The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Why Yanukovych Spat in the EU's Soup

By Yulia Latynina

November 26, 2013

President Vladimir Putin can now rejoice. Ukraine will not sign an association agreement with the European Union.

Russia focused its foreign policy for the last six months on preventing Ukraine from developing closer ties with the EU, and now it can claim complete success. Russia will always have one advantage over the EU in that Moscow has no qualms about spitting in its neighbor's soup, while Brussels would never stoop that low.

Of course, the most compelling reason Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych decided not to sign the Association Agreement was because he does not want to release former Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko from prison. This was a much more important factor than whatever Moscow threatened to do to in terms of economic sanctions if Yanukovych signed the agreement with Brussels. According to his punk way of thinking, freeing Tymoshenko would not just create a potential political rival. It would have made him look like a chump, and nobody would respect him.

But the main problem is that none of the three parties involved in this conflict — Yanukovych, Putin and the EU — is guided by rational considerations.

First, why would Europe have any interest in Ukraine? Is it a thriving economy? Does it have a real democracy? No, Ukraine is a corrupt, semi-authoritarian morass, and Europe wants it for the same reason it wants Greece: only as a means for expanding the EU bureaucracy. But now, in times of crisis, the European bureaucratic monster that imposes regulations on how sharp the curve must be on cucumbers and hands out subsidies for "clean energy" considers it a vitally important task to show the world that it is still a beacon of hope to surrounding countries. And imagine how many thousands of bureaucrats would be assigned to the Ukraine project alone. Given Ukraine's sorry political and economic state, any attempt to bring the country even close to EU standards would require huge human resources.

Meanwhile, not a single Western politician today is prepared to risk voters' lives or money in order to confront an international bully — that is, Russia. To save face, the West tries to explain why the bully is not actually a bully. The Tagliavini Commission's report on the 2008 Russia-Georgia war was a perfect example. Putin showed during the international security conference in Munich back in 2011 that he was the first modern politician to realize that Europe would make even greater concessions to new authoritarian regimes than former British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain and former French Prime Minister Edouard Daladier.

Putin's problem is that after he had demonstrated his ability to manipulate Europe before the entire Commonwealth of Independent States, two of his students turned out to be even better at the game: Yanukovych and Belarussian President Alexander Lukashenko. Both hold little or no responsibility to their own citizens, both can switch their political course as swiftly and capriciously as medieval kings and both could not care less about the havoc such behavior wreaks with their economies. What's more, both have learned how to play the alliance-with-Putin card to manipulate Europe.

In this sense, Russia's use of blackmail against Ukraine to achieve a major tactical victory reflects a new geopolitical reality. In a world in which states foreswear the use of war to resolve their differences, victory will always go to those states willing to spit in their neighbor's soup without worrying about the cost to their own economies.

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