

# Executive Memorandum

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## The Lessons of Ukraine: Russia's Growing Influence in Eurasia

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The outcome of the Ukrainian presidential elections could dramatically increase Moscow's influence in Eurasia. If former Prime Minister Victor Yanukovich (the Kremlin's preferred candidate) is elected, the Kremlin would virtually control the Ukrainian presidency. That would allow Russia to exercise greater geopolitical influence in Ukraine and would increase Moscow's political momentum in the rest of Eurasia.

The biggest challenges for the U.S. are to keep Russia in the anti-terrorism coalition and to ensure continued access to Russian energy resources, while supporting the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all post-Soviet states. To these ends, the U.S. should boost cooperation with these countries and expand the dialogue with Moscow about contentious issues, such as South Ossetia and Abkhazia and the U.S. presence in Central Asia. In Ukraine, the Bush Administration should assist Ukrainian groups that are committed to democracy, free markets, and Euro-Atlantic integration by providing diplomatic, financial, and media support.

**The First Round.** According to the government-controlled Central Electoral Commission, Yanukovich received 40.12 percent of the vote in the first round of the presidential election. Opposition leader Victor Yushchenko received 39.15 percent.

However, European observers and independent pollsters gave the victory to Yushchenko by 4 percent to 6 percent. Widespread election fraud and Yushchenko's lack of access to the government-controlled media could also give Yanukovich a "win" in the run-off election on November 21.

The U.S. has a strategic interest in preserving Ukraine's sovereignty and keeping the democratic process on track, while preventing Russian influence from growing further. The U.S. has warned that it may impose selective visa bans on Ukrainian officials involved in election fraud, but this may not prevent fraud in the run-off.

**Russia's Ascendancy.** The Soviet-educated Russian elite, which generally views the U.S. as a strategic adversary, may challenge the sovereignty of or pursue increased control over the post-Soviet states by overtly supporting pro-Moscow candidates. In the process, undermine long-term U.S. interests in developing democratic, globally integrated states in Eurasia.

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There are two reasons for the Kremlin's ascendancy in Ukraine. First, according to published accounts in Moscow and Kiev, the Kremlin has poured unprecedented resources into the election campaign—at least \$200 million from sympathetic Russian and Ukrainian businessmen. Second, Russia has access to the Soviet-era criminal files of Yanukovich, who was jailed twice for aggravated assault and robbery. According to Moscow experts, Yanukovich's criminal past creates a relationship of a case officer and an "asset" between Russian President Vladimir Putin and Yanukovich.

**Ukraine's Significance.** Ukraine should be viewed in the larger context of the recent negative regional dynamics. Before the elections, at Moscow's request, President Leonid Kuchma and Yanukovich engineered changes in Ukraine's military doctrine and turned away from NATO and EU integration. On October 17, Belarussian President Alexander Lukashenka pulled off an unconstitutional power grab in Belarus. The stalemate in Moldova about the secessionist Transdnier region continues. In the Caucasus, Moscow is undermining Georgian independence by creeping annexation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

Ukraine is crucial to the Kremlin because it is a large-scale demonstration that Russia can reestablish influence in the former empire and expand its access to the Black Sea and Southeastern Europe, including the Balkans. Russia has deliberately focused on detaching Ukraine from its Western ties and making it dependent on Moscow.

**Implications for Eurasia.** If Russia successfully consolidates control over Belarus and Ukraine while derailing a peaceful resolution in Moldova, Moscow may also be encouraged to pursue greater control over Caspian oil. It could do so by increasing pressure on Kazakhstan, possibly through its Russian-speaking minority, and it could eventually move to secure Azerbaijan's compliance with the Kremlin regional policy.

Moscow has also utilized secessionist enclaves to advance its "near abroad" policy. Beyond that, it may further undermine pro-American Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili and pressure Uzbekistan to return to the Russia-led bloc. However, as the Beslan tragedy demonstrated, Russian

military power is still limited in its ability to counter real security threats. Such ambitious policy may stoke imperial hubris in Russia—with unpredictable consequences.

**What the Bush Administration Should Do.** The biggest U.S. challenges are to keep Russia in the anti-terrorism coalition and to ensure access to Russian energy resources, while keeping the former Soviet republics sovereign and independent. Furthermore, the tools in the U.S. diplomatic toolbox are limited. Russia is flush with oil revenue and no longer needs Western economic assistance, and it can easily obtain the financing and needed advanced technology for oil exploration on the open market. In this context, the Bush Administration should:

- **Support** Ukrainian groups that are committed to democracy, free markets, and Euro-Atlantic integration by providing diplomatic, financial, and media support.
- **Support** sovereignty and territorial integrity of all post-Soviet states by expanding cooperation via NATO's Partnership for Peace, bilateral military-to-military ties, exchanges, train-and-equip programs, and even limited troop deployment where necessary.
- **Expand** high-level diplomatic dialogue with Moscow about contentious issues, such as South Ossetia and Abkhazia and the U.S. presence in Central Asia.

**Conclusions.** Recent developments in Iraq and elsewhere in the Middle East will require the President's attention and will likely limit American freedom of maneuver in Eurasia. The muted U.S. responses to recent power shifts in Ukraine and Belarus demonstrate that the U.S. is unwilling to challenge Moscow's growing influence. However, the long-term geopolitical outcome in Eurasia will depend on Washington's engagement in the region, on Russia and the U.S. agreeing on the "traffic rules" in Eurasia, and on Moscow abandoning its anti-American policy in and beyond the territory of the former Soviet Union.

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