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Tabachnyk recycles outdated ideology

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In a recent Kyiv Post Op-Ed, Rada deputy Dmytro Tabachnyk outlined his foreign policy vision for Ukraine ("The West is not Ukraine's only option," Oct. 17). Tabachnyk masterminded Leonid Kuchma's successful 1994 election campaign and went on to head his Presidential Administration. Now head of the Rada's foreign affairs committee, he remains an influential figure whose views cannot be ignored.

Unfortunately, Tabachnyk's article contains little that is new or invigorating. In particular, he repeats the old line that Ukraine has other alternatives if Euro-Atlantic structures continue to refuse to consider it for admission. Tabachnyk warns the West that the current "Western-oriented elite" could be replaced by one oriented toward the "Tashkent bloc" or the "Third World." As he points out, just such a re-orientation occurred in Belarus in 1994.

These views ignore the changes that have taken place in the world since the terrorist attacks on the United States. The U.S.-Ukrainian strategic partnership was already coming under strain even before Sept. 11. The year 2001 was the first since 1992 when no U.S.-Ukrainian presidential summit took place. Washington ruled out such a summit while the murder of journalist Georgy Gongadze remained unresolved. After Sept. 11, the United States developed an alliance with Russia. It is now debatable whether the United States can still be included on Ukraine's list of 19 strategic partners, at least from Washington's viewpoint.

Ukraine's domestic and foreign policies have done nothing to improve its standing with Washington. All the CIS states, Ukraine included, have experienced a regression in their democratization and rule of law ratings since 1997, according to Freedom House, Reporters Without Borders, the Committee to Protect Journalists,

Transparency International and the Heritage Foundation. This has only added to Washington's disinterest in Ukraine as a "strategic partner." After all, strategic partners do not sell military equipment to Iraq. Tabachnyk does not seem to realize that the West no longer sees Ukraine's elites as "Western oriented."

To Europe with Russia

Threats that the West has to support Kuchma or else he will integrate with Russia were commonly heard in the second half of the 1990s. Tabachnyk, a prominent member of the Dnipropetrovsk-based Labor Ukraine clan, headed the inter-faction group "To Europe with Russia!" in the previous parliament. In fact, the ideological preference for cooperating with Europe together with Russia (or under Russia's wing, some might say) was a return to Kuchma's 1994 election program. Tabachnyk later expounded these ideas in the book "Ukraine on the threshold of the XXI Century" co-written with Dmytro Vydryn.

Times have changed since Ukraine was the third-largest recipient of U.S. aid and an important buffer against a still unstable and uncertain Russia. Now Russia's president enjoys popularity at home and internationally, while Kuchma has the support of just 5 percent of Ukrainians and is increasingly seen by the West as a pariah on a par with Belarus' Aleksander Lukashenka. By returning to this questionable line in 2002, Tabachnyk suggests that current Ukrainian elites simply do not understand international affairs and European security issues.

Tabachnyk's threat is empty because it is only the extreme left that supports Ukraine's membership of the Russian-Belarusian union. None of the oligarchic centrist groups do. But ironically Tabachnyk's threat has, in a way, already taken place. Kuchma has re-oriented Ukraine toward Russia since 2000 in line with the "To Europe with Russia!" ideology, but also in response to his semi-isolation by the West after the Gongadze case. This isolation is set to grow with the Iraqi arms scandal.

After two years of the Kuchmagate crisis and five years of political-economic stagnation, the West is disillusioned with Ukraine (and the CIS in general). The reasons for this are many. Why did Tabachnyk not address these real and vital issues and how they impact on Ukrainian foreign policy? Unfortunately, his unwillingness to do so is a reflection of a general tendency within Ukraine's ruling elites of placing the responsibility for Ukraine's domestic and foreign stagnation onto the shoulders of others. It is not clear, therefore, that the elites that Tabachnyk represents are in touch with reality.

Tabachnyk claims that the drive toward Euro-Atlantic integration "is central to the dynamics of decision-making at all levels" and that this is "more clearly articulated at the domestic level than it is abroad." Nobody in the West thinks this is the case.

