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Back in the (Former) USSR

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Ukraine's "Orange Revolution" stirred hopes and fears similar to those of the Autumn of the Peoples in Central Europe fifteen years ago at the end of the Cold War. While the protesters in Kiev demanded honest elections and clean politics, Russia and the West clashed over whether Ukraine should drift toward autocracy or join the family of free nations. By standing up for their rights and making a claim to become a normal Western nation, the Ukrainian democrats have given hope to other peoples of the former USSR and, incidentally, reminded us that people around the world aspire to what we call Western values. They are giving Europeans and Americans, after a bruising family quarrel of the last couple of years, an opportunity to reunite the West around the vital task of completing the democratic revolution on the territory of the former Soviet Union.

Europe came close in 2004 to seeing a new curtain dividing it from north to south. Had the fraudulent result of the Ukrainian elections stood, the continent's geopolitical division would have gelled and the window of liberty in the former USSR would have closed. The line from the Barents Sea in the North, to the Black Sea in the South, along the eastern borders of Norway, Finland, the Baltic States, Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, Moldova, and Romania, would have marked a division between democracies to its west, and post-Soviet "managed democracies," that is to say kleptocratic dictatorships, to its east. The peaceful protesters in Kiev, who braved the cold and the possibility of violence, saved not only their country, but the continent from plunging into a mini Cold War.

Let's start with the chronology. Fifteen years after the Autumn of the Peoples that liberated Central Europe from Soviet rule, the fall of 2004 was supposed to be the autumn of stolen elections. First in September, Chechnya's interior minister was "elected" as the republic's president in a poll that was criticized by the European Union, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), and all major monitoring groups as in breach of Russia's own electoral laws, not to mention general standards of free and fair elections. Russian authorities pressured inconvenient candidates to withdraw, bribed and intimidated local officials to secure votes for the anointed candidate, and used official media as a tool in the campaign. Improbably high participation rates went hand in hand with a wide variance between independent exit polls and officially sanctioned results.

Similarly, in Belarus in October, Alexander Lukashenko used intimidation, administrative manipulation, and outright falsification to "win" a referendum that makes it possible for him to serve as president-for-life, as well as to appoint a parliament devoid of any independent voices. Everything went without a hitch, confirming Lukashenko's standing as Europe's model tin-horned dictator.

Trouble started in Abkhazia, the tiny, separatist region of Georgia where the Kremlin's favorite in the presidential election in October was a former KGB/FSB officer. When another candidate won, Russian forces on the ground prevented him from assuming office even though

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both the Abkhaz electoral commission and local parliament declared him duly elected. In a counterpoint to Ukraine, the Kremlin insisted that certification by electoral authorities in Abkhazia should not be final and can be subject to a political compromise, which is being negotiated under the threat of a Russian economic blockade. In another interesting parallel, in view of the campaign promises made by Russia's candidate in Ukraine, Russia bestowed its citizenship—in what is legally another country—on the Abkhaz population en masse. She now claims the right to defend the interests of these newly minted Russian citizens vis-à-vis the government of Georgia.

However, the pattern of professionally falsified elections had started earlier, in Russia itself, with the March 26, 2000, presidential election, which officially accorded 52.94 percent of the vote to Vladimir Putin. After an exhaustive investigation that involved hundreds of interviews and a thorough analysis of results at the precinct level, the *Moscow Times* concluded that "given Vladimir Putin's narrow 2.2 million-vote margin of victory, fraud put him over the top."[1] The Central Election Commission simply added to the Putin votes actually certified at the precinct level, as well as showing 1.3 million voters more than existed eighteen months previously, despite the fact that the population shrank in the period by over a million.

