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Ukraine's Untold Story

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Description :

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However Ukraine's crisis is resolved, it is clear that interference by Russia and the United States has been massive. Viktor Yanukovich, the current Prime Minister, was Moscow's favorite. Viktor Yushchenko, a former chairman of the Central Bank, was Washington's. In this long-range competition Moscow's partisanship was the more blatant and clumsy, highlighted by Vladimir Putin's two visits to Ukraine to appear alongside Yanukovich and publicly endorse him. Russian state-controlled TV, which can be seen in large areas of Ukraine, has also done what it can to influence voters with the same one-sided coverage it serves up in Russia's elections.

By contrast, US interference has been subtle and sophisticated, but the degree of American involvement appears to be more comprehensive than anything emanating from Moscow. And it has had minimal coverage in the largely partisan picture the Western media have painted of the Ukrainian crisis. US funding has ranged from bankrolling opposition websites and radio stations to paying for the exit polls, which play a powerful role in mobilizing street protesters. It follows a template used four times in the past four years. The overthrow of Slobodan Milosevic in Belgrade in 2000 and of Eduard Shevardnadze in Georgia in 2003 were US successes. A similar effort to topple Alexander Lukashenko in Belarus in 2001 failed. So too did the campaign against Robert Mugabe in Zimbabwe in 2002.

The pattern is that US diplomats orchestrate a campaign of financial help and marketing advice to civil groups, which is described as nonpartisan although in practice it is only put at the service of one side. Using consultants and poll experts, they explain how to choose catchy slogans and punchy logos and organize street comedy and rock concerts to create attractive grassroots campaigns to mobilize young people. Exit polls are a crucial tool. By getting their data on the table as soon as voting ends and being widely disseminated in the opposition media, they create an alleged truth against which the official results are measured. Any divergence of the official count is seen as proof that fraud is under way. Crowds pour into the streets, ready to block public buildings and engage in civil disobedience. This in turn puts the police and security forces under pressure, with the aim (successful in Belgrade and Tbilisi) of getting individual policemen and then whole units to mutiny against their commanders and switch sides. It can also have an intimidating effect on the Parliament and the courts, when they are asked to find compromises or adjudicate, as in Kiev.

America's first effort of this kind in modern times was in Asia—in 1986 in the Philippines when dictator Ferdinand Marcos tried to rig what turned out to be his last election. Senator Richard Lugar, who has been active as an observer in Ukraine, cut his foreign electoral teeth as head of the US observer team in Manila in 1986. When Marcos cheated, crowds came into the streets, eventually prompting two key army commanders to break ranks and join the protesters. One of them, Gen. Fidel Ramos, was later elected to the presidency.

So it was no surprise that after the cold war the United States would dust off the template and refine it for post-Communist conditions, taking advantage of the new democratic space and bringing it up to date with the use of imaginative marketing, the burgeoning of websites and exit polling. As my colleague Ian Traynor recently reported in the Guardian, the same actors have sometimes played in more than one production. Richard Miles, the US ambassador in Belgrade during the election protests in 2000, moved on to Georgia, where he coached Mikhail Saakashvili in how to topple Shevardnadze. Michael Kozak, the US ambassador in Belarus in 2001, was a veteran of US operations in Central America.

Under this template US pollsters and consultants are hired to organize focus groups and plot strategy. The Democratic Party's National Democratic Institute and the Republicans' International Republican Institute train and

fund election monitors to go beyond simple poll-watching to do their own parallel vote counts. These have a mobilizing effect similar to the exit polls.

In short, intervening in foreign elections under the guise of an impartial interest in helping civil society has become the run-up to the postmodern coup d'état, the CIA-sponsored Third World uprising of cold war days adapted to post-Soviet conditions. Even if conducted impartially around the world, this heavy use of money in another country's elections (which would be illegal in the United States and most Western countries) raises serious questions. What makes it worse is its selectivity.

Like "humanitarian interventionism," which has been used more than once recently as a cover for going to war, "electoral interventionism" has become a tool in Washington's arsenal for overseas manipulation. The instruments of democracy are used selectively to topple particular rulers, and only when a US-friendly successor candidate or regime has been groomed. Countless elections in the post-Soviet space have been distorted by incumbents to a degree that probably reversed the result, usually by unfair use of state television and sometimes by direct ballot rigging. Boris Yeltsin's constitutional referendum in Russia in 1993 and his re-election in 1996 were early cases. Azerbaijan's presidential vote last year was also highly suspicious.

Yet after none of those polls did the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, the main international observer body, or the US and other Western governments, make the furious noise they are producing today. The decision to protest appears to depend mainly on realpolitik and whether the challengers or the incumbent are considered more "pro-Western" or "pro-market." Or, as in Azerbaijan, Washington is happy with the antidemocratic policies maintained by the Aliyev dynasty because it is friendly to US oil companies.

In Ukraine, Yushchenko got the Western nod, and floods of money poured in to groups supporting him. This one-sided intervention is playing with fire. Not only is the country geographically and culturally divided—a recipe for partition or even civil war—it is also an important neighbor to Russia. Putin has been clumsy, but to accuse Russia of imperialism because it shows close interest in adjoining states and the Russian-speaking minorities who live there is a wild exaggeration.

Ukraine has been turned into a geostrategic matter by Washington, which refuses to abandon its cold war policy of encircling Russia and seeking to pull every former Soviet republic into its orbit. The US campaign against Yanukovich accelerated this summer after outgoing President Leonid Kuchma reversed policy and said he no longer aspired to NATO membership for Ukraine. Yanukovich adopted that line.

Many Ukrainians certainly want a more democratic system. The vast bulk of the demonstrators in Kiev are undoubtedly genuine. Their enthusiasm and determination are palpable. But they do not reflect nationwide sentiment, and the support for Yanukovich in Ukraine is also genuine. Nor are we watching a struggle between freedom and authoritarianism, as is romantically alleged. Yushchenko served as prime minister under Kuchma, and some of his backers are also linked to the brutal industrial clans who manipulated Ukraine's post-Soviet privatization. On some issues Yushchenko may be a better potential president than Yanukovich, but to suggest that he would provide a sea change in Ukrainian politics and economic management is naïve. Putin is not inherently against a democratic Ukraine, however authoritarian he is in his own country. What concerns him is instability, the threat of anti-Russian regimes on his borders and American mischief.

The European Union has been weak and divided, missing the chance to exert a strong European line in the face of US strategic meddling. It should give Ukraine the option of future membership rather than the feeble "action plan" of cooperation currently on offer. Adapting its legislation and practice to EU norms would set Ukraine on a surer path to irreversible reform than anything that either Yushchenko or Yanukovich would do. The EU should also make a public statement that it sees no value in NATO membership for Ukraine, and those EU members who belong to NATO will

not support it. At a stroke this would calm Russia's legitimate fears and send a signal to Washington not to go on inflaming a purely European issue.

Post-scriptum :

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