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Ukraine and Twenty-First Century Coups

By Ted Snider

March 9, 2014

When instability is stirred up in the streets by a minority group too small to change a government in the polls but big enough to look like a massive social democratic movement in the street, it can lead to one of at least three kinds of coups.

In the first type, the domestic military intervenes to restore order where there is the appearance of disorder. Restoration of order and removal of the democratically elected government by tanks in the street was the classical pattern of the CIA coups of the third quarter of the twentieth century. This was the coup strategy that was employed in Iran in 1953, in Guatemala in 1954 and in Chile in 1973.

The close of the twentieth century ushered in a new paradigm for coups. This paradigm was the child of Yugoslavia's opposition. When a minority group lacks sufficient political or military strength to replace a government domestically, it can create the appearance of instability in the street that justifies foreign intervention on humanitarian grounds. In her book on NATO's Yugoslavia war, *Fools' Crusade*, Diana Johnstone explains that ". . . when real or potential rebel groups are made to understand that Great Powers can arbitrarily decide to intervene on the basis of a "humanitarian catastrophe", the incentive becomes enormous to manufacture just such a catastrophe, or the appearance of such a catastrophe, in order to get decisive military support from outside." Johnstone argues that this coup strategy was employed in Yugoslavia. Similar strategies may recently have been attempted in Libya and Syria. And the same strategy may be being employed as part of the current plan in Venezuela where the 2013 "Strategic Venezuela

Plan" recommends creating "situations of crisis in the streets that will facilitate U.S. intervention, as well as NATO forces, with the support of the Colombian government."

The Obama administration has preferred to make its coups look like acts of domestic democracy. One way it has done this is by disguising the coup as the shuffling of the legal and constitutional workings of a nation's parliament. In this tank-less coup, democracy is wielded as a weapon.

This third, and most modern, coup paradigm was developed and perfected in Latin America. Its first appearance was in Honduras where democratically elected President Manuel Zelaya was whisked out of Honduras, and the kidnapping at gunpoint was dressed up as a constitutional obligation. After Zelaya announced a plebiscite to determine whether Hondurans wanted to draft a new constitution, the hostile political establishment falsely translated his announcement into an unconstitutional intention to seek reelection. The ability to stand for a second term would be considered in the constitutional discussions, but was never announced as an intention by Zelaya. The Supreme Court declared the President's plebiscite unconstitutional, the military kidnapped Zelaya, and the Supreme Court charged Zelaya with treason and declared a new president: a coup in constitutional disguise. As American diplomatic cables make clear, the US knew the change in regime was a coup cloaked in the costume of a constitutional act.

The second appearance of this coup pattern occurred in Paraguay when the right wing Frederico Franco took the presidency from democratically elected, left leaning Fernando Lugo in what has been characterized as a parliamentary coup. As in Honduras, a coup was made to look like a constitutional transition. The right wing opposition opportunistically capitalized on a skirmish over disputed land that left at least eleven people dead to unfairly blame the deaths on President Lugo. It then impeached him after giving him only twenty-four hours to prepare his defense and only two hours to deliver it. Embassy cables again show that the US was prepared to permit this kind of coup.

The recent change in regime in Ukraine seems to fit this pattern. If so, the ousting of President Viktor Yanukovich was a coup disguised as parliamentary democracy and, if so, the US was similarly involved.

As in Honduras and Paraguay, President Yanukovich was democratically elected in 2010 with 48.9% of the vote in an election declared fair by international observers.

The parliamentary process that removed the democratically elected President had three stages. In the first, government "security forces left the streets and public buildings unguarded," "allowing protesters in."

In the second, the opposition ensured that it had the numbers and the strength to take over the parliament. Attaining the numbers was achieved both by timing, as "many of the MPs for southern and eastern Ukraine were absent from the session. Instead they were at a pre-scheduled congress of regional politicians in Kharkiv . . ." and by intimidation. Robert Parry says that storm troopers of the neo-Nazi right wing protesters occupied the government buildings "and forced Yanukovich and many of his allies to flee for their lives."

In the third, the parliament then dismissed Yanukovich, elected a new speaker and a new parliament and began passing new laws often unanimously under intimidation. Parry says that "With Yanukovich and many of his supporters fleeing for their lives, the opposition parties seized control of parliament and began passing draconian new laws . . . as neo-Nazi thugs patrolled the scene."

So, what was really a coup accomplished by the military and police abandoning the government, opportunism and intimidation was made to look, as in Honduras and Paraguay, like the legitimate democratic acting of the parliament.

And though the numbers in parliament were made to look like there had been a change in the popular will, since the people's representatives altered their allegiance, giving the parliament of the people a new configuration, the numbers had not, in fact, altered at all.

The issue used as a pretext for the coup was Yanukovich's abandonment of an economic alliance with the European Union in favor of an economic alliance with Russia. But polls clearly demonstrate that the numbers on each side of the choice paralleled the numbers in the 2010 election: a nearly even split.

Nick Alexandrov points to four polls. The British Foreign and Commonwealth Office conducted a study through the British Embassy in Kiev last year that found that 30% of Ukrainians are in favor of European integration, 30% favor Russian integration and 30% are undecided. The International Republican Institute (IRI) polled Ukrainians in September and found that 42% chose Europe while 37% chose Russia if they had to choose economic union with one. When asked how they felt about each, 50% felt warmly toward Russia while 41% felt warmly toward Europe and only 26% felt good about America. USAID, like IRI not exactly an objective pollster, found that 37% would choose Europe while 33% would choose Russia and 15% wanted neither. 35% wanted closer ties to Europe, while 34% chose Russia. 17% wanted closer ties to both. And finally, the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology found that "Ukraine is split practically 50/50 over the accession to the EU or Russia."