Just like in Ukraine later on, administrative pressure on governors to produce results for the boss was the norm. For example, officials in Tatarstan explained how the system of "the caterpillar" worked: "There are people standing near the elections precincts and when they see a voter coming up, they offer him or her 50 rubles or a 100 rubles so that he or she takes a pre-filled-in ballot to drop in the box, and then returns with a blank ballot. Then they fill in the new clean ballot and offer it to the next voter."[2]

What is odd about the Russian election is that Vladimir Putin would almost certainly have won the runoff against his post-Communist opponent Gennady Zyuganov. But then, "playing it safe" in the presidential election paved the way to the Duma elections in December 2003. According to Vladimir Kara-Murza from the Free Choice 2008 Committee of Russia, "All exit-polls as well as a parallel vote recount showed that the Union of Right Forces (led by Boris Nemtsov) received 5.5 percent of the vote, and Yabloko (led by Grigory Yavlinsky) received 6 percent of the vote. This meant that the two democratic opposition parties together would have controlled some 50 seats in the Russian Duma."[3] However, official results gave Yabloko 4.3 percent and the Union of Right Forces 4 percent—not enough for either to be represented in parliament.

Helping Prime Minister Yanukovych to steal the election for president of Ukraine would have completed the construction of a club of authoritarian states whose leaders, by virtue of their alienation from their own societies, could be relied upon to toe the line. We do not yet know all of the techniques and the budget of the operation to support Yanukovych. Funds were likely obtained from corrupt arrangements between Ukrainian and Russian energy companies, who in turn paid for consultants, campaign propaganda, and other essential logistics. We do know that in addition to the official campaign staff, Yanukovych had a parallel organization manned by Russian advisers. Defending their position after the stalled second round, one of them, Gleb Pavlovsky, told Russian media that they did what they could with a convict for a candidate and that they did well considering that they managed to quadruple his support. Another "political technologist" on loan from the Kremlin to the Ukrainian oligarchs, Sergei Markov, concluded: "The campaign also relied too heavily on anti-American rhetoric, which works in Russia, but not in Ukraine. Russians consider themselves equal to Americans, but Ukrainians do not. They don't see anything wrong in having a big brother taking care of them. . . . I told them to use anti-Polish rhetoric, since Ukrainians consider themselves equal to that country."[4]

Now that the tide is turning, Ukrainian authorities have restarted the investigation as to who poisoned candidate Viktor Yushchenko with dioxins. Symptoms appeared shortly after he dined with Ukraine's intelligence chief. If Yushchenko's deputy, Julya Timoshenko, is right in charging that the technology of the poisoning came from outside the country, it would be another disturbing clue that Russia once again is operating a department of "wet affairs," to use the Soviet-era jargon that referred to the KGB's office that conducted numerous assassinations of its enemies abroad, including, notoriously, supplying the technology for the "umbrella assassination" on London's Waterloo Bridge of the head of the Bulgarian service of the BBC in 1978. Consider the following evidence:

- Mystery still surrounds aspects of the blowing up of apartment blocks in Russia on the eve of the

Second Chechen War in 2000, an incident in which the Russian secret service, the FSB, was caught planting the powerful military explosive hexogen under an apartment block in Ryazan and improbably calling it an exercise.[5]

- Russian operatives were convicted in Qatar earlier this year for the murder of the former Chechen president Zelimkhan Yandarbiyev.

- Russian authorities misused poison and killed 130 hostages, as well as terrorists, in the siege of the Nord-Ost Theatre in Moscow in 2001.

- Several Chechen field commanders have been killed with poison, and Russian journalists were poisoned to prevent them from reaching the Caucasus in the wake of the terrorist attack in Beslan in September 2004.[6]

As this evidence mounts, so does suspicion that Russian authorities are using dirty tricks and murder as a tool of state policy.

Ukraine's "Orange Revolution" was, of course, no revolution at all by the classical definition of a violent overthrow of established order. Yushchenko's movement veered toward a real revolution for a moment when he prematurely took the oath of office and some in his entourage advocated the storming of government buildings. On the whole, however, the crowds in Kiev demanded not the breaking of rules, but the upholding of rules that were blatantly being broken by those in power. Instead of overthrowing the state, the Ukrainians were reclaiming the state from an oligarchy that had privatized it.

