



Explainer: What and who are behind Ukraine's political crisis?

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STORY HIGHLIGHTS

- Ukraine has been rattled by anti-government protests since November
- The trigger then was the president's decision to sign a trade pact with the EU
- Ukraine is split: Some want to align more with the West, others favor Russia
- The opposition has also pushed to shift power away from the president

(CNN) -- For three months, they've staked their claim to Kiev's Maidan, or Independence Square, and to Ukraine itself. We will leave only when you pull closer to the European Union, when you change the constitution, when you alter the government's power structure, they have loudly insisted.

But why?

Why have thousands of protesters staked their lives, seemingly, on their desire for political change? And why has the government resisted their calls so vehemently?

Questions that relate to human nature, of people with strong interests or passions refusing to budge, can't be answered easily. But a look at Ukraine's distant and more recent history, as well as the players involved, can shed light on what's going on and what might happen next:

What makes Ukraine unique, important?

A nation of 45 million people, Ukraine is the biggest frontier nation separating Russia and the European Union.

Until 1991, it was part of the Soviet Union. But when that communist nation collapsed following the fall of the Berlin Wall, Ukraine -- like several other Soviet states -- was forced to reinvent itself.

But it didn't do so alone.

Players outside took an interest and took action. Ukraine is something of a pawn between Russia and the West.

The European Union, with backing of the United States, has been working on its relations with former Soviet bloc countries for more than two decades, with the aim of restoring democratic rule and improving quality of life for Ukrainians.

It views the decision by Ukraine, the largest of the former republics, not to partner more with the EU as bowing to Russian pressure.

Russian President Vladimir Putin has denied that Moscow is exerting undue influence in Ukraine.

Last month, he insisted, "Russia has always respected, is respecting and will respect the sovereign rights of all the international entities including new states that emerged after breakdown of the Soviet Union."

But many don't believe him, claiming that his government's offers of aid to Ukraine constitute meddling in an attempt to tighten ties between the former Soviet states.

This alignment hurts Ukraine, these opposition activists say. Whereas other states, like Poland, that were once under Soviet control only to turn later more toward the West have thrived, Ukraine's economy has stumbled.

Its government has also been slow to embrace Western ideals when it comes to politics and human rights, not to mention good governance: Ukraine is ranked 144 out of 177 countries in Transparency International's corruption index.

Why are Russia and the EU central to the protest?

The recent protests are a byproduct in large part of the East-West tensions in Ukraine. The pro-European camp is stronger in Ukraine's west, while the eastern part of the nation aligns more closely with Russia.

In November, thousands spilled onto the streets after President Viktor Yanukovich did a U-turn over a trade pact with the European Union that had been years in the making -- favoring closer relations with Russia instead.

Angered by this backpedaling, the demonstrators demanded the EU deal be signed, saying it would strengthen cooperation with the bloc.

Their daily protests soon escalated, drawing parallels to Ukraine's 2004 Orange Revolution that toppled the government.

But with Ukraine desperately in need of a cash injection, Kiev cited the need for financial assistance if it were to do business with the EU. Yanukovich, who has been in power since 2010, said that Ukraine could not afford to sign the EU deal -- alluding to economic pressure from Russia.

Another factor in Yanukovich's decision not to sign the deal is likely to have been the EU's demands that he release from jail former Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko, his political opponent. The Orange Revolution that swept then-prime minister Yanukovich out in 2004 also brought Tymoshenko to power.

"The changes that occurred after the Orange Revolution weren't simply deep enough. This time around, it appears that the disenchantment is so strong that there is a genuine opportunity to make a fresh start," said Dalibor Rohac, policy analyst with the Cato Institute's Center for Global Liberty and Prosperity.

"For Ukrainians this is a chance to get on a different trajectory from the one the country has been on for the past 22 years and become eventually a part of prosperous, democratic Europe."

Tellingly, the European Union and particularly the United States have been outspoken in support of protesters.

On the flip side, Russia has backed Ukraine's government. Calling protesters' actions setting up barricades and more as "provocative steps," Russia's foreign ministry expressed "hope the opposition in Ukraine will renounce threats and ultimatums."

What about talk of constitutional reform?

The disputes aren't just about money or whether Ukraine aligns more with the European Union or Russia. It's also about power.

Yes, many in the opposition have called for the ouster of Yanukovich and the ordering of new elections.

But both on the streets and in parliament, they've also pushed to alter the government's overall power structure, feeling that too much of it rests with Yanukovich and not enough with parliament.

That thinking has been behind numerous opposition proposals in recent weeks to alter Ukraine's laws and, more fundamentally, its constitution.

The government has offered some concessions, but not enough to satisfy the opposition.

Yanukovich has hardly loosened his grip on the government, nor has he seemingly reined in authorities' approach to protesters -- as evidenced by intensified clashes in recent weeks.

Why has the situation grown more tense?

