Ukraine's Revolution: Good, Bad or Ugly?

The recent ouster of Ukraine's spectacularly incompetent and corrupt president Viktor Yanukovich has led many to speculate that a new dawn is around the corner for this deeply troubled country. What began as a protest against Mr Yanukovich's refusal to sign an association agreement with the EU degenerated into civil strife that turned central Kiev into a battleground between police, and a hard core of rioters determined to bring down the government at any cost. Scores of lives were lost on both sides.

But now the president who vowed he would never go is gone. And many are cheering a new chapter for Ukraine. An election, which Mr Yanukovich would almost certainly have lost, was due for 2015. But few will mourn the early end of a regime that had enriched itself beyond most Ukrainians' wildest imaginings - it appears Mr Yanukovich absconded with $70bn of state funds - while the country itself went bust. Not even Russia's president, Vladimir Putin, whose relations with Mr Yanukovich were frosty at best, will be shedding many tears over his demise. Mr Yanukovich was an embarrassment to Russia long before this present crisis began. But what can we say of Ukraine's revolution? A new government that mostly looks west is in charge in Kiev, and Crimea, an autonomous region in the south, has voted by referendum to leave Ukraine and join the Russian Federation. So will the aftermath of this revolution be good, bad, or ugly?

A False Dawn?

Hopes of a bright new future for Ukraine may be false, and indeed short-lived. This writer has seen much of the dashed hopes of the post-Communist world, including Ukraine, and wonders whether such hopes for a bright future will once again come to ashes. Over the past two decades, Ukraine's forces of revolution and reaction have moved against each other like tectonic plates, producing friction, then an earthquake, then a new status quo that satisfies no one, and so the cycle begins again. Only this time it is a lot more dangerous because other powers are involved, and decades-old grievances have re-surfaced.

A more general reason for pessimism about this revolution is that revolutions rarely realize all the dreams hoped for; yet one thing they always do with crude efficiency is create victims. And in the case of the living, that means victims with scores to settle. Add to that the muddied history of Ukrainian revolutions. Ukraine shook itself free of the Soviet Union in 1991, only to find itself ruled by a kleptocracy that even now is not far from the levers of power. Indeed, some of the oligarchs pulled their support of Mr Yanukovich only when they saw his power slipping away: so they're still around, even in the 'new order.' Furthermore, some of these oligarchs have even been rewarded with governorships in the Russian-speaking industrialized east. So much for the revolutionary premise of separating the political and economic elites. These appointments are perverse, and will likely set the scene for further dashed dreams and discontent, following a pattern last seen in the Orange Revolution of 2004. That one degenerated into such a bitter struggle between its main protagonists that it achieved little that outside observers can remember, except perhaps a long list of 'What ifs.'

Czech or Thai?

Ukraine's most recent revolution is not to be compared with other eastern European revolutions which saw a number of countries absorbed into the European Union, for better and for worse. Ukraine's current political turmoil - excluding of course, Russia's military intervention - has more in common with that in Egypt and the impasse in Thailand than with the revolutions in its nearer neighbours. The reasons are as follows:

In Egypt and Thailand, political opinion is evenly split between two broad groups with zero-sum agendas. That is why Thailand has had a decade at least of political turmoil, and why Egypt's political impasse shows no sign of abating three years after the deposition of its dictator-president, Hosni Mubarak. For historical reasons, the political forces in Ukraine are also evenly matched, and equally importantly, run zero-sum agendas. Each side sees nothing but the entire defeat and acquiescence of the other side as being in the best long-term interests of the country as a whole. The Kiev protestors did little more than nothing to engage the predominantly Russian-speaking east and south of the country. Those in the east, meanwhile, saw the protestors in Kiev and the west of the country as insurrectionists and fascists who have taken power illegally. That is not a recipe for the stability that Ukraine so desperately needs.

Now Crimea, which was incidentally part of Russia until 1954, is in the spotlight, and for a number of reasons. First, in the zero-sum political game that is being played in Ukraine, a large swathe of the east and south of the country sees no good future for itself in being part of a country ruled by pro-Western and other power grabbers in Kiev. This was underlined by one of the first actions of the new government, which was to stipulate that Ukrainian would be the only language of official communications, effectively outlawing the use of Russian for those purposes in those regions where Russian is the majority language. Again, zero-sum thinking. How the majority Russian-speaking east and south was supposed to acquiesce willingly to that is beyond this writer's imagination.

