



Orange Revolution Redux In The Ukraine? The U.S. Should Stay Out Of This Fight

By Doug Bandow
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Opposition activists have just staged their first demonstration of the new year in Kiev. Nine years after the so-called Orange Revolution against electoral fraud, opponents of Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich hope to stage a repeat.

But the issue today, whether Kiev aligns economically with Europe or Russia, doesn't much concern the U.S. Other than warn against violent repression of peaceful protests, the Obama administration should not meddle in Ukraine.

Ukraine was part of both imperial Russia and the Soviet Union, despite the persistent desire of many for independence. When the U.S.S.R. collapsed, Ukraine became the largest territory to split off. However, in the years since it has been badly divided and governed. The Ukrainian George Washington has yet to appear.

In 2004 the Orange Revolution helped deliver the presidency to Western-favorite Viktor Yushchenko over Yanukovich. However, the former proved to be ineffective and inconsistent. He fell out with his one-time ally, "gas princess" Yulia Tymoshenko, who made a fortune in the natural gas industry. When he ran for reelection five years later he finished fifth with 5.4 percent.

Yanukovich, a former convict allied with many of the country's business oligarchs, narrowly won the 2009 race. Although representing Ukraine's Russophile east, he kept Ukraine's distance from Moscow. His government prosecuted Tymoshenko for abuse of power in her natural gas negotiations with Russia. She is no virginal naïf, but the case was mostly about politics.

Most Ukrainians seem to favor a Western economic orientation while opposing a confrontation with Russia by joining NATO. Yanukovich followed that course, negotiating over an Association Agreement with the European Union.

However, full membership remained far away given Kiev's manifold infirmities and EU angst over the messy incorporation of Bulgaria and Romania. Yet for just a half-way connection Brussels demanded painful economic reforms and significant political concessions, most importantly Tymoshenko's freedom, and refused to offer cash assistance. At the same time Vladimir Putin pushed Kiev to forswear the EU and join the Moscow-led Customs Union. To

the consternation of Brussels, last November the Yanukovich government dropped the EU option and signed an accord with Russia—though without joining the CU.

Although European officials later said that financial benefits would have followed signing the AA, Kiev saw more conditions than payments. In contrast, Moscow brought cash to the table even as it threatened trade sanctions and a natural gas cut-off. Russia agreed to buy about \$15 billion in Ukrainian government bonds and cut natural gas prices by a third, worth another \$2 billion. The first gave Yanukovich's government financial aid. The second benefited consumers—including the heavy industries located in Donetsk and elsewhere which tend to support Yanukovich and his Party of the Regions. Noted the *New York Times*, the accord provides “Yanukovich an economic and political lifeline that will spare him for now from negotiations with the International Monetary Fund, Europe or the United States.”

Brussels and Washington were shocked, shocked at this terrible act of coercion on Russia's part. The *Washington Post* denounced Moscow for treating Ukraine as a “zero-sum game.” New German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier said “It is utterly scandalous how Russia used Ukraine's economic plight for its own ends, also in order to prevent the signing of the Association Agreement with the EU.”

The ever-bombastic Sen. John McCain visited Kiev, where he announced that Russian “interference in the affairs of Ukraine is not acceptable to the United States.” He complained that “President Putin has pulled out all the stops to coerce, intimidate and threaten Ukraine away from Europe.” Former Undersecretary of State Paula Dobriansky demanded “a broad range of measures, including WTO sanctions, Russian expulsion from the Group of Eight and even a boycott of the 2014 Winter Olympics by political leaders, unless Moscow abandons its strong-arm tactics toward Kiev.”

Western hypocrisy is breathtaking.

After all, complained Nicolai Petro of the University of Rhode Island, the EU was “attempting to force Ukraine to choose Europe over Russia” rather than “adopting a strategy that would have allowed Ukraine to capitalize on its close cultural, religious and economic ties with Russia.” In particular, Brussels insisted that Kiev choose Europe's AA over Russia's CU, treating the former as “a loyalty test,” in Petro's words. Along the way the EU expected Kiev to make political changes and overturn what the government claimed was an independent court verdict.

In return, the Europeans offered the prospect of economic gain through increased trade. After Kiev said no European officials let slip that billions in grants and loans would have been forthcoming had Ukraine signed with the EU. Steinmeier criticized his European colleagues for not offering more, complaining that “we presented a financial and economic aid package that lay far behind what was necessary to keep Ukraine competitive and permanently tie it economically to Europe.”

Of course, Washington goes not one hour, let alone one day, without attempting to bribe or coerce another government to do something. The American secretary of state constantly circles the globe lecturing other nations how to behave. Since the end of the Cold War the U.S. has

been a warrior state, routinely using military means to achieve its ends. Indeed, Sen. McCain has variously supported war against Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, Libya, North Korea, Serbia, and Syria. Dobriansky advocated an “appropriate financial incentives” and “assistance package for Ukraine to offset the one put forward by Moscow.”

Russia is guilty of heavy-handedness?

Yanukovich doesn't have much credibility, but he still had a point when he observed: “I am categorically against anybody coming and teaching us how to live” and “Some countries should not meddle in our internal affairs and should not believe that they can be the bosses here.” It is up to the Ukrainian people to choose their future and they remain deeply divided.

A November poll found 45 percent wanted their government to sign the AA, 14 percent wanted to join the CU, and 41 percent wanted neither or hadn't decided. While Yanukovich is an unpleasant character, he was legitimately, if not cleanly, elected. Noted Wayne Merry of the American Foreign Policy Council: “The regime of Viktor Yanukovich is both strong enough and legitimate enough—for the time being—to pursue its ‘third way’ option of seeking improved economic access with both Europe and Russia.”

