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## Washington Lucked Out

by Doug Bandow

03.22.2010

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Ukraine recently elected Viktor Yanukovich president. Reviled as “pro-Russian” by American policy makers, Yanukovich could prove to be the best Ukrainian leader that Washington could hope for. He is looking to the West economically but has credibility in Moscow and, most importantly, does not want to join NATO, which would entangle the U.S. militarily against Russia.

Five years ago the Bush administration and U.S.-funded NGOs promoted the so-called Orange Revolution, through which Viktor Yushchenko bested Yanukovich, who was tainted by charges of electoral fraud. The former presented himself as pro-Western, but spent five years fighting with his allies and driving away voters. In January he received just 5.4 percent of the vote in the original election round and failed to make the run-off, which was won by Yanukovich.

The knocks on Yanukovich are obvious: the former mechanic has a criminal record, is tied to big business and is badly-spoken. Moreover, he has advocated the cause of Ukrainians of Russian heritage. He was notably friendlier to Moscow than was Yushchenko, who accused the Putin government of poisoning him.

Yet none of these should matter much to Washington. Yanukovich’s criminal conduct ended in his youth and President George W. Bush was no orator. And no one in Ukrainian politics looks very clean. Yushchenko had more than a few business “oligarchs” in his corner. Yulia Tymoshenko, Yushchenko’s Orange Revolution ally—who later became his bitter enemy and who faced Yanukovich in the election run-off—is an “oligarch” nicknamed the “gas princess.”

More serious is concern over Yanukovich’s relationship with Moscow. But anyone who reads Ukrainian history or who looks at a map understands the connection between the two countries.

Ukraine was part of both Imperial Russia and the Soviet Union. Roughly one-fifth of Ukrainians are ethnic Russians. The Crimea is dominated by ethnic Russians and ended up in Ukraine only through a then—purely symbolic transfer ordered by Soviet Communist Party General Secretary Nikita Krushchev, a Ukrainian. No surprise, then, that there is strong political support in Ukraine for preserving use of the Russian language and maintaining ties with Moscow.

Of course, not all Ukrainians, especially those from the country’s

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west, are enthused about all things Russian. Yushchenko appealed to them by pushing an explicitly anti-Russian policy. Yet the majority of Ukrainians recognize the benefit of maintaining economic ties and preserving a friendly bilateral relationship. Kiev gains nothing but trouble from becoming an enemy of its big neighbor next door. Even Tymoshenko indicated she wanted good relations with Moscow.

This sensible position is in Washington's interest as well. The Bush administration apparently hoped to turn Ukraine into an American ally, pulling it into the U.S. geopolitical orbit. Adding Kiev to NATO would allow the alliance, which had already advanced to Russia's borders, to increasingly encircle Moscow.

Rather than encouraging stability and peace, Washington's efforts roiled Russia's relations with the United States as well as with Ukraine. Moscow became less willing to cooperate on other American objectives, such as expanding sanctions against Iran, more willing to threaten states which cooperated with Washington, such as Poland on missile defense, and more willing to use force against other nations siding with America, notably Georgia. Seldom has a greater hash been made of an important international relationship.

Had Yushchenko been reelected, the Obama "reset" could have gone in reverse. The Ukraine-Russia relationship likely would have gone from bad to worse. Yushchenko would have pushed to get Kiev into NATO despite opposition of two-thirds of Ukrainians, putting the Americans and Europeans in an increasingly difficult spot dealing with Moscow. And bringing Ukraine into NATO would have encouraged Yushchenko to follow the example of Georgia's irresponsible Mikhail Saakashvili in directly challenging Russia. At least two major crisis points would have loomed: expiration of the lease on Russia's Crimean naval base in Sevastopol and disagreements over Russian provision of natural gas to Ukraine.

It is hard to predict what Tymoshenko's policies would have been, since she had sharply moderated her position towards Moscow and temporized on NATO. In fact, Yushchenko called her a "traitor" for not following his lead towards Russia. Still, her opportunistic past would have limited her credibility in refashioning Ukrainian policy.

Yanukovich has no such problem. He is seen as pro-Russian in the West. Yet so far he is proving to be no Putin pushover. During the campaign he carefully distanced himself from Russia. In fact, he criticized then Prime Minister Tymoshenko for allegedly giving Moscow too much in negotiation over natural gas pricing.

