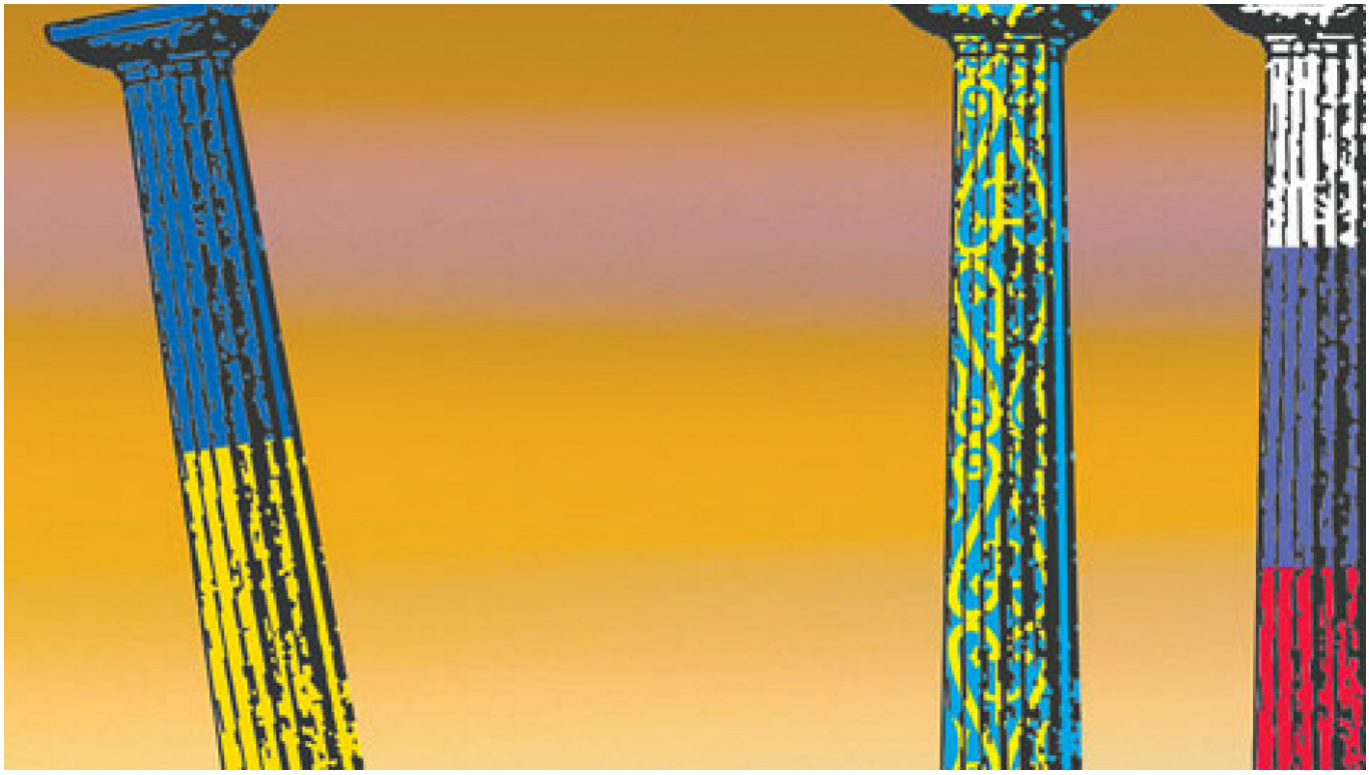
The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

What Kiev's Democratic Turn Means for Moscow

By Anders Åslund

February 24, 2014



Last week, the Ukrainian opposition suddenly gained a parliamentary majority through democratic and legal means as lawmakers defected in droves from President Viktor Yanukovych after his killing of 82 people in Kiev in three days. On Feb. 22, the president was impeached with the required two-thirds majority. It is still early to say how this transition to democracy will work, but it looks promising. What will this mean to Russia?

The Ukrainian protests present a challenge to all Russians. Putin must realize the Eurasian Union is stillborn and Russia needs

the EU.

For the last three decades, I have been deeply involved in both Russia and Ukraine. To a foreigner, common Russian attitudes toward Ukraine are clearly contradictory. Russians will tell you that Ukrainians are their brother nation, but at the same time they claim that Ukraine is not a real nation, Ukrainian not an actual language, and Ukrainians are intellectually backward. Russians can barely hide their superiority complex toward Ukraine. Ukrainians take note and object in their quiet, polite fashion.

