

Five minutes with Taras Kuzio: “Ukraine is sleepwalking into an authoritarian state. We are in a dangerous situation.”

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With former Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko in jail and on hunger strike, European leaders have threatened to politically boycott this summer's Euro 2012 competition in Ukraine. British scholar and expert on Ukraine [Taras Kuzio](#) discusses with EUROPP editors Chris Gilson and Julian Kirchherr where he thinks Ukraine is heading and why he believes the European Union's foreign policy towards the country needs to fundamentally change.

Should European leaders politically boycott this summer's Euro 2012 competition?

That is a difficult question. Certainly, the relations between the European Union (EU), the United States and Ukraine are increasingly problematic. There will be possibly sanctions in the near future. But I am not sure whether the Euro 2012 is the right event to start pressurizing Ukrainian leaders. I think the EU is firing its guns too early. Boycotting the 11-12 May summit of Central European leaders was a more sensible policy and because 13 out of 20 refused to attend it the summit has been postponed.

Yulia Tymoshenko is serving a seven-year jail sentence for abuse of office and faces another trial on tax evasion charges. Do you think these charges are justified?

No. These charges are not justified, but a prime example of the selective use of justice in the Ukrainian system. In essence, the charges against her are political charges, and if you applied identical charges to, for example, European or American leaders, then many of our world's politicians would be in jail. One cannot be sentenced for making wrong political decisions. That is always a subjective question and the prerogative for voters in elections.

Tymoshenko serves this sentence because she signed the 2009 gas contract for Ukraine that is not to the liking of former President Viktor Yushchenko and current President Viktor Yanukovich. That is not an abuse of office. The entire energy trade in Eurasia is non-transparent and corrupt in every gas contract dating back to 1991 and many of Ukraine's elites and Russia's elites have made billions of dollars in this sector.

How do you judge the EU's response to this verdict?

The EU does not know where its red lines should be. When it comes to EU 'Enlargement Light' – and that is probably the best way of describing the current EU-Ukrainian association agreement without membership prospects – the EU's policy approach is inconsistent.

For example, the former interior minister of Ukraine, Yuriy Lutsenko, was arrested in December 2010 and the EU ignored his imprisonment. Democratic regression took place throughout 2010-2011 but nevertheless, the EU continued to negotiate with Ukraine right through until the summer of 2011 which sent the wrong signal to Ukraine's President, Yanukovich, and his administration. They started to believe they could get away with incarcerating Tymoshenko in jail.

The only European red line that mysteriously and very quickly appeared was when Tymoshenko was arrested in the summer of 2011. But in fact, democratic regressions had been happening in Ukraine much earlier. [Freedom House](#), the US-based NGO that advocates democracy and political freedom, downgraded Ukraine in January 2011 from 'free' to 'partly free'. The EU ignored democratic regression in Ukraine until Tymoshenko's arrest and imprisonment in summer-autumn 2011.

It is puzzling to me why the EU has now woken up to human rights violations and threatens a potential boycott of Euro 2012 only because of Yulia Tymoshenko. Is Tymoshenko more important, than say, Lutsenko, or other examples of democratic regression that took place in Ukraine?

Which role does the United States play in this context?

In fact, it has been the United States – and not the EU – which first raised the question of selective use of justice in December 2010. Hence, the Ukrainian leadership feels very confused with regard to the Western sharp condemnations. Why did Tymoshenko become the tipping point?. There are no clear guidelines for red lines in EU enlargement-Light about what you can and cannot get away with.

Furthermore, the Ukrainian leadership has mistakenly assumed that they are so geopolitically influential that they will be treated like Russia, and not like, say, Belarus. There are eight countries in Eurasia ruled by authoritarian regimes, according to Freedom House, but there are only Western sanctions in place against one of them, Belarus. With political repression the Ukrainian authorities have now opened up a Pandora's Box both on the international stage and on the domestic stage which they really can't get out of. If they release Tymoshenko, as the West demands, she would probably win the 2012 and 2015 parliamentary and presidential elections and remove Yanukovich from power where he could be charged with a host of crimes pertaining to political manipulation of the judiciary and high level corruption.

