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Ukraine Leader Was Defeated Even Before He Was Ousted

Український лідер програв ще до того, як був зміщений

21 лютого 2014 року екс-президент України Віктор Янукович підписав угоду, завдяки якій сподівався протриматися при владі хоча б ще кілька місяців, пише The New York Times, яка провела розслідування останніх годин правління Януковича в Україні. Але прямо під час переговорів «керівники силових структур спішно дзвонили депутатам-опозиціонерам, чітко роз'яснюючи, що турбуються більше про свою власну безпеку, ніж про захист Януковича і його уряду». До вечора того ж дня Янукович залишив Київ. Росія стверджує, що Янукович був зміщений в результаті насильницького перевороту, який підтримувався і навіть режисерувати Заходом. Зі свого боку, The New York Times пише, що її розслідування показало: «президент був не стільки повалений, скільки кинутий напризволяще його власними союзниками, а західні офіційні особи були здивовані цим крахом не менше, аніж всі інші». Втеча союзників прискорилося з огляду на те, що протестуючі захопили багато зброї, але настільки ж важливу роль зіграла паніка в урядових колах через спроби Януковича помиритися з противниками.

http://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/04/world/europe/ukraine-leader-was-defeated-even-before-he-was-ousted.html?_r=0



Riot police set up water cannons to shoot at protesters in Kiev last February. But shortly after, a mass defection of the president's allies quickly led to his downfall. Credit Sergey Ponomarev for The New York Times

Ashen-faced after a sleepless night of marathon negotiations, Viktor F. Yanukovich hesitated, shaking his pen above the text placed before him in the chandelied hall. Then, under

the unsmiling gaze of European diplomats and his political enemies, the beleaguered Ukrainian president scrawled his signature, sealing a deal that he believed would keep him in power, at least for a few more months.

But even as Mr. Yanukovich sat down with his political foes at the presidential administration building on the afternoon of Friday, Feb. 21, his last authority was fast draining away. In a flurry of frantic calls to opposition lawmakers, police officials and security commanders were making clear that they were more worried about their own safety than protecting Mr. Yanukovich and his government.

By that evening, he was gone, evacuated from the capital by helicopter, setting the stage for the most severe bout of East-West tensions since the Cold War.

Russia has attributed Mr. Yanukovich's ouster to what it portrays as a violent, "neo-fascist" coup supported and even choreographed by the West and dressed up as a popular uprising. The Kremlin has cited this assertion, along with historical ties, as the main justification for its annexation of Crimea in March and its subsequent support for an armed revolt by pro-Russian separatists in Ukraine's industrial heartland in the east.



Violence resumed in Ukraine on Tuesday with an attack at the headquarters of the party of President Viktor F. Yanukovich, among other clashes.

Few outside the Russian propaganda bubble ever seriously entertained the Kremlin's line. But almost a year after the fall of Mr. Yanukovich's government, questions remain about how and why it collapsed so quickly and completely.

An investigation by The New York Times into the final hours of Mr. Yanukovich's rule — based on interviews with prominent players, including former commanders of the Berkut riot police and other security units, telephone records and other documents — shows that the president was not so much overthrown as cast adrift by his own allies, and that Western officials were just as surprised by the meltdown as anyone else.

The allies' desertion, fueled in large part by fear, was accelerated by the seizing by protesters of a large stock of weapons in the west of the country. But just as important, the review of the final hours shows, was the panic in government ranks created by Mr. Yanukovich's own efforts to make peace.

At dawn on the morning of Thursday, Feb. 20, a bedraggled pro-European protest movement controlled just a few hundred square yards, at best, of scorched and soot-smearred pavement in central Kiev. They had gathered there the previous November, enraged that Mr. Yanukovich, under heavy pressure from Moscow, had abruptly turned away from a long-planned trade deal with the European Union.

