



CENTRE FOR EUROPEAN REFORM

briefing note

RUSSIA, THE EU AND UKRAINE: NOT A TUG OF WAR

By Katinka Barysch and Charles Grant

What has been the real choice in Ukraine's presidential election? To judge not only from the Russian media, but also from some western newspapers, Ukraine is the subject of a tug of war between Russia and the West. It is true that the West and Russia have different views on what is best for Ukraine. But this does not mean that Ukraine has become the battleground of a new geopolitical great game between East and West. Many Ukrainians, and most European governments, see the crisis as a struggle between a corrupt, semi-authoritarian regime and a movement that is committed to democratic reform and economic opening.

So far, the EU has performed well in this crisis, speaking with a single voice. But it now faces serious problems in its already strained relationship with Russia. The EU needs to stand up for its principles of democracy and non-interference in other countries' affairs, while doing its best to limit the damage to that important relationship. In particular, it needs to persuade the Russians that they should work with the EU to sort out the problems of their common neighbourhood.

As far as most Europeans and Americans are concerned, Russian conduct during and after Ukraine's presidential elections has displayed an alarming tendency to revert to Cold War-style thinking. Many Russians assume that the EU's position is the mirror image of Kremlin's: an attempt to control Ukraine by installing 'our' man in Kiev. This assumption has been fuelled by Kremlin propaganda and reinforced by some western commentators, who have taken up the idea that a new Cold War is tearing Ukraine apart. It is true that some right-wing Republicans, notably those active in Washington think-tanks, play up to this caricature. These Americans argue that anything that weakens Russia must be good for the US, but they are neither the majority nor those in charge of US policy on Russia.

The recent and rapid deterioration of EU-Russia relations might appear to give some plausibility to the tug-of-war thesis. At their last summit in November, the two sides openly disagreed over Ukraine. They even failed to strike a deal on deeper co-operation in areas where they should find common cause, such as trade, energy or the fight against terrorism. Many Russian leaders now view the EU as a hostile power that is expanding into Russia's traditional sphere of influence. The EU, meanwhile, has become increasingly concerned about Russia's eroding democratic standards and weak regard for human rights. Events in Ukraine have reinforced each side's worst fears of the other. While the EU admonished Ukraine's rulers for skewing the electoral playing field in favour of Victor Yanukovich, Putin supported him as best he could. While the EU has refused to acknowledge the results of the second round run-off, Putin rushed to congratulate Yanukovich for his supposed success.

However, the European policy on Ukraine is not driven by a desire to weaken Russia. The theory that the EU is planning to grab Ukraine, and pluck it from the Russian sphere of influence, simply does not fit the facts:

- ★ As in the case of other post-Soviet states, Russia has backed a particular leader – in this case Yanukovich – because it assumes that he will safeguard Russian interests. Whether this leader is elected, appointed or has fallen from space is immaterial to Moscow. In contrast, the EU ultimately cares little who is in charge in Ukraine – or Belarus or Georgia – provided that person gains legitimacy through fair elections and upholds western standards of democracy and human rights. The EU cannot endorse the results of the second round of voting in Ukraine’s presidential elections because the OSCE observers reported widespread abuse, principally by Yanukovich’s supporters. Russia bets on personality. The EU defends process.
- ★ Ever since Ukraine became independent, the EU has shown remarkably little interest in it. For many years, Ukraine has asked the EU to acknowledge it as a potential candidate for membership. The EU’s answer has been a consistent ‘no’. Except for the Poles and the Lithuanians, who have only just joined the EU, most Europeans regard the prospect of Ukrainian membership of the EU with horror. The EU is finding it difficult enough to digest the ten countries that have just joined, and it is struggling to decide what to do about Turkey’s bid for membership. Many European governments would very happily leave Ukraine in Russia’s orbit, rather than worry about the integration of a large, backward and fissiparous country. The Union is a reluctant and haphazard imperialist: its continued expansion depends not on its leaders’ desire to extend territory, but on its attraction for neighbouring countries.
- ★ The Kremlin blatantly endorsed Yanukovich for the presidency, while no western leader openly stood up for Victor Yushchenko. Nevertheless the Yanukovich camp portray Yushchenko as a western puppet. In fact, many in Yushchenko’s liberal and reformist camp feel that the EU has let them down. And his relationship with Washington is ambiguous. Yushchenko has promised to pull Ukraine’s 1,600 troops out of Iraq, should he win the presidency. Yanukovich was the one who sent them there.

