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Why Yanukovych Is Scared

By Yevgeny Kiselyov

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Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych shocked everybody on Saturday. After showing no willingness to compromise with protesters who are demanding his resignation, Yanukovych unexpectedly proposed serious concessions to his opponents.

Yanukovych offered the prime minister post to Batkivshchyna Party leader Arseny Yatsenyuk and the deputy prime minister post to Vitali Klitchko, the country's popular boxer and head of the other leading opposition party.

What happened?

Protesters are
becoming more
extreme
and unwilling
to reach any
compromise with

Yanukovych. This could lead to a worst-case scenario in which Ukraine is divided into two separate nations.

Many observers drew the standard conclusion that Yanukovych is trying to co-opt the opposition leaders. But his cooperation has a clear ulterior motive: to compromise the opposition leaders and provoke them into quarreling with both moderate and more radical members of their constituencies who have already criticized them for not taking strong enough positions against Yanukovych.

In addition, Yanukovych chose to suddenly reverse course and share power with others because he became truly scared. In the face of mounting political danger, he flinched. Every attempt to intimidate the street protesters with force and repressive laws modeled after those in Russia have only had the opposite effect. The protesters are digging in their heels and are determined to achieve their main political goals: Yanukovych's resignation, an early presidential election, the dismissal of parliament, and the release of former Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko and other political prisoners.

What's more, a dangerous "domino effect" has led to protests and riots breaking out in other major cities in Ukraine, especially in the traditionally opposition-minded western part of the country.

Ukraine's oligarchs have maintained their loyalty to Yanukovych on the surface and do not dare to openly support the protesters, but they are definitely unhappy with what is happening and are quietly funding his opponents. Rinat Akhmetov — the largest and most influential Ukrainian industrialist who was considered Yanukovych's closest ally — recently broke his long silence and strongly advocated peaceful negotiations and compromise between the government and opposition. Although Akhmetov is no longer a parliamentary deputy from Yanukovych's Party of Regions, it is believed that he still exerts influence on the way the party votes. If his fellow deputies in the ruling party refuse to vote with the other factions, not a single initiative will receive the 226 votes needed to pass and all legislation will come to a standstill. And if those deputies switch over to the opposition, it could create a new majority in parliament.

Meanwhile, Yanukovych is concerned about the presidential election slated for March 2015. Yanukovych is also reportedly thinking about reverting to the older version of the Ukrainian constitution that was adopted in late 2004.

At that time, the constitution had been amended to limit presidential power and increase the powers of the prime minister and parliament. In fact, it was by adopting those amendments that Ukraine extricated itself from the acute political crisis known as the Orange Revolution. The post-election crisis was solved when both sides reached a compromise in which Viktor Yushchenko became president with considerably less power than his predecessor had held, while Yanukovych retained the chance to win the upcoming

parliamentary elections and again form a government to take advantage of the newly empowered Verkhovnaya Rada, Ukraine's parliament.

As it turned out, however, Yanukovych did not last long as prime minister — his government was dismissed after the country's first serious political crisis — and so his plans did not pan out.

But once Yanukovych became president in 2010, he got his sweet revenge. One of his first actions was to apply pressure through the Constitutional Court for the repeal of those amendments, thereby returning Ukraine to a presidential republic all over again, thus giving himself expanded executive powers.

Now, as he nears the end of his fourth year in office and the polls show that he has little chance of winning re-election next year, Yanukovych apparently believes that it would be better to return to the model of government in which the president and prime minister share power. That would give him the option of retaining some power for himself as prime minister, especially because his party currently hold the majority in parliament. (The next parliamentary elections are not due until 2017, and it is difficult by law for the president to dismiss parliament before the elections.)

Most protesters oppose all deals and compromises with Yanukovych, refuse to cede a single step and will fight on until they achieve victory, which they believe is imminent. Unfortunately, the opposition might be overestimating its strength and is ignoring the fact that Yanukovych has millions of loyal supporters in the eastern and southern parts of the country — particularly in Donetsk, Lugansk, Odessa and Crimea. Those Ukrainians will not accept a victory by the opposition, just as residents of western Ukraine will not accept a victory over the opposition by the ruling party. Either outcome could lead to a shift toward separatism, with a worse-case scenario being the ultimate division of Ukraine into two separate countries.

One thing that the protesters are ignoring, however, is that Yanukovych remains a democratically elected president, and the loss of legitimacy as a result of recent events does not change that. If they simply ignore Yanukovych's bold proposals to share power in the parliament with opposition leaders, the opposition will appear radical, and they may lose a golden opportunity to reach a peaceful compromise. What's more, protesters now have the possibility of presenting a set of strict demands to Yanukovych and even putting someone like Yatsenyuk at the head of the government.

After that, the opposition could continue to negotiate in search of a suitable compromise. Only if Yanukovych were to later reject the their proposals could opposition leaders justify their rejection of Yanukovych's original offer.

But it will be extremely difficult to convince the extreme factions within the opposition to agree on any compromise with Yanukovych, and they are the ones who are setting the tone in Kiev and other cities.

Yevgeny Kiselyov is a political analyst and television journalist.

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