

THE UKRAINIAN REVOLUTION: OVERVIEW AND CAUSES

Alexandra MIHALI

Abstract. *The purpose of this paper is to give an overview of the events that took place in Ukraine in the latest months and, based on that, to identify and analyze the triggers that led to the escalation of the conflict, as well as the structural causes that influenced the current situation. Moreover, the article is meant to establish whether the Ukrainian revolution does in fact constitute an international crisis and the link between crisis and conflict in this particular case study.*

Keywords: *Ukraine, international crisis, conflict, protests, triggers, structural causes, timeline, war, strategic importance, revolution.*

Introduction

Ukraine has recently been on everyone's lips, especially on those of journalists, politicians, international relations specialists and policy makers. In order to understand this complex situation, it is very important to identify and analyze the triggers that led to the escalation of the events. Furthermore, the conflict cannot be understood without an analysis of the main (structural) causes that generated it.

There have been many opinions voiced, many positions taken on the issue, but whether they are pro-Western or pro-Russian, the first step is to provide an objective timeline of events, that will serve as basis for the analysis on triggers and causes.

Timeline of events

It all started on November 21st, 2013, when Ukraine's president Viktor Yanukovich an-

Alexandra MIHALI
research assistant,
Conflict Studies Center
Email: alexandra.mihali@fspac.ro

Conflict Studies Quarterly
Issue 7, April 2014, pp. 3-13

nounced the abandonment of a trade agreement with the European Union. Since 2008, the EU has negotiated a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA) with Ukraine. The DCFTA was meant to be part of a future Association Agreement, which would replace the present Partnership and Cooperation Agreement between the EU and Ukraine (which dates from 1998) (European Commission website, 2014). The signing of this agreement was thought to be directed at pulling Ukraine out of Russia's orbit and bringing the country closer to the Western states (Traynor&Grytsenko, 2013).

By November 30, public support for pro-EU anti-government protesters grew and on December 1st, 2013, more than 300,000 people were protesting in Kiev's Independence Square. A month later, anti-protest laws were passed and the first victims arose from the protests. In the meantime, Russian President Vladimir Putin announced plans to buy \$15bn in Ukrainian government bonds and a cut in cost of Russia's natural gas for Ukraine. On January 28, Mykola Azarov resigned as Ukraine's prime minister and the parliament repealed anti-protest laws that caused the demonstrations to escalate in the first place. As the parliament stalled passing constitutional reform to limit presidential powers and comply with protesters' demands, the latter took back government buildings. The deadliest day of the crisis was February 20, when government snipers shot protesters from rooftops, leading to over 70 deaths. The following day, protest leaders, the political opposition and Yanukovich agreed to form a new government and hold early elections. Yanukovich's powers were slashed. The parliament voted to free Yulia Tymoshenko, the former Prime Minister, from prison, and Yanukovich fled Kiev after protesters took control of the capital. Further on, Ukrainian politicians voted to remove Yanukovich and assign presidential powers to its new speaker, Oleksandr Turchinov, an ally of Tymoshenko. On February 24, Ukraine's interim government drew up a warrant for Yanukovich's arrest, as pro-Russian protesters rallied in Crimea against the new Kiev administration. Crimean Tartars supporting the new Kiev administration clashed with pro-Russia protesters in the region and, by the end of February, Pro-Kremlin armed men seized government buildings in Crimea. The Ukrainian government vowed to prevent a country break-up as Crimean parliament set May 25 as the date for referendum on region's status. In this time, Yanukovich was granted refuge in Russia. The situation got worse when armed men in unmarked combat fatigues seized Simferopol international airport and a military airfield in Sevastopol and the Ukrainian government accused Russia of aggression. The UN Security Council held an emergency closed-door session to discuss the situation in Crimea. After this, the US warned Russia of militarily intervening in Ukraine. At this point, the international community got involved in the crisis. Russia responded that military movements in Crimea were in line with previous agreements to protect its fleet position in the Black Sea.