The fact is that any Ukrainian president will have to seek good relations with both the West and Russia. The EU is Ukraine’s most important trading partner, Russia is its key energy supplier, and both are crucial for the country’s security. Ukraine’s East-West balancing act will probably be more difficult after the elections, but just as essential to its survival as a unitary state.

The EU has so far been remarkably consistent in its response to the Ukrainian crisis. The big member-states have overcome their normal temptation to run solo policies and instead sent Javier Solana, the EU’s foreign minister designate, to try and mediate in Kiev. That is more likely to produce results than having 25 foreign ministers knocking on doors. On his two missions Solana has been accompanied by the Polish president, Alexander Kwasniewski, and his Lithuanian counterpart, Valdas Adamkus, both of whom know and care a lot about Ukraine. Their talks with the out-going President, Leonid Kuchma, Yushchenko and Yanukovich have included a Russian representative, parliamentary speaker Boris Gryzlov. These gatherings are in themselves a step forward. Until now Russia has refused to talk to the EU about the future of what it calls the ‘near abroad’ and the EU refers to as ‘the new neighbours’. If Ukraine’s crisis can lead to the first steps towards such a structured dialogue on their common neighbours, all parties would benefit. After all, Russia and the EU share the same interests in promoting these states’ stability, security and prosperity.

President Putin made a serious diplomatic error in backing Yanukovich during and after the recent elections. If Yushchenko becomes president it will not only be embarrassing for Putin, but also a significant set-back for his strategy of tightening Russia’s grip on its near abroad. In the zero-sum mentality beloved by the Russian security establishment, a Yushchenko presidency will be seen as a victory for the EU. The Europeans must be careful not to gloat, or do anything that could be taken as an attempt to humiliate Putin. They must continue to insist that a President Yushchenko elected by fair elections would be a victory for Ukrainian democracy, and nothing more.

Furthermore, the Europeans should not say anything that would reinforce the view of many Russians that Ukraine faces a clear-cut choice between East and West. The EU may want to rethink its long-standing position that Ukraine “has as much reason to be in the EU as New Zealand”, in the words of Romano Prodi, the recently departed Commission president. But now is not the time to talk about Ukraine becoming an EU member. In the long run, when a secure and stable Ukrainian government has

implemented the kind of economic and political reforms that would lend credibility to a membership bid, this subject will return to the agenda. But for the time being, Ukraine should have plenty of reasons to embrace reform, other than the specific carrot of EU membership.

But what if the election is not re-run and Yanukovich assumes the presidency? Some people in Europe have called for the EU to impose a travel ban on Yanukovich and his allies. Some have even demanded economic penalties. But sanctions would be foolish. Ukraine is an important country – as a neighbour, as a factor in regional stability and a transit route for European oil and gas supplies. The EU needs a functioning relationship with the Ukrainian government. Evidently, so long as that government lacks democratic legitimacy, the relationship will remain cool. But the EU will have warmer and more dynamic relations with a government that enjoys legitimacy, and it will evidently be more generous with aid.

Ukraine's people have impressed the West. They have shown that democratic instincts are alive and well in some parts of the former Soviet Union. Many Russians – as far as one can tell – are quite happy with Putin's authoritarian tendencies, even though they gripe about corruption and growing inequality. At least half of the Ukrainians seem determined to achieve something better for their country. They have built a rather rich civil society, and they are prepared to protest peacefully to achieve the more liberal regime they voted for. From its position on the sidelines, the EU should cheer them on.

Hopefully, Russia may learn some lessons from its ham-fisted attempt to influence the Ukrainian elections. If Russia believes that Ukraine should not join NATO and the EU, it should not interfere in ways that lead many Ukrainians to think that the best chance of achieving a modern, democratic state is to seek protection from Russian dominance in western institutions. If Russia supported the modernising and democratic forces in Ukraine, many Ukrainians would see little purpose in shifting their country closer to NATO and the EU. A more subtle Russian diplomacy would see that backing the 'pro-Russian' candidate is not always in the Russian national interest, especially if that candidate is authoritarian – as the pro-Russian leaders tend to be in places like Abkhazia, Belarus, South Ossetia and Transdnistria. The Putin regime seems to regard the installation of democratic governments in Russia's near abroad as a threat. But in fact such an outcome would have a positive effect on Russia's security and prosperity. It would also do wonders for Russia's troubled relations with the EU.



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