

# RUSSIAN-UKRAINIAN RELATIONS AFTER THE GEORGIAN WAR

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There is little doubt that the August 2008 crisis in Georgia affected relations between Russia and Ukraine. At the time, a number of analysts voiced serious concerns that Ukraine would be the next addressee of Russia's growing neo-imperialist assertiveness. These concerns now look even more justified. Since the beginning of autumn (and *de facto* for far longer) Ukraine has been in a state of political crisis and lacking an effective and responsible system of governance. It indeed appears to be a lucrative target for outside influence.

Surely, Moscow is tempted to exploit the weakness of its neighbor and take revenge for the Orange Revolution, the biggest foreign policy debacle that Vladimir Putin has experienced throughout his years in power. Yet, many factors place constraints on Russian behavior. The real situation, and consequently the decisionmaking process, is far more debatable than alarmist accounts about "Ukraine being next" are comfortable to admit.

However, "debatable" does not mean unpredictable. It can be argued that the continuation of the status quo -- a process of muddling through -- is more likely in the immediate future of Russian-Ukrainian relations than a revision resulting from Russian actions. This status quo is far from the "strategic partnership" rhetoric that parties still occasionally use to describe their mutual relationship, but it is even further away from open confrontation, notwithstanding the wide range of economic and political issues that are constantly surfacing.

## **Changing Context: Emotions**

So what has changed since August 2008? It is impossible not to notice the worsening emotional atmosphere, a result of the desire of Ukraine's president, Viktor Yushchenko, and circles around him to express solidarity with Georgia, combined with the Russian belief (justified or not) that armaments Ukraine supplied to Georgia were used to kill Russian citizens. Stories about Ukrainian air defense systems and their crews have a stronger power of persuasion today than analogous stories about female snipers from the time of the first Chechen War. In the 1990s, the "brotherhood" paradigm was still alive and well; adversarial behavior was considered an exception, an initiative of individuals. Today, such tales fit well with the image of a generally unfriendly Ukrainian state.

The general atmosphere of nervousness, along with the uncertainty in Ukraine's domestic political situation, likely dictated a number of Ukrainian actions that are hard to consider well-calculated unless their purpose was to provoke Moscow. In August, President Yushchenko attempted to decree a new regime for the ships of the Black Sea Fleet to enter and depart Ukraine's territorial waters that was much more restrictive than before. Ukraine's requested level of "transparency" would make missions almost pointless militarily, as the ships would have to report their plans in advance. Short of naval conflict, this regime cannot be enforced, as it was not agreed upon bilaterally. The very attempt to introduce it, however, had an obvious political impact.

Subsequently, Ukrainian authorities tried to stop the broadcast of Russian television channels by national cable operators, prompting Russian protests. While the rationale behind this decision might be understandable – Russian broadcast media could be considered a channel for spreading unwelcome political influences -- the timing of the action is not: if Russian television has failed to undermine Ukrainian statehood in seventeen years of independence, why has it suddenly become so dangerous?

Finally, in November, Viktor Yushchenko stated that Russian president Dmitry Medvedev's refusal to come to Kyiv to participate in a commemoration of the victims of the Holodomor (the 1930s famine) "insults the memory of the dead." This was a statement that went far beyond diplomatic protocol.

## **Changing Context: Rational Choices**

Russian-Georgian relations in this decade demonstrate only too well the role of emotions and sensitivities in Russian policymaking. This may still have implications for Ukraine as well. If emotions are put aside, however, one can conclude that the situation does not warrant any urgent countermeasures on Russia's part.

To begin with, the turmoil in Ukraine is also a problem for Russia. It is very difficult to exercise structural influence in a country where no internal political deal can hold longer than several months, and where the ability of a chosen ally to keep a promise is limited by the unreliability of its temporary political companions. Furthermore, today's Kyiv is so different from both contemporary Russia and the pre-Orange Ukraine that Moscow once knew that even a proper understanding of the dynamic situation, let alone a timely reaction to the changes, is difficult.

On a day-to-day level, this explains the fluctuations between Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko and opposition leader Viktor Yanukovich as Moscow's major potential ally. Yanukovich would seem to be the preferred choice: he is a proven partner and, unlike Tymoshenko, has never published an article in a prominent Western journal called "Containing Russia." However, Ukraine's political crisis has brought back a strategic debate from the 1990s on whether an effort to wield post-imperial influence in neighboring states is useful to Russia or only imports instability. Interestingly, the latter position is now argued by Modest Kolerov, formerly the head of the department in the presidential administration dealing with compatriots abroad and an individual whose views are normally far from benevolent toward Ukraine.

Second, unfortunate as it is for the country, Ukraine for the time being will be left in the grey zone of European security. Unsurprisingly, a European Union-Ukraine summit in September failed to offer anything that would resemble a membership perspective to Ukraine. In December, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization also did not grant Ukraine a Membership Action Plan (MAP). The weakening of the challenge of NATO enlargement to Ukraine means that Moscow can approach the situation far more calmly. There is no need to immediately undertake measures of direct pressure.

