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**THE NEW POLITICAL REGIME IN UKRAINE –
TOWARD SULTANISM YANUKOVYCH-STYLE?**

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Introduction

Ukraine formally left the “Orange” era defined by Viktor Yushchenko’s disappointing five years in office on February 7, 2010, the day Viktor Yanukovich was elected president. Within a few months, Yanukovich’s Ukraine also turned its back on democracy. The new president quickly accumulated more power than even the authoritarian President Leonid Kuchma, whose abuses helped spark the 2004 Orange Revolution. As Ukrainians began referring to Yanukovich as a “bulldozer,” his confidantes privately spoke of him as “the leader.” One of his acolytes, a governor, even went so far as to say that “Power comes from God, and we should discard our political preferences and work to sustain it.” Notwithstanding such invocations of the divine right of kings, Yanukovich’s hyper-centralized and personalistic—or “sultanistic”—regime is, in reality, brittle, ineffective, and unstable and could, as a result of its inability to cope with economic crisis, produce his downfall.

Yanukovich's power grab

It took Yanukovich a few weeks to dismantle Ukraine's democracy. He placed himself at the center of a hub-like power structure, prompting his first vice prime minister to remark "that all the country's leaders should work in one direction, that determined by the President." Yanukovich made all the key decisions, made all the key appointments, and headed all the key agencies—from the Committee on Economic Reform to the Humanitarian Council that is concerned with culture to the committee dealing with Ukraine's preparations for the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA) soccer championship, scheduled to be held in four Ukrainian cities in 2012.

Most of Yanukovich's appointees were political clients from Ukraine's highly Sovietized rust-belt, the Donbas. Yanukovich acted as their patron, doling out favors, providing access to power and privilege, and supervising their work in a paternalistic fashion. His chief of staff, Serhii Lyovochkin, aptly characterized Yanukovich's relationship to his underlings in the following manner: "President Viktor Yanukovich places very tall demands on absolutely all power holders working for him... [I]f someone does not measure up for whatever reasons, then the conclusions drawn about him will be very severe." In addition, Yanukovich took control of the legislature while neutralizing the judiciary, empowered the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the Security Service (SBU), marginalized the opposition, and constricted freedom of the press and assembly. He defined democracy as "order" and warned "citizens who disturb public order" that "the militia will in advance protect [them] from un-pleasantries."

Just why Yanukovich decided on such a shockingly swift authoritarian take-over can only be guessed at. Some Ukrainians said that, as a typical Soviet-era politician who cut his teeth in the rough and tumble politics of the Donbas, he was simply being true to his political nature. Others pointed to his two prison sentences, which he served for hooliganism as a teenager, and suggest that he was and remains a thug. Still others argued that Yanukovich's Party of Regions primarily consists of former

Communist Party members and voters and that radicalism and authoritarianism are deeply lodged in their mentality and political culture. His supporters suggested that Yanukovich was merely responding to the chaos he inherited from the Yushchenko years.

The Brittleness of Sultanism

Whatever the correct interpretation or interpretations, Yanukovich had effectively enthroned himself as the Sultan of Ukraine—a *pater familias* writ large, a ruler who delegates little, decides much, and runs his family with the force of his personality (and, as is reliably rumored in Yanukovich's case, with the force of his own fists). Despite the appearance of solidity, sultanism Yanukovich-style is actually quite brittle for two general and three specifically Ukrainian reasons.

First, such a personalistic regime, with one lord presiding over servile clients, is the antithesis of an institutionalized modern state. Sultanism may work in a medieval feudal polity with a primitive peasant economy and an illiterate society, but it is incompatible with a modern economy and globalized society that can be governed only with flexible and effective institutions. In particular, sultanistic regimes are inevitably corrupt, both because resources flow toward the center of power and because patron-client relations can be sustained only by providing clients with access to wealth. Just how corrupt the Yanukovich regime is may be gleaned from opposition democrat Oles Donii's claim that he was promised \$1 million in advance and \$20,000 monthly for joining the pro-government coalition in the parliament.

Second, personalistic regimes are ineffective and inefficient, because vassals are generally unwilling to employ individual initiative without the patron's approval. As decisions are moved up the hierarchy, sooner or later the decision-making capacity of the sultan becomes overloaded. Moreover, because clients compete with one another for the patron's favor, they tend to compartmentalize, refuse to cooperate, sabotage one another's initiatives, and refrain from providing the patron with

accurate information—thereby both straining and undermining his capacity to make good decisions.

