

# Ukraine: A key geopolitical battleground between Russia and the West

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Region: [Russia and FSU](#)

Global Research, January 09, 2009

9 January 2009

The countdown for Ukraine's presidential election, to be held on January 31 2010, has already started. The much-anticipated electoral process will be decisive due to its deep geopolitical implications. Its result will have a considerable impact on the world's balance of power. A fierce battle on Ukrainian soil approaches and it will be fought, once again, between pro-Western and pro-Russian forces.

During the so called 'Orange Revolution' a pro-Western coalition headed by former Ukrainian Central Banker Viktor Yushchenko came out victorious over the Party of Regions, lead by Viktor Yanukovich and prone to pro-Russian positions. Shortly afterwards, Kiev distanced itself from Moscow in order to become of the staunchest American allies in the post Soviet space (along with Mikheil Saakashvili's Georgia). Since then, Ukrainian foreign policy has persistently sought membership in both the EU (European Union) and NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization).

That 'regime change' was evidently a major setback for Russian interests. Conspicuously enough, many American NGOs and semi-official organizations became actively involved, such as USAID, George Soros' Open Society Institute and Freedom House (whose Chairman at the time was none other than former CIA Director James Woolsey).

As prominent neocon Charles Krauthammer declared "*This [the Western-sponsored Orange Revolution] is about Russia first, democracy second...*" which plainly means that the main goal of Washington's efforts was to crown an unconditional regime in Kiev in order to further isolate Russia from Europe and ultimately dismantle the Russian Federation as a functioning Nation-State.

That project is hardly new; it was originally plotted by Polish intelligence officers in the early twentieth century. Back then it was called 'Prometheism' and its core methodology to break Russia into pieces included the support of separatist groups willing to antagonize Moscow both inside Russian territory and beyond its borders (that is, the Russian sphere of influence). Prometheism was reloaded by Zbigniew Brzezinski when he lured the Soviets into the Afghan trap using the Islamist card as bait. The idea was to create an irritant which could absorb and eventually erode Soviet power. Also, another goal of that endeavor was to instigate unrest in the predominantly Muslim (yet officially secular) Central Asian Republics which were part of the Soviet Union: Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 90's, the Kremlin has been attempting to promote the idea of an economic reintegration in the Former Soviet Union (an area also

called the 'Near Abroad' by Moscow's geostrategists), using Russia's gravitational pull to attract other countries belonging to the Post-Soviet Space. In its initial stages, this cooperation would encompass Ukraine, Belarus and Kazakhstan (those States which are closer to Moscow in geographic, linguistic and demographic terms). If successful, this project could serve as a platform to launch some other initiatives meant to enhance this re-integration process by including some more participants and by establishing a parallel mutual defense system. This agenda has been pushed through several institutional organisms such as:

- The Eurasian Economic Community (EurAsEC) which includes Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. Its main purpose is to advance the formation of a Single Economic Space in terms of trade, investments, customs regulation, foreign exchange control, energy markets and so on.
- The Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO, a.k.a. 'The Tashkent Pact') which encompasses Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. Its founding charter stipulates that member States are not allowed to join any other military alliance. This agreement indicates that an aggression committed against any signatory would be regarded as an attack against all members.
- The Union of Russia and Belarus. This project intends to merge both States economically, monetarily and politically. However, it is not yet clear how this unification will proceed so there have been disagreements over whether there will be some sort of confederacy or if Belarus will just be incorporated into the Russian Federation as another Oblast (administrative region).
- The Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). It is rather a multilateral forum which provides a space to promote joint initiatives and to discuss common issues.

Russia, needless to say, possesses many interests in the Former Soviet Union in terms of energy and military cooperation, development of natural resources and geostrategic concerns. However, Ukraine is the single most important Post-Soviet State for Moscow because:

- Is a buffer State that prevents Russia's European borders from being directly exposed to NATO forces. One must bear in mind that there is no considerable natural obstacle to attack Russia's westernmost borders. This is a weakness which was exploited by invaders such as Napoleon and Adolph Hitler.
- Possesses warm water ports in the Crimean Peninsula, like Odessa, Yalta and Sevastopol. The latter hosts the Russian Black Sea Fleet's headquarters. Thus, the Ukraine is vital to maintain a Russian naval presence in the Black Sea. The Crimea, by the way, was transferred in 1954 from the Soviet Russian Republic to the Soviet Ukrainian Republic which is why Ukraine inherited it after the disintegration of the Soviet Union.
- Has infrastructure linking Europe and Russia, particularly pipelines, railways and highways.
- Is home to a considerable number of ethnic Russians and even a large portion of Ukraine's population professes pro-Russian sympathies. Moreover, Russia and Ukraine share some common traits because they are countries mainly populated by Orthodox Slavs. The Medieval State called the 'Kievan Rus' is an ancestor to

modern Russia, Ukraine and Belarus, i.e. the 'Great Russians', the 'Little Russians' and the 'White Russians', respectively. Thus, in the minds of Russian statesmen, a hostile government in Kiev is little more than a historic aberration that has to be corrected.

