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US Bungling in Ukraine

By Doug Bandow

Five years ago Western governments and NGOs did their best to support Ukraine's so-called Orange Revolution, which propelled Viktor Yushchenko into the Ukrainian presidency.

But Yushchenko's performance in office was a disaster; in the presidential election last month, he finished in fifth place with a dismal 5.4 percent. His failure serves as a stark reminder of the risks when Washington intervenes in foreign politics.



Ukraine was one of many lands absorbed by both the Russian Empire and Soviet Union. The collapse of the latter allowed Ukraine to win its independence.

But the break was never clean. Nearly one-fifth of Ukrainians are ethnic Russians. They make up a majority in the Crimea, which contains Russia's Sevastopol naval base.

Moreover, Ukrainian politics has been marred by corruption, vote fraud, brutal infighting and violence. Despite the Manichean prism through which Westerners tend to view foreign political contests, most leading Ukrainian politicians appear to be shades of gray rather than black and white.

In the December 2004 poll, Washington-backed Yushchenko had his own big business allies, just like Viktor Yanukovich, who was attacked for being a tool of financial oligarchs. Moreover, Yushchenko was allied with financial baroness Yulia Tymoshenko.

Although Yushchenko was more obviously pro-Western than Yanukovich, in practice the differences were smaller than advertised.

Even the latter advocated membership in the European Union and Yushchenko never found public or political support for his plan to join NATO.

Finally, Yushchenko proved to be one of the least competent politicians ever elected head of state. Despite the initial euphoria of more liberal and Western-leaning elites at Yushchenko's victory, Ukrainian politics quickly turned into a national soap opera.

Yushchenko quickly turned on Tymoshenko, even accusing her of treason. In the meantime, the economy stagnated, reform halted, relations with Russia deteriorated and the Ukrainian people grew frustrated.

In the latest vote, Yanukovich finished first with about 35 percent compared to Tymoshenko's 25 percent.

She could still win the run-off on Feb. 7, but the Orange Revolution is dead. For those outside Ukraine, at least, it doesn't matter much who becomes Ukraine's next president.

It especially does not matter to the West. Kiev's status, policies and orientation simply aren't of significant interest outside of Ukraine.

The Soviet Union lost the Cold War. Russia won't be able to pick up the pieces, irrespective of its relationship with Ukraine.

The Putin government wants to be treated with respect internationally; it takes Russian security very seriously, but has only limited ambitions.

Whatever Moscow's attitude toward the border states which had been part of the Soviet Union, Russia is not going to attack the other nations of Europe or America.

In fact, expanding NATO to Russia's border has made Moscow more paranoid and confrontational. Georgia's hope for Western protection from Russian military action proved stillborn. No sane American policymaker would risk Washington to protect Kiev.

Attempting to manipulate Ukrainian elections may be less dangerous than offering Ukraine security guarantees, but it has proved to be even less successful.

Not that this should surprise anyone. U.S. officials have meddled in other nations for decades, but too often have had only a limited understanding of local politics and politicians.

So it was in 2004. Ukraine was not going to become either a Western or a Russian satellite, irrespective of who was elected. As Yushchenko dramatically demonstrated, even the most committed pro-American candidate could not force his countrymen in a direction which they opposed.

Moreover, there is no guarantee that once bought friendly local leaders will stay bought. Tymoshenko was initially part of the supposedly pro-Western team. However, she ended up making peace with Russia.

Further, foreign politicians usually will put their own interests and nations first. Without shame, after the Orange Revolution, Tymoshenko quickly adjusted to political reality and moved toward Moscow.

Yanukovich, attacked as Russia's candidate, supported joining the European Union and noticeably distanced himself from Moscow.

Meddling in other nations also can spark national and regional instability. Even if allied objectives are laudable — supporting (sometimes) more democratic forces, for instance — the consequences still often are counterproductive.

Promoting a pro-Western revolution in Moscow's big southern neighbor exacerbated Moscow's paranoia.

Washington has a long history of intervening in other countries. While the consequences have not always been disastrous, the results usually have been disappointing. As in Ukraine.

Who is likely to win Ukraine's presidency? It shouldn't matter much to the U.S. or Europe. The last time they meddled in Ukrainian politics five years of political chaos ensued. There's no reason to look for a return performance, in Ukraine or elsewhere.

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