Commentators have made much of geopolitical and territorial splits that propelled the two candidates: Europe versus Russia and Ukraine's West versus East. That is not how it appeared to the protesters in Kiev. Europe, in the sense of the institutions of the European Union, was passive until late in the confrontation, and Ukrainians know that they have no chance to accede to the organization anytime soon. It was the Ukrainians' own civilizational choice of what kind of country they aspire to, rather than the non-existent encouragement from the EU, that drove them on. It is equally true that most of Yanukovych's supporters came from the industrial and Russian-speaking East, while Yushchenko is more popular in the West and, crucially, the capital city itself. However, we should remember that Yushchenko himself comes from Ukraine's Northeast, that his religion is orthodoxy, that his Russian is as good as his Ukrainian, and that he has been consistently conciliatory toward both his Russian-speaking compatriots and toward Russia.
For the people in Independence Square in Kiev, the Orange Revolution, much less than a geopolitical confrontation, was a rebellion of ordinary people against a corrupt elite. It was a protest at the fact that a country with per-capita GDP of just under $1,000 registered last year a dozen Maybach Mercedes-Benz limousines that retail in Ukraine for around 500,000 euros.[7] It was educated young against Soviet-nostalgic old. It was a revolt of the middle class against a system in which corruption was vertically integrated with state institutions. It was competitive capitalism against "political capitalism" in which you make money by skewing rules. It was also a revulsion against gangsterism as practiced by the authorities. Several Ukrainians that I spoke to while observing the first round of the election on behalf of the International Republican Institute in Kiev and Odessa told me that they plunged into politics only when they saw Yushchenko's scarred face: "We don't want the politics of murder here again." It was also the marriage of Ukrainian patriotism with Ukrainian yearning for democracy, which is to say the birth of a modern Ukrainian nation.

Crucial to its success was the fact that state institutions such as the army and interior ministry troops proclaimed neutrality while others, such as municipalities and some of the previously state-controlled media, joined the protesters. A split in the domestic intelligence service was also important. In a repeat of the taping of President Leonid Kuchma giving the order to get rid of a nosy journalist, Gyorgi Gongadze, in September 2000, which gave the original stimulus to the Ukrainian revulsion with the regime, Ukrainian intelligence officers recorded senior members of Prime Minister Yanukovych's campaign staff apparently discussing how to rig the vote. Given the ambiguity of some of the evidence of the scale of fraud, the publication of these conversations galvanized the opposition and probably contributed to the supreme court's decision to invalidate the second round of voting.

International factors played a secondary, but fortuitous, role. With hindsight, it seems that Moscow played a forceful but extraordinarily inept game. The

Kremlin treated Ukraine as a bigger Belarus rather than an aspiring Poland. Crucially, it failed to appreciate that the capital city of Kiev, once a dependable imperial administrative hub, had, in the thirteen years of independence, become a Ukrainian "Kyiv" and would behave like the capital of a sovereign state. In what was supposed to be friendly support from one strongman to another, President Putin visited Prime Minister Yanukovych for three days in Kiev just before the first round of voting, which put off even the Ukrainian Communists. Sending Moscow's mayor, Yuri Luzhkov, with a message of support to a meeting of East Ukrainian governors and mayors who raised the specter of secession and civil war, likely also alienated Ukrainian bureaucrats and moderate voters.

