

Central Asia  
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# Outcome of Ukraine cr

LIFE isn't long enough to know everything about everywhere. Or even to know that much about anywhere. One of the big advantages of having the old Soviet Union around was that it hoovered up a great job — lot of nations and peoples — and allowed them all to be posted in the same pigeon hole. What did you need to understand about Azerbaijan (to pick one at random) when it was part of that big place ruled over by Brezhnev or Khrushchev? And the Cold War also permitted the tidy-minded on both sides of the ideological divide to flatten out the bumps and reduce the complexities to a series of simple 'for us or against us' calculations.

Now it's hard to keep track of it all. It's like something written by Malcolm Bradbury or produced by Jetlag Travel Guides. No sooner has Slaka re-elected the kleptocratic President Splodj, than people waving red and green flags are in the streets of neighbouring Molvonian demanding the right of the bauxite producing province of Plit to secede from the crisis-ridden (and hitherto completely unknown) republic.

So, when you encounter a situation like that of the Ukraine it's tempting to settle for one of the great simplifications. With two candidates, both called Viktor, battling each other for the presidency and their partisans making accusations about each other, you look for a story to make sense of it all. One of the most obviously available is 'pro-Western democrats struggle for freedom against corrupt hangers-on of previous regime', and another — increasingly popular on the left — is 'warring factions in divided country head for civil war, intervene at your peril'. In the post-Iraq world these two narratives can also be fairly easily reduced still further into 'pro' and 'anti' American.

Somewhere in the middle of these stories is the place itself and its people, 48 million of them: miners in Donetsk, intellectuals in Kiev, farmers on the great wheatlands, waiters in Sebastopol and postmen in Kharkov. They are citizens of a large European country, and the possibility of its descent into civil strife or civil war should be as frightening as anything that happened in the Balkans.

So far, however, this crisis seems to

have been handled by the lads and lasses in the Department for Half-full Glasses. In Belarus (up and to the left a bit) last month there was one of those dodgy referendums, overturning a constitutional provision limiting the sitting president to two terms. Alexander Lukashenko will now be able to run for a third term in 2006. "An authoritarian style of rule is characteristic of me, and I have always admitted it," Lukashenko said in August 2003. "You need to control the country, and the main thing is not to ruin people's lives." This notion of control may explain why the occasional Belarussian opposition figure has simply disappeared. Meanwhile, south in the 'stans, ruling presidents rarely manage to garner less than 90 per cent of the vote, and vociferous opponents rarely manage to stay alive.

Yet in the Ukraine apparent widespread electoral malpractice has not sealed an election for a sitting candidate. And nor, as I write this, has the situation degenerated into violence, despite the fact that the Ukraine has not been a model democracy. According to the CIA world fact-book (despite its provenance, actually

# crisis crucial for Europe's future

By David Aaronovitch

(rather useful) of January 2004, in the Ukraine, 'true freedom remains elusive, as the legacy of state control has been difficult to throw off. Where state control has dissipated, endemic corruption has filled much of the resulting vacuum, stalling efforts at economic reform, privatisation, and civil liberties'. There were reports from international observers of intimidation at polling stations, of attempts at electoral fraud, and voting figures from some electoral districts seemed implausibly unanimous.

But in the face of a determined and surprisingly youthful opposition, it has not been possible for the old regime simply to impose the 'results' of this election, nor to use force to crush the demonstrations. Either that, or they simply haven't wanted to behave in a brutal manner. And so far the demonstrators (who seem an articulate and moderate bunch), have also handled themselves with restraint. In Kiev the protesters have been joined by flower-wielding police cadets, army officers and TV journalists.

At the time of writing both the Viktor — Yanukovich, supposed winner of the presidential election, and

Yuschenko, the challenger — are due to meet under the auspices of various international figures, to try and find a way out of the impasse. That never happened in Belarus. And here's a second reason for feeling warm about this cold place. For all the talk about the wedge driven between the EU and America over Iraq, what has been evident from the response to events in the Ukraine is how much we have in common. The EU and its representatives, the governments of the new EU states which border the Ukraine and the US State Department have all been saying much the same thing. The consequence has been to give immense encouragement to those Ukrainians for whom the issue is a straightforward one of democratic standards. And for those of us who cannot see how the world will be a better place if Europe and America are at each others' throats, this solidarity is encouraging.

It also shows that there are some places where it is easier for the EU to go than for America. Eurosceptics, many of whom claim that democracy lies at the heart of their objection to the Union, should reflect on the role of

Javier Solana, the EU's foreign policy chief, who has been leading mediation attempts in Kiev. This is how it should be. This was the whole idea. The EU's political purpose was originally about bringing the continent together, not in currencies, but in peace and democracy.

Hopefully the consequence of any talks will be the holding of new elections under international supervision, the results of which should be respected by all participants. Hopefully too, the victor of such an election will reflect on the extraordinary division that seems to exist between the western and eastern parts of the Ukraine — a division that makes the much-bruited red-state/blue-state schism in America look tame. Perhaps some regional autonomy does make sense.

But a word of warning here, to oneself as much as to anyone else. This business, from the point of view of America or Europe, must be about democracy and pluralism, and not about geopolitics. The people of the Ukraine deserve a proper democracy, not because they are more likely to do business with the West or join Nato,

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y but because it is a superior form of  
n government. What the Ukrainians  
d then decide to do about their relations  
s with other countries is up to them.

t Corrupt and oppressive regimes  
1 end up being dangerous for all of us.  
- They create tensions that cannot be  
7 resolved and grievances that cannot  
- be dealt with. The simple fact that  
e they are "on our side" in any particu-  
lar struggle in no way lessens the long-  
term dangers that they represent. In  
fact it magnifies them.

And Russia has to understand this  
process too. There is absolutely no  
reason why the Russian people should  
regard a democratic Ukraine as a  
threat. But by siding too obviously  
with people who may be guilty of rig-  
ging elections and suppressing opposi-  
tion, Russia could turn millions of peo-  
ple against it.

The question is in the balance, right  
now. What happens in the Ukraine,  
even if none of us were thinking much  
— if anything — about that country  
just a month ago, may decide whether  
democracy or neo-Stalinism rules in  
the important lands to the east of the  
EU. Keep your fingers crossed.—  
*Dawn/The Observer News Service.*