The first day of spring came with bad news for the region, as the situation worsened in Crimea: local leaders asked for Russian President Vladimir Putin's help. The Russian upper house of the parliament approved a request by Putin to use military power in

Ukraine. The next day, a convoy of hundreds of Russian troops headed towards the regional capital of Ukraine's Crimea region, a day after Russia's forces took over the strategic Black Sea peninsula without firing a shot. Arseny Yatsenyuk, Ukraine's new Prime Minister said his country was on the "brink of disaster" and accused Russia of declaring war on his country. NATO stepped up with a statement saying that Moscow was threatening peace and security in Europe. In the same time, the Russian position was that the country reserved its right to use all means to protect its citizens in eastern Ukraine (Al Jazeera, 2014).

By March 5, the involvement of the international community was more visible. US Secretary of State John Kerry sought to arrange a face-to-face meeting between Russian and Ukrainian foreign ministers. However, Sergey Lavrov refused to talk to his Ukrainian counterpart, Andriy Deshchychia. Meanwhile, NATO announced a full review of its cooperation with Russia. Additionally, the US announced visa restrictions on Russians and Ukraine's Crimean inhabitants who it said were "threatening the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine". Meanwhile, Crimea's parliament voted unanimously in favor of joining Russia. Hours later, the city council of Sevastopol in Crimea announced joining Russia immediately. In response, Ukraine offered to hold talks with Russia over Crimea, but on the condition that the Kremlin withdrew troops from the autonomous republic. This time, top Russian politicians met Crimea's delegation with standing ovation and expressed their support for the region's aspirations of joining Russia (Al Jazeera, 2014).

On March 11, the EU proposed a package of trade liberalization measures to support Ukraine's economy and the Crimean regional parliament adopted a "declaration of independence". Also, US President Barack Obama met with Yatsenyuk at the White House in a show of support for the new Ukrainian government and declared the US would "completely reject" the Crimea referendum (Al Jazeera, 2014). Two days later, German Chancellor Angela Merkel warned Moscow of potentially "massive" long-term economic and political damage if the crisis was not resolved. By mid-March, UN Security Council members voted overwhelmingly in support of a draft resolution condemning an upcoming referendum on the future of Crimea as illegal. Russia vetoed the action and China abstained. Still, partial results from Crimea's referendum showed 95 percent of voters supported the union with Russia, according to the Russian state news agency RIA. On March 17th, the EU and the US announced sanctions like travel bans and asset freezes against a number of officials from Russia and Ukraine (BBC News, 2014).

Methodology

This paper aims at identifying the main triggers and causes of the Ukrainian revolution, as well as offering an overview of the events that led to the current situation. In doing so, the main research method is document analysis. Starting with a detailed analysis of news articles for the timeline of events and then analyzing reports, opinion articles and

international reactions in order to identify the triggers and causes, I then applied The International Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE) model of conflict analysis to the crisis in Ukraine. The model was not applied entirely, but shaped for the case study in discussion and for the purpose of this paper.

Profile and strategic importance

Ukraine is a very important state in terms of geopolitical and strategic significance. Currently, the population of Ukraine is one of the largest in Europe, with more than 44.6 million people, and it is also one of the biggest countries in the world and the second largest country in Europe, after Russia. Its dimensions make it an important market for both EU and Russian goods (Adusei, 2014).

Ukraine is also a major transit point for oil and gas coming from Russia and Central Asia to the EU. Most of the gas and oil pipelines carrying hydrocarbon products to the EU from Russia pass through this country. In 2004, for example, more than 80% of Russian gas exported to Europe came through Ukrainian pipelines. And currently more than 70% of Russian gas enters Europe through Ukraine. These pipelines consist of 36,720 km for gas, 4,514 km for oil, and 4,363 km which carry refined products. Any disruption of these pipelines or the flow of petroleum products will bring untold suffering to millions of Western Europeans who depend on gas coming from Russia (Adusei, 2014).

But Russia's interests in Ukraine go beyond the economic sphere. Ukraine is also important for military reasons; the Ukrainian city of Sevastopol is the headquarters of Russia's Black Sea Fleet. Ukraine's strategic location as a borderland between Russia and Europe and its proximity to Russia's own breadbasket and economic heartland in the Volga region make the country key to Russia's geopolitical strength and, ultimately, its survival (European Dialogue, 2011). Ukraine shares a 1,576 km-long border with Russia in the east, making it a strategic country especially for the US and its Western allies who want to prevent Russia from expanding its influence westwards. In terms of security, Russia's topography is flat and often considered indefensible because of the lack of geographical barriers. Therefore, Ukraine serves as a "buffer zone" and can slow down any military expansion directed at Russia. Ideologically speaking, Ukraine can be seen to be at the core of Russian identity, because it united the lands of modern Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine (Caspian Report, 2014).

