

Is a Junior Partner *Really* a Partner?

MAKING SENSE OF UKRAINIAN FOREIGN POLICY

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There is a widely held belief among observers regarding the extent of change that has been implemented by Ukrainian President Victor Yanukovich and his team, particularly in the field of foreign policy. Indeed, Yanukovich has moved swiftly and decisively in the first months of his presidency. While agreeing on the scale of the new team's initiatives, however, analysts often disagree about everything else. Some observers say his new foreign policy is a kind of revolution altering much of what has been done by previous presidents and dramatically shifting the priorities of Ukraine. Others believe that the president is merely returning to the politics of the time before ex-president Viktor Yushchenko, rather than inventing an entirely new agenda. Some think that Yanukovich's policies are tactical, while others characterize them as strategic. Some believe that what the new team is doing is mostly caused by domestic political calculations; others hint about external pressures. All in all, there are numerous routes of explanation, none conclusive, and so Yanukovich's actions must be closely examined.

Relations with Russia

There is little doubt that the most dramatic shift has taken place in Ukraine's relations with Russia. Others might see the abandoning of the aspiration to join the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and the return of Ukraine's non-aligned status as the most dramatic move, but these developments are closely connected. Indeed, nothing has attracted more attention than the new tone in relations between Kyiv and Moscow. The "gas for fleet" deal, whereby Ukraine gets less expensive gas in return for agreeing to a long-term extension of the Black Sea Fleet's lease, clearly stands out. This was much more about the fleet than about the gas. Although it was reported by authorities that Kyiv had to go ahead with the deal because of the critical state of the Ukrainian economy, such official pronouncements were a smokescreen. The gas discount was introduced as a way to sell the prolongation of the base lease to both domestic and international audiences. One can be sure that if Ukraine's economy was not in critical condition, the deal would have anyhow gone through. Also, the two narratives – "this

was in Ukraine's interests" and "we had no other choice" – seem to contradict one another. Either it was a genuinely good thing for Ukraine, or it was a rather negative move done under the influence and/or pressure of something or someone.

Certainly, military concerns are not at the heart of Russia's willingness to keep its Black Sea Fleet at Sevastopol. Many consider that the military significance of this navy is limited. It can be used against Georgia, as in 2008, but that is all. Besides, if the fleet exists only for military purposes, then Russia can easily operate it from its own territory. There is also the appalling technical state of the fleet. Russia thus needs the fleet in Sevastopol for political and geopolitical reasons. It wants to be anchored in Crimea to maintain its influence there, to strengthen its presence in this volatile region, and ultimately diminish Ukraine's sovereignty.

Other complaints about the Kharkiv Agreement also existed. One is that the deal must have been in the works prior to Yanukovich's election (the signing of the deal happened very quickly indeed). At the same time, preparations were kept in unprecedented secrecy. Not only did the government not launch a public discussion on what they knew was a contentious issue, some top-ranking officials, like vice prime-minister Serhiy Tihipko, were not in the know. Such secrecy runs contrary to any notion of democratic decision making and clearly reveals that there were reasons to hide the entire process.

Certainly, the Kharkiv Agreement has not been the only "achievement" of Ukrainian-Russian relations in recent months. For example, Russian companies have been aiming to move aggressively into the most lucrative and strategic spheres of the Ukrainian economy. A new pro-Russian ideological discourse was implemented within the country, manifesting itself around the May 9 Victory Day holiday and also during Russian Patriarch Cyril's July 2010 visit. Were such moves made to signal the true attitude of the ruling party and the most loyal portion of its electorate, or simply to please Russia? It is not entirely clear whether the new team in Kyiv is ready to give Russia everything it wants or, instead, seeks to impose conditions on relations with the Kremlin.

One might think that Yanukovich and his inner circle believe they can give Russia some of the key items it desires and leave it at that; Russia would be satisfied and provide staunch support to Yanukovich for years to come. The case of Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko has apparently not taught the current Ukrainian regime anything. The government has quickly discovered that Russia will never be fully satisfied and that it will continue to ask for (or demand) more.

And here the notion of drawing lines vis-à-vis Russia surfaces. Should such lines be drawn? Where should they be drawn? Who should deliver them to the Kremlin and how? There is a tendency to see some of Yanukovich's recent steps as an attempt to draw one such line. The president and his team have blocked a plan to merge Gazprom with the Ukrainian state oil and gas company Naftogaz, criticized the South Stream project, and made contradictory statements concerning recognition of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. So was all this an attempt to draw a line, or merely a sophisticated public relations game with the purpose of showing that the current rulers of Ukraine have not

sold out to the Kremlin? Perhaps it is too early to give a definitive answer to this question. After all, the ruling party itself is not monolithic and there is a certain power struggle going on within the executive branch.

However, one thing is clear: Ukraine has become a junior partner to Russia. While declaring a new era of pragmatism and stability in its relations with Russia, the new government has in fact allowed these relations to become very uneven. These relations are not problem-free. Perhaps in a way, this is a good sign, as relations could only become problem-free if Ukraine were to fall under Russia's total domination.

