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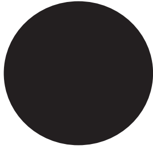

Ukraine: Stranded between Two Worlds?

Michael Meyer

At the critical moment in Ukraine's Orange Revolution, the U.S. ambassador in Kiev, John Herbst, received a frantic telephone call. The husband of Leonid Kuchma's daughter, Lena, was on the line. Protesters had surrounded the outgoing president's residence outside the city. His family was trapped inside. "They're putting ladders against the fence! They're going to climb it!"

Herbst placed a call to an opposition leader. "What's going on?" he asked. The man didn't know but promised to find out. He phoned back moments later. "It's nothing," he told the ambassador. "The ladders were propped up against trees, not the fence. The demonstrators were just doing "a little sightseeing," he explained—and letting themselves be seen. "It was a form of psychological pressure," says one of those involved, and very effective.

It was also very dangerous. At that moment, tensions were near-fissile. Opposition leaders were pushing Kuchma to sign a new election law that would open the way to a rerun of last November's fraudulent presidential ballot, subsequently won on December 26 by their leader, Viktor Yushchenko. Radicals among them had stormed parliament only the day before. The presidents of Poland and Lithuania had just arrived in Kiev to mediate, followed by the foreign policy czar of the European Union, Javier Solana. In Moscow, President Vladimir Putin was warning Europe and the United States "not to meddle" in Ukraine's internal affairs—as the Kremlin itself was doing, with a vengeance. Amid the turmoil, Kuchma was stalling, hoping time and cold weather would dissipate the revolution's energy.

At least, he was until the demonstrators threatened to come over his fence. That was the turning point. "I think Kuchma realized then and there that we could get to him, physically," one of the ringleaders, Taras Stetskiv, later told a local newspaper, *Zerkalo Nedeli*. Had they, Ukraine's velvet revolution would have turned violent. The Ukrainian special forces ringing the president's dacha may not have fired on the people, but the Russian *spetznaz* units backing them up (in the same sense that GRU political officers backed up Russian soldiers in the Second World War, shooting any who disobeyed orders) almost certainly would have. As it was, within an hour Kuchma agreed to talks with Yushchenko and other opposition leaders at the Mariinsky Palace, setting the stage for their ultimate victory. The peaceful outcome is a credit to the new president's levelheadedness and considerable diplomatic skills. But it's revealing for something else: Kuchma's assumption that Washington was calling the shots, or was at least close enough to the opposition to be able to guarantee his security and guide the revolution. That, in turn, is key to understanding what happens next, not only in Ukraine but also in neighboring Russia and beyond.

No foreign government has followed events in Ukraine more closely than Moscow, or with more misgivings. The Kremlin's obsession with its near-abroad is

legendary, not merely as a traditional sphere of influence but also for its more recent ambition to create a new "Euro-East," a whole civilizational zone that is part of Europe yet distinct, characterized not by Western-style liberal values but by Moscow's brand of quasi-autocratic "managed democracy." "If you're Vladimir Putin, following an antidemocratic trajectory, you want similar regimes around you," says a Western diplomat in Kiev. Instead, look what has happened. Former prime minister Viktor Yanukovych, the establishment candidate for whom Putin campaigned and twice congratulated on his "convincing victory," was blocked by a popular uprising from stealing the election. For Putin, all this has been profoundly unsettling. Here is a man whose career has been based on the exercise of administrative power, covert and overt. He has reengineered the instruments of the Russian state to do his bidding. Yet this "vertical power," as Russians call it, failed—utterly—in Kiev. Worse, the defeat came out of the blue. No one warned Putin of its remotest possibility, certainly not the well-funded "advisers" he personally dispatched to secure his favorite's win. No less troubling, in the face of this hitherto inconceivable turn of events, were the banners that promptly appeared on Kiev's now-famous Independence Square: UKRAINE TODAY, BELARUS TOMORROW, RUSSIA...?

