

Opinion / Commentary**Ukrainians fight against return to the past**

Young Ukrainians continue to protest President Viktor Yanukovych's closer ties with Russia, even though protests are now unlawful.



EFREM LUKATSKY / ASSOCIATED PRESS

Ukrainian protesters clash with police in Kyiv on Jan. 22, 2014. Officials said two people died of gunshot wounds. The mass protests erupted after Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych spurned a pact with the European Union in favor of closer ties with Russia.

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Imagine that over the course of four years the prime minister and ruling party in Ottawa progressively stripped away your democratic rights and national identity and cut ties to traditional foreign partners. Would you be angry enough to hit the streets and protest? More importantly, would you still believe that the democratically elected government, which has broken countless laws and trodden on the constitution and your rights, retained any legitimacy in office?

Remember this when you think of the [young Ukrainians who have been taking to the streets](#) for the last two months, often in freezing winter weather, to defend democratic rights, Ukrainian national identity and the country's place in Europe. After all, these are the three pillars upon which the Ukrainian state was born in 1991, when Canada was the first country to recognize it.

Indeed, how would you feel if these pillars had been hard won after a century of genocide committed against your people, if you saw an independent state as the guarantor that such terrible bloodshed would never happen again? Ukrainians gathering in protest face rubber and plastic bullets, tear gas, water cannons, batons and now snipers firing live rounds — [two protesters were shot and killed on Wednesday](#) — all because they refuse to return to the past.

President Viktor Yanukovych and the ruling Party of Regions have treated the population as

conquered subjects while they asset-strip the country in a manner that would have made conquering medieval armies proud. Millions of dollars of government funds have been used to build lavish palaces around the country for Yanukovich, including extravagant furniture, tennis courts, hunting lodges and fake Spanish galleons. Meanwhile, millions of Ukrainians and pensioners eke out an existence on less than \$200 a month.

Over the last four years, the attack on the personal dignity and national identity of Ukrainians has borne huge doses of bitterness. Immediately after coming to power, Yanukovich showed his utter disrespect for the millions of Ukrainians who had been murdered in the 1933 genocide by adopting the whitewash position of the Russian government. Could one imagine the explosive reaction if a government adopted the position of the former Nazi regime to whitewash the genocide that had been committed against its own people?

In the summer of 2012, a new language law elevated Russian to the same level as Ukrainian, a language that had been discriminated against for the last 150 years. How many Quebecers would have likewise and rightfully protested on the streets if the English-speaking minority in their province had taken the same step of elevating English to the level of French?

Two further provocative steps brought this swelling anger on the street — anger I witnessed last month in Kyiv when millions of protesters and their tents took control of the capital's downtown.

In late November, the government reversed a two-decade policy of seeking a Ukrainian home in democratic Europe by [striking a deal](#) with Russian President Vladimir Putin rather than allying with the European Union, which would have set the country on a path away from Eurasian despotism toward a democratic European future. But Yanukovich instead chose Russia in exchange for Putin's promise to provide loans with fewer conditions and to back his re-election next year. As former Ukrainian foreign minister Petro Poroshenko explained, power and money trumped values and the national interest: "The talks with the EU were an auction. It was a position of a pimp who is offering Ukraine up for sale."

The second and final straw that turned the protests violent was the anti-democratic legislation Yanukovich railroaded through on "Black Thursday," as last week's parliamentary session has been named. The ruling party, with the help of the Communists, passed measures that effectively established a dictatorship in Ukraine. From today, when the legislation comes into effect, the millions of Ukrainians protesting the government will now be acting beyond the law. Arrests have begun taking place.

An independent Ukraine came into existence, like Israel, in the wake of genocide with the rallying cry of "never again." Ukraine's democracy, national identity and hopes for rejoining the European home have now been trampled underfoot.

Returning Ukraine to colonial status in Putin's Eurasian Union is unacceptable to the majority of Ukrainians, both those with a memory of genocide and the post-Soviet younger generation who are today fighting the regime's jackbooted policemen and skinhead vigilantes. If Canadians were faced with similar threats to their democracy and national identity, they would be acting no differently. The U.S. has imposed targeted sanctions and is threatening more and the EU is considering freezing bank accounts of officials and oligarchs. Why is Canada remaining so passive?

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