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UKRAINE BETWEEN RUSSIA AND THE EUROPEAN UNION:

AN ANALYSIS OF THE PRESENT SITUATION

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Contemporary Ukraine is trapped in the no-man's land between Russia and the European Union. Ukraine will remain there as long as Russia remains a neo-imperial authoritarian state or the EU refrains from offering Kyiv any prospect of membership at any time in the future. If faced with such a condition of deep insecurity for a protracted period of time, Ukraine will in all likelihood progressively abandon its democratic institutions and norms, eventually opt for strong-man rule, and pursue its own security interests regardless of the impact they may have on security in Eurasia.

The Orange Revolution and Its Aftermath

The Orange Revolution marked a turning point in Ukraine's post-Soviet development. Until late 2004, Ukraine, like Belarus and Russia, was moving toward authoritarianism. Ukraine's trajectory changed when, outraged by fraudulent presidential elections, millions of Ukrainians took to the streets and demanded justice, dignity, and democracy. Their exalted expectations of immediate transformation were inevitably dashed, because complex societies cannot be changed over night, especially by non-violent means. Although the prevailing mood five years later is one of profound disappointment, Ukraine is a far different, and better, country today. It has opened itself to the world. It is democratic and free, even if chaotically so. Civil society and the media are robust, and open debate is the norm. Ukraine remains poor and corrupt, but, unlike Belarus and Russia, it is anything but an authoritarian state with a dictatorial leader and a passive population.

How could a democratic breakthrough take place in a country known for systemic stasis and government deadlock? Paradoxically, the "stagnation" of the 1990s made the Orange Revolution possible. It takes time for institutions—or valued rules of the game—to take hold. They "stick" only after people use them repeatedly and come to view them as effective, valuable, and "natural." Since such rule-based behavior evolves slowly, almost invisibly, many observers failed to see that Ukraine had become transformed since independence in 1991,

when it was a post-totalitarian and post-imperial “space” without the institutions of a state, rule of law, democracy, a market, and civil society.

That changed in the years before the Orange Revolution. A state apparatus and skilled administrative elites emerged, parties were established, regular elections were held, popular activism grew, and market relations took hold. Because all political players practiced “formal democracy,” Ukraine’s fractious parliament never submitted to the increasingly authoritarian President Leonid Kuchma. That made him vulnerable to pressure from civil society and encouraged him to forge alliances with economic clans that benefited from crooked privatization schemes. The result was a rough balance of power between parliament, president, civil society, and business. Kuchma’s illegitimate regime crumbled during the Orange Revolution, when civil society rose in protest, and parliament and the oligarchs stood on the sidelines. Constrained by a constitution invoked by everyone, the Revolution’s protagonists and antagonists resolved the crisis by negotiating—and not by shooting—thereby enabling the people to elect Viktor Yushchenko president.

This power balance ensures Ukraine’s continued democratic development. It also means that systemic change will remain incremental: unconsolidated democracies move slowly, Ukraine’s constitution is a recipe for government volatility, and its corrupt political and business clans will resist reforms that undercut their interests. The continued power of shadowy oligarchs has been, and will remain, a source of deep disillusionment for the Orange Revolution’s supporters, who expected corruption to end and the “bandits” to be jailed. Although their anger at feckless Orange politicians is understandable, the best way to build stable democracies and markets may be—not to repress Ukraine’s versions of Mikhail Khodorkovsky and thereby undermine rule of law—but to integrate and thereby transform them into a productive “national bourgeoisie.”

Although Ukrainians are disgusted by their leaders’ infantile shenanigans, the seemingly endless squabbling do show that Ukraine’s politicians, like their counterparts in other democratic countries, are, despite deep personal animosities, resolving their differences according to the rules of the game. All Ukraine’s political elites agree that Ukraine should be an independent, democratic, multinational, and rule-of-law state with a market economy. They insist on the inviolability of the constitution, want a vibrant parliament, support a free press, a market economy, and cultural tolerance, and oppose Ukraine’s fragmentation. They believe that Ukraine should enter the EU and maintain good relations with Russia and the United States. Unsurprisingly, they also disagree violently on many policies, such as Ukraine’s joining NATO, relations between Kyiv and the provinces, the pace of privatization, and the status of the Russian language.

Ukraine and the EU

Until late 2004, both Ukrainian and European officials had a perfunctory, and mutually reinforcing, attitude toward the possibility of Ukraine’s joining the EU. The former were reluctant to abandon their authoritarian leanings, while the latter preferred not to deal with a large, poor, and quasi-democratic country that Russian elites claimed as part of their sphere of influence. Both sides were comfortable with the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) that was explicitly premised on Ukraine’s non-accession.

