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**Why is Ukraine in turmoil?**

**Ukraine is in turmoil after its bloodiest week in decades. Days of deadly clashes between anti-government protesters and police have culminated in parliament voting to oust President Viktor Yanukovych.**

Although he has denounced the act as a coup d'etat, the capital Kiev and his presidential administration are out of his hands.

For three months, anti-government protesters were involved in a stand-off with the authorities that oscillated between calm and violence. On 18 February, the violence escalated dramatically, with policemen being shot, and riot police moving in to clear the peaceful protest camp on Independence Square.

The stakes for Ukraine and its 45 million people are enormous, with the country's fate now part of a wider strategic battle between the West and Russia.

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**What are the protests about?**

Protesters want nothing less than President Viktor Yanukovych's resignation

The protests broke out after President Yanukovych's government rejected a far-reaching accord with the European Union in November 2013 in favour of stronger ties with Russia. Thousands of people, outraged that a long-standing aspiration for integration with Europe had been ditched overnight, poured into central Kiev for peaceful protests. They have occupied Independence Square, known as Maidan, ever since.

Several developments - including police attacks on student protesters, severe new anti-protest laws, and the abduction and beating of opposition activists - caused the demonstrations to spread and intensify. For many people, they were less about Europe than about getting rid of a president who they believed was clinging to power and serving the interests of his own close circle and Moscow.

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**What caused February's deadly clashes?**

Gabriel Gatehouse spent Thursday with protesters and witnessed the clashes up close

The bloodshed in Kiev on 20 February was the worst so far. The health ministry said 77 people had been killed in 48 hours, with nearly 600 wounded.

Video showed police snipers firing live rounds at a group of protesters carrying makeshift shields.

The sudden deterioration began on 18 February - and took many people by surprise. Both sides blamed each other, but who threw the first stone or fired the first shot is still not clear.

The government and opposition had agreed a deal - an amnesty for arrested protesters, if demonstrators vacated captured government buildings.

The opposition had also agreed - with negotiators for the president's ruling Party of the Regions - that parliament would discuss changing the constitution to reduce the president's powers. But then the speaker of parliament refused to allow that on the agenda. As news got out, angry protesters marched on parliament.

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**How did it come to this?**

Demonstrations on Independence Square were initially characterised by a festive, optimistic air...

...but as time has gone on protesters have formed "self-defence" groups, anticipating a violent denouement

These are some of the key events in the escalating unrest:

* **21 November 2013:** Government announces [**EU Association Agreement is being abandoned**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-25032275), prompting major protests in Kiev
* **30 November:**[**Police launch brutal raid**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-25176191) on student protesters; TV images spur [**protests which grow during December**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-25290959)
* **17 December:** Russian President Vladimir Putin offers [**economic lifeline to Ukraine**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-25411118), with $15bn of loans and cheaper gas supplies; protesters see it as Moscow buying off President Yanukovych
* **16 January 2014:**Parliament passes [**anti-protest laws**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-25771595), which opponents call "draconian"; most of the laws later repealed
* **19-20 January**: [**Intense clashes**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-25803233)
* **22 January:**First protest deaths: [**two people die**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-25838962) from gunshot wounds after clashes with police; body of an activist found in a forest days after his abduction
* **23-24 January:**[**Protesters seize government buildings**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-25876807) in Lviv, Ivano-Frankivsk, and other western Ukrainian cities; protests also spread east
* **28 January:**Prime Minister Mykola Azarov and his [**government resign**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-25932352)
* **14-16 February:**Under an [**amnesty deal**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-26220905), protesters vacate occupied government buildings, and charges against those arrested dropped
* **18 February:**Parliament speaker rejects debate on changing constitution; [**violent clashes erupt in Kiev**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/in-pictures-26255926), leaving many dead
* **20 February:**Independence Square and nearby streets become a battlefield. At least 77 people are killed in a 48-hour period, and hundreds wounded in clashes between protesters and police, including many shot by uniformed snipers

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**Who are the protesters?**

Vitali Klitschko, with raised fist, hopes to become president in 2015. Oleh Tyahnybok is second left

The protests have been strongest in the Kiev area and western Ukraine, where there is a greater affinity with Europe to the west, rather than in the Russian-speaking east and south. But there have been protests in eastern Ukraine too.

The leaders of the three opposition parties in parliament - Vitali Klitschko of the pro-EU Udar movement; Arseniy Yatsenyuk of the main opposition Fatherland; and Oleh Tyahnybok of the far-right Svoboda - have been on the Maidan, attempting to direct the protests and trying to present a united front.

