

# ISSUE BRIEF

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## The U.S. Should Lead on Ukraine

*Ariel Cohen, PhD*

U.S. policy toward Ukraine suffered a significant self-inflicted injury early Thursday morning when President Viktor Yanukovich dispatched riot-control teams to disperse peaceful demonstrators in the center of Kyiv, the ancient capital of Ukraine.

So far, the White House and the State Department have been behind the curve on one of the most important geopolitical crises in Europe since the end of the Cold War. They acted with passivity when Russia went all out to twist arms and bring weak countries like Armenia into its orbit.<sup>1</sup> Ukraine was next: Moscow developed a comprehensive policy to force Ukraine into the Kremlin's fold under the leadership of Vladimir Putin's economic adviser, Sergey Glazyev, a statist and a Russian imperialist.<sup>2</sup>

Mass demonstrations erupted in Kyiv on November 28 after Yanukovich refused to sign the much-promised EU Association Agreement, which would have brought Ukraine closer to the EU and away from Russia.

**From Oppression to Freedom and Prosperity.** Ukrainians, under Russian domination since 1654, have survived the czarist crackdown on personal freedoms, a language ban, the derogatory term "Little Russians," a civil war, Bolshevik mass executions

and expropriations, man-made starvation ("Holodomor"), the Nazi invasion, and the Holocaust. Ukraine lost 5 million people in World War II alone.

Today, many young Ukrainians raised after independence in 1991 want to live under European norms of governance and transparency, which the Association Agreement would have brought. Like other EU associate members, Ukraine would eventually benefit from visa-free travel, educational opportunities, and greater investment.

**Why the U.S. Should Care.** The United States has good reason to be involved. First, about 1 million Americans hail from Ukraine, with another 1.5 million Ukrainians living in Canada. Ukraine is the largest European country—larger than France—with a population of 45 million.

Second, Ukraine is geopolitically important, located just on the border of NATO members Romania, Hungary, Slovakia, and Poland. With a long Black Sea shoreline and indirect access to the Mediterranean, it hosts the Russian naval base in Sevastopol and has vast agricultural potential, major ports, and a developed heavy industry, including space rocket launchers and the largest cargo planes in the world, as well as shipbuilding and steel factories.

Russia views Ukraine as belonging to its sphere. Kyiv was the first capital of the "Rus" principalities before 1237. The languages of Russia and Ukraine are closely related, but the streak of freedom permeates Ukrainian history and society to a greater extent than Russia's.

As Putin has embarked on the Eurasian Union project, "re-assembling" the space Moscow claimed under the czars and the commissars, Ukraine has

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**The Heritage Foundation**  
214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE  
Washington, DC 20002  
(202) 546-4400 | [heritage.org](http://heritage.org)

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become the main prize.<sup>3</sup> The West balked, however. While Europe, led by Poland and Sweden, was ready to sign the Association Agreement with Ukraine, it refused to offer either visa-free travel or major economic incentives.

Ukraine is on the verge of economic collapse and is desperate to get an International Monetary Fund (IMF) bailout package, but the U.S. and Germany have not been willing to link economic aid to geopolitics. Understandably, they were waiting for Ukraine to cut the state budget, which Yanukovich is afraid to do for political reasons.

Today, Yanukovich appears to have cast his lot with Putin. By rejecting the European path and probably signing a customs union agreement with Russia, he appears to be taking his country to the Eurasian Union. This is not what most Ukrainians want. Thus, Yanukovich can survive politically only by resorting to massive fraud in the 2015 presidential elections and making himself into a dictator like Belarus's Alexander Lukashenko.

To add insult to injury, Yanukovich failed to abide by an earlier agreement reached with European leaders to release the imprisoned former Prime Minister Yulia Timoshenko, currently in a jail hospital in Kharkiv, for medical treatment in Germany.<sup>4</sup>

**What the U.S. Should Do.** The U.S. Senate is furious with the way the protesters in Kyiv are being treated. Senator Benjamin Cardin (D-MD), chairman of the Helsinki Commission, has issued the following statement:

Unless the Ukrainian authorities take concrete actions to improve the situation, the international community should seriously consider under-

taking additional measures such as the imposition of targeted sanctions against Ukrainian officials responsible for human rights abuses, including the suppression of peaceful protests.<sup>5</sup>

