Ukraine and Europe: a fatal attraction

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The “orange revolution” in Ukraine is not the last of the post-1989 Kiev is not the last of Europe’s post-1989 “velvet revolutions”, but the first of the European Union-inspired revolutions of the 21st century, says Ivan Krastev.

After three tumultuous weeks in Ukraine, it seems overwhelmingly likely that the opposition candidate in the presidential election, Viktor Yushchenko, will be voted president of the republic after the re-run, third round on 26 December 2004. What remains unclear is which party will be more frustrated by such an outcome: Russia, because of the defeat of her protégé Viktor Yanukovych and her “near-abroad policy”, or most European Union governments because of the victory of the pro-European Yushchenko.

For events in Ukraine have revealed an extraordinary paradox: that the European Union is a revolutionary power able to overthrow undemocratic regimes – and that this is exactly what EU is afraid to be. This historic moment in Kyiv (Kiev), Lviv, and other centres across Ukraine emphasise that the EU can exert transformative force even while a majority of its member-states are committed to preserving the status quo.

The thousands of people occupying Independence Square in Kiev since the fraudulent results of the second round of voting were declared on 21 November – demonstrating, standing, sleeping, and (some at least) falling in love – have made irrelevant both Vladimir Putin’s dream to consolidate Russia’s sphere of influence on the territory of most of the former Soviet Union, and the feverish desire of the Berlin-Paris axis to draw the final borders of the European Union.

In the aftermath of a Yushchenko victory, it is feasible that Russia will continue to press for a partitioned or at least federalised Ukraine – and that European leaders will be forced in response to declare that the door of the union is in principle open to a united Ukraine. This is exactly what makes so many of them deeply unhappy: for the “orange revolution” has shown that the EU’s “soft power” – the power to mobilise and empower people, to inspire their imagination, to effect change via civic example not superior physical force – itself derives from its soft, shifting, borders.

In this context, comparisons between Ukraine today and central Europe in 1989 are exciting but misleading. The aesthetics are identical, the slogans are similar, people look alike, but the difference is profound. The citizens of Warsaw, Prague, Budapest and Leipzig took to the streets in 1989 demanding a “return to Europe”, where “Europe” stood for the west and the pre-communist past – not the (then) European Community. In 2004, “Europe” means aspiration not return, model not protection, future not past – the
European Union. Thus, the “orange revolution” in Kiev is not the last of Europe’s “velvet revolutions” of the late 20th century. It is rather the first of the EU-inspired revolutions of the 21st century.

In 1989, in many aspects, Europe was also America. The streets reverberated with American songs, the crowd waved American flags and the American dream was a significant component of the “return-to-Europe” revolutions. The 2004 “orange revolution” is both more realistic and stronger: it demands not just the destruction of the “Kiev wall” that Russia seeks to build within Ukraine and between the country and the west, but the “Schengen wall” that Brussels is busy erecting.

In their vigorous resistance to electoral fraud and systemic corruption, Ukrainians are insisting that their democratic rights as free citizens be respected. But to entrench these rights beyond the present days of liberation, they are also insisting that the political course of their country includes a European Union perspective. What helped convince Ukrainian citizens to endure days and nights on the freezing streets is not Hollywood melodrama but the kind of changes they can see occurring in their neighbours, the new EU accession states of Poland, Hungary, Slovakia (and near-neighbour Lithuania). If large swathes of eastern as well as western Ukraine, elder as well as young people, workers as well as middle-class people, support the democracy movement, a large part of this is owed to the post-1989 success of European integration in transforming central Europe.

Between Russia and America

The enlargement of the European Union is driven less by the member-states’s strategic interests or the Commission’s bureaucratic inertia than the union’s magnetic attraction for neighbouring societies. Joseph Nye’s concept of “soft power” – the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion and payment, arising from the appeal of your culture, political ideals, and policies – is relevant here. But the EU’s soft power is not wielded by European governments or the EU Commission, nor reducible to its prosperity and freedoms; it inheres in the promise that if you are like us you could become one of us. This makes the EU more forceful than the combined weight of its individual members yet also vulnerable in its collective foreign policy, for this is fuelled by external demand not internal supply.

Meanwhile, Russia feels threatened, humiliated and betrayed by Europe. Its sense of betrayal and outrage over Ukraine is rooted in more than its own diplomatic incompetence and incomprehension. It has failed to grasp the “dialectics” of Europe’s involvement in Ukraine. This could, in time, lead to a major shift in Moscow’s foreign policy.

The Kremlin conspiracy theory – supported by proliferating commentary in western newspapers like the Guardian – saw Ukraine’s revolution as little more than a covert operation conducted by George W Bush’s intelligence services, George Soros, and the Poles. The Russian media is now in search of “quiet Americans” (or “quiet Europeans”) who are in the business of seducing Ukraine from Moscow’s embrace.

This is a profound misconception. The European Union did not want to be involved in Ukraine, yet knew that (with EU flags on the streets of Kiev and leaders of its member-states already visiting) it could not stay on the sidelines. In the process it tried in word and deed to accommodate, not override, Russian interests. “Russia wants to know where the European Union will stop”, said the Dutch foreign minister Bernard Bot. It is clear that Brussels itself does not know the answer, and is both more confused and less Machiavellian than Moscow assumes.

Throughout the Ukraine crisis, European leaders did everything in their power to discourage Ukraine’s people to dream about possible EU membership. Brussels reaffirmed its vision of Ukraine as a country that is not Russia’s “near abroad” but at the same time is not a future EU member. This Brussels dream is over.

It was the EU’s failure, not excess, of Realpolitik in Ukraine that prevented it from guaranteeing Russia the secured sphere of influence it wanted. Russia’s version of the Monroe Doctrine could not co-exist with the EU’s soft power. In this sense, it is easier for Moscow today to make a deal with neo-conservative Washington than with post-modern Brussels.

The Russian strategic vision – which sees the battle for Kiev as a zero-sum game – has shifted from deep suspicion to profound paranoia over the EU. Its response may be to formulate its own version of the politics of containment – what Moscow political technologist and Kremlin adviser Gleb Pavlovski calls...
“preventive counter-revolution”. In Moscow, less nationalist foreign-policy specialists still hope for a Realpolitik deal with Gerhard Schroder, Jacques Chirac, Silvio Berlusconi or even Tony Blair. This hope is in vain, for none of these leaders – even where they wished – could deliver such a thing.

The “orange revolution” in Ukraine has made evident that the only common foreign policy available to the European Union is the politics of enlargement and expansion. Many people, inside and outside the union, may fear it; but the perspective of an ever-enlarging Europe is a precondition of keeping Europe together. The EU can survive only to the extent by exerting soft power, and “moral” power, in international relations.

“It has been our fate as a nation not to have ideologies but to be one”, wrote Richard Hofstadter in his 1960s attempt to grasp the nature of the American foreign policy. As the Ukrainian people win their democracy, this observation is even more relevant with respect to the European Union. It is the fate of our union not to have borders but to be the border of freedom in Europe.