Their fortunes dimmed further on Thursday morning when a hail of gunfire cut down scores of protesters as they pushed to break out of their shrinking encampment and expand their reach into the heavily guarded government district.

By Thursday evening, however, the shock created by that bloodshed, the worst in the Ukrainian capital since World War II, had prompted a mass defection by the president's allies in Parliament and prodded Mr. Yanukovich to join negotiations with a trio of opposition politicians.

That was when the phone calls from the security officers began, said one of those opposition lawmakers, Sergey Pashinsky. Beginning in the late morning, they became a torrent as the day progressed, each making the same desperate plea: Help! We want to get out of Kiev and need escorts to get through streets clogged with angry protesters.

"They all had the same message," Mr. Pashinsky recalled.

The security officers said in interviews that they were alarmed by language in the truce deal that called for an investigation of the killing of protesters. They feared that a desperate Mr. Yanukovich was ready to abandon the very people who had protected him, particularly those in the lower ranks who had borne the brunt of the street battles.

One of the units that pulled out on Friday afternoon was a 30-man Berkut squad from Sumska, a region east of Kiev. Its acting commander, who asked to be identified only by his first name, Vladimir, because he fears retribution for his past service, said that he had tried calling his superiors at the Ukraine Interior Ministry all morning on Friday, Feb. 21, to get instructions, but that their phones had all gone dead.

"The minister had disappeared, and nobody was taking calls," he recalled. He finally reached a middle-ranking official at the ministry. Advised to leave as "all the chiefs are running away," Vladimir contacted Mr. Pashinsky and requested an escort out of town. "We were all worried about being hung out to dry," he said. He said he was not ordered to leave but simply told that he and his men could go if they wanted.

Aleksandr Khodakovsky, who in February commanded an elite unit of Alfa special forces guarding the headquarters of Ukraine's domestic intelligence service, was also having doubts.

"We started to understand that there would be no central government, that it was falling apart," Mr. Khodakovsky recalled in a recent interview in Donetsk, where he now leads a battalion of armed pro-Russian separatists. "We understood that all the mediation of the Europeans would lead to nothing."

A Changing Atmosphere

Along with many other commanders, he believed that a tough response to protesters by Mr. Yanukovich in November or December could easily have cleared Kiev's Independence Square, known as Maidan, the epicenter of the pro-European protest movement.

By February, however, it was too late.



In the Ukrainian capital, triage centers have sprung up around Independence Square, where dozens of people have died in the fighting.

“The atmosphere was changing” in the elite police units, Mr. Khodakovsky said. “Everybody understood the government was not going to take decisive action. We understood that all the crimes we were going to commit clearing the square, in the last breath of the old government, would all be blamed on us.”

Security forces were also thrown into a panic by rumors, fanned by the protesters themselves, about the whereabouts of hundreds of guns seized on the night of Feb. 18 in Lviv, a bastion of pro-European fervor 300 miles west of Kiev near the Polish border. The weapons were said to be on their way to Kiev to add to an already growing arsenal of hunting rifles, pistols, Molotov cocktails and metal clubs.

According to the chief of police in Lviv, Dmytro D. Zagariya, around 1,200 weapons, mostly pistols and Kalashnikov rifles, were seized in raids on five district police stations and the headquarters of the Interior Ministry’s western command. Only 300 of these, he said, were recovered by the authorities. He said there was no evidence that any of the missing guns had been used in or even reached Kiev.

Western diplomats in Kiev, including the American ambassador Geoffrey R. Pyatt, also heard about the guns grabbed in Lviv and worried that, if brought to Kiev, they would turn what had begun as a peaceful protest movement that enjoyed wide sympathy in the West into an armed insurrection that would quickly lose this good will.

As the foreign ministers of Germany and Poland and a senior French diplomat met Mr. Yanukovich to negotiate a truce on the evening of Thursday, Feb. 20, at the presidential offices, Mr. Pyatt and several European envoys met at the German Embassy with Andriy Parubiy, the chief of the protesters’ security forces, and told him to keep the Lviv guns away from Kiev.

