

Two years since the Kiev coup

Part one

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February marked two years since Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich fled the country's capital, having been forcibly removed from power after several months of increasingly violent street protests backed by the US and its European allies. Despite having just signed a deal with opposition leaders brokered by European diplomats that was supposedly intended to resolve the crisis, Yanukovich was stripped of his powers by the parliament in Kiev. After days of heavy fighting with government security forces, Right Sector, a neo-fascist militia formed by leading political figures in the protests, which were centered in Kiev's Maidan Square, had gained control of the city center. Right Sector declared that it would not accept any arrangement that allowed Yanukovich to remain in power.

The movement to bring down the elected Ukrainian government was touched off in November 2013 when Yanukovich refused at the last minute to sign an association agreement with the European Union. He feared that the structural adjustment program demanded by the EU would hammer the largely Russian-speaking eastern industrial regions of Ukraine where he and his Party of Regions had their traditional base of support. This would cause a social explosion directed against his corrupt and already unpopular regime. Yanukovich decided instead to join a customs union with Russia, which was offering loans, trade advantages and continued access to natural gas at below-market rates.

Opposition parties with ties to Washington and various wings of the European political establishment mobilized demonstrations in response. Speaking on behalf of a layer of the business elite and better-off segments of the population tired of being cut out of official politics, and hoping to profit from closer ties with the EU, the protests opposed Yanukovich's oligarchic rule on the basis of anti-Russian chauvinism and free-market policies.

Utilizing amorphous anti-corruption and anti-establishment slogans, the Maidan protests garnered a measure of support from broader layers of the population, particularly in its initial stages and at later points when the government attempted to suppress them. However, at their height, the Maidan demonstrations never attracted more than 300,000 people in a country of over 45 million. As a class, the country's workers stayed away, organizing neither mass strikes nor labor actions in support.

The political character of the Maidan movement rapidly made itself clear. Representatives from Ukraine's ultra-nationalist and neo-fascist parties took center stage alongside the country's super-rich. Ukrainian boxer Vitali Klitschko, with an estimated net worth of \$65 million, was one of the protests' spokespeople. Far-right battalions emblazoned with Nazi-era insignia marched in demonstrations and served as Maidan's shock troops.

Western diplomats made public appearances at Maidan rallies and were in constant communication with opposition leaders regarding how to secure their aims. A notorious leaked tape of a phone call between US Assistant Secretary of State Victoria Nuland and US Ambassador to Ukraine Geoffrey Pyatt documented Washington's direct role in

determining the constitution of the post-coup government in Kiev. In November 2013, Nuland boasted that since 1991 the US had sunk \$5 billion into Ukraine in an effort to promote "civic engagement" and "democratic skills and aspirations."

Yanukovich's overthrow in 2014 was the culmination of long-standing efforts on the part of the US to install a pliant regime with close ties to Washington on the borders of Russia. The ultimate aim of this operation is to reduce Russia to neo-colonial status, including through its possible dismemberment, thereby enabling the US to establish its hegemony over the Eurasian continent.

In the 2004 "Orange Revolution," American-backed Viktor Yushchenko was able to wrest power from Yanukovich in a contested election accompanied by street protests. But Yushchenko and his soon-to-be erstwhile ally Yulia Tymoshenko quickly lost the support of the population. Their corrupt free-market policies drove down workers' living standards while enriching wealthy upper-middle class layers and the country's oligarchs. In 2010, Yanukovich, who retained close ties to Moscow, won the presidential election.

The unwillingness of Yanukovich to reorient his government towards the US and the EU in 2014 was deemed unacceptable by Western imperialism. Germany, which at the beginning of 2014 announced that it was abandoning its pacifist pretensions and returning openly to the path of militarism and realpolitik, was, along with the US, determined to force Yanukovich from office. Fearing that he would suffer a similar fate to that of Muammar Gaddafi, who had been savagely murdered in a US-backed coup in 2011, Yanukovich fled the country. The right-wing forces behind Maidan were installed as Ukraine's new government.

Arseniy Yatsenyuk, a leader of Tymoshenko's nationalist Fatherland Party, headed the new administration. Tymoshenko would soon call for a "scorched earth" policy against Russians and for "killing those assholes" who make up 17 percent of the Ukrainian population and whose language is spoken by much of the country, including ethnic Ukrainians.

Yatsenyuk handed six cabinet posts to the Svoboda Party, the neo-fascist organization founded in 1991 as the Social-National Party of Ukraine. Now embraced by the US and Germany as the leading force in the "democratic" Maidan movement, in 2012 the European Parliament had condemned Svoboda for its "racist, anti-Semitic and xenophobic views." At that time it called on Ukraine's parliament "not to associate with, endorse, or form coalitions with" Svoboda. The party's leader, Oleh Tyahnybok, has repeatedly declared his determination to crush the "Russkie-Yid mafia that controls Ukraine."

Two years later, what has become of Ukraine? And what have been the broader European and international consequences of the February 2014 coup?

The Maidan operation in Ukraine has brought the world to the brink of war. Immediately following the event, opposition exploded in the country's predominantly Russian-speaking southeast, with people demanding separation from Ukraine. Kiev responded with brute force.

Crimea's overwhelmingly Russian population then voted to reunify with Russia and the peninsula was subsequently annexed by Moscow.

