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Ukraine Is Failing as a State

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Only two weeks have passed since Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych decided not to sign an association agreement with the European Union, preferring the "bird in the hand" offered by President Vladimir Putin to the "two in the bush" promised by Brussels.

It is too early to say whether that move will help Yanukovych retain power and win re-election to a second term in 2015, or whether he will even manage to serve out his current term. In any case, events in Kiev illustrate a few important points concerning the former Soviet republics as they vacillate on their future course.

First, Putin is no altruist. He is ready to promise not only Ukraine, but also Armenia, Belarus and Kazakhstan, billions of dollars in aid to stop them from linking up with the despicable West. But Putin's offer comes at a price. Each recipient must provide some service in return. For Yanukovych, that entails Ukraine's accession to Russia's Customs Union. When Yanukovych buckled under the direct threats from Putin, it seems he did not consider how his decision to reject the EU pact would be received at home.

Second, Ukraine has traveled much further along the path of democracy than Russia has during the post-Soviet period. As I see it, the principle difference between the two countries is that Ukraine has already had two presidents, Leonid Kravchuk and Viktor Yushchenko, who have failed to win re-election. At the same time, however, this did not end in tragedy or with the country reeling into the abyss of chaos and anarchy.

Now Ukrainians understand that they can transfer presidential authority peacefully through fair elections and without the world coming to an end — a "point of no return" that Russia has yet to pass. At the same time, though, it is unclear whether Ukraine has conclusively passed that point. When Yanukovych came to power in 2010, I could not believe my Ukrainian friends' dire predictions that he would build an autocratic power vertical like in Russia. I thought the system of checks and balances was firmly in place there and would prevent it. But events proved me wrong. Hopefully, I will not be wrong again this time.

Third, as happened in Egypt and Tunisia, youth are leading Ukraine's movement for democratic principles and freedoms. These young Ukrainians do not remember the Soviet Union. They are not jaded or indifferent to their country's future, and they will not tolerate violations of their rights and freedoms as the older generation might. They want to build their own future in a European fashion and refuse to be appeased by unchallenging jobs at government ministries or state-owned companies.

Fourth, the Ukrainian police officers who beat peaceful protesters will inevitably attempt to save themselves by testifying against those who gave them orders, and so on up the chain of command. This could happen as early as the coming months, and it will serve as an object lesson for advocates of repressive measures.

Fifth and last, the political conflict only exacerbates Ukraine's already serious economic crisis. The country's economy is so unstable that it could collapse at any moment. The government holds its position in parliament by the slimmest of margins, and Yanukovych, who tries to pretend that he didn't know anything, now stands at a crossroads.

He can either undertake radical reforms that might win support from the International Monetary Fund but would likely elicit strong protests from the traditionally pro-Russian electorate. Or he could give in to the Russian ultimatum Putin's pet future project, the Eurasian Alliance, for the sake of the hefty gas credits and thereby lose any chance of re-election.

The Ukrainian authorities hope to go on "dodging raindrops" as long as they can, but experience shows that postponing the choice of an economic path is a sure recipe for collapse. That would turn Ukraine into a failed state, a country in which no government institution can properly carry out its function, even when it wants to.

It seems that both Russia and Europe are blind to the possibility of this political scenario playing out — and to the disastrous consequences it would bring.

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