By sweeping away the Kuchma regime, the Orange Revolution upset this cozy arrangement. President Yushchenko and Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko openly proclaimed their allegiance to democracy, rule of law, and human rights. They also said they really expected Ukraine to join the EU. Brussels had no choice but to welcome Ukraine's turn toward democracy and Europe—if only because it had been insisting since 1991 that Ukraine do so. The Revolution also placed Ukrainian and EU policy makers in a bind. Ukraine's democrats desperately needed a green light from Brussels. They knew from the experience of the East European states that a declaration of the EU's willingness to integrate Ukraine would enhance their legitimacy and help them promote reform. But the EU was suffering from "enlargement fatigue" and, with so many members, faced classic coordination problems and had difficulty arriving at decisions. More important, Europe's energy dependence on Gazprom and the EU's institutional incapacity to respond geopolitically to Russia's challenge or to agree on a common EU defense, security, and energy policy meant keeping a respectful distance from Ukraine lest the Kremlin's neo-imperialist feathers got ruffled. Torn by competing visions of the EU—as a paragon of democracy or as a hard-nosed quasi-state—visibly embarrassed EU officials have hemmed and hawed and preferred to deflect attention to "European values," a largely empty category that serves to justify just about any policy choice.

As a result, Ukraine came to face and still faces an impossible task. No matter how democratic and prosperous it becomes, it cannot join Europe as long as the EU is unwilling to let it join. Ukraine could fulfill every single paragraph of the *acquis communautaire*, and membership would still remain out of reach as long as the EU is unwilling to countenance Ukraine's membership. The EU insists that Ukraine must first show progress before membership talks can begin, but that is at best an evasion and at worst dishonesty, as every Eurocrat knows full well that it is precisely the prospect of membership that succeeded in mobilizing Eastern Europe's squabbling elites behind democracy and rule of law. As if this preposterous insistence were not enough, the EU wants Ukraine to maintain good relations with Russia, while inadvertently encouraging Moscow to engage in the very tub-thumping that terrifies all of Russia's neighbors and thereby subverts the possibility of both good relations and continued democratic development. By suggesting that Russian gas supplies could take precedence over Ukraine's democratic and European future, European policy makers only reinforce Russian high-handedness toward Ukraine and Ukrainian suspicion of Russia. Germany, in particular, has pursued a crudely neo-Bismarckian "Gaspolitik" that has outraged its eastern neighbors, all with long memories of fatal partitions and fateful pacts.

Ukraine's Security in the No-Man's Land

Thanks to its enormous geographic, military, demographic, and economic size, Russia will always be a challenge for its non-Russian neighbors, Ukraine included. Sadly, Russia currently is, and is all too easily perceived as, also a threat to them because it has become—thanks in large part to Vladimir Putin's predilection for strong states, grandiose mythmaking, and zero-sum thinking—neo-imperial, xenophobic, authoritarian, and unstable. The Kremlin hopes to resurrect a sphere of influence in the "near abroad." Too many Russians openly dislike non-Russians. Putin has constructed an unapologetically "fascistoid" state whose elites view democracy as a threat. And Russia is a "petro-state" beset with weak political institutions, inefficient government control of a resource-based economy, pervasive corruption, and high instability. Whatever such a post-Weimar Russia does—from cutting off gas supplies to Ukraine to engaging Georgia in war to laying claim to the Crimea to arrogating to itself the right to defend all Russians living in the near

abroad to promoting its legitimate economic and security interests—evokes deep suspicion among non-Russians. That most Russians support Putin is even more cause for alarm.

Kyiv's response to geopolitical reality and divided domestic loyalties has been, is, and will remain to try to maintain good relations with Europe, the United States, and Russia. However hard it may be to satisfy the competing interests of all three, Kyiv has no alternative to a reactive "multi-vector" policy. But such a policy will be unviable, if the perception that Ukraine is trapped in a no-man's land between Russia and the EU becomes widespread among Ukrainian elites. Kyiv faces an impossible set of circumstances. The more neo-imperial, xenophobic, authoritarian, and unstable Russia becomes, the more will Kyiv want to move toward the West. But the more indifferent the EU becomes to Ukraine's pro-Western aspirations, the more will Ukraine's elites seek solutions that center only on the perceived needs and interests of Ukraine alone. Even today some Ukrainian commentators have argued that, if democracy and freedom does not open doors to the West and if Putin-style authoritarianism does, Ukraine should follow in Russia's authoritarian footsteps. And if Moscow's ruthless pursuit of national interests does not deter Germany, France, and other EU states from pursuing good relations with Russia, then why should Ukraine remain cooperative and moderate?

