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UKRAINE'S NEW NATIONALISM AND THE CONTROVERSIAL DANUBE CANAL

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On September 8, Romanian Foreign Minister Mircea Dan Geoana declined an invitation to visit Ukraine to discuss recent bilateral problems. Ukraine's Foreign Ministry spokesman Markian Lubkivskyi reiterated Ukraine's interest in dialogue with Romania. But how sincere is the Ukrainian side in its stated desire for dialogue over unilateral actions?

On August 26, Ukrainian President Leonid Kuchma opened the controversial Bystraya Danube Delta canal with the words, "I give the command to restore navigation in the Ukrainian part of the Danube Delta." Kuchma predicted, "In the future, the estuary of Europe's longest river may transform into a large European transport intersection" (Independent, August 26).

Construction of the canal began in May to loud international criticism about building a canal in an environmentally sensitive area. The EU, among others, "deeply regrets" the opening of the canal, and said that Kyiv's insistence on forging ahead "is not a welcome development at all," (Independent, August 26).

The canal was built in a registered UNESCO World Heritage site of 70,000 hectares. According to the World Wildlife Fund, the area is home to large numbers of rare and threatened birds. Around 330 species of birds nest in the area, as well as 2,500 pairs of white pelicans. Large flocks of these birds fled during the canal's construction, and fish stocks will be negatively affected as well.

Nevertheless, the Ukrainian authorities have brushed aside international criticism in a newly defiant bout of state nationalism. A Ukrainian Foreign Ministry spokesman said, "We see no reason to worry about . . . the presumed danger this canal poses for the ecology of the region" (Independent, August 26). The same spokesman claimed, contrary to all international evaluations, that the canal will not damage the environment. Ukraine has ignored complaints from the EU and also seems unperturbed that UNESCO is considering withdrawing its special protected status from the Danube wetlands, one of only two such protected areas in Europe.

The Romanian Foreign Ministry has backed the EU and the U.S. State Department in loudly complaining about the canal's construction. The EU and the Romanians asked the Ukrainians to halt construction of the canal until an environmental impact assessment was undertaken. Kyiv refused.

The issue has also led to political disagreements inside Romania. Former Romanian President Emil Constantinescu accused the current left-wing government of showing a lack of interest in the canal project. The previous liberal government, allied to the Constantinescu presidency, had signed a 1997 treaty with Ukraine that recognized each other's borders. Building on the 1997 treaty, Romania, Ukraine, and Moldova signed an agreement in 2000 on cooperation in the Danube Delta.

The current government allied to President Ion Iliescu has long been in league with Romanian extreme nationalists and has therefore been a critic of the 1997 treaty, because it recognized Ukrainian sovereignty over Bessarabia and northern Bukovina, two areas occupied by the Soviets in World War II. Liberal critics of the Iliescu government, however, allege that the current difficulties with Ukraine have arisen because the Iliescu administration stalled until 2003 before ratifying the 2000 Romanian-Ukrainian-Moldovan agreement.

President Iliescu held an extraordinary meeting of officials on August 26 that resulted in a decision to file an international lawsuit against Ukraine at the Hague-based International Court of Justice. "The participants [in the meeting] agreed that all the conditions needed to unilaterally alert the International Court of Justice in Hague have been met," according to a spokesman for President Iliescu (Reuters, August 26).

The Romanian side has long threatened to take Ukraine to the International Court over Kyiv's refusal to negotiate a delimitation of the uninhabited Serpent Islands to the west of the Crimea. The islands, which are thought to contain large deposits of oil, were ceded to the USSR by Romania after World War II.

The United States and EU, as well as Ukraine's immediate western neighbors, have been caught off guard by Ukraine's position due to the West's misunderstanding of Ukrainian politics. They seemingly missed the subtle hint by a Ukrainian Foreign Ministry spokesman who said that the canal was needed to defend Ukraine's economic interests (ICTV, August 25).

The canal is being built by Ukraine's Ministry of Transportation, headed by Transport Minister Heorhiy Kirpa, who is a Kuchma loyalist and a well-respected minister. Over the summer Kirpa launched his own political party, Renaissance (Vidrodzhenia), whose underlying ideology is "state nationalism." Kuchma's policies on the Danube Delta are part of a growing reassertion of Ukrainian state and economic nationalism vis-a-vis the outside world. There is a widespread view among President Kuchma, his oligarchic allies, and the political left that the West demands much from Ukraine but fails to deliver on its promises, either in the form of financial assistance or future membership in Euro-Atlantic structures.

Ukraine's new state nationalism is an outgrowth of the country's neo-Soviet political culture and post-colonial inferiority complexes toward the Western world. This new Ukrainian attitude feels more at home aligned with Russia than with the West, partly because Moscow does not place political demands on Ukraine.

In one recent example of Kyiv's realignment, Ukraine has voiced its support for Soviet-style criticism by the CIS of the alleged "double standards" of the OSCE over its election monitoring programs. This criticism is made even easier by the fact that Kuchma is also now head of the CIS Council of Heads of State.

Russia's long-standing goal to realign Ukraine's foreign policy towards Russia is now nearer realization. Russia has strongly backed Ukraine's position on the Danube, to the surprise and consternation of Romanian Foreign Minister Geoana (Rompres, September 1). President Iliescu was less surprised. "There is a natural solidarity between the two countries, although we used to get along better with the Russians," he admitted (Rompres, September 2).