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Saving spiralling Ukraine from its own president

Ukraine is now facing its greatest crisis since it became an independent country nearly a quarter of a century ago. That's in no small part due to its corrupt leadership.



SERGEI SUPINSKY / AFP/GETTY IMAGES

A man shouts slogans during a mass rally aimed at forcing Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych to resign.

By: Taras Kuzio Published on Tue Dec 10 2013

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KYIV — In December 1991, Canada with its large Ukrainian diaspora was not surprisingly the first country to diplomatically recognize Ukraine as an independent state from the Soviet Union following a referendum endorsed by over 90 per cent of Ukrainians. While the country turned its back on the Soviet empire the legacies it inherited of divisions over national identity, integration and deep corruption remain omnipresent, and have now led to Ukraine's greatest crisis since it became an independent nation. Once again, the country could use Canada's support.

Ukraine's leadership triumvirate — President Viktor Yanukovych, Premier Nikolai Azarov and Parliamentary Chairman Volodymyr Rybak — were born in the late 1940s when Dictator Joseph Stalin ran the Soviet Union, and their hometown of Donetsk was still called Stalino. Although they today wear expensive suits and watches costing small fortunes they remain at heart *Homo Sovieticus* (Soviet People).

That Yanukovych is a thuggish president willing to use [police violence](#) and vigilantes to get his way will come as no surprise to those who have followed his rise. During the transition to a market economy, Donetsk became, along with the Crimea, the most violent place to live in Ukraine. As the local governor, Yanukovych, who served two prison sentences in his youth,

oversaw the emergence of a managed democracy and rapacious oligarchic elites who became his support base.

Ukrainian-Canadians will remember holding placards half a century ago with slogans such as “Stop persecution!” outside Ottawa’s Soviet Embassy. It’s disheartening that we have not come very far. Today similar placards are being held in Kyiv by the post-Soviet younger generation. Ukraine has more political prisoners than the eight currently imprisoned in neighbouring authoritarian Belarus.

Ukraine’s crises emerged when the government withdrew its support for European integration last month bringing hundreds of thousands of people on to the streets of Kyiv in what an EU official described as the biggest pro-European demonstrations since the Second World War. The pro-European sentiment on the Euro-Maydan square, the epicentre of [the protests](#), encompasses four revolutions in one.

The first revolution resembles the Arab Spring in the demand to be treated with dignity as European citizens. Ukrainian elites treat their people with contempt and Yanukovich is on record describing his own supporters as “morons” and his opponents as “kozly” (prison slang for bitches).

The second is an anti-Soviet revolt of Ukraine’s middle class businesspeople, professionals and students who desire to live in a European country. Ukrainian patriots’ anger at the disrespect shown towards their culture and language has galvanized nationalism which was most visibly demonstrated in the toppling of Kyiv’s last monument to Soviet leader Vladimir Lenin.

The third is anger at corruption and asset stripping by those in power. President Yanukovich’s three goals are to become the wealthiest, most powerful and indefinitely serving president. He lives in a private palace beyond his state salary that, as Alexander Motyl of Rutgers University wrote, “amounts to a nightmarish amalgam of nouveau riche kitsch, late Ottoman excess, Disneyland vulgarity and Donald Trump tastelessness.”

President Yanukovich’s family friends have usurped government positions that control the budget and law enforcement and his eldest son, Oleksandr, a dentist by profession, has joined Ukraine’s top 100 wealthiest since his father came to power.

Finally, neo-Soviet octogenarian Premier Azarov’s [mishandling of the economy](#) and finances has brought the country to the brink of collapse. Ukraine needs \$15 billion to \$20 billion next year to cover gas imports and debt repayments. The funds can only come from the IMF or Russia, both of which would involve conditions that would bring unwanted consequences: a further reduction in the President’s popularity in the first case, or a loss of Ukrainian sovereignty in the latter. Joining Vladimir Putin’s Eurasian Union would be viewed by all shades of patriotic Ukrainians and Ukrainian-Canadians as the country’s Anschluss into a new Soviet Union and would open the path to massive civil strife.

Ukraine’s political, economic and financial crisis is spiralling out of control. Yet, as former Polish President and EU negotiator Aleksandr Kwasniewski has said, President Yanukovich has no visible strategy to get it under control.

The question is no longer if Yanukovich can win re-election in 2015 but whether he will survive 2014 and if in clinging on to power he will drag the country down with him.

These factors taken together represent the biggest crisis facing Ukraine since it became an independent state. Canada can once again play a leading role in aiding Ukraine at a pivotal moment, this time by seeking to mediate and save the country from its own president.

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