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Ukraine: protests without leadership

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Ukrainians have now been protesting for two months. Initially, they wanted their President to sign the Association Agreement with the EU at the end of November in Vilnius. This would have offered hope for economic and democratic development, including visa-free travel to Europe. When President Yanukovich ignored this demand and responded with force by sending riot police to disperse a few hundred peaceful demonstrators, Ukrainians came out on the streets in large numbers demanding justice – to punish those responsible for the beatings – and the resignation of the government. For many Ukrainians, Yanukovich and the politicians around him have become the personification of personal enrichment, corruption, police violence and arbitrary justice.

Concluding that the violence of 11 December – when EU and US top officials were in Kyiv to mediate – had not had the intended effect, the incumbent government chose to ignore the subsequent large-scale protests. It hoped they would fade away in Ukraine's harsh winter conditions. Furthermore, targeted sanctions (legal persecution) and physical attacks were carried out against the most active members of the protests: civic activists, journalists and opposition politicians. At the same time, President Yanukovich turned to Moscow where he was able to secure \$15 billion in credit, the terms of which remain obscure.

The protesters in Maidan Nezalezhnosti, Kyiv's Independence Square, waited patiently during the freezing winter holidays for the government to respond to their demands. Meanwhile, the government prepared a longer-term policy to end the protests and avoid new ones, based on repression. On 16 January, the Parliament passed new laws that severely restrict freedoms of assembly, association, expression and information, and the right to a fair trial. These new laws violate both Ukraine's constitution and

international human rights conventions. Some of them are copy-pasted from public security regulations in neighbouring Russia and Belarus, both of which have been heavily criticised before by the EU and the US, and especially international human rights watchdogs. These new laws proved the final straw that ended the patience of some protesters, resulting in violence on Sunday 19 February in Kyiv.

Beyond the protesters in the streets and the repressive government responses, another side to the story that is less well covered in the international media concerns the parliamentary opposition. Since the jailing of ex-prime minister Yulia Tymoshenko in 2011 and the parliamentary elections of 2012, the opposition has been represented by three major parties, each boasting their own strong leader: Arseniy Yatseniuk of Tymoshenko's Batkivshchyna party; Vitaliy Klitschko, world boxing champion, of UDAR ('punch' in Ukrainian); and Oleg Tyahnybok of the nationalist Svoboda party.

All three went to the stage of Euromaidan to address the protesters and all expressed their intention to represent the protesters as a whole in talks with the government. None of them hid their ambitions with a view to presidential elections in early 2015. This contrasted with the hopes of protesters of different political colours for a unified leader and a joint action plan from the political opposition. So far action plans have been changing in response to the unfolding situation but opposition parties have refused to stand behind one leader that could defeat Yanukovich.

Last weekend the opposition presented a new plan that included the establishment of parallel institutions – parliament, government, militia and local authorities – but failed to offer a clear roadmap or timeline for implementation. Klitschko said he would talk to his party the next day; Yatseniuk proposed to gather again on 22 January to march towards the presidential administration building; and Tyahnybok said that the new dictatorial laws should not be obeyed. When directly questioned by a civic activist, Yatseniuk argued that the leader

of the revolution is the Ukrainian people and described those asking for one leader as 'provocateurs'.

However, the opposition does need clear leadership to ensure coordination and to lead negotiations with the government and potential ruling-party dissidents and oligarchs. Unfortunately, opposition leaders have so far been unwilling to set aside their personal ambitions and divisions. They have continued to hold their cards close to their chest, possibly hoping for good opportunities in the lead up to next year's elections. Many Ukrainians do not want to wait that long and do not believe in fair elections under an authoritarian system. They increasingly feel they have to rely on themselves instead of the government or even the opposition.

Over the last two days, some protesters have tried to clear their way towards the Parliament building, which had been blocked by the police for two months. The police denied them access and clashes started. Central Kyiv seemed at war, with burning police cars and buses, flash grenades, water cannons, stones, tear gas, and hundreds of severely injured among the protesters and police as well as journalists. Klitschko went to Yanukovich's residence to call for talks. The latter has agreed to talk with opposition leaders through a crisis committee, while more police forces have been ordered to the capital. Meanwhile some angry protesters are hurtling towards new clashes. It is difficult to assess the political impact of current riots in the short-term but, as one activist put it, 'When there is a leader, the riot will become a revolution'. However, the risk persists that Ukraine's hopes for democracy and a European perspective will dim further while repression increases.