

Great power rivalries erupt over disputed election in Ukraine

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A struggle for power has broken out between the two candidates, acting head of the government Viktor Yanukovich and opposition leader Viktor Yushchenko, following the Ukrainian presidential elections last Sunday. The official electoral committee pronounced Yanukovich to be the winner, but the opposition has refused to recognize the result. It maintains that the election results were falsified and Yushchenko was the legitimate winner.

On Monday, Yushchenko allowed himself to be sworn in as president by the delegates of the opposition in the Kiev parliament. At the same time, crowds of up to 200,000 have demonstrated in the city centre of Kiev since Monday, with many camping out on the streets. They are seeking to secure Yushchenko's recognition as president with a campaign of civil disobedience. Their models are the so-called "Rose Revolution" which one year ago led to the ousting of Shevardnadze in Georgia and the events that toppled Milosevic in Serbia.

In the Western media, this struggle for power is portrayed as a conflict between the forces of dictatorship and democracy, between an autocratic regime and a democratic opposition. But a closer examination presents a very different picture. Both Yushchenko and Yanukovich have their roots in the new elite which divided the wealth of the country after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Differences between the two camps are of recent origin.

From 1993 to 1999, Yushchenko was head of the Ukrainian central bank, and from 1999 to April 2001, he was prime minister—serving in both posts under President Leonid Kuchma, who is now considered to be the power behind Yanukovich. As head of the central bank and prime minister, Yushchenko was one of the most important architects of a policy of economic liberalisation and privatisation, which has had devastating social effects. With an average monthly income of 65 euros, the Ukraine has one of the poorest populations in Europe, while an infinitesimal layer of nouveau riche has accumulated enormous wealth.

The conflict within the new elite revolves around the question of how best to defend its privileged status—in a close alliance with Russia, or by a further opening up to Western capitalist interests.

President Kuchma, who came to power in 1994 and must now step down, carried out a careful balancing act. On the one hand, he strived to establish close cooperation with the European Union and the US. He made several agreements with the European Union aimed, so far unsuccessfully, at gaining admission to NATO, and

even sent 1,500 soldiers to support the US occupation in Iraq. On the other hand, he maintained close relations with Russia and its president, Vladimir Putin.

It is no longer possible to maintain this posture. The Ukraine has suddenly become the focal point of intense rivalries between Russia, on the one side, and the US and the European Union, on the other. Both sides intervened in a massive fashion in the election campaign and supported without scruple their respective favourites—Russia backing Yanukovich and the Western powers supporting Yushchenko. Both sides are pursuing their own economic and geo-political interests.

Given the alliance between a number of Eastern Europe countries and NATO, and the establishment of American military bases in former Soviet republics in Central Asia, Putin is determined to prevent the Ukraine falling into the Western sphere of influence. For some time he has been pursuing a policy aimed at more closely binding the former Soviet republics economically and politically to Russia.

For the US and the European Union—in particular, Germany—the Ukraine, with its nearly 50 million inhabitants and strategic location, is a potentially lucrative market and a critical transportation route for oil and gas. Approximately 80 per cent of Russian natural gas supplies to Western Europe flow through the Ukraine.

The German financial newspaper *Handelsblatt* summed up German interests, writing on November 23: "[T]he Ukraine is much too important as a transportation route for sources of energy, both Russian oil and gas and the reserves in the Caspian Sea, to allow the country to become the play thing of the Kremlin."

The vehemence with which the interests of Russia and the Western powers collide in the Ukraine recalls the darkest days of the Cold War. It shows how strained and explosive relations between the great powers have become.

Just three weeks ago, Russian President Putin was the first to congratulate Bush on his re-election. Now, Washington and Moscow confront one another as irreconcilable opponents over the issue of the future Ukrainian president. If the conflict is not resolved soon, differences threaten to escalate further. As was the case in the first half of the 20th century, the fight for influence, markets and raw materials threatens once again to lead to armed conflicts between the great powers.

In the Ukrainian election campaign, Putin backed Yanukovich, whose base lies in the coal and steel region of the Donetsk Basin

and the city of Dnepropetrovsk. The Donetsk heavy industry magnate Rinat Achmetov is considered his most important backer. The oligarchs in heavy industry fear Western competition and rely on support from Russia. In addition, the east of Ukraine has a large Russian-speaking population. Yanukovich speaks Russian as his native language.

