

August 5, 2003

## THE EU AND UKRAINE: NEIGHBOR, PARTNER, MEMBER?

By Taras Kuzio

As the European Union and NATO enlarge, a Ukraine that is trying to balance both camps and that straddles the central European-Eurasian divide is not being taken seriously in the West.

President Leonid Kuchma stated in May that he expected an offer of Associate Membership for Ukraine to be given at the next annual Ukraine-EU summit in October. This is far too optimistic. Most Ukrainians take a more pessimistic stance, comparing Ukraine to Turkey, which has tried for decades to become an EU member.

Ukraine is not Morocco, which was turned down for EU membership after being told it was not "European." Neither is Ukraine in the same category as Belarus, whose relations with the EU have been frozen since 1997. Nor is Ukraine like Russia, which has not expressed an interest in EU membership and is probably too big to ever join it.

Within the CIS only two countries have expressed a desire to join the EU--Ukraine and Moldova. Of these Ukraine occupies the better position, because Moldova is saddled with the separatist region of Transdnistria. The EU will become progressively involved in the peace process in Moldova, which is to be welcomed. But Moldova's communist policies will hardly improve its chances for future EU membership.

What then of Ukraine? Geographically, Ukraine (unlike the northern African members of the EU's Wider Europe initiative announced in March) is part of the continent of Europe, which stretches to the Urals. As Ukraine's political and cultural elites continually emphasize, its culture and language are also European.

Unfortunately, these qualities are not sufficient to guarantee a warm welcome from the EU. Ukraine's Soviet past, its links to Russia and to

neo-Soviet political culture mean that, for many West Europeans, Ukraine is still psychologically outside "Europe."

This means that it is pointless to complain, as Ukrainian government ministers do, about the "double standards" applied by the EU in its treatment of Ukraine, on the one hand, and of Romania and Bulgaria on the other. The latter two countries are set to join the EU in 2007, three years after other central European states take that step in 2004.

Ukraine has to "prove" that it is "European," and it is doing a bad job in that endeavor. Despite public rhetoric to the contrary, EU leaders point privately to President Leonid Kuchma and his domestic allies and say, "We can't let them in. Look at their non-European policies." In response, President Kuchma says, "Look, the EU (that is, Europe) is blocking Ukraine. We have to turn to the CIS and Russia."

#### ASSESSING UKRAINE'S CHANCES

Four factors need to be taken into account. First, when comparing Ukraine--even to Romania--Ukraine comes out worst. As a country with a large oligarchic ruling class, Ukraine has more similarities with what remains of Russia and with the CIS. Ukraine's pro-presidential oligarchs would suffer if EU reforms were implemented in Ukraine as part of an association agreement with the EU.

At the same time, Ukraine is also different from Russia and the CIS. It is the only country in the CIS with a large, pro-Western reform movement (Viktor Yushchenko's Our Ukraine), one that finished first in the 2002 elections. In this respect Ukraine has more similarities with central Europe. Ukraine, therefore, straddles the central European-Eurasian divide.

Second, Ukraine's pro-European lobby is certainly smaller than in the countries of central Europe. In central Europe, the former Communist Parties became social democrats and, in a few cases, nationalists. There are genuine centrist political parties in central Europe but not in Ukraine. In Ukraine they have been taken over by oligarchs.

In Ukraine, the only parties ideologically committed to European integration are on the center-right. The center is ideologically amorphous and not committed to anything beyond short term gain. The communists are hard line neo-Stalinists. The socialists are genuine democratizers, but their stance on economic reform is at variance with EU conditions.

Third, following the signing of an association agreement Ukraine would be tasked with undertaking a veritable revolution in legislation and policy to qualify it for membership. This would require acceptance of EU intervention in Ukraine's domestic affairs across a broad range of issues, and would lead to a perceived erosion of national sovereignty.

