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Yanukovych Is No Alpha Male

By Yulia Latynina

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I find the differences between Ukraine and Russia fascinating.

It turns out that 1 million Ukrainians have no qualms about taking to the streets in protest if they find their president's actions insulting — and that's even after riot police had broken up earlier demonstrations. In Moscow, a city of 14 million, even generous estimates put the maximum number of demonstrators during the peak of the protests in December 2011 at 100,000. After that, a turnout of 30,000 or 40,000 at subsequent protests in 2012 was the most that organizers could muster.

The oil factor explains the large difference.

All of Moscow's 14 million residents live in one way or another off of the country's oil revenues. Oil has seeped into everything: the food packages distributed to pensioners who voted for Mayor Sergei Sobyanin, and the pay bonuses given to policemen and traffic cops. Oil windfalls pay for the thousands of personal chauffeurs who drive government officials on their rounds and the huge army of government bureaucrats. Oil revenues explain why there no empty tables at expensive restaurants or at the thousands of overpriced cafes that are so popular with the so-called middle class. The oil windfall even trickles down to millions of migrant workers.

The paradox is that the smaller the handout that those at the bottom receive, the greater their gratitude and the more eagerly they vote for the alpha male during elections.

Ukraine, however, has no oil. The 3 million residents of Kiev must survive by other means. As a result, they do not feel indebted to their leaders and cannot be confined to a petrodollar pecking order. For them, Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych is not an alpha male like Putin, bequeathing pensions and food packages from on high. He is just one of the reasons that the average resident of Kiev slugs it out at low-paying jobs, struggling to pay bills and put bread on the table.

In accordance with the laws of dialectics, at some point quantity turns into quality. The 100,000 Russian protesters went home frustrated, but the 1 million in Kiev have stripped Yanukovych of whatever legitimacy he once held. The force of those numbers has prompted even the president's close colleagues to resign and several Party of Regions deputies to abandon ship. They are abandoning Yanukovych not because they sympathize with the people but because they do not want to be part of his losing team.

At the same time, Yanukovych is the legitimately elected president and he will probably hold onto power. However, he will also probably lose the 2015 presidential election and end up behind bars if he tries to hold onto power at any cost.

Even before the protests in Kiev began, opposition leader Vitali Klitschko was far more popular than Yanukovych. According to a Oct. 14 poll conducted by Kiev-based Razumkov Center, only 25 percent of Ukrainians polled said they would vote for Yanukovych in a second-round presidential election in 2015, while 38 percent would vote for Klitschko. After the EU -fiasco, the spread between the two has most likely gotten even larger.

Yanukovych will likely attempt to hold onto power at any cost because, according to the very non-European rule he has adopted, the winner in a presidential race can imprison the loser at will. In other words, Yanukovych has nothing to lose by falsifying the results of the 2015 presidential election.

Yanukovych's capitulation to Putin shows that in a global system in which civilized countries have renounced war as a means for resolving their differences, the most powerful politician is the bully who will spit in his neighbor's soup without considering the consequences for his own reputation or his country's economy.

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