Third, Ukraine's inefficient government apparatus cannot serve as the basis of an effective sultanistic government. Yanukovich may attempt to crack the whip and beat the bloated bureaucracy into shape, but he will fail, inasmuch as he cannot solve the problem his own regime promotes and sustains. His vassals and clients will temporarily adjust their behavior, point fingers at their bureaucratic enemies, and extol the Sultan, but the system itself will not change. Nor does Yanukovich have the strong army or secret police that a modernizing sultan would require. Ukraine's armed forces are underfunded, demoralized, and ineffective, and the secret police—whose head, a media mogul with vast interests in television, is especially prone to public relations blunders—has lost many of its best and brightest to *biznes* or organized crime.

Fourth, Yanukovich might be able to rule effectively on his own if he were a philosopher king. Instead, his embarrassing proclivity to get facts wrong may be reflective of a deeper inability to think complexly and see the big picture. He has confused the famous Russian poet Anna Akhmatova with his billionaire backer Rinat Akhmetov, the Jewish writer Isaac Babel with the German socialist August Bebel, Slovenia with Slovakia, and genocide with the genetic fund. Yanukovich has called the Russian playwright Anton Chekhov a Ukrainian poet and the Helsinki Treaty the Stockholm Treaty and has placed Israel within Europe. Yanukovich's best-known gaffe was to have misspelled "proFFessor" back in 2004—a mistake that is doubly embarrassing inasmuch as he claims to have two higher degrees, a Master of International Law and a Doctorate of Economic Sciences (the latter from some unnamed institution of higher learning). Yanukovich somehow managed to acquire both degrees and write a dissertation while serving as full-time deputy governor and governor of Donetsk province, which with 4.5 million people is Ukraine's largest.

Finally, while a sultan may be despised, he dare not ever appear silly—and Yanukovich has already become an object of derision. The Orange Revolution and

the five years of the Yushchenko presidency empowered the Ukrainian population, endowing it with a self-confidence that it lacked before 2004 and consolidating a vigorous civil society consisting of professionals, intellectuals, students, and businesspeople who ridicule Yanukovich's sultanistic aspirations. Symptomatic of Yanukovich's legitimacy problem was his embarrassing encounter with a wreath at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Kyiv on a stormy Victory Day, on May 17. As he and Russian President Dmitry Medvedev paid their respects to the millions of Ukrainians who had died in World War II, a gust of wind blew the wreath onto Yanukovich's head at just the moment he was bowing before it. The flustered president attempted to regain his dignity, but his clumsy efforts to do so—and his subsequent attempts to quash video coverage of the incident—only accentuated his ridiculous appearance and became the stuff of widespread jokes on the Internet (see <http://kotyhoroshko.livejournal.com/446778.html>).

The Instability of Sultanism

Because sultanistic regimes are inefficient, ineffective, and corrupt, they tend to be concerned above all with preserving their own prerogatives. There is no reason to think that the Donbas-based cronies who man the Yanukovich system will be able or willing to sacrifice their well-being to vague notions of macroeconomic stability and structural reform, especially if reform undermines the bases of their power and privilege. Radical economic reform is especially unlikely, as the hyper-centralized structure of the government and Yanukovich's own limitations militate against smart policy making. Moreover, Yanukovich lacks both the legitimacy that painful economic reform requires and the coercive resources that an authoritarian imposition of economic pain entails.

Instead, grandiose reform plans will continue to be announced and corruption will be denounced, but little actual change will take place. Big capital- and labor-intensive projects—new roads, new bridges, new atomic energy stations, new stadiums, and the like—will help modernize Ukraine's Soviet-era infrastructure, but, like the "gigantomania" of the Soviet era, they will not make the economy market-

based, efficient, and rational. By the same token, some officials caught taking egregiously large bribes may be punished, but bribe-taking and corruption as a systemic phenomenon will remain as long as sultanism remains.

A draft law “On the Conflict of Interests in the Activity of Public Servants” nicely illustrates the Yanukovich regime’s inability to see that it, and not individual bureaucrats, is the problem. According to the proposed draft, public servants would be *obligated* to inform their superiors of their colleagues’ conflicts of interest. Inasmuch as every single Ukrainian public servant—starting with Yanukovich himself—has enormous conflicts of interest, the law will either lead to a whirlwind of denunciations or to an embarrassed silence. In either case, the bureaucracy will become more ineffective, conflicts of interest will remain in place, and the regime will triumphantly proclaim that it is actively combating corruption and promoting economic rationality.

