

Russia and the EU Are Incompatible in Ukraine

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One need only glance at a map of Ukraine to understand one of the main reasons for the apparent intractability of its bitter political crisis: the country's almost symmetrical division between the largely Russian-speaking east and the nationalist stronghold of the west. The uncannily symmetrical split between the left and right banks of the Dnepr River passes through the capital Kiev, which it also divides in half.

But maps can't illustrate the motives of the external forces involved, including Russia's — Moscow having helped prompt the crisis by pressuring Kiev to refuse signing sweeping deals with the European Union last month. The conventional wisdom is that a Kremlin pathologically afraid of color revolutions sees Western influence as a threat to what it calls its sphere of "privileged interests."

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Bending to that zero-sum calculus, some question whether the EU can provide enough economic assistance to compensate for what Ukraine would lose by spurning Moscow, its largest trade partner. Although viewing the complicated conflict in those terms may explain some of its dimensions, equating the two sides of the geostrategic tussle tends to obscure the key difference between both sides.

Western officials may be too polite or constrained to describe it as such, but the standoff is also between those advocating the institution of rule of law and those interested in exporting corruption. It's not an accident or solely a matter of pride that the Kremlin insists Ukraine take steps toward an alliance either with the EU or Russia, but not both. The two sides are incompatible.

That's been clear for some time. When the Orange Revolution toppled the old administration in 2005, the Kremlin scrambled to stop the sale of highly subsidized natural gas to its southern neighbor not simply to punish Kiev's new Western-looking leaders, but also because it had lost its partners in the semi-secret deals involving mysterious third parties that governed the trade. Their value to Moscow lies in enabling loyal executives to build huge fortunes by skimming off profits belonging to the state monopoly Gazprom. Naturally, the deals also benefitted their counterparts in Kiev.

Months before a fixed presidential election prompted the protests that led to the Orange Revolution, Moscow had extended the arrangement by signing a five-year deal with Kiev for cheap gas, part of the Kremlin's bid to boost the chances of its favored candidate: Viktor Yanukovich. After a court overturned his election, however, Moscow demanded what it called market prices for its gas from his rivals, saying it was against Soviet-era subsidies. A protracted standoff prompted two shutoffs that disrupted supplies to Europe, leaving millions without heat during bitterly cold winters.

Former Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko eventually negotiated an overhaul to the old arrangements that resulted in significantly higher prices but promised to usher in a new era by weaning Ukraine from dependency on cheap Russian gas.

After Yanukovich defeated her in the presidential election of 2010, however, Moscow and Kiev looked forward to renewing the old system. Russia promptly gave Ukraine a 30 percent discount for gas in return for a long extension of the Russian Navy's lease on the Black Sea port of Sevastopol.

The deal belied serious problems in future relations, including new gas disputes, disillusionment on both sides and the realization that Yanukovich and his Russian counterpart, Vladimir Putin, clearly despise each other. This may help explain the Ukrainian leader's flirting with the EU.

Still, both men are cut from the same cloth. That was already clear in 2010, when European officials who pressured Tymoshenko to concede the country's freest yet election to her bitter rival were claiming that he had reformed himself. But although her subsequent arrest for negotiating the gas deal may have come as a surprise, most of the new president's repression hasn't. It's doubtful Yanukovich ever intended to sign the EU's agreements, which he probably saw as a bargaining chip for use in dealing with Moscow. Now the Kremlin has rewarded him by offering another huge gas discount on top of \$15 billion in loans.

Russia wants Ukraine to commit to its plans for a so-called Eurasian Union, which would be toothless without its participation. The main question now is whether the half of Ukrainians who elected Yanukovich — including the oligarchs who bankrolled him — will go along with such a move.

Moscow says Russia and Ukraine belong together because they are part of the same civilization. That's an even older story. Russians claim the medieval civilization of Kievan Rus, including its Orthodox Christianity, as the source of their most important cultural heritage. However, that separate civilization died out centuries before the northern Slav principalities that eventually became Russia rose to power. In the centuries since, Ukrainian language and culture have survived waves of forced Russification under the tsarist empire.

Today, the Kremlin's strategy is to expand its business model, in the process exporting corruption and the authoritarianism required to suppress dissent. For Ukrainians struggling to secure an independent national identity — for whom Europe provides a balance to Russian influence — choosing a new path would require the country to do things differently.

The EU is right to hold out tough conditions for political and economic reform that would reinforce democracy and the rule of law. But Western countries should also do more to back the protesters who are at an unfair disadvantage against the authorities and their allies in Russia. They are surely doing everything they can in a struggle that is far more nuanced than a battle between east and west.

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