“We told him: ‘Don’t let these guns come to Kiev. If they come, that will change the whole situation,’ ” Mr. Pyatt recalled telling Mr. Parubiy, who turned up for the meeting wearing a black balaclava.

In a recent interview in Kiev, Mr. Parubiy denied that the guns taken in Lviv ever got to Kiev, but added that the prospect that they might have provided a powerful lever to pressure both Mr. Yanukovich’s camp and Western governments.

“I warned them that if Western governments did not take firmer action against Yanukovich, the whole process could gain a very threatening dimension,” he said.



Mr. Yanukovich before signing a pact that he thought would keep him in power. Credit Sergei Supinsky/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

Andriy Tereschenko, a Berkut commander from Donetsk who was holed up with his men in the Cabinet Ministry, the government headquarters in Kiev, said that 16 of his men had already been shot on Feb. 18 and that he was terrified by the rumors of an armory of automatic weapons on its way from Lviv.

“It was already an armed uprising, and it was going to get worse,” he said. “We understood why the weapons were taken, to bring them to Kiev.”

Around 2 p.m. that Friday, just as European diplomats were gathering for the signing ceremony at the nearby presidential administration building, Mr. Tereschenko received a call from a deputy interior minister, Viktor Dubovik, with an order to leave the city. Mr. Dubovik, he said, put him in touch with the opposition lawmaker Mr. Pashinsky, who escorted the Berkut commander and his 60 or so men to the edge of town, from where they drove overnight by bus to Donetsk.

Mr. Dubovik, who the authorities say has since fled Ukraine, could not be located for comment.

Mr. Pashinsky estimated that in all, he arranged escorts out of the city for more than 5,000 officers from the riot police, Interior Ministry forces and other security units, like the special operations unit, Alfa. He said Mr. Dubovik was just one of the officials he worked with on the mass evacuation, but added that he did not know where the order to retreat had originated.

Giving Up on a Leader

Inna Bogoslovskaya, a longtime ally of Mr. Yanukovich who broke with him over his November decision not to sign the trade deal with the European Union, said the retreat was merely a response to a resolution adopted late Thursday that week by the Ukrainian Parliament that ordered all Interior Ministry troops and police officers to return to their barracks.

Ms. Bogoslovskaya said that the Thursday night vote sent an emphatic message to Mr. Yanukovich and his last backers that Parliament, dominated by the governing Party of Regions and previously a bastion of loyal support, had given up on him.



After months of protests and a week of bloody mayhem, demonstrators in Independence Square celebrated the departure of President Viktor F. Yanukovych.

“This was the moment that Yanukovych realized that he no longer had even Parliament on his side,” she said, adding that the president had no choice after this but to respect its resolution and order security forces off the streets.

But Mykhalo V. Dobkin, a Party of Regions baron who had for years worked closely with Mr. Yanukovych, said the president did not give the order and had no knowledge of it until security forces suddenly vanished.

Mr. Dobkin, who met with Mr. Yanukovych late Friday night after he fled Kiev for the eastern city of Kharkiv, said he spoke with a senior presidential official whom he declined to name and was told that the sudden departure of security forces on Friday afternoon had taken the president and his entourage entirely by surprise.

The official, Mr. Dobkin said, had looked out of his window in the presidential administration building on Friday afternoon and, shocked to see the police “laying down their shields and getting on buses,” rushed to see the president to ask what was going on. Told by Mr. Yanukovych that he had issued no order for a withdrawal, the official, according to Mr. Dobkin, then left the building, never to return.

Also gone by Friday afternoon was Vladimir P. Lukin, the envoy of the Russian president, Vladimir V. Putin, to the truce negotiations. He had put his initials on a text negotiated overnight but then vanished, returning to Moscow rather than put his signature on a short-lived peace accord in whose rapid collapse Russia subsequently found proof of Western treachery.