Some say that Ukraine is of great importance for any power that wants to undermine the Russian Federation (Caspian Report, 2014).

Triggers

There are several events and actions that can be considered triggers of the Ukrainian crisis. The latest developments in the country are the result of a four-month-long stand-off between protesters and the Yanukovich government.

The protests erupted on November 21st, when President Viktor Yanukovych backed down from signing a trade agreement with the European Union. The setting for this agreement is given by the importance of Ukraine as a commercial partner of the EU. Ukraine's primary exports to the EU are iron, steel, mining products, agricultural products, and machinery, whereas EU exports to Ukraine are dominated by machinery and transport equipment, chemicals, and manufactured goods (European Commission website, 2014). According to the European Commission website, the Free Trade Agreement is designed to cover all trade-related areas (including services, intellectual property rights, customs, public procurement, energy-related issues, competition, et cetera). The free trade area between the EU and Ukraine is meant to deepen Ukraine's access to the European market and to encourage further European investment in Ukraine.

As we can see, a straightforward conclusion would be that the EU wanted more Eastern European economies to enter into their trade agreements, while Ukrainians longed for stronger relations with the more modern and productive Western economies. Although it appeared to be a "win-win" situation at a first glance, the desire for economic reform was not enough (Curran, 2014). Some say that this sudden change in Yanukovych's approach was actually in favor of Russia. When the deal with the EU was considered last year, the Ukrainian President began to capriciously voice doubts in the final stages about signing the EU's proposed association agreement. This was a clear sign for the Ukrainian people that the rejection of the agreement would be in favor of Russia. And so, a few days later, President Yanukovych accepted a new deal from Russia in the form of \$15 billion in aid and other economic benefits.

This retreat under the wing of Russia immediately triggered a response from the Ukrainian people. Only hours after the rejection of the EU proposal, thousands of protesters took to the streets of Kiev to express their disagreement with the president's decision and to call for economic reform (Curran, 2014).

The second trigger actually consists of the response the Ukrainian governmental forces gave to the peaceful protests. The Ukrainian government began to carry out aggressive action. Riot police, armed guards, and military personnel quickly descended on protest sites throughout Ukraine in order to shut down the opposition. Tensions between the two groups quickly escalated, with online videos showing protesters throwing Molotov cocktails at riot police and armed guards tormenting opposition prisoners. By mid-February, when the number of victims was increasing, the chance of a resolution between the opposition and President Yanukovych seemed unlikely (Curran, 2014).

Unable to contain the revolt spreading through hostile regions, Yanukovych tried to use yet more lethal force in Kiev. Violent escalation, including random killings of protesters by snipers, only served to reinforce the impression of absolute power gone wild and strengthen the key motivation for opposing it. With two remaining options – ordering mass bloodshed or surrendering his powers – Yanukovych recognized the limits of his

loyal troops and signed a deal with the opposition to shift most of his formal powers to parliament. This also sealed his fate. The moment the agreement was finalized, the coercive basis of his rule crumbled (Kudelia, 2014).

According to the polls conducted over the last three months, two-thirds of protesters consistently named the government's harsh repression of protesters as the main reason for their own decision to protest. Less than a fifth named authoritarianism or integration with Russia as motives (Kudelia, 2014).

In addition to the violent response of the Ukrainian government, another aspect that could be considered a trigger is the Russian response to the crisis. After the opposition had taken over Kiev and the Ukrainian President fled to Russia, unmarked guards started to appear at the Ukrainian-Russian border. More than this, Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered an urgent drill meant to test the combat readiness of the Russian armed forces across the west of the country. This drill involved more than 100,000 troops, many situated in proximity of the Ukrainian border. Although Russia said that the exercises were not linked to the events in Ukraine (Guterman, 2014), this gesture raised concerns in the international community regarding Russia's possible military intervention in Ukraine. Also, many believe that President Putin's deliberate show of force sent the message that Russia was prepared to go to war with Ukraine (Curran, 2014). After this drill, the unmarked soldiers quickly began to enter the Ukrainian province of Crimea and, pretty fast, President Putin received approval from the parliament to send more troops to Ukraine.

