

The International Implications of Ukraine's Orange Revolution

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The Orange Revolution of November/December 2004, set in motion by a newly assertive Ukrainian society, opened a new chapter in Ukrainian history and led to a tangible change in international politics. Europe and the rest of the world were challenged to come to terms with the unexpected demands of a new wave of democratic development, the strongest since the velvet revolutions of the late 1980s in Central and Eastern Europe and the collapse of the Soviet Union. This memo will provide a brief analysis of three aspects of the international impact of recent events in Ukraine.

The first is the so called 'rediscovery' of Ukraine by the West after several years of neglect. This rediscovery may lead to a reshaping of the European political map if Ukraine's transformation is continued through the consistent application of policy by a new Yushchenko government. The second is the collapse, or at least a weakening, of Mr. Putin's neo-imperial policy toward the NIS. The third relates to the call for further democratization in Eastern Europe, which is likely to become a real challenge for existing autocracies and semi-democratic regimes such as Belarus, Russia, Moldova, Armenia, and Azerbaijan.

The Rediscovery of Ukraine by the West

It is clear that Ukraine has become a fashionable topic in the West since the events surrounding the presidential elections in late November 2004. As hundreds of thousands of Ukrainians came out onto the streets to defend their right to fair and free elections against a backdrop of massive falsifications, neither Victor Yushchenko nor any other opposition leader could have dreamt that these events would be followed by such intense and prolonged interest from Western political elites and the media. In fact, it was not the opposition, but the passion and bravery of Ukrainian society itself to pursue its desire for democracy in sub-zero temperatures which touched the nerve of Westerners.

Indeed, it was the sheer breadth and depth of Ukrainian society's outrage which forced Western actors to respond so rapidly and unambiguously. The U.S., Canada, and the EU declared unanimously and without hesitation that they do not and would not recognize the official returns, which so obviously did not correspond to the real choice of the Ukrainian people. It was the first time for several years that the whole of Europe, the United States, as well a plethora of international organizations, shared the same position as to what had happened and what needed to be done in terms of challenging the election.

At the same time, the reaction of the West could not have been so strong and consolidated had it not been for the sheer determination of the Ukrainians demonstrating in Independence Square (Maidan) in Kyiv, and throughout Ukraine. Arguably, the Ukrainian crisis helped the West unite after the divisive tensions of recent years.

The Orange Revolution will have profound consequences for the U.S. and Europe's relationship with Ukraine. The Ukrainian people have shown a strong desire for Ukraine to be a pluralistic democracy and the nations of the west will be forced to respond. It is therefore essential that the West does so in a way which supports the aspirations of the Ukrainian people.

The decision of the Supreme Court to cancel the vote of November 21 and to schedule a new vote for December 26 provided evidence that the rule of law, presided over by existing judicial bodies, can work, and the emergence of a fully independent judiciary is possible in Ukraine if the political will is there. It is this perhaps more than anything which has resulted in the West changing its perception of Ukraine from that of a 'lost country' or 'Russia's backyard' to one where Ukraine can be genuinely categorized as a European state.

The nation's ambition of joining the West was expressed clearly in the Orange Revolution as evidenced by the people's willingness to defend their rights and principles and core values for the Euro-Atlantic community. The fact that they did so peacefully merely reinforces their claim.

However, despite the immediate reaction to events and the involvement of European leaders in talks in Kyiv, the West still has a significant role to play.

The Yushchenko victory on December 26 will undoubtedly pose a profound challenge for the EU and NATO, for Brussels and Washington. Indeed, on one level the EU may find it more difficult to deal with a Ukraine under President Yushchenko than a Ukraine led by a President Yanukovich. There are two reasons for this. First, Viktor Yushchenko is serious about domestic reform. Secondly, he and his team are all committed to Ukraine's eventual membership in the EU and NATO.

In contrast to Kuchma, who also was ostensibly in favor of eventual accession to the EU, under Yushchenko a push toward NATO and EU membership will become credible, as it is likely to be accompanied by economic and political reform. As prime minister from 1999 to 2001, Yushchenko pushed vigorously and effectively for economic reforms. While there are vested interests against further serious reform in Ukraine, a President Yushchenko would be supported by what, at the moment, appears to be a comfortable majority in the Ukrainian parliament. Crucially, judging by the ongoing mass demonstrations, he enjoys strong popular support, making implementation of difficult reforms more likely.

Under Yushchenko's government, the issue of NATO membership is likely to be one of major challenges to the creation of a national consensus in Ukraine. Despite strong pro-European ambitions, just over half of Yushchenko's voters clearly support NATO membership. According to recent polls about 20 to 25 percent of the population would support Ukraine joining the Alliance immediately (45 percent against, 30 to 35 percent undecided). The low level of support for NATO membership is a consequence of the

massive and widespread use of anti-Western and anti-NATO rhetoric during the campaign. Yet despite internal ambivalence amongst the Ukrainian public, NATO is expected to develop a more integrative approach toward Ukraine. Upgrading NATO-Ukraine relations by devising a Membership Action Plan is a logical response to the challenge presented by the Orange Revolution.

