

Kyiv's Rapid Drift Back to Moscow

Since the election of Viktor Yanukovich as the new president in February 2010, Ukrainian-Russian relations have substantially strengthened. Not only has the downward spiral from the Yushchenko years been reversed, which was quite predictable, but the process has moved forward with remarkable pace and real substance. One may even ask to what extent Ukraine from now on will be able to pursue a foreign policy independent of Russia.

One example of Ukraine's compliance came on 21 April 2010, when Yanukovich made the controversial deal to extend the Russian Black Sea Fleet's basing in Sevastopol until 2042. The Ukrainian motive for signing the agreement was purely economic: to limit the country's huge budget deficit. In exchange for Ukraine's extending the fleet's lease, Russia gave Ukraine a ten-year 30 per cent discount on its gas imports. The deal will have far-reaching security consequences for Ukraine. One major concern is the fear that Russia will use the fleet base to foment Russian separatism in Crimea, the only Ukrainian region with an ethnic-Russian majority. Shortly after the signing of the fleet agreement, another bilateral agreement provided for the return of Russian FSB military counter-intelligence officers to the Black Sea Fleet. As late as December 2009, Ukraine had ordered FSB officers attached to the fleet to leave Ukraine's territory, as their presence contravened CIS-wide agreements that prohibit FSB operations on the territories of CIS member countries.

During President Dmitry Medvedev's visit to Ukraine, on 17–18 May in Kyiv, a range of new bilateral treaties were signed, including agreements on the demarcation of the Russian-Ukrainian land border and joint declarations concerning the need for a new European security architecture, and one on the conflict in Transnistria. This indicates that the Ukrainian government is willing to increase cooperation with Russia in the security sphere and to harmonize its foreign policy with Russia's. The two presidents also signed agreements on Ukraine's using the Russian navigational system GLONASS and on cooperation between the ministries of culture and education. It also seems likely that new treaties will be signed soon on cooperation in the fields of the aviation industry and on nuclear energy.

The new agreements, as well as the proposals – among them one by Vladimir Putin to merge Gazprom and Naftohaz – underscore that we are now witnessing a new phase in the reintegration of the two former Soviet republics. The substance and speed of this process raise the question whether Ukraine is heading to a point of no return, a point from which this process of resignation to Moscow will be impossible to reverse. Officially, Ukraine still maintains a pro-European foreign policy with the goal of joining the EU. The first trip Yanukovich made as new president was to Brussels, to underscore this. But there are three reasons why it will be extremely difficult for Ukraine to pursue a pro-European foreign policy independent of Russia in the future.

First, Ukraine has in effect given away some of its most important foreign policy levers. Already as prime minister in 2006, Yanukovich declared that Ukraine was not ready for NATO membership, at least for the time being. As president, he is proposing a 'non-bloc' status for Ukraine and has disbanded the two state commissions that used to handle Ukraine-NATO cooperation programmes. This has limited Kyiv's security policy options, as it has given away its 'NATO card'. The multi-vector policy of President Leonid Kuchma has been replaced by a single-vector policy under Yanukovich. Interestingly, given his statements in Kyiv, Medvedev did not see this 'non-bloc' status of

Ukraine as anything other than a temporary stage towards its future accession to the Russian bloc (primarily to the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO)).

Second, the rapprochement of Russia and Ukraine coincides with a period marked by the absence of a coherent Western policy towards Ukraine. Medvedev explained this himself for the Ukrainian media before his Kyiv visit: 'As soon as any vacuum emerges, the temptation arises to fill this vacuum with something. ... This is why Europe and NATO showed an absolutely calm reaction to our agreement with Ukraine to extend the presence of Russia's naval base in Sevastopol.' Thus, in Moscow's interpretation, the EU has allowed Russia a walkover on the issue of Ukraine.

The speed with which the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Presidential Administration have prepared new proposals for reintegrating Ukraine with Russia cannot but impress. Even if only half of them are implemented, it will probably be enough to pull Ukraine securely within Russia's sphere of influence for a long time to come. The contrast to the EU's slow bureaucracy and lack of vision concerning Ukraine could not be more striking. The Eastern Partnership, which less than a year ago was considered a landmark in relations between the EU and the former Soviet republics, seems to be on the back burner in Brussels. Europe is embroiled in its own internal problems and not interested in other matters, such as Ukraine. Russia, on the other hand, has both a vision and financial power to achieve what it wants with its southern neighbour. Moscow is eager to move quickly in its process of reintegrating Ukraine, beyond the point of no return, while the opportunity lasts.

The current Russian campaign to tie up Ukraine could also be linked to the likely major switch in Russian foreign policy which has been discussed since a policy paper was leaked to Russian Newsweek in May 2010. According to this policy paper, the Kremlin seems to be aiming for an enduring understanding with the West and settling outstanding differences on the solid basis of carving up Eurasia into clear zones of dominance and a written code of conduct. Russia seems to be saying to the West: 'If you do not interfere in our zone of interests, we will not make trouble for you.'

The third reason why Ukraine's current policy of resignation to Russia will be difficult to reverse is that it is, according to different surveys, rather popular among a large section of the Ukrainian population. Many Ukrainians were tired of what they perceived as Yushchenko's antagonistic policy towards Russia, which only destroyed Kyiv's important links to a strategic neighbour without leading to a major breakthrough in the country's integration with the West. That is why the protests against the government's new policy have been rather weak. The political opposition, apart from staging a spectacular show in the Parliament on the day the fleet agreement was ratified, is split and still paralysed by its loss of the election.

As Ukraine seems to have limited levers for reversing the current reintegration process, full membership of Ukraine in the CIS and the CSTO or the proposed customs union with Russia and Kazakhstan could be within reach for Russia. That would effectively mean the death blow for Ukraine's European integration, which now faces its moment of truth.

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