

East-West Fault Lines

As protesters hailing from western Ukraine dramatically stormed the presidential premises in Kiev last week, President Viktor Yanukovich fled to Kharkiv on the eastern edge of the country. On the lam from the hordes of western Ukraine who took over the capital city, the democratically elected but undemocratically ousted Yanukovich found refuge in the eastern border with Russia, praising it as “a less dangerous and a more secure region” from which he would try to regain power.

The divided soul of Ukraine, torn between two distinct regional cultures of west and east, is the main fault line driving the political confrontation and violence which pushed the country to the brink over the last few months. Yanukovich and his Party of the Regions derive support from the southern and eastern areas of Ukraine that are demographically populated with ethnic Russians and which share political values closer to those of Russia proper, i.e. preference for a strong state, conservative social beliefs, and obedience to those in power.

Yanukovich's victory in the 2010 presidential election against the charismatic politician, Yulia Tymoshenko, was enabled by a total sweep for his pro-Russia ticket in the eastern part of Ukraine. Ominously at that time, Tymoshenko garnered votes from almost the entire electorate of western Ukraine, indicating a split right down the middle for the country.

Western Ukraine, especially the territories near Lviv which borders Poland, has had a diametrically opposite historical evolution compared to that in the east. The pro-European darling of the human rights community, Tymoshenko, is the perfect fit for western Ukraine's citizenry, whose psyche has traditionally been more participative and activist in politics.

The Ukrainian intellectual Andrey Kurkov has written that his country would have turned into “another Belarus” (i.e. a society that quietly submits to strongmen and reveres Russia) if it “did not have its western regions, with Lviv at the centre.” He adds that the absorption of these western frontiers into Ukraine during the period when it was a Republic of the Soviet Union “brought to the country a rebellious and free spirit.”

Historical accident and geographical circumstances can seal the trajectories of nations that lie along critical crossroads. Ukraine is so pivotal and strategically located in the middle of the vast combined continental landmass called ‘Eurasia’ that a tug-of-war over its destinies between contending West and East is inexorable.

Yanukovich had won a fair election in 2010 and his removal from power through mass popular uprising before he could complete his term is absolutely unconstitutional. Yet, his grating style of rule (Tymoshenko was imprisoned soon after she lost the presidential election), his pro-Moscow and anti-European Union foreign policies further alienated the western portion of Ukraine and paved the way for his downfall.

Yanukovich's attempts to play the Russia card to bargain for more economic concessions and benefits from Brussels could be seen as smart diplomatic maneuvering for extracting the best terms for Ukraine, but it convinced the western half of the country that he was governing only in favour of the other half in the east. In such a polarised atmosphere, the EU and the United States sensed an opportunity to recreate the ‘Orange Revolution’ scenario of 2004, when pro-Western civil society groups massed in Kiev's streets and forced the then pro-Russia president, Leonid Kuchma, out of office.

Western politicians and diplomats left none in doubt during the so-called ‘Euromaidan’ movement in Kiev to unseat Yanukovich that they were backing the crowds clashing with the police and demanding the president's

resignation. Since Yanukovych was playing hide-and-seek with the EU on signing an economic accession agreement, Western powers consciously encouraged and fuelled anti-government protests in the western part of Ukraine until they snowballed into forcible regime change.

European and American support for the rebellious mobs on the streets of Kiev was presented in the Western media as an act of sympathy and solidarity for Ukrainians struggling to rid themselves of an undemocratic and tyrannical president. What the Western press did not tell its readers was that Washington and Brussels were frustrated with Yanukovych because he was a prime obstacle for eastward expansion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) and of the EU's vision of free market capitalism devoid of oligarchs. Protecting human rights and promoting democracy have frequently been disguises for strategic goals in Western foreign policies. Ukraine is the latest victim of this doublespeak.

The hypocrisy of the West in cheering for the Euromaidan revolt is revealed by the fact that there was no unambiguous denunciation from the US or the EU of neo-Nazis and fascist storm troopers who were the most organised and fearsome components of the protest movement. The confidence with which anti-Semitic and extreme rightist formations like the ultranationalist Svoboda party and the 'Right Sector' militia were parading captured policemen in Kiev was frightening, especially due to the historical association of these Ukrainian outfits with 'Russophobia' (vigilante violence aimed at Russian minorities) and their collaboration with Hitler's invading forces during World War II.

Admittedly, non-fascist anti-government protesters were in the majority in Kiev, but the Americans and the Europeans legitimised acts of extreme violence by the hardened rightist factions by one-sidedly condemning only abuses committed by the security forces. Most regimes facing a swelling opposition tide are prone to unfairly branding all protesters as "terrorists" (as Syria's Bashar al-Assad is doing), but what kind of future reconciliation can one expect in Ukraine if far-right thugs are being toasted in western Ukraine and across the Western world as heroes who are sacrificing themselves to save Ukraine from the Russian bear hug?

Ukraine's plight is that neither Tymoshenko nor Yanukovych has found a viable politics to unite the country's antithetical regional identities and outlooks. Conspiracy theories that Russia is plotting to partition Ukraine and maintain its sphere of influence in the eastern half under Yanukovych's control, while letting Tymoshenko and the EU retain the western half, highlight how dangerous regional imbalances and disconnects can become if they are not healed.

Euromaidan's achievement of overthrowing Yanukovych is not a victory for democracy but a failure of nation-building. Rudyard Kipling's famous verse, "East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet", sums up the real tragedy of Ukraine.

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