



CENTRE FOR EUROPEAN REFORM

briefing note

UKRAINE SHOULD NOT BE A PART OF A 'GREAT GAME'

By Katinka Barysch and Charles Grant

In their reporting of the crisis in Ukraine, the world's media have focused on the pro-Yushchenko demonstrators. But while this manifestation of 'people power' has understandably grabbed the headlines, another, more sinuous tale has unfolded in the chancelleries and foreign ministries of EU capitals, Moscow and Washington. This is about what the 'orange revolution' means for Russia's attempt to control its near-abroad, for the EU's relationship with Russia, and the future orientation of Ukraine.

The apparent failure of Moscow's man, Victor Yanukovich, to win the presidency, has reinforced an already strong tendency in the Kremlin to revert to Cold War attitudes. Many Russians see Ukraine as the target of a tug of war between themselves and the West. They assume that the EU, like the Kremlin, has been working to install 'its' man in Kiev. Kremlin propaganda has fed such assumptions. So have some western commentators, at both ends of the political spectrum. Some right-wing Republicans, notably those active in Washington think-tanks, take the line that anything that weakens Russia – such as the installation of a pro-western government in Kiev – is inherently good. However, these Republicans are neither the majority of Americans nor those in charge of policy on Russia. The support of some American NGOs for the Ukrainian opposition has convinced a number of left-wing European commentators – such as the *Guardian's* Jonathan Steele – that 'America' is playing geopolitical games and that Russia has therefore every right to thwart Victor Yushchenko.

That is how it looks in Russia, and not only among members of the security establishment. While Russian paranoia about American intentions is longstanding, paranoia towards the EU is something new. In the space of two years the EU-Russia relationship has deteriorated from cordiality to antagonism, to the point where senior Russians now view the EU as a hostile power that is expanding into Russia's sphere of influence. The EU's complaints about human rights in Russia, and notably in Chechnya, changed the Russian mood, while the recent mediation missions to Kiev, led by EU foreign policy chief Javier Solana, have provoked more wrath.

However, many Russians misread the EU's intentions. Most of its governments do not want to pluck Ukraine from Russia's sphere of influence. They know that some leading figures in the Yushchenko camp have dodgy pasts. However, like many Ukrainians, they see the crisis as a struggle between a corrupt, semi-authoritarian regime and a movement that is committed to democratic reform and economic opening.

The Kremlin openly endorsed Victor Yanukovich because it thought that he would safeguard Russian interests. As far as the Russian government is concerned, whether this leader is elected, appointed or

has fallen from space is immaterial. In contrast, the EU cares little who runs Ukraine, provided that he or she gains legitimacy through fair elections and upholds western standards of democracy and human rights. The EU could not endorse the results of the second round of voting in the recent presidential elections because the OECD observers reported widespread abuse, principally by Yanukovich's supporters. Russia bets on personality but the EU defends process. In any case, whoever becomes president, he or she will have to seek good relations with both the West and Russia. The EU is Ukraine's most important trading partner, Russia is its key energy supplier, and both are crucial for the country's security.

Although no western leader openly endorsed Yushchenko, the Yanukovich camp portray him as a western puppet. In fact many of Yushchenko's liberal and reformist supporters feel that the EU has let them down. Moreover, his relationship with Washington is ambiguous. Yushchenko has promised to pull Ukraine's 1,600 troops out of Iraq. It was Yanukovich who sent them there.

The EU governments have stuck together during the crisis in Ukraine, which is why Solana has been able to speak for the Union. Yet in the years since independence, the EU has shown little interest in Ukraine. Each time that Ukraine asked to be acknowledged as a potential candidate for membership, the EU answered 'no'. Except for the Poles and the Lithuanians, most Europeans regard the prospect of Ukrainian membership as distinctly unappealing. The EU is finding it difficult enough to digest the ten countries that have just joined, and now faces the task of running an epic negotiation with Turkey. Most European governments would very happily leave Ukraine in Russia's orbit, rather than worry about the problems of a large, backward and fissiparous country. The Union is a reluctant and haphazard imperialist: its continued expansion depends not on its leaders' desire to extend territory, but on its attraction for neighbouring countries.

President Putin made a serious diplomatic error in backing Yanukovich during and after the recent elections. If Yushchenko becomes president it will not only be embarrassing for Putin, but also a significant set-back for his strategy of tightening Russia's grip on its near abroad. In the zero-sum mentality beloved of the Russian security establishment, a Yushchenko presidency will be seen as a victory for the West. The Europeans must be careful not to gloat, or do anything that could be taken as an attempt to humiliate Putin. If Yushchenko is elected through fair elections they should describe it as nothing more than a victory for Ukrainian democracy.

The EU should and probably will rethink its longstanding position that Ukraine "has as much reason to be in the EU as New Zealand", in the words of Romano Prodi, the recently departed Commission president. But now is not the time to make a big noise about Ukraine becoming an EU member. In the long run, if and when a secure and stable Ukrainian government has implemented the kind of economic and political reforms that would lend credibility to a membership bid, this subject will return to the agenda. But for the time being Ukraine should have plenty of reasons to embrace reform, other than the specific carrot of EU membership. In the short run the EU can do much to help Ukraine with specific policies. For example it should make it easier and cheaper for Ukrainians to get visas for EU countries. The EU should dismantle some of the protectionist measures which harm Ukraine's farmers and steel firms. And it should do much more to promote student exchanges between Ukraine and EU countries.

Ukraine's people have impressed the West, showing that democratic instincts and civil society are alive and well in some parts of the former Soviet Union. Many Russians – as far as one can tell – are quite happy with Putin's authoritarian tendencies, even though they gripe about corruption and growing inequality. At least half of the Ukrainians seem determined to achieve a more liberal and open society. People in western Europe are starting to realise that Ukrainians may share more of their values than they had appreciated, and that that will in the long run open the perspective of EU membership.

Hopefully, the Kremlin may learn some lessons from its ham-fisted attempt to influence the Ukrainian elections. If Russia believes that Ukraine should not join NATO and the EU, it should not interfere in ways that make many Ukrainians think that the best chance of achieving a modern, democratic state is to seek protection from Russian dominance in western institutions. Significant numbers of Russian-speaking people from eastern Ukraine voted for Yushchenko because they were annoyed by Russia's attempt to influence the elections. If Russia supported the modernising and democratic forces in Ukraine, many Ukrainians would see little purpose in moving their country closer to NATO and the EU.

People in EU countries should remember that many Russians regard Putin's attempt to influence Ukraine's elections as perfectly proper and normal. After all, Ukraine is the birthplace of Russian

civilisation, while the economic and family ties between the two countries are even closer than those between say, Britain and Ireland. Nevertheless, Russian diplomacy needs to learn that backing the ‘pro-Russian’ candidate is not always in the Russian national interest, especially if that candidate is authoritarian – as pro-Russian leaders tend to be in places like Abkhazia, Belarus, South Ossetia and Transdnistria. The Kremlin seems to regard the installation of democratic governments in Russia’s near abroad as a threat. To the extent such governments might inspire the democratic forces within Russia, it may be right. But in the long run Russia will only gain from its neighbours becoming democratic, prosperous and open to the West.



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