But these leaders appear not to enjoy the full trust of many protesters. The Fatherland party, in particular, is tainted by its recent years in government and seen by some as part of the political establishment.

Some radical right-wing groups, like Right Sector and Common Cause, have been at the forefront of clashes with police, though it is not clear how much support they have.

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**What is at stake?**

Ukraine seems be caught in a modern "Great Game". Vladimir Putin wants to make Russia a global economic player, rivalling China, the US and EU. To that end he is creating a customs union with other countries and sees Ukraine as a vital and natural element in that - not least because of the countries' deep cultural and historical ties.

The EU says assimilation and eventual membership could be worth billions of euros to Ukraine, modernising its economy and giving it access to the single market. It also wants to reverse what it sees as damaging infringements on democracy and human rights in Ukraine.

Many Ukrainians in the east, working in heavy industry that supplies Russian markets, are fearful of losing their jobs if Kiev throws in its lot with Brussels. But many in the west want the prosperity and the rule of law they believe the EU would bring. They point out that while Ukraine had a bigger GDP than Poland in 1990, Poland's economy is now nearly three times larger.

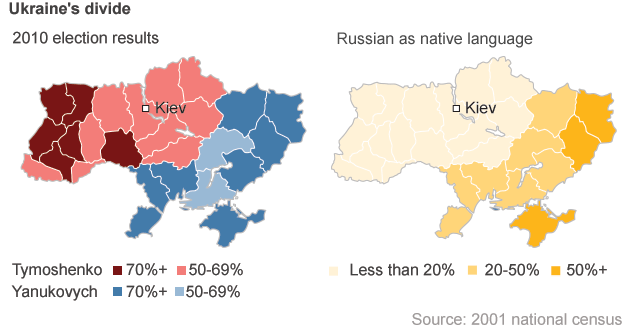
[**Kremlin strategy on Ukraine**](http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-25401179)

[**Ukraine's failing economy - who is to blame?**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-26127210)

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**Will Ukraine split in two?**

Much has been made of the cultural-linguistic divide between Ukraine's east and west - and the way this is to some extent reflected in voting patterns. Russian is widely spoken in parts of the east and south, and in some places, like the Crimean peninsula, is the main language. This is largely down to heavy immigration from Russia during the Soviet era. In westernmost regions - where Poland and Austria were dominant for hundreds of years - the population speaks Ukrainian, tends to be more nationalistic and identifies with Central Europe.



Maps show that areas where a significant proportion of people speak Russian almost exactly match those which voted for Mr Yanukovych in 2010. Some commentators suggest this shows the country is liable to split violently across the middle. But others say this is unlikely - and that many in the east still identify as Ukrainians, even if they speak Russian.

[**Is east deserting Yanukovych?**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-25925372)

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**What led to parliament voting to oust Viktor Yanukovych?**

President Yanukovych signed a deal with opposition leaders after lengthy talks with the foreign ministers of three EU countries - France, Germany and Poland.

He offered early elections - to be held by December - and the formation of a new coalition government and said he was ready to reform the constitution, to return to the 2004 constitution under which parliament had more powers.

But overnight into Saturday 22 February the heavily armed guard around the presidential offices slipped away and Mr Yanukovych himself was also nowhere to be seen.

It appears he had flown to Kharkiv where he gave a TV interview insisting he was still in power. But events had moved too quickly for him. His arch-rival Yulia Tymoshenko - jailed in 2011 - has been freed and has flown to Kiev, the city where President Yanukovych no longer appears to have control.

Even many in his own party deserted him.

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**What is Russia's role in Ukraine?**

Russia offered cheaper gas after nearly four weeks of street protests in Ukraine

Moscow clearly had a strong influence over Mr Yanukovych, whom it backed during the 2004 Orange Revolution when his election was ruled to have been fraudulent. To many observers, Russia has used a carrot-and-stick approach to Ukraine. It suspended its loans when the Ukrainian government resigned, and restricted trade when Ukraine looked like signing up with the EU. The EU called this "unacceptable" economic pressure.

But Russia accused the EU of trying to doing the same, using free trade with Europe as the temptation.

There are also very rich oligarchs in Ukraine, thought to have political influence behind the scenes. The richest, Rinat Akhmetov, has issued strong statements backing people's right to peaceful protest. But some oligarchs are thought to have been sidelined under Mr Yanukovych, in favour of a new group centred around his own family.