After all, how do states that face existential threats invariably respond to such threats? Contrary to the implicit expectations of European policymakers and analysts, the non-Russians—in particular Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Kazakhstan—will not just roll over and accept a *fait accompli* crafted in Berlin, Paris, or Brussels. Instead, they will seek existential solutions to existential threats.

At a minimum, this means beefing up substantially their defense expenditures, crafting anti-Russian alliances, and subordinating economic reform to the exigencies of security. More likely than not, the non-Russian states that feel most threatened by Russia will follow in Israel's footsteps and seek security guarantees from the United States and shelter under the American nuclear umbrella. At a maximum, this means doing exactly what the Israelis have done: secretly acquiring nuclear weapons. All the ex-Soviet states have the know-how to build nuclear reactors and weapons; Belarus, Ukraine, and Kazakhstan even inherited hundreds of warheads after the collapse of the Soviet Union. And some of their leaders have openly expressed regret at having transferred them to Russia in the early 1990s.

If Europe remains indifferent to the fate of the non-Russian states and continues to demonstrate its willingness to subordinate them to Russia's great-power aspirations, the non-Russians will, unsurprisingly and predictably, become increasingly indifferent to Berlin's obsession with cheap gas and Paris's obsession with balancing the Americans. At some later point, integration into Europe will be abandoned as a policy goal and democracy will be junked for the same kind of Russian-style authoritarianism and hyper-nationalism that provokes so little criticism in the Europe of Gerhard Schröder and Sylvio Berlusconi. Soon thereafter, the entire former Soviet space—including some of the east European states already part of the European Union—could easily come to consist of angry, suspicious, and aggressive authoritarian states that threaten the stability of all of Europe.

Ironically, the first casualty of such growing interstate tensions may be Russia. Despite Putin's bluster and quick victory over tiny Georgia, Russia remains weak, corrupt, and unstable. And, with its propensity to "talk loudly while carrying a small stick," Russia will be prone to militarist

adventurism, overreach, crisis, and even collapse. Whether Russia's eventual destabilization involves a regional war or massive popular unrest, it will affect many non-Russian states as well—and, not incidentally, lead to disruptions in energy deliveries to Europe.

Integrating Ukraine

Ukraine's encounter with the twentieth century was catastrophic. Ukraine's people experienced some forty consecutive years of relentless death and destruction, starting in 1914 and ending in 1953, when Stalin died. Over three decades of normal totalitarianism then followed. Everyday violence ended, the death camps were disbanded, and living standards improved, but no elements of democracy, the market, and civil society could emerge. Sixty years of Communist domination, irrational central planning, and stultifying ideological control produced a close-minded and provincial population. Even as late as 1991 Ukrainians knew little about the world, and the world knew nothing about them.

A sea change has taken place in the eighteen years since independence. Ukraine is in the world and, willy-nilly, in Europe. Several hundred thousand Europeans now take advantage of visa-free regulations to visit Ukraine. Several million Ukrainians work, for the most part illegally, in Eastern and Western Europe. Some will stay; many will go back; all will adopt European values, both good and bad. Thousands of Ukrainians study at European and American universities. American and European music, books, and films are freely available in Ukraine; over three-quarters of all Ukrainians have mobile phones, and a growing minority has access to the Internet. Every major airline flies to Ukraine. Ukrainian diplomats—confined to secondary roles in the United Nations in Soviet times—play an active role in every international and European organization. Ukraine's oligarchs invest in Europe, vacation on the Cote d'Azur, actively pursue global business, and seek to hire Americans, Europeans, and Western-educated Ukrainians.

The EU and the United States can promote their own interests by helping Ukraine complete its democratic transition and making its opening to the world irreversible. They should incorporate Ukraine into their energy strategies, assure Kyiv that it will not be forgotten in the West's pursuit of its strategic interests, and support a quiet public relations campaign aimed at convincing Ukraine's elites and public of NATO's benign nature. Regardless of who rules in Kyiv, the EU must also muster the courage to make a simple declaration: "Ukraine is European and, once a fully consolidated democracy that meets all the criteria for EU membership, deserves to be within the EU." Such a statement costs nothing and entails no risk, while instantly legitimizing Ukraine's European aspirations. Most important, such a declaration gives Ukraine's squabbling elites a goal around which they can, like their counterparts in Eastern Europe, unite and thereby pursue Ukraine's continued integration into Europe and the world.

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