



## **Ron Forthofer: Mainstream media and Ukraine**

By Ron Forthofer

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The mainstream media have provided a lot of coverage of Ukraine since anti-government protests began last November. However, their "reporting" is reminiscent of their coverage on Iraq and again shows the media to be little more than stenographers for U.S. political leadership.

For example, the media's portrayal of the events occurring in Ukraine is simplistic, a good versus evil story. Of course, the good are represented by the U.S. and the Ukrainians who overthrew the Yanukovich government. The evil are represented by Putin, Russia and those Ukrainians influenced and supported by Russia. This fictional version reminds me of the plots of the old cowboy movies, radio and TV shows featuring actors or characters such as Tom Mix, Hopalong Cassidy, and Gene Autry.

However the situation is a lot more complex. The outside actors — the European Union, the U.S. and Russia — are driven by geopolitics. Their motivations are not based on any concern for Ukrainians nor by any concern about democracy. The U.S. and the EU have had a long-term goal of moving Ukraine into the Western camp, eventually drawing Ukraine into collaboration with and/or membership in NATO. Russia's goal seems to be keeping Ukraine in the Russian sphere of influence and preventing NATO forces from taking positions on Russia's long border with Ukraine. For more information, see the 2009 paper "Hitting the 'stop' button on NATO expansion" by Benjamin H. Friedman and Justin Logan on the Cato Institute's site.

Much of Russia's anger about NATO expansion is based on the oft-repeated violation of a promise that U.S. Secretary of State James Baker (under the first President Bush) made to Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev. Baker said that if the Soviets would allow the reunification of Germany, that NATO would not expand "one inch" further east, not even to East Germany itself. In fact, NATO has expanded east all the way to Russia itself in places, greatly increasing Russian concerns about its security.

The elite U.S. media generally failed to provide the background behind the protest that began in November. The EU and Ukraine were negotiating terms of an association and a trade deal for several years. They were close to an agreement when Ukraine had pro-Western leadership, but things changed in 2010 when Viktor Yanukovich was democratically elected as president. He wanted Ukraine to be neutral and to have good relations with both Russia and the EU. The West wanted him to choose between the sides.

The election of Yanukovich clearly threw a monkey wrench into the West's plan for Ukraine. When the Ukrainian Parliament and Yanukovich officially rejected the latest EU terms in November, that was the final straw. Nonviolent protests began against this decision, against the widespread corruption of Ukrainian leaders, and against Yanukovich's taking more power.

Given Ukraine's near bankrupt situation, Yanukovich needed lots of aid whereas the EU and the International Monetary Fund instead pushed austerity. Yanukovich then turned to Russia, and Putin offered a generous aid package in early December. The media downplayed the differences in the offers. The current IMF-led package again features the failed austerity approach as well as protection for the interests of Western bankers.

The media have been mostly quiet about the U.S. role before and during the protests that led to the overthrow of the democratically elected president. A taped conversation between high-level U.S. officials showed the U.S. was involved. The media have also minimized the violence of the opposition that began in January as well as the key role played by far-right elements in the coup. Finally there has been little discussion in the media of the legitimacy of the current Ukrainian government.

I don't support Russia's actions, but I do realize that the media have not adequately informed the U.S. public on this important issue.

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