

The political crisis in Ukraine

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The pacification in the early hours of 30 November of several hundred demonstrators on the Maidan has brought about an increase in public protests in Kyiv and other Ukrainian cities. The largest demonstration in the capital on 1 December was attended by around 200,000-300,000 protesters. The speaker of parliament, Volodymyr Rybak, suggested that the opposition should join 'round table' discussions, but the offer was rejected. Three opposition parties called a vote of no confidence in the government of Prime Minister Mykola Azarov; however, the motion in parliament on 3 December did not receive the required majority. In response, the opposition called for further protests, and reiterated its demands for the resignation of the president and early elections to parliament. On 1 December, a tent city was re-established on the Maidan, and the peak of the protests on 3 December saw crowds of at least ten thousand people.

After the pacification of the Maidan, Serhiy Lovochkin resigned as head of the Presidential Administration, and two parliamentary MP's left the Party of Regions, which indicated serious friction among the ranks of the ruling camp. On 2 December, it turned out that Lovochkin's resignation had not been accepted, which means that the conflict within the ruling elite has been averted. At the same time, the authorities adopted a tougher stance towards the opposition, accusing it of attempting to stage a coup. The government's statements and actions indicate that they have adopted a strategy of 'waiting out' the protests, and are counting on a rapid fall-off in social mobilisation. How the situation in Ukraine develops will depend on how large any further protests will be, and on whether the authorities again fail to use force against the protesters.

The timeline of the protests

Following the Ukrainian government's announcement on 21 November that it would withdraw from signing its Association Agreement with the EU during the Eastern Partnership Summit, peaceful protests began in Kyiv, Lviv and some other cities, organised primarily by students and opposition parties. In the capital, some protesters stayed on the Maidan overnight, and a tent city was organised as a centre for permanent protest. At about four in the morning on 30 November, units of the *Berkut* (special units of the police) brutally scattered some hundreds of demonstrators. The pacification of the Maidan caused widespread outrage, and again contributed to a rise in social mobilisation. The government's decision to disperse the protesters by force is irrational and incomprehensible, as the protests were in fact weakening in intensity, and it had seemed that the opposition would find it difficult to maintain those levels of social activity. Yet on 30

November, President Viktor Yanukovych and Prime Minister Mykola Azarov issued separate statements which condemned the use of force and announced the initiation of an investigation into the actions of the *Berkut*.

On 1 December over 100,000 demonstrators gathered at the monument to Taras Shevchenko in Kyiv, mobilised by opposition parties and organisations. Despite a ban on demonstrations on the Khreshchatyk and Independence Square, the march went in that direction, occupying the Maidan, the European Square, and a large part of the Khreshchatyk, as well as two public buildings: the headquarters of the city council and the main office of the trade unions. The police withdrew as the procession approached. The same evening, around 200,000-300,000 people gathered on the Maidan. Some activists reconstructed the tent city which had been removed by the *Berkut*, and it was surrounded by barricades in the evening. Earlier in the afternoon, a group of about a thousand demonstrators, which was led by militant groups, used tear gas and other weapons to attack a police cordon at the headquarters of the Presidential Administration on Bank Street. Initially the police were content to just push the attackers back, but after some time they responded with their own charge and gas attack. The clashes lasted at least two hours, and several dozen demonstrators were injured and wounded. It is not clear whether this attack was a provocation (as the opposition have claimed, saying their leaders tried to restrain the attackers), or the work of uncontrolled radical groups.

Beyond Kyiv, demonstrations also continued in many other cities in Ukraine; at their peak on 1 December, tens of thousands of people demonstrated in Lviv, several thousands in Ternopil and Ivano-Frankivsk (the local authorities in these three cities officially supported the protests), and from a few hundred to a few thousand in Donetsk, Dnipropetrovsk and Odessa, among other places.

In addition to the offices in the town centre, the opposition is currently occupying part of the Maidan and the Khreshchatyk, where a group of about two to three thousand people remains at night. On 2-3 December, the number of protesters in the centre of Kyiv was about ten thousand; the opposition picketed the seat of government and the parliament. The police surrounded the government buildings with a tight cordon, but did not take any action against the protesters.

The government's reaction

Late in the evening of 1 December, the speaker of parliament, Volodymyr Rybak, after a conversation with President Yanukovych, proposed holding talks with the opposition in a 'round table' format. The opposition rejected this option next day, and put forward a motion of no confidence in Azarov's government, demanding that early parliamentary and presidential elections be called. Surprisingly, Rybak agreed to a quick discussion of the opposition's motion, and the document was approved by the relevant parliamentary committee (with the agreement of some of its members from the Party of Regions). As a result, it seemed possible that the government was willing to make some concessions to the opposition, and perhaps even replace the prime minister.

