

## CENTRE FOR EUROPEAN, RUSSIAN, AND EURASIAN STUDIES



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### UKRAINE'S NEW COURSE: AWAY FROM THE WEST

The election of Viktor Yanukovich as Ukraine's fourth president in February 2010 led to a sharp discontinuity in the country's foreign and domestic policies. After a few months in office, President Yanukovich has already renounced many of the legacies of his predecessor, Viktor Yushchenko. He takes a distinctly different approach to the issues of language politics, national history, energy relations, and national security. Yanukovich has also managed to consolidate his political power by securing control over the government, the parliament, the courts, and the electronic media.

What impact will this have on the country's democratic credentials and European aspirations? Will Yanukovich's presidency turn Ukraine into another post-Soviet hybrid regime dependent on Moscow for political and economic survival? Or will Yanukovich fall victim to the same peculiarities of Ukraine's ethno-linguistic makeup that prevented all of his predecessors from pushing the country decisively in one direction?

While the Yanukovich presidency may still take a few unexpected turns, several outcomes seem increasingly likely.

against viewing the 1930s famine in Ukraine as an act of genocide, initiated the revision of history textbooks to eliminate their nationalist bent, and embraced Russia as Ukraine's main foreign partner. While these policies may solidify the president's support among his electorate, they further alienate and intensify animosity towards Yanukovich among many Western Ukrainians. As a result, East-West political cleavage, which surfaced during the Orange Revolution, is likely to remain an enduring feature of Ukraine's electoral politics. Yanukovich will further exploit this cleavage in order to maintain his re-election chances. At the same time, lack of overwhelming popular support will make him dependent on the continued backing of his oligarchic sponsors, who control media outlets and financial resources.

Second, Yanukovich will gradually erode the democratic gains of the Orange Revolution, particularly media freedoms, a level electoral playing field and the space for independent political activities. The news coverage on the main TV channels, controlled by friendly oligarchs, has become increasingly subservient to the new president. Yanukovich's "Party of Regions" has also emerged as the dominant political force with no serious rivals among the opposition parties. Its nationwide party network will improve Yanukovich's capacity to rig the electoral process and limit the space available for potential challengers. The local elections in 2011 will serve as the first test of the effectiveness of the incumbent's party machine.

Yanukovich will also maintain control over the court system and use political corruption as an incentive for loyalty. The Constitutional Court has already issued several controversial rulings, which openly favoured the president's political agenda. Similarly, the Supreme Court and the High Justice Council, responsible for appointing judges, have been staffed with president's supporters, precluding any prospects of genuine judiciary reform. The new president has also approved high-level appointments of his business cronies to the key government posts in exchange for their continued loyalty. Rinat Akhmetov, Ukraine's leading billionaire, has three business partners doing his bidding in the lucrative positions of the deputy prime minister, minister of transportation, and minister of industrial policies. Overall, Yanukovich's government has the largest number of businessmen of all previous cabinets. Out of six deputy prime ministers, three are official multimillionaires with active business ties.

The use of coercion may also be revived as an informal weapon in the president's hands. Yanukovich has installed loyalists in charge of all the law enforcement agencies, thus ending the multiple political allegiances which had characterized Yushchenko's presidency. The prosecutor-general has already opened an investigation into the financial mishandlings of the previous government and interrogated several former government members. Although Yanukovich is unlikely to go after the prominent opposition leaders, fearing a popular backlash, he will try to increase the potential costs of supporting the opposition for many businessmen and regular political activists.

Third, as he moves further along in reversing Ukraine's democratic freedoms, Yanukovich will become increasingly dependent on Russia for outside political support and legitimacy. The Western powers, while distinctively open-minded about Yanukovich at the outset of his presidency, will be unlikely to tolerate his authoritarian policies in the future. This will make Yanukovich's strategy of preserving a neutral stance between Russia and the West untenable. Ukraine may, therefore, become non-aligned *de jure*, but *de facto* it will increasingly resemble Russia's client — giving up some of its assets and sovereignty in exchange for continuous political and economic backing. The contradictory nature of Yanukovich's foreign policy vision became apparent in his decision to sign an agreement with Russia on extending the lease of a military base for the Russian Black Sea fleet in Sevastopol until 2042. While guaranteeing a 30 percent discount on Russian gas supplies until 2019 (the last year of Yanukovich's potential second term), the deal with Russia will undermine any credibility of Ukraine's nonaligned status.

The logic of President Yanukovich's political strategy and his own worldview will inevitably reverse the attempts of his predecessors to move Ukraine closer to Europe. However, given the country's regional diversity and the strong pro-European sentiments among many Ukrainians, the president's new course will not gain wide public acceptance. Rather, Yanukovich will face intense popular disapproval in Western Ukraine and areas of Central Ukraine, which will sustain the continued competitive nature of the country's political process. Whether it will eventually bring about another regime change and usher in a new generation of pro-Western reformers depends on the ability of the emerging opposition to formulate a more unifying vision for the badly fractured nation.



Sechange in Ukraine: Supporters celebrate the election of Viktor Yanukovich.

First, President Yanukovich will remain a polarizing figure, whose political fortunes will depend primarily on his ability to placate his electoral base and key oligarchic backers. All of Yanukovich's policies over the last few months have been largely consistent with his campaign rhetoric and targeted primarily at his core voters in the Southeastern regions of the country. He lifted strict requirements on the use of Ukrainian language in official, educational, and media settings, argued

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