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Ukraine: a tale of two elections

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AP Ukraine's new President Viktor Yanukovich greets his supporters during a rally in Kiev, Ukraine. File Photo

Why did the U.S. and Europe hail the victory of Viktor Yanukovich whom they denounced as a crook five years ago?

The victory of the “pro-Russian” Opposition candidate, Viktor Yanukovich, in Ukraine’s presidential election was greeted with dismay in the West as a setback to the “orange revolution” the United States and Europe helped orchestrate in the country five years ago.

The western media, however, took some consolation from the fact that the 2010 election was a clean and democratic race. This, they said, stood in stark contrast to the 2004 election, which was rigged in favour of Mr. Yanukovich, provoking large-scale street protests in capital Kiev. The “orange revolution” overturned Mr. Yanukovich’s victory and vaulted his pro-western rival, Viktor Yushchenko, into presidency. Mr. Yanukovich has since become “contaminated with the ‘Orange virus’,” as *The Times* put it, and the bad guy of the 2004 poll won a fraud-free election.

How far does this story square with reality? It would be interesting to compare the results of the 2004 and 2010 elections. In 2004, Mr. Yanukovich polled 49.46 per cent of the votes against Mr. Yushchenko’s 46.61 in the run-off that was later overturned by the “orange revolution.” The 2010 vote tally was remarkably similar: Mr. Yanukovich garnered 48.95 per cent against 45.47 for Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko, former “orange” ally-turned-foe of Mr. Yushchenko.

Could it be just a coincidence? Hardly so, if we look at the way the Ukrainian regions voted in both elections. In 2004, Mr. Yanukovich won 80-90 per cent of the votes in Russian-speaking eastern and southern provinces and Mr. Yushchenko received just as strong support in the western and central regions, oriented towards Europe. The east-west divide was strikingly evident again in the 2006 parliamentary election, in which Mr. Yanukovich’s Party of the Regions won most votes.

In the Yanukovich-Tymoshenko faceoff in 2010, the pattern of voting was once again the same — the east and south voted for Mr. Yanukovich, and the west and the centre gave their votes to Ms Tymoshenko. This means the support base of the pro-Russian and pro-western candidates remains the same as it was five years ago. Those who voted for Mr. Yanukovich in 2004 backed him again in 2010.

The identical results refute the claim that in 2004, Mr. Yanukovich’s returns were heavily padded, and in 2010 they were not. Yet the same western observers who denounced Mr. Yanukovich’s victory in 2004 as fraudulent, in 2010 hailed it as “an impressive display of democratic elections.” Interestingly, the 2004 electoral violations were never properly investigated, and nobody was punished maybe because, as many analysts claimed, both sides resorted to rigging.

In 2004, the U.S. and other NATO countries refused to accept the legitimacy of Mr. Yanukovich’s election and sent a high-power team of “mediators” to Kiev to push for a cancellation of the vote. A re-run of the run-off between Mr. Yanukovich and Mr. Yushchenko brought victory to the “orange revolution” leader with the score 52-44. However, the outcome was heavily impacted by media hysteria over alleged vote rigging and the West’s massive support for the Opposition leader.

This year, western leaders, including U.S. President Barack Obama, congratulated Mr. Yanukovich on his victory without even waiting for the losing side to take its case to court. The West ignored Ms Tymoshenko’s allegation that electoral fraud in the eastern and southern regions was just as bad as in 2004 and exceeded the 10,00,000-vote lead the official count gave to Mr. Yanukovich. “The so-called Orange Revolution ... was essentially political theatre (or political circus) not more legitimate than the presidential elections that it overturned,” says analyst Vladimir Beliaeff of the U.S. Global Society Institute.

Why did the U.S. and Europe in 2010 hail the victory of a man whom they denounced as a crook five years earlier? The western media called it the “Ukraine fatigue” — disappointment with the inefficient leadership in the past five years.

“Yushchenko proved to be one of the least competent politicians ever elected head of state,” writes U.S. Republican conservative Doug Bandow, former special assistant to President Ronald Reagan. “Ukrainian politics has been marred by corruption, vote fraud, brutal infighting and violence.”

