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'Ukraine Has Become a Wild Country'

Yanukovych Resurfaces

By Christian Neef

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Three years after the Maidan insurgency, Viktor Yanukovych has re-emerged to express his views on the Ukraine conflict in a letter addressed to Trump, Putin, Merkel and others. DER SPIEGEL correspondent Christian Neef met with the former president.

Viktor Yanukovych went underground following the Maidan Square uprising in Kiev three years ago, but this week he resurfaced. On Tuesday night, the former Ukrainian president unveiled a nine-page letter in Moscow that he planned to deliver to the leaders of the United States, Russia, Germany, France and Poland on Wednesday. German Chancellor Angela Merkel and "President

Frank-Walter Steinmeier" are also addressees, even though Steinmeier hasn't yet officially been sworn in to his new office.

It's close to 7:30 p.m. when Yanukovich walks into the room, located in a building in central Moscow. He is wearing a black, pin-striped suit along with a blue polka dot tie. He's not in the Russian capital very often, spending most of his time in southern Russia near Rostov-on-Don. But it's Feb. 21, the anniversary of the bloody uprising on the Maidan, and Yanukovich wants to remind people that he remains a player in the great poker game over Ukraine's future.

It's a memorable evening in many respects. First, an aide slides the letter addressed to Trump, Merkel, Putin and Hollande across the table, the same missive that will be delivered on Wednesday, Feb. 22, to Washington, Berlin, Moscow and Paris. Then the former president explains that he is ready to answer any and all questions, because he is deeply interested in shedding light on the bloody events of 2014.

Before doing so, though, Yanukovich launches into an extended monologue. He says he wants to explain why he didn't sign the Association Agreement with the European Union at a meeting in Vilnius in Lithuania in fall 2013, a decision that triggered the Maidan uprising. He takes 30 minutes to do so.

He explains that the West didn't play fairly with him. It had been clear to him from the very beginning, he says, that Europe "didn't even need our goods." And also that negotiations with Brussels would unsettle Russia and that Moscow had already begun unwinding its economic ties with Kiev "out of self-defense."

'We Were Right at the Time'

Yanukovich says that the loss of trade with Russia was becoming increasingly expensive for Ukraine and that he had demanded compensation from the Europeans in the event he signed the Association Agreement. When asked how much, he says, "200 billion euros. That's not any more than what the EU paid to Greece." But he says the Europeans only offered 5 or 10 billion euros, to be paid out over the long term. He says that is when he put a stop to the talks. In light of how badly things are going in Ukraine today, he says, "we were right."

All of that, of course, is water under the bridge. But things start to get interesting when he begins talking about the Maidan. Who gave the order in November 2013 for the violent clearing of the square -- at a time when the only people there were disappointed and unarmed students? Initially, Yanukovich disputes that the situation on Maidan Square was still peaceful at the time. But after the question is repeated, he relents and confirms that special units were deployed at the time, but that the head of the National Security Council and the head of his presidential administration had been responsible for the decision. He also names oligarch Dmytro Firtash, who recently fled to Vienna. He accuses them of having played games behind his back and of deceit, lies and betrayal.

Indeed, the former president claims that he was constantly being deceived. He also says he got similar treatment from the foreign ministers of Germany, France and Poland, when they traveled

to Kiev on Feb. 20, 2014. "We negotiated a deal together with the opposition. I was essentially open to everything proposed to me, including snap presidential elections and a change to the constitution in order to prevent bloodshed. But it was all a masquerade from the very start."

Yanukovych means to say that the foreign ministers, including Germany's Steinmeier, deceived him during negotiations, thus supporting the "unconstitutional coup." And then they dropped him, he says, by immediately recognizing the parliament vote to remove him from power. He says Steinmeier told him that the deal with the opposition had been a good one but that he -- Yanukovych -- had broken it, and then he fled Ukraine. "In the time since, no one from Europe or America has ever tried to contact me." None of these accusations, of course, are included in the letter, which is addressed to "Your Excellency Mr. President Frank-Walter Steinmeier."

Yanukovych Seeks To Justify Himself

Yanukovych says that he could have defended his position of power by deploying the military at the time and that he even considered establishing a government-in-exile in another Ukrainian city, but he says that would have resulted in a civil war.

In the letter to Trump, Putin, Merkel and Hollande, he describes every possible facet of the events on the Maidan and his subsequent flight: the drive to Kharkiv, the helicopter flight to Donetsk and finally his escape to Crimea that almost failed near Melitopol because "a heavily armed group of mercenaries had been waiting for our convoy with orders to shoot everyone in it, including me." It becomes clear that this is a man who is seeking to retroactively exculpate himself. Even the Russian president himself suggested publicly that he never would have left his country behind in a situation like that.

Yanukovych says he knows the exact identity of the snipers on Maidan Square, who it was who let them through and from which buildings they shot at police officers and at the men belonging to his special force. But he says he has to protect the identities of his informants and he also has to mount a legal defense. He constantly repeats, "I can't tell you everything right now." And this includes the names of the oligarchs or the politicians currently in leadership roles in Kiev with whom he has recently met.

Six Points for Resolving the Conflict

During his interview, Yanukovych says he would like to contribute to a peacekeeping mission in Donbas, where the war is currently waging near his hometown. He says the contested region should remain part of Ukraine but be given greater autonomy.

In his letter to the leaders, he lists six points he believes could lead to the resolution of the conflict in eastern Ukraine. Four relate to the "investigation into the crimes committed on the Maidan in February 2014," for which he proposes a special commission to be established by the Council for Europe. Yanukovych also calls for the separatist leaders in Donetsk and Luhansk to be included in the negotiations in the Normandy format, the group that monitors adherence to the Minsk agreement. Finally, the sixth point comes with a threat: If the Minsk deal isn't fulfilled by those "currently in power in Kiev," then a referendum should be held over the status of Donbas.

The letter doesn't devote a single word to what will happen if Russia doesn't adhere to the deal, which leads one to conclude that the missive was closely coordinated with the leadership in Moscow or that the idea was perhaps even initiated by the Russians. The letter to Putin, incidentally, is three pages shorter than the one to Western leaders because Yanukovich spared Putin of all the details that the Russian leader likely knows intimately already.

The evening with Viktor Yanukovich ends shortly before 10 p.m. The final impression is of a deeply unsettled man fighting for his reputation. His account of the past three years was repetitive and long-winded, constantly searching for understanding and at times almost pleading for it.

One insight, though, is that he apparently had very little control over the events on Maidan Square, constantly controlled by those in his own circle and by his distant allies in Moscow. He's a man who shies away from making decisions.

Ultimately, it is one of his advisers who suggests bringing the interview to a close because his people want to go home for the night. "Ukraine has become a wild country," Yanukovich says before reluctantly standing up. He likely would have gone on talking all night.