A Geopolitical Virus

That sound bite still resonates in Moscow. Since the election—partly at the prodding of Western leaders—Putin has welcomed Ukraine's new government. Yushchenko's first trip abroad as president, the day after his inauguration, was to Moscow. Yet the gap between public diplomacy and private reservation is large. Putin himself has bitterly denounced the appointment of "anti-Russian" Yulia Tymoshenko as Ukraine's new prime minister. A prominent Russian lawmaker, Konstantin Zatulin, warns that Ukraine will become an "anti-Russian bridgehead," a "second Poland" that will abandon the old Soviet fold and join the West. Just beneath the surface lurks the fear that the Orange Revolution is a sort of geopolitical virus, a contagion even. Thus Vitaly Tretyakov, a political analyst with close ties to the Kremlin, has warned that within two years a "Kiev scenario" could topple autocratic regimes across the former Soviet space—Belarus, Moldova, and Central Asia, according to the Eurasia Daily Monitor in Washington. Grigory Yavlinsky, leader of Moscow's liberal Yabloko Party, predicts that Ukraine's "domino effect" could even spread to Russia. Kremlin hardliners were quick to note remarks by Oleksander Zinchenko, Yushchenko's campaign manager, the night Yushchenko won. After cautioning supporters about the risks of "getting drunk on victory," he told reporters at an exuberant press conference: "I don't want to boast, but events here will change not only Russia's policies toward Ukraine, but also domestic policies within Russia." And what of Oleh Rybachuk, Yushchenko's deputy prime minister, during the recent visit to Moscow? "From now on," he told *Izvestiya* while his boss was conferring with Putin, "we'll be speaking with Moscow like equals." Coming from a country traditionally known as Little Russia, this is unsettling talk indeed.

Many in the Kremlin blame the United States. It's the same mind-set, the Western diplomat says, that prompted Kuchma, in extremis, to call the American ambassador. Events in Ukraine are less the product of democratic yearnings, Russian hardliners say, than evidence of a vast conspiracy to isolate Russia and strip it of its influence. One well-placed Moscow analyst, Vyacheslan Nikonov, recently set out what he described as a "view from the Kremlin" in the daily newspaper, *Trud*. Ukraine is but the first phase of "a large-scale geopolitical 'special operation' of the united West," he wrote, aimed at "revolutionary regime change." U.S. support for civic-action non-

governmental organizations in Ukraine is only the latest proof. Kremlin leaders see events there as an extension of the U.S. role in last year's "Rose Revolution" in Georgia, where the American embassy effectively functioned as command central for the movement to oust Moscow-friendly dictator-president Eduard Shevardnadze. "We know what you're up to," one Kremlin official told an astonished American official in Moscow recently, waving a sheaf of what he said were electronic intercepts of embassy communications. Small wonder that some Kremlin advisers have been muttering about the need for a preventive "counter-revolution" to thwart this destabilization campaign.

Such fears might sound exaggerated, if not silly. Certainly, few Western analysts put much stock in a domino theory of cascading Orange Revolutions across the former Soviet sphere. But that misses the point: to Moscow, irrational or not, these concerns are very real. According to many U.S. and Russian experts, Putin has come under intense criticism for "losing Ukraine" and bungling Moscow's interests in the region. If the former secret-service types—the so-called *siloviki*—who surround him have their way, that could well translate to even further consolidation of central political control in Russia. Western human rights and democracy-building NGOs have been under heavy pressure over the past year, and events in Ukraine will only intensify that, predicts the head of one U.S. human-rights institute in Moscow. Foreign financial contributions are being taxed more heavily, and these groups fear for their ability to operate freely. "They are really going to turn the screws on us, then pick us off one by one—bang, bang, bang," says this source, gesturing as if his hand were a gun.

Authoritarian leaders elsewhere are even more wary of the Kiev effect. In neighboring Belarus, President Aleksandr Lukashenko does not hide his concern. "Once the authorities begin to display hesitancy, passivity, or weakness," he said at the peak of the Ukraine crisis, "destructive forces immediately make use of this." Europe's last Stalinist spent much of the last few months bolstering his power base. In December, he fired six of the more liberal members of his inner circle and appointed a confirmed hardliner as his No. 2, a former general prosecutor accused by human rights groups of "disappearing" opposition leaders. He also jailed the country's leading opposition figure on trumped up charges of "stealing" computers and fax machines donated by the U.S. embassy. In late February, he accused the West of plotting a "blue revolution" in Belarus, so-named for the country's national flower. "We have already had enough of such blueness," Lukashenko thundered in a televised speech. On more than one occasion, he has unmistakably expressed his willingness to use force to put down unrest and retain power.