The Western press made a great fuss about Putin's interference in the Ukrainian election campaign. He briefly visited Kiev on two occasions before the election. This, however, is not so extraordinary, given the fact that prior to 1991, Russia and Ukraine had for centuries been part of a common country, and a large proportion of the population is Russian-speaking.

On the other hand, the substantial interference by Western governments and institutions in favour of Yushchenko was portrayed as completely normal, and justified as facilitating a further "opening up to the West" (i.e., opening up to Western capitalist interests), and a "continuation of the reform process" (i.e., "free market" liberalisation of the economy).

Yushchenko's strongholds are situated in western Ukraine, which has long been a centre of Ukrainian nationalism and oriented strongly towards Europe. His standpoint corresponds to that of the new dominant layer in Poland, Hungary and other Eastern European countries, which see their future as junior partners of the Western great powers.

Yushchenko was supported in his propaganda and finances by outside advisors. European and American politicians continually praised him, describing him as an exemplary democrat. As soon as the polls closed, they raised accusations of electoral fraud.

US Senator Richard Lugar, who spent time in Kiev as an election observer, spoke of a "concentrated and energetic program of fraud and abuse on election day." The foreign policy speaker of the German Social Democratic Party (SPD), Gert Weißkirchen, declared Yushchenko to be the winner. He demanded international reprisals should the ruling powers in the Ukraine refuse to reverse themselves and recognize the election of the opposition candidate.

The governments in Washington and Berlin have demanded an examination of the election result and threatened sanctions. Together with his American colleague Colin Powell, the German foreign affairs minister, Joschka Fischer, demanded a recount of the vote under the control of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe.

It is quite possible, and even probable, that substantial fraud occurred in the Ukrainian election. Certainly the hand-picked candidate of Kuchma and Putin, both of whom rule on the basis of authoritarian methods and preside over corrupt regimes, is entirely capable of such tactics. And among the anti-Yanukovich demonstrators are many people genuinely motivated by democratic concerns.

But the democratic posturing of the US and Europe is entirely hypocritical. When pro-Western regimes defend their power with autocratic methods, as is the case with many states in Central Asia, Washington, Berlin and the other European capitals look the other way. In Iraq they are preparing the "democratic" election of a puppet regime by waging a brutal war against the civilian population.

The Ukrainian population has become a plaything in the struggle

for power between Yanukovich and Yushchenko, and the great powers pulling the strings in the background. Nevertheless, there are real social concerns and fears that animated the voters.

Not all of those who voted for the government candidate did so because of manipulation by the official Ukrainian media, despite the claims of the opposition. Workers in heavy industry have justified fears of losing their jobs if the Ukraine continues to open up to the European Union, as occurred in Poland and other Eastern European countries. In addition, the Russian-speaking minority fears discrimination should Ukrainian nationalism prevail. In this respect, the Baltic states are horrific examples of what could go wrong.

Amongst the supporters of Yushchenko, on the other hand, there are young people and students who are honestly shocked over attacks on free speech and political expression. They find themselves, however, in the very dubious company of priests and nationalists, whose tradition, to put it mildly, does not embody democratic convictions. Anti-Semitism was common in nationalist circles in Ukraine for a long time, and assisted the Nazis in the recruitment of accomplices during the German occupation of the country.

So far, the power struggle in Ukraine has remained largely peaceful. The situation is, however, extremely tense. Violence by the government camp against the demonstrators cannot be ruled out. If the conflict escalates, the country confronts the danger of a civil war, with results similar to the catastrophes that have engulfed the Balkans over the past decade.

In both cases, the responsibility rests, in the first instance, with US and European imperialism, which seek to manipulate and exploit internal tensions within these countries for their own predatory ends. For his part, Putin acts in the interests of an aspiring national bourgeois elite in Russia with its own imperial ambitions.

The danger of civil war and an intensified assault on living standards and democratic rights cannot be averted by support for either Yushchenko or Yanukovich. It requires an independent political movement of the working population, based on a socialist program, not only in Ukraine, but throughout Europe.



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