In late 2004, the Orange Revolution turned the tables on the Russians. Suddenly, Ukraine was ahead in terms of democracy, freedom and modernity, although not in economic policy or wealth. President Vladimir Putin swiftly adopted a series of laws to curtail civil society and safeguard his authoritarian rule. Since the Orange government turned out to be disorganized, Putin could relax.

In February 2010, Yanukovych won a free but not very fair presidential election with 49 percent of the vote in a runoff. At the time, the common view was that Yanukovych would turn into a Putin by installing a political vertical of power and greatly enriching his loyalists.

Yanukovych's problem was that he had not learned Putin's sophisticated art of sharing. Instead, he concentrated all wealth in a tiny family circle, alienating everybody else. His political base did not expand but narrowed. As his political legitimacy dwindled, he imposed more repression. Russians have accepted some repression because their standard of living has risen palpably, but Yanukovych's predatory economic policies caused economic output to stagnate.

In the end, Ukrainians asked themselves, "Why should we accept a leader who robs and represses our country and only cares about himself?"

But dissatisfaction alone is rarely sufficient. It requires a catalyst to be unleashed. Foolishly, Yanukovych provided such a catalyst with the European Union agreement that he first endorsed and then rejected. Few were concerned about the free-trade agreement, but it represented a choice of civilization. Would Ukraine go for European values — freedom and justice, democracy and the rule of law — or for corruption and authoritarianism? To Ukrainians, the choice was clearcut, and they stood up in protest.

The Ukrainian public protests present a challenge to all Russians. This might explain the uncommonly crude Russian television propaganda about Ukraine. A month ago, I participated in a political panel of 10 people at the Gaidar Forum in Moscow. I was the sole panelist who wasn't a Russian political analyst. The general view was that political stability and economic stagnation would prevail in Russia this year. If anything were to shake the country, six of us suggested it would be Ukraine's Euromaidan.

Euromaidan challenges Russians' perception of themselves. Russians identify themselves as brave for good reason, but now they look cowardly next to Ukrainians. For less good reason, opinion polls show that Russians consider themselves as people of traditional values. Yet now they look like cynical cowards, while Ukrainians have defended their nation and universal values such as freedom, democracy and justice.

After many years of cynicism, the Ukrainian public has decided to clear out more than 40 Lenin monuments, which represent inhumane ideals. This is Ukraine's moment of de-communization, a period that lasted all too briefly in Russia in August 1991. In Moscow, Lenin still rests in his mausoleum on Red Square.

The most evident blow to the Kremlin is that the victory of Euromaidan means that the Eurasian Union will not take place. The union is protectionist and economically damaging to all its members. If Putin wants to enter the modern world, he had better abandon it and opt for European integration like Ukraine. The Eurasian Union could fail through falling growth rates in Russia combined with excessive subsidies to Belarus. The ultimate insult to Putin would be if a dissatisfied President Nursultan Nazarbayev declares that Kazakhstan will leave the association.

The Yanukovych model of "presidential robber capitalism" was much more crude and single-minded than the elaborate Putin model of state and crony capitalism. But both men share the view that presidents are entitled to top-level corruption and authoritarianism. While Yanukovych is now being chased like a criminal on the run, Putin must feel somewhat less comfortable. He expressed such discomfort after his friend Moammar Gadhafi of Libya was chased and killed.

Meanwhile, Russia's economic growth has dwindled since 2009 and now seems to have stopped because of Putin's policy of state and crony capitalism. Putin's reserves are running low. Therefore, Euromaidan puts the Putin regime in a new light to thinking Russians: "If Ukrainians can rise against authoritarianism and corruption and opt for European values and integration, why shouldn't we be able to do so, too?"

The Kremlin faces a stark choice. One possibility is that it will choose the same policies as after the Orange Revolution: hostility to Ukraine, including cuts in gas deliveries and trade sanctions, and increased repression at home. But those policies were possible when the Russian standard of living rose more than ever. Putin also was lucky that Ukraine's Orange government collapsed on its own.

Now the economic backdrop is much worse. The Russian standard of living is barely rising. Russia's client Yanukovych has been exposed as a greedy thief and executioner, abandoned by his own party. The Ukrainian revolutionaries and all the more the Ukrainian people have likely learned their lesson from the failure of the Orange Revolution.

Presumably, the Kremlin realizes that Euromaidan proves its old policy is no longer viable. As democracy has broken through in Ukraine, the crudest Russian propaganda about Euromaidan appears to have abated. But is Putin able to realize that his Eurasian Union is stillborn and that Russia's best hope is European values and European integration?

Euromaidan might wake Russians up. But I wouldn't bet on it.

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