Western Relations

Yanukovich's personal history regarding relations with NATO is contradictory. He was a member of the government (even for a time serving as prime minister) when Ukraine's ex-president, Leonid Kuchma, proposed Ukrainian membership in 2002-2003. Yanukovich's Party of Regions parliamentary faction voted unanimously in 2003 in favor of a measure that declared NATO integration to be one of Ukraine's major priorities. During his ice-breaking visit to Washington in the fall of 2006, Yanukovich stated that he was personally in favor of Ukraine becoming a member of NATO, even though, unfortunately, public opinion in Ukraine was not ready for such a move.

In the first months of his presidency, Yanukovich moved quickly to discard the Euro-Atlantic integration project. A law on the "foundations of domestic and foreign policy," which passed in early June of this year, sailed through parliament without discussion— characteristic of how vital strategic decisions are now made in Ukraine. Furthermore, it is a vague document, and when it comes to foreign policy, it seems to have one function only: to take NATO membership off the table.

Euro-Atlantic integration has now been substituted with a doctrine of non-alignment. This concept remains ill-defined and confusing, especially when applied to the reality of Ukraine's foreign policy. Also, it falls short of providing an understanding of how Ukraine should provide for its national security, if not through the NATO-based system of collective security. There is a lot of talk now of Ukraine being able to play an active role in a new European security architecture, but such suggestions lack any concrete meaning or detail. Russia, in its turn, has welcomed the change in Ukraine's orientation. Russia now positions itself as an alternative security provider for Ukraine. As was to be expected, Moscow now calls Kyiv's attention to the possibility of actively cooperating with the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). It is not a secret that many pro-presidential forces view this idea with favor.

In the meantime, cooperation with NATO remains formally alive. The "Sea Breeze" military exercises over the last summer took place as planned. Only the most radical, anti-Western, pro-Russian party, Natalia Vitrenko's Progressive Socialists, actively protested against the exercises in Odessa. The fact that the very same parliamentary deputies who blocked such trainings in previous years now vote for them to take place is yet another manifestation of the cynicism and opportunism of the Ukrainian political class.

While the government makes all the right noises regarding its commitment to NATO cooperation, questions remain. A special NATO division within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has ceased to exist. The interagency coordinating body on Euro-Atlantic integration has been dismissed. Staff in the Ukrainian mission to NATO have been cut drastically. Not to mention that the best experts in the field have been pushed out of the decision-making process and two leading government-related think tanks have been shut down. The problem thus becomes: Who in Ukraine is responsible for cooperating with NATO?

Rather than NATO, the European Union has become Ukraine's top foreign policy priority, based on the statements of the presidential team. Clearly, this is seen as a substitute for everything that was NATO-oriented. The EU is a safe topic for the president to speak about to Ukrainians. He knows that prospects for membership are remote, that the EU will not be ready any time soon to seriously talk about Ukraine's membership prospects, and that while public opinion is mostly supportive of integration with Western Europe, many Ukrainians tend to know very little about what the EU is and what European integration entails. What Yanukovich also knows is that Russia is not alarmed when it comes to Ukraine's "European choice." This is true, but only because politicians in Moscow do not see Ukrainian integration into the EU as a realistic option.

Apart from rhetoric, the task of European integration appears in only twelfth place in the above-mentioned law on the foundations of Ukrainian domestic and foreign policy. More importantly, the reforms needed to facilitate Ukraine's integration into the EU have stalled. There seems to be no progress on concrete tasks: opening a free trade area with the EU, signing an agreement of association, and introducing a visa-free regime for Ukrainian citizens to enter the Schengen zone. Symbolically enough, the position of vice-premier on European integration has been abandoned.

Finally, Ukrainian-U.S. relations have not seen as much change as have relations between Kyiv and Moscow. Some feared that with the advent of Yanukovich these relations would experience a downturn. Nothing of this sort has happened. On the contrary, the Obama administration seems to be quite content with Yanukovich. For one thing, a pro-Russian turn in Ukrainian foreign policy does not greatly alarm policymakers in Washington. Coupled with the United States' own reset of relations with Russia, Ukrainian-Russian rapprochement is seen in a favorable light. The administration understands that as Ukrainian-Russian relations continue to improve, the need for the United States to intervene and choose sides diminishes proportionally.

Another aspect that one should remember is that Obama's foreign and domestic agendas are quite full. When it comes to the administration's list of foreign policy priorities, Ukraine does not rank high. There is no acute crisis that would require Washington's action in the eyes of American decision makers. Moreover, Obama's team sees real value in the stability that the new government has presumably introduced in Ukraine. In the traditional dilemma of "democracy vs. stability," this administration seems to prefer the stability of the current Ukrainian administration over the messy and chaotic democracy of the recent past.

Rare expressions of concern over the situation in Ukraine and its government's policies have fallen on deaf ears. Instead, Yanukovich was congratulated on his decision to get rid of the piles of enriched uranium in Ukraine's possession. In a more general way, Washington has praised the new Ukrainian foreign policy as balanced. But there is a problem in understanding what is meant by balanced. Is it that Ukraine has given up on prospective membership in NATO, something that Washington has in the past supported? By saying that it is balanced, does the administration imply that it was once imbalanced? If so, does this mean that Ukraine was previously too pro-Western, pro-American? In other words, is Ukraine being criticized for once having been too close to the United States?

Finally, it is important that no one in Washington fool themselves concerning the current Ukrainian government's attitude toward the United States: Yanukovich sees no shared values or common strategic interests. He remembers well the trauma of 2004, when it was U.S. intervention, he is convinced, that prevented him from becoming president.

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