The West, on the other hand, acted cohesively, responsibly, and subtly. The United States led the way, with Senator Richard Lugar's (R-Ind.) criticism of the poll, as did the OSCE. Secretary of State Colin Powell's statement that the results of the falsified second round "cannot be accepted as legitimate" was unexpectedly tough.[8] President Bush played the good cop by merely stating that the world was following the crisis. The administration as a whole was energetically pro-Ukrainian without making anti-Kremlin noises, thus sounding firm but without being provocative. In moves that were probably less coordinated with the United States than they appeared, the EU's mediation helped to diffuse the confrontation. As Oleh Rybachuk, Viktor Yushchenko's chief of staff, told this writer at the New Atlantic Initiative conference on Ukraine at AEI on December 10, the idea to repeat only the second round of voting, which found its way into the decision of the Ukrainian Supreme Court, was actually first voiced by President Aleksander Kwasniewski of Poland. Without energetic diplomatic and parliamentary pressure from the former captive nations of Central Europe and the Baltic States, Bonn and Paris's default position of deference to the wishes of Vladimir Putin would likely have prevailed. The New Europeans, who had joined the EU only six months earlier, helped by a sympathetic Dutch presidency, swayed the whole organization behind defense of democracy.

The outcome of the repeat second round of the Ukrainian presidential election on December 26 is unknown at the time of writing, but irrespective of who wins, 2004 ends not on a note of closing the window of liberty, but of dramatically expanding it. Whomever the Ukrainians finally elect, the fact that they insisted on doing so democratically reverses the trend and changes the template. Rather than sliding towards authoritarianism à la Belarus, Russia, and the satrapies of Central Asia, the peoples of the former Soviet Union have been presented with an entirely new dynamic: following the course of the peaceful revolutions of Central Europe, Serbia, and Georgia. While Georgia may be dismissed as too small to set a trend, Ukraine with its 48 million people and deep historical ties to Russia is a different matter. Russian attitudes toward Ukraine are somewhat akin to British ones toward Ireland—where centuries-old colonial entanglement also resulted in deep religious and linguistic fissures. We may be sure that Ukraine's emancipation will be at least as irritating to the former imperial center as Ireland's greater per-capita income is to some Britons. One would *hope* that after Kiev's Orange Revolution, Moscow's elites conclude that reconstituting the Russian empire is unrealistic. It is not too late for Vladimir Putin to reverse a course that has just earned Russia a downgrade in Freedom House's yearly "Freedom in the World" survey to the status of "not free." One *fears* that Putin and his ex-KGB entourage, whose advice led him to his humiliating misadventure in Ukraine, will draw the opposite conclusion. Putin's intemperate outbursts against alleged Western plots, as well as the anti-Western propaganda that passes for news in official Russian media, suggest that a further militarization of the state is equally likely. Either way, if oil prices flag and authoritarianism keeps landing Russia in trouble, the country's younger middle class will sooner or later demand its rights too.

Ukraine's Euro-Atlantic Outlook

The transformation of Ukraine into a normal European state, far from accomplished or inevitable, is still mostly a gleam in the Kiev protesters' eyes. Assuming the reformers win the battle for the presidency, this will only give them some of the levers of power necessary for engaging in a wrenching process. Even though the Yanukovych government stoked a likely bout of inflation with its election-oriented wage and pension increases, Ukraine is in a better position today than were countries of Central Europe at the time of Soviet collapse. Its economy is in macroeconomic balance, its trade patterns in place. Thanks to high energy prices and demand from China, even its

decrepit Soviet-era coal mines and steelworks turn a profit. To tackle corruption, the government will have to lean on powerful interests, including in its own ranks. Imposing rules of competitive capitalism on Ukrainian clans risks affecting the country's industrial East, with all the political implications. The process of EU integration imposes costly, inconvenient, and often humiliating sacrifices, while the reward of membership is distant and uncertain. Elements of the Russian government are likely to try to snatch a victory out of the jaws of defeat and frustrate Ukraine's reorientation to the West. Given that much of the country's media, industrial, and energy assets are owned by companies ultimately controlled from Moscow, they will have plenty of opportunity for mischief.

