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The West Leaves Ukraine to Putin

BY MATTHEW KAMINSKI

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A pro-Russia gunman outside a seized police station in Slovyansk, Ukraine, April 13. Associated Press

Kiev, Ukraine — 'We're the chosen generation," says Arseniy Yatsenyuk, Ukraine's interim prime minister. He's referring to all those who made this winter's European revolution. For the first time since 1654, when Ukrainian Cossacks formed a fateful alliance with Moscow against Polish rulers, Ukrainians are heading back West.

Their timing is terrible. Two decades ago, when the Berlin Wall fell, the West embraced another generation of Eastern Europeans. Ukraine has gotten a different welcoming committee. An economically feebleEuropean Union gorges on Russian energy and dirty money while lecturing Ukraine on Western values but refusing to defend it. Asking for Washington's help against Russian attack, Kiev finds a man "chosen" in the past two presidential elections to get America out of the world's trouble spots.

Vladimir Putin sees a West made soft by money, led by weak men and women, unwilling to make sacrifices to defend their so-called ideals. In the Ukrainian crisis, the im-

age fits. Russia's president is many things, but most of all he is resolute. He took the EU and America's measure and annexed Crimea last month at minimal cost. Ignoring Western pleas for "de-escalation," Russia this weekend invaded eastern Ukraine. Just don't look for video of T-72 tanks rolling across the borders, not yet at least.

Russian intelligence and special forces on Saturday directed local crime bosses and thugs in coordinated attacks on police stations and other government buildings in towns across eastern Ukraine. These men were dressed and equipped like the elite Russian special forces ("little green men," as Ukrainians called them) who took Crimea. Ukrainian participants got the equivalent of $500 to storm and $40 to occupy buildings, according to journalists who spoke to them. Fighting broke out on Sunday in Slovyansk, a sleepy town in the working-class Donbas region that hadn't seen any "pro-Russia" protests. A Ukrainian security officer was killed.

Kiev is on a war footing. Radio commercials ask for donations to the defense budget by mobile-telephone texts. The government's decision to cede Crimea without firing a shot cost the defense minister his job and wasn't popular. Western praise for Ukrainians' "restraint" got them nothing. The fight for Ukraine's east will be different.

This invasion was stealthy enough to let Brussels and Washington not use the i-word in their toothless statements. The EU's high representative, Catherine Ashton, called herself "gravely concerned" and commended Ukraine's "measured response." There was no mention of sanctions or blame. The U.S. State Department on Saturday said that John Kerry warned his diplomatic counterpart, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, that "if Russia did not take steps to de-escalate in eastern Ukraine and move its troops back from Ukraine's border, there would be additional consequences."

By now, the Ukrainians ought to have seen enough to know that they're on their own. Moscow has reached the same conclusion. These perceptions of the West are shaping events.

A month ago, the EU sanctioned 21 marginal Russian officials and quickly tried to get back to business as usual. On Friday, the U.S. added to its sanctions list seven Russian citizens and one company, all in Crimea. What a relief for Moscow's elites, who were speculating in recent days about who might end up on the list. Slovyansk fell the next day.

Any revolution brings a hangover. Ukrainians expected

problems: an economic downturn, some of the old politics-as-usual in Kiev, including fisticuffs last week in parliament, and trouble from Russia. Abandonment by the West is the unexpected blow. Hundreds of thousands of Ukrainians fought, and 100 died, for their chance to join the world's democracies.

As an institution, the EU always found excuses to deny Ukraine the prospect of membership in the bloc one day. But Bill Clinton and George W. Bush never recognized Russian domination over Ukraine. Billions were spent — Kiev was the third-largest recipient of U.S. aid in the 1990s — and American promises were made to protect Ukraine's sovereignty. In return, Ukraine took active part in NATO discussions and missions, sending thousands of troops to the Balkans and Iraq.

As Russian special forces invade the country's east, Kiev's leaders feel betrayed by the EU and America.

When Russia invaded Crimea and massed 40,000 or more troops in the east, Ukraine turned to an old friend, the United States, and asked for light arms, antitank weapons, intelligence help and nonlethal aid. The Obama administration agreed to deliver 300,000 meals-ready-to-eat. As this newspaper reported Friday, military transport planes were deemed too provocative for Russia, so the food was shipped by commercial trucks. The administration refused Kiev's requests for intelligence-sharing and other supplies, lethal or not.

Boris Tarasiuk, Ukraine's former foreign minister, barely disguises his anger. He says: "We've not seen the same reaction from the U.S." as during Russia's 2008 attack on Georgia. U.S. Navy warships were deployed off the Georgian Black Sea coast. Large Air Force transport planes flew into Tbilisi with emergency humanitarian supplies. But who really knew for sure what was on board the planes? That was the point. Russian troops on the road to the Georgian capital saw them above and soon after turned back. The Bush administration dropped the ball on follow-up sanctions but may have saved Georgia.

By contrast, the Obama administration seems to think that pre-emptive concessions will pacify Mr. Putin. So the president in March ruled out U.S. military intervention in Ukraine. Maybe, but why say so? Late last month at a news conference in Brussels, Mr. Obama also openly discouraged the idea of Georgia or Ukraine joining NATO.

The next diplomatic "off ramp" touted by the Obama administration will be the negotiations involving Russia,

Ukraine, the EU and the U.S. scheduled for later this week. Petro Poroshenko, the leading Ukrainian presidential candidate, tells me that these "talks for the sake of talks" send "a very wrong signal" about the West's commitment to sanctions. It's a case of the blind faith in "diplomacy" undermining diplomacy. See the Obama record on Syria for the past three years.

The West looks scared of Russia, which encourages Mr. Putin's bullying. But on the Ukrainian side, the sense of abandonment brings unappreciated consequences. Ukraine's political elites have taken into account that Russia could reimpose its will — perhaps that anticorruption law demanded by the EU isn't so necessary after all?

While millions of Ukrainians have united against Russia, out in the east of the country many people are fence-sitters. The fight there, as in Crimea, won't be over any genuine desire to rejoin Russia. Before last month, polls in Crimea and eastern Ukraine put support for separatists in single digits. But the locals' historical memory teaches them to respect force and side with winners. Left to fend for itself by the West, Ukraine looks like a loser to them, notes Kiev academic Andreas Umland.

The U.S. Army won't save Slovyansk. But Ukraine expects and deserves America's support by every other means that Washington has refused so far. Betrayal is an ugly word and an uglier deed. Europe and the U.S. will pay dearly for it in Ukraine.

Mr. Kaminski is a member of the Journal's editorial board.