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Ukraine and Euro-Atlantic integration

By Taras Kuzio,

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To many Western observers, Ukraine's foreign policy appears confused, indecisive and shot through with contradictions. It is instructive to compare Russia and Ukraine in this regard. While the two countries' foreign policies are fundamentally different in theory, they are becoming increasingly similar in practice.

Russia has never expressed an interest in NATO or EU membership. It continues to see itself as a great power, even though its GDP is smaller than that of the Netherlands. Russia is interested in participating in the G8. While cooperating with the United States against international terrorism, it is also seeking an alignment with the Chinese to counter-balance U.S. hegemony.

As a member of NATO, Russia would have a single vote - the same as a country like Denmark. Instead, it prefers to give the appearance of dealing with NATO as an "equal" through the NATO-Russia Council. Unlike Ukraine, Russia under President Boris Yeltsin vigorously opposed NATO enlargement and continued to see NATO as a threat. Moscow was furious when it failed to organise a CIS anti-NATO lobby during NATO's military action against Serbia in 1999.

Geopolitics - not reform - is paramount for Russia. It has always sought to dominate the CIS and transform it into a viable structure with supra-national institutions. Moscow is backing Sovietophile Belarus, Communist Moldova and authoritarian regimes throughout the CIS. In its relations with Ukraine, Russia has been President Leonid Kuchma's most loyal supporter since the Kuchmagate crisis began in 2000. Although Russia has

enthusiastically endorsed the international struggle against terrorism since Sept. 11, it has in the past covertly backed separatist movements in Georgia, Moldova and Azerbaijan.

Ukraine's foreign policy is quite different, at least in theory. Traditionally, Ukraine has been opposed to deep CIS integration, suspicious of Russian-led institutions (such as the Eurasian Economic Community), and in favor of balancing NATO and the United States against Russia. It seeks NATO and EU membership as part of a long-touted commitment to "return to Europe." Ukraine has never opposed NATO enlargement, and it has been the most enthusiastic CIS country cooperating with NATO through Partnership for Peace and bilateral programmes.

In an article "Ukraine's Euro-Atlantic Choice: Is Failure Inevitable?" published in late 2002, James Sherr, a specialist with the Royal Military College at Sandhurst who has long been involved in the British Ministry of Defence's military cooperation with Ukraine, described the impact of cooperation with NATO upon Ukraine's armed forces: "No one of significance in Ukraine's military establishment believes that Russia could 'support' this reform. In all the areas where progress is sought - low-intensity operations, joint operations, professionalisation, planning and budgetary transparency, civil-military collaboration - NATO is seen as a repository of experience and expertise."

He contrasted this with the Ukrainian military's belief that Russia has undertaken "inconsistent and internally contested reforms."

"In addition, Russia's aims are mistrusted and its methods regarded with suspicion," he added.

Ukrainian foreign policy

in practice

These theoretical differences between Ukrainian and Russian foreign policies have narrowed in practice during Kuchma's second term in office.

The Rada has never ratified the CIS Charter, so Ukraine is technically not a member of the CIS. Nor is it an "Associate Member," as Kuchma pointed out last month, since no such status exists. Even so, Ukraine has progressively increased its participation in the organization since the mid 1990s. The CIS is no longer a "civilised divorce," as it was described under President Leonid Kravchuk, and it clearly continues to render an important psychological service to post-Soviet leaders. As Kuchma recently said, in Moscow he can find a common language unlike in the West where the sides often seem to be speaking at cross-purposes. The CIS is currently growing in strength under Russia's President Vladimir Putin. Putin's more pragmatic policies towards CIS states have been backed up by growing ties between CIS oligarchs.

Ukraine is an observer at the EEC, the former CIS Customs Union, and is under severe Russian pressure to join. Geographically, Ukraine's membership would allow Moldova to join. Ukraine has been a long time "Associate Member" of the CIS Anti-Defence Agreement, a full member of the CIS Inter-Parliamentary Assembly and the CIS Anti-Terrorist Council (run in Moscow by the Russian domestic intelligence agency, the FSB).

