

Russian-Ukrainian Gas Crisis Fuelled by National Identity

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Western media coverage of the latest Ukrainian-Russian gas crisis has largely ignored the national identity component of the conflict, and yet this is the main factor fuelling poor relations between Ukraine and Russia. Inter-elite corruption in the energy sector comes second to national identity issues.

The corrupt and opaque intermediary RosUkrEnergo is only half controlled by Gazprom. Blame for energy corruption should therefore be distributed equally between the Russian and Ukrainian elites. Prime Minister Vladimir Putin's claim that the gas crisis is a product of the "struggle of clans" in Ukraine is therefore only true up to a point as both the Ukrainian and Russian elites are enveloped in corruption (Ukrayinska Pravda, January 10). Gazprom has been at the heart of the gas intermediaries Eural Trans Gas and its replacement RosUkrEnergo. Putin's claims also ignore the consistent opposition to the use of intermediaries by Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko and her eponymous bloc. The October 2008 Tymoshenko-Putin memorandum signed in Moscow called for the removal of gas intermediaries. The Tymoshenko government and Naftohaz Ukrainy have blamed these intermediaries for the current crisis (Reuters, January 7).

Putin's allegations also ignore the influence of the corrupt gas lobby of the Party of Regions, which has had a cooperation agreement since 2005 with the Unified Russia party. Regions' gas lobby has taken over the financing of the party from oligarchs such as Renat Akhmetov, and sabotaged negotiations to establish a BYuT-Regions coalition in fall 2008 because of Tymoshenko's opposition to the role of intermediaries.

At the heart of the gas crisis are very poor relations between Ukraine and Russia that worsened following Russia's unsuccessful, high-profile intervention in the 2004 Ukrainian presidential elections. Russia has continued to intervene in Ukraine's domestic affairs by issuing passports and developing a new policy of "Russian Cards" for Ukrainians. The cards would be issued to Ukrainian citizens on the basis of their allegiance to Russian culture and language and would enable them to enter

Russia without visas and have the same rights as Russian citizens, including access to free education (Ukrayinska Pravda, December 3, 2008). The implicit threat of such brazen intervention can be seen in the claim by a deputy head of the presidential secretariat Roman Besmertnyi that the gas crisis was planned by Russia to mobilize eastern Ukraine against Yushchenko (Ukrayinska Pravda, January 12).

To disguise the utter failure of Russia's intervention and its abject lack of understanding of Ukrainian domestic politics and nation-building, Moscow has continually held to a neo-Soviet version of the Orange Revolution, namely, that it was not the product of legitimate popular protest against electoral fraud and a decade of Leonid Kuchma's rule but was the outcome of an American conspiracy.

Viktor Yushchenko's election was therefore illegitimate because, in Russian eyes, he was imposed on the country by the "political technology" imported from the United States that had been developed earlier in Serbia's Bulldozer and Georgia's Rose Revolutions. Yushchenko's policies on seeking NATO membership, obtaining international recognition of the 1933 genocide famine, his refusal to extend the Black Sea Fleet lease, and "Ukrainization" have only served to confirm to Russia that he is acting at variance with the wishes of the Ukrainian narod.

Russia's view of Ukraine is built on deep-seated Russian conceptions of the "artificiality" of Ukraine. In the 1990s the Russian media portrayed Ukraine as a country artificially kept independent by corrupt elites, while the narod sought to reunite with Russia. Russian leaders therefore continually raised the specter of Ukraine joining the Russian-Belarusian union.

A Novosti commentary (March 31, 2008) on the eve of the Bucharest NATO summit claimed, "In fact, present-day Ukraine is an artificial heir to the Ukrainian Soviet Republic, with borders appointed at the arbitrary will and volition of Soviet rulers." At the April 2008 NATO-Russia Council, Putin said to his American counterpart George Bush, "But George, don't you understand that Ukraine is not a state." Putin claimed that most of Ukraine's territory was a Russian gift in the 1950s and that if Ukraine joined NATO, Russia would detach eastern Ukraine and the Crimea, which would end Ukraine's existence as a state (Zerkalo Nedeli, April 24, 2008). In reality, the only region transferred from Russia to Ukraine was the Crimea in 1954, while numerous Ukrainian territories were transferred to Russia in the 1920s.

Russian attitudes to the Orange Revolution, Yushchenko, and Ukraine better explain the level of vitriol in the annual gas crisis. During a press conference at his residence in Novo-Ogaryovo on January 8, Putin said, "The Ukrainian leadership is unable to organize a normal, transparent functioning economy based on market principals." He went even further, alleging that, "we are witnessing a political collapse in Ukraine." In effect, Putin placed Yushchenko in the same "illegitimate" category as Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili, with whom the Russian leadership has refused to deal since the 2008 Georgian-Russian war (Russia Today, January 8).

Another national identity aspect to the gas crisis relates to Moscow's unwillingness to accept the post-Soviet status quo. Russia recognized Ukraine's borders and its inheritance of the gas pipelines de jure but has never accepted them de facto. It is galling to Moscow that Ukrainian pipelines control 80 percent of Russia's gas exports which are central to Russia's policies to revive its great-power status (Ukrayinska Pravda, January 10).

It is in this area that Russia's inability to understand Ukrainian domestic politics is again evident. Russia will never find a politician in Ukraine who would be "pro-Russian" enough, while no Ukrainian parliament will ever vote to privatize the pipelines. In February 2007 Tymoshenko mobilized 420 parliamentary votes, including those of most Regions deputies, to prevent privatization. Tymoshenko has supported a strong line during the crisis and demanded reciprocity from Russia, permitting EU observers into Ukraine only if Moscow allowed them to enter Russia (Ukrayinska Pravda, January 9).

A deputy head of the presidential secretariat Andriy Honcharuk called for a toning down of Russian rhetoric and a "dialogue among equals" (Ukrayinska Pravda, January 12). As the failed Belarusian-Russian union shows, Honcharuk was whistling in the wind.