



U.S.-Ukraine Relations Return To "Golden Era"

By Taras Kuzio

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Ukrainian President Viktor Yushchenko will visit Washington for a four-day state visit in the first week of April. The visit will mark a return to the "golden era" of U.S.-Ukrainian relations, only once seen in the Bill Clinton era, from 1994 to 2000, which coincided with Leonid Kuchma's first term in office. The "golden era" followed a period of neglect by the U.S., when it focused exclusively on Russia, following the disintegration of the USSR.

During Kuchma's second term in office, U.S.-Ukrainian relations went into the doldrums. The Kuchmagate scandal was followed by the Kolchugate one. Kuchma was shunned by Washington and was ignored during the 2002 Prague-NATO summit. After 9/11, the U.S. shifted focus to Russia, which sought to ingratiate itself with the U.S. in the international campaign against terrorism.

The election of Yushchenko and the Orange Revolution were prominently featured by most U.S. and Western European media. This has created a totally different, dare I say pro-Ukrainian atmosphere, in Washington. Unfortunately for Russia, its image has declined at the same time as Ukraine's has gone up. The U.S. and Western Europe are disillusioned by Vladimir Putin, following his election for a second term.

Ukraine's new foreign minister, Borys Tarasiuk, visited Washington D.C. on March 10-11 to prepare the groundwork for Yushchenko's trip. Tarasiuk served as foreign minister from 1998-2000, and prior to that as ambassador to Benelux (Belgium, Netherlands, Luxembourg) and head of mission to NATO. He was removed in October 2000 after intense lobbying by Putin, which heralded the start of Ukraine's re-orientation to Russia under Kuchma.

In Tarasiuk's speech to the International Republican Institute (IRI), he called for a revival of a "viable political dialogue on the highest political level." This, Tarasiuk proposed, should include the revival of the Ukrainian-American Consultative Committee, which played an important role facilitating political dialogue during the Clinton era but which went into decline during Bush's first term and Kuchma's second terms in office.

Tarasiuk, who unlike Yushchenko speaks fluent English, charmed his audiences during his two presentations at the IRI and George Washington University. In contrast to Kuchma, Tarasiuk and Yushchenko's political culture is recognized as one that the U.S. and its Western allies can relate to. The importance of this personal communication cannot be over-emphasized and will only be increased by Yushchenko's American-born spouse, Katya, and Tarasiuk's knowledge of English.

No doubt recalling then U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell's refusal to recognize the official election results on November 24, Tarasiuk argued during his speech to the IRI that during the 2004 elections the U.S. "was a friend giving hope that the democratic world would not turn a blind eye" if non-democratic forces attempted to rig the election. The USA "was a friend from whom we expected solidarity and support" and

it "did not make any concessions behind the Ukrainian people's backs," Tarasiuk added.

This was true only to some extent. Ukrainian officials have complained that the U.S. only waded into the Ukrainian elections after round one, when Bush sent his personal envoy, Senator Richard Lugar, to Kyiv. Until round one, which took place only three days before the U.S. elections, the U.S. was highly circumspect in its comments on what had by then become a very dirty election campaign. The reason? You said it, Iraq.

Tarasiuk sought to dispel any notion that the planned withdrawal of Ukrainian troops from Iraq, where they comprise the fourth largest contingent and serve under Polish control, is "anti-American." The American side claimed during his visit that they understood Yushchenko had to fulfil his election pledge. Ukraine is to pull out its troops by December, not earlier, as previously stated. The reason? So that they are no longer in Iraq by the March 2006 elections.

Tarasiuk emphasized that the USA and Ukraine "share the same values: global promotion of democracy, the struggle against terrorism and the strengthening of European and Transatlantic security." President Yushchenko and Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko "have the political will to make the changes" that will make Ukraine eligible for WTO membership and Euro-Atlantic integration.

Despite the return to the Clinton "golden era," the U.S. continues to have a multi-vector foreign policy on Ukraine and Russia.

Tarasiuk, long an ardent supporter of Ukraine's membership in NATO, did not mention it once during his visit to the USA in order not to upset his American hosts. NATO membership is far more sensitive to both the USA and Russia than EU membership. Ironically, if the EU continues to ignore Ukraine's desire for EU membership, this will only push Kyiv to integrate faster into NATO. The new Ukrainian leadership sees NATO membership as a stepping stone to EU membership, and not in military-security terms as a way of defending the country against Russia.

Ukrainian Defense Minister Anatoliy Grytsenko and his colleagues at the Razumkov Center think tank, which he previously headed, believe this could be as early as 2009, during Yushchenko's first term in office. Ukraine will only raise this goal after the March 2006 elections.

Although NATO is an alliance of equals, as George Orwell commented, some are more equal than others. The USA is the key to Ukraine's membership in NATO. Currently, pro-Ukrainian views dominate Washington because of the Orange revolution and Yushchenko's integrity.

At the same time, U.S. policy has a built-in contradiction in the manner in which it is dealing with Russia and Ukraine, which was clearly seen during Bush's February tour of Europe. In Brussels, Bush spoke in the same manner as in his inaugural and state of the union speeches: i.e., U.S. support for world-wide democratization. Bush met Yushchenko in Brussels, who no doubt welcomed this U.S. position.

In Bratislava, on the other hand, Bush spoke in realist and geo-political terms with an autocratic leader, Putin, and kept democratization issues to the background. U.S. Secretary of State Condoleza Rice is known for her Russophile and realist views of

international affairs. Democratization issues are far less important for her than they were for her predecessor, Colin Powell.

The Yushchenko visit to the U.S. will signify a return to the "golden era" of U.S.-Ukraine relations in the second half of the 1990s, when Ukraine was the third largest recipient of U.S. aid. The world has changed though since 9/11, and aid to Ukraine and the former USSR is less of a priority than to Iraq, Afghanistan and the Middle East. Ultimately, it is up to Ukraine's newly-elected leaders to prove through their domestic reforms that they - unlike Kuchma - are genuinely committed to integrating Ukraine into the Euro-Atlantic community of democracies.

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