

Why Progressives Must Embrace the Ukrainian Pro-Democracy Movement

By Stephen Zunes | December 2004

Some elements of the American left have committed a grievous error, both morally and strategically, in their failure to enthusiastically support the momentous pro-democracy movement in the Ukraine.

After more than three centuries of subjugation under Russian rule—first under the czars and then under the communists—followed by a dozen years of independence under corrupt and autocratic rule, the Ukrainian people appear to be on the verge of a new era of freedom. This development is significant, given that—with a population and land mass comparable to France, rich in minerals, fertile farmland, and modern industry—a democratic Ukraine could become a pivotal, independent player in European and international affairs.

But rather than embracing this inspiring triumph of the human spirit against authoritarianism and repression, much of the left media has focused instead upon the opposition's shortcomings and on the double standards and questionable motivations of the Bush administration's support for the movement. Although these concerns are not without merit, they miss the fact that we are witnessing one of the most notable popular democratic uprisings in history. Furthermore, the left's lukewarm response has given both the right and the mainstream media an opportunity to brand the entire progressive community with allegations that we oppose freedom and democracy.

Typically, the arguments on the left are that:

- *The Bush administration has poured in millions of dollars to support the Ukrainian opposition.*

First of all, U.S. financial support—which has flowed primarily through reputable nongovernmental organizations—pales in comparison to support from Western European democracies. Most U.S. financial backing for the democratic Ukrainian opposition has come through private foundations, including those funded by billionaire George Soros, the Hungarian

exile who also donated millions of dollars to the unsuccessful effort to defeat George W. Bush.

Secondly, by overemphasizing Washington's role in the pro-democracy movement, the left is playing right into the hands of the neoconservatives, who are also exaggerating the U.S. role in order to bolster their claim that global democracy can only be advanced through American leadership.

Financial support from Western sources—which has enabled the Ukrainian opposition to purchase computers and fax machines, pay expenses, and hire consultants—has undoubtedly been useful in the movement's challenge to the autocratic regime in Kiev. Such assistance, however, does not precipitate a liberal democratic revolution any more than Soviet financial and material support for leftist movements in the Third World provoked socialist revolution during the Cold War. As Marxists have long recognized, revolutions are the result of specific objective conditions. Indeed, no amount of money could force hundreds of thousands of people to leave their jobs, homes, schools, and families to face down heavily armed police and camp out in the bitter cold for weeks. Such boldness can only be fueled by strong, heart-felt motivations.

- *Washington's support for the Ukrainian opposition and the movement's sympathetic portrayal in the mainstream U.S. media is part of a broader effort to weaken Russian influence and enable the Ukraine to liberalize its economy, become part of the European Union, and join NATO.*

Although the Bush administration's support for the Ukrainian opposition in this former Soviet republic is not really about democracy, the same could be said regarding U.S. support for the opposition movement



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in the former Soviet republic of Georgia, which, in a similar nonviolent uprising following a fraudulent election, ousted a pro-Russian government in 2003. By contrast, when the Aliyev administration rigged the 2003 election in the former Soviet republic of Azerbaijan, the Bush White House raised no objections, since Azerbaijan is considered an important U.S. ally. The Bush administration has also been a major backer of the repressive Karimov dictatorship in the former Soviet republic of Uzbekistan, which has allowed the U.S. military basing rights and is considered an ally in “the war on terrorism.”

The insinuation that a democratic Ukraine would somehow be beholden to American interests, however, is ludicrous. The strong sense of nationalism resulting from centuries of subjugation by the Russian, Ottoman, Austro-Hungarian, Polish, and Lithuanian empires—combined with the country’s large industrial capacity and generous natural resources—is indicative that a democratic Ukraine would be able to put its own national interests first.

Among the popular criticisms directed at the incumbent president, Leonid Kuchma, have been his call for the Ukraine to join NATO and, especially, his decision to deploy Ukrainian forces in Iraq. By contrast, opposition presidential candidate Victor Yushchenko has pledged—should he be allowed to take office—to immediately withdraw Ukrainian forces from Iraq.

Accepting U.S. support does not guarantee subservience to U.S. interests. The United States supported the 2000 nonviolent pro-democracy movement in Serbia, which swept the dictator and war criminal Slobodan Milosevic from power. Yet opposition leader Vojislav Kostunica, who was elected as Yugoslavia’s new president, had been an outspoken

opponent of the 1999 NATO bombing campaign against his country and, since coming to office, has hardly acted like an American puppet.

As Nick Paton, writing on the Ukrainian uprising for the British newspaper *The Guardian*, observed, “This protest is no longer about America’s or Russia’s candidate, but [is about] an end to the past 12 years of misrule.” It is an eruption of civil society whereby significant sectors of the Ukrainian population are, according to Paton, “for the first time, realizing how they could one day have a government whose main interest is not stealing from state coffers and protecting favored oligarchs, but actually representing the people who elected them. For most people, this is a first taste of real self-determination.”