When Ukraine was named co-host of Euro 2012 in 2009, its leaders [hailed the award as a milestone](#) on the road to joining the European mainstream. How would you describe Ukraine's relationship with the EU?

They are in complete crisis and this is due to a number of factors, not only Tymoshenko. There is no level of trust between President Yanukovich and European leaders. For instance, there is bad personal chemistry between the German Chancellor Angela Merkel and Yanukovich because he lied to her on two occasions that he would resolve the Tymoshenko case by decriminalising two Soviet era articles (from 1962) that remain in the criminal code and were used to sentence her.

The EU-Ukraine crisis will deteriorate further in 2012-2013. There are elections coming up in Ukraine in October and the OSCE and no European country will be able to recognise the results of these elections as having been held in a “democratic” manner because opposition leaders in Ukraine are in jail.

What is left of [Ukraine's Orange Revolution](#)?

The past five years have led to massive disillusionment among the millions of Ukrainian citizens and voters who participated in the Orange Revolution. The Ukrainian public today is in a schizophrenic mood. First, they are very upset for a variety of reasons, including economic and social. Second, they are unhappy at growing corruption, the boorish manner in which the Yanukovich regime is treating Ukrainians and the monopolisation of power by the Donetsk clan: The popularity of Ukrainian opposition politicians has not increased very much in the last two years because Ukrainians voters prefer to say “A plague on all your houses.”

Viktor Yushchenko, Ukraine's president from 2005 to 2010, never understood that democracy is not just about free elections and media pluralism, it is also about the rule of law, reducing corruption, and improving public trust in state institutions. The rule of law and trust in state institutions are in a dismal state and deteriorating. The German magazine Der Spiegel published a report and photo in December 2011 of Ukraine's Minister of Justice, Oleksandr Lavrynovych, in a stolen Mercedes from Germany. If the Minister of Justice uses a stolen car what kind of rule of law can there be in Ukraine?

Where do you think Ukraine will be ten years from now?

There are only two potential scenarios: Either Ukraine will sleepwalk into an authoritarian state, with the population remaining passive and with the opposition without leaders who could mobilise them. Alternatively, there could be an Orange Revolution II around the 2015 presidential elections- but it will not be peaceful like in 2004. In 2004, President Leonid Kuchma was leaving office after two terms whereas in 2015 President Yanukovich will be seeking a second term. In 2004, Ukraine's elites split and some supported Yushchenko over Yanukovich while the security forces largely defected to Yushchenko and refused to suppress the Orange Revolution protests.

This second prediction is a reflection of the Pandora's Box I mentioned earlier. The crux is: The current authorities cannot now leave power because they have broken an unwritten non-aggression pact between the Ukrainian elites that they do not go after each other after elections. Therefore, if the current leaders, for example, were to lose the 2012 and 2015 elections, they would be threatened with a host of criminal charges that could land them in jail. They would be now threatened with criminal prosecutions themselves. So they are very afraid of giving up power to the opposition. The period from 2013-2014, after the parliamentary and just before the presidential elections, will be a very dangerous and potentially explosive situation. If the Ukrainian authorities do not release Tymoshenko, Lutsenko and other political prisoners (as I believe they will not) Ukraine will sink deeper into international isolation in the approach to the 2015 presidential elections with the likelihood of Western sanctions, further boycotts and visa blacklists of senior officials. Britain, Cyprus, Austria, Lichtenstein and Monaco, four of whom are EU members, have benefitted from a huge influx of Ukrainian and Russian capital and would suffer from sanctions.

The major direction for the next decade will be decided in Ukraine's next presidential elections in 2015. If Viktor Yanukovich manages – through massive election fraud – to re-elect himself as Ukraine's president, even though he will only have a popularity of 15-20%, then Ukraine will become a Belarusian-style authoritarian state by 2020, the end of his second term. If on the other hand, the [opposition successfully evict him from office](#), then I believe the politicians who then come to power will have learnt their lessons from the Yushchenko presidency and will implement radical policies and particularly renew the process of Ukraine's integration towards Europe which is currently frozen.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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