So has Askar Akayev, president of Kyrgyzstan in Central Asia. Of all the region's strongmen, he has been most outspoken in his fear that the Orange Revolution will spread. Up for reelection in October, he faces an emboldened opposition. Upheavals in Georgia and Ukraine, he told military leaders late last year, are a "call to arms" for the governments of the former republics. In January, he warned that the country's February 27 parliamentary elections could be exploited by "provocateurs" bent on "infecting the people with a yellow plague"—a clear if mismatched reference to Ukraine, according to Radio Free Europe. He then called on the nation to beware those seeking to stir unrest. "There is intimidation everywhere," says Muratbek Imanliev, head of the beleaguered civic action group New Direction. International observers reported the usual litany of electoral fraud: vote buying, widespread disenfranchisement of opposition candidates, repression of independent media. On election day itself, after the American ambassador warned in a newspaper editorial that Kyrgyzstan's retreat from democratic

development could complicate relations, the foreign ministry condemned his remarks as an "attempt to interfere in the internal affairs of the country."

The picture is similar in Kazakhstan, where the once-feeble opposition to President Nursultan Nazarbayev got an unexpected boost last year when the leader of the country's parliament abruptly switched sides, accusing the regime of rigging last fall's elections. Then, in January, the government shut down the party Democratic Choice. Police have since raided its offices and detained party members, questioning their political views. In Tajikistan, authorities have jailed opposition leader Mahmadruzi Iskandarov and barred him from running in that country's upcoming parliamentary elections.

No European Welcome Mat

The ferment on Russia's borders in many ways resembles early 1989. But the revolutions in Eastern Europe were against Soviet totalitarianism. Ukraine's struggle is against what some call "phony democracy"—corrupt, autocratic governments operating in open collusion with oligarchic crony-capitalists and indifferent to (if not outright contemptuous of) their people. UKRAINIANS WANT A COUNTRY THAT RESPECTS THEM read the headline in the election issue of the *Ukraine Observer*. That might also be a message for Putin, not to mention his like-minded neighbors. After all, with power increasingly concentrated in his hands and freedoms curtailed, "phony democracy" pretty much describes today's Russia.

What happens next? Much depends on the West. If the Orange Revolution is to become an engine for change in the region—presumably a desirable goal—it must succeed. In this, Ukraine clearly needs help. Yet it's an open question whether it will receive it. The reason: the West, and most especially Western Europe, does not wholeheartedly welcome a democratic Ukraine. At first glance, that might seem like nonsense. After all, the European Union, that most democratic of multinational institutions, champions "European" values. Ukraine's uprising against authoritarianism, and the protesters' fervent affirmations of their own liberal "Europeanism," should by rights be an inspiration. At the recent Davos World Economic Forum, Yushchenko was feted as a conquering hero. His ambitious agenda for change—to attack corruption, push free-market reforms, and join Europe, "the alpha and omega of our new government"—drew standing ovations. The famous scars on his face, the product of a mysterious poisoning at the height of the election campaign, only magnified the drama of Ukraine's triumph.

Yet Europe is ambivalent. During his first month in office, Yushchenko has visited Brussels twice, most recently for the February 22–23 NATO summit. If body language means anything, it wasn't encouraging for Kiev. During a joint session dedicated to Ukraine, U.S. president George W. Bush likened Yushchenko to George Washington, fighting for values everyone in the West "holds dear." By contrast, French president Jacques Chirac left early. Germany's chancellor Gerhard Schroeder was ostentatiously silent. Spain's José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero was reported to remark that the meeting had not been "very sexy." The best Europeans could do was reiterate their proposal for including Ukraine in their "neighborhood," a gauzy notion falling far short of Yushchenko's hopes to join the World Trade Organization and create what he calls a "free economic zone" with Europe. As Eurocrats in Brussels see it, Ukraine is an untimely inconvenience. The EU already has its hands full already with its most recent enlargement. Turkey waits in the wings, as do other nations. Ukraine is big: 48 million, larger even than Poland, and poor. European leaders—especially such Russophiles as Belgium, France, and Germany—worry that too-quick an embrace of Ukraine will harm relations with Russia, particularly if Ukraine pushed for membership in NATO.