As we can see, all these actions and events contributed to the rapid escalation of the Ukrainian crisis. What started as peaceful protests against the decision of President Yanukovich, became a violent conflict because of the aggressive response of the Ukrainian governmental forces and also due to the controversial Russian reaction to the situation.

Causes (structural causes)

For the purpose of this paper, the structural causes that led to the current situation in Ukraine will be analyzed. In short, structural causes are pervasive factors that have become built into the policies, structures and fabric of a society and may create the pre-conditions for violent conflict. There are several causes that can be identified in the Ukrainian society and policy making and which stand at the origins of the revolution.

On December 8th, 2013, the statue of Lenin from Kiev was vandalized. The presence of this statue was symbolic in Ukraine and meant strong and unbreakable ties with Russia (Wolczuk&Wolczuk, 2013). But, as Lenin fell, the feeling that the refusal to sign the trade agreement with the EU was just the straw that broke the camel's back became a certainty.

Ukraine's foreign policy has been characterized, since its independence in 1991, by a single central feature: a reluctance to commit to one side or the other. However, the

international situation shows that this option will no longer be available to Ukraine. And the choice is simple: associating with the EU or joining Russia, because they are, as things stand, mutually exclusive. Turning to Russia meant the exclusion of the European option – hence the fury in Kiev (Tucker, 2013).

Probably the most obvious cause of the Ukrainian conflict is the dissatisfaction of the people. There is no doubt that many Ukrainian people were deeply unhappy with the regime in power and with Yanukovych. This has been going on for many years. In September 2010, a few months after Yanukovych's election, he pushed for a return to the presidential system (Ukraine had had a mixed system), which formalized his dominance over the legislature and the executive branch. It seemed, at that time, that the criteria for government appointments were either ties with the president's native Donetsk or personal ties to his family. The situation got worse and, by September 2013, officials from Donbas, the metropolitan area that contains Donetsk, controlled half of all government ministries, including the lucrative energy ministry and the interior ministry, and occupied high-ranking positions in two-thirds of the country's oblasts (Kudelia, 2014). Gradually, key businessman and politicians became loyal to Yanukovych. This might seem surprising, since betrayal by insiders was the leading cause for the fall of regimes in the last decades. But it is a widely spread opinion that the reason why Yanukovych managed to hold his regime together for so long was, in fact, the clientelistic web of personal dependencies and individual insecurities that he had learned to exploit so well. Economic collapse could have sped up the collapse of his regime, but with support from Russia he managed to control this aspect, too (Kudelia, 2014).

Taking this into account, it is no surprise that the Ukrainian people are dissatisfied. What they want is prosperity, safety, the rule of law, business opportunities, and the means for personal, social, professional and spiritual development. Basically, they want what every human being wants: decent living conditions. Some of them see the EU as the best hope of achieving this goal, while others see a participation in an economic union with Russia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan, as a much better option (Vineyardsaker, 2014).

Another relevant cause, which is strongly linked to the previous one, is national division. With the risk of oversimplifying the issue, it is not unfair to split Ukraine into a mostly Europe-leaning, Ukrainian-speaking west and a mostly Russia-leaning, Russian-speaking east. In terms of sociocultural identity, Ukraine could almost be considered two different countries, and this is reflected in its politics (Simms, 2014). In 2004, after a decade of government incompetence, corruption and a disastrous economy, the year's presidential elections would inevitably be close. Viktor Yushchenko suffered a mysterious poisoning that left his face disfigured. Viktor Yanukovych claimed victory over his opponent, Viktor Yushchenko, in a run-off, until reports of fraud and rigged elections came in, prompting massive, peaceful street protests in Kiev, dubbed the Orange Revolution. The protests managed to get the original vote annulled, the nation's Supreme Court called

a new election, and Yushchenko beat Yanukovych with 52% of the vote (Yuhás&Jalabi, 2014). As time passed by, reforms seemed more and more unlikely due to corruption and economic problems, and by the 2010 election, dissatisfaction with Yushchenko's failure to reform the economy and get closer to Europe, helped his opponent, Viktor Yanukovych, win the elections (Yuhás&Jalabi, 2014).

Strongly linked to political division, there is a strong economic division. As is the case with much of post-Soviet Russia, Ukraine, too, saw the rise of an oligarchical class who quickly captured former state assets, and then got involved in politics to protect their economic gains. While these oligarchs span the political spectrum, they have mostly been a conservative force in Ukrainian politics, fearing that closer integration with the EU could damage their standing. The allegations of corruption surrounding these oligarchs, along with the dire economic situation in Ukraine, have combined to fuel much of the discontent of recent months (Simms, 2014).

The last structural cause we will analyze is the need for reform in the country. Of course, the subject has already been tackled in the previous paragraphs and will not be insisted upon. One thing is clear: the Ukrainian people want and have wanted better economic and living conditions for a long time now. And in the light of the President's sudden refusal of tightening relations with the European Union, this need has been amplified.

Ukrainian Revolution – is it a Crisis?

This part of the article will try to establish whether the situation in Ukraine is an international crisis.

The concept of crisis has a wide variety of meanings. Indeed, it is used in various fields, such as medicine, economics, management, public administration, communications, history, psychology, political science, and international relations.

In social relations, crises are chaotic situations that might be experienced by people, states, governments, organizations, etc. The word 'crisis' means disorder; in other words we can explain that crisis is a situation which is not normal or stable. This term means an urgent situation that suddenly happens and breaks the routine processes of any system (İşyar, 2008). If we take this definition into account, the Ukrainian revolution can be, in fact, considered a crisis. The protests in Ukraine broke suddenly, at only a week after the abandonment of the trade agreement with the European Union. It is, obviously, a situation that influenced the stability of the country.

In order to prove that the Ukrainian revolution is in fact a crisis, the events that took place in the last months will be included in the four stages of an international crisis.

The first phase is called the "pre-crisis phase" or the warning phase. At this point, the initial signs of the crisis are detected, but the main decision makers are bound to not respond, because the problems caused by the crisis do not vitally influence the go-

vernment. Also, at this stage, the government makes decisions based on habit. We can identify this phase of a crisis with the period immediately after Yanukovych refused to sign the trade agreement with the EU. The protests began soon after this decision, but the crisis broke only days later, on December 1st, when about 300,000 people protested in Kiev's Independence Square and the city hall was seized by activists.

This leads to the second phase, the crisis phase, when the crisis has definitely begun and the government administration tries to become a control center. The decision making process is highly influenced by the events, which occur very fast and change day by day. The leader has a vital role in managing a situation. Returning to Ukraine, after the beginning of December, the rapid decisions of the government can be easily noticed. A month after having seized the City Hall in Kiev, the protesters received a firm reaction from the government, as anti-protest laws were passed and quickly condemned as "draconian". This is the perfect example of a rapid decision due to the dynamics of the situation. Another incident is the resignation of Mykola Azarov as Ukraine's Prime Minister. The examples are numerous and all in support of the idea that what is happening in Ukraine is a crisis. The revolution claimed its first victims and the government took another crisis measure, passing on January 29 an amnesty bill for arrested protesters if seized government buildings were relinquished.

The third phase of the crisis is called abatement. In this phase, if the government cannot find a solution to the crisis, its credibility might be damaged and this could lead to losing prestige in the political landscape. Has this happened in Ukraine? Well, on February 21, protest leaders, the political opposition and Yanukovich agreed to form a new government and hold early elections. This was the first sign that Yanukovich's power and credibility was damaged by the crisis. The parliament voted in favor of releasing Yulia Tymoshenko, the former Prime Minister, from prison. Soon after, Yanukovich fled Kiev after protesters took control of the capital.

The last phase of a crisis is called post-crisis. Of course, Ukraine has not reached this phase yet. The crisis is still ongoing, especially considering the latest events in Crimea, which further complicated the already difficult situation.

Conclusions

This paper has analyzed the triggers and causes of the conflict in Ukraine and whether or not the situation there can be called a crisis. At a first glance, these two concepts, crisis and conflict, seem very different. As considered by the general literature on crisis, there is a direct relationship between international conflicts and international crises. But international crises are often focused on specific matters and therefore have a narrower spectrum than conflicts. Of course, we can argue that, very often, international crises appear within the time of protracted conflicts. But it can happen the other way around also and what starts as a crisis can easily turn into a conflict. This is, in my

opinion, what happened in Ukraine. It started as a peaceful protest, turned into a crisis due to the inappropriate response of the government and, considering the latest events in Crimea, has the chances of becoming an international conflict.

References

1. Adusei, A. (2014). *The Strategic importance of Ukraine and why both Russia and U.S. want her as an ally*. Retrieved at the 11th of March 2014 from <http://www.modernghana.com/news/526204/1/the-strategic-importance-of-ukraine.html>.
2. AL Jazeera (2014). *Putin: Use of force is last resort in Ukraine*. Retrieved at the 20th of February 2014 from <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/europe/2014/03/putin-ukraine-events-unconstitutional-coup-201434105511394582.html>.
3. BBC News (2014). *Ukraine crisis: EU and US impose sanctions over Crimea*. Retrieved at the 10th of March 2014 from <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-26613567>.
4. Caspian Report (2014). *Ukraine's crisis and strategic importance*. Retrieved at the 11th of March 2014 from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v6jHhzj08yQ&list=TLWi1w23Tc_aljTyMwK7B7nbNUunThNOhc.
5. Curran, J. (2014). Russian-Ukrainian Conflict Explained. *Huffington Post*. Retrieved at the 10th of March 2014 from http://www.huffingtonpost.com/johncurran/russian-ukrainian-conflict-explained_b_4909192.html.
6. European Commission (2014). *Countries and Regions – Ukraine*. Retrieved at the 21st of February 2014 from <http://ec.europa.eu/trade/policy/countries-and-regions/countries/ukraine/>.
7. European Dialogue (2011). *Russia battles with Europe over Ukraine*. Retrieved at the 15th of March 2014 from <http://www.eurodialogue.org/Russia-battles-with-Europe-over-Ukraine>.
8. Geopolitical Mirror (2014). *Ukraine on the Brink: A Fragile Calm*. Retrieved at the 10th of March 2014 from <http://www.geopoliticalmonitor.com/ukraine-on-the-brink-a-fragile-calm-4928/>.
9. Gutterman, S. (2014). Putin puts troops in western Russia on alert in drill. *Reuters*. Retrieved at the 9th of March 2014 from <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/02/26/us-ukraine-crisis-russia-military-idUSBREA1P0RW20140226>.
10. International Network for Education in Emergencies (2014). *Conflict Sensitive Education*. Retrieved at the 10th of March 2014 from <http://www.ineesite.org/en/education-fragility/conflict-sensitive-education>.
11. İşyar, O. (2008). Definition and Management of the International Crises. *Perceptions Journal of International Affairs*. Center for Strategic Research. Turkey.
12. Kudelia, S. (2014). Ukraine in Context. *Foreign Affairs*. Retrieved at the 9th of March 2014 from <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/140976/serhiy-kudelia/ukraine-in-context?nocache=1>.
13. The Guardian (2013). *Ukraine suspends talks on EU trade pact as Putin wins tug of war*. Retrieved at the 20th of February 2014 from <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/nov/21/ukraine-suspends-preparations-eu-trade-pact>.

- 14.The Guardian (2014). *Ukraine's revolution and Russia's occupation of Crimea: how we got here*. Retrieved at the 15th of March 2014 from <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/mar/05/ukraine-russia-explainer>.
- 15.Vineyardsaker (2014). *The geopolitics of the Ukrainian conflict: back to basics*. Retrieved at the 5th of March 2014 from <http://vineyardsaker.blogspot.ro/2014/02/the-geopolitics-of-ukrainian-conflict.html>.
- 16.Wolczuk, K., Wolczuk, R. (2013). What you need to know about the causes of the Ukrainian protests. *Washington Post*. Retrieved at the 21st of February 2014 from <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/monkey-cage/wp/2013/12/09/what-you-need-to-know-about-the-causes-of-the-ukrainian-protests/>.