

The government and the opposition in Ukraine are still far from reaching a compromise

Wojciech Konończuk

The round table talks between the government and the opposition on 13 December failed to bring about a breakthrough in the political crisis which has been ongoing in Ukraine for almost one month. Everything seems to indicate that the government is not willing to make any major concessions that would meet the opposition's demands and is merely feigning its readiness to open dialogue. Over the weekend, the opposition once again managed to organise a massive protest rally. On 15 December more than 100 thousand people were protesting in Maidan. On 14 December, a 40 to 50 thousand-strong rally made up of president Yanukovich's supporters was held in European Square in Kyiv. It was organised top-down by the authorities. The political situation has been aggravated further by the results of the by-election to the Verkhovna Rada. In the opposition's opinion, the results have been partly falsified. Despite media reports on the alleged split emerging within the ruling class, it appears that this does not pose a real threat to the government at this moment. The weakness of the opposition (who will find it difficult to maintain public mobilisation due to holidays being near and who have no vision for the continuation of the protests), and the terms of the deal with Russia setting lower gas prices and offering a loan both reinforce the position of President Yanukovich. The way the situation develops from now on will depend on whether or not the government decides to use force against the protesters and on whether the opposition proves able to maintain its mobilisation of society.

The round table fiasco

It came as something of a surprise that the opposition agreed to take part in round table talks with President Yanukovich with no preconditions. The meeting, though, failed to produce any real rapprochement between the parties. The president rejected the opposition's demand to dissolve the government and proposed a moratorium on the use of force, continued talks and the adoption by parliament, of an amnesty for those detained during the protests. Former President of Ukraine Leonid Kravchuk chaired the meeting and suggested that a negotiating group should be established to work on a draft agreement to end the crisis. It is, however, unclear if and when such a group will be created. From the government's point of view, the meeting with the opposition was intended as a demonstration of good will and that it is not hostile to dialogue. However, there are no indications that the authorities might be in a position to meet the main demands of the opposition (the dismissal of the government), and their moves should be seen primarily as playing for time until the urge to protest subsides and the demonstrations dissipate. The

dismissals, on 14 December, of Volodymyr Sivkovych, the deputy secretary of the National Council for Security and Defence, Oleksandr Popov, the head of the Kyiv administration, and Valeriy Koriak, the Kyiv chief of police, all suspected of exceeding their powers in connection with the police attack on Maidan on 30 November, may be regarded as the only effect of the round table talks.

The EuroMaidan and the AntiMaidan

On 14 and 15 December the opposition again managed to draw massive numbers of demonstrators to Maidan – a success which means that the urge to protest is not subsiding among Ukrainians. The rally in Maidan and pickets in front of government buildings (including the headquarters of the Security Service (SBU) and the Interior Ministry) did not come up against any countermeasures on the part of law enforcement agencies. Nor were there any incidents resembling incitement.

Maidan currently resembles a fortified camp surrounded on all sides by 3-4 metre-tall barricades, some of which are reinforced with barbed wire. Food and firewood supplies are reaching the protesters without the law enforcement agencies creating any impediment. More than ten thousand people come to Maidan on workdays, and two to three thousand people remain in Maidan each night. On 13 December, the Federation of Trade Unions, in whose building the opposition headquarters is located, issued a statement saying it expected the authorities to take measures to remove those illegally occupying the building. The political activists gathered in Maidan interpreted this information as sign that arrests and actions to disperse the protest were likely to take place soon.

On 14 December, a rally of support for President Yanukovych was held in Kyiv's European Square, which brought together around 40–50 thousand people, mostly visitors from the eastern and southern regions of Ukraine. The gathering had been organised using administrative methods by the central and regional authorities and the Party of Regions. Most participants had been brought to Kyiv by special trains and received pay for their participation. Prime Minister Azarov addressed the rally with a criticism of the Association Agreement with the EU, mentioning, among other things, that one of the obstacles to visa liberalisation with the EU concerned the requirement, allegedly imposed by Brussels, for Ukraine to legalise same-sex relationships. The participants of the 'AntiMaidan' were separated from Maidan, situated some 250 metres away, by a tight cordon of buses. This suggests that – contrary to the fears expressed by opposition leaders – the authorities wished to prevent any potential incitement.

