

How It All Began: A Cold War Battle Heats Up

By DAVID M. HERSZENHORN FEB. 22, 2014

KIEV, Ukraine — Three months of civic unrest in Ukraine spiraled out of control last week with dozens of people dead, the center of this elegant city turned into a burning war zone and the eventual flight from the capital Saturday by the president. Puzzled about the conflict and how it got so bad? Here's a primer.



Demonstrators rode a military vehicle to Independence Square in central Kiev. Protesters claimed control of the city's security. Louisa Gouliamaki/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

There are three core factors that led to the chaos:

First is a broken promise between a leader and his citizens: President Viktor F. Yanukovich had long promised to integrate Ukraine with the European Union by signing sweeping political and trade agreements. In November, he refused to sign.

Second is a lingering Cold War-era fight between Russia and the West for influence over countries in Eastern Europe still suffering from political and economic problems rooted in the Soviet era. While Europe and the United States have made a priority of fostering democracy in the former Soviet republics, the Kremlin sees an ulterior motive: the expansion of Western military and economic power. Perceiving

a threat to its big military and economic interests in Ukraine, Russia exerted enormous pressure to scuttle the accords with the European Union.

Launch media viewer

Demonstrators rode a military vehicle to Independence Square in central Kiev. Protesters claimed control of the city's security. Louisa Gouliamaki/Agence France-Press — Getty Images

Third is searing public outrage over the government's sometimes brutal response to the street protests that followed the president's about-face on ties with the European Union. The crackdowns deeply contradicted Ukraine's post-Soviet national identity as a peaceful, pluralistic society. Even in the 2004 Orange Revolution, in which there were also huge street demonstrations, the authorities did not assault the protesters.

Now, a quick recap of how recent events unfolded.

In 2009, the European Union initiated an Eastern Partnership program to tighten ties with former Soviet republics, including Ukraine. Russia immediately registered alarm. "Some states view this partnership as a partnership against Russia," said Dmitri A. Medvedev, then the president and now prime minister.

Russia had serious reasons for unease. Its Black Sea naval fleet is based in Ukraine, and crucial pipelines in Ukraine carry Russian natural gas to customers in Europe. European officials repeatedly dismissed Russia's concerns in what in hindsight they viewed as a serious miscalculation given Russia's control over Ukraine's gas supply, and eastern Ukraine's heavy dependence on Russia for business and trade.

Ukraine has long been caught between Europe and Russia, and Mr. Yanukovich, elected in 2010, had tried to strike a balance even as his own Eastern Ukrainian, Russian-speaking heritage seemed to place him personally closer to Moscow.

By January 2013, he said that he intended to join Russia's Customs Union with other former Soviet Republics, as well as sign the political and economic agreements with the European Union.

Many Ukrainians, especially in the Western part of the country, saw the accords with Europe as symbolic of a larger push to improve their lives with much-needed reforms especially to the economy and the justice system. In March 2013, Mr. Yanukovich published a decree directing the government to work toward signing the accords.

Street protests erupted in late November, when it became clear that Mr. Yanukovich would not move forward. At several critical junctures, the rallies seemed about to taper off, especially after Russia gave Mr. Yanukovich \$15 billion in loans and natural gas discounts, only to then be reignited by government missteps.

These included the beating by the police of young protesters on Nov. 30, which prompted demonstrators to seize public buildings and occupy Independence Square, as well as the ramming through of new laws severely restricting free speech and assembly.

The protests turned deadly as demonstrators, furious over the legislation, threw firebombs at the police and the authorities responded in some cases with gunfire. Mr. Yanukovich tried to stem the violence by firing the government, but calls for his own resignation grew louder anyway.

Tensions simmered until last week when it seemed Parliament might squelch a deal to reverse constitutional changes that had expanded presidential powers earlier in Mr. Yanukovich's term. Demonstrators marched toward Parliament, setting off what quickly became the most violent clashes yet.