

On Political Violence in Ukraine

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UKRAINE:

ORIGINS OF THE CURRENT CRISIS

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At the root of the quasi-war in Ukraine has been the use of violence to achieve political means, known in social science as political violence. We can identify six moments in the escalation of violence in the last four months, each raising questions of evidence, instigation, consequences, and ethics.

The first was the use of excessive, but nonlethal violence, by Ukrainian police forces against nonviolent demonstrators on Maidan in the wee hours of December 1. The evidence was straightforward — demonstrators were beaten up, many injured — and the consequences were the opposite of what the state had intended, as the number of demonstrators, modest up to then, now swelled in the tens of thousands and Maidan turned into a permanent occupation of the Kyiv center, including two adjacent buildings. Independent Ukraine had never witnessed before the use of violence against so many people at once — not a single act of violence was reported during the Orange Revolution — and the demands for Ukraine to sign a EU trade agreement were superseded by demands that the government assume political responsibility for the violence. Cases of abductions and torture by unknown forces presumed to be related

to the Berkut riot police and the use of untrained civilians to intimidate demonstrators (*titushkis*) increased the level of state violence.

The second moment was the decision by Maidan activists to use nonlethal violence against police forces on January 19. This occurred a few days after a set of laws adopted by the Rada criminalized political dissent, closing off channels of political negotiations. The decision was likely taken by Pravyi sector, a group then unknown, over the heads of political parties and of the Maidan coordination council. We lack solid sociological profiles of Pravyi sector activists, but we know that many come from fringe far right nationalist groups. What we know is that a unilateral decision was made to begin using rocks and cocktail molotovs against the police, a technique of civilian violence that is common in Western Europe, but was new to Ukraine. The use of violence brought the first deaths on Maidan, from sniper bullets, which instantly changed the political dynamics, since President Yanukovich accepted for the first time to begin negotiations with the political opposition. The use of violence thereby achieved in the short term was it politically intended, but it had divisive effects over the legitimacy of the movement. When is the use of violence justified? Polls showed support in Kyiv and Western Ukraine, but with minority voices decrying the takeover of the movement by the far right, and rejection in Eastern and Southern Ukraine. A key point is that the violence was targeting police forces, not civilians, and, however disturbing, was not lethal.

The third moment was another decision by front-line activists – again, presumably by Pravyi sector – to attack the police (rocks, cocktail molotovs) on February 18, after it was announced that constitutional reforms, one of the key political demands, would not be on the agenda of parliament — in other words, that political channels were once again deadlocked. The consequences were on scale that no one could have thought possible: in a course of three days, nearly a hundred people died, including a dozen policemen. The evidence here gets murky. The reasonable assumption, based on similar tactics used by other regime, was the regime intended to kill civilians in order to break insurgents into submission. That it did not happen was due to political, not police, behavior. The Party of Regions, for the first time, began to crack, and President Yanukovich agreed to negotiations with the political opposition, mediated by three EU foreign ministers, that produced an agreement that

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Russia, it is important to remember, refused to sign. The question is why did Yanukovich agree to negotiate and apparently surrender everything but his position? An even more fateful one is why did the police abandon him the day after? Yanukovich fled because he was left unprotected by his own people. His regime fell due to a combination of insurgent violence and internal defection.

A fourth moment occurred in parallel with the deadly violence in the streets of Kyiv after February 18. In several oblasts of Western Ukraine, activists stormed government buildings. The tactic has begun earlier all over Ukraine but it now included police stations and offices of the security services (SBU). In light of what we have been observing in Eastern Ukraine in the past weeks, this tactic could have long-lasting consequences for the integrity of the state. In the short run, the breakdown of government authority in Western Ukraine may have played an important role in Yanukovich's decision to negotiate on the night of February 20 – since the seizure of arms in the West meant that armed battalions were now on their way to Maidan. In the long run, however, the takeover of core institutions of the state, those entrusted to maintain order, could not but make a powerful impression in a society, as in Eastern Ukraine, accustomed to unchallenged political authority. The arming of civilians also created a climate of vigilantism leading to disturbing scenes, such as public humiliation, that quickly found their way in social media and in the Russian media.

The fifth moment is the decision by Russia to use military force. What had been fairly obvious, with the presence of military vehicles with Russian plates and the evident professionalism of unidentified troops, has now been confirmed by President Putin and his press attache last week: Russian forces were used to conquer Crimea. These forces have been accompanied by paramilitaries, “self-defense” forces, whose lawless conduct towards civilians mirrors the portrait of Pravyi sector presented in the Russian media. Similarly-looking unidentified armed men, nicknamed “green men”, have been involved in the takeover of government and police buildings in the Donbas in the past two weeks. Once again, circumstantial evidence points to an involvement of special forces from Russia, which Russia is currently denying, as well as local insurgents. Mirroring the formation of Pravyi sector, some of these insurgents can be traced back to heretofore fringe far right groups. Their actions have elicited a degree of popular

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support, evidence by the ability of civilians to demoralize Ukrainian soldiers sent to retake the occupied government buildings. Of crucial consideration will be the ability, or capability, of the Ukrainian central government to find political means to defuse the tense situation – by agreeing, for instance, on decentralization, inclusion, and language regulations.

The sixth, and most dangerous, moment, however, is the determination by armed groups to target and murder civilians. Two such incidents have occurred since the last weekend – the shootout at a checkpoint in Sloviansk, the disappearance and murder of a Tymoshenko local member in Horlivka. Donetsk insurgents accuse Pravyi sector of having perpetrated these acts, a claim that has been relayed by Russian mass media. In the fog of war, to ascertain what actually happened is not possible. In terms of the logic of political violence, on the other hand, the killing of civilians would not be a strategic policy for the Ukrainian far right. When civilians are targeted in insurrections, it is for a purpose – however ethically deplorable the act is, and should, be. In this case, there is no possible credible motive. This brings the Ukraine quasi-war to a different level, and one that may begin to resemble that of a civil war. •