Paradoxically, the easiest institutional anchoring with the West that Ukraine can aspire to would be membership in NATO. Thanks to years of cooperation under the Partnership for Peace, Ukraine's armed forces are the country's most Westernized institution. Ukrainian forces already deploy in the field with NATO militaries in the Balkans, in Iraq, and in the Polish-Ukrainian battalion. With civilian control of the armed forces, borders settled by treaty, civilized treatment of minorities, and, likely soon, fully functional democracy, Ukraine already fulfills the political criteria of NATO membership. There are no defense criteria that Ukraine could not fulfill in a couple of years. Having been host to much of the Second Strategic Echelon of Soviet forces, Ukraine inherited some relatively modern military equipment and is host to a significant part of the former Soviet defense and space industry. Her membership would make both a geostrategic and practical contribution to NATO. Contrary to conventional wisdom, NATO membership should not be delayed beyond the country's possible EU accession. As the experience of previous NATO enlargements shows, it is only by embracing countries firmly within the Western security perimeter that we make it possible for them to integrate economically and, incidentally, to develop normal neighborly relations with Russia.

Steps toward Reform

Ukraine should vigorously pursue the reforms that will make it compatible with Western institutions, among them:

- Institutionalize the gains of the Orange Revolution by creating legal safeguards for the pluralism of media, accountability of the branches of government, and tough criteria of probity and separation of personal and public interests of public officials.

- Publish and publicize the files and the evidence of malfeasance by the secret services, both in Soviet times and more recently.

- Bring to justice those involved in the political murders of the Kuchma regime, the poisoning of Victor Yushchenko, and the conspiracy to steal the presidential election.

- Formulate and enforce impartial rules of behavior for business, including business interests that supported the opposition.

- Continue its liberal policy toward national minorities.

- Help Moldovan authorities to bring within Moldovan jurisdiction the criminal micro-regime in Transdniestr on the border between the two countries.

Provided early signs are good, the West should take the following steps:

Continue the moral clarity. As the Euro-Atlantic community, we are not neutral between democracy and "managed democracy," and there is no need to pretend otherwise. In addition to morals, our credibility and security are at stake. If we preach democracy and turn a blind eye when its rules are violated on EU and NATO's border, we will only breed cynicism and undermine faith in Western intentions.

Put together a support package. The worst outcome of all for the democratic prospects in the former USSR would be for Victor Yushchenko to win the presidency, and then to be seen to fail. Who gives early, gives twice, and we need to mobilize all the institutions over which we have influence:

- NATO should come up with a membership action plan, to be implemented during Victor Yushchenko's first term of office.

- The EU should create a tough but tangible path for Ukraine's accession within a decade or so. In the meantime, the EU should spend serious money on tying Ukraine infrastructurally to Europe. Pipelines, highways, and railway lines across Ukraine to the Caspian Sea basin would help to anchor Ukraine to the West, as well as contribute to our energy security.

- The WTO should speed up negotiations with Ukraine on membership.

- The IMF should be on standby, to provide macroeconomic support.

- The World Bank should spring to help cushion social costs of reform.

Continue to make it plain to Russia that attempts to interfere in Ukraine's internal affairs, or to split the country, will have serious consequences for relations with the West.

Expand support for civil society in Belarus and Russia itself. The U.S. Congress was right to pass the "Belarus Democracy Act" recently, and President Bush was right to sign it immediately. Leaving it without any funding to actually affect change, however, sends the wrong signal. Those Russian democrats who cheered the events in Kiev may be said to have genuinely shed their country's imperial complex and deserve our solidarity in the face of Vladimir Putin's increasing authoritarianism. The European Union, as well as its member states, should enact similar measures and fund them generously.

Western encouragement was not central to events in Kiev, but insofar as we weighed in, our influence helped to prevent violence and contributed to a constitutional solution. Thus Ukraine's Orange Revolution proves yet again that when Europe and America act together, they usually prevail. We should try this approach more often. With a new realism blowing through the chancelleries of Europe, and with the Bush administration sending conciliatory signals, Ukraine has given us an opportunity to rebuild the Western alliance.

Notes

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