

The Ukrainian Conundrum

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Western countries have responded to the election of Viktor Yanukovyc

What should the West Do?

Without Western support, it may be in the long run difficult for Ukraine to resist Russian pressure. The obvious incentive that might strengthen Ukrainian independence, help preserve pluralism, and mobilize Ukraine for political and economic reform, would be an offer of EU membership. There is no chance of the EU making such an offer for the foreseeable future. Nevertheless, during President Yanukovich's visit to Brussels in early March, EU officials did not shut the door on eventual membership and offered to conclude a free trade agreement as a step towards an association agreement. In return, the Ukrainian government had to combat corruption, and to work with the opposition in carrying out extensive reforms to the economy, the judicial system, the electoral system, and the constitution. In response, President Yanukovich made it clear that his goal was not merely free trade, but also membership in the EU. Nevertheless, it is not certain that President Yanukovich will be prepared, for free trade alone, to carry out the required political, economic and social reforms. They would threaten many elite privileges. In order to strengthen the leverage of the EU offer, Canada might negotiate its own offer of free trade in parallel with the EU, and encourage closer Western coordination on Ukraine.

Western efforts to support Ukrainian democracy and independence may also require a broader understanding with Russia. Russia's efforts to restore its hegemony in Eastern Europe have partly arisen out of Russia's perception of a Western threat. The EU and NATO have expanded eastward into the Soviet Union's old sphere of influence. The Russians saw the Coloured Revolutions that shook Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan as products of Western coups. If we do not accept the Russian claim to hegemony in Eastern Europe, therefore, we have to deal with Russia's suspicion of the West.

The basis for a better understanding with Russia may lie in expanding our present policy of seeking compromises and co-operation with Russia on a range of international issues. We should aim at building a broader network of political, security, and economic understandings. Our ability to build a structure of common purposes with Russia would, however, partly depend on the extent to which Russia becomes a functioning democracy, and conducts its relations with the other former Soviet republics on the basis of equality and respect for international law. The development of broader common interests and greater mutual trust between Russia and the West may provide the best basis for the future of Ukraine.