So, the side that took over on the streets and in the parliament was the same side that lost in the 2010 election and did not represent a democratic change of the people.

And, as in Honduras and Paraguay, the U.S., and, this time its Western allies, had a hand in the coup. First, the West seems to have had a hand in setting the stage for the trigger of the coup. The situation is consistently presented in the media as Yanukovich simply abandoning the EU in favor of Russia. But the West backed him into a situation that made protest inevitable.

According to Stephen Cohen, Professor Emeritus of Russian Studies at Princeton, "it was the European Union, backed by Washington, that said in November to the democratically elected President of a profoundly divided country, Ukraine, "You must choose between Europe and Russia." Cohen adds that Washington and the EU rejected Putin's offer to allow both to help Ukraine without forcing it to choose.

Having said that Yanukovych must choose one or the other, the West then made it impossible for him to choose the West. Robert Parry reports that the EU was "demanding substantial economic 'reforms,' including an austerity plan dictated by the International Monetary Fund." Naomi Klein has well documented where that leads a nation. Ben Aris, the editor of Business News Europe says that, "had Yanukovych accepted the EU deal, the country would have collapsed." Conn Hallinan quotes Citibank analyst Ivan Tchakarov as saying that the EU deal would probably put Ukraine into a recession in 2014. Russia, on the other hand, offered \$15 billion in loans and discounted natural gas. Stephen Cohen adds that the EU proposal also "included 'security policy' provisions . . . that would apparently subordinate Ukraine to NATO."

The West said Yanukovych must choose and then made it impossible to choose the West. That compelled him to choose Russia, which set the stage for the violent protests in the street.

America then protected and nurtured those protests. Both Senator John McCain and Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian affairs Victoria Nuland publicly endorsed and supported the protesters' undemocratic demand for change. The White House then provided cover and legitimacy to the violent movement in the street by condemning, not their violence and undemocratic demand for change, but the government's response to a violent and undemocratic attack on the democratically elected government. Professor Cohen says of Obama's response that "it gives them Western license, because he's not saying to the people in the streets ' . . . stop shooting policemen, stop attacking buildings . . .'" but that the government needs to stop protecting democratic institutions from violent insurrections and withdraw its security forces from the streets.

But America did more than support and protect the protests: it helped finance them. The National Endowment for Democracy (NED) was created by Ronald Reagan in 1983 to, according to Robert Parry, "promote political action and psychological warfare against targeted states." Allen Weinstein, its original project director, said in 1991 that "a lot of what we do today was done covertly 25 years ago by the CIA" Perry reports that the NED lists a staggering 65 projects that it funds inside Ukraine. He says that the NED has created "a shadow political structure of media and activist groups that could be deployed to stir up unrest when the Ukrainian government didn't act as desired." NED funding helped fuel projects that helped drive the coup. In December 2013, Victoria Nuland told her audience at the Ukraine Foundation Conference that

Since Ukraine's independence in 1991, the United States has supported Ukrainians as they build democratic skills and institutions, as they promote civic participation and good governance, all of which are preconditions for Ukraine to achieve its European aspirations. We've invested over \$5 billion to assist Ukraine in these and other goals that will ensure a secure and prosperous and democratic Ukraine.

But Nuland revealed more than U.S. funding for "democracy promotion" in Ukraine. She also accidentally revealed the American handwriting on the Ukrainian coup script. She was caught plotting who the Americans want to be the winner of the regime change. She can be heard on an intercepted call telling the American ambassador in Kiev, Geoffrey Pyatt, that Arseniy Yatsenyuk is America's choice to replace Yanukovych (and he did). Most importantly, Pyatt refers to the West needing to "midwife this thing," a metaphorical admission of America's role in

the coup. At one point, Nuland even seems to say that Vice President Biden, himself, would be willing to do the midwifery.

And it may even have been, in part, an American hand that opened the doors to the government buildings and let the mob in. Rinat Akhmetov is the wealthiest man in Ukraine and the oligarch who has long allied with Yanukovich and bankrolled his party. According to the influential Ukrainian online newspaper *Ukrayinska Pravda*, Akhmetov met privately with Nuland. The paper reports that Nuland warned the man who bankrolls Yanukovich's party that the US was prepared to impose sanctions, not just against the leaders of Yanukovich's party, but also against its financial backers if force was used to block the protesters. The police and military would decide to stop guarding presidential buildings, opening the doors to the protesters.

America, then, had a hand in a coup that fits a pattern of coups that have occurred during the Obama Presidency. Polling numbers show that the crowd in the streets was the same crowd that was too small to win democratically in the polls. So the crowd takes to the street, where it looks much larger, and orchestrates a coup, with American help, that looks to the world like the legal and constitutional movements of the nation's parliament. The disguise allows the coup to go unseen because democracy, and not tanks, is wielded as a weapon. The coup cloaked in democracy was first seen in Latin America, in Honduras and Paraguay. It may also have made an appearance in the Maldives and, possibly, in Bolivia. And now, it seems to have appeared in Ukraine.