich stated, "I would have been wrong if I hadn't done everything necessary for people not to lose their jobs, receive salaries, pensions and scholarships." Observers may scoff at the political subservience that Yanukovich shows towards Russia, but had

he severed economic ties with Russia, economic disaster would have immediately followed.

Without the EU ready to save Ukraine, the government renounced signing the Association Agreement. As of mid-December, Ukraine continues to flirt with both East and West trying to bridge a \$17 billion funding gap in its budget. Russia seems most likely to help with credit by dropping gas prices by 10-15%. The EU is in discussions with the IMF and World Bank regarding how to best help Ukraine.

The challenge for all Ukrainians, regardless of their ethnicity or location, will be to choose an economic model that benefits Ukraine and its people. Diplomacy will continue to be important as Ukraine incorporates the European statutes that it values while accepting that Russian interest is unlikely to waver.

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QUESTIONS:

1. Why are location and ethnicity often tied to political orientation?
2. What advantages would ties to the EU bring? What disadvantages?
3. What type of impact do political protests have on economic policies?
4. What strategic values does Ukraine have for Russia? The EU?
5. What strategic value do economic and political alliances with Russia and the EU have for Ukraine? Can they have both?

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