During Mr. Yushchenko’s presidency, bribery and cronyism have ballooned; his self-destructive war with the “orange” princess, Ms Tymoshenko, paralysed decision-making. Living standards declined, prices soared as the global crisis shattered Ukraine’s commodity-sector economy.

“Ukraine’s under-reformed economy teeters on the edge of national bankruptcy, the rule of law is elusive, courts remain corrupt and the parliament resembles a trading platform for business tycoons in which deals are made and seats bought and sold,” *The Economist* fumed.

However, the main reason for the “Ukraine fatigue” in the West lies in Mr. Yushchenko's foreign, rather than domestic, policies. His top-priority goals were to drag Ukraine into NATO, throw out the Russian Navy from its Soviet-era naval base in Sevastopol and turn the Black Sea into a NATO lake. However, Ukrainian voters rejected Mr. Yushchenko's anti-Russian policy, eliminating him from the presidential race with a dismal 5 per cent of the votes. To save her campaign, Ms Tymoshenko made a U-turn, from criticising Russia to vowing to rebuild close ties with Moscow. “As Yushchenko dramatically demonstrated, even the most committed pro-American candidate could not force his countrymen in a direction which they opposed,” said Mr. Bandow, who today works for the Cato Institute.

Mr. Yushchenko failed to advance the strategic objective of the U.S. “orange” project — tear away Ukraine from Russia and deny Russia a strategic reach in Europe and the Caucasus. As the former U.S. National Security Adviser, Zbigniew Brzezinski, wrote in his famous book *The Great Chessboard*: “Without Ukraine, Russia ceases to be an empire in Eurasia.” “The Orange Revolution is dead,” Mr. Bandow wrote in the *National Interest* journal.

The end of the “orange” regime alters the balance of power in Eastern Europe. “Relations with Russia and the CIS [Commonwealth of Independent States, a Russia-dominated loose alliance of former Soviet republics] will be our priority,” Mr. Yanukovych said in his first statement after winning the run-off. “Our countries are closely tied by economy, history and culture.”

Mr. Yanukovych has voiced support for the Russian proposal to set up an international consortium to manage the Ukrainian gas pipelines, and called for joining the Customs Union Russia has set up with Kazakhstan and Belarus. This shift is dictated by economic realities: Russia meets 80 per cent of Ukraine's gas needs and, together with other former Soviet states, accounts for 34 per cent of Ukrainian exports. Russia is Ukraine's best hope of avoiding imminent national bankruptcy by playing “the role of ‘Abu Dhabi’ to Ukraine's ‘Dubai’,” as *The Wall Street Journal* put it.

Mr. Yanukovych has ruled out NATO membership for Ukraine and signalled his readiness to consider extending the basing rights of the Russian Black Sea Naval base in Sevastopol beyond 2017, when the current lease agreement expires. Without Ukraine, the U.S.-built *cordon sanitaire* around Russia will fall apart. Georgia, which is still reeling from the thrashing Russia gave it in a five-day war in 2008, has lost a valuable ally.

The U.S. is unlikely to accept these strategic shifts. In contrast to the heady days of the “orange revolution,” Washington did not openly interfere with the 2010 election in Ukraine. Some suggested that Mr. Obama did not want to jeopardise his policy of “reset” with Russia.

However, Washington has repeatedly stated in recent months that the “reset” does not mean U.S. recognition of Russia's special interests in the former Soviet Union. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton stressed the point in a keynote address at Ecole Militaire in France last month. “We object to any spheres of influence claimed in Europe in which one country seeks to control another's future,” she said.

The newly appointed U.S. Ambassador to Ukraine, John Tefft (whose previous assignment was Georgia), made it clear that the U.S. would continue its policy of driving a wedge between Ukraine and Russia. “...We have some serious differences with the Russians over the way they conduct relations with their neighbours,” he said in one of his first interviews to the Ukrainian media. “The administration has been quite clear about the Russians in Georgia, and we have been very clear in stressing our support for the sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity in all of these countries, including Ukraine.”

The envoy said Washington remained committed to the idea of NATO membership for Ukraine.

“With regard to NATO, the Bucharest [2008 NATO summit] decision was made that Ukraine will become a member,” Ambassador Tefft said. Unless Moscow and Washington agree to extend their “reset” to the former Soviet space, the Ukrainian election will set the stage for a renewed battle for influence in Eurasia.

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