On the same evening, an interview with President Yanukovych aired on four Ukrainian television stations, and Prime Minister Azarov met ambassadors of EU countries, the USA

and Canada. Both these statements were a demonstration of the government's strength, and served as evidence that it was hardening its position against the opposition and the protests. The President and the Prime Minister reiterated their earlier statements that the government was not responsible for the decision to pacify the Maidan; they criticised the police for an unreasonable use of force, and announced that they had appointed an investigative group which would report on the incident. At the same time, Prime Minister Azarov accused the opposition of radicalising the situation surrounding the protests, attempting to stage a coup plans and take over the parliament, and warned the opposition parties that "not everything is allowed". President Yanukovich criticised the opposition for occupying the buildings in the centre of Kyiv, suggested that its actions had gone beyond the law, and urged the demonstrators to suspend their protests until new presidential elections were held. It is noteworthy that on the same day President Vladimir Putin expressed his opinion of the opposition's actions in a very similar manner.

On 3 December, after a very heated debate, the parliament failed to adopt the no confidence vote. The proposal was supported by 186 MP's (the three opposition parties and some independent MPs), although the required minimum was 226 votes. The Party of Regions voted against the motion (with the exception of one MP) and the Communists abstained. The opposition reacted by announcing a blockade of further work by the parliament, called on President Yanukovich to dismiss the government, and demanded his impeachment and the calling of early parliamentary elections. The opposition parties also began an indefinite blockade of government buildings, but the number of pickets manning the blockades on 4 December was smaller than it had been on previous days.

The opposition's situation

The opposition parties have been taken aback by the course of events, as they had not been expecting such a large social mobilisation. Another, less pleasant surprise for them was the apolitical nature of the first, spontaneous protests, and the aversion to the presence there of the leading politicians and symbols of the opposition parties. Soon enough, however, the opposition leaders (Vitaly Klitschko, Arseniy Yatsenyuk, Oleh Tiahnybok and, unexpectedly present there, Petro Poroshenko) managed to assume symbolic leadership over the protests. In addition to party structures of *Svoboda* and *Batkivshchyna*, their main organiser seems to be Third Republic, a civil movement founded a few months ago by Yuri Lutsenko, one of the organisers of the Orange Revolution of 2004, and later the interior minister in the government of Yulia Tymoshenko.

The protests are being weakened by the contradictions between the opposition parties and their tepid popularity among the general public. *Batkivshchyna*, *UDAR* and *Svoboda* are only tactical allies, and each party's goals and policies are divergent from the others. On the other hand, their leadership is being challenged by the protesters, who are largely dissatisfied with the traditional parties' structures and programmes. The movement's internal heterogeneity and amorphous nature is one of the protests' main weaknesses. Another is the lack of a clear and realistic goal, such as the 'orange revolution' had in 2004 with winning the presidency for Yushchenko; also, the absence of a natural leader for the protest is a problem. New groups and organisations will probably arise from among the protesters; for the time being, however, nothing certain is known about them.

The opposition parties' demands are unrealistic, which their leaders are fully aware of. Paradoxically, their implementation would be unfavourable for the opposition because it is not prepared, either organisationally or financially, to undertake an election campaign in the coming months. In addition, it has still not been decided who the main opposition candidate for president will be; the rivalry between the main contenders is becoming more visible to the public, and is conducive to the radicalisation of demands and actions.

The leaders of the opposition, having set a series of impossible demands, and even proclaimed the beginning of a revolution (as Oleh Tiahnybok did), cannot simply call off the protests without achieving at least something. Otherwise, they run the risk of further losing their authority, and of yielding ground to a new generation of leaders who will mature during the course of the protests. Probably, they will therefore continue stoking the protests, while waiting for them to 'burn out' naturally. They may also wait for an offer of mediation, leading to some form of 'round table', although they themselves would rather not sit at the table with government representatives alone.

Prospects

The parliament's rejection of the opposition's motion of no confidence, and the statements by the President and Prime Minister, represent a significant hardening of the authorities' attitude, and mean that they do not intend to make any further concessions to the opposition. The government has adopted a strategy of playing for time, hoping that the opposition's weaknesses will see the protests weaken, and that they will not be able to maintain such large social mobilisation over the coming days. It seems that for now the government's only 'concession' will be to tolerate the protest in central Kyiv, and not to use force against the protesters occupying the three buildings. There may also be a partial cabinet reshuffle, announced by Prime Minister Azarov on 4 December, which is also intended to soothe public sentiment. Viktor Yanukovych's departure on a state visit to China (3-6 December) is another demonstration of the government's confidence.

The President's rejection of Serhiy Lovochkin's resignation, and the refusal by most of the Party of Regions' MP's to support the no-confidence motion, shows that the conflict within the ruling elite has been overcome, and that the most important groups have managed to reach a compromise. The 'internal opposition' in the government has probably obtained a promise of some financial concessions, and/or a guarantee that their interests will not be affected as a consequence of the forthcoming agreement with Russia. The fact that no further MP's have resigned from the Party of Regions, contrary to previous announcements, is further proof that the mood within the ruling camp is calming down.

The further development of the situation in Ukraine will largely depend on how the opposition manages to maintain social mobilisation and the mood of protest. If the demonstrations die out, then the government's strategy of 'waiting out' the demonstrations may work, but only on the condition that they do not use force. Resuming the use of violence against demonstrators is too risky, and is thus unlikely because it would stoke the fires of the protests, complicate Ukraine's international situation even more, and probably fuelled disputes within the elite again. It is now unlikely that the demonstrations will continue to attract such massive numbers, and it seems that their intensity will decrease, despite the opposition parties' best efforts.