If Kuchma and the oligarchic elites really believe this, then Ukraine is in deep trouble, as it suggests that such a wide cultural gulf separates Ukraine (and the CIS) from the West that dialogue will be difficult. The policies of Ukraine's ruling elites are undermining – not supporting – the country's Euro-Atlantic integration. Kuchma is an obstacle to Ukraine's Euro-Atlantic integration, as Western media, think tanks and governments now agree. Hence, NATO and Washington have redefined their new relationship to Ukraine as "Kuchma bad, Ukraine good." This, at least, leaves the door open for Ukraine, unlike Belarus.

It is not at all clear if Ukraine's elites really support Euro-Atlantic integration, except as an abstract concept. In contrast to Ukraine, the former communist elites in the 12 EU-pending and seven NATO-prospective members are united in their support for Euro-Atlantic integration. As former NATO Secretary General Javier Solana said in Warsaw, to join Europe it is necessary to play by the rules, not change them. Unfortunately, the extensive and deep reforms required for EU membership would damage oligarchic interests, as the oligarchs themselves recognized when they voted to remove Viktor Yushchenko's reformist government.

Double standards

The second string of Tabachnyk's argument is that by welcoming the integration of Bulgaria and Romania into Euro-Atlantic structures while excluding Ukraine, the West is guilty of double standards. Bulgaria and Romania will be asked to join NATO this month. But they will have to wait at least until 2007 before joining the EU, three years after the 10 post-communist and Mediterranean countries that have been asked to join in 2004.

Tabachnyk seems to believe that Ukraine has made as much progress in its post-communist transition as Bulgaria and Romania. Unfortunately, this is not the case, particularly regarding Bulgaria.

Democratization in Bulgaria and Romania progressed during 1998-2002, while it stagnated in Ukraine. According to Freedom House's annual Nations in Transit survey of post-communist states for 2001-2002, Bulgaria is a "consolidated democracy" with a market economy. Between 1998 and 2002 Bulgaria improved its ratings on democratization, rule of law and economic reform. Freedom House classifies Romania, like Ukraine, as a "transitional" democracy with a market economy. And though rule of law and economic reform deteriorated in Romania, its democratization rating has improved.

In the last two years, according to Freedom House, Ukraine's democratization and rule of law ratings worsened, while its economic reform rating improved only marginally. This improvement was entirely due to the Yushchenko government of December 1999-April 2001 and ended when Tabachnyk's oligarchic allies voted it out.

The Heritage Foundation's Index of Economic Freedom in 2002 gave Bulgaria a score that has progressed each year since 1995. Romania's and Ukraine's worsened during the same period.

Even worse for Ukraine is a comparison of per capita income. Bulgaria's and Romania's per capita income in 2001 were \$1,619 and \$1,743 respectively, whereas Ukraine's was only \$781. In comparison, Estonia's was \$3,786, Poland's \$4,654, Hungary's \$5,121 and Slovenia's \$9,416.

The 2002 Transparency International corruption perceptions index placed Bulgaria in 45th place, around the same level as Poland. Romania and Ukraine came 77th and 85th respectively out of 102 countries. According to Freedom House, Ukraine's corruption level is on a par with the former Soviet states of Central Asia. Worse for Ukraine is the fact that corruption is seen as endemic and worsening.

Ukraine also faces specific problems when it comes to joining NATO. It spends only \$590 million a year on its military. It would require a six- to sevenfold increase to reach the 2 percent of GDP required by NATO. Romania spends 2.7 per cent of its GDP on its military. Hungary, with armed forces only one-seventh the size of Ukraine's, spends twice as much annually on the military (\$1.09 billion), while Poland, with a population slightly less than Ukraine's, spends \$3.58 billion annually. Ukraine spends only \$2,900 per soldier per year, compared to \$9,700 by Romania, one of the poorest NATO aspirant members, or Poland's \$18,000.

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