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What Future for Russo-Ukrainian Relations?

By Taras Kuzio

Ukrainian President Leonid Kuchma arrived in St. Petersburg on Sunday for a summit meeting with President Vladimir Putin.

An important item on the already crowded agenda will be recent moves by both countries toward closer ties with NATO. Russia and NATO have upgraded their relations with the establishment of a NATO-Russia Council, and Ukraine made an announcement on the same day President George W. Bush arrived in Moscow that it had decided to join the queue of countries wishing to become members of NATO.

This latest meeting is set to continue the discussions held at their May 17 summit in the Crimea and Sochi.

The Sochi-Crimea summit touched on the vexed question of gas supplies and Ukraine's role as a transit country -- issues that have bedeviled relations between the two countries for the last decade.

The biggest surprise to come out of that summit was that Kuchma agreed to make Ukraine an associate member of the Eurasian Economic Community -- the CIS alternative to the European Union.

Kuchma had already promised to do this at a March summit in Odessa between Putin, Kuchma and Moldovan President Vladimir Voronin. But in April the Ukrainian foreign minister and the state secretary for foreign affairs both ruled it out as incompatible with the country's declared strategic goal of integration with the EU.

Kuchma has clearly now overruled them because he needs Putin's personal support. Highly placed sources in Kiev believe Kuchma consented to this as a quid pro quo for Putin not opposing Ukraine's move to join NATO.

However, Russia should be asking itself whether all these summit meetings actually produce any concrete results. And, if not, can Kuchma be regarded as a reliable partner, let alone ally?

A year ago during the "Kuchmagate" crisis that rocked Ukraine (after a presidential guard released tapes he had made in Kuchma's office that

provided evidence of numerous wrongdoings), Deputy State Duma Speaker Vladimir Lukin warned that Russia should be cautious when dealing with Kuchma. He asserted that while Russia was interested in a long-term partnership, Kuchma was only interested in a short-term relationship to shore up his power, particularly in times of crisis.

Lukin hit the nail on the head when he said that Kuchma's attitude toward Russia has a tendency to improve as his position inside Ukraine deteriorates and vice versa.

Putin must be proud of having cemented the "turn to the East" forced upon the Ukrainian president during the "Kuchmagate" scandal. But does this make Kuchma's turn away from Europe and toward Eurasia any more genuine this time? It is worth recalling that Kuchma was first elected in July 1994 on a platform of closer ties with Russia, which he quickly dropped in favor of integration with "trans-Atlantic and European structures."

Russia has three problems in dealing with Kuchma and his allies in the pro-presidential United Ukraine parliamentary faction.

First, Kuchma's origins are in the high-ranking nomenklatura of the pre-August 1991 Communist Party of Ukraine and his operating style and mannerisms are steeped in Soviet political culture.

Ukraine's first president and high-ranking member of the Social Democratic Party Leonid Kravchuk recently complained in the Kiev daily newspaper Den (which is controlled by Secretary of the National Security and Defense Council Yevhen Marchuk) that Ukraine has lacked any domestic or foreign policy direction. Policies are simply adjusted to suit the president's tactical agenda and therefore are constantly in flux. Ukraine's "multi-vector" foreign policy is merely a cover for the lack of any coherent policy whatsoever.

Kuchma can never become a Ukrainian version of Belarussian President Alexander Lukashenko because he, unlike Kuchma, actually believes in pan-Eastern Slavism and Soviet revivalism. In Ukraine, such ideologically driven policies exist on the left or right, but not in the pro-presidential center occupied by United Ukraine. A foreign policy that is hostage to Kuchma's personal isolation in the West cannot be regarded as a foreign policy that is driven either by ideological considerations or medium to long-term goals.

Secondly, Kuchma trusts nobody apart from Volodymyr Lytvyn, former head of the presidential administration and leader of United Ukraine who was not long ago elected speaker of the parliament by somewhat dubious means. Lytvyn is the only colleague of Kuchma's to have remained by his side since 1994.

Kravchuk's critical remarks and the radical proposals for an overhaul of Ukraine's political system introduced into the newly

elected

parliament by former Prime Minister Viktor Yushchenko's Our Ukraine show there is growing discontent within Ukraine's political and business elite with the Kuchma presidency for its conservatism, lack of direction and neo-Soviet authoritarianism.

Thirdly, Kuchma is a lame-duck president with only two years left of his last term in office. Putin would be well advised not to put all his eggs in Kuchma's and United Ukraine's basket.

According to national opinion polls, Yushchenko is Ukraine's most popular politician and the current favorite to win the 2004 presidential election.

Russian officials, including Ambassador to Ukraine Viktor Chernomyrdin, have expressed negative views regarding Yushchenko's pro-Western orientation and his "anti-Russian" Our Ukraine bloc. Yushchenko is, however, not "anti-Russian" and has in fact taken the Rukh party toward a more pragmatic position.

Our Ukraine's election manifesto did not call for Ukraine's withdrawal from the CIS. In addition, it is worth recalling that Yushchenko's government in 2000-01 was the first to deal with energy arrears, halt the theft of Russian gas and reduce corruption in the energy sector.

If Russia believes it has a reliable partner in Kuchma it is very much mistaken. His record in office shows that he lacks any ideologically based program -- either oriented toward the West or Russia and the CIS.

His chief concern has always been to adapt domestic and foreign policies to his own benefit and that of his corrupt allies.

Putin's optimism, expressed after the Crimea-Sochi summit that relations between Russia and Ukraine are improving, is in serious danger of being disappointed as a result of Kuchma's complete inability to adhere to commitments.

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