

[Opinion: President Yanukovich threatens Ukraine's democracy](#)

If Obama meets with Yanukovich, they should discuss the importance of democracy to US-Ukraine cooperation.



By Taras Kuzio — Special to GlobalPost

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WASHINGTON and KIEV, Ukraine — Ukraine's newly elected President Viktor Yanukovich is in Washington for the nuclear summit with the hope of securing a meeting with President Barack Obama. If a meeting goes ahead, Yanukovich should be reminded of the importance of democratic values to the U.S.-Ukrainian relationship.

In 2008, the United States and Ukraine signed a Charter on Strategic Partnership that highlights cooperation in security, energy, democracy and economics. President Yanukovich supports continued cooperation within the Charter but his domestic policies, after only 40 days in office, point to him backsliding on democratic and economic reforms.

Speaking to a conference on Ukraine at George Washington University this week, University of Florida's Paul D'Anieri does not see encouraging signs for democracy in Ukraine: "Will there be free and fair elections in 2015? It's early, but the signs aren't encouraging. Already it appears that Yanukovich seeks to eliminate political competition in Ukraine, and it is questionable whether there is any force powerful enough to stop him."

A presidential meeting on the sidelines of the nuclear summit should be used by Washington to discuss five areas that threaten further U.S. cooperation with Ukraine. The first should point to the unacceptable trend of the Yanukovich administration towards clawing back Ukraine's democratic gains. Only four days before Yanukovich set foot on U.S. soil he engineered a blatantly political ruling by the Constitutional Court.

Political corruption, which is now being rewarded, is by far the biggest threat to Ukraine's democracy. Opposition leader Yulia Tymoshenko warned that the court's ruling "blessed corruption" and "opened great perspectives for corruption by Ukrainian parliamentary deputies."

The court's ruling legitimizes the ruling coalition by permitting factions and deputies who have defected from their factions to join a coalition. The ruling contradicts an earlier ruling that permitted only factions to join coalitions and overturns the very essence of Ukraine's proportional system whereby voters elect parties, not individuals.

Second, the president's coalition has indefinitely postponed local elections set for May and introduced draft legislation that permanently takes away the vote from Kyev to elect a mayor.

Threats to media pluralism, one of the main democratic achievements in Ukraine, are growing.

Evidence of interference by the Chairman of the Security Service, Valery Khoroshkovsky, an oligarchic media tycoon, into allocation of television licenses have led to growing protests by journalists. Journalists have been arrested and harassed by police and officials.

Intolerance of the opposition is gauged by arrests and police brutality against protesters. An investigation is to be launched against Tymoshenko into alleged financial transgressions when she headed the government.

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Third, the appointment of Nikolai Azarov as prime minister dispels any prospects for economic reforms. As Rutgers University's Alexander Motyl points out, the prime minister is "synonymous with government corruption, ruinous taxation rates, and hostility to small business."

Fourth, the Azarov government is the first of 15 in Ukraine over the last two decades that does not include a single woman. Both Yanukovich and Azarov have expressed brazenly chauvinist views that consign women to the kitchen or allege they are unable to work the long hours that are required during the economic crisis. Britain's Guardian newspaper depicted Azarov as a "Neanderthal" for his sexist comments.

Fifth, the president's staffing policies have returned corrupt oligarchs, those opposed to reforms and holding neo-Soviet and anti-American views to senior positions of power in law enforcement, the military and the intelligence services. These personnel escaped justice following election fraud five years ago by seeking asylum in Russia or through backroom immunity deals with President Yushchenko.

The return of such individuals to head the security forces have opened up channels for greater Russian influence over Ukraine's national security apparatus and the country's foreign policy orientation and reduces prospects for continued high levels of security cooperation with NATO and the U.S. Such cooperation has benefited Ukraine through military reforms and income generated by the military-industrial complex.

Ukraine became a democracy five years ago following Europe's biggest mass protests since World War II when one in five Ukrainians protested in what became known as the Orange Revolution. The Supreme Court overturned a rigged election that brought Yanukovich to power and ordered a re-run which opposition leader Viktor Yushchenko won.

During the next five years U.S. political consultants Rick Davis and Paul Manafort worked on improving Yanukovich's image by introducing American-style party rallies and election campaigns. Davis-Manafort's re-imaging led many Western newspapers in the 2010 elections to portray Yanukovich as a "new-born democrat."

But, after less than two months in office Yanukovich's "new" image is fraying and proving to be not very different from the old, un-democratic image he held five years ago.

When Yanukovich sought to undemocratically come to power five years ago he provoked a 17-day non-violent street carnival known as the Orange Revolution. If President Yanukovich attempts a second time to undermine Ukraine's democracy he will be again faced by mass protests — but of a different type. The violent breakdown of order in Kyrgyzstan should be a wake up call to the U.S. that Yanukovich's policies will fail to bring stability to Ukraine.

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