



Protesters in Kiev demonstrating against President Yanukovich's reneging, under pressure from the Russians, on becoming an associate member of the European Union. Shutterstock photo

Canada's Place at Ukraine's Euromaidan

Yaroslav Baran

The mass protests in Kiev's European Square ("Euromaidan") are merely the most contemporary manifestation of a tragic and blood-soaked history: a strong Russian ruler in the north with long arms, attempting to weaken the integrity of a Ukrainian state to the south. For Canada, the response to the protests is about more than the 1.25 million citizens who claim Ukrainian roots. That is why John Baird was met with mass chants of "Thank you, Canada!" when he ventured onto European Square.

It would be rare for foreign policy discussions to start with etymology, but in the case of Ukraine's current political crisis, nothing could be more apt. The name "Ukraine" comes from an archaic Slavic term meaning "borderland". And that's precisely what Ukraine has been through most of its history: the frontier between modern, democratic Europe with its Western values, and the russophone, Orthodox, sphere to the north and east, with its autocratic and imperialist traditions.

Russia's separate identity and history began in the early 12th-century, when Prince Yuri Dolgoruky—a second-son scion of Kiev's ruling dynasty—went north with an army to the sparsely-populated Suzdal lands, set up an ar-

chipelago of strongholds, and eventually established the new fort of Moscow. From his new northern base, Prince Yuri—nicknamed “Yuri Long-Arms”—embarked on a lifetime quest to reach back down and manipulate the traditional capital of the Kievan, proto-Ukrainian, medieval state. His tactics ranged from occasional sacking and pillaging of Kiev to attempts at installing puppet aristocrats to keep the Grand Prince of Kiev politically weak.

And so it all began.

Yuri Long-Arms’ descendants became the first ruling dynasty of Muscovy—the kings who would eventually (with Constantinople under constant attack from the Turks) relocate the mantle of Caesar (“Czar”) in an effort to appropriate the East Roman Emperors’ divine sanction mythology, and bring it north: for the new caesars, the Russian Czars.

Fast forward 900 years, and the mass protests on European Square (“Euro-maidan”) are merely the most contemporary manifestation of a tragic and blood-soaked history: a strong Russian ruler in the north with long arms, attempting to manipulate the affairs and weaken the integrity of a Ukrainian state to the south. And while military prowess was the traditional tool (from the Yuris to the Czars to the Bolsheviks) the methods *du jour*, in the post-Soviet era, tend to be economic.

Ukraine’s domestic energy industry remains underdeveloped, while its industrial supply chains were deliberately constructed during the Soviet era to force economic integration among Ukraine, Belarus, Russia and Kazakhstan. Under such circumstances, a series of well-chosen wheel turns and lever pulls from Moscow could cripple Ukraine’s economy and cost it billions of Euros in a matter of weeks.

This is precisely what happened in the lead up to the Vilnius Summit—the high-level meeting between EU delegates and Ukrainian President Victor Yanukovich, which was ostensibly to be a final decision point and signing ceremony for Ukraine’s entry as an associate-class member of the European Union. Vilnius was to be one foot into the EU for a post-Soviet country the size of France and sitting on the edge of Europe.

What started as a modest but significant protest over the EU-Russia debate grew into a virtual general strike in Kiev due to the violent crackdown on the early, modest manifestation.

But the modern-day Czar President Vladimir Putin extended his long arms once again to quietly, yet firmly, demonstrate the consequences of Ukraine’s move closer to the West. Ukraine’s globally-coveted chocolates were decreed to no longer meet Russian food safety standards. Ukrainian manufactured vehicle parts—always integral to the heavy-manufacturing supply chain—were no longer deemed safe for Russian conditions. Border checkpoints sprang into action with unprecedented documentation reviews causing several-day queues for exporters trying to get their goods out the door. And the coup de grâce: Moscow declared it was time to renegotiate natural gas rates for 2014—at non-preferred rates, of course.

For Yanukovich, there was no decision to make. The European market may be much larger and wealthier than the Russian market, but the prosperity it represented for Ukraine was a future prosperity—a hypothetical one. European integration would also require political and economic reforms that would be unwelcome by the oligopolist clans dominating Ukraine’s political and economic life.

A Russian deal, on the other hand, would be immediate, would reinforce trade and supply lines already in place, and would stave off considerable discomfort in the short term. It could also be done without disrupting the post-Soviet *château clique* power structure which underlay Yanukovich’s political fortunes as well as the immense personal wealth he is reputed to have amassed since becoming president. Moreover, Yanukovich hails from the heavily russified industrial south-east, where Russian tends to be the home language and Russian pop culture is readily consumed. Culturally, a middle-aged rusophone industrialist from Donetsk or Dnipropetrovsk, and a young, educated, and west-leaning student from the western metropolis of Lviv, may as well be from different planets.

