

What Should Our Response Be to Ukraine's Dirty Elections?

By

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Synopsis

The Ukrainian parliamentary elections on October 28 2012 did not meet the minimum international standards for democratic elections. The international community had offered considerable incentives to President Yanukovich to conduct honest elections, including diplomatic support from the United States, the conclusion of the Association and Free Trade Agreement with the EU, and a Free Trade Agreement with Canada.

President Yanukovich only made certain gestures towards domestic and international opinion, where these gestures would not detract seriously from his principal goal of remaining in control.

Yanukovich's hold on power has a purpose. He has set out to enrich his immediate Family, not only at a cost to the country, but also at the expense of his erstwhile oligarch allies.

The discontent that the Yanukovich Family's greediness is arousing in the general population, and the ill will that it is generating among the oligarchs, suggest that this policy cannot be pursued successfully without increasing repression.

Some of Yanukovich's allies are apparently now breaking with him because not only of their resentment at the grasp of his Family, but also because of their concern that Ukraine may miss the boat to Europe, and instead be forced to join Russia's Customs Union.

Yanukovich might conceivably be tempted to do a deal with Russia. The economic situation is serious in part due to the Yanukovich administration's incompetence.

Ukraine needs external financing badly. In 2013, Ukraine must find the means to pay back \$9 billion in loans. Ukraine is seeking a credit of \$12 billion from the IMF. The previous IMF loan was suspended in 2011 when Ukraine did not carry out all the required economic reforms. It is not clear whether Ukraine is now prepared to do so.

Ukraine can also ill afford the ruinous gas prices it has to pay Russia. Russia charges Ukraine for gas almost twice as much as it demands from its West European customers. The Russians have, however, offered Ukraine gas at about a third of the present price, only if it agrees to join the Customs Union.

The other possible source of economic relief for Ukraine is the EU. The EU has

made it clear that it will sign the Association and Free Trade Agreement only if Ukraine carries out political and economic reforms, including honest elections, and releases political prisoners. Since Yanukovich is not prepared to do either, the EU's position leaves it with few other levers over him. There are some signs that some in the EU are considering how the EU could, short of signing the Association Agreement, influence the Yanukovich administration to carry out reforms.

It is important that Canada should continue to be involved in Ukraine in supporting Ukrainian independence, in promoting democratic and economic reforms where possible, and in strengthening the civil society.

We must also be prepared to be in Ukraine for the long haul. There are reasons for the blocked progress in Ukraine. Ukraine had, at the moment of independence, only been obliquely affected by the evolution of the Western culture from authoritarianism to pluralism. Ukraine had also little tradition of the separation of powers. The country had had no previous experience as an independent state or, since the First World War, as a market economy. It had few of the government structures needed to run a state.

There are very few European countries that have smoothly made the transition from dictatorship to democracy. Most making the journey before the advent of the EU, have fallen back at least once. Ukraine has not had the benefit of an offer of EU membership, an offer that has eased the way to democracy for so many other countries in eastern Central Europe and the Balkans.

In contrast, Ukraine has faced frequent Russian interference in its internal affairs. Present Russian pressure on Ukraine to join, not only the Eurasian Customs Union, but also the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), would give Russia a strong voice over the economies, the finances, and the defence of Ukraine, and accord Russia the right to intervene militarily to keep Ukraine in line.

An independent Ukraine free from Russian domination remains important for both stability in Europe and the possibility of the West eventually reaching an understanding with Russia.

Should Russia succeed in re-establishing its hegemony over Ukraine, it could prolong the instability of the area, prevent the spread of democracy, divide Europe, and, by offending our consciences, make it difficult for the West to achieve reconciliation with Russia.