By the time European diplomats who did sign the accord left the presidential administration building after the signing ceremony in the late afternoon of Friday, Feb. 21, hundreds of helmeted police officers who had been a menacing presence when they arrived were piling into buses ready to drive away.

The scene dismayed and alarmed Poland’s foreign minister, Radoslaw Sikorski, who signed the truce deal as an observer. “It was astonishing. Within 45 minutes of the signing, after some prayer, we were walking out of the building, and all the riot police were leaving as we left the building,” Mr. Sikorski recalled. “Not just from the presidential compound, but from all the government buildings.”

When Russia’s foreign minister, Sergey V. Lavrov, later complained to him that Mr. Yanukovych had been ousted in an armed coup, Mr. Sikorski told him that “this wasn’t a coup. The government was abandoned.” Mr. Lavrov, according to Mr. Sikorski, responded that “the police were without the power to shoot, so they were afraid of Maidan, so they left.”



Protesters invading the grounds of the residence of President Viktor F. Yanukovych on Feb. 22, 2014, after he fled Kiev. Credit Sergey Ponomarev for The New York Times

‘He Had to Leave’

With the presidential administration building and also his home unguarded from the afternoon of Friday, Feb. 21, Mr. Yanukovych judged that it was time for him, too, to leave Kiev, at least for a few days, his associates said.

“When they removed the guards around the presidential administration, he had to leave,” said Mr. Dobkin, who was serving at the time as governor of Kharkiv, an industrial eastern region in whose capital, Kharkiv, Mr. Yanukovych had decided to seek refuge on Friday evening.

“He called and said, ‘I’m coming, either tonight or tomorrow,’ ” Mr. Dobkin recalled, adding that Mr. Yanukovych presented his proposed trip east as just another presidential inspection tour and was desperate to “make it look like he wasn’t running away.” To keep up appearances, he asked Mr. Dobkin to “ ‘pick out a few factories for me to visit.’ ”

Mr. Dobkin tried to set something up at a Kharkiv turbine factory, Turboatom, but the director, who would previously have jumped at a chance to meet the president, now wanted nothing to do with Mr. Yanukovych. The director, said Mr. Dobkin, declined even to take his call.

Met at the airport in Kharkiv after midnight by Mr. Dobkin, Mr. Yanukovych did not seem in a panic, or even to understand the gravity of the situation. “He thought this was a temporary difficulty,” Mr. Dobkin recalled, describing the president as “a guy on another planet” who believed that the deal brokered by the Europeans could still provide for a graceful exit later in the year.

He did not realize, Mr. Dobkin said, that rather than securing his future, the deal, which provided for early elections and other concessions, only sent a signal to Mr. Yanukovych’s allies that it was time to change sides.

“When a leader stops being a leader, all the people around him fall away,” Mr. Dobkin said. “That is the rule.” He added, “To betray on time is not to betray, but to foresee.”

The violence that convulsed Kiev in the days before Mr. Yanukovich's departure came to an abrupt halt as soon as he left. Early on the morning of Saturday, Feb. 22, protesters, amazed to find streets empty of the police, took control of the presidential administration building, Mr. Yanukovich's residence and other previously impregnable buildings by simply walking up to and through their front gates.

A few hours later, in a melancholy television address from Kharkiv, his last public statement before he fled to Russia, Mr. Yanukovich insisted that he remained president, complaining that his car had been shot at and that he had been betrayed by turncoats.

"There are traitors," he said. "I don't want to talk about them. I do not want to name any names. Let it be on their own conscience and their responsibility."

Correction: January 11, 2015

An article last Sunday about fast-paced events last February that led to the abrupt downfall of Ukraine's president, Viktor F. Yanukovich, misspelled the surname of an ally of the president who broke with him over his refusal to sign a trade deal with the European Union. She is Inna Bogoslovskaya, not Bogolovskaya.