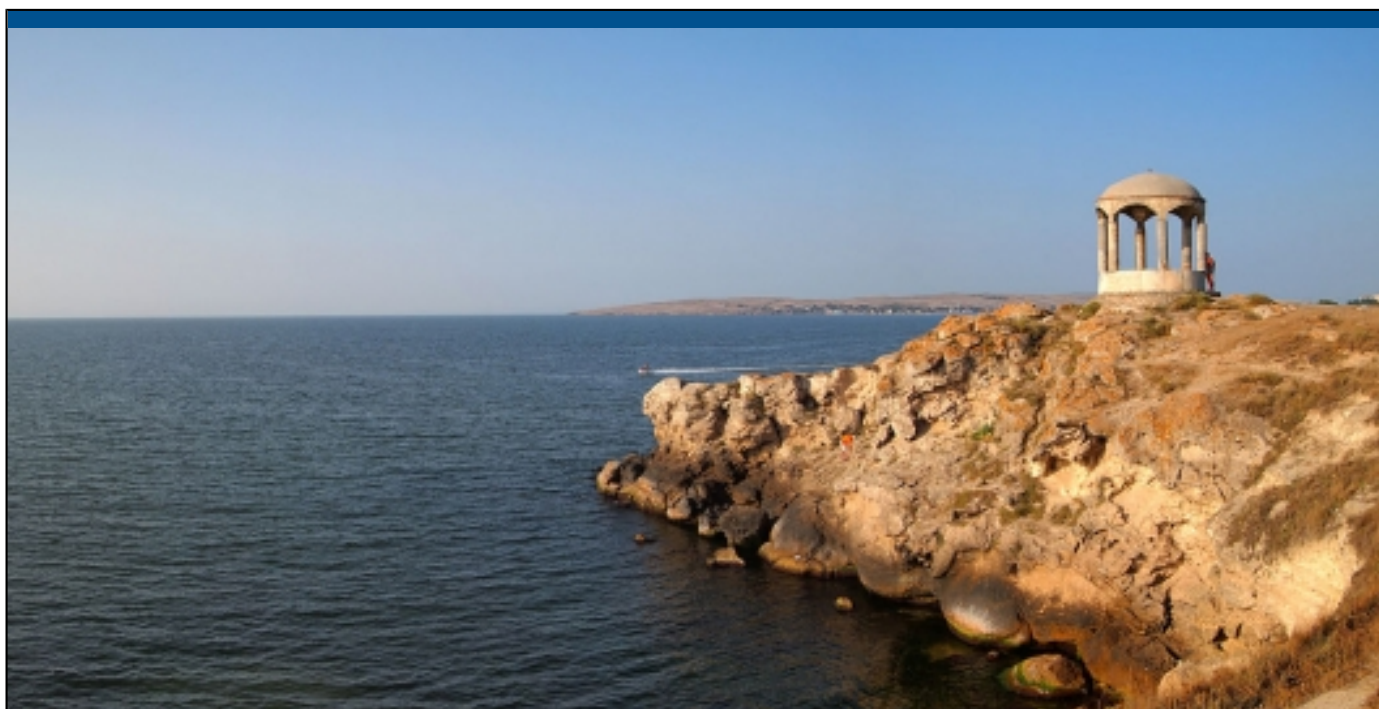


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Russian Policies towards Ukraine are Illogically Consistent (/blogs/new-atlanticist/russian-policies-towards-ukraine-are-illogically-consistent)

BY TARAS KUZIO



View of Sea of Azov and a monument on a shore in Shcholkine (Photo: Wikimedia Commons/ Tia Monto/ CC License)

The European Parliament on September 12 called on Russia to respect the right of EU Eastern Partnership members such as Ukraine to enter Association Agreements. The resolution, which received overwhelming support across the parliament's political groups, called on Russia to not use trade sanctions to force Ukraine to choose the Eurasian over the European Union.

It is doubtful whether the resolution will have any impact in Moscow because Russian policies have

been consistently heavy handed and counter-productive over the last quarter of a century. Besides predicting dire consequences of an economic collapse when Ukraine no longer has access to the CIS market following entry into an Association Agreement, Russian leaders are also claiming that Russian-speaking eastern Ukraine will split away. Sergei Glazyev, one of President Vladimir Putin's senior advisers, said that Russia would be legally entitled to support eastern Ukraine in such a split, comparing this to Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia in the 1990s.

Putin first outlined such threats during his speech to the NATO-Russia Council in Bucharest in April 2008. They are therefore nothing new, but nevertheless still alarming.