Third, Russia does not seek open confrontation with the West, in general, or Europe, in particular. After the Georgian crisis, Moscow made a considerable effort to demonstrate that its actions vis-à-vis Georgia represented a special case and were not part of a trend toward reinstating imperial predominance in the entire region of the Western post-Soviet states. Although Moscow had to be satisfied with the fact that its uncompromising stance on the issue of South Ossetian and Abkhazian independence ended with Europe returning to "business-almost-as-usual," Brussels will not give Russia unlimited leeway. A major crisis in Russian-Ukrainian relations, should it occur, could provoke a stronger response by a united Europe, given Ukraine's size and its role in European energy security.

Fourth, Ukraine is not like Georgia in a key way. Like the latter, Ukraine has an emerging political nation which, regardless of its ethnic composition, has demonstrated the ability to rally around the flag and resist outside pressure —

recall the tension surrounding the Tuzla island boundary dispute in 2003. However, if one were to think the “unthinkable” (according to Putin, a military conflict between Ukraine and Russia), Ukraine has a conventional military capability that would allow it to inflict upon an invader far greater damage than Georgia did during its war with Russia (and Russian casualties were large enough even then). In November, Ukrainian Defense Minister Yuri Yekhanurov signaled Kyiv’s readiness to protect the country’s military security interests by announcing an intention to redeploy troops closer to Ukraine’s southern and southeastern borders (even if the plan ultimately does not materialize due to a lack of funds). As for energy, Russia knows very well the degree it depends on Ukrainian transit routes and storage capacity for its gas export to Europe, and that any protracted conflict in the field will have a price tag.

This conclusion bridges the gap to the last, but not least, point. An economization of relations between Russia and Ukraine has taken place. Russia has a huge economic interest in Ukraine, even if murky and non-transparent, and an aggressive policy might be very damaging for Russia’s various economic actors, especially in a time of global recession.

## **Inertial Policy**

Russian decisionmakers may well assess the situation differently. Russian policymaking is a black box, and it is very difficult to trace the connection between inputs and outputs. However, the policy outcomes that appeared in the fall suggest that the choices made are of a status quo rather than revisionist type.

First and foremost, despite a number of loud statements to the contrary, Russia did not seek to withdraw from the 1997 Treaty on Friendship, Cooperation and Partnership. Instead, the treaty was extended. This was an act of primary significance, as with this treaty Russia recognizes the territorial integrity of Ukraine within its current borders. Even though this does not rule out the possibility of future actions to mobilize pro-Russian and even secessionist sentiment in Crimea, irredentist claims will continue to lack a formal point of reference.

Second, none other than Russian Deputy Prime Minister Sergei Ivanov, known for his rather hawkish attitudes on many issues, said in October that if the lease agreement for the Black Sea Fleet was not extended after 2017, he could imagine it leaving Sevastopol. Admittedly, this statement ran contrary to many other, no less official, ones which asserted that Russia was interested in doing its utmost to make sure the Fleet will keep its basing rights. Yet it leaves hope that interstate negotiations could indeed focus on the details of the troops’ withdrawal.

Third, 2009 is unlikely to begin with energy drama, despite the chronic gas controversy concerning future prices and current debts which repeats itself at

least almost every autumn. According to media reports, Ukraine has more than average gas reserves due to a warm autumn, whereas recession-related consumption decreases in Europe will only raise Russian exporters' dependence on Ukraine's storage capacity. In this situation, cutting supplies of gas to Ukraine would create more problems for Russia than it would solve, whereas reaching an overarching compromise would be in both countries' mutual interest. Indeed, in October, Prime Ministers Tymoshenko and Putin signed a memorandum that stipulates direct contracts between Russian Gazprom and Ukraine's Naftogaz, eliminating the institute of intermediaries, as well as a transitional period of three years for Ukraine to start paying market prices for gas. Ukrainian authorities also said they had reached an understanding with Gazprom concerning supply and transit contracts until 2019.

Finally, Moscow will continue to react in its usual rhetorical way when it disagrees with Ukraine's policies in the humanitarian sphere, whether in regards to Russian media or differing views of historical events. This approach, however, contains nothing new.

## **Conclusions**

Ukraine's current foreign policy difficulties are primarily a result of the power ambitions of its elite and, particularly, the failure of the Orange forces to create an effective, honest, and truly reformist government. This is the major reason why Ukraine has not received a NATO MAP. Supporters of the idea have lacked a convincing argument as to why a country whose politicians cannot find a common language at home should be given a seat at a table where crucial security decisions will be made.

This has also been the major source of trouble in Ukraine's relations with Russia. After the Orange Revolution, it seemed that Russia had lost the role of kingmaker in Ukraine's domestic politics and a veto on its foreign policy choices. If there are now reasons to believe that Russia is regaining its position, it is because it feels invited to exploit the emerging rifts within Ukraine.

In this situation, the West should be primarily interested in restoring a credible system of governance in Ukraine, based on principles of electoral democracy, political responsibility, and accountability before the people, and in fostering new political elites, rather than in bringing the country into Western security alliances.

Making Ukraine a success story for its own citizens would have a positive effect on Russia as well as on Russian-Ukrainian relations. Western priorities should be geared toward helping Ukraine address its economic problems, which will worsen amid the global crisis, as well as on issues of energy efficiency. The current period of lower energy prices is an opportune moment for adapting to the market system, but during a recession preventing the temptation to return to

special deals will not be an easy task.

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