

# **U.S.-Ukrainian relations will not revive under Kuchma**

By Taras Kuzio,  
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A worldwide survey last year by the Washington-based Pew Global Attitudes Project found that of the six post-communist states surveyed, Ukrainians had the most favorable opinion of the United States (80 percent), with Poland coming second at 79 percent. A December 2002 poll by the Kyiv International Institute for Sociology found that 61 percent held positive attitudes toward the U.S., a figure still high but lower than the Pew poll.

These positive views of the United States have not prevented deterioration in U.S.-Ukraine relations because Ukraine's foreign policy is developed by its elite with no public input. However, blame for the deterioration of relations should be shared by the United States because of its mishandling of its relationship with Ukraine.

## **U.S.-Ukraine relations in Kuchma I (1994-1999)**

In Kuchma I there was a coincidence of interests that elevated U.S.-Ukraine relations to what was then called a "strategic partnership" where Ukraine was described as "the lynchpin" or the "keystone in the arch" of European security. U.S.-Ukraine relations improved in 1994-1996 because the U.S. saw a reformer elected (Kuchma) whose government program obtained support from the IMF and World Bank. Ukraine's reward was to become the third-largest recipient of U.S. aid, surpassed only by Israel and Egypt.

## **U.S.-Ukraine relations in Kuchma II (1999-2004)**

The United States under Bill Clinton ignored many of the signs of the dangerous trends evident in Ukraine during the late 1990s. By any stretch of the imagination the Valery Pustovoitenko government of 1997-1999 could not be labeled “reformist.” Former Prime Minister Pavlo Lazarenko’s defection to the United States in 1999 brought Ukraine’s high levels of corruption into the open, amidst growing international recognition. This phenomenon was accentuated by many further details revealed by the Kuchma-gate tapes made in 1999-2000 by Mykola Melnychenko.

The general state of democratization in Ukraine also came under scrutiny. Ukraine received a litany of bad reports from Western think tanks (Freedom House, Amnesty International, Helsinki Watch), international organizations (Council of Europe, EU) and governments (the U.S. State Department). The question of media freedom had already damaged Ukraine’s reputation even before the murder of opposition journalist Georgy Gongadze in fall 2000.

### **Yushchenko government: A glimmer of hope? (1999-2001)**

These negative trends in the late Clinton era were still ignored by the U.S. In December 1999, a month after Kuchma was re-elected as Ukraine’s savior from Communism, Ukraine’s only ever truly reformist government under Viktor Yushchenko began working, albeit under difficult conditions. Its ability to maneuver became impossible within Ukraine’s Byzantine political system after the Kuchma-gate crisis broke, and repercussions of the tapes scandal continue to impair governmental unity to this day.

The divisions between centrists and national democrats, coupled with the growth of opposition from pro-presidential centrists towards Yushchenko’s reforms, led to the removal of the government in April 2001. According to a study done by former Ukrainian government adviser Anders Aslund for the Carnegie Endowment, when Yushchenko formed his government, Ukraine’s oligarchs were earning

an annual net income of \$2 billion on the gas trade. Aslund calculated that insider energy trading assisted by good connections to the state were in the range of \$4 billion, or 13 percent of Ukraine's GDP. Little wonder they became hostile to Yushchenko.

### **U.S.-Ukraine-Russia relations after Sept. 11**

The removal of the Yushchenko government followed the replacement seven months earlier of Borys Tarasyuk as foreign minister. With Tarasyuk and Yushchenko gone for the first time since 1992, Ukraine no longer had pro-Western figures within the government or the presidential administration.

The absence of pro-Western influence in 2000-2001 coincided with the Kuchma-gate crisis. These events in of themselves helped the decline of Ukraine's relations with the U.S. They reinforced a trend that had already been evident of a re-orientation of Ukraine's multi-vector foreign policy from West to East between Kuchma I and Kuchma II. Under Kuchma II, both the executive and his centrist allies felt increasingly more comfortable with the CIS, where opaque and corrupt business practices and authoritarian tendencies were accepted. By Kuchma II, Ukraine's oligarchs felt financially secure and in a strong enough position to deal with Russia's oligarchs, something they had not been in the 1990s. Russian investment began to be welcomed into Ukraine, a turnabout from the 1990s, when investment was discouraged.

If these trends were not bad enough, the election of George W. Bush and the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks on the U.S. signaled an end to the U.S. view of Ukraine's strategic importance. The U.S.-Russia strategic relationship of the early 1990s was revived and Ukraine became less significant. Bush refused to follow Clinton's lead of annual presidential summits until the Gongadze affair was resolved.

### **Post-Kolchuga relations**

The U.S. has not always played its cards right on Ukraine. In April 2001 and September 2002 the U.S. undercut support for the opposition by giving Melnychenko asylum, and when it publicly released details of Kuchma's decision to sell Kolchugas to Iraq. Ukrainian authorities reluctantly admitted that the July meeting where the Kolchuga authorization was given had taken place. At the same time, the U.S. admitted that it has no proof that the Kolchugas were dispatched to Iraq.

The Kolchuga affair was handled publicly because of the dire strait of U.S.-Ukraine relations and the U.S. obsession with Iraq and Saddam Hussein. Had relations been good, the problem could have been handled behind closed doors. After the November NATO summit, which Kuchma was encouraged not to attend but did, the U.S. began sending signals that it wished to improve relations. The Kolchuga question was "put in a box," at least for now.

Will U.S.-Ukraine relations now improve? One factor working in their favor is the likely collapse of the U.S.-Russia partnership created after Sept. 11, due to Russia's support for France in opposition to military action in Iraq. The U.S. is seeking allies wherever it can find them and most of its new allies are in the "new world" of Central-Eastern Europe. Ukraine could find a niche for itself here and hence is sending the anti-chemical warfare and clean up battalion to Iraq.

The U.S. outlined what is required to improve relations with Ukraine in four key speeches by Ambassador Carlos Pascual. The following month, the state department's Deputy Assistant Secretary for European and Eurasian Affairs and former Ambassador to Ukraine Steven Pifer also spoke out. It is, therefore, no secret what the U.S. considers necessary to improve relations.

Kyiv will find it impossible to fulfill U.S. recommendations until after President Kuchma leaves office in 2004. Kuchma's priority is to search for ways to obtain immunity from prosecution after he steps down, rather than fulfilling U.S. conditions for improved relations. Kuchma's

fate is also closely tied to the political culture of his centrist allies, which cannot change while he remains in power. Both of these factors mean that while there may be small tactical improvements in relations, a full-blown revival will have to wait for Kuchma's retirement.

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