

Ukraine: Choke on it Putin

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Why a new Ukraine is the Kremlin's worst nightmare

Details still need to be decided, but the revolutionaries have won in Ukraine. Some elements of the old regime may survive, but that is precisely why the protesters on the "Maidan" (Kiev's main square) don't trust the mainstream politicians who claim to be negotiating on their behalf.



Obama and Putin

The politicians in suits can do the donkey work - writing a new constitution to improve on the old one they have just restored, and trying to save the collapsing economy. But the Maidan leaders in the fatigues and helmets will set the agenda on justice - dismantling the militia and reworking the corrupt legal system, so that the many guilty end up behind bars. And there are credible reports that the snipers who killed more than 70 on Thursday were based in the government buildings that are already being occupied by protesters combing for evidence. Once the world knows who gave the deadly orders, justice will decapitate the old regime. And the "official" opposition will be radicalised by the need to compete with the moral authority of the Maidan.

All of which is the Kremlin's worst nightmare. When the protests started back in November they were about a trade deal with the EU. Russia was ecstatic that it had persuaded Ukraine to walk away from that deal, and was picking off the other states in the EU's "Eastern Partnership" programme (Armenia caved in September, Georgia and Moldova were expected to come under enormous pressure in 2014). Russia hoped to drag them into its alternative Eurasian Union instead, which is due to be launched in January 2015.

But this is 10 times worse than Brussels expanding its bureaucracy to Russia's borders. A real democracy in Ukraine is an existential threat to the entire system that Vladimir Putin has built since 2000. Ironically because Putin is right - most Russians regard Ukraine as a kin state, or not really a different state at all. They are used to stepping in tandem; so if something changes in Ukraine, why not in Russia too? And now the dominoes might fall in the other direction. Other Maidans might appear in other neighbouring states - maybe first in Moldova where the Russia-backed Communist Party was hoping to return to power in elections due in November.

Putin marginalised his own protest movement after the last Russian election cycle. He does not want to see that flare up again. So far, the Russian opposition has been quiet. Few have supported the Ukrainian Maidan, even fewer sound inspired to copy it - for now. But Putin will need to come up

with something more convincing than the scattergun propaganda the Russian media has pumped out to date.

None of the favourite Russian myths – the protesters are all crazy nationalists, which is why they are also backed by the Americans, the young guys throwing rocks are really only interested in promoting gay rights – make much sense in the long run.

So the new government in Ukraine, however it's made up, will be given the briefest of ritualistic honeymoons before Russia uses every instrument at its disposal to try to make it fail. Unfortunately, Russia holds most of the economic cards. Ukraine's coffers are almost empty, and the old guard is busy looting what is left. It has less than \$18bn (£10.9bn) in hard currency reserves, its currency is dropping and immediate debt-repayment needs are more than \$10bn.

Russia tied Ukraine to a \$15bn bailout deal in December, which is parcelled out by the month to maximise leverage, and periodically suspended whenever the opposition looked like getting the upper hand. But Russia's real aim was to provide just enough money to support the old semi-authoritarian system (helping Viktor Yanukovich pay the police) and keep Ukrainian society post-Soviet, that is, still dependent on government. So Ukraine's new leaders will have to be honest and say their aim is to dismantle both. They cannot declare victory now, but will have to plead for popular support during what will be two or three difficult years.

And if the West is serious about an alternative deal, Ukraine needs a lot of money fast. Fortunately, the West would no longer be throwing it down the black hole created by the old regime. Instead the money would support the kind of kamikaze leader Ukraine has never had in the past. Politicians were reluctant to make difficult choices and lose elections, because they'd never get back into power. Now Russia and the old regime will back any populist who promises to keep government subsidies flowing; but an honest kamikaze might just win the long-term credit and at least write his place in the history books.

Russia has talked a lot about its "soft power" in recent years. It isn't particularly soft. The new Ukraine will pay more for gas, which will be regularly cut off for "technical reasons". Russia's crazy "food safety" agency will declare that everything that comes out of Ukraine is radioactive. Ukrainian migrant workers will be sent home now they have finished helping to rebuild Sochi.

Worst of all, Russia will work hard to try to re-corrupt the political system. The Kremlin used to boast that it could exploit Ukraine's old-style "democracy" – meaning that, just like Yanukovich, they could launch their own puppet parties and buy agents of influence in the honest ones. The Ukrainian Front, a bizarre alliance of hooligans and bikers with a vaguely pan-Slavist ideology that appeared in the eastern city of Kharkiv two weeks ago, was backed by the Russians. Skinheads and sportsmen with the money to spend on propaganda are not a natural combination. Similar groups may pop up in Crimea and elsewhere, where the last elements of the old regime may try and regroup.

But Russia's ultimate problem is the same as Yanukovich faced. The Kremlin simply can't understand that protesters would be motivated by ideology rather than by money or foreign support. The Russians were good at manipulating the old system, but dealing with real revolutionaries is a different matter. Ukraine is starting a very bumpy ride.

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