But the more immediate problem in Ukraine is not that the president chose to bow to Putin’s pressure rather than

signing an EU agreement supported by a clear majority of his countrymen. The current crisis is the mass protest in response—a mass protest that, in December, grew in energy, and danger, by the day—and whether there is a way out of this impasse.

What started as a modest but significant protest over the EU-Russia debate grew into a virtual general strike in Kiev due to the violent crackdown on the early, modest manifestation. As with most other political controversies, it’s not the act, it’s the response, that matters most. President Yanukovich’s decision to unleash the riot police on peaceful protesters catalyzed a much larger and much more volatile civil unrest that is now demanding his resignation as an entry-level concession.

This was the explosive situation into which Canadian Foreign Affairs Minister John Baird walked on December 4 with his decision to personally attend an Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) meeting in Kiev while virtually all other “FMs” had opted to send deputies or junior representatives. Baird could easily have chosen to hide behind official safety concerns, boycott spin, or the diplomatic convenience of sending junior reps “to send a political message”. No. John Baird made the bold decision to go to Kiev himself. Because Canada can do for Ukraine what no other country can do. And Canada has always had an interest as no other countries have had.

John Baird made the bold decision to go to Kiev himself. Because Canada can do for Ukraine what no other country can do. And Canada has always had an interest as no other countries have had.

Canada boasts some 1.25 million citizens who claim Ukrainian roots. The post-war era saw a massive wave of immigration—many from DP camps—of Ukrainians who maintained not only their language and culture, but also



Foreign Affairs Minister John Baird with protestors in Kiev, where he was met by chants of "Thank you, Canada." Flickr photo

their political awareness and involvement. They supplemented an earlier wave of turn-of-the-century economic refugees that settled the prairies and opened up the West. And this critical sequence of waves gelled the Ukrainian-Canadian community into a political force, woe to be ignored now in Canadian politics.

This is why we have official multiculturalism—the brainchild of Ukrainian-Canadian Tory Senator Paul Yuzyk. This is why we had Ray Hnatyshyn as governor-general at the end of the Cold War. And this is why Canada, under Brian Mulroney in 1991, was the first Western country to recognize Ukrainian independence from the Soviet Union—breaking ahead of the NATO flock with whom Canada normally takes such steps in concert.

And this is why John Baird was met with mass chants of "Thank you, Canada!" when he ventured onto European Square.

This is why Canada matters to Ukraine, why Canada is paying attention, and why Canada's foreign policy vis-à-vis Ukraine remains bold and principled while the US has largely checked out, the UK concedes the lead to Europe, and Germany and France weigh their own pros and cons of poking the Russian bear.

Unlike the Orange Revolution, there is no obvious exit from what is now an extremely

Canada's foreign policy vis-à-vis Ukraine remains bold and principled while the US has largely checked out, the UK concedes the lead to Europe, and Germany and France weigh their own pros and cons of poking the Russian bear.

tense situation. In 2004, the mass Orange Revolution protests demanded a re-election following widespread Yanukovich-camp electoral irregularities. But it all happened right after a presidential election, so even Yanukovich had a face-saving out: "Fine. Do the election all over again. I have nothing to hide." This time, however, we are 14 months away from the next election—practically mid-term. There is no room for an electoral compromise, and little mood to engage between a hardline old-guard president and the mass protests demanding, finally, and end to the russo-oligarch establishment that has controlled most of Ukraine's post-independence reality.

In the news cycle, the dogs bark and the caravan moves on. Late December became a time for year-enders and holiday cheer. In sum, ideal conditions were emerging for a crackdown or at least a *thirty-silvers* deal with Moscow that few outside Ukraine would notice.

And indeed, this came to pass with a

pre-Christmas deal in which Moscow raided its pension fund to offer Kiev \$15 billion in bond purchases as well as a sweetheart deal on the critical natural gas that fuels its economy—in classic Cold War style. You can side with the West, along with its outrage, press releases and reprimands, or you can side with us—your old friend, who comes with a big bag of cash and an even bigger bottle of vodka to wash it down and forget the consequences.

The West was indeed snookered in a Cold War manoeuvre that, in hindsight, seems obvious in its slow-motion replay. But the West also has assets capable of the understanding, the tactics, the context, and the principle required to countermove in this ongoing high-stakes game of chess. One of those assets is Canada, and another is John Baird.

And in the immediate term, if nothing else was practically gained by John Baird's bold personal foray into the Kiev fray, it will have left one critical indelible reminder: that even as the rest of the world checked out for the holidays, Ukraine's democracy movement still had Canada watching its back. **P**

Yaroslav Baran, a principal of the Earncliffe Strategy Group, is a former senior communications adviser to Stephen Harper, and helped lead the Canadian election observation missions to Ukraine in 2010 and 2012.

yaroslav@earncliffe.ca