

## Unrest in Ukraine—Background

*Instructions:* Read the information below on the ongoing protests in Ukraine and then fill in the boxes on the handout “Charting the Crisis.” Be prepared to share your answers with the class.

### ***What triggered the political crisis?***

In November 2013, widespread protests broke out in Kiev, the capital of Ukraine. These protests responded to President Viktor Yanukovich’s decision to back out of a plan to sign a far-reaching agreement with the European Union (EU). The plan would have established a closer political and economic relationship with the EU, and signaled Ukraine’s interest in joining the twenty-eight nation bloc. Pro-EU Ukrainians took to the streets, hoping that Yanukovich would retract his decision. He did not, and instead signed a \$15 billion trade deal with Russia. Pro-EU demonstrators rejected Yanukovich’s decision to deepen Ukraine’s ties with Russia and continued their demonstrations. Moscow had controlled the territory of present-day Ukraine for centuries, up until 1991, and many protesters did not want to see hard-won gains, specifically those tied to political and economic independence, undone.



Ivan Bandura. CC BY 2.0.

Pro-EU protesters gather at Independence Square in Kiev on December 1, 2013.

### ***How did Yanukovich’s government respond to pro-EU protests?***

Starting in November 2013, riot police and security forces used violence and intimidation tactics in their crackdowns against demonstrators. In January 2014, Yanukovich’s government implemented anti-democratic legislation restricting political dissent. The legislation banned the installation of tents and stages in public spaces, criminalized the use of masks and helmets at protests, and outlawed the slandering of government officials. Facing immense public pressure and criticism from the international community, the government repealed the laws just two weeks after they had been enacted. Anti-Yanukovich demonstrations and fears about Russia’s sway over Ukraine continued. In late February, the violence reached an all-time high with rising death tolls among protesters and the police. Under growing pressure, Yanukovich fled Kiev and the parliament voted to oust him from government. After this turn of events, the chiefs of the riot police and security forces signaled their interest in withdrawing from all conflict.

### ***Who are the anti-Yanukovich protesters?***

The pro-EU protests quickly came to be called the Euromaidan movement. The name, Euro-maidan, merges Euro with Maidan (Ukrainian for “square”). Ukrainians often use “maidan” to refer

to Independence Square in Kiev where hundreds of thousands of protesters have rallied over the past months. Euromaidan protesters are mainly from Kiev and western Ukraine, and include, among others, students, workers, retirees, entrepreneurs, and journalists. These protesters' demands extend far beyond establishing a stronger partnership with the EU and center around human rights, freedom, and democracy. Other groups, such as right-wing nationalists, have carried out their own anti-Yanukovich demonstrations.

***“[I]t is our attempt to change the situation in Ukraine, to set true values, to reach real democracy, to create our future...without inhumanity and violence!”***

—A Euromaidan statement on Facebook, February 2014

### ***Who are the pro-Yanukovich demonstrators?***

Ukrainians are not united in their demands for the future of their country. Widespread divisions hinge upon the question—Should Ukraine follow a European path or establish closer ties with Russia? Tens of thousands of Ukrainians have participated in rallies that not only signal their support for Yanukovich, but also a preference for continued strong ties with Russia. Many pro-Yanukovich demonstrators are from the eastern and southern parts of Ukraine—regions that are the base of Yanukovich's support, the location of major industries, and where Russian is more commonly spoken. Most pro-Yanukovich protesters reject the idea of a far-reaching partnership with the EU, fearing that such an agreement would do more harm than good to the Ukrainian economy and their livelihoods.

### ***What are some international perspectives on the situation?***

**European Union:** Yanukovich's decision to break off an agreement with the EU left many European leaders perplexed. Why did Yanukovich back out of a deal that was five years in the making? EU members have identified Russia as a contributing factor. Many have criticized Russia for exerting economic and political pressure on its neighbor, Ukraine, and for meddling in Ukraine's efforts to form ties with the EU. Appalled by the violation of human rights and the deaths of dozens of Ukrainian civilians, the EU imposed sanctions against Ukrainian officials who are responsible for the violence.

***“In Kiev, we have seen the biggest ever pro-European demonstration in the history of the European Union. A whole population that wants to join the European family.”***

—Guy Verhofstadt, Belgian member of the EU Parliament

**Russia:** Officially, Russia claims to have a policy of nonintervention in Ukrainian politics. However, Russia is interested in keeping Ukraine within its sphere of influence. Russia's natural gas pipelines travel across Ukraine, and Ukraine itself is a major market for Russian gas. Politically, Russia does not want Ukraine to form stronger ties with the EU. Russia has labeled pro-EU Ukrainian demonstrators as “extremists” and condemned these protesters for attempting to initiate a “coup.”

**United States:** The Obama administration is closely monitoring the ongoing crisis in Ukraine. The U.S. State Department has condemned the Ukrainian government's use of violence. Following the first deaths of protesters, the U.S. State Department announced visa sanctions against Ukrainian officials. The crisis has heightened tensions between the United States and Russia. U.S. officials continue to side with the EU on this issue.

***“The United States strongly condemns the increasing violence on the streets of Kyiv, which has led to casualties.... We urge all sides to immediately de-escalate the situation and refrain from violence.”***

—U.S. State Department, January 22, 2014

## Charting the Crisis

### TIMELINE

*List the main events that took place during these months.*

**November 2013:**

**January 2014:**

**February 2014:**

### UKRAINE'S GENERAL PUBLIC

*Top concerns of anti-government protesters:*

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•

*Top concerns of pro-government protesters:*

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*In your own words, what is the polarizing question that divides Ukrainians?*

### INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVES

*How do these countries/bodies view the crisis in Ukraine?*

**European Union**

**Russia**

**United States**