As previously stated, Ukrainian President Yushchenko has demonstrated an obstinate determination to embed Ukraine into Atlanticist institutions (e.g. the EU and NATO) at the expense of cooperation with Russia and he intends to achieve that as quickly as possible (presumably before his term is over or before someone else decides to put an end to it). Yushchenko's pro-Western policies program has even met a considerable deal of domestic opposition. As polls indicate, the overwhelming majority (close to 50% or even a larger percentage according to other surveys) of Ukraine's citizens do not favor membership in NATO so even a nation-wide referendum perhaps would be defeated. In 2006 the Sea Breeze Ukraine-NATO military exercise (scheduled to be held in the Crimean) did not take place because such plans sparked several protests denouncing NATO presence there.

Yushchenko's administration unleashed the Kremlin's wrath when his government provided weapons for Georgia prior to the latter's attack against South Ossetia. Moreover, it has been reported that Ukrainian mercenaries participated in the fighting on Georgia's side.

Therefore, taking into account all of the above; Russia cannot simply let a pro-Western coalition triumph in Ukraine's incoming electoral process. For national security reasons and long-term geopolitical strategy, the Russians need a pro-Russian regime in Kiev just as much as the Americans need a friendly government in Mexico.

Moscow can count on the backing of the Party of Regions, firmly pro-Russian, and who is the dominant political force in Ukraine's eastern part. The Kremlin has made substantial efforts to seduce (politically, that is) Yulia Timoshenko who, even if does not have the same pro-Russian sentiment as the Party of Regions, is well aware that recklessly provoking the Russian bear goes against Ukrainian national interests.

Just a few days ago, Ukraine experienced a cutoff in its gas natural gas supplies by Russia due to failed bilateral negotiations concerning the pricing of this fossil fuel. Other Eastern European States have also been affected by this, even though more important purchasers of Russian natural gas (read Germany) have not yet experienced the same deal of trouble. That means that this is apparently an effort undertaken by the Kremlin to carry out a controlled demolition of Ukraine's pro-Western government, taking into account that Ukraine will hold presidential elections early next year. With this maneuver, Moscow is making its point clear to the EU that it is impossible to alienate Russian interests without expecting some meaningful retribution in return. The Putin-Medvedev duo is thus expressing that Russia is neither afraid nor hesitant to use a little bit of hard power to advance its key geopolitical objectives.

Therefore, the Kremlin will resort to every available option at its disposal to defeat the pro-Western political factions in Ukraine (i.e. to prevent Viktor Yushchenko from being reelected). Now, Moscow has many tools at its disposal that it can use to win this critical geopolitical battle. Russia can:

- Exploit Ukrainian dependence on Russian energy
- Negotiate with the West a geopolitical tradeoff (i.e. Atlantist abandonment of

Ukraine in exchange for Russian abandonment of Iran).

- Capitalize pro-Russian sentiment and mobilize political support for Ukrainian forces of pro-Russian orientation, mainly the Party of Regions, and even Yulia Tymoshenko.
- Use Russian language media outlets operating in Ukraine.
- Employ Russian intelligence agencies and exploit the assets they have developed in Ukraine.
- Manipulate Russian oligarchs as a foreign policy tool as a vehicle to advance Moscow's interests in Kiev.

If Russia is indeed successful in empowering a friendly government in Kiev, that would be a major geostrategic victory that will return Ukraine back to the Russian sphere of influence. That would also mean the end of American intentions to accomplish NATO membership for Ukraine. Likewise, this success could become a catalyst to trigger a further (re)integration throughout the post-Soviet space. A post-Yushchenko Ukraine could then be invited to join the CSTO, EurAsEC, the Union of Russia and Belarus and perhaps even the SCO (Shanghai Cooperation Organization).

Even if the Kremlin fails, Putin and Medvedev still will be able to resort to military means to ensure that Russian interests ultimately prevail. The use of force to annex Ukraine's eastern part (which is pro-Russian and is industrialized) must not be discarded. There have been many rumors concerning the Russian government distributing Russian passports all over the Crimea and Eastern Ukraine. In case the Yushchenko government targets pro-Russian citizens and even Russian passport holders, Moscow could intervene invoking the protection of its own citizens as a rationale. Here, one must bear in mind that the defense of Russian nationals is an integral part of the so called 'Medvedev Doctrine'.