Economic and political reforms are likely to be accompanied by vigorous lobbying by the new President and his government for immediate measures from EU. In particular, the Action Plan negotiated between the EU and Ukraine is unlikely to be acceptable to President Yushchenko and his ambitious team because the plan, as it currently stands, reflects the low level of relations between the EU and Kuchma's Ukraine. Currently, the Action Plan consists of long lists of political criteria that Ukraine would have to fulfill as well as specific measures to implement the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA). Worst of all, apart from minor new commitments in the short-term and vague promises for closer relations in the medium-term, the Action Plan fails to offer any specific commitments on the part of the EU to strengthen relations with Ukraine.

As tangible proof of Europe's commitment to a democratic, pluralistic Ukraine, a new Action Plan should be negotiated as soon as a new Ukrainian government is in place. This should include a number of immediate measures such as the EU endowing Ukraine with market-economy status for anti-dumping purposes, as the EU did with Russia in 2002, removing quantitative restrictions on steel imports from Ukraine, and starting negotiations on a visa facilitation agreement. The EU should also be more generous in terms of Ukraine's participation and inclusion in EU programs and agencies.

The EU and the U.S. should also live up to their promises of increased economic assistance to Ukraine. The Union could take the lead in organizing a donor conference, as was done for Georgia following its 'Rose Revolution' in late 2003, in a combined effort by the international community to support Ukraine. The EU and its member countries, the U.S., Canada, Japan, as well as International Financial Institutions (IFI), should take part in the conference. These efforts should be bolstered by common EU-U.S. actions supporting Ukraine or at least some form of coordination of activities. The special role of Canada in transatlantic actions toward Ukraine would be welcomed.

Faced with a pro-European reformist like President Yushchenko, who is bolstered by broad parliamentary and popular support, the EU will find it difficult to continue with its current policy of 'welcoming Ukraine's European aspirations' without acknowledging Ukraine as a candidate for membership. Widely expected to endorse the beginning of accession negotiations with Turkey, European leaders must now confront, with utmost seriousness, Ukraine's demand to be acknowledged as a candidate for EU membership.

Ukraine's membership in the EU will undoubtedly become a topic of debate within the EU. At present at least 10 out of 25 member states (namely the three Baltic States, the Visegrad Four, Slovenia, Austria, Finland, and Sweden) are already willing to adopt a more ambitious strategy toward Ukraine than the current 'partnership' paradigm. Among these states, Poland stands out in terms of its insistence and determination to promote Ukraine's status. At the same time, however, some of the more established EU states, namely Germany, France, and the UK, prefer to defer this subject to a later time. The spokeswoman of the EU High Representative Javier Solana, Kristina Gallach, told the

Wall Street Journal on December 8 that membership is not the only attractive resource that the Union can offer and the EU cannot offer membership 'just to encourage democratic development'. In other words, Ukraine cannot expect a rapid and fundamental change of the EU's approach even if a new legitimate and democratic government leads a 'new Ukraine'.

A decision to abrogate one the fundamental tenets of European integration - that the Union is open to all European countries that fulfill the stated criteria of membership - would represent a fundamental break with the basic values on which the EU is based. To do this for the sake of political convenience - to avoid a complicated decision-making process - would be a dramatic break with more than 50 years of European history and a break with Europe's proudest achievements. It would also be a betrayal of the people of Ukraine who have taken to the streets to defend their democratic rights. This is the principal challenge posed to Europe by the Orange Revolution in Ukraine.

The Collapse of Putin's Neo-Imperial 'Renaissance'

Zbigniew Brzezinski's thesis that 'there is no Russian empire without Ukraine' remains popular in Russia. Thus, the reduction of Russian influence in the Caucasus and Central Asia during recent years, while painful, was not crucial for the Kremlin. Ukraine is different. Ukraine has been at the center of Russian projects since 2001 to reintegrate the post-soviet space.

Since 2001, Putin has moved away from a policy of concentrating on the numerous and inefficient post-Soviet structures (the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), customs union, Eurasian Economic Community (EurAsEC), Russia-Belarus Union, Tashkent Treaty) toward a more selective approach in which Ukraine became the key. This more targeted approach led to the formation of the Single Economic Space (SES - 2003) embracing Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, and Kazakhstan without the Caucasus, Central Asia, and Moldova. The SES aimed to intensify the economic and structural dependence of Ukraine (Belarus and Kazakhstan were already involved in the customs union of EurAsEC) by first establishing a Free Trade Area (a short-term objective) followed by a customs union (mid-term objective) and then eventually an economic union (long-term objective). Russia quickly insisted on the simultaneous development of a free trade area (FTA) and customs union. If Ukraine were to be integrated into a customs union with Russia, it would thereby be precluded from participation in European integration.

