

## **UKRAINIAN FOREIGN MINISTER CHARMS WASHINGTON**

By **Taras Kuzio**

Ukraine's new Foreign Minister, Borys Tarasyuk, visited Washington, DC, on March 10-11 to prepare for a four-day state visit by President Viktor Yushchenko in the first week of April. Tarasyuk's career includes an earlier stint as Ukraine's foreign minister (1998-2000), ambassador to the Benelux countries (Belgium, the Netherlands, and Luxembourg), and as head of mission to NATO. He was removed in October 2000 after intense lobbying by Russian President Vladimir Putin.

The two high-level visits signify a return to the "golden era" of U.S.-Ukrainian relations under President Bill Clinton in the 1990s following very cool relations between President George W. Bush and Leonid Kuchma after 2000. Addressing the International Republican Institute (IRI), Tarasyuk called for the revival of a "viable political dialogue on the highest political level" ([iri.org](http://iri.org)). He advocated reviving the Ukrainian-American Consultative Committee, which facilitated political dialogue during the Clinton era but went into decline during Bush's first term.

Four factors contribute to the new optimism, but two concerns also merit caution.

First, Tarasyuk, unlike Yushchenko, speaks fluent English. He charmed his audiences at IRI and at the George Washington University ([mfa.gov.ua](http://mfa.gov.ua)). Political culture is important in signifying who is "one of us" and who is not.

The United States and other Western governments eventually came to realize that Kuchma and his allies had a completely different political culture. U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice never forgave Kuchma for his deception over the dispatch of Ukrainian arms to Macedonia during its civil war in 2001. In contrast, Tarasyuk and Yushchenko share a political culture that is recognized as "one of us." The importance of personal communications cannot be over-emphasized and will only be increased by Yushchenko's American-born spouse, Katya, and Tarasyuk's facility with English.

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Second, Tarasyuk noted the cold shoulder given to Ukraine by what he termed "Europe" (meaning the EU) and then expressed thanks for the support given to Ukraine by IRI Chairman and Senator John McCain, the U.S. Congress, and Senator Richard Lugar (Bush's Special Envoy to Ukraine in round two of the 2004 elections). Yushchenko will address both houses of Congress in April, and he has also accepted an invitation to speak at IRI.

No doubt recalling then-U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell's refusal to recognize Ukraine's official presidential election results on November 24, Tarasyuk argued that during the 2004 elections the United States "was a friend giving hope that the democratic world would not turn a blind eye" should non-democratic forces attempt to rig the election. The United States "was a friend from whom we expected solidarity and support" and it "did not make any concessions behind the Ukrainian people's backs," Tarasyuk told the IRI audience.

Third, Tarasyuk sought to dispel any notion that the planned withdrawal of Ukrainian troops from Iraq, where they are the fourth-largest contingent, should be interpreted as "anti-American." The U.S. side claimed to understand that Yushchenko needed to fulfill his election pledge. Notably, U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld spoke to Tarasyuk at the U.S. Embassy reception and talked with him the next day in a more official capacity.

As a commentator pointed out in *Ukrayinska pravda* (March 15), perhaps this exchange signified that U.S.-Ukraine relations are no longer gauged solely by Ukraine's contribution to Iraq. Tarasyuk told his IRI audience that Kyiv would work to minimize any disruptions caused by its withdrawal.

Fourth, Tarasyuk emphasized that the United States and Ukraine "share the same values: global promotion of democracy, struggle against terrorism, strengthening of European and Trans-Atlantic security." This is again related to issues of political culture. Tarasyuk promised to ensure that there would no longer be "Ukraine fatigue" in the West, as President Yushchenko and Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko "have the political will to make these changes" that will make Ukraine eligible for WTO membership and Euro-Atlantic integration.

The two yellow flags deal with Russia and are interrelated.

First, it is surprising that Tarasyuk, long an ardent supporter of Ukraine's membership in NATO, did not mention that goal even once during his IRI speech. NATO membership is far more sensitive to both the United States and Russia than is EU membership. Ironically, the EU's

continued disregard of Ukraine's desire for EU membership, because "old Europe" does not wish to upset Russia, will only push Kyiv to integrate faster into NATO, which Russia wants even less.

The new Ukrainian leadership sees NATO membership as a stepping-stone to EU membership, not as a way to defend the country against Russia. The U.S.-Ukraine partnership, Tarasyuk pointed out, "is not an alliance against any third party" (i.e. Russia). In Russia the United States is often mistakenly equated with NATO.

Second, the United States is key to Ukraine's membership in NATO. Currently, pro-Ukrainian views dominate Washington because of the Orange Revolution and Yushchenko's integrity. Opinions about Russia, however, are now far more despondent compared to the positive atmosphere afforded Putin in his, and Bush's, first terms in office.

At the same time, U.S. policy has an inherent contradiction in how it deals with Russia and Ukraine. This inconsistency was clearly seen during Bush's February tour of Europe. In Brussels, Bush again declared U.S. support for worldwide democratization. Bush met Yushchenko in Brussels, and the Ukrainian leader no doubt welcomed this U.S. position. But days later in Bratislava, Bush spoke in realist and geopolitical terms with an autocratic leader, Putin, and kept democratization issues in the background.