

Ukraine's Elections: The Forces In Play (1)

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1. The dynamics of revolution have displaced the dynamics of politics in Ukraine. Whatever the complexity of earlier agendas, the struggle has now assumed a black and white character. A middle position is becoming untenable as it was in Budapest in 1956 or Bucharest in 1989. Fateful thresholds have been crossed: the immediate declaration of fraudulent results by the Central Electoral Commission (22 November), the swearing in of Yushchenko as President (23 November), the official proclamation of Yanukovych as victor (24 November) and several reports that Russian armed detachments have arrived in the country. Since 22 November, large numbers of state functionaries are no longer playing the parts cast for them.¹ Turbulence extends across eastern Ukraine. 'Third forces' (e.g. Volodymyr Lytvyn, Speaker of Parliament) are rapidly losing their ability to shape events. The most legitimate third force, Oleksandr Moroz, leader of Ukraine's Socialist Party, has warned that the authorities risk a Romanian revolution rather than a Georgian one if they do not back down. The alternative could be a suppression of the opposition far more bloody than that which occurred in Poland in 1981. The beneficiaries of such a Pyrrhic victory would be obliged to govern in most of the country as an occupying force.

2. It is important to understand who such an outcome would benefit and who it would not. It would not benefit Prime Minister Viktor Yanukovych, who has no more wish to be a 'vassal of Russia' than President Kuchma. Although he is orientated towards Russia, Yanukovych seeks to expand relations with the West; although he is no democrat, he seeks a broad base of support in Ukraine.² But such an outcome would benefit those who fear the independence of Yanukovych and the strength and ambition of his so-called 'Donetsk clan'. These include a small number of powerful groups and individuals in Ukraine (notably but not exclusively Viktor Medvedchuk, Chief of the President's Administration) and Russia's President, Vladimir Putin. An isolated Yanukovych, dependent upon them, is a key, albeit hidden objective of these notional allies. But their overriding objective remains Yushchenko's defeat.

3. A Yushchenko victory would threaten a system that has afforded Russia dominance in the CIS and Putin a congenial backdrop to the construction of the 'administrative vertical' in Russia. A democratic, Western orientated Ukraine would have reverberations across the CIS and in Russia itself. Without Ukraine, the Single Economic Space loses its rationale. The implications of a more open market in this vital energy transport corridor are highly problematic for Russia's energy giants.³ The prospect of NATO membership for Ukraine would undermine Putin's project of a 'single security space' in the CIS and would be deeply disturbing to Russia's Armed Forces. Whilst committed to a strategic partnership with the West,

Putin retains a remorselessly geopolitical view of the world and equates security with well defined 'zones of interest'. He has developed Russia's zone of interest as methodically as he has advanced Western partnership. Even Yushchenko's partial success would call this policy into question.

4. These concerns explain the intensity of Putin's intervention in Ukraine as well as his willingness to raise the stakes now that the usual 'administrative resources' have failed. His determination has not been diminished by US concentration on the 'war on terror', the perceived importance of Russian cooperation over Iraq, Iran and North Korea and the West's diminished attentiveness, post-9/11, to developments in Ukraine. Much as Suez formed the backdrop for Hungary's suppression in 1956, Iraq is part of the wider geopolitical context surrounding events in Ukraine, whether we wish this to be so or not.⁴ During his 12-14 November visit to Crimea, Putin possibly warned Kuchma that Russia would not accept an opposition victory. Kuchma emerged very shaken from this meeting. The possibility of such a warning (reminiscent of that given by Brezhnev to Jaruzelski in 1981) is given credence by several reports since 23 November of the deployment of Russian *spetsnaz* detachments to Ukraine.⁵ Their presence, not to say employment, creates the possibility of division, and possibly turbulence, within Ukraine's pre-eminent but hitherto unpoliticised force structure, the Armed Forces.

5. Russian armed intervention, however limited and covert, would not only multiply dangers already present. It would call into question the basis of the relationship that the West and Russia have established since 1991. If we seek to avert these disasters, it would be prudent to say so. President Putin respects clarity, and Europe's interests now demand it. Without it, there is unlikely to be restraint.

ENDNOTES

¹ In many cities local police and SBU officers have been protecting voters and demonstrators from hired thugs. Some local police have also set up 'hot lines' in case Russian *spetsnaz* are sighted. By 23 November 150 serving Ukrainian diplomats signed declarations of support for Yushchenko. On the same date, the SBU reportedly declared its 'neutrality'. Although President Kuchma dismissed eleven senior regional officials after the first round, and although Yanukovich's campaign chairman (and Central Bank chairman) Serhiy Tyhytko, called for the dismissal of 260 more, several city authorities and at least one regional authority have taken oaths of loyalty to Yushchenko.