Assuming the Kremlin is triumphant in convincing the Europeans to comply with Russian interest in the Former Soviet Union, there still will be two members of the Atlantic community that will not be easily persuaded because they do not depend on Russian energy supplies: The United States and the United Kingdom. Moscow knows it can dispense carrots and sticks to both.

Nonetheless, that does not mean that there are no ways to put pressure on them. Moscow has also several levers which it can use to arrange an understanding with Washington and London. One bargaining chip that could be particularly useful is the links Russia has established with Iran. Moscow is Teheran's main weapons provider and the Russian Nuclear Agency *Rosatom* is in charge of completing the Busher nuclear plant. The Kremlin could suggest a tradeoff with the US and the UK, i.e. Iran in exchange for Ukraine.

The role of Russia in Middle Eastern geopolitics must not be underestimated under any circumstance. Some analysts explain Moscow's decision to sell the S-300 air defense system to Iran as merely a vendetta against the US for supplying weapons, military advisors and training to Georgia. Nevertheless, such maneuver has a far deeper strategic significance because Russia could lure Washington into a deadly trap. The 2003 Anglo-American invasion of Iraq provided Moscow with a profitable opportunity to enhance its own power because the US became distracted by dedicating a considerable fraction of its military and diplomatic efforts to invade and later occupy Iraq.

Any eventual US invasion of Iran would not be necessarily undesirable for Russia at all. For the Americans, the Persian operations theater would be definitively far more challenging than Iraq because Iran is territorially larger, its geography is more complex, has a higher degree of internal cohesion (even though it is not ethnically homogeneous) and it has a better and bigger arsenal.

In case Israel decides to attack Iran and is assisted by the US, such situation could lead to a quagmire that will entrap the Americans in Iranian soil. This will imply that, for Russian geostrategists, Persia will be a sort of 'black hole' which will suck up a formidable amount of American resources in terms of troops, funds and power projection in general. Russia would thus obtain an ample opportunity to consolidate its power in the post-Soviet space and it just turns out that Ukraine is right at the very top of Russia's strategic agenda because of the reasons discussed beforehand.

Another option is to raise the stakes in the US neighborhood (read the American hemisphere) by supporting regimens openly hostile to American power and even by fueling instability in Mexico. Moscow has been busy developing closer ties in South America and the Caribbean which were, until recently, regarded as Washington's exclusive backyard.

The case of Venezuela is noteworthy because it has become a major buyer of Russian-made military equipment. Venezuela has purchased tanks, fighter aircraft, assault rifles and so on from Russia. Moscow and Caracas have deepened their cooperation to the point that Venezuelan soil has hosted Russian long range strategic bombers as well as military sea vessels.

Moscow is probably considering increasing somehow its presence in Venezuela, but it knows that the stability of the Hugo Chavez regime is uncertain. The dramatic drop of oil prices has been problematic for Venezuela because oil exports are its largest source of income and, thus, they provide funds needed to finance ambitious public policies. Regardless of that, Russia is preparing to collaborate with Venezuela in order to apply a good dose of geopolitical pressure on the US in its own continent.

The Russian government has also become a close friend of Nicaragua. Actually, besides Moscow, Managua is the only capital that has granted Abkhazia and South Ossetia diplomatic recognition. It is predictable that in 2009, to persuasively convince Washington to stop messing with Russian interests in Eurasia, the Kremlin will seek more cooperative links (commercial, diplomatic, arms sells, etc.) with some other Latin American governments prone to display anti-American proclivity, such as Ecuador, Bolivia and even Paraguay.

Cuba's devastation by meteorological phenomena offers Moscow a sizeable opportunity to increase its presence in the Caribbean and maybe even to exert some influence in eventual economic and political reforms in the island. Indeed, the Kremlin has already manifested its will to participate financially and logistically in the Cuban reconstruction efforts. It is logical that they will receive a generous and grateful compensation from Havana.

There has been some discussion regarding Russo-Cuban intentions to reinforce links between both States, specifically in areas like cooperation on defense issues. Moscow has been seriously contemplating the possibility of stationing strategic bombers, fighter jets and maybe even submarines in the Caribbean island, as well the opening of electronic intelligence collection facilities. With the Kremlin's contribution toward the reconstruction of Cuba, Russia has just found a window of opportunity to advance those goals.

One can reasonably conclude that Russia is more than serious in its efforts to get Ukraine back in the Russian orbit. Putin and Medvedev hold many tools at their disposal in order to make Russian interests ultimately prevail. The Kremlin has thus developed an integral strategy designed to convince both the Europeans and the Americans that they have to take into considerations Moscow's wishes. Otherwise, they would have to face very serious repercussions indeed.

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