

Current Politics in Ukraine

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Viktor Yanukovich Excels in Orwellian Doublethink while Ukrainian Politics Resembles George Orwell's 1984, But Only Better

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The party seeks power entirely for its own sake. We are not interested in the good of others; we are interested solely in power.'

George Orwell, 1984

On a recent episode of Saturday Night Live (SNL) the Ukrainian cleaner, played by the ever excellent Kate McKinnon, jokes that with the US government closed down she is thinking of returning to Ukraine where the government is more 'stable.'

Ukraine is not only more 'stable' but its politics are far more surreal in a manner that befits George Orwell's well-known novels 1984 and Animal Farm.

The biggest obstacle for US and European policymakers in understanding Ukraine and Eurasia has always been the major disconnect between what is said and what the actual steps are undertaken by Ukrainian leaders. This is incredibly frustrating – even for long-term Ukraine watchers such as me – and last year I began collecting examples of such Orwellian doublethink

(<http://blog.taraskuzio.net/2013/01/23/sovokistan/>

(<http://blog.taraskuzio.net/2013/01/23/sovokistan/>)) which as Orwell wrote in 1984 'means the power of holding two contradictory beliefs in one's mind simultaneously, and accepting both of them.'

Of course the key to this doublethink is in the Soviet mind-set that cannot see a contradiction between saying one thing and doing another, between, for example, working on legislation permitting Tymoshenko to travel to Germany while imposing at the same time additional criminal cases against her. As Orwell's 1984 novel wrote: 'To tell deliberate lies while genuinely believing in them, to forget any fact that has become inconvenient, and then, when it becomes necessary again, to draw it back from oblivion for just as long as it is needed, to deny the existence of objective reality and all the while to take account of the reality which one denies – all this is indispensably necessary.'

President Viktor Yanukovich and Prime Minister Nikolai Azarov's words are *not* to be taken as representing the policies that they will actually implement. The most frustrating example of this has been the stringing along of EU policymakers over Yulia Tymoshenko, whose release from imprisonment is a requirement for Ukraine to receive an Association Agreement on November 28-29 in Vilnius.

For the last two years there has been a George Orwellian tennis match of 'will they' or 'won't they' release her. Today –with less than two weeks to go before the Vilnius deadline – it is clearer than ever that President Yanukovich does not understand the concept of 'selective use of justice' of which the most blatant example is the Tymoshenko case. A few days ago President Yanukovich fired back saying 'all citizens are equal before the law. In Ukraine, rule by laws and the rule of law, applies to everyone.'

Examples of such doublethink are countless. A few days ago President Yanukovich said that Ukrainian 'mass media play an important role in establishing democratic society' at a time when media freedom in Ukraine has been on the decline each year during his presidency. Ukraine is ranked fourth out of six Eastern Partnership countries in media freedom with CIS Customs Union member Armenia higher and only Azerbaijan and Belarus below. We would all applaud if it was not for the fact that Ukraine resembles Orwell's *Animal Farm* where some are more equal than others – as they were in the Soviet Union.

At a recent event I attended I asked Prime Minister Azarov why Ukrainians did not believe the president was committed to fighting corruption, regardless of official rhetoric. He replied robustly that his government had done more to fight corruption in the last three years than had been undertaken in the last two decades. Unfortunately, it slipped his mind that he had been a government member for six of those years.

Prime Minister Azarov and other members of the Ukrainian government may not have availed themselves of the opportunity to read a book authored by their president because no such books exist. After President Yanukovich declared huge royalties for books in his last two tax returns, Ukrainian television stations scoured Ukrainian bookstores but to no avail; either they had been sold out or more than likely they were never published.

President Yanukovich's last two annual official salaries have been 757, 000 *hryvnya* while his declared income was 17 and 20 million *hryvnya* respectively. The difference between his official salaries and declared incomes were \$2 million and \$2.4 million respectively which were allegedly received from royalties paid for his hard to find books. Unluckily for him, the Donetsk publishing house that allegedly paid him the royalties does *not* actually publish books and therefore the entire falsity was an exercise in Orwellian doublethink.

In contrast to the difficulty in finding his books we can thank Google Earth for giving us the location of his palaces.

Indeed, it is very likely that members of the government have been invited to President Yanukovich's palatial Mezhyhirya mansion outside Kyiv which Rutgers University Alexander Motyl described as 'a nightmarish amalgam of nouveau riche kitsch, late Ottoman excess, Disneyland vulgarity, and Donald Trump tastelessness.' The grounds include a massive hunting preserve, tennis courts, a fake Spanish galleon and undoubtedly other facilities to reduce the stress of over-worked Ukrainian officials.

Unfortunately for the president and prime minister, Mezhyhirya is viewed by Ukrainians an example of rampant corruption and understandably therefore the authorities are highly sensitive to publicity surrounding the president's lavish life style in a country with widespread poverty and wage arrears.

Two years ago Ukraine adopted a widely praised law on access to public information which covered everybody, although it would seem the president remains above the law. Photographs of Mezhyhirya are widely available on the internet in a country where nearly half the population are wired (perhaps not surprisingly one never sees the president clutching an iPad, laptop or smart phone).

Nevertheless, this has not stopped business owners seeking to keep on good terms with the president removing editors such as Ihor Huzhva for publishing photographs of the palace in the high circulation Segodnya newspaper.

In a scene straight out of Orwell's novel 1984, the authorities have been paranoid enough about the public hearing about their lavish lifestyles they have attempted to censor a movie about Mezhyhirya with the illegal use of law enforcement officers in twenty cities around Ukraine. In the Soviet Union the New Class, as Milovan Djilas described them, could hide from public view in gated communities but this is impossibility in today's wired and globalized world. Mezhyhirya can be found on Google Earth, among many places on the net.

Journalistic investigations published photographs of an officer in the Kyiv's Police Department to Combat Organized Crime who organized thirty highly inebriated homeless people to stage a raucous that forced the cancellation of the movie. On other occasions it proved impossible to screen the movie when there was either an electricity blackout, tear gas canisters or stink bombs were thrown inside the hall, or police searches were made for 'explosives.' In Ukraine ruled by an Orwellian political force those tasked with combatting crime are protecting those who are abusing their high office by censoring publicity about President Yanukovich's palatial appetites (equally sumptuous Carpathian and Crimean palaces have been added to Mezhyhirya).

In August journalists travelling to Berlin to show the movie were detained at Kyiv's airport by border guards, who have not been reformed since the Soviet era when they were part of the KGB. They searched the journalist's laptops for 'state secrets' and confiscated DVD copies of the movie. Presumably Ukraine's security services have never heard of the Cloud, Google Drive or Drop Box.

Is President Yanukovich therefore somebody who will eventually come round in the next two weeks to understanding the errors of his ways in imprisoning Tymoshenko? Indeed, after Vilnius, can we honestly expect the Ukrainian President to replace the Ukrainian Orwellian system he rules over where he plays a star role with a European opera?

I doubt it; after all, as the Ukrainian cleaning lady on SNL said, Ukraine's 'stability' and politics are far more surreal than in America. I would add that they are also far more lucrative for those who are in power and therefore will opt for 'stability' over change.



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