Ukraine Conflict Divides Families, Neighbors

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KIEV — Over a table piled high with food and wine, a newly married husband and wife watched warily as the toasts began.

Despite asking everyone to steer clear of politics, bringing together relatives from Russia and Ukraine a day after Kiev accused Moscow of arming rebels to bring down an airliner was never going to be easy.

The father of the groom, who hails from Russia, raised his glass: "Our country is now going through difficult times. They are trying to divide us. But we are Russians, Belarussians ... We are one people!"

"Glory to Ukraine!" returned the bride's Ukrainian grandmother loudly, a wedding guest told Reuters.

The rest of the wedding party hissed "Shush!," desperate to head off any ill-feeling, a tall order for any event involving two peoples once joined in the Soviet Union but now more

divided than ever.

Even the most mild-mannered Ukrainians, known for their long-suffering tolerance born of a history of occupation and conflict, have turned on, if not all their neighbors in Russia, one in particular: President Vladimir Putin.

"Putin should understand that it's enough already. This is not a conflict between Ukraine and Russia. It is an international conflict," Ukraine's usually quietly spoken prime minister, Arseniy Yatsenyuk told a news conference.

"Russia is on the dark side, on the side of the devil."

For many Russians, the feeling is mutual.

Since the street protests in Kiev that ousted a pro-Russian president in February, Russia has branded Ukraine's new rulers as fascists. It now says Kiev is being run by U.S. leaders bent on bringing Russia to its knees.

Marriages between Ukrainians and Russians have become tense, families divided, and one couple on the verge of marriage called it off after arguing whether Putin was in the wrong or the right, acquaintances said.

Across the Divide

Kiev says it has "conclusive evidence" that Russia supplied rebels with the BUK-M1, or SA-11 radar guided missile launcher, and the crew that shot down the Malaysian airliner on Thursday, killing all 298 people on board.

Russia denies arming the rebels, and its Defense Ministry has challenged Washington to produce any evidence that a missile was fired at the airliner. The ministry says Ukrainian warplanes had flown close to the aircraft.

"It is obvious it is Russian weapons. I cannot blame the people, but it is clear that one stupid guy, one stupid hand, killed almost 300 people," said Oleksiy Yaroshevych, a consultant on the environment, referring to Putin.

Outside the Dutch Embassy in Kiev, where Ukrainians laid flowers to remember the dead, including 80 children, Yaroshevych said he was ashamed it had happened in Ukraine.

"Maybe this horrible story will help focus the people of Europe to understand that we should do something together against Russia," he said.

Not Putin's Plan

Ukrainian Foreign Minister Pavlo Klymkin concurs, saying Kiev could count on Europe's solidarity but little more.

"I sometimes say ... in Europe they have looked at us as if through a window," he told Ukraine's Inter television.

"And now the terrorists have thrown the stone."

They may have also sharpened the sense for some of what it is to be Ukrainian.

Whether fueled by attachment to the past or an urge for a different future, the violence of the last few months has concentrated many minds on what distinguishes Ukrainians not just from Russia but also from the rest of Europe.

Since the fall of the Soviet Union over 20 years ago Ukraine has struggled to form its identity, making it easy for bigger powers to deepen the divides in a population split between a Ukrainian-speaking west and Russian-speaking southeast.

The country's first and second presidents after independence took pride in holding Ukraine together, acknowledging the pressures on a country that has a 1,000-year history as a state, but has been carved up by its neighbors for centuries.

In Cherkasy in central Ukraine, local activists have taken up painting to offer children, and some adults, traditional Ukrainian murals to compete with the usual global fare of Spiderman and Superman.

Cossacks, with their trademark lock of hair, baggy trousers and peasant shirts, take pride of place alongside stylized women with garlands of ribbons and flowers in their hair.

Benches are painted yellow and blue, the color of the Ukrainian flag. Even a house is split into the two colors.

But there is a long road to travel. On day two back at the wedding in Ukraine's Odessa, known for its mix of Russians and Ukrainians, Arabs and Armenians, Georgians and Bulgarians, Jews and Tatars, the conversation returns to politics.

"Well, there is not a single Russian soldier here, and they still blame Putin," said the mother of the groom.

It is not a version of events that the Ukrainian government and its Western allies accept, but the other guests let it go, for the sake of the newlyweds.

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