Yes, the West offers a better, freer path. Which is why protests broke out over the government's abandonment of the EU. It's fair for Washington to wish Yanukovich's critics well and warn him against a violent response, but Western officials need to engage more than the English-speaking opposition activists who dominate Kiev. And officials like McCain—who showed up among violent jihadists when visiting Syrian rebels—should note that opposition leaders protesting in Independence (or Maidan) Square included Oleg Tyagnibok of the virulently nationalistic and anti-Semitic Svoboda party.

More fundamentally, why should Brussels or Washington meddle in Ukraine's decision? This isn't 2004 when the issue was ballot integrity. This is dissatisfaction with a policy decision within the normal competence of the government.

Yet Western officials and commentators act like they are confronting the reincarnation of Joseph Stalin.

For instance, the EU's chief bureaucrat, European Commission President Jose Manuel Barroso, praised the demonstrators for “writing a new history of Europe.” Sen. Chris Murphy (D-Conn.) told Ukrainian protestors: “Ukraine's future stands with Europe, and the U.S. stands with Ukraine.” The ever-belligerent Sen. McCain, who in 2008 traveled to Tbilisi, Georgia to announce his apparent readiness for war with Russia, visited Kiev and declared: “We are here to support your just cause, the sovereign right of Ukraine to determine its own destiny freely and independently.” (Of course, the duly elected government of Ukraine had done just that. He actually wanted the U.S. to reverse Kiev's decision.)

The equally belligerent *Wall Street Journal* insisted that the Obama administration “stand up for America's interests and values.” But what are they in Ukraine? Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs Victoria Nuland declared at an opposition rally in Kiev: “the U.S. stands with

you in your search for justice, for human dignity and security, for economic health, and the European future that you have chosen and deserve.” Paula Dobriansky insisted that “It is essential for the United States to exercise strong leadership, reverse Yanukovich’s turn toward Moscow and spur Ukraine to reengage with the European Union.”

Washington should endorse justice and human dignity, which justifies support for honest elections and warnings against police brutality. Of course, America’s message would have greater credibility if Washington better respected such values both at home and in its dealings with other nations which don’t always share America’s “interests and values.”

But Ukraine’s “economic health,” “European future,” “turn toward Moscow,” and reengagement “with the European Union” aren’t American values and are barely American interests. Indeed, they really aren’t proper U.S. concerns. How would Americans feel if Ukrainian politicians showed up at an “Occupy Wall Street” rally in Washington vowing to stand with protestors in demanding economic redistribution, a North American Union, and a turn away from Europe—all in the name of Ukrainian “interests and values”?

It’s obviously difficult for Washington to imagine any issue that doesn’t warrant U.S. meddling, but Ukraine’s status is one. Alexander J. Motyl of Rutgers University (Newark) spoke of Washington and Brussels having “vital interests at stake in Ukraine.” Only in Kiev’s dreams.

More extreme was former UN Ambassador John Bolton, who contended “that tectonic plates are being realigned in Europe” and that Ukraine is “the great prize.” Robert Zubrin of Pioneer Energy argued that “the events unfolding in Ukraine right now are of global historic importance.” Indeed, he added, Moscow’s reach for influence in Kiev is part of a “dark program” which “threatens not only the prospects for freedom in Ukraine and Russia, but the peace of the world.” To suggest that Ukraine is vital to global peace is beyond exaggeration.

A stable, democratic Ukraine would be good for all concerned—and America’s Ukrainian diaspora deserves credit for its long-standing support for its homeland—but Kiev’s orientation isn’t important to Washington. Ukraine spent centuries subject to Moscow and the U.S. never noticed. Vladimir Putin wants to reestablish Russian influence, but that doesn’t mean he can put the Soviet Humpty Dumpty back together. Today’s protests in Kiev demonstrate that Ukraine will never be a quiescent tool of Moscow.

On the security side, Russia’s activities in Ukraine do not threaten the U.S. The reverse, however, is not true. Bringing NATO up to Russia’s southern border cannot help but be seen as dangerous by Russia—imagine Americans would view the Warsaw Pact expanding to Mexico. Washington’s policy today looks like the fabled “Brezhnev Doctrine,” what is mine is mine, and what is yours is negotiable. America seeks to dominate not only the Western Hemisphere, Europe, and Central Asia, but all along Russia’s borders. Washington wants to hold all of the geopolitical chips.

The better strategy would be for the West to treat Russia with respect, acknowledging that it has legitimate interests in Ukraine, while using the prospect of greater economic opportunity to convince Kiev to look westward. Yanukovich has been rented, not bought. Complained

the *Economist*: “Mr. Yanukovich’s favored option seems to be to preserve the status quo and refrain from joining either camp while continuing to milk both.” Which sounds like a sound strategy from Ukraine’s standpoint. The EU, which obviously has the most at stake, could up its offer and reconsider its political demands. How badly does it want to “win”?

Moreover, Europe should look for compromise opportunities with Moscow. Kiev has proposed creation of “a tripartite commission to handle complex issues.” Such an approach has promise. Former congressional staffer Jim Jatras cited recent talks between the EU and Russia over “aspects of the AA with Ukraine that Moscow considers detrimental to its own economy, specifically a massive flow of EU products into Russia via Ukraine.” All would benefit with greater links between the EU and the Russian-lead CU, which might reduce Moscow’s pressure on Kiev.

Ukraine matters, to Ukraine. It also matters to Russia. But less to Europe and much less to the U.S. If Kiev wants to look east, so be it. The West is most likely to win influence if it makes itself more attractive, not if it treats the issue like a new Cold War. Despite Russia’s money Yanukovich’s reelection prospects are weak and Ukraine is likely to eventually join the West. If not, however, so be it. The country never was the EU’s or Washington’s to lose.