

Don't Lose Ukraine

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WASHINGTON, DC – United States Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's visit to Ukraine on July 4-5 provides an important opportunity to reassure Ukrainians that the US remains committed to Ukraine's sovereignty and democratic evolution.

This signal is of critical importance, because Ukraine's hard-won independence and ability to pursue closer ties to Euro-Atlantic institutions are under threat. Many Ukrainians feel that the US – indeed, most of the West – has given up on their country.

When Viktor Yanukovich was elected president in February, many Ukrainians hoped his victory would end five years of political infighting under former President Viktor Yushchenko and lead to increased stability, reform, and national unity.

These hopes have proven illusory. Rather than bringing greater stability, Yanukovich has pursued a series of policies that have exacerbated domestic tensions and set the stage for Ukraine's drift back into Russia's economic and political orbit.

In late April, the coalition headed by Yanukovich railroaded through parliament a 25-year extension of the agreement, due to expire in 2017, that allows Russia to base its Black Sea Fleet in Sevastopol in Crimea. The extension of the basing accord until 2042 was accompanied by an agreement permitting the return of Russian intelligence officers to the Sevastopol base and the termination of Ukraine's long-term intelligence cooperation with NATO.

The agreement was ratified without proper parliamentary oversight and in violation of a constitutional provision forbidding foreign bases on Ukrainian territory. It provoked a virtual riot in the parliament, complete with fistfights, hurling of eggs, and smoke bombs.

In exchange for extending the base agreement, Russia agreed to cut by 30% the price of gas that it sells to Ukraine, throwing out the January 2009 contract signed by former Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko, which ended a 17-day gas crisis.

But, given falling demand for gas, Russia had already begun renegotiating contracts in Europe and giving customers discounts. Thus, energy specialists point out that the 30% reduction simply brings the price negotiated with Yanukovych down to the current European average. Indeed, the final price is similar to the 2009 contract.

The gas agreement, moreover, undermines Ukraine's incentive to reform its inefficient and corrupt energy sector, and commits the country to buy more gas in subsequent years than it may need. At the same time, it increases energy dependence and economic reliance on Russia, hardening Ukraine into a one-dimensional – Russia-leaning – foreign policy.

That appears to be precisely the Kremlin's goal. Several days after the conclusion of the energy agreement, Prime Minister Vladimir Putin suggested at a news conference in Sochi that Ukraine's national energy company, Naftogaz, should be merged with the state-owned Russian energy giant Gazprom.

Such a move would put Ukraine's strategic network of gas pipelines under direct Russian control, and, as Tymoshenko, now the opposition leader, has noted, would be tantamount to the "full absorption of Ukraine by Russia."

The Obama administration, including Clinton, initially portrayed these steps as part of a "balancing act" on Yanukovych's part. But there is a critical difference between balancing and subservience. Yanukovych's policies will significantly weaken Ukraine's hard-won independence and its ability to pursue closer ties to the Euro-Atlantic community, which the US has supported.

The US and the European Union have a strong stake in keeping open a European option for Ukraine. A reorientation of Ukrainian foreign policy back toward Russia would shift the strategic balance in Europe and have a negative impact on the prospects for democratic change on Europe's eastern periphery, making it much more difficult for Georgia and Moldova to pursue their pro-Western course.

It would also have a dampening impact on the long-term prospects for reform in Belarus by creating an eastern bloc of Slavic nations suspicious of the West.

Finally, Ukraine's turn toward Russia would set back prospects for democratic reform in Russia itself for years, if not decades, and make any serious "reset" of US-Russian relations in the near term much more difficult.

In short, now is not the time to pursue a policy of benign neglect. Clinton's trip should signal America's firm commitment to building an independent and democratic Ukraine, and make clear that the US rejects a European security order based on spheres of influence. The EU should also be encouraged to be more forthright in agreeing to an Association Agreement and free-trade area.

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