



Viktor Yanukovich: From partner to violent kleptocrat

Published: Feb. 14, 2014 at 9:00 AM

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WASHINGTON, Feb. 14 (UPI) -- WASHINGTON, Feb. 14 (UPI) -- Over the course of four years the international image of Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich has evolved from partner to violent kleptocrat.

U.S. and EU policymakers' views were shaped by wishful thinking rather than being based on hard intelligence. Links between Yanukovich, the Party of Regions and crime have been long known to policymakers as seen in U.S. cables from Kiev available through WikiLeaks.

At least 18 Party of Regions deputies have criminal ties, according to Hennadiy Moskal, deputy head of Parliament's Committee on Organized Crime and Corruption.

Attitudes toward Ukraine's president evolved through four stages: wishful thinking (2010), thaw (2011), stagnation (2012) and violent kleptocrat (2013).

The first stage -- wishful thinking -- dominated 2010, when Yanukovich became president in the last free election Ukraine has held with policymakers either believing he had changed under the influence of U.S. consultants or would be no different to President Leonid Kuchma (1994-2004). Policymakers reserved their criticism arguing Yanukovich needed to be given a chance to prove himself.

Wishful thinking papered over democratic regression, the transformation of Parliament into a rubber-stamp institution, corruption of the constitutional court and local election fraud. It also sidestepped the first signs of selective justice against defeated opposition candidate and Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko.

The second stage -- thaw -- in 2011 began with Freedom House downgrading Ukraine from "Free" to "Partly Free." Although Ukraine's democracy was being rolled back and opposition leaders persecuted, the European Union continued to negotiate with Ukraine for an Association Agreement and Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement.

The European Union and United States condemned Tymoshenko's imprisonment in October. The European Union, in what could be only described as a slap on Yanukovich's wrist, postponed the initialing of the AA from December to the following March but continued to hope it would be signed in late 2012.

The third stage -- stagnation -- dominated 2012 with efforts to end selective use of justice. Yanukovich was only invited to one Western country -- Cyprus -- as he became internationally isolated. Additional criminal charges, including murder, were added against Tymoshenko, which didn't prevent the European Union from continuing to negotiate with Ukraine.

Attacks on democratic rights and media freedom continued to escalate and Parliament adopted a highly controversial language law in July 2012 that raised Russian to the same level as Ukrainian.

Transparency International reported on rampant growth of corruption and emergence of "The Family," a new clan of presidential loyalists from Yanukovich's home region headed by his eldest son Oleksandr who, although a dentist by profession, entered the list of the Top 50 wealthiest people in Ukraine. In the former U.S.S.R., only four Central Asian countries had worse levels of corruption than Ukraine, TI said, while the Heritage Foundation ranked Ukraine with the least economic freedom in Europe.

The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, Council of Europe and Western governments criticized the November 2012 parliamentary elections as not meeting democratic standards.

The fourth stage -- violent kleptocrat -- came into view in 2013 took a long time in coming because news was dominated by negotiations over the AA and whether Tymoshenko would be released or permitted to travel abroad for medical treatment.

Yuriy Lutsenko's release in April 2013 had been insufficient to satisfy U.S. and EU demands for an end to selective use of justice. Many believed Yanukovich's desire to enter history as the leader who would take Ukraine into Europe would outweigh his fear of Tymoshenko and she would be freed.

At the end of November 2013 the Ukrainian government, without public consultation or warning, abruptly canceled European integration and locked Ukraine into a Russian loan agreement. Incompetent and corrupt policies by Party of Regions leader and Prime Minister Nikolai Azarov had taken Ukraine to bankruptcy.

The decision ended Western illusions about Yanukovich's commitment to Europe and most came to believe his choice of foreign policy partner was linked not to Ukrainian national interests but what would be best for his re-election the following year.

Russian loans with fewer conditions -- rather than unpopular reforms demanded by an International Monetary Fund agreement -- would be more likely to secure his re-election.

The occupation of downtown Kiev and massive popular protests that reached 1 million people at its peak -- which remain on-going in freezing winter weather -- were also fuelled by four years of attacks on democracy and Ukrainian national identity and rapacious corruption.

Protests turned violent after "Black Thursday" (Jan. 16) when what was left of Ukraine's democracy was destroyed in the space of 21 minutes when the Party of Regions and Communists voted by an illegal show of hands rather than using the electronic system. Ukraine had become a dictatorship.

The image of Yanukovich and his administration dramatically changed to violent kleptocrat after a tally of seven dead (including an Armenian and Belarusian), 2,000 protesters wounded, 136 journalists attacked, 30 protesters kidnapped and 120 detained.

This was reinforced by images of Automobile-Maydan leader Dmytro Bulatov who had been kidnapped and tortured in what Amnesty International described as a "barbaric act."

Over four years and stages U.S. and EU policymakers came to view Yanukovich as a violent and corrupt kleptocrat who had no allegiance to European values. With Yanukovich now persona non grata in Europe and North America it is time for the European Union to follow the United States and Canada in introducing targeted sanctions.

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