The problem facing Yanukovich, however, is that genuine economic reform really is imperative and declarations of intent will, over time, look increasingly hollow. Ukraine is still mired in the transition from socialism to capitalism. Moreover, the global financial crisis has savaged the country. In 2009, Gross Domestic Product fell by 15.1 percent, while industry contracted by 26.6 percent, construction by 45.9 percent, exports by 25.6 percent, and imports by 38.6. The consumer price index rose by 12.3 percent. Unemployment remained low, under 5 percent, but only because employers lowered wages or reduced the work week in order to forestall lay-offs. Unsurprisingly, the government’s own finances are a mess, with a ballooning deficit—currently estimated at \$21 billion or 16 percent of GDP—and debt and a desperate need for IMF funding. According to the SigmaBleyzer Investment Group, “a high fiscal deficit in 2010 and rising sovereign debt increase worries over government solvency and represent the major risk to financial stability over the medium-term.”

If Yanukovich follows his sultanistic instincts and does nothing to fix the economy, Ukraine will eventually face default and mass discontent among his working class

constituency in the industrially decrepit south-east, which will be hardest hit by continued economic deterioration. If, on the other hand, Yanukovych miraculously confounds expectations and embarks on serious reforms that address imbalances in energy prices and pensions, the entire population, including his Donbas constituency, will suffer and popular unrest, possibly including strikes, is equally certain. The prospect of growing instability will do little to attract foreign investors, while declining legitimacy, growing incompetence, and tub thumping will fail to modernize Ukraine's industry, agriculture, and education.

In sum, the best-case scenario for Yanukovych is lack of reform and declining legitimacy and effectiveness. The worst-case scenario is an increasingly angry and immiserated population consisting of national democrats who reject sultanism and workers who refuse to tighten their belts while the fat cats prosper. Unless Yanukovych abandons sultanism and incorporates the national-democratic opposition in a reformist government of national unity, a second Orange Revolution, but this time including Yanukovych supporters, will become increasingly likely.

The Sultan's End?

If sultanism remains in place, Yanukovych's downfall could come in 2012. By then, his sultanistic ambitions will have become abundantly clear, even to those Ukrainians who are still willing to give him the benefit of the doubt, and his inability or unwillingness to reform the economy and improve living standards will also be equally manifest. Because Yanukovych claims to run the country single-handedly, he will be blamed for all its problems. Over time, his proclivity to make blunders will appear, not as the endearing quality of a local boy-made-good, but as the glaring weakness of a leader incapable of delegating authority. Yanukovych currently enjoys some 50-60 percent trust levels, but those numbers could easily plummet and, like Yushchenko's, even fall to below 5 percent.

Meanwhile, civil society, the independent media, and the political opposition will still be alive, if not quite well, in 2012. After a few years of persecution and harassment,

Ukrainian national democrats will be angry, focused, and more united, while the Orange-era incompetence of opposition politicians will be a distant memory. An energized opposition could take advantage of the 2012 parliamentary elections to mobilize the angry populace against the regime. When that happens, fissures are likely to open up in the Yanukovich regime, as some of his lukewarm supporters concerned with political survival defect to the opposition. Finally, Ukraine will be co-hosting the UEFA soccer championship and will, as a result, be overrun by foreign tourists and journalists, who will provide regime opponents with both a window of opportunity and a bullhorn.

The result could be a “perfect storm.” Disillusioned and angry at a time of electoral mobilization, average Ukrainians could join forces with existing and defecting elites and, with political repression relaxed due to foreign scrutiny, make demands that the regime will be unable to repress or resist. If “people power” is asserted peacefully, Russia will be unable to intervene and Ukraine will likely resume its interrupted democratic transition. If the regime employs violence against the opposition or if Russia peremptorily intervenes, Ukraine could fragment or become a second Kyrgyzstan. Whatever the outcome, Ukraine’s citizens, exhausted by five years of government instability during the Yushchenko years, are unlikely to find respite anytime soon. European and American policy makers, meanwhile, would do well to consider how they might forestall the second scenario—which would be disastrous for European stability and security—well before the onset of 2012.

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