

# THE NATIONAL INTEREST

## *Euro 2012 and the Price of Repression*

Doug Bandow | May 17, 2012

Ukraine has suffered a tortured post-Soviet independence. Its second president, Leonid Kuchma, was accused of ordering the murder of an opposition journalist. Kuchma's successor, Viktor Yushchenko, was pro-Western, but utterly ineffective, even incompetent. The current president, Viktor Yanukovich, turns out to be almost as pro-Western, but his chief ability appears to be beating up his opponents.

Now he and his country are paying the price for his politicized prosecution of his last electoral opponent, Yulia Tymoshenko. At least eight foreign leaders, led by the presidents of Austria, the Czech Republic, and Germany, threatened to boycott a Central and Eastern European summit scheduled last weekend at Yalta in the Crimea. With so many heads of state indicating that they weren't coming, Kiev was forced to postpone the gathering.

Moreover, Herman Van Rompuy, president of the European Council, has told the Ukrainian prime minister not to attend a EU-Ukraine meeting scheduled for next week. The Yanukovich government looks especially foolish being banned from a meeting about the country it governs. And several European leaders are pressing for a boycott of the Euro 2012 soccer tournament, scheduled for next

month and co-hosted by the Ukraine and Poland. The event, in which Ukraine has invested \$9 billion worth of facilities, will go on, but only under a cloud—and the guarantee of numerous media stories about Tymoshenko's condition and Yanukovich's governance.

Admittedly, it's hard to pick sides in Ukraine. Many participants in the political system are unsavory. Virtually no business oligarch, including Tymoshenko, once known as the "gas princess," likely is entirely clean. She and Yushchenko, the joint victors over Yanukovich in the so-called "Orange Revolution," had a bitter falling out. Despite his pro-Russian reputation, Yanukovich has emphasized an orientation toward Brussels over Moscow.

But no one is served by gratuitous repression. One can at least understand brutality intended to keep the existing regime in power. The prosecution of Tymoshenko has the air of persecution, the vengeful destruction of an already defeated opponent. Indeed, it looks a bit like Vladimir Putin's seeming obsession with keeping one-time billionaire and potential political opponent Mikhail Khodorkovsky behind bars.

In Yanukovich's case the practice also smells of political weakness. He faces a tough legislative election in October, when all 450 seats in the Rada will be in play. Now he suffered the humiliation of being rejected by his peers throughout the region on top of pressure from European leaders who will decide on Ukraine's suitability for the European Union.

Yanukovich also has squandered any chance of exercising regional leadership. Ukraine is the largest former Soviet Republic, after Russia, to achieve independence. For countries seeking cooperation with Moscow while maintaining their independence, Kiev could play a lead role. But Yanukovich risks turning his nation as well as himself into a pariah. Admittedly, Ukraine won't be North Korea, but no one will be looking to Ukraine for leadership on any issue.

Engagement usually is a better foreign policy strategy than isolation when attempting to transform a recalcitrant state. Indeed, economic and trade sanctions often are counterproductive, discouraging reform. However, in this case engagement had not prevented repression, so a little bit of isolation seems called for. Especially important is tarnishing the upcoming games, which apparently were a favorite prestige project for Yanukovich. Reported Andrew Rettman in the *EU Observer*: “Markiyian Lubkivskyi, Ukraine’s man in charge of preparing the event, has said Euro 2012 is the president’s baby.” Ukraine should be a leader among not only the former Soviet republics but the independent Eastern European nations once dominated by the U.S.S.R. However, Yanukovich’s ruthless rule is squandering Ukraine’s opportunity. It’s a tragedy for the Ukrainian people, but also for anyone else who would benefit from a freer and wealthier Ukraine.