Ukraine’s Euromaidan Revolution

KEY PLAYERS

Viktor Yanukovych — Ukrainian president from the industrial Donbas region of Ukraine’s east. Yanukovych was denied the presidency in 2004 after massive voting fraud triggered the Orange Revolution, leading to a re-do of the election. He returned in 2010 to win the presidential election, ushering in an era of increased corruption and closer cooperation with Russia.

Mustafa Nayyem — An Afghan-born journalist who is credited with triggering the protests. Nayyem posted a message to Facebook encouraging people to gather in Kyiv and helped coin the term “Euromaidan.”

OVERVIEW

Euromaidan was a mass protest movement in Ukraine that began on November 21, 2013 and ended on February 22, 2014, when Russian-backed President Viktor Yanukovych fled the country. Approximately 100 protesters and 17 police and government troops were killed during the unrest. The protest movement kicked off a series of events that severely strained relations between the West and Russia. Following the ouster of Yanukovych, Russia annexed the Black Sea peninsula of Crimea and provided economic, political, and military support to armed separatist militias in Ukraine’s eastern Donbas region. The EU and the US responded with sanctions against Russian banks and political leaders.

BACKGROUND

In 2012 Ukraine and the European Union began negotiations on a treaty that would lower trade barriers with the EU, launch reforms to bring Ukrainian political institutions closer to European standards, and begin a process that could lead to eventual European Union membership. Students, who made up a large number of protesters during the revolution’s early phases, had much to gain from the signing of this document, known as the European Union Association Agreement. They saw their futures tied with European Union integration and viewed European-style political reform as a way to combat the corruption that plagued Ukraine.

Under pressure from Russia, Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych announced on November 21, 2013 that he would suspend talks on the Association Agreement. That same day, several hundred activists and students gathered on Ukraine’s main square to protest the decision and to encourage Yanukovych to reconsider. Further protests took place in the coming days as Yanukovych formally walked away from the agreement, which he was expected to sign at a summit in Vilnius, Lithuania on November 28, 2013. Yanukovych instead accepted a multibillion dollar “bailout” package from Russia, which many saw as a sign that he had chosen Moscow over Brussels.

“Maidan” comes from “Maidan Nezalezhnosti,” which in Ukrainian simply means “Independence Square,” the name of the central square in Kyiv where protesters gathered. Activists named the movement “Euromaidan” to express their desire to identify Ukrainian society with Europe. The protest erupted as a reaction against Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych and his abrupt decision to scrap a trade and political treaty with the European Union in November 2013. Violence by riot police provoked larger and larger rallies, as protesters called for Yanukovych’s removal.
A DEEPENING CRISIS

During the pre-dawn hours of November 30, riot police violently cracked down on protesters who were camped out on the city’s main square, beating them with batons and sending several to the hospital. Images of police brutality went viral on social media, angering people across the country. By the next day, the protest had swelled to hundreds of thousands as people poured in from across the country to demand the president’s resignation.

Protesters built barricades and erected a stage, from which participants listened to activists, politicians, and famous Ukrainian pop groups who performed to show their support. Activists also took over the country’s New Year’s tree, hanging protest banners and European flags from its metal frame.

On January 19, 2014, the Ukrainian parliament passed a controversial package of laws targeting protesters. Known as the “dictatorship laws,” public protests were essentially outlawed, and the government gave itself the power to shut down the internet. The laws provoked another surge in protest activity, and riot police began to violently crack down on demonstrators. Radicalized protesters responded by throwing bricks and Molotov cocktails, leading to days of violent clashes and the deaths of three protesters. A truce brought a temporary halt to the violence.

On February 18, riot police stormed the protest camp, setting fire to tents and shooting at demonstrators with rubber bullets. Violence swiftly escalated, climaxing on the morning of February 20, when riot police opened fire with live ammunition. Dozens died in the violence. European Union representatives hastily brokered a deal with the Yanukovych government and the opposition political leaders that called for early elections and restoration of the country’s 2004 constitution.

Protesters on Maidan angrily denounced the deal and threatened to storm the presidential building the next morning. Sensing he was losing support among his own allies, Yanukovych secretly fled Kyiv during the night, eventually surfacing in Russia. The Ukrainian parliament voted 328-0 to remove him from office and formed a unity government with the opposition. A few days later, unmarked Russian troops surrounded Ukrainian military bases in Crimea, beginning a new phase of the crisis.