

Five minutes with Andreas Umland: “The situation in Ukraine could easily turn into an armed conflict”

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Protests began in Ukraine in November following the country's failure to sign an Association Agreement with the European Union. In an interview with EUROPP's Managing Editor Stuart Brown, [Andreas Umland](#), Associate Professor at National University of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy, discusses the development of the protests, the role the EU should play in the crisis, and the very real threat that the situation could develop into a civil war.



The protests began after the failure to sign an EU Association Agreement in November. Is Ukraine's relationship with the EU still a primary focus of the movement, or has it since developed to incorporate much wider aims?

Only during the first days of the EuroMaidan, in late November 2013, was the issue of the Association Agreement with the EU the primary topic of concern for the protesters. After the violent police crackdown on young pro-European students on 30 November 2013, the focus changed to more domestic political issues and the protests turned into a broader social movement. The primary demands of the protests became the punishment of those responsible for the crackdown, especially the dismissal of the Minister of Interior Zakharchenko and other officials responsible for violent police actions.

This did not happen, however. Instead more police brutality against protesters, bystanders and journalists occurred during the following weeks. Simultaneously, President Yanukovich started a rapprochement with Russia during December 2013. In light of these developments, the movement's core demands turned towards elections of both the President and Parliament. Snap elections had been earlier suggested, but did not have as principal an importance as later on.

Has the response from the Ukrainian government, including the recent introduction of anti-protest laws, simply inflamed the situation further?

The procedurally and democratically flawed adoption of the so-called “dictatorship laws” of 16 January 2014 gave the protests a new quality in terms of their aims and character. Whereas before, the protesters had demanded a change of policy and government, today the demand has changed to a transformation of the entire, now officially semi-authoritarian regime.

The second recent novelty was a split within the movement into, on the one side, moderate protesters led by the opposition parties who are remaining peaceful and continue not using force, and, on the other side, a growing radical part ready to use violence and primitive weapons like stones and sticks. Whereas the moderates demand political change and may be ready to accept an amnesty for all perpetrators, the radicals want a full-scale revolution and those responsible for violence, including the President, brought to justice. Some even want revenge for the various missteps of Yanukovich.

Should the EU be doing more to intervene in the crisis, particularly with regard to its relations with Russia?

Yes – because the EU is a part of this conflict already. The pretext of the protests was the upcoming signing of the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement at the Eastern Partnership summit at Vilnius, in November 2013. This Agreement was an idea of the EU, and its negotiation directed by the Commission.

The main, although not only reason for the Ukrainian leadership's last-minute cancellation of the treaty's conclusion

was an intervention of Russia that included both economic pressure and financial offers. On the one side, for instance, during a five-day trade boycott in August 2013, Russia demonstrated to Ukraine what the counter or “protective” measures would look like in the case that Ukraine signs the Association Agreement. On the other side, Russia is now supporting Ukraine through a \$15 billion credit line, and significant lowering of gas prices. Putin may have brought forward other threats or benefits that we do not know of, but that may have been voiced during the semi-secret Russian-Ukrainian negotiations of autumn 2013.

In view of Russia’s obvious co-responsibility for the failure of the EU’s partnership policies in Ukraine, the EU should have used – or should, at least, in the future use – its considerable economic pressure potential here, as well as regarding the Association Agreements with Georgia, Moldova and, perhaps, also Armenia. Russia needs European customers and investments more than the EU needs Russian deliveries and markets. The Union could and should have used its leverage, yet it did not.

In addition, many political representatives, supportive state officials, and financial backers of the growingly authoritarian Ukrainian regime have assets, bank accounts, businesses, real estate, family (and so on) in the EU. The member states of the EU could impose painful sanctions on particularly unapologetic Ukrainian violators of human rights. There also seem to be certain Ukrainian [criminal activities](#), like money laundering, happening on EU territory which have been ignored so far by the European law protection agencies. The more repressive Yanukovich’s rule becomes, the more scandalous will the EU’s inaction regarding these issues look.

Former President Viktor Yushchenko has warned that the crisis could create a civil war within the country. Do the protests have real potential to spill over into armed conflict?

Yes, if people die and martyrs appear, an escalation could easily turn into an armed conflict. The protests are, perhaps, not even the only and most dangerous issue. A civil war could also occur as a result of separatist tendencies. In the case of an accumulation of various crises in Ukraine – political, social, economic, financial, international etc. – some regions in the East and South of Ukraine could appeal to Moscow asking to become Russian protectorates. Both official Kyiv and Ukrainian nationalists would hardly accept this, and may try to prevent a separation by force. This, in turn, could trigger a Russian military involvement following the scheme of Moscow’s intervention in Georgia in August 2008.

The coming months will be tense. One hopes that the relevant decision-makers in the West understand how high the stakes in the current confrontation in Kyiv are.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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