Moreover, five ministerial posts - yes, five - in the new Ukrainian government have been given to members of Svoboda, a party with long roots in fascism, anti-Russianism, and anti-Semitism, stoking memories in the east of the activities of Nazi collaborators during Germany's occupation of Ukraine in World War 2. One such appointment is that of deputy prime minister Oleksandr Sych, the party's chief ideologist. Is this government a government for all Ukrainians? This writer does not think so. Zero-sum thinking again.

Enter - Russia

Faced with such developments, it is inconceivable that Russia would stand on the sidelines as this conflict unfolded. Not for a small number of reasons, both internal to Russia and external - Russia has arrived…

One reason Russia intervened in the crisis was quite simply because she could. She had, and has, the economic and military capacity to do so, vis-a-vis a Ukraine that is economically, politically and militarily weak. Furthermore, the Sochi Olympics are past, and so Mr Putin doesn't have to worry about a mass boycott of the Games. Additionally, the much-feared disruption of those games by Caucasian separatist terrorists failed to materialize. This writer wonders whether Russia's ability to deploy in Crimea would have been possible if the atrocities committed in Volgograd just before the new year had been repeated around Sochi.

However, whatever the projection of power, Mr Putin's actions are motivated by fear at a number of levels. First, he cannot be seen at home to be weak abroad, especially in a situation where ethnic Russians are felt to be the losers in the political process. That reason alone would justify intervention in the minds of Russian policymakers, not just in Crimea, but in other parts of eastern and southern Ukraine as well.

Moreover, in the 1990's, when Russia was economically and militarily weak, she could do no more than stand by impotently while a client state, Serbia, was shorn of its southern province of Kosovo, the cradle, according to national myth, of Serb nationhood. At the same time, a number of eastern European countries with significant Russian minorities walked

away from Moscow's embrace and aligned with the EU and NATO. Mr Putin cannot afford for such a thing to happen in Ukraine, where the stakes are arguably much higher. For instance, there is the status of Russia's Black Sea Fleet, which is based in Crimea. Under a deal with the Mr Yanukovich government, Russia can lease the port at Sevastopol until 2042. A less sympathetic government in Kiev might see every reason to renege on that agreement, thus jeopardizing Russian naval power in the Black Sea and Mediterranean. No Russian leader can afford to let that happen.

Second, the Orange Revolution of 2004-5 in Ukraine served a warning to the Kremlin as to what could happen within its own borders. It was one of the main catalysts for the development of 'Sovereign Democracy' as a political philosophy in Russia in reaction to the 'Orange-ism' of Ukraine. Broadly speaking, sovereign democracy is based on what might be called a dominant party system, with one party and its different organs supporting, and being supported by, the Kremlin. The fact that sovereign democracy thinking has not had the desired effect on the population is evident from the mass protests that surrounded Mr Putin's return to the presidency in 2012.

And Mr Putin has far more to fear from the current political shenanigans in Ukraine than he did 10 years ago. That is because the days when he enjoyed 90%+ approval ratings among Russians are a dim and hazy memory. The political opposition is no longer on the periphery of the public space, even if it is largely ignored by the Kremlin-controlled mass media. Furthermore, corruption in Russia today is proportionally as big a problem as it is in Ukraine, if not bigger. Having come to power in 2000 partly on a promise to shaft the despised oligarchs who control Russia's economy, he has done little more than play them off against each other while crowing about the need to crack down on graft. Sitting atop an economy that was buoyed for more than a decade by impressive hydrocarbon receipts, he had little incentive to do anything about this while ordinary Russian households were being filled with consumer goods. But those same households, who no longer have to worry about where they're going to get the next meal from find themselves with more time and inclination to ask uncomfortable questions about their political masters, Mr Putin included. Ironically, Mr Putin may be proportionately more popular in the Russian-speaking regions of Ukraine than he is in Russia itself: certainly more popular than Mr Mr Yanukovich, whose name is rarely chanted in the protests now taking place across the east and south of Ukraine.

