

The Ukrainian divide

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VIEW

For the Kremlin, to 'lose' Ukraine now is a potential source of great instability at home - both because of the failure of its policies and because a democratic Ukraine will make people more likely to believe in the possibility of a democratic Russia. In Ukraine, the bad blood built up over the past days may mean that blood will be spilled before either side yields

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EVEN AS THE PROSPECT OF A REPEAT vote grows more likely, a threat of violence lingers in Kiev in the wake of last Sunday's rigged Ukrainian elections. With new calls for secession by the country's south-eastern provinces, and a deep geopolitical rift opening between Russia and the West, many observers have concluded that an old fault line has reappeared in Europe — one that runs straight down the Dnieper River through the heart of Ukraine.

Contrary to the claims of instant pundits, no such division existed in Ukraine before the election, which was essentially a referendum on a patently criminal government. But after the election, Russian President Vladimir Putin's ill-judged intervention and Western reaction have now set the country on a spiral that might turn the fear into reality: Ukraine is rapidly becoming a battleground between Russia and the West.

Merely a week ago, this fault line seemed a mere chimera — just recycled old bits of 19th century propaganda that flew in the face of the facts. Why? Because if a cultural divide sepa-

rates Russia and the West, Ukraine — overwhelmingly Orthodox, pro-Russian, and somewhat wary of the West — falls squarely on one side of it. In 2002, the US State Department surveyed all regions of Ukraine: 85 percent of respondents held a favourable view of Russia, only 5 percent saw Russia as a threat to Ukraine's security. Most strikingly, 60 percent of respondents supported at least a confederal union with Russia and Belarus, and 39 percent thought that Ukraine and Russia should be united in a single state. In contrast, only 24 percent of the respondents expressed any confidence that the United States could deal responsibly with the world's problems — this, before the invasion of Iraq. Anti-Russian sentiments are certainly pervasive in a few Western provinces, three of which are predominantly Greek Catholic (Uniate); but with less than 15 percent of the population, these provinces would hardly amount to much in a "clash of civilisations".

In short, if those who voted in this past election had seen it as a choice between Russia and the West, there would have been no contest. The pro-Russian candidate, Prime Minister Victor Yanukovich, would have won the election handily. Yanukovich would never have needed to mobilise the Ukrainian state's political muscle to work on his behalf, nor to systematically tar the opposition candidate Victor Yushchenko with biased media coverage, nor to run his car off the road with heavy machinery or poison his food. During the elections, Yanukovich supporters would not have needed to buy votes, to stuff ballots, to run busloads full of supporters through the "carousel" of repeated voting at multiple sites, to illegally expel opposition members of local electoral commissions or, finally, to force the Central Electoral Commission to alter the final count in his favour. Indeed, if this vote were a simple choice between Russia and the West, or a civilisational choice between Eastern Orthodoxy and Western Christianity, Yushchenko would have needed to rig the election.

The election itself did not reflect such divides. While Yushchenko surely received the vast majority of the Uniate and nationalist vote in the West, the votes from pro-Russian voters more than doubled that support. Even though it was often a personal risk to vote for the opposi-

tion, simple mathematics reveals that a substantial number of voters who favour confederation with Russia supported Yushchenko. Polls suggest that the majority of Ukraine's Communist Party members voted for Yushchenko in the final round. So much for the civilisational divide.

Yet misreading often proves contagious, and when the contagion spreads to those in power, it come to take on a life of its own. In the heated aftermath of this fraudulent election, with clumsy Russian intervention favouring the official candidate, rhetoric of Yushchenko supporters at home and abroad has begun to displace reality. A referendum on Leonid Kuchma's corrupt government and his handpicked successor has been transformed into a bigger battle. In part, this is because Russia has chosen to make it one. Having put his reputation on the line by formally endorsing and campaigning with Yanukovich, Putin burned even more bridges by claiming victory even before the votes were counted. He has left himself little room to manoeuvre or retreat, and his deliberate opposition to Yushchenko further polarises matters.

The response by the West, though appropriate, has also reinforced the notion of a deep divide. Shortly after Putin's endorsement, US Secretary of State Colin Powell stated that the United States would not recognise the elections as legitimate. Marek Siwec, the Polish representative of the European Parliament delegation, went so far as to claim that the vote was more akin to a North Korean than a European election. The result has been complete polarisation: The Russian elite argue that while the election may have been marred by cheating, both sides were guilty. Further, they suggest that Western-funded groups are agitating in favour of their pro-Western nationalist stooge to overturn a legitimate victory. Western observers, with greater reliance on fact, argue that the electoral process was flawed and illegitimate, and that the international community cannot accept the result. Yet there is no denying that the West takes a much greater interest in the flaws when they are unhappy with the outcome.

This international polarisation is both feeding and reshaping the political struggle within the country. In part because of Russia's actions, the opposition in the street has taken on a more stri-

dent anti-Russian tone, framing the struggle with Yanukovich as a struggle against Moscow — using the traditional language of the far Western (formerly Austrian) provinces of the country, whose nationalism has never held much appeal in the rest of Ukraine. This, in turn, has fed into the worst fears of Yanukovich supporters in the Eastern *oblasts*, who have the strongest cultural and economic ties to Russia. They fear that the Western "occupation" of a Yushchenko government will mean the loss of their jobs, their language, and their personal ties to Russia.

The result is that an election that clearly defied ethnic cleavages is being rewritten in ethnic terms, with new battle lines drawn accordingly. With calls for secession growing in the south and east of the country, where support for union with Russia is strongest, and Yushchenko now making bellicose statements that those calling for separatism will "receive severe punishment", there is a high likelihood of some form of political violence. As each faction within Ukraine — egged on by supporters abroad — radicalises its position, the country is dangerously close to being rent in two.

And the stakes for each side just seem to get higher — not that there is much to fight over, at least materially speaking. Ukraine is a poor, corrupt country with few natural resources. Yet like an acre of land at Verdun, the importance lies more in the symbolic cache of winning (or not losing) than in the prize itself. For the Kremlin, to "lose" Ukraine now is a potential source of great instability at home — both because of the failure of its policies and because a democratic Ukraine will make people more likely to believe in the possibility of a democratic Russia. And for those in Ukraine, the bad blood that has built up in the past months, weeks, and especially over the past days, may mean that blood will be spilled before either side yields.

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