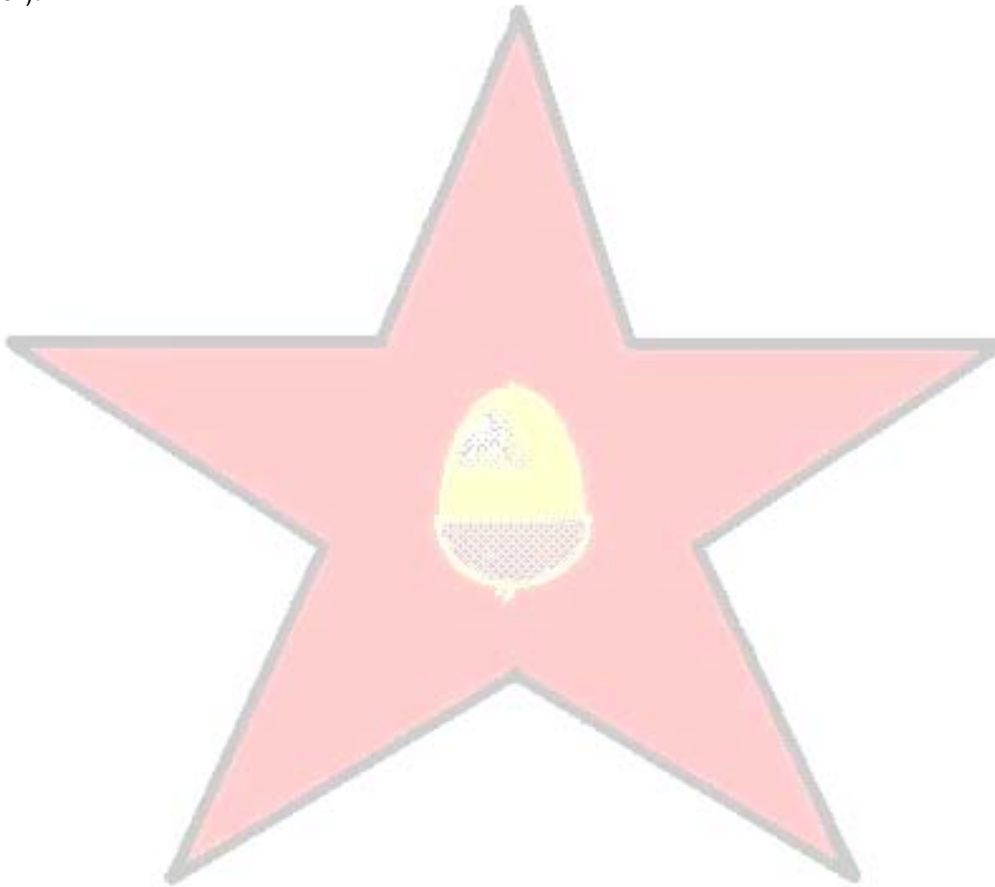
² On 24 November, Yanukovich declared: 'I will not accept the results of the presidential election until it is proved to be me and the Ukrainian people that they are legitimate and credible in accordance with conditions set down by the constitution....I need no fictitious victory, a result which could lead to violence and victims. No position of authority, no matter how important, is worth a single human life'.

³ It is widely reported that Yanukovich expended \$600mn on his campaign (a sum, incidentally, equivalent to that expended by Bush's campaign in the United States, whose official GDP is more than 50 times greater than Ukraine's). Of this sum, \$300mn is reported to have come from Russian sources and a large portion of this from Russian energy companies.

⁴ It might not be incidental that on 22 November, President Putin accepted President Bush's proposal to forgive the debts assumed by Iraq under Saddam Hussein's regime, the largest single portion of which were owed to the USSR and Russia.

⁵ On 23 November, it was reported that a Russian special forces detachment had flown into the base at Irpin for unspecified deployment. On 24 November, a report from *Nasha Urkaina* (Yushchenko's political bloc) stated that 'two Russian aircraft landed at the

Kyiv International Boryspil airport today carrying military personnel of the “Vityaz” special forces unit. Approximately 1,000 in number, they were transported to Kyiv, but their whereabouts are unknown’. Colonel Lyashenko, Assistant Commander of Aviation, who services military aviation at Boryspil, refused orders to service the aircraft and promptly resigned. Although 1,000 is an implausibly high figure, Lyashenko’s resignation was confirmed by the SBU, which, however, stated that Russian *spetsnaz* had not landed at Boryspil. According to several observers, including former Deputy Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko and Oleksandr Zinchenko (Yushchenko’s campaign chairman), Russian *spetsnaz* are deployed at the headquarters of the Presidential Administration on Bankova Street. According to <maidan.org> (source of some of the most up-to-date online reports), the full deployment consists of three special units armed with machine guns: a Ukrainian *spetsnaz* unit from Irpin, a Russian *spetsnaz* unit and a unit of the Presidential Guard, surrounded by a cordon of *militia* (police) in full riot equipment. According to the same source, the Ukrainian *spetsnaz* unit left its post and has ‘gone over to Yushchenko’ (23 November).



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