One possible historical reason for the Russian intervention in Crimea lies in a curious deal that took it from Russia and gave it to Ukraine during the Soviet period in 1954. The mover was the then Soviet leader Nikita Krushchev, himself a Ukrainian. Apparently he was drunk at the time! The Russian-speaking majority in Crimea can be understood for thinking that this is a historic injustice that needs to be righted. If this consideration is anywhere near the centre of Mr Putin's calculations, Ukraine can bid farewell to Crimea. She will not get it back.

On this line, it is worth noting that Russia has a long history of entering conflicts and then freezing them on its own terms, rather than actually solving them. It's primary purpose for doing so is always to weaken the states on its periphery and keep them compliant, or at least unable to threaten it. For instance, a string of Japanese islands were taken over by the USSR at the end of the second world war, and Russia maintains control over them to this day. It's a running sore in Japan. But the Russian calculus is quite simple: as long as Japan frets about getting 'its' islands back, it will think more about them than any military adventures on the eastern Russian mainland. Again, the breakaway republics of South Ossetia and Abkhazia were prized from Georgia after a short war in 2008, and they remain so to this day. The recklessness of Georgia's then president, Mikheil Saakashvili, played right into Putin's hands. Georgia wants the territories back, but it may as well whistle for them.

In the current case, it is not known outside Mr Putin's inner circle where he wishes to freeze the current conflict in Ukraine. Will he stop with annexing Crimea? Or are Ukraine's eastern and south-eastern regions also on the annexation list? He will certainly wish to destabilise a Kiev government that his media have long described as driven by fascists and usurpers, and may well stir up tensions in these regions to achieve this end. And he definitely will want to ensure that the overthrow of an authoritarian government on his western border is not repeated in Moscow itself. If Mr Putin fears one thing above anything else, it is disorder spilling into Russia.

Moreover, the area on which Ukraine now sits is none other than the cradle of early Russian statehood. Until the Mongol invasions of the 13th century (Kiev was destroyed by the Mongols in 1240), Kievan Rus' *was* Russia. In succeeding centuries, when the Duchy of Moscow began to reassert itself against the Mongol-Tatar horde, swathes of what is now Ukraine fell under Russian influence, especially with the later Tsarist-instigated migrations of ethnic Russians into the industrialialised regions of Ukraine's east and south. Russia's land-grab in Crimea could be seen as an opportunistic seizure of that which has always belonged to her except for a hiatus between 1954 and 2014.

'Anything you can do…'

Russia's interventions in Georgia in 2008 and in Ukraine in 2014 run on a script that says, 'Anything you can do, so can we.' Russia frequently lambasts what it sees as the West's interference in the internal affairs of other countries. Yet it uses this interference to justify interference of its own. Arguably, Russia needs Western interventionism in order to achieve her geo-strategic goals. For example, when many western countries recognized Kosovo's declaration of independence from Serbia early in 2008, Mr Putin promised there would be consequences. There were. Those consequences fell on West-leaning Georgia, following its disastrous attempt in the summer of that year to retake its breakaway enclaves of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Russia and a few other countries swiftly recognized these two regions as independent countries. That story is unfinished: if Crimea leaves Ukraine, as Mr Putin wants, expect South Ossetia to see that as a template for joining North Ossetia, which is a subject of the Russian Federation.

As for the 'anything you can do' script in the current crisis, Western interference in Ukraine is undeniable, and some of it lamentable. Russia decried it, then as soon as a new government took over in Kiev, intervened in Crimea. How was it possible? Wind the tape back to Libya, where Western countries intervened in a civil conflict there in 2011, which ultimately led to the deposal and killing of its leader Col. Gaddafi. Libya once had chemical weapons, but decommissioned them several years previously under pressure from the US. Had she kept them, this writer doubts that the West's intervention in 2011 would have taken place. Similarly, Ukraine once bristled with nuclear weapons, a hangover from its days as a Soviet republic. Not anymore, and this writer wonders whether Russia would have intervened in Crimea if Ukraine still possessed those weapons.

Meanwhile the public pronouncements of Western and Russian diplomats is following the familiar yah-boo pattern, as each side takes to its high horses to claim the moral high ground. So once again the cold war mentality that drives the diplomacy of both sides is in full cry, and the interplay of Western hectoring and Russian cussedness is being rolled out again. Isn't it possible for the language of international diplomacy to become more mature than this?

