**Behind the Headlines: History and Geography Help Explain Ukraine Crisis**

The country rests precariously between East and West

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**Charged with the**[**mass killings of civilians**](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/ousted-ukraine-president-accused-of-mass-murder/2014/02/24/c2e19d30-9d47-11e3-b8d8-94577ff66b28_story.html)**, Ukraine's recently ousted president, Viktor Yanukovych, is now on the lam.**

Last November Yanukovych touched off months of deadly protests in the capital of Kiev and other cities by caving into pressure from the country's former overlords in Moscow and[shelving a landmark trade deal](http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2013-12-15/news/sns-rt-us-ukraine-eu-20131211_1_prime-minister-mykola-azarov-moscow-led-customs-union-arseny-yatsenyuk) with the European Union.[Dozens of citizens died](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/21/world/europe/ukraine.html) last week in clashes with police and security forces in Kiev.

On Saturday evening, the Ukrainian parliament voted to[remove Yanukovych from his post](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/feb/23/ukraine-crisis-interim-president-turchynov-yanukovych-tymoshenko) as president.

The new government has now issued a[warrant for the president's arrest](http://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/ukraine-parliament-chief-takes-presidential-power-22636660), but his exact whereabouts are unknown.

Yanukovych left Kiev by helicopter on Friday after signing an agreement to end the protests. On Saturday, he arrived in the eastern city of Donetsk, where he was prevented from leaving the country on a private jet. He then drove to Ukraine's pro-Russian Crimean Peninsula and was most recently[rumored to be in Sevastopol](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/feb/24/fugitive-viktor-yanukovych-balaclava-sevastopol-ukraine), the home port of both the Ukrainian navy and Russia's Black Sea fleet.

**The Fault Lines of History**

A look back into the country's history and geography helps explain why Yanukovych would flee eastward, and how the passions and upheaval in the recent news stem from centuries of battles over [Ukraine](http://travel.nationalgeographic.com/travel/countries/ukraine-guide/)'s precarious position between East and West.

It was a history that created fault lines. Eastern Ukraine fell under Russian imperial rule by the late 17th century, much earlier than western Ukraine. This helps to explain why, after the fall of the Soviet Union, people in the east have generally supported more Russian-leaning politicians. Western Ukraine spent centuries under the shifting control of European powers like Poland and the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The western third of Ukraine was even part of Poland for several years leading up to World War II. That, to some degree, helps explain why people in the west have tended to support more Western-leaning politicians. The east tends to be more Russian-speaking and Orthodox, with parts of the west more Ukrainian-speaking and with heavier Roman Catholic influences.

But it's not just about geography or religion. "The biggest divide," says[Adrian Karatnycky](http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/about/experts/list/adrian-karatnycky), a Ukraine expert at the Atlantic Council of the United States, "is between those who view the Russian imperial and Soviet rule more sympathetically versus those who see them as a tragedy."

At first there were no such divisions. In the ninth century, Ukraine, known as Kievan Rus, was becoming the early seat of Slavic power and of the newly adopted Orthodox religion. But Mongol invasions in the 13th century curtailed Kiev's rise, with power eventually shifting north into Russia, to present-day St. Petersburg and Moscow.

**East and West**

Over the centuries, Ukraine—with its rich black soil that would help it become a major grain producer—was continually carved up by competing powers. In the 16th century, major swaths of the country were under the control of Poland and Lithuania, with Cossack fighters patrolling Ukraine's frontier with Poland.

In the 17th century, war between the Tsardom of Russia and the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth resulted in more internal divisions. Lands to the east of the Dnieper River fell under Russian imperial control much earlier than Ukrainian lands to the west of the Dnieper. The east became known as "Left Bank" Ukraine and as a center of industry and coal. Lands to the west of the Dnieper, or "Right Bank," were to be ruled by Poland. A small part in the west, called Galicia, was allotted to the Austro-Hungarian Empire in the late 19th century. The Austro-Hungarian Empire ended at the conclusion of World War I, and Galicia remained outside the Russian Empire, becoming incorporated into the U.S.S.R. only as a result of the World War II.

Under the reign of Catherine the Great, the steppe areas of eastern Ukraine became major economic centers of coal and iron. The Ukrainian language—spoken in rural areas—was twice banned by decree of the tsar, says Karatnycky (and today both Ukrainian and Russian are spoken in the country). But peace did not last for long. After the communist revolution of 1917, Ukraine was one of the many countries to suffer a brutal civil war before becoming a Soviet republic in 1920.

**Ukrainian Identity**

In the early 1930s, to force peasants into joining collective farms, Soviet leader[Joseph Stalin](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/historic_figures/stalin_joseph.shtml) orchestrated a famine that resulted in the starvation and death of millions of Ukrainians. Afterward, Stalin imported large numbers of Russians and other Soviet citizens—many with no ability to speak Ukrainian and with few ties to the region—to help repopulate the east.

This, says former ambassador to Ukraine[Steven Pifer](http://ukraine.usembassy.gov/pifer.html), is just one of the historic reasons that helps explain why "the sense of Ukrainian nationalism is not as deep in the east as it is in west."

On some maps you can even see the divide between the southern and eastern parts of Ukraine—known as the steppes—with their fertile farming soil, and the northern and western regions, which are more forested, says[Serhii Plokhii](http://history.fas.harvard.edu/people/faculty/plokhii.php), a history professor at Harvard and director of the university's Ukrainian Research Institute. The institute has created a map depicting the demarcations between the steppe and the forest, a diagonal line between east and west, that bears a "striking resemblance" to political maps of the Ukrainian presidential elections in 2004 and 2010.

As the protests spread east, the conflict "metamorphosed into much more," says Pifer. It was initially about Europe but in the end turned to the issues of democracy and the end of corruption. There also appeared to be political divisions based on demographics, between younger and older generations, not just geography and a turbulent history.