

Behind the Tuzla Island controversy

By Taras Kuzio,
Oct 30, 2003
Kyiv Post, Op Ed

The rapid escalation of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict over the miniscule island of Tuzla should lead all of us to ask: why? This is the last development we expected to happen only twelve days after the signing of the Common Economic Space agreement (CES) by Russia, Belarus, Ukraine and Kazakhstan. The creation of the CES crowned three years during which Ukraine's multi-vector foreign policy was reoriented from west to east.

Pro-western forces, such as Our Ukraine, condemned the creation of the CES as a move that strenghtens this reorientation towards Russia and the Commonwealth of Independent States. These same pro-western political forces are now likely to benefit from the conflict over Tuzla and the dampening of support for the CES.

Nationalism and elections in Russia

In 1999-2000, during the organised succession of the Russian presidency from Boris Yeltsin to Vladimir Putin, two nationalist passions were stirred up to ensure Putin's victory. First, there was hostility to NATO and NATO enlargement in the aftermath of that organization's bombing of Serbia in spring 1999. This hostility did not subside until after the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the U.S. Second, there was the launch of a second Chechen conflict after a number of highly suspicious bomb blasts in Russian cities. These were blamed on the Chechens, though the accusation was never proven.

Elections to the Russia Duma are again approaching in December, while Putin faces elections in March 2004. Rousing nationalist

passions, even if against a “fraternal people” such as the Ukrainians, might just help Putin’s United Russia do better than the polls are predicting. Both United Russia and Putin himself have been criticised for their lack of concrete policies.

Launching territorial claims against Ukraine in Tuzla is a less risky strategy than reopening the Sevastopol issue (although some Russian politicians have linked the two). If we add this nationalist issue to the “anti-oligarch” campaign that has stepped up with the arrest of Yukos CEO Mikhail Khodorkovsky, then we can see that Putin is riding a populist wave.

‘Off the cuff’ policymaking

To the minds of Ukrainian nationalists and many in the Ukrainian Diaspora, Russia has a centrally guided strategy to undermine Ukraine. The truth is far different.

An academic study published in December 2001 by Norwegian scholar Tor Bukkvoll described Russia’s lack of a coherent strategy towards Ukraine as “off the cuff politics.” Russia, Bukkvoll wrote, does not treat Ukraine seriously, but only as a “misunderstanding.” Ukrainian analyst Dmytro Vydryn agrees. He claims that 60 per cent of the Tuzla mess is due to “legal bardak” in the CIS, a place where there is no western-style respect for signed agreements, contracts, and treaties. Western businessmen know this only too well.

The liberal, russophone activist Vladimir Malynkowitch agrees with Bukkvoll and Vydryn. In an article on the Tuzla crisis, he lamented that “Nobody has ever seriously undertaken an interest in Moscow in Ukrainian problems.” He adds that there are also “no analysts who know the situation in Ukraine.” The lack of “objective information” in the Russian media means that “until now the Russian public is not convinced that Ukraine is a sovereign state.”

These Russian attitudes apply to the entire CIS. Russia does not treat other CIS countries as fully independent states, similar to say Poland,

France or Israel. The CIS is Russia's "near abroad"; it is only partially foreign. That is why we have witnessed, in the CIS, long periods of haggling over border delimitation and opposition to dividing seas into country sectors.

President Leonid Kuchma came first to power in July 1994, promising to be successful where Leonid Kravchuk had failed: in improving relations with Russia. Even with the "pro-Russian" Kuchma in office, it took another 4 years before Russia agreed to sign a treaty that recognised the countries' mutual borders. This was only obtained after Ukraine used the "NATO card" to scare Russia into signing. It took Russia another two years for its parliament to ratify the treaty, and then another five to delimit the border.

In other words, two "fraternal brother nations" have taken 12 years to agree just to an inherited border that had already been legally codified from the USSR. Russia continues to refuse to demarcate it, and has seemingly attempted to extract a better negotiating position for planned Oct. 30 talks.

Who gains?

Who is the Tuzla mess good for? Putin gains first and foremost, as it will improve the election chances of his party. Putin does not need to boost his own ratings. They're already high, and he's certain to be reelected in 2004. Putin sees Kuchma as untrustworthy and a spent force, and the Tuzla conflict shows his utter disrespect for the Ukrainian president.

This might temporarily benefit Kuchma. But most Ukrainians and outsiders remain suspicious about Kuchma's returning home from a 10-day trip to Latin America. Why did Kuchma not try and contact Putin earlier?

Either he seriously miscalculated when it came to Putin, perhaps influenced by the romantic pro-Russian views circulating inside the presidential administration, or this was all pure theatrics, and part of a staged event to boost his patriotism ratings. In reality, as Yulia Mostova wrote in *Zerkalo Nedeli*, “the Ukrainian leadership looked really embarrassed and unskilled in responding to external threats.”

Looking ahead to 2004

Ukraine’s elites are no different than others elsewhere in the CIS: they are afraid of being out of power. In Ukraine, the issue of Kuchma’s immunity and the fate of the oligarchs hangs like a cloud over the election campaign.

What’s going to happen next? Russia might provide a good model. In 2000, Boris Yeltsin was given immunity and has also stayed out of politics. Putin struck a deal with the oligarchs according to which they would stay out of politics, and in return get to keep their ill-gotten wealth. Oligarchs who refused to play by these rules were exiled (Boris Berezovsky) or imprisoned on corruption charges (Mikhail Khodorkovsky).

Just think – a Ukraine without oligarchs, Kuchma removed from politics and Ukraine’s “Berezovsky” (Viktor Medvedchuk, in Anders Aslund’s eyes) exiled. That sounds too good to be true, but it’s worth striving for.

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