Enter - the EU?

So far, the EU has done pretty well out of this conflict, at least in terms of its public image. It

was Mr Yanukovich's refusal to sign an association agreement with the EU in November that started the trouble. During the crisis, the EU has been able to position itself as a defender of clean government and democracy. That is perverse. For sure, there are few who, for scale, can match the gargantunal graft of Mr Yanukovich and his cronies. His competency as president of Ukraine seems only to have extended to enriching himself and his cronies at the country's expense while suppressing his enemies. But the EU is not 'whiter than white' when it comes to corruption. In fact, the EU's own books have not been signed off by its auditors for years, precisely because of endemic corruption within the EU itself. And that is before mentioning graft in the member states themselves, which the relevant EU Commissioner only this year described as 'breathtaking.'

As for democracy, this is not the space to detail the rising - and potentially dangerous - sentiment across many EU member states; sentiment that sees the EU as nothing more more than a faceless and unaccountable bureaucracy whose tentacles reach into every aspect of life. So those in Ukraine who see the country's destiny as belonging to a clean and democratic EU may be in for a shock.

Where now for Russia?
This may seem an odd question to ask, given that the primary focus of this article is the situation in Ukraine. But Russia's intervention in Crimea - and potential interventions elsewhere in Ukraine - raise a number of concerns for Russia itself.

The first is the prospect of withering economic and financial sanctions from the US and EU. Mr Putin and others around him have said Russia will face these down with reciprocal sanctions. But Russia's economy, skewed as it is towards the natural resource sector, is ill-prepared for a long stand-off. And cutting oil and gas exports will, in the long run, stoke Russia's reputation as an untrustworthy trading partner, and speed the development of alternative sources of those materials.

The second concerns Russia's long-term territorial integrity. Crimea, with its ethnic Russian majority, has long had separatist tendencies. But by rewarding those aspirations with annexation to Russia itself, Mr Putin has, not for the first time, stoked separatism among Russia's own non-Russian minorities. Nowhere will this be more keenly felt than in Russia's restive North Caucasus. And of course, Russia's Caucasian minorities have seen it all before: rewind to 2008, when Russia wrested Abkhazia and South Ossetia from Georgia. Her intervention in Ukraine follows the same template. The parallels will not be lost on the minds of militants and others in the North Caucasus. Russia, of course, has many minorities outside the North Caucasus. This writer has seen first hand the generally peaceable co-existence of a number of these minorities, many of whom are living in their ancestral homelands under the umbrella of a *Pax Russica.* Tearing at the territorial integrity of a neighboring country, in this case, Ukraine, risks doing to Russia in the long run, the very thing that Mr Putin most fears. That would be disastrous, not just for Russia, but for the world.

So - what of the Church?
The situation in Ukraine is very messy, and it is reasonable to assume that there are Christians on both sides of the conflict. However, the church must stand tall over this crisis. Neither side has a monopoly of the moral high ground, so for churches to take sides risks tearing at the body of Christ and compromising its prophetic witness at a crucial time in Ukraine's history. As we have seen, there is bad history wherever one looks in Ukraine. For churches to be a true agents of healing in this troubled land, they must, to use the words of St Augustine, 'hear the other side.' Only as they do so can fears be addressed, dreams be affirmed, and true reconciliation begin. Local churches must stand shoulder to shoulder

across the divide caused by mutual fear and live out the reconciliation that Ukraine so desperately needs.

This writer wants to end by quoting from Yuri Sipko, sometime leader of the Russian Union of Evangelical Christian Baptists, whom he has met a couple of times. He said this:

> *"Russian churches, as institutions standing guard over spiritual life, must declare their disagreement with lies. Russian churches must stop armed conflict. Russia must not become an aggressor. Too much blood has been spilled by our people, in order to spill the blood of our brother nation of Ukraine. God's Word proclaims, 'Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good' (Romans 12:21).*

Those of us outside the unfolding situation should pray for the churches in the region, the political leaders, and other stakeholders, for the healing of the wounds of history. This is a time of significant challenge for the church in Ukraine - and Russia - but significant opportunity too. Let us pray that the churches will rise over the crisis to meet this crucial moment in the history of these two great nations.

Gareth Davies
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Note: The views expressed above are the author's own and do not represent those of the wider Radstock network.