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UKRAINIAN FOREIGN POLICY: PRO-RUSSIAN, PRO-WESTERN OR SIMPLY  
PRO-KUCHMA?

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President Kuchma is fond of explaining Ukrainian foreign policy as being neither pro-Russian nor pro-Western, but simply pro-Ukrainian. In reality, the best way to understand Ukraine's confusing and constantly shifting foreign policy is by understanding it as pro-Kuchma.

If we understand the president and his oligarchic allies as being the equivalent of "Ukraine," then President Kuchma could be indeed understood to be following a "pro-Ukrainian" foreign policy. For this to be true though, two assumptions would have to hold.

Firstly, Kuchma and his allies would have to be broad-based ruling elites. In reality, the executive and centrist oligarchs only represent a portion of the elites (e.g., in parliament they control half of the deputies) who have, in the World Bank's terminology, "captured" the Ukrainian state and refuse to share power.

Secondly, to pursue a "pro-Ukrainian" foreign policy would require the elaboration of the country's national interests. As Ukrainian commentators and opposition politicians have pointed out, the executive and its oligarchic allies have been unable to formulate any clear national interests for Ukraine over 13 years of independence.

National interests would require that long-term goals (i.e., EU membership) be backed up by domestic policies. Yet, Ukraine has a radical mismatch between its declared foreign-policy goals and its domestic policies, the former -- advertised as "re-joining Europe" -- are regularly undermined by the latter.

Ukraine has not achieved strategic foreign-policy goals it outlined in the 1990s, such as becoming an associate member of the EU or joining the World Trade Organization (which, according to high-placed International Monetary Fund sources, will not take place this year). If anything, Ukraine is further away from achieving these goals in 2004 than it was in the 1990s. Witness the highly critical Parliamentary Assembly Council of Europe (PACE) resolution on 29 January that threatened Ukraine with suspension of its membership in the Council of Europe. PACE's resolution was backed by an EU declaration jointly signed with European Free Trade Association and accession countries, which were, in turn, backed by statements from

U.S. officials.

These confusing and contradictory signals have led to two repercussions in the West. Firstly, Kuchma's international (i.e. Western) image is so low that it will be impossible to change it before he leaves office. Western government leaders and international organizations no longer believe statements by Kuchma and his allies. An outcome of this is that Ukraine is not treated as a serious country, a factor long pointed out by Ukrainian commentators and opposition politicians.

Secondly, this lack of trust in Kuchma and his allies is reflected in "Ukraine fatigue" in the West. The West perceives Kuchma and his allies as possessing a neo-Soviet political culture. This confirms the already deeply held stereotypes in the EU and elsewhere that Ukraine is culturally not a "European" country (the fact that it is geographically inside Europe, as Ukrainians continually point out, is irrelevant).

The political crisis in Ukraine over proposed constitutional changes is a case in point. Kuchma, presidential administration head Viktor Medvedchuk, and their parliamentary allies have repeatedly claimed that "reforms" are necessary to bring Ukraine into line with "European" standards. This shows the degree to which their neo-Soviet political culture speaks a different language to that of the West.

Western governments and international organizations know the real reason why "reforms" are being undertaken in the presidential election year as being to prevent a Viktor Yushchenko victory or to ensure that if he is elected he inherits few powers. Kuchma's "reforms" therefore reinforce the Western view that Ukraine is not "European," as its elites are again pursuing a policy of deception, are afraid of free and fair elections, and the opposition are denied an authentic role in the "reform" process. Meanwhile, Western criticism is denounced by Kyiv with Soviet-style language as "interference in internal affairs."

This deception shows the degree to which Ukraine's foreign policy is closely tied to Kuchma's personal fate. Kuchma's fear of being out of power, coupled with a Soviet-style reluctance to admit responsibility for one's actions while in power, has led him to initiate "reforms." These have led to Ukraine's crisis with PACE and the West.

The majority of the pro-presidential elite are disinterested in Western integration, and Ukraine's "European choice" is therefore narrowly confined to the center-right and some centrists. Maintaining Russia and the West at a distance, even if this means on occasion isolation, is the price to pay for Kuchma's and his allies' staying in power. Membership in NATO, the EU, or the CIS Single Economic Space are less important than their continued "capture" of the Ukrainian state.

The Davos World Economic Summit in January was not attended by a Ukrainian delegation, the first occasion this has happened. Another example of recent isolationist trends are roundtables organized in Warsaw to facilitate dialogue between the Ukrainian opposition and authorities.

The first roundtable, organized in November 2002 by the Polish Know-How Foundation with backing from the Polish president,

was attended by the Ukrainian opposition and presidential camp, including Medvedchuk. In November 2003 only the Ukrainian opposition turned up at the second roundtable in Warsaw, as Polish sources reported that Medvedchuk had blocked the attendance of representatives from the pro-presidential camp. This again gave an impression of disinterest in dialogue with the opposition.

At the same time, this willingness to accept some degree of isolation if that means staying in power is pragmatic, thereby differentiating it from Belarus's ideologically driven isolation. Ukraine, for example, took into account some of PACE's criticism, hoping thereby to avoid suspension from the Council of Europe and the country's full isolation. Full isolation would inevitably drive Ukraine (like Belarus) into a dependent relationship with Russia, a step Kuchma and his allies would oppose.

Ukraine's "multivector" foreign policy is geared toward fulfilling Kuchma's and his allies' short-term objectives, not because it is responsive to domestic factors. These short-term horizons are an outgrowth of Ukraine's foreign policy being pro-Kuchma, not pro anything else.

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