The situation of the government camp

Signals have been reported in recent days suggesting that some sections of the ruling elite are becoming increasingly concerned about the situation in Ukraine. On 13 December, a statement by Rinat Akhmetov was published, which referred to "peaceful people in peaceful demonstrations" and "the unacceptable use of force", and called for "common sense to prevail", arguing that the state should preserve its territorial integrity. The statement by

Akhmetov, who is one of Ukraine's most influential people in Ukraine and who issues public statements very rarely, can be viewed as meaning that the ruling camp is indeed divided on how to deal with the protests. The faction opting for a peaceful solution seems to be stronger at the moment. The fact that a joint meeting of the government and the Party of Regions caucus was convened on 16 December is also an indication that there is a split in the ruling elite. A government reshuffle was proposed during the meeting. The reshuffle is rather probable (most likely at the ministries in charge of economic issues), but everything seems to indicate that Prime Minister Azarov will keep his post.

The weakening opposition

Each day of protests brings proof of the ineffectiveness of the opposition's measures and of the weakness of the opposition parties, whose key (and in fact the only) advantage over the government is Maidan's infrastructure. Even though the opposition embarked upon a petition under a new motion for a vote of no confidence in the government, pursuant to Article 87(2) of the Ukrainian constitution this may take place only once in each of the two semi-annual parliamentary sessions (the spring session and the autumn-winter session). This means that the opposition parties would next be able to make the next attempt at dismissing the government in February.

A by-election to the Verkhovna Rada was held on 15 December in the five single-member constituencies in which the electoral commission could not name the winners after the general election on 28 October 2012. The opposition candidate was victorious in only one of the five constituencies. The opposition parties accused the government of electoral fraud. This was partly confirmed by election observers, who reported irregularities in the election process and bribing voters. The results of the by-election have led to a radicalisation of the opposition's rhetoric. The opposition have refused to continue negotiations with the government. However, none of this has not led to an escalation of the protests.

Possible further developments

The way the political crisis will develop in Ukraine now depends above all on whether or not the government decides to use force against the protesters again. Even though President Yanukovich declared during the meeting with the US senators John McCain and Chris Murphy on 16 December that "the government would uphold the citizens' right to peaceful protest", it seems that the scenario involving the use of force cannot be fully ruled out at this stage. The apparent lack of consensus within the ruling elite on this issue, the risk that the use of force could lead to a further escalation of the protests, and the threat of the EU and the US imposing sanctions (as suggested by representatives of the US administration) will nevertheless discourage the government from going down this path.

In the current conditions, no good way out of the political crisis presents itself. The government is most likely hoping that the number of protesters will decrease in conjunction with the upcoming holidays and that the urge to protest will subside. This is a correct assumption, but the opposition, despite its weakness, will try to maintain the Maidan infrastructure. If the opposition parties manage that within the next few weeks, the authorities will have to either make concessions (such as dismissal of the Interior Minister,

Yuri Zakharchenko, and the secretary of the National Council for Security and Defence, Andriy Kluyev, at the least), or make another attempt at forcefully clearing Maidan. Due to the agreements signed on 17 December in Moscow, President Yanukovych feels stronger, since the terms of the agreements will be beneficial for him in the period preceding the presidential election (March 2015) and will strengthen his position at home. The Russian loan will make it possible for the economy to be stabilised within months or in a little more than a year. In turn, the lower gas prices will also ensure good income for the large companies owned by the oligarchs. Whatever actions the government takes with regard to Maidan, the political conflict in Ukraine will continue at least until the presidential election.