

**The Situation in Ukraine**  
**Briefing before the Standing Committee on**  
**Foreign Affairs and International Development**  
**House of Commons, Parliament of Canada**

**Michael Druckman**  
**Resident Country Director, [International Republican Institute](#)**

**March 24, 2014**

Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, I am honored to appear before you today on behalf of the International Republican Institute (IRI). We thank the Committee for its kind invitation to offer our thoughts regarding the situation in Ukraine and to share with you some insights on activities that IRI is conducting there. I am pleased to follow-up on the earlier exchange the Committee had with IRI's president, Ambassador Mark Green. Again, I am grateful that you have given us an opportunity to share our insights today.

**Recent Events in Ukraine**

Mr. Chairman, not since it became independent in 1991, has Ukraine had such an opportunity to reform its political, economic and judicial systems. At the same time, Ukraine faces an existential threat from multiple internal and external actors. It is critical that the international community support the democratic process in Ukraine, especially to ensure a transparent presidential election in May. That election is important for stabilizing the country and empowering the new government in Kyiv to implement long-term reforms.

Former President Viktor Yanukovich's sudden reversal on European integration in November 2013 precipitated spontaneous protests by Ukrainian citizens throughout the country, with the biggest protest in Kyiv. The Ukrainian government attempted to suppress the movement, popularly known as the EuroMaidan (European Square), by brutally beating those involved, most of whom were students. As a result of the government's brutal crackdown on November 30, up to a million Ukrainians from across the country flooded into the capital to exercise their right to protest peacefully.

Violence erupted in January and again in mid-February during which government forces utilized rubber bullets, tear gas and water cannons against peaceful protestors. In spite of the increased aggressiveness and a number of casualties, protestors refused to give up Independence Square, the center of the EuroMaidan movement in Kyiv. As a result, the government positioned snipers throughout the city, who indiscriminately shot at protestors.

On February 21, opposition leaders signed an agreement with former President Yanukovich to, among other things, conduct the presidential election no later than December 2014. The agreement was not accepted by EuroMaidan protestors and Yanukovich fled the capital, effectively abdicating the presidency. In his absence, the Parliament voted for Oleksandr Turchynov as interim President on February 22. On the

same day, Parliament set the presidential election for May 25, 2014, and voted to release former Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko, who had spent more than two years in prison on politically-motivated charges.

Displeased with developments in Ukraine, Russian Prime Minister Medvedev asserted that the developments constituted an “armed mutiny,” ignoring the fact that Ukraine is an independent country. At the end of February, after the eyes of the world had moved from the region and the Sochi Olympics, Russian forces invaded the Crimean peninsula in Ukraine. First taking control of the Crimean Parliament, they then moved on Ukrainian naval bases and military outposts in the region.

On March 16, Russia-occupied Crimea called for a referendum with two options on the ballot: to join Russia or to increase autonomy. There was no option to maintain the status quo. The referendum was rightly deemed “illegal” by the international community. Of specific note, the vote was boycotted by the Crimean Tatars, an indigenous population of Crimea who were forced into exile to Central Asia by Joseph Stalin, only returning to the peninsula after Ukrainian independence. The Crimean Tatars have been considered among the most progressive actors on the peninsula, having most adamantly supported the EuroMaidan movement.

The *Kurultai* (their governing body), while not initially a directly elected entity, at their own initiative in May 2013, held the first direct elections to this representative body. IRI with the support of the [United States Agency for International Development](#) (USAID) observed the 2013 *Kurultai* elections. The elections were the only elections to have been held under former President Yanukovich’s regime which met international standards. Although Russian President Putin attempted to persuade the Crimean Tatar leadership to support the March 16 referendum with promises of government positions and security, the Tatar leadership refused. It was not lost on the Tatar community, and it should be remembered by the international community, that among the first casualties of the Russian incursion into Crimea, was a Crimean Tatar civic activist, Reshat Ametov, whose body was found with signs of torture.

The March 16 Crimea referendum showed “official” results with 97 percent of voters choosing to join Russia. However, according to an IRI survey conducted in May 2013, only 23 percent of Crimean residents supported unification with Russia. Although somewhat dated, the poll provides an accurate snapshot, as it was taken during a time of peace. In the same poll, IRI found that 53 percent of Crimean residents supported maintaining the status quo with Ukraine. This is in sharp contrast with the “official” referendum results announced 10 days ago in Simferopol with Russian troops on the streets.

While Russia appears to be consolidating its power on the Crimean peninsula, it has also been escalating tensions in Eastern and Southern Ukraine. As the conflict erupted in Crimea, pro-Russian groups appeared in Eastern Ukraine attempting to take over government buildings and demonstrate support and unity with Russia. In the last few weeks, several Ukrainians have been killed by pro-Russia groups who clashed with pro-Ukraine demonstrators in Donetsk and Kharkiv. In both cases, evidence points to pro-

Russia groups attempting to create provocations, disrupt public order and give the impression of an unstable political situation in which ethnic Russians or Russian speakers were “under threat.”

