

Op-Ed on Ukraine

While some might be surprised at the violence in Ukraine that erupted this week, the divisions in Ukraine have long been predicted to cause just such a rupture. Ukraine is a country which has existed for most of its history as part of the Russian and Austro-Hungarian Empires. In fact, before 1991 its only period of independence as a country came in 1918 before the Red Army conquered the country in 1919 (emblematic of this is the fact that in the Russian language “Ukraine” literally means “borderland”- i.e. the borderland of the Russian Empire). Due to its heritage, the ethnic composition of Ukraine is divided between areas belonging to the former empires- the West is Catholic and the East is Russian Orthodox- which are neatly divided by the Dnepr river that runs through central Kiev. In 1993 Samuel Huntington described the division in Ukraine as one of the best examples of a “civilizational fault line” where conflict could happen in the future.

Against this background, the current protests and violence in Ukraine seem almost over-determined, as if they were inevitable. Indeed, in 2004 thousands of protestors turned out in central Kiev to protest the corrupt election of Victor Yanukovich in what became known as the “Orange Revolution.” His opponent, Victor Yushenko, had been the victim of some dirty tricks including poisoning that left his face disfigured. When the crowds turned out on the street in 2004, they eventually managed to bring down the government and Yushenko took power, which he lost to Yanukovich in the 2010 Presidential election.

The legacy of the Orange Revolution can be seen in the protests today. Back in November 2013, President Viktor Yanukovich suspended plans for a trade deal with the European Union which many Ukrainians had hoped would facilitate eventual entry into the regional club. The suspicion was that Yanukovich wanted Ukraine eventually to join the Eurasian Union promoted by Russia’s Vladimir Putin. This triggered protests on the main Maidan square in Ukraine (and for this reason became known as the EUMaidan). The protestors have been camped out on the Maidan Square for the last 3 months in the middle of the cruel Ukrainian winter, protesting the government’s decision to move away from the EU. At first, Russia provided only symbolic support to the Ukrainian government such as not protesting its initial heavy-handed response to the protestors at the end of November. In December Russia offered to prop up the Ukrainian economy with an extremely generous loan, further evidence that Yanukovich was a Russian puppet. The protestors- no doubt with inflated expectations of popular action due to the memories of the Orange revolution- have been camped out on the square ever since. What is surprising is that the protests have been mostly peaceful up to this point, so there are many questions about who initiated the violence on the Maidan. If the protestors, then one has to wonder why they think a disorganized protest movement can successfully fight even a state like Ukraine. If the police and regime, then one has to wonder why they would want to divert attention from the Sochi Olympics.