

## Ukraine and Europe: challenges ahead

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Following the failure of the Ukrainian government to sign an Association Agreement (AA), a pillar of the European Union's much-vaunted Eastern Partnership with Ukraine at its heart, protestors spilled onto the streets of Kyiv and other Ukrainian cities to demand the rescinding of this decision. Soon, these initial protests escalated into demands by the fragmented opposition for the dismissal of the deeply unpopular authorities. However, the failure of the no-confidence vote in the government of Mykola Azarov on 3 December leaves the protesters and political opposition at a quandary as to how to proceed. This stand-off presents the EU and its member states with a dilemma as to how to engage with the current authorities in Ukraine.



This latest 'revolution' can be seen as the third in a series of movements in Ukraine – the first being independence in 1991, the second being the so-called Orange Revolution in 2004. Each reflected people's increasing dissatisfaction with the governance of the country. As increasing numbers of Ukrainians travel abroad, their awareness of the endemic corruption, poverty, cronyism, disrespect for property rights and selective application of justice in Ukraine grows. The refusal to sign the AA dashed their hopes for becoming a 'normal' European country.

However, the demonstrations lack leadership and strategy. They lack leadership because the opposition is fragmented; and the opposition has no strategy because there is no mechanism for bringing down the government or unseating the president. As a result the initiative is being lost and the ruling party is consolidating its power after the ferocious onslaught. Initial signs of fragmentation in President Viktor Yanukovich's powerbase have disappeared.

Yet the Ukrainian leadership has failed to grasp the nature of the protests ie the widespread disenchantment with its rule. This dissatisfaction is at the popular level, as mentioned above, but also the elite level. The Ukrainian economy is in the hands of major economic groups. Some of these groups are dissatisfied with the rule of Mr Yanukovich who has favoured members and close associates of his family. However, this dissatisfaction has not yet resulted in splits – 'if we don't hang together, we will all hang separately' might be their motto.

While the domestic political context is tense, the economic and geopolitical factors further complicate the outlook:

- Ukraine is moving towards bankruptcy – the country has less than three months' gold reserves to pay for imports – an IMF benchmark. This means that Ukraine desperately needs external funding, which explains Mr Yanukovich's trip to China during the demonstrations.
- Moscow has been putting Ukraine under immense pressure to not sign the AA. Instead, Russia wants Ukraine to accede its Eurasian Customs Union which precludes Ukraine's integration with the EU.

While the EU wants Ukraine to sign an AA, it needs to exercise caution with a government that has lost legitimacy. The EU is, however, buoyed by the fervent wish of people in Ukraine to move closer to the EU. The current authorities in Ukraine treat relations with the EU in an instrumental way. Their approach to the EU is a tactic for preserving power rather than evidence of a long-term vision. The EU is in danger of getting into an 'auction' with Russia for Ukraine. Its principled stance should preclude this, but a temptation may remain nevertheless.

In the event of a failure of the protests, a ruthless clampdown by the authorities is likely to follow. Even before these events, the leadership was unpopular. Following the brutality of the law-enforcement agencies, it is even less likely to win free and fair presidential elections scheduled for 2015, and will probably resort to fraud. Ukraine is a deeply fragmented country: this fragmentation is vulnerable to exploitation almost at will. A fissure of Ukraine is not inconceivable, albeit unlikely.

Conclusion:

- The EU should maintain close engagement with Ukraine and offer a package of support for the signing of the AA, conditional upon reform and maintenance of democratic standards and human rights.
- The EU, the USA and Switzerland should make clear that indiscriminate punishment and retribution against protesters cannot be tolerated and will be followed by asset freezing, travel restrictions and appropriate sanctions against member of the ruling elite.
- In recognition of civic mobilisation, stronger support for student organisations and NGOs should be provided.

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