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American progressives need to be emphasizing that *this* is how regime change ought to take place: not by foreign conquest but by the subjugated peoples themselves; not by bombs and bullets but by the far-greater power of nonviolence. We should be pleased that the Bush administration is actu-

ally embracing, albeit for suspect reasons, an authentic, grassroots democratic movement against an authoritarian regime. Instead of questioning U.S. support for Ukrainian democrats, progressives must seize this opportunity to emphasize the need for the United States to champion nonviolent democratic movements everywhere and to end U.S. backing for autocratic regimes and occupation armies that suppress such movements.

- *The vote fraud in November’s Ukrainian election, which denied Yushchenko his victory, was no different than the vote fraud in the U.S. election that same month, which denied John Kerry his victory; in both cases, there was a major discrepancy between the exit polls and the official count.*

The exit polls in the United States were off by less than 2%. This discrepancy can largely be explained by exit pollsters' acknowledged oversampling of women voters, new rules that limit nonvoters' proximity to polling places, and the apparent higher level of interview cooperation by Kerry supporters than by Bush advocates. The difference between exit polls and the official count in the Ukraine, by contrast, was more than 14%, and considerable evidence suggests that the Kiev government tampered with the results. For example, in the Donestk region, officials claimed that Yushchenko won less than 3% of the vote. International observers also reported widespread intimidation of election monitors, ballot stuffing, multiple voting, and government pressuring of voters.

Of course, voting fraud in the Ukraine does not excuse illegal behavior by supporters of the Bush campaign. All suspicious U.S. electoral activities also need to be investigated thoroughly. However, rectifying such irregularities would not likely make enough difference in Florida or Ohio to hand Kerry an Electoral College victory.

And, despite the many abuses of the Bush administration, Americans live in a far more open society than do Ukrainians under President Kuchma. The state-controlled Ukrainian media covered only the campaigns of pro-government parties. Government thugs often disrupted the campaign activities of the opposition parties and engaged in numerous acts of violence, including the 2002 murder of Mykota Shkribliak, a leading opposition politician. Journalists who reported on corruption or criticized government policies were subjected to particularly serious harassment and violence, such as the 2000 murder of prominent independent journalist Heorhiy Gongadze, which has been linked to Kuchma. The judiciary is notoriously inefficient and subject to

corruption; torture is widespread. And, of course, there was the poisoning of Yushchenko himself. Despite the frightening abuses of power by the Bush administration, it is a gross exaggeration to imply that the rulers in Kiev are no worse; to do so undermines the efforts of those working for human rights and accountable government in both countries.

- *Opposition leader Victor Yushchenko, whose stolen presidential victory in November prompted the uprising, is backed by elements linked to the crooked cabal of business leaders who enriched themselves during the privatization of nationalized industries in the 1990s; Yushchenko himself served for a time as prime minister under the corrupt, outgoing President Leonid Kuchma. Yushchenko also has the backing of right-wing ultranationalists, particularly in the western part of the country, some of whom have ties with anti-Semitic elements and former Nazi collaborators.*

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Antipathy for the country's pro-Russian political establishment runs deep in the Ukraine and spans the political spectrum. This potpourri includes some corrupt and even fascist elements, but they are a small minority of those who have rallied to form the opposition, which consists primarily of liberal democrats. Other opponents of the current autocratic regime include democratic socialists, Greens, and others on the left who recognize that although Yushchenko may not be particularly progressive politically or capable of completely cleaning up the system, his election is currently the best hope for establishing a more open and accountable government.

Free elections and political liberty do not guarantee a progressive government or a just society. However, without individual liberties and accountable government, building a just society becomes virtually impossible. Democracy affords a political opening whereby a democratic left stands a chance of challenging the excesses of national and global capitalism;

of empowering local communities; of openly defending the rights of women, minorities, and the poor; and of eventually gaining power. Few in the Latin American left, for example, would argue that despite the failure of democratic governance to alter the continent's underlying social and economic inequality, things were somehow better under the U.S.-backed military dictatorships that ruled those nations for decades. Political and civil rights do not automatically lead to social and economic equality, but such equality will be far more difficult to achieve without the establishment of democratic institutions and the guaranteed protection of individual liberties.

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The pro-democracy movement in the Ukraine is destined to emerge victorious and has captured the popular imagination of millions of people in the United States and around the world. Perhaps the understandable cynicism that so many American progressives are experiencing at this point in history makes it difficult for many of us to fully appreciate such a hopeful development, especially when it is supported by those who are responsible for so much violence and injustice both at home and abroad. But despite the double standards and cynical opportunism of the Bush administration, let's not deny ourselves this occasion to celebrate an incipient peoples' victory. May it inspire us to redouble our efforts to support other struggles for freedom and justice both at home and abroad.

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