

As His Fortunes Fell in Ukraine, a President Clung to Illusions

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Launch media viewer

Protesters waved a Ukrainian flag in Independence Square in Kiev after President Viktor F. Yanukovych fled the capital. Credit Brendan Hoffman/Getty Images

As his allies deserted him and throngs of people bayed for his blood almost within earshot of his office, President Viktor F. Yanukovych took time out on Friday to celebrate Ukraine's first gold medal at the Olympic Games in Sochi, Russia. In a message of congratulations to the women's biathlon relay team, he praised its "power and will to win."

Shortly before issuing that message, Mr. Yanukovych, still driven by a "will to win" of his own that many others in his crumbling administration had abandoned, signed an agreement with three opposition leaders that he hoped would keep him in power until December, and perhaps longer.

"He was fighting hard to preserve whatever he could and yield the least," said Radoslaw Sikorski, the foreign minister of Poland, who spent hours with Mr. Yanukovych as part of a team of European diplomats who mediated the accord. "His big miscalculation, as always, was to leave things too late. Timing is everything."

By late Friday afternoon, Mr. Yanukovych's time had run out. Between the signing ceremony for the peace deal, held at the vast, colonnaded building that houses Ukraine's presidential administration, and his break for Olympic cheerleading, the president's prospects had taken a drastic turn for the worse: Hundreds of riot police officers guarding the presidential compound and nearby government buildings had vanished.

"It was astonishing," said Mr. Sikorski, who, while leaving the presidential building, watched in dismay as police officers jumped into buses and drove off. "That was not part of the deal. Astonishing."

The departure of the police had been days in the making, a result of a sequence of events that began late on Wednesday with the seizing of an Interior Ministry armory in the western city of Lviv and the transportation of those weapons to the outskirts of Kiev, the capital. Violent clashes on Thursday, which left more than 80 protesters and many police officers dead, enraged the opposition and sapped the will of Mr. Yanukovich's enforcers, if not Mr. Yanukovich himself.

By the end of Friday, the deal that Mr. Yanukovich had believed would win him at least a few more months in office was dead, discarded the moment enraged protesters in Kiev's Independence Square learned of it. But Mr. Yanukovich was on a plane to the eastern city of Kharkiv, a planned trip that he still appeared to believe would be just another official visit in his four-year-old presidency.

The political crisis erupted in November after Mr. Yanukovich rejected, at the last minute, a trade deal with the European Union that he had been promising to sign for months. Throughout, the president displayed an almost delusional disregard of the forces gathering against him, along with a misplaced trust in his supporters' loyalty and determination to defend him.

"He was living in an illusion right to the end," said a Ukrainian politician close to the president's entourage who asked not to be named because, like many in Mr. Yanukovich's camp, he feared attracting unwelcome attention. "He did not believe it was over."

Like Nicolae Ceausescu — the brutal and sinister Romanian leader who, even after being taken captive in December 1989, continued to believe that he would prevail — Mr. Yanukovich seemed to persevere in the belief that he could hold on. After misjudging the mood on the street time and time again, he was simply overtaken by reality.

In a television interview given in Kharkiv on Saturday after protesters had taken control of his offices, his palatial residence outside Kiev and other once-impregnable centers of power, Mr. Yanukovich complained indignantly that the events in Kiev had prevented him from attending a Soviet-style congress in Kharkiv of politicians and dignitaries from eastern and southern Ukraine.

"I wanted to take part in today's congress," he said, dressed in a dark blue suit as if attending an official engagement, "but it turned out I could not attend. I could not waste time because I had to be in communication all the time" with Kiev.

He went on to declare that he had not resigned and had no intention of doing so, denouncing "traitors" in his own camp and dismissing protesters as hooligans and vandals who had staged a coup. Recalling that he had bounced back from trouble before and rebuilt his political power base, the Party of Regions, after the tumult of Ukraine's 2004 Orange Revolution, he vowed to stay in the country and make a public report every day on what he was doing to re-establish his position as president.

Mr. Yanukovich has not been heard from since. Even his official presidential website, which was still under his control through the takeover of Kiev by protesters on Saturday, finally died on Sunday. At the same time, his last allies jumped ship, with his party issuing a scathing statement denouncing him as a coward, a criminal and a crook.

The events that led to his ouster accelerated early last week after a month of relative calm. On Tuesday, empowered by a new aid package from Russia announced the day before, Mr. Yanukovich pressed to remove an encampment of antigovernment activists from Independence Square, where they had been cursing his government since November.