Yanukovich's first trip abroad was to Brussels, sparking a negative reaction from the Medvedev/Putin government. Yanukovich met with leading EU leaders and reaffirmed his government's interest in economic cooperation with Europe—Kiev and the European Union are negotiating an association agreement, including accords on free trade and visa-free travel. The EU also is considering 500 million euros in economic assistance and contemplating the long-term possibility of Ukrainian membership.

The EU always was a more rational objective than NATO for Ukraine: membership would yield real economic benefits without being perceived as a threat by Moscow. Ukrainians could draw closer to Europe without becoming a front-line state in any conflict between Russia and the Western alliance. Indeed, Yanukovich calls European integration a unifying issue for an otherwise badly fractured population.

His succeeding visit to Moscow did not go as well. The atmosphere

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was labored, not triumphant. Yanukovich talked of a “complete turnaround” in bilateral relations and commented that “all roads lead to Moscow.” Yet he resisted strong pressure from Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin to join the Russian-led customs union with Belarus and Kazakhstan. Yanukovich indicated that Ukrainian participation in the World Trade Organization took precedence.

The Jamestown Foundation’s Vladimir Socor suggests that Yanukovich “is moving almost without transition from a pro-Russian electoral campaign to a double-vector policy toward Russia and the West.” In fact, it might more accurately be called a multiple-vector policy. Yanukovich covered all the bases in his inaugural address, declaring: “Our priorities will include integration into the European Union, bringing up constructive relations with the Russian Federation, and developing friendly relations with strategic partners as the United States.”

Yet while keeping Moscow at arms length, the Yanukovich government has taken two steps that should limit complaints from Russia. First, while in Moscow Yanukovich indicated that he expected to resolve the status of Russia’s Black Sea Fleet, based at Sebastopol; presumably he intends to renew Moscow’s lease, which expires in 2017. Moreover, Kiev announced plans to introduce legislation to block accession to NATO and “enshrine Ukraine’s nonaligned status in law.” There was no greater irritant with Russia than possible membership in NATO.

Yanukovich calls Ukraine “a European state outside of any bloc” and “a bridge between the East and West.” Resisting pressure from both sides might not be easy, but it is the most sensible policy for Kiev: gain economic benefits from joining the West while avoiding the geopolitical risks of aligning militarily against Russia.

It also is what Washington should want. There is nothing at stake in Kiev that warrants an American security guarantee. The U.S. government should wish Ukrainians well, not risk war on their behalf.

In fact, Russia would have an extraordinarily hard time attempting to swallow Ukraine through military action. Holding onto its conquest would be even more difficult. And Moscow knows this.

At the same time, the United States has no reason to confront nuclear-armed Russia over border issues in the latter’s part of the world. The original objective of NATO was to deter Soviet aggression against America and vital allies in Europe, not to protect every new nation that won its independence, however welcome that independence might be.

In fact, whatever Ukraine’s membership status, NATO would find Kiev’s defense no easy matter. Winning agreement from the major Western European states to intervene in a Russo-Ukrainian conflict would be difficult at best.

The Eastern Europeans would be happy to act as cheerleaders, but with minimal military capability they would no more likely be participants. The burden of mounting difficult military operations along Russia’s border would fall almost entirely on the United States—as usual, when it comes to NATO.

The best way for Ukraine to protect its security is to avoid joining a military alliance seen as a menace to Moscow. Whether NATO in fact threatens Russia is less important than whether the Russian government believes that it does so. NATO membership would offer Kiev geopolitical instability rather than security. At the same time,

Washington would be forced to make promises that it could ill afford to keep. That would be a bad deal all around.

Washington invests much effort and money in attempting to micro-manage the globe. Alas, Washington receives precious little in return for all of its efforts. So it has been in Ukraine. Yet the recent elections may have worked out to America's benefit despite Washington's best efforts to achieve the contrary. Next time the United States should stop worrying and just stay out of the political affairs of other nations.

Doug Bandow is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute. A former special assistant to President Reagan, he is the author of several books, including *Foreign Follies: America's New Global Empire* (Xulon Press).

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The National Interest is published by The Nixon Center

The Nixon Center  
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