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Ukraine's Two Nations

By James Brooke

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To understand what is happening in Kiev today, remember that Ukraine has a larger landmass in Europe than France, the largest nation of the European Union.

Western Ukrainians look to Poland, Austria and Germany. People consider themselves European to the core. City halls in Western Ukraine now fly EU flags. In schools, children study German and Polish. This new post-Soviet generation speaks Russian poorly, if at all.

Travel 1,200 kilometers to the east, and Ukrainians look to Russia. They produce goods that are exported to Russia. They speak Russian. The Soviet generation often has a hard time speaking Ukrainian, the national language.

For three years as president, Viktor Yanukovych has tried to balance these two sides, roughly comparable to the way pre-Civil War U.S. presidents tried to keep America's house together by waffling on slavery.

Now, the EU and the Kremlin are telling Ukraine: make your choice! This winter, in the

biggest political crisis since Ukraine won independence in 1991, foot soldiers for both sides are on the march.

At Kiev's pro-government camp, Grisha, a 30-year-old tattooed construction worker from the Russian-speaking city of Nikolaev, says his opposition to the EU is a no brainer. Reeling off the names of his city's three remaining factories, all from the Soviet era, he says: "If Russia refuses to buy, the factories simply shut down."

But one kilometer down a cobblestone street, views are diametrically opposed.

In normal times, Oleg works in a pharmaceutical warehouse in Lviv, the western Ukrainian city near Poland. But now, he mans a 3-meter high barrier that faces Kiev's government quarter.

Taking a break from scrutinizing a constant flow of pedestrians entering the pro-Western camp, Oleg says the EU is a no brainer.

He is confident that by orienting his country toward the EU, Ukraine can be Europe's next Poland. He says: "The country will be more open, and investment will come, and factories will work again."

In Kiev, the capital, people are responding overwhelmingly in favor of the "Euromaidan." Specialized Facebook groups channel a steady flow of warm clothing, tents, firewood and food to Kiev's Independence Square. Some of Ukraine's best pop groups sing nightly on the stage. After three weeks of police attacks and freezing temperatures, the Euromaidan keeps bouncing back, always larger than before.

The Ukrainian Interior Ministry no longer views Kiev police as politically reliable. Repressive actions are carried out by riot police trucked in from Russian speaking areas of Ukraine. But, in general, policemen are known to be fans of Vitali Klitschko, the 2-meter tall boxing prize fighter who is the opposition's rising star.

Ukraine's financial oligarchs now are covering their bets. Two of the nation's richest men, Victor Pinchuk and Rinat Akhmetov, have broken their silence and called on the president to start serious talks with the opposition.

Ducking responsibility, Yanukovych blames the police violence on rogue policemen and the fact that he did not sign a EU trade and political association agreement on his own negotiators.

On Monday, he travels to Moscow to sign economic agreements.

For three centuries, much of what is modern day Ukraine was ruled from the Kremlin. Under the tsars, it was called "Little Russia."

In 2008, at a NATO meeting President Vladimir Putin told U.S. President George W. Bush, "Ukraine is not a real country."

Time will tell if Yanukovych can keep Ukraine's two nations under one roof.

James Brooke is the Moscow bureau chief of Voice of America.

The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

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