Whatever his exact motivation, after backing away from the EU deal, Yanukovich flew to Moscow, where he and Putin announced Russia would buy \$15 billion in Ukrainian debt and slash the price Kiev pays for its gas.

That move upset demonstrators. But what inflamed them even more was the adoption of a sweeping anti-protest law in mid-January.

The new law included provisions barring people from wearing helmets and masks to rallies and from setting up tents or sound equipment without prior police permission.

This sparked concerns it could be used to put down demonstrations and deny people the right to free speech -- and clashes soon escalated.

That includes not only occupying Kiev's central Independence Square, but also blocking other streets and government buildings. The demonstrators took over City Hall for the better part of three months.

Amid intense pressure, deputies loyal to Yanukovich backtracked and overturned that anti-protest law.

The protests continued, as did on-again, off-again conversations between opposition and government officials.

On Sunday, protesters vacated Kiev's City Hall, unblocked a major street and left other government buildings in exchange for the government dropping charges against those arrested, opposition parliament member Arsen Avakov said. This came two days after the country's attorney general announced that 243 protesters had been freed, though charges against them remained.

Any breakthrough was a distant memory by Tuesday. The speaker of parliament's refusal to allow amendments that would have limited the president's powers and restored the constitution to what it was in 2004 angered many in the opposition.

Whoever started them, fresh clashes ensued on the streets of Kiev, leading to at least 19 deaths by early Wednesday.

As Arseniy Yatsenyuk, an opposition leader, urged Yanukovich to "pull back the police and announce a cease-fire" so negotiations could resume, the government pinned the blame for the latest violence squarely on protesters.

"The truce has been broken," said prosecutor general Viktor Pshonka. "For the sake of pursuing their own political interests, they neglected all previously reached agreements and put lives and the peace of millions of Kiev residents under threat."

Who makes up the opposition?

Without doubt, Yanukovich is the face of the Ukrainian government. Other than a few days he took off to fight off a respiratory infection, Yanukovich has been leading the way in dealing with the domestic and international aspects of the crisis.

In addition to controlling his government, his allies in parliament have done numerous things in recent weeks that have inflamed the opposition and also attempted (unsuccessfully) to assuage them.

So who is the opposition that Yanukovich and his allies are at odds with?

It's not just one figure, but a coalition.

The biggest and most well known figure is Vitali Klitschko. A former world champion boxer (just like his brother Wladimir), Klitschko heads the Ukrainian Democratic Alliance for Reforms party.

In a sign of his influence, it was Klitschko who went to Yanukovich's office late Tuesday for talks, according to his spokesperson.

But the opposition bloc goes well beyond Klitschko.

Yatsenyuk heads the Fatherland party. And Oleh Tiahnybok is the leader of the Freedom party, or Svoboda.

These opposition leaders have been talking with Yanukovich's camp.

In late January, the president offered a package of concessions under which Yatsenyuk would have become the prime minister and, under the president's offer, been able to dismiss the government.

He also offered Klitschko the post of deputy prime minister on humanitarian issues and also agreed to a working group looking at changes to the constitution. But the opposition refused.

"No deal @ua_yanukovich, we're finishing what we started. The people decide our leaders, not you," Yatsenyuk tweeted.

What's been the impact of crisis outside Ukraine?

February was supposed to be Russia's -- and, by connection, Putin's -- chance to shine with the Winter Olympics in the Black Sea city of Sochi.

Instead, the spiraling Ukraine unrest has snared some of that attention, as well as increased the focus on the Russian government's part in it.

The ordeal has also shone a spotlight on seeming discord within the ranks of the opposition's international allies.

A [leaked audio recording](#) of a phone call allegedly catches a U.S. diplomat to Europe using profanity to express strong frustrations with inaction and indecision by the European Union in resolving the crisis.

U.S. officials suggested that Moscow probably tapped a call -- believed to include State Department official Victoria Nuland and U.S. Ambassador to Ukraine Geoffrey Pyatt -- and leaked it out of concern about a potential deal between the government and opposition. The recording was posted to YouTube.

In the conversation, a man refers to Klitschko as the opposition's "top dog" but suggests he's too inexperienced to hold a government post. A woman who sounds like Nuland (though neither she nor the State Department confirmed it's her voice) then refers to a perceived lack of pressure that the European Union is exerting on Yanukovich, stating, "f**k the EU."

German Chancellor Angela Merkel called the use of such language "unacceptable," according to a spokeswoman.

What's next?

Opposition and government leaders have talked for weeks. Top international diplomats have been involved in trying to resolve the crisis.

And yet, seemingly, it's only gotten worse.

One open-ended question is how much worse will it get. Assuming they back off, what tools and techniques will authorities use to clamp down on dissenters? Might the government and/or the opposition accept concessions to end this all peacefully?

All good questions, all seemingly impossible to answer at this point.

Regardless, the world is watching.

CNN's Antonia Mortensen contributed to this report