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Guest post: Viktor Yanukovich, the latest in a long line of Ukrainian leaders to tie their fate to Moscow

Dec 17, 2013 11:26am by guest writer



By Taras Kuzio of the University of Alberta

President Viktor Yanukovich after turning his back on the EU less than a month ago travelled to Moscow on Tuesday to sign agreements that closely bind Ukraine to Russia and Eurasia. Ukraine needs \$15-20bn to rescue the country from an economic and financial tsunami brought on, in my view, by the government's mismanagement and colossal asset stripping befitting a medieval occupation army.

The agreements to be signed by Yanukovich in Moscow are tantamount to a CIS Customs Union-lite in exchange for a financial lifeline and Russian political support for Yanukovich's re-election in 2015 and access to Ukrainian assets. There is little question that the second stage of this deal after 2015 with Vladimir Putin, Russia's president, will be for Ukraine to join as a fully-fledged member of the CIS Customs Union and thereafter the Eurasian Union.

The decision to choose Russia over the IMF as a source of credit means Yanukovich will go down in Ukraine's history as the latest in a long line of leaders from the 17th century Cossack leader Bohdan Khmelnytsky, who signed a union of Ukraine and Russia, to the country's longest ruling Soviet Communist leader Volodymyr Shcherbytsky, who in the last two decades before the collapse of the USSR presided over mass Russification and political repression. It is in this light that one has to understand the joint open letter by Ukraine's three first presidents, who distanced themselves from Yanukovich's policies that are at odds with those pursued by them in 1991-2010.

Until 2010, the year Yanukovich was elected to power, Ukraine had broadly advanced on three fronts: democratisation and free elections; institutionalising a Ukrainian national identity; and integration with Europe. Yanukovich has succeeded in stealing all three from Ukrainians, first in rolling back democracy, returning to Soviet-era political repression and establishing an authoritarian regime, second in returning to neo-Soviet identity policies and Russification and finally in turning Ukraine's back on Europe.

The reversal of these gains made by independent Ukraine will have three consequences.

First, the reversal rests on brittle foundations because authoritarian systems traditionally do well in countries with abundant resources, popular nationalism and ruling parties who receive parliamentary majorities, all three of which are absent in Ukraine. Yanukovich will have to impose an authoritarian regime in a country where – even more so following his Moscow trip – more than half of the population see him as a traitor, while many others in his home constituencies of eastern

Ukraine are ambivalent or passive.

The second consequence will be the entrenchment of a fully authoritarian system and an end to free elections, as seen in the refusal to hold local and mayoral elections in Kiev and the suspected electoral fraud on Sunday in five repeat elections.

Yanukovich, who had already presided over three dubious elections as Donetsk Governor and Prime Minister, ended free elections after they brought him to power four years ago.

Third, elections are dangerous when you fear being out of power. The accumulation of enormous wealth by the president and what has become known as ‘The Family’ – those from his home region, who have privatized the budget and law enforcement – means he and his circle have too much to lose if they are put out of power. In addition to losing assets, a victorious opposition is likely to pursue criminal charges over abuse of office, treason for extending the Black Sea Fleet base in Sevastopol, signing up to Putin’s geopolitical project and most likely transferring Ukraine’s crown jewels – its gas pipelines – to a Russian-controlled consortium next year.

The signing of the accords in Moscow will deepen Ukraine’s regional divide to dangerous levels that could tear the country apart in the presidential election campaign that has already begun. The rolling back of Ukraine’s three gains of democratisation, national identity and European integration, coupled with the greed and fear that are keeping Ukraine’s kleptocrats in power, make a combustible mix that has already produced the most severe political crisis in Ukraine’s history.

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