Squads of riot police overpowered the outer ring of defenses protesters had set up and advanced to within 25 yards of a stage in the center of the square, called the Maidan.

Running out of options, the protesters mounted a final, desperate defense, a so-called ring of fire stoked with tires, firewood and even their own sleeping bags and pads.

But Andrei Levus, deputy head of the Maidan "self-defense" forces, the umbrella organization of militant activists fighting the government, knew he had reinforcements on the

way. Protesters in Lviv had overrun an Interior Ministry garrison and were en route to Kiev with the captured military weapons.

"I'm reluctant to talk about this because we are protesters and not illegal armed groups," Mr. Levus said. "But the square was about to look different. There would be more people, and they would not have had empty hands."

Despite the dwindling of the protective fires, the protesters decided to hold on to the square long enough for both sides to consider the significance of the arrival of the weapons in the capital.

Using a member of Parliament as an intermediary, Mr. Levus opened a line of communication with a deputy interior minister, whom he declined to name. It appeared that Mr. Yanukovich, perhaps sensing that his security forces were reluctant to press the crackdown, was inclined to turn to the army for help. He had fired the armed forces chief of staff, Col. Gen. Volodymyr Zamana, on Monday.

"We understood they had a few hundred fanatical riot police, but the rest of the police would not fight," Mr. Levus said.

Several street fighters who were on the barricades early Thursday morning said that they saw police officers walking away from their positions, and that this emboldened them. Some protesters fired hunting rifles and shotguns. Police lines crumpled.

"Our people are ideologically motivated, and on the contrary, they were demoralized," Mr. Levus said. "They did not want this fight. And he understood that our people were ready to run against gunfire."

Mr. Levus said he received a call on his cellphone around noon on Thursday from the deputy interior minister. "I told him, 'We will guarantee the safety of the police if they leave the city,'" he said.

The deputy minister agreed first to a cease-fire until 3 p.m., when Parliament was set to meet. With support from some members of Mr. Yanukovich's quickly disintegrating Party of Regions, Parliament voted to support the protesters' demand that the police demobilize.

Mr. Yanukovich, for his part, had begun discussions with the European mediators. According to Mr. Sikorski, the Polish foreign minister, the president was digging in his heels, telling the French, German and Polish diplomats that he was not to blame for the crisis and refusing even to consider setting a date for an early election.

Mr. Sikorski said he told Mr. Yanukovich that the only way to sell a deal to the opposition was to specify when a new presidential election would be held. "You need to declare on what date you'll resign," he said he told the president.

Mr. Yanukovich "went white," Mr. Sikorski said. But the deadlock lifted after the Ukrainian leader received a phone call shortly afterward from President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia. "He came back, he was agreeing to limit his time in office," Mr. Sikorski said. "That made everything possible."

At the same time, the police and Parliament had their own deliberations underway. On Friday morning, Parliament passed a motion dismissing Mr. Yanukovich's hated interior minister, Vitaly Zakharchenko, for using violence against protesters. And the protesters' fighting groups held talks with individual police commanders about how their officers would withdraw, in keeping with an earlier resolution by Parliament calling on the riot police to stand down.

"We negotiated with the commanders of different units," Mr. Levus said. "They called and asked simply to be allowed to safely leave the city. We made a corridor, and some buses were escorted by our cars."

By late Friday afternoon, just as the European diplomats were leaving the presidential offices after the signing of the peace deal, police officers at the most sensitive positions around Mr. Yanukovich's office compound and the Cabinet of Ministers building were withdrawing.

When the protesters in Independence Square heard the details of the deal, they made clear it was a nonstarter. Furious that Mr. Yanukovich would be allowed to stay in office until December, the crowd chanted, “Out, bandits,” and “Death to the criminal.”

Volodymyr Parasiuk, a leader of one of the fighting units, took to the stage and announced that his men would begin armed attacks if Mr. Yanukovich had not resigned by morning.

By dawn, well-organized groups of protesters armed with clubs and shields, but not guns, were already swarming toward Mr. Yanukovich’s offices, the Cabinet of Ministers building (the headquarters of the government) and Parliament. With the police forces gone, they met no resistance.

Vadim Ovad, who used to work as a driver and bodyguard, said he reached the Cabinet of Ministers building around 6 a.m. and joined other members of his unit in guarding it. As the sun came up and news spread that Mr. Yanukovich had left Kiev, people from across the city began flooding into the area to savor a victory few had expected.

“I have never seen so many people smiling,” Mr. Ovad said. “Everyone is overflowing with delight.”