Luxembourg's prime minister, Jean-Claude Juncker, head of Europe's rotating presidency, spoke for many in Europe when he declared in December: "I can only warn against offering Ukraine the prospect of full membership."

Ukraine thus puts Old Europe at odds with New Europe, to use Donald Rumsfeld's notorious formulation. When the presidents of Poland and Lithuania flew to Kiev to help defuse the crisis, the head of the European parliament, Josep Borrell, likened the pair to a "Trojan horse" for America, interfering where they were not welcome. The split reflected more than irritation that the EU's newest members would undertake diplomacy better left to their elders. It also heralded a deeper and more enduring divide.

For the East European and Baltic members of the union, Ukraine is a test case: their security and economic prosperity will be enhanced by a stable, increasingly prosperous Ukraine, linked more closely to the West. They see Russia attempting to preserve its historic influence in the region, by any means possible, and impeding the spread of democracy. "Poland will not only support Ukraine's drive to join the European Union," said a Polish member of the European parliament in Kiev, Janusz Onyszkiewicz, but "we will fight for it." Facing years of intramural conflict, Brussels' schizophrenia is understandable. "Had Viktor Yanukovych won the presidential election," suggests Taras Kuzio at George Washington University, "it would have resolved the EU's dilemma: Brussels and Strasbourg could still use the excuse given earlier to President Leonid Kuchma, namely that the Ukraine has shown itself not to be part of Europe."

A Treacherous Neighborhood

Relations with Russia could prove no less problematic. On the one hand, as Liliya Shevtsova at the Carnegie Center in Moscow told *Newsweek*, "Putin is very pragmatic. However much he hates the idea, he will have to back off on Ukraine. He will do anything to preserve his image as a man the West can deal with." On the other, Russia can be expected to continue to pursue its own interests in the country. That will begin with ensuring its hold on Sevastopol, home to Russia's Black Sea Fleet, and guaranteeing favorable transit rights for its natural gas and oil pipelines traversing Ukraine for Europe. Putin will insist on Ukraine's participation in his cherished commonwealth of former Soviet states, of which Ukraine is the linchpin, after Russia itself. Meanwhile, Kiev can expect considerable behind-the-scenes pressure. Putin contributed a reported $300 million to Yushchenko's rival in the recent elections. Advisers from his personal staff worked directly for Yanukovych, organizing rallies, handling campaign advertising, and writing daily instructions to Ukraine's state-controlled media about how to cover election-related "news." Under the guise of protecting the interests of Ukraine's Russian-speaking minority, leading Russian politicians (among them Moscow mayor Yuri Lushkov and former prime minister Viktor Chernomyrdin) canvassed eastern Ukraine stirring up separatist sentiment, according to a senior Western diplomat in Kiev.

Perhaps most alarming are suggestions of a Russian connection to a pair of apparent assassination plots. The poison that incapacitated Yushchenko during the campaign last fall, disfiguring and very nearly killing him, has been identified as a highly toxic form of dioxin manufactured at a special military lab outside St. Petersburg, according to Ukrainian government sources. It is difficult to conceive of this material finding its way to Kiev, they say, without the involvement of the FSB, Russia's security service. Another attempt on Yushchenko's life came on November 21, election day, when Ukrainian police arrested two men and found a car parked outside the candidate's headquarters packed with four kilos of plastic explosive

controlled by a remote detonator. The men, both Russians, told Ukrainian authorities that they were hired in Moscow and had been offered $250,000 to kill Yushchenko. Investigations are underway in both cases, with results expected to be announced this spring.

The inescapable conclusion in all this is that newly democratic Ukraine inhabits a treacherous neighborhood, flanked by powerful regimes that do not wish it well. With the EU's indifference and Russia's not-so-covert enmity, the danger is that it will end up stranded between two worlds, neither East nor West. With its message of democracy so resoundingly triumphant, that would indeed be a tragedy. ●