Under the tenure of Kuchma's government, ties between Ukraine and the West were at best strained, forcing him to turn to Russia and the SES for some political support. A Yanukovich presidency could have been expected to intensify Ukraine's participation in the SES. Furthermore, a less than legitimate President Yanukovich would have been further cold-shouldered by the West, thereby leaving Ukraine even more vulnerable to Russia's neo-imperial policies. That is why the numerous observers from the CIS were so eager to acknowledge Yanukovich's 'victory' of November 21 as soon as possible, and it explains why Putin congratulated him twice (together with Alexander Lukashenko, Igor Smirnov, Askar Akayev, Islam Karimov and Slobodan Milosevic) despite the protests of Western and Ukrainian observers. As the project of a controlled 'succession of power' in

Ukraine failed, Putin's strategy of restoring Russia's dominance over Ukraine collapsed, leaving the Kremlin's entire strategy of reintegration of a corrupt and authoritarian 'post-Soviet space' in tatters.

A Yushchenko government is expected to change the very nature of Ukraine-Russia relations. It will do so by removing the decision making process from behind closed doors, and putting on display relations characterized by legitimate content and transparent procedures, as well as fair politics. Moscow-Kyiv relations are unlikely to serve as a tool for neo-imperial revival anymore.

The West should continue to keep Russia informed of its opinion on Ukraine. The discussions between the prime minister of the Netherlands, Jan Peter Balkenende, and Putin during the EU-Russia summit in The Hague were a good beginning. And while the 12th OSCE Ministerial Council in Sofia on December 6-7 confirmed serious discrepancies between Russia and the West on the issue of Ukraine, it did at least ensure that the dialogue continued.

The fear of provoking a new 'Cold War' between Russia and the West should not prevent world leaders from being consistent in defending the basic values of the West within the Euro-Atlantic space. Mr. Putin's anxiety over Ukraine (as was evident in Istanbul on December 6) will probably dissipate after a new Ukrainian government comes to power.

At the same time it might be expected that Russia will remodel its policy toward Ukraine along the lines of the 'Baltic-Transdnier-Abkhazian model'. That means Moscow will try to actively support a Russia oriented 'parallel society', mainly in the southeastern region of Ukraine. The aim would be to prevent integration of Russian speakers into the Ukrainian nation and to support separatist (autonomist, federalist) attitudes where possible. The local bureaucracy, deprived of power or limited in the scope of its power, as well as large business leaders of the southeast are likely to become the main target of such a policy.

The core weakness of Russia's restoration project lies in its inability to offer an alternative political program, namely a desirable system of values, which could successfully compete with Western principles of rule of law and democracy. The appeal to 'historic ties' within the CIS along with the doubtful economic benefits of integration in the SES are not enough to make the neoimperial project successful.

A New Stage of 'Democratic Turmoil' in the CIS

The Georgian Rose Revolution of 2003 has, until now, been considered unique. Before November 2004, very few people believed that Ukraine (or any other country of the CIS) could follow the Georgian path. The view that Ukraine lacked the preconditions necessary for an explosion similar to Georgian or earlier Serbian ones prevailed. In fact, the Georgian (2003) and Serbian (1999-2000) velvet revolutions confirmed the dominant political trend of Eastern Europe. Ukraine's Orange Revolution merely reconfirmed it.

The logic of all these events remains in the focus of political analysts throughout the world. The mainstream Russian approach is based upon the notion of a continued Cold War (or zagovor) waged by the West against Russia. It is therefore no surprise, that this

approach dominates the debates in Russia on events in Ukraine. The predominant fear is that further events of this kind will limit Russia's influence in the near abroad. The circle of client governments around Russia is decreasing. In fact, events in Ukraine have triggered a new fear: the export of revolutionary fervor to Russia itself.

Despite the fact that a change of power structure in Russia currently looks improbable, it is not as unimaginable in the mid-term future as perhaps was thought prior to events in Ukraine. Frightened by such a scenario, the ruling elite in Russia has already started to create institutional and functional insurance (President Putin has just put in place a reform which abolishes the direct election of regional governors). If events in Georgia merely threatened to circumscribe Russia's sphere of influence, these events in Ukraine may directly undermine the authority and public legitimacy of the Kremlin's boss. That is why Russian resistance to the Orange Revolution was so much more vigorous than to the Rose Revolution.

Belarus is more vulnerable to a democratic challenge. The presidential elections of 2006 will become a real battle with President Lukashenka determined to preserve the status quo. If the democratic opposition in Belarus can consolidate itself, the last European dictator may fall from power. However, he is unlikely to go quietly: massive falsifications in Belarus may lead to the next surge of the democratic trend in Eastern Europe.

Moldova, Azerbaijan, and Armenia are semi-democratic states with high levels of corruption and unstable societies and economies. Any public support of the government is quite low. Yet distrust of the state authorities in these countries is such that a Ukrainian scenario cannot be dismissed.

The Orange Revolution in Ukraine has destroyed the myth that events of this sort are possible only in depressed economies (as in the case of Georgia). The lack of democracy and rule of law, accompanied by massive electoral fraud, can bring millions of people onto the streets if they have sufficient determination to defend their rights. In Ukraine, the newly emerged middle class proved to be the engine driving the protests in what is a quite stable and rapidly growing economy. The case of Ukraine has provided a final call for the post-Soviet elites, who are accustomed to living and governing by their own rules in the virtual space of Byzantium politics.