Secretary of State John Kerry used unprecedentedly harsh language in a statement over the violence in Kyiv:

The United States expresses its disgust with the decision of Ukrainian authorities to meet the peaceful protest in Kyiv's Maidan Square with riot police, bulldozers, and batons, rather than with respect for democratic rights and human dignity.... As Vice President Biden made clear to President Yanukovich during their phone call yesterday, respect for democratic principles, including freedom of assembly, is fundamental to the United States' approach to Ukraine.... Instead, Ukraine's leaders appear tonight to have made a very different choice. We call for utmost restraint. Human life must be protected.... As church bells ring tonight amidst the smoke in the streets of Kyiv, the United States stands with the people of Ukraine. They deserve better.<sup>6</sup>

These were strong words, but the Obama Administration has shown little willingness to lead on Ukraine. It is time for firm U.S. leadership, sending a clear signal that Washington stands with the protesters on the streets of Kyiv.

The United States should:

- Increase coordination of Ukraine policy with its European allies, including an offer of a com-

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1. Laurence Peter, "Armenia Rift over Trade Deal Fuels EU-Russia Tension," BBC News, September 5, 2013, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-23975951> (accessed December 11, 2013).

2. See Ariel Cohen, "Why the U.S. Should Support Ukraine's Association and Free Trade Agreements with Europe," Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 2849, October 21, 2013, <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2013/10/why-the-us-should-support-ukraines-association-and-free-trade-agreements-with-europe>.

3. See Ariel Cohen, "Russia's Eurasian Union Could Endanger the Neighborhood and U.S. Interests," Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 2804, June 14, 2013, <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2013/06/russias-eurasian-union-could-endanger-the-neighborhood-and-us-interests>.

4. Richard Balmforth, "Ukraine's Yanukovich Pushes Hard Line on Tymoshenko Release," Reuters, November 14, 2013, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/11/14/us-ukraine-tymoshenko-yanukovich-idUSBRE9AD0WP20131114> (accessed December 11, 2013).

5. News release, "Cardin Urges Immediate Action by Ukrainian Officials to Respect Human Rights," Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, December 11, 2013, [http://www.csce.gov/index.cfm?FuseAction=ContentRecords.ViewDetail&ContentRecord\\_id=1116&ContentRecordType=P&ContentType=P&CFID=2039749&CFTOKEN=dc1d5da2b924f61b-F019953C-9E0D-566C-6B2EE9A222F6A826](http://www.csce.gov/index.cfm?FuseAction=ContentRecords.ViewDetail&ContentRecord_id=1116&ContentRecordType=P&ContentType=P&CFID=2039749&CFTOKEN=dc1d5da2b924f61b-F019953C-9E0D-566C-6B2EE9A222F6A826) (accessed December 11, 2013).

6. News release, "Statement on Events in Ukraine," U.S. Department of State, December 10, 2013, <http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2013/12/218585.htm> (accessed December 11, 2013).

prehensive economic reform package, such as a technical assistance program to repair the ailing economy, a significant increase in trade with Europe and the U.S., and the IMF loan.

- Ensure that Ukraine behaves within the Helsinki accords and other human rights norms and requirements and introduce targeted sanctions such as visa bans against those who violate the law—as well as their family members. Violations of human rights by the security forces should be documented, including by videotaping evidence, to prepare for prosecutions and sanctions against the culprits.
- Open international investigations against corrupt senior officials and oligarchs, including for money laundering, weapons trafficking, and other violations committed by senior Ukrainian officials.

- Boost public diplomacy efforts aimed at both Ukraine and Russia explaining why the U.S. is taking such policy steps.

**Stand with the Ukrainian People.** Ukrainians are striving for liberty, independence, and territorial integrity. They want to live in peace and prosperity within Europe. In that, their desires coincide with American interests. The Obama Administration appears to have missed the train, yet an extra effort on behalf of Ukrainian freedom is necessary to prevent it from leaving the West and descending into the Russian orbit.

—*Ariel Cohen, PhD, is Senior Research Fellow in Russian and Eurasian Studies and International Energy Policy in the Douglas and Sarah Allison Center for Foreign Policy Studies, a department of the Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Institute for International Studies, at The Heritage Foundation.*