

END NOTE

RUSSIA CONTINUES TO DISRESPECT UKRAINIAN SOVEREIGNTY

By Taras Kuzio

It took Russia five years after the demise of the USSR to sign an all-encompassing interstate treaty with Ukraine in 1997, and then a further two for both chambers of the Russian parliament to ratify that treaty. Three years later, Russia's actions in a number of areas show that although Ukraine's borders might no longer be in question, Moscow still finds it extremely difficult to recognize Ukraine as an equal and sovereign state.

Former Russian Premier Viktor Chernomyrdin was appointed ambassador to Ukraine and "special presidential envoy for the development of Russian-Ukrainian trade and economic ties" in May of last year. Since then, his actions show confusion as to whether he also has a third unofficial position, that of regional governor. Chernomyrdin's appointment was meant to consolidate the Russian vector in Ukraine's "multivector" foreign policy as the primary one at a time when the West was becoming increasingly disenchanted with Ukraine. During the 31 March elections, Chernomyrdin openly interfered in favor of pro-presidential parties, helped fan the flames of an "antinationalist" campaign against pro-Western forces, and chided Ukrainian Foreign Ministry State Secretary Oleksandr Chaly as "obtuse" when he listed among Ukraine's goals joining the European Union, not the alternative Eurasian Economic Community.

Two factors, both of them related to Russian perceptions of national identity, form Chernomyrdin's gubernatorial style. First, Russia has looked upon the CIS since its creation in December 1991 as a loose commonwealth or confederation guided and led by Russia. In Russia's view, other CIS member states only possess partial sovereignty as the "near abroad," a region that is no longer part of the USSR but, at the same time, is not as fully sovereign as the "far abroad." Chernomyrdin and other members of the Russian elite are hostile to the Our Ukraine election bloc's foreign policy objective of integration into the European Union and NATO because this is seen as an attempt at fully breaking from Russia. Hence, Russia's open support for the pan-Slavic and pro-Soviet Communist Party of Ukraine and for oligarchic centrist parties that back a foreign policy strategy of "to Europe with Russia."

Second, Russia still finds it difficult to accept Ukraine (and Belarus) as separate countries with independent statehood. Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov told "Rossiiskaya gazeta" in February that Ukraine and Russia are destined to be close "strategic partners" because of "our shared linguistic, religious, cultural, and historical legacy, our kindred mentality..." A year ago, Russian President Vladimir Putin tasked his Foreign Ministry to protect the

rights of Russian speakers ("compatriots") in the CIS and organized the first congress of "compatriots" in Moscow last October. Russia has used this concern for "compatriots" as a pretext for repeated complaints about the alleged infringement of their rights in education and the media in Ukraine.

Although only the extreme left in Ukraine supports Ukraine's membership of the Russia-Belarus Union, Russia still holds out hope that this will change. In an interview in "Trud" in January, Chernomyrdin was asked if a union of the three eastern Slavic peoples was possible. His reply was indicative: "When Ukrainian society matures to this point it will opt for such a step."

According to a March poll by the Russian Public Opinion Fund, almost 50 percent of Russian citizens would like Russia and Ukraine to unite, while another 35 percent believe Ukraine and Russia should remain independent but remove border restrictions and have no visas or customs controls.

When Russia equates demarcation with erecting a "fence" between two countries, it is referring to the kind of border demarcation that was formerly undertaken by the Soviet Union. In Russia's eyes, the only difference between the former borders between the constituent republics of the USSR and the present frontiers between CIS states is that the latter can be now delimited on maps. But this is as far as Russia will go. Demarcation should only be applied -- as it was in the USSR -- to the "external frontiers" of the CIS. Chernomyrdin, whose views have been echoed by other Russian officials, said that "demarcation is out of the question" because it is being imposed on Ukraine and Russia by the West.

To some extent this is true. Ukraine cannot make good on its rhetoric in favor of aspiring to become an associate and then full member of the EU if it has not demarcated its 2,000-kilometer-long eastern border with Russia (the 2,600-kilometer western border was demarcated in the Soviet era). But this is not the only reason why Ukraine has unsuccessfully pushed for demarcation. Ukraine's elites have always steadfastly defended their sovereignty and territorial integrity, and to them borders are a symbol of this sovereignty.

To accept Russia's division of borders in the CIS into delimited "internal" and delimited-demarcated "external" ones would be to accept a status of only partial sovereignty. Some 30,000 migrants manage to enter Ukraine each year because of its transparent border with Russia. The security of the Russian-Ukrainian border cannot be therefore resolved without demarcation, according to National Security and Defense Council Secretary Yevhen Marchuk.

As is common with Russian officials who like to speak on behalf of the CIS, Chernomyrdin claimed that the decision not to proceed with demarcation was taken by "mutual agreement." This is not the case. Ukrainian Foreign Ministry First Deputy State Secretary Volodymyr Yelchenko responded by saying demarcation is an integral part of the legalization of national borders. Nevertheless, three years after its ratification of the border treaty, Russia continues to rule out taking the next logical step; namely, border demarcation. Delimitation of the border is all but settled except for the Azov Sea, which Russia wants to maintain as a common lake.

In an article published last month in the journal "Nations

and Nationalism," Vera Tolz outlined advances made in Russian post-Soviet historiography on Ukraine that she suggested reflect a Russian retreat from its traditional imperial, "big brother" paternalistic attitude. Nevertheless, Tolz concluded that it will take decades to redefine Ukrainian-Russian relations "on the basis of Russia's full acceptance of an independent Ukraine as an equal partner in the international arena." This would be similar to the protracted process of Polish-Ukrainian reconciliation, which began after World War II but eventually only bore fruit in the 1980s.

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