Over the past three years in Ukraine anti-Americanism has grown in the media--which are controlled by the oligarchs--and complaints have been voiced describing Western criticism of poor human rights and lack of media freedom as "interference in Ukraine's domestic affairs." How would Ukraine's pro-presidential forces react if the EU were to intervene to an even greater extent as part of the accession process?

Fourth, western Europe is flummoxed by Ukrainian foreign policy. Kuchma has for years complained that the new EU border with Ukraine will, starting next year, be like a second "Yalta." This stance contradicts his avowed interest in closer ties with the EU. The confusion has only increased since Kuchma became head of the CIS Council of Heads of State and then declared his support for a CIS Free Trade Zone. It is unclear how the zone will relate to Ukraine's relations with the EU, which are set to become far closer with the new Wider Europe initiative.

But Ukraine's policy toward the CIS is also confused. How can Ukraine refuse to join the Eurasian Economic Community, which Russia always pressured Ukraine to join, but wish to create a CIS free trade zone? These contradictory steps have contributed both to a fatigue with Ukraine in the West and to a growing perception that "Ukrainians cannot make up their minds."

Closer integration with the EU would inevitably lead to a break with Russia and the CIS. This is the main reason why only the center-right in Ukraine is ideologically committed to European integration; it really does want to break with Russia and the Soviet past. It is therefore disingenuous of President Kuchma to say that European integration should not harm relations with Russia.

## FUTURE PROSPECTS

Because of the polarized character of Ukrainian domestic politics today, no real progress can be expected on Ukraine's integration into the EU or NATO. Nor can there be any return to the "strategic

partnership" with the United States that existed in the 1990s. No such changes can occur until after President Kuchma leaves office in 2004.

The EU will not sign an association agreement with Ukraine in October. As the British minister for Europe said in May, to be eligible for an EU association agreement Ukraine must resolve issues related to the murder of opposition journalist Heorhiy Gongadze.

This sort of skepticism was reinforced in Paris after Ukraine failed to send a replacement ambassador for Anatoly Zlenko, who was recalled to Kyiv in September of 2000. France cannot take Ukraine's desire to integrate into "Europe" seriously in light of the fact that Ukraine had no ambassador in France from September of 2000 until March of 2003.

EU officials understand that without an offer of full membership at some future date there is no incentive for a state to undertake all of the reforms that the EU desires. The NATO-Ukraine Action Plan, if fulfilled, will lead to membership later this decade. But the action plans for Ukraine that are being drawn up in the EU's Wider Europe initiative will not lead to full membership.

To overcome the "virtuality" in the EU-Ukrainian relationship, Ukraine needs a new president from a younger generation, one who is less corrupted by Soviet political culture and is ideologically committed to Ukraine being part of "Europe." A change of this sort would help Ukraine in much the same way as Poland's chances with the EU were enhanced by President Alexander Kwasniewski. (Even Russia's relationship with the EU dramatically improved after the appearance of President Vladimir Putin.) Such a change at the top in Kyiv might make Brussels change its attitude toward Ukraine. The 2004 elections, therefore, are of crucial importance for Ukraine's "European choice," although so far only the United States (with regard to NATO) has explicitly linked the two.

It is important for Ukraine to work within the EU's Wider Europe initiative to differentiate itself from the other Western CIS states, two of which are Communist/Sovietophile (Moldova/Belarus) and one of which has no interest in EU membership (Russia).

Ukraine should also point out the unfairness evident in the EU's offer of future membership to western Balkan states--which have been guilty of discriminatory policies against "non-native" residents--while denying membership to Ukraine, which should be rewarded for pursuing inclusive policies that successfully defused potentially

explosive ethnic rivalries. Such a "signal" would be important for states in the former Yugoslavia and Caucasus as they seek closer ties with the EU.

The practice of duplicity--saying one thing and doing another--that the presidential administration follows has led to a bad case of "Ukraine fatigue" in the West. Such duplicity is a sign of Ukraine's "un-European" neo-Soviet political culture, and it adds to doubts regarding Kyiv's sincerity in its stated goal of European integration.

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