This evoked a hysterical campaign against the Kremlin, which was accused of military aggression in Crimea and eastern Ukraine. It was charged with seeking to take over Eastern Europe and reestablish an empire on the territory of the former USSR. The *New York Times* published purported photographic evidence, handed to it by the US government, of masked Russian soldiers invading southeastern Ukraine, a story it was forced to retract as based on doctored photographs. When Malaysian Airlines Flight 17 crashed in Ukraine, the US and its allies blamed the Kremlin and Russian-backed separatists in Ukraine's southeast for the plane's destruction. No substantial evidence was ever produced to back this up, and the issue of responsibility for the downing of the plane remains unresolved to this day.

All of this was used to justify a massive US-NATO military buildup along Russia's borders. NATO forces are deployed in the Baltic states, military exercises are being carried out in the Black Sea, Poland is being readied for war with its eastern neighbor, and the possible use of nuclear weapons is almost routinely spoken of in connection with deterring alleged Russian aggression.

In September 2014, on a visit to Estonia, US President Obama declared Washington's "unwavering," "eternal," and "unbreakable" commitment to defend the Baltic states, which are ruled by right-wing nationalist regimes hostile to Moscow. In total disregard for the sentiments of the American people, the US government pledged to go to war with nuclear-armed Russia in the event of a clash between Estonia, Latvia or Lithuania, and Moscow.

In an effort to destabilize the Putin government and provoke the disintegration of Russia, the US and Europe imposed economic sanctions on Moscow that have, coupled with currency speculation and a collapse in the price of oil, pushed the country into recession and dramatically eroded living standards.

As for Ukraine itself, in 2015 the country's economy contracted by 10 percent. To meet the demands of the International Monetary Fund, Kiev has gutted spending on social programs, frozen wages, laid off public employees and sharply increased what it charges consumers for utilities. Last year the government hiked the cost of natural gas by 285 percent and water by over 70 percent. Pensions have been cut by 15 percent, which has amounted to 40 percent in real terms. Fifteen percent of teachers have been laid off. Still, the IMF refuses to release the third tranche of a \$35 billion bailout, insisting that the government is not moving fast enough to "reform" the economy.

Under conditions where the average monthly wage is about 1,176 hryvnia (\$50), by mid-2015, one-third of Ukraine's population was living below the poverty line. Based on World Bank data, this is a nearly four-fold increase over 2013. As of last year, the youth unemployment rate stood at 23 percent, the highest since 1991, when Ukraine became an independent state as part of the dissolution of the USSR.

One-and-a-half million people have fled Ukraine's Donbass region, where the government and far-right paramilitary battalions have sought to suppress a pro-Russian separatist movement. The flood of refugees has spawned a hunger crisis. The World Food Programme is in urgent need of \$35 million to feed an expected 260,000 displaced people. The fighting in eastern Ukraine is costing an estimated \$5 million a day and has resulted in upwards of 9,000 deaths.

The Ukrainian armed forces, which had been disintegrating under the weight of widespread desertions and mass opposition to conscription, is being propped up with the aid of American military advisers and infusions of cash from Washington. The Ukrainian military collaborates with marauding bands of neo-fascists, which the government is often unable to control. The regime in Kiev is itself investigating these militias for kidnappings, murder, armed assault and robbery.

The government, headed by the "Chocolate King" oligarch, President Petro Poroshenko, remains staffed by a combination of ardent right-wingers, ultra-nationalists, anti-communists and open Nazi sympathizers. Dmytro Yarosh, a Svoboda party member and leader of Right Sector, serves as a military adviser to the government. Far-right violence regularly erupts around the country. To mark the two-year anniversary of Maidan, mobs of Ukrainian nationalists burned and looted Russian banks in Kiev, Lviv and Mariupol last month. The American private intelligence think tank Stratfor writes of a "proliferation of right-wing movements" in the country.

The post-Yanukovich government is despised by the general population. Poroshenko's approval rating has fallen by 30 points since he assumed power in May of 2014, and now stands at just 17 percent, well below that of his predecessor. The only individual perhaps more hated than Poroshenko is Prime Minister Yatsenyuk, the IMF's hatchet man on the ground. He has the support of 8 percent of the population and only just narrowly survived a no-confidence vote last month in parliament.

The claim that Maidan would usher in a democratic renaissance in Ukraine lies in tatters. So does the argument that Yanukovich's violent ouster was a defensive response to a government slaughter of peaceful protesters. Evidence continues to emerge that the "sniper massacre" of February 20, 2014, in which demonstrators were allegedly killed by Yanukovich's security services (Berkut) in an unprovoked attack, was, in the words of scholar Ivan Katchanovski, "a false flag operation, which was rationally planned and carried out with a goal of the overthrow of the government and seizure of power." Most recently, Ivan Bubenchik, a Maidan gunman, acknowledged that he targeted and killed two Berkut commanders before the security forces fired any shots into the crowd.

The events of the last two years have vindicated the position of the *World Socialist Web Site* and the International Committee of the Fourth International. The WWSW tirelessly exposed the right-wing forces behind Maidan and pointed out the dangerous implications of the Kiev coup. It explained the origins of the event in the dissolution of the Soviet Union at the hands of the Stalinist Communist Party bureaucracy, the insatiable drive of US imperialism to establish hegemony over Eurasia, and the reactionary character of the Russian ruling elite, which seeks only to defend its own ill-gotten wealth at the expense of the working class.

We wrote on February 25, 2014, "The recent events in Ukraine are a warning to the international working class. Under conditions in which workers lack both a perspective and a party to enable them to intervene independently in political events, the situation in Ukraine has developed in an extremely reactionary direction. What had been unthinkable in Europe since the fall of Hitler's Third Reich in 1945 has come to pass: while the US and Germany ruthlessly and recklessly destabilized the country, fascists became the decisive force on the ground."

To be continued



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