Although Ukraine has made tremendous progress in its relationship with NATO, last year's Iraqi arms scandal has been a major setback to its plans to join. Ukraine has set its sights on membership at either of the next two NATO summits in 2007 or 2012. But this will only be possible if Ukraine improves its non-military reforms, and this is dependent on who is elected president in 2004.

Meanwhile, relations with the EU remain poor. Ukraine is the only CIS state, apart from Moldova, that seeks EU membership. However, the EU has never considered offering membership to CIS countries and only signed partnership and cooperation (not

association) agreements with CIS countries such as Ukraine. Given its worsening record on democratization and human rights, Ukraine's chances for joining the EU are unlikely.

Ukrainian, Russian foreign policies are merging

Ukraine cannot be entirely written off as a typical CIS authoritarian state. It differs from the remainder of the CIS in that it possesses a sizeable domestic pro-Western and pro-reform movement. Moldova is the only other CIS country whose parliament is strong enough to serve as a counter-balance to the executive. Reformist and anti-presidential forces have public majority support. Based on the 2002 election results and a change in the election law to fully proportional, the anti-oligarchic opposition could possibly win an outright majority in the 2006 elections.

However, Ukraine is also very different to Central-Eastern Europe and the Baltic states. Many Ukrainian and some diaspora scholars are given to comparing the country positively to other CIS states. But this is not an appropriate comparison to make given that Ukraine alone among CIS states is seeking Euro-Atlantic integration. A better comparison would be with non-CIS countries (such as Bulgaria and Romania), and here Ukraine falls down.

Two significant factors are increasingly hampering Ukraine's Euro-Atlantic integration and drawing it closer to the CIS. Firstly, the growing importance since 1998-99 of oligarch support for Kuchma. The requirements of reform, a transparent budget and political system, free media and clampdown on corruption, all policies required for Euro-Atlantic integration, would harm the interests of this new (and former Soviet) ruling class. Russian support for Kuchma is strengthening this oligarchic alliance, as Putin has himself failed to eliminate their power in Russia.

Secondly, Ukraine's Euro-Atlantic integration is weak because the political center is not ideologically committed to it. The national democrats are committed to Euro-Atlantic

integration. At the opposite end of the ideological spectrum, the Communists are opposed. In the countries of Central-Eastern Europe, the center is also ideologically committed and they are backed in turn by former Communists who have become social democrats, as in Poland.

Such a consensus is lacking in Ukraine. The center consists of oligarchic groups whose commitment to Euro-Atlantic integration - as to anything - is purely rhetorical and dependent on how it affects their clan and financial interests. For example, the pro-Kuchma For a United Ukraine bloc backed a stronger presidency during the 2002 elections. Today, their successors support the opposite.

During Kuchma's first term in office (1994-99), the centrist-oligarchs and executive saw Russia as the principal threat. Forming an alliance with the national democrats, they leaned towards NATO and the United States. This threat largely disappeared after Russia recognised Ukraine's borders and Putin replaced Yeltsin in 1999-2000. While seeking to maintain Ukraine within Russia's sphere of influence, Putin is not challenging Ukraine's independent statehood.

During Kuchma's second term in office, the oligarchs and executive have begun to perceive a new threat coming from the United States, and this has led to growing anti-American rhetoric. Kuchma seems to believe sincerely that Washington is behind the Kuchmagate scandal. This anti-Americanism is clearly grounded in the Soviet origins of Ukraine's new oligarchic class and seems to have little popular basis. A study entitled "What the World Thinks in 2002" just released by the Washington-based Pew Research Center found that Ukrainians held more favorable views of Americans than Poles, Bulgarians, Czechs, Russians or Slovaks. In fact, the Czechs, Slovaks and Russians had far higher negative views of Americans than Ukrainians.

Ukraine's vague multi-vector policy has easily been adjusted from a Western to an Eastern leaning orientation. The oligarchs' only attempt to find an intellectual support for this re-orientation was the slogan "To Europe With Russia!" Although this slogan is not official

Foreign Ministry policy, it has become so in practice. In effect, Kuchma has returned to the views he first aired in the 1994 presidential elections. Needless to say, “To Europe with Russia!” will take Ukraine to Russia, but never to Europe.

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