Russia's policies towards Ukraine under Presidents Borys Yeltsin and Putin transformed Eastern Ukrainian candidates elected on pro-Russian platforms into "pro-European" Presidents Leonid Kuchma and Viktor Yanukovich. Democratic Yeltsin and nationalist Putin have not greatly differed in their tough policies towards their neighbors.

Kuchma came to power on milder pro-Russian slogans than Yanukovich sixteen years later. Nevertheless, both expected Russia to treat their country, Ukraine, and themselves with respect and equality which it has never truly done since the USSR disintegrated.

Yeltsin took four years before visiting Ukraine to sign a twenty-year Black Sea Fleet Agreement and a treaty that recognized Ukraine's border; it took until February 1999 before both houses of the Russian parliament ratified the treaty. Russia has repeatedly refused to demarcate the border while insisting on joint sovereignty over the Sea of Azov.

Although the Ukrainian-Russian border was officially recognized, Moscow Mayor Yuriy Luzhkov—a member of Putin's Unified Russia party—and other Russian politicians have repeatedly raised demands for annexation of the Crimea and Sevastopol. In 2003, Kuchma cut short a state visit to Brazil and sent troops to the island of Tuzla, lying off the eastern Crimean coast, in response to Russia's attempts to annex the island. In 2008-2009, Russian support for Crimean separatism led to the expulsion of the Simferopol and Odessa Russian Consuls.

The irony is that in 1994 Russia was one of four nuclear powers that agreed to respect Ukrainian sovereignty in exchange for Ukrainian agreement to give up nuclear weapons and join the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. Treaties, contracts, laws, and constitutions in Eurasia have little meaning in post-Soviet societies.

Putin's relations with the nationalist Viktor Yushchenko, who sought NATO membership for Ukraine,

were understandably poor. But they did not improve after the coming to power of pro-Russian Yanukovich. Moscow's disdain for Ukrainian sovereignty has remained consistent. Immediately after coming to power, Yanukovich fulfilled every Russian demand on changing national identity policies—dropping NATO membership and extending the Sevastopol Black Sea Fleet base that had been addressed by President Dmitri Medvedev in his August 2009 open letter to Yushchenko. In return, Yanukovich insisted on Russian respect for Ukrainian sovereignty and a discount on the gas price in the 2009 contract. He received neither.

In fact, Russia demanded even more without giving anything in return. Putin and Medvedev sought to merge state gas companies Gazprom and Naftohaz Ukrainy, a Russian controlled consortium over Ukraine's gas pipelines and joint ventures in strategic industries. With Russia, you give an arm and it demands the second.

In the last few months Russia has launched a trade war against Ukraine and threatened that if the EU signs an Association Agreement that they would no longer be "strategic partners." If they are no longer "partners" some Ukrainian politicians have wondered whether Russia should then withdraw its Black Sea Fleet.

Russian policies in the 1990s and 2000s changed Kuchma and Yanukovich's foreign policies from integration into Eurasia toward support for NATO and EU membership. Under Kuchma, Ukraine became the most active member of NATO's Partnership for Peace (PfP), supported NATO enlargement, and sent the third largest contingent to the US-led coalition in Iraq at a time when Yanukovich was prime minister. In summer 2001, Kuchma outlined plans to seek NATO membership and twice sought to join the MAP (Membership Action Plan) process in Prague (2002), and Istanbul (2004).

Despite Yanukovich's concessions, Russia has continued to insist Ukraine pay the highest gas price in Europe. This has encouraged, for the first time, a push for energy independence through greater energy conservation, expansion of domestic gas production, fracking of shale gas, and LNG imports. Ukraine is—in a surreal way—importing cheaper Russian gas from Germany and Eastern Europe than it is from Russia, which has led to a drastic reduction by forty percent this year of direct Ukrainian imports of Russian gas.

It is highly likely that Ukraine will, in the next five years, be able to do without Russian gas. It is uncertain if Russia, even after the launch of Nordstream, will be able to do without Ukrainian gas pipelines to export its main source of export revenue.

Advocates of Ukraine's NATO and EU integration should be thankful to Russian leaders for their disrespectful policies towards Ukraine. If Ukraine were to join the EU the advocates of European integration should put up a monument to Russian leaders.

Russian policies towards Ukraine have been arrogant, disrespectful and counter-productive regardless of who is president, pro-Western nationalist Yushchenko or pro-Russian Kuchma and Yanukovich. This consistent illogical behavior is unlikely to change.

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