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## Ukrainian Democracy: A Barrier to Washington's Goals

*What Do Ukrainians Really Want?*

by NICK ALEXANDROV

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When Ukraine is the topic, the major U.S. media outlets agree: “Europe and the United States have made a priority of fostering democracy in the former Soviet republics,” David M. Herszenhorn wrote in the *New York Times*. The *Washington Post* asserted that Ukraine is “a country that has been struggling to become a genuine democracy” with help from Western powers, who keep it “from becoming an autocratic Kremlin colony, like neighboring Belarus.” “Ukraine is the crossroads between a free and an authoritarian Europe,” the *Wall Street Journal* concurred, while Yale professor Timothy Snyder urged, in a CNN piece, Europe and America to back the Ukrainian protesters—“a chance to support democracy,” he emphasized. Marvelous. But in the real world, Ukrainian democracy is not merely something Washington has failed to support, but is actually incompatible with U.S. governmental aims.

U.S. officials are quite open about their opposition to Ukrainian self-determination and well-aware how unpopular Washington's preferred policies are. Nearly a decade ago, for example, the U.S. House of Representatives' Subcommittee on Europe met for a hearing on "Ukraine's Future and U.S. Interests." Rep. Doug Bereuter (R-NE) opened the session, noting that "a recent survey conducted by a center for economic and political research suggests that up to 40 percent of Ukrainians believe that relations with Russia should be a priority." Meanwhile, "28 percent gave preference to the EU," and "2 percent said that relations with the U.S. should be a foreign policy priority. Another survey suggested that almost two-thirds of the population would consider supporting a political union with Russia," Bereuter concluded. "So," he went on, "I think that United States policy must remain focused" on incorporating Ukraine "into European and Euro-Atlantic structures." Rep. Robert Wexler (D-FL) spoke next, reiterating that U.S. policy should "further Ukraine's integration in Euro-Atlantic institutions;" Steven Pifer, the former Ambassador to Ukraine, drove the point home, outlining "the United States Government's vision for Ukraine": "increasingly close ties to Europe and Euro-Atlantic institutions." This vision persisted over the following decade. The Atlantic Council's Damon Wilson, speaking before the U.S. Senate's Subcommittee on European Affairs—the topic was "Ukraine at a Crossroads"—in February 2012, explained that "Ukraine's genuine European integration" remained a major objective.

And recent commentary and news coverage depicts European integration as something most Ukrainians desire. In early February, Secretary of State Kerry, at the Munich Security Conference, remarked that Ukrainians should be permitted "to associate with partners who will help them realize their aspirations"—Europe and the U.S. obviously being the partners, integration to be deepened via what the *Times*' Herszenhorn referred to as "sweeping political and trade agreements" that Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich "refused to sign" last November, resulting in "a broken promise between a leader and his citizens," and then the uprisings. Now *Al Jazeera* reports that the acting president, Oleksander Turchinov, has "made clear that Kiev's European integration would be a priority," thereby giving Ukrainians what we're told they want.

But British and U.S. governmental studies reveal the Ukrainian public is ambivalent about European integration. Britain's Foreign and Commonwealth Office, for example, funded a "scoping study" through the British Embassy in Kyiv a year ago, titled "A blueprint for enhancing understanding of and support for the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement [AA] including DCFTA [Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area] in Ukraine." The AA was one of the key "sweeping political and trade agreements" Yanukovich refused to sign. British officials,

in their report, stressed that “support for the AA is not overwhelming amongst the population at large,” observing that “opinion polls show that about 30% of respondents are in favour of European integration, 30% for the Customs Union [Moscow-led integration], and about 30% are undecided.” This bleak situation called for a propaganda offensive, or “a national public awareness ‘Campaign of Arguments,’” as the British dubbed it, which was to “be aimed at the general public as its primary target audience.” British advisers urged PR teams “to formulate advertising slogans, global and targeted messages,” and to play up “the European civilizational model” and other benefits the AA allegedly would bring. This “civilizational model” today entails “massive attacks on public services, wages, pensions, trade unions, and social rights” under imposed “draconian austerity policies,” Asbjørn Wahl wrote in January’s *Monthly Review*—a reality the British indoctrination scheme’s outline studiously avoided, it’s hardly worth mentioning.

The propaganda barrage may have been successful to some extent. But as the year progressed, the U.S. government had a hard time finding evidence of overwhelming Ukrainian support for European integration. The International Republican Institute (IRI), for example, polled Ukrainians last September: “If Ukraine was able to enter only one international economic union, with whom should it be?” Forty-two percent of respondents chose the EU, while 37% preferred the Russian Customs Union. IRI then asked, “How would you evaluate your attitude towards the following entities?” Fifty percent of respondents felt “warm” towards Russia; 41% felt “warm” towards Europe—and just 26% were fond of the U.S. IRI figures resembled those USAID published in a December 2013 report. Its authors found it “interesting to note that Ukrainians are split on whether the country should join the European Union or the Customs Union. Thirty-seven percent would like Ukraine to take steps to join the European Union, 33% prefer the Customs Union and 15% say Ukraine should join neither of these blocs.” Furthermore, “34% say that Ukraine should have closer economic relations with Russia, 35% say it should have closer economic relations with Europe and 17% say it should have good relations with both.” A Kyiv International Institute of Sociology poll reinforced these findings: “Ukraine is split practically 50/50 over the accession to the European Union or the Customs Union,” Interfax-Ukraine summarized the study’s conclusions.

Reviewing this data forces us to ask: Who is Washington’s chief enemy in Ukraine? Is it Russia, bent on killing Ukraine’s budding democracy? Is it the tyrant Yanukovich? The U.S. policy record points to a different conclusion, one a Johns Hopkins Center for Transatlantic Relations study—including in the official transcription of the Senate’s 2012 “Ukraine at a Crossroads” hearing—discusses in the context of Ukraine’s potential NATO membership. “The main

obstacle” to Ukraine’s joining the organization “is not Russian opposition,” its authors emphasized, “but low public support for membership in Ukraine itself.” Again: on this and other issues, the Ukrainian people are “the main obstacle” to U.S. foreign policy aims. We should bear this fact in mind as the crisis deepens in Eastern Europe.