

# Outside View: Ukraine cannot forever stay at the crossroads

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WASHINGTON, Sept. 5 (UPI) -- What has been described as a "trade war" between Ukraine and Russia has overshadowed two more important factors that have more important long-term strategic implications for the U.S.-Russian-Ukrainian strategic triangle.

The first is country-related and arises from the new desire for energy independence while the second is personal and affects Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich.

Western reporting on Yanukovich is routinely simplistic in its use of "pro-Russian" and "pro-European." That there is rhetoric in favor of European integration is irrelevant when domestically Yanukovich pursues "pro-Russian" political and economic policies that are typically Eurasian.

Pro-European rhetoric is out of tune with Yanukovich's Russian-speaking electorate. A new poll indicated that one-third of Ukrainians asked said they feel themselves to be European, only 4 percent more than people in Russia.

Two decades after the U.S.S.R. was put in the trash can of history a staggering 40 percent of Ukrainian respondents say they wish it was still around. That figure rises to 56 percent in Yanukovich's Eastern Ukraine, a region where nearly half of the population feels closer to the Soviet Union than to Ukraine.

Only a third of the Donbas -- where the president has his own home base -- actually supports Ukrainian independence.

At the same time, Yanukovich is an economic nationalist who doesn't want to give up sovereignty to either Moscow or Brussels and doesn't want to lose sources of income from natural pipelines. He has therefore sought to play a balancing act by milking both sides that has exasperated both Russia and the European Union.

But, in straddling the crossroads he is being typically Ukrainian as polls indicate that roughly similar numbers of Ukrainians support membership in the European Union as they do CIS Customs Union with the average Ukrainian preferring, in the same manner as Yanukovich, to be members of both.

Ukraine exports roughly similar amounts to the European Union and Russia but trade with the latter is heavily dominated by energy, which is in decline. This year, Moscow is alarmed that Ukraine has reduced its natural gas imports by nearly half through increasing domestic production and buying cheaper Russian gas from Germany and Eastern Europe.

As an economic nationalist Yanukovich has instituted the first serious Ukrainian drive to achieve energy independence from Moscow. Energy independence in conventional and shale gas, oil and liquefied natural gas has deliberately favored large U.S. companies such as Exxon Mobil and medium-sized ones such as Cub Energy.

This, which is combined with a massive lobbying effort in Washington that has targeted in particular (but not only) Republicans, is aimed at encouraging the United States to continue -- as it did under Presidents Bill Clinton and George W. Bush -- to view Ukraine as an important geopolitical and strategic partner.

Nationalist Ukrainians who are quick to attack Russia for its trade war are at the same time undermining Ukrainian energy independence by blocking U.S. companies exploring shale gas. Just this month the Western Ukrainian region of Ivano-Frankivsk, controlled by the nationalist Svoboda party, ruled against Chevron's fracking of shale gas.

Then there is the personal factor.

After she was defeated in the 2010 presidential elections Yulia Tymoshenko was on the decline. Younger politicians such as Serhiy Tihipko and Arseniy Yatseniuk, who came third and fourth, respectively, with a combined 20 percent of the vote, had cross-country support from Ukraine's middle class. Meanwhile, international boxing champion Vitaliy Klitschko, whose party UDAR (meaning punch) came third in last year's elections, is also a rising star.

Facing competition from three "yuppie" rising stars, Tymoshenko would have become a marginal politician if it had not been for the gas lobbies desire to extract personal revenge on her. In April the European Court of Human Rights ruled that Tymoshenko's pretrial detention had been arbitrary, that the lawfulness of her detention hadn't been properly reviewed and, that she had no possibility to seek compensation for her unlawful deprivation of liberty.

A second ECHR ruling is imminent that will also be in her favor.

The criminal charges revived her career and made her into an international star. If she were ever to become president her first decree should be to put up a monument to her arch nemesis Yanukowych.

Taras Chornovil knows the president very well as he ran Yanukowych's election campaign in December 2004 and was a faithful Party of Regions parliamentary deputy until last year. In a recent interview he explained the president's personal dilemma.

Integrating into the European Union represents a defensive mechanism against Russia because "He sees that Vladimir Putin demonstrates open disrespect and disdain toward him."

Yanukowych himself said late last month that Russian arguments against changing the 2009 gas contract were "demeaning."

Chornovil added at the same time "in the EU Yanukowych would have to live by rules that foresee very serious losses of possibilities and capital accumulation. Added to this is the Tymoshenko factor."

Chornovil says this is the reason "why the president is disoriented because neither of these paths guarantees his personal security."

The irony is that even if he agreed to European and U.S. demands to free Tymoshenko she would be unlikely to become a threat to his re-election in 2015 as that comes from Klitschko whose is the front-runner in the upcoming elections.

The next two months will be decisive for Yanukowych in deciding his own fate and that of Ukraine's. In accumulating massive power he cannot shy away from responsibility as ultimately the buck stops with him.

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