## **Political Situation in Ukraine**

These events have had a profound impact on the political situation in Ukraine. New political forces have emerged from the EuroMaidan movement, while others have been diminished. Interim President Turchynov and the Parliament sought to move quickly to stabilize the evolving situation by creating a new government within a week of the former president’s abandonment of the presidency. The new prime minister, Arseniy Yatsenyuk, has promised to undertake difficult economic and political reforms to set the course for Ukraine’s European integration. On March 20, Yatsenyuk signed an Association Agreement with the European Union and officially announced the government’s plans to accelerate economic and political ties with Europe.

With the presidential election set for May 25, potential candidates have until the end of March to announce their candidacy. Thus far, boxing champion and leader of the Ukrainian Democratic Alliance for Reform, Vitaliy Klychko, has announced his intention to run on a platform promising Ukraine’s European integration. In addition to Klychko, the outspoken leader of the Right Sector, Dmitry Yarosh, has also announced his candidacy, most recently calling for a policy of Ukrainian non-alignment. Serhiy Tihipko from the former president’s party, the Party of Regions, has also announced his candidacy calling for an overhaul of the political system. We understand that prominent businessman Petro Poroshenko is also considering entering the race. Finally, it is expected that Yulia Tymoshenko will announce her candidacy.

The goal of IRI’s assistance in electoral processes with support from USAID and the [National Endowment for Democracy](#) is to ensure that the forthcoming presidential election meets international standards. If Ukraine, particularly its eastern section, can administer an election that is peaceful, open and transparent on May 25, it has the opportunity to continue as an independent and sovereign country and will be able to continue on a democratic, constitutional and Western path. The West must do everything it can over the next two months to assist in this endeavor, and this must be our collective priority. In addition, a transparent election would create space for Ukraine to be able to develop sound economic policies and continue to build its democratic institutions. In light of this, it is difficult to overstate the importance of a free, fair and well-administered election on May 25 for the future of the country.

However, Ukraine will not be able to achieve this short-term goal if it continues to face the threat of an armed invasion of its eastern or southern territories. It is incumbent upon the West to use all means at its disposal to deter any such external threat.

## **IRI's Longstanding Role in Ukraine**

[IRI began programming in Ukraine in 1994](#), working with numerous funders from the United States, Europe and Canada. IRI has sought to support the development of national, broad-based and well-organized democratic political parties. It has done so by providing parties with regular national public opinion data to inform their decision-making processes. IRI also sought to use this polling data as a mechanism for building coalitions among like-minded parties by focusing on issues. IRI regularly provides political parties and candidates with campaign trainings on message development and voter targeting. Currently, IRI is providing such trainings in the lead-up to the May 25 presidential election.

IRI has promoted [democratic governance](#) across Ukraine, working with local elected officials in Ukraine since the beginning of its programming in country. Often in Ukraine, local elected officials are unaware of their rights and responsibilities. In addition to conducting trainings to inform officials of their rights, IRI recently began to create a network of reform-oriented local elected officials. In conducting its initial trainings, IRI observed that local officials in one part of the country were not aware of reforms their counterparts were implementing in other parts of the country. Therefore, IRI connected these officials by conducting study trips, such as taking officials from Crimea to observe best practices in Western Ukraine. IRI seeks to expand this program in the future with a particular focus on building bridges between young local elected officials.

IRI also has monitored and strengthened civil society organizations by implementing an innovative project creating sustainable linkages between political parties and civil society in select cities. Under its program, IRI has seen a significant increase in cooperation between the two groups on specific local issues. IRI has been working to enhance civil society capacity by providing them with access to information on conducting public hearings, a useful mechanism for citizens to bring attention to local issues of concern, such as waste management and service delivery, while at the same time, establishing connections with their local governing bodies.

A critical component in ensuring transparent and free national elections is the participation of non-partisan international observers to monitor Election Day activities and bring legitimacy to the result. IRI has fielded an election observation delegation in every presidential and parliamentary election in Ukraine since the country declared independence in 1991. As a result of these observation missions, each delegation issued a statement following the elections which served as the basis for subsequent reforms instituted by the Ukrainian Central Election Commission of Ukraine.

## **Conclusion**

After the May 25 election, IRI plans to continue its work, including providing assistance to the new government as it builds democratic institutions based on the principle of accountable representation. The immediate objective for the international community must be to help Ukraine create a sense of stability and security so that it can conduct the May 25 election in a transparent manner. This will help Ukraine to focus on economic,

judicial and political reforms. Again, Ukraine cannot achieve stability if its primary focus is on securing borders from possible military invasion. Therefore, the West must continue to do what it can to minimize pressure on Ukraine's borders to the east and in the south.

Thank you for your attention. I am happy to answer your questions.