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The end of "Euro-romanticism" in Ukraine: The origins of anti-Western sentiments in the Presidential campaign

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The End of "Euro-romanticism" in Ukraine

The Origins of Anti-Western Sentiments in the Presidential Campaign

Volodymyr Kulyk

The beginning of the presidential campaign in Ukraine has produced foreign policy statements that differ markedly from the usual rhetoric of European integration. Except for the incumbent, Viktor Yushchenko, all prominent candidates display rather reserved attitudes towards the West in general and the European Union in particular. Moreover, in contrast to the earlier criticism of Yushchenko's "Euro-romanticism", some candidates now go beyond presenting it as an established fact that the EU is not going to admit Ukraine and question the expediency of the very attempt. Although most candidates call for Ukraine's balanced relations with the West and Russia, disappointment with the former will lead to a greater dependence on the latter.

The campaign publications and public statements of the Ukrainian presidential candidates can be seen as expressing their atittudes towards the policies pursued since the Orange Revolution in 2004. These policies are primarily associated in public opinion with President Yushchenko. The most concentrated articulation of such attitudes can be found in the electoral programmes of the candidates. Although these documents are unlikely to be implemented in their entirety, they nonetheless indicate which topics are considered important and which positions are believed to be attractive to the population in general or the respective candidate's core constituency in particular.

Asymmetrical assertiveness

Although most candidates focus on populist promises on social and economic issues, positions on foreign policy are clearly expressed in all programmes. The candidates promise to pursue a more assertive foreign policy capable of ensuring Ukraine's national interests and the respectful treatment of its citizens by foreigners. Ukraine's relations with other countries are to become more equal, its products more competitive, and its citizens able to travel without spending exhausting hours at foreign consulates to obtain visas.

Most candidates portray their future foreign policy as balanced in terms of the relations with the West and the East, striving for mutually beneficial economic and cultural cooperation and avoiding integration into any military alliances.

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However, the specific measures referred to and the very wording of foreign policy statements imply asymmetrical relations that will bring Ukraine closer to Russia than to the West. On the one hand, while the cooperation with Russia is deemed to be worth deepening, Ukraine's approach to the West is to become more reserved, with the country giving up not only its NATO aspirations but also its path towards EU membership. On the other hand, while the Ukrainians' frustration with the perceived egotism and non-reciprocity of the West is addressed in many programmes, the problematic aspects of the relationship with Russia are largely avoided. This implies that Ukraine will be less assertive in its dealings with Russia than in its relations with the West. The programmes thus reverse the priorities and sensitivities of the post-Orange foreign policy discourse exemplified by President Yushchenko.

Not surprisingly, Yushchenko is the only candidate who unequivocally adheres in his programme to the goal of Ukraine's integration into the EU and supports strengthening the "Euro-Atlantic system of collective security". He is also the only one, except for two rather marginal nationalist candidates, who clearly states that Russia's Black Sea Fleet must leave Ukraine after the current agreement on its stationing expires in 2017. Even Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko, who seeks to please the West-leaning voters in the western part of the country, prefers not to mention the fleet issue and to downplay the goal of EU membership. She also stresses that integration into any system of collective security can only result from a referendum. The latter point is intended to distance her from Yushchenko's attempt to bring Ukraine into NATO despite the disapproval of the majority of the population.

The opposition leader, Viktor Yanukovych, who is supported primarily by a pro-Russian constituency in the eastern and southern regions, calls for a non-aligned status and promises to restore "friendly and mutually beneficial relations" with Russia and other CIS countries while ensuring "strategic partnership" with the US, EU and G20. Even more distant from the current pro-Western priorities are Arsenii Yatseniuk and Volodymyr Lytvyn, who are expected to place third and fourth in the first round of the election. Their constituencies' preferences are likely to become crucial in the ensuing competition between the two front-runners—Yanukovych and Tymoshenko.

The failure of Yushchenko's course

The marked difference between most candidates' programmes and that of Yushchenko reflects his growing isolation from the Ukrainian political elite which, in turn, partly results from the perceived failure of his political course. In other words, as Yushchenko becomes increasingly weak, particularly with the approach of the election, where he arguably stands no chance, nobody wants to seem like him.

Yushchenko's failure results from a combination of internal and external factors. On the one hand, he has attempted a rather radical change in the political course, for which he did not have the backing of either the majority of the population or the bulk of the political elite. On the other, Russia's effort at undermining his attempt was not countered by adequate support from the West.

Regarding foreign policy, the key elements of Yushchenko's agenda were 1) integration into European and Euro-Atlantic structures and 2) equal and mutually beneficial relations with Russia. He wanted primarily to take advantage of the apparent recognition in the West of the considerable democratic maturity of Ukraine as demonstrated by the Orange Revolution, in order to make admission into the EU and NATO a clear and near prospect. At the same time, he sought to get rid of Ukraine's unilateral dependence on Russia, