

Situation in Ukraine, Crimea has global implications

By Anna-Sofia Lesiv



For the past 23 years, Ukraine was a post-Soviet wreck.

With the previous communist ideology so deeply entrenched within the minds of those who never once questioned its values, its collapse was a shock.

In a vacuum without strong or fair democratic institutions in place, there was a dangerous new freedom found for those wishing to adapt to the new lifestyle as fast as possible. In a sick and ironic twist of fate, an oligarchy rose from the Soviet ashes.

Formerly nationalized companies were privatized and seized by a powerful elite which resorted to crimes like murder and bribery to maintain their positions. Government bodies filled with their associates. Corruption became endemic and people feared for their safety as police and courts administered justice based on the biggest bribe. Politicians suddenly became the wealthiest members of society as Ukraine's budgets shrank and its debts grew.

Viktor Yanukovich was the embodiment of everything wrong in Ukraine. Having been convicted of rape and robbery in his past, this man was now serving as Ukraine's president.

Hope lied in the EU association agreement which Yanukovich promised to sign as it would require Ukraine to begin reforming government bodies. But the ultimate suspension of the talks in Vilnius meant that Ukrainians would have to endure this corrupt way of life indefinitely. To those fed up or fearful that the alternative would be integration with Putin's planned Eurasian Customs Union, a parallel to the EU, this was the last straw.

Previously labeled as a nation with one of the weakest civil societies, the people responded with Ukraine's largest protest which, at its peak, amassed a million people in Kyiv's Independence Square. This movement became known as 'Maidan'.

Three months they stood out in the cold while Berkut special police units sprayed them with water, arrested them, beat them, kidnapped them and tortured them. Each time a protestor died of sniper fire on the streets, more people came out. They would stay until Yanukovich was deposed and an entirely new government formed.

Three of Ukraine's opposition leaders, Yatsenyuk, Klitschko and Tyahnybok, came out to support the protests, but were perceived as weak. Though the prime minister and cabinet resigned, they were not able to achieve the kind of change that Ukrainians wanted.

On Feb. 18 and 20, protestors were massacred on the streets, shot by snipers. Some estimate more than 100 died.

Finally, the opposition reached a deal with Yanukovich. He could stay in power, as long as new elections occurred no later than December; police were withdrawn and arrested protestors released. But the people were not pleased. They wanted Yanukovich out immediately so they continued to stand. On the next day, he, along with the speaker of the parliament, packed his belongings and fled Kyiv after a short stop in Kharkiv, he crossed the border into Russia.

In Kyiv, his party 'likely to save face' turned on him. A new speaker was elected and soon after, he was unanimously impeached by Ukraine's parliament.

Today, Ukraine has a new interim government. All ministers were voted in by existing deputies in parliament and a coalition formed by former opposition parties now has the majority. Fearing the immense pressure of serving in this new government, many declined nominations. Many who accepted and now serve as cabinet ministers played key roles in the Maidan revolution. For instance, Tatyana Chornovol, a famous journalist beaten for inquiring into Yanukovich's corrupt affairs, now serves as the head of the Anti-Corruption Bureau. The PM is Arseniy Yatsenyuk. Ukraine does not have a president at the moment, but elections are scheduled for May 25. Despite their success, the protestors still stand on the Maidan ready to act if the government does not abide by their will.

The nation was reeling from its victory and the loss of Maidan's heroes when pro-Russian demonstrations broke out in some of Ukraine's eastern regions and in Crimea. For the entire duration of the revolution, Russian state media had been reporting on the ?true? intentions of the protestors, calling them fascists, ultra-nationalists, and anti-semites. They called the movement a coup, and declared the new government illegitimate.

The East, with little access to independently run or Western Ukrainian news channels, seemed to be listening in on the Kremlin's rhetoric.

Here are the facts: Western Ukraine is populated by ethnic Ukrainians, whereas the East is comprised of mostly ethnic Russians. Everyone in Ukraine speaks Russian and most at least understand Ukrainian. There exists a dangerous stereotype in the East that Western Ukrainians feel animosity to ethnic Russians who do not speak Ukrainian. As a result, some fear Ukrainian nationalism may encroach on their security and language rights. It is important to note that Yanukovich's main support base was in the East, which generally possessed a pro-Russian outlook. The success of the Western, pro-EU demonstrators in removing him from government led many to believe their fears would be realized while the Kremlin's anti-Ukrainian propaganda ensured that they stay afraid.

The East fell into Putin's trap and he used it as his cue to move in. For years, Putin kept Ukraine on a tight leash, making it dependent on Russian gas and business and threatening it economically whenever it tried to free itself from Russia's grasp. As former U.S. National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski once said: ?without Ukraine, Russia ceases to be an empire.? Putin couldn't let this happen, and accordingly sent in thousands of troops into the autonomous republic of Crimea.

Historically the land of the Tatars, which make up 10% of Crimea's population, Crimea was transferred to Ukraine in 1954 by Nikita Khrushchev. In 1991, when Ukraine voted to gain independence from Russia in a national referendum, Crimea left with it. However, due to its distinct character, Crimea has always had its own parliament and was exempt from many laws applying in other parts of Ukraine. Still, its citizens had Ukrainian passports and voted in national elections.

The incoming military personnel were unidentified, but arrived in trucks with Russian license plates. They quickly surrounded many of Ukraine's military posts and ordered those inside to surrender. Crimea's airports were overthrown. Putin said these were simply scheduled training measures for the Russian bases in Sevastopol.

Crimea's parliament was dissolved and a new government set up with Sergei Aksyonov, leader of the Russian Unity party as its PM. Interestingly, before the coming of the Russian troops, Aksyonov's party had only 3% of the seats in Crimea's parliament.

Putin refuses to acknowledge that the unidentified troops are Russian yet the militarization of the area continues to increase despite international condemnation of his actions.

The new Crimean government supports Russian annexation, and at this point, Kyiv has lost all control in the region. An estimated 30,000 troops are present as the region prepares for a referendum on Russian annexation set to take place on March 16.

But Putin's moves seem erratic. Annexing Crimea will offer no advantage to Putin as Crimea is mostly subsidized by the Ukrainian government and its only source of income is the tourism industry, which the presence of Putin's soldiers has already destroyed. Annexing Crimea is a massive stunt, and if successful will test the principles of the EU, and Western nations while consolidating Russia's power to act with impunity. Though the implications of Crimea's fate may seem regional, the sovereignty of Ukraine is a very important, truly global issue.

In 1994, Ukraine destroyed its nuclear arsenal in exchange for the guarantee of its territorial integrity by the U.S., UK, Russia, China and France in an agreement called the Budapest Memorandum. Should the guarantors not act in defence of Ukraine's sovereignty and Crimea falls into the hands of Russia, there would be massive implications for nuclear non-proliferation treaties being drafted all over the world. With the credibility of these nations compromised, progress on nuclear non-proliferation would likely come to a standstill.

At the moment, Crimea's future is truly uncertain. The area continues to be militarized, talks with Russia are fruitless and no threats or sanctions seem to be stopping them from further aggression. But what we do know for sure, is that Putin's encroachment on Ukraine's sovereignty has brought Ukraine together. East and West have never been closer and a bright future is on the horizon.

Ukraine has recently secured a \$15 billion loan from the IMF to support its ailing economy; will proceed to sign the EU association agreement in coming weeks, and is working on creating a visa-free space with the EU. In the midst of threats and aggression, Ukraine has made many new friends and forged budding new relationships with countries all over the world.

Now is truly an incredible moment when all of us around the world get the privilege to witness the birth of a nation.

Nobleton's Anna-Sofia Lesiv has been named as one of 12 recipients of the Ontario Junior Citizen?Award, sponsored by the Ontario Community Newspapers Association (OCNA). She's been praised for her efforts to increase awareness among youth of global

issues.