

The Ukrainian Conundrum

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Western countries have responded to the election of Viktor Yanukovich as President of Ukraine in February this year with some disenchantment. The country that, following the Orange Revolution of 2004, had, according to Freedom House, developed into a freer society with a higher respect for civil liberties than, for example, Turkey, and on which so much Western attention had been lavished, had elected as president the man whose fraudulent and dictatorial practices in the 2004-5 presidential election campaign had provoked the Orange Revolution. To understand how we should react, we have to understand why the upset occurred, what the policies of the new administration are, and where our interest lies.

Why Did President Yanukovich Win?

President Yanukovich won by the narrowest of margins due to a split in the Orange vote. Nevertheless, a poll taken shortly before the Presidential election, showed that over two thirds of Ukrainians, apparently disappointed with the fecklessness of the Orange Coalition, believed that only a leader with a strong hand could solve the country's problems. A reversion to authoritarianism in Ukraine is not surprising. In the twentieth century, it was almost a rite of passage for authoritarian societies trying out democracy to return to a strongman's rule at least once. The road to a stable democracy and a functioning market economy is more difficult for Ukraine than it was for many of the ex-communist countries of Central Europe and the Balkans. Since Ukraine was only obliquely affected by the slow evolution of Western civilization towards pluralism, it had no culture of democracy to draw on. It also had no knowledge of a market economy. It had little sense of national cohesion; and it also lacked much of the apparatus of a state. Finally and most importantly, Ukraine has not been shepherded by an offer of EU membership with the accompanying substantial financial help and expertise. Instead, Ukraine has faced at times severe pressure from Russia seeking to block Ukraine's move towards democracy and membership in NATO, and to force Ukraine into Russia's economic and security organizations,

Just how authoritarian is the Yanukovich administration?

The Yanukovych administration has the potential to become as oppressive as that of President Kuchma before the Orange Revolution. The governing coalition in parliament was formed, and legislation is frequently passed, in violation of the constitution. An electoral law has been biased against the opposition. The courts' independence is being weakened. The freedom of the media is under attack. The universities are being reined in. The Security Service and the judiciary are seeking to neutralize the opposition. Unwelcome demonstrations are blocked. While Ukraine remains a pluralist society, it is one under threat.

How far has Ukraine's foreign policy shifted toward the East?

In contrast to the foreign policy of the Orange Coalition, which sought Ukraine's security through membership in NATO and the EU, the Yanukovych administration has looked for it through friendship with Russia. Russian suggestions were appointed to four of the key ministries - security, defence, foreign affairs, and education. The goal of NATO membership was abandoned. Ukraine agreed to extend the lease on the Russian naval base at Sevastopol from 2017 to 2042 in return for a substantial reduction in the price of Russian gas. President Yanukovych, however, rejected a Russian proposal to join the Common Economic Space, a common market controlled by Russia.

President Yanukovych's efforts to placate the Russians have, however, led to further Russian pressure, this time to put substantial sectors of the Ukrainian economy under Russian control and legal jurisdiction, and to have Ukraine join the Russia's Collective Security Treaty Organization. This pressure President Yanukovych has resisted.

President Yanukovych cannot do without the West. Ukraine needs the West's support to balance Russian pressure. The Ukrainian government needs the cooperation of the IMF, which has just approved a 29 month Stand-By Arrangement worth \$15.5 billion. The oligarchs in Yanukovych's party want to see Ukraine join the EU. For these reasons, President Yanukovych is likely to pursue President Kuchma's foreign policy of calculated ambiguity between East and West, playing one off against the other.

What Interest Has the West in Yanukovych's Ukraine?

In spite of the political upset in Ukraine, the West still has a substantial interest in providing support. Russia appears to seek to bring Ukraine under some degree of control as part of its policy of restoring Russian hegemony over the other former Soviet republics. The loss of effective Ukrainian independence would be an affront to our values. It would shift the balance of power in Europe. Furthermore, what the history of the twentieth century should have taught us is that the same rules of international law, including the right of states to manage their own affairs, have to apply throughout the continent. The Second World War and the Cold War both arose out of the attempts by first Germany, and then the Soviet Union, to do what they wanted in Eastern Europe. The re-emergence of Russian satellites in Eastern Europe would prevent any lasting reconciliation with Russia.

What should the West Do?

Without Western support, it may be in the long run difficult for Ukraine to resist Russian pressure. The obvious incentive that might strengthen Ukrainian independence, help preserve pluralism, and mobilize Ukraine for political and economic reform, would be an offer of EU membership. There is no chance of the EU making such an offer for the foreseeable future. Nevertheless, during President Yanukovich's visit to Brussels in early March, EU officials did not shut the door on eventual membership and offered to conclude a free trade agreement as a step towards an association agreement. In return, the Ukrainian government had to combat corruption, and to work with the opposition in carrying out extensive reforms to the economy, the judicial system, the electoral system, and the constitution. In response, President Yanukovich made it clear that his goal was not merely free trade, but also membership in the EU. Nevertheless, it is not certain that President Yanukovich will be prepared, for free trade alone, to carry out the required political, economic and social reforms. They would threaten many elite privileges. In order to strengthen the leverage of the EU offer, Canada might negotiate its own offer of free trade in parallel with the EU, and encourage closer Western coordination on Ukraine.

Western efforts to support Ukrainian democracy and independence may also require a broader understanding with Russia. Russia's efforts to restore its hegemony in Eastern Europe have partly arisen out of Russia's perception of a Western threat. The EU and NATO have expanded eastward into the Soviet Union's old sphere of influence. The Russians saw the Coloured Revolutions that shook Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan as products of Western coups. If we do not accept the Russian claim to hegemony in Eastern Europe, therefore, we have to deal with Russia's suspicion of the West.

The basis for a better understanding with Russia may lie in expanding our present policy of seeking compromises and co-operation with Russia on a range of international issues. We should aim at building a broader network of political, security, and economic understandings. Our ability to build a structure of common purposes with Russia would, however, partly depend on the extent to which Russia becomes a functioning democracy, and conducts its relations with the other former Soviet republics on the basis of equality and respect for international law. The development of broader common interests and greater mutual trust between Russia and the West may provide the best basis for the future of Ukraine.