

Crackdown in Kiev

Battle for Ukraine

Nov 30th 2013, 11:21 by A.O. | VILNIUS



THUGS and thieves always prefer to act in the early hours of the morning. So did Viktor Yanukovich, Ukraine's president.

Less than 24 hours after he ruined the Eastern Partnership summit in Vilnius and ditched the Association Agreement with Europe, he vividly demonstrated his preferred alternative. In the small hours of Saturday morning he sent in special troops to beat up the few hundred students and activists who stood vigil for Ukraine's European future. Armed with truncheons and tear gas, the police pummelled the peaceful demonstration, smashing heads and kicking people on the ground. Never in its 22 years as an independent country has Ukraine seen such violence.

It was a cowardly and treacherous act by a government that behaved like an occupying force in its own capital. "Tonight Yankovich turned into Alexander Lukashenka [Belarus's hardline president]," wrote Mustafa Nayyem, a Ukrainian journalist and blogger who mobilised the civil protest a week ago. A video he posted showed the violence that Mr Yanukovich had unleashed.

Protestors first started to gather in the centre of Kiev ten days ago when Ukraine froze negotiations with the EU. The government decided not to use force until after the summit. As soon as Mr Yanukovich escaped safely from Vilnius, the restraints were off. But hours after Mr Yanukovich deprived his country of a chance to converge with Europe, turning to Russia instead, tens of thousands of students and middle-class Ukrainians came out to defy him with renewed resolve.

The government, fearful that the police would not obey its orders, bussed in several thousand plain-

clothed bull-neck thugs armed with iron rods from the regions to intimidate the students and provoke clashes. Mr Yanukovich's Party of the Regions' deputies tried to block the leaders of the opposition from entering a television studio and going on air. The American ambassador in Kiev issued a stern warning to Mr Yanukovich not to use force against the demonstration. But Mr Yanukovich waited until 4am, when the crowd had dispersed to just a few hundred people and most journalists had gone to bed, to attack those who were left to guard Maidan Square.

This was his response to Maidan's demand to send him and his government packing for betraying national interests. But it was also his revenge for the Orange revolution, which took place in the same square nine years ago, defying his attempt to steal a presidential election. At the time, Mr Yanukovich demanded that Leonid Kuchma, the acting president, send in the troops against a peaceful demonstration of several hundred people. Bloodshed was narrowly avoided, mainly because of the intervention of senior American government officials, including Colin Powell, the secretary of state. This time Mr Yanukovich finally got his chance to enact that scenario. He has plunged Ukraine into one of its most serious political crises, with unpredictable consequences.

Although Mr Yanukovich may try to act like Mr Lukashenka, Ukraine is not Belarus. It has a vibrant middle class, television is controlled by oligarchs (many of whom are extremely angry with Mr Yanukovich) and, most importantly, a diverse population. Although Mr Yanukovich, whose popularity rating is less than 20%, is still backed by his native Russian-speaking industrial region of Donetsk, he has never had much legitimacy in the Ukrainian-speaking west of the country. His latest actions could lead to a split in the country, with its western part and Kiev simply refusing to recognise the government's authority.

But Ukraine's turnaround also caught the European Union flat-footed, while delivering another victory for Vladimir Putin, who wants Ukraine to stay within Russia's sphere of influence as one of its former territories. The Eastern Partnership project, which was conceived by Sweden and Poland in the Spring of 2008 as a non-military form of engaging with the former Soviet republics, is now in tatters. Three years ago in Georgia, Russia drew a red line against NATO expansion and defended it with tanks. This time it drew a similarly thick red line at the expansion of the European system of governance and its values to Ukraine, and defended it with bribes and threats of economic war. European politicians naively believed that Russia would not object to the Eastern Partnership, because it contained no security dimension. But as Giga Bokeria, the ideologue of Georgia's reforms, argues, in many ways the expansion of the European model was more threatening to Mr Putin than the expansion of NATO. It poses a challenge to the post-Soviet political model which Mr Putin has defended and spread—one based on corruption, paternalism and violence.

If any proof were needed, Mr Yanukovich's behaviour is the best proof that he never shared European values and never intended to sign the European Association Agreement in the first place. He simply used it as a bargaining chip in his negotiations with Russia. At a reception in Vilnius with Angela Merkel, the German chancellor, and Dalia Grybauskaitė, the Lithuanian president, Mr Yanukovich was caught on video trying to justify his U-turn to the European leaders. "I've been alone for three-and-a-half years...in very unequal conditions, with a very strong Russia," he is heard saying.

This cut little ice with Mr Grybauskaitė, whose country has been under pressure from Russia for decades. In fact, it was in Vilnius in January 1991 that the Soviet government made its last attempts to keep the Soviet Union together by using force. It brought in military troops and fired at the peaceful demonstration outside the Vilnius television centre. Less than a year later, the Soviet Union ceased to exist and Lithuania won its deserved independence. Ukraine also won independence at the time,

although it never really fought for it or knew what to do with it. But 22 years later, with hundreds of thousands of Ukrainians defying their thuggish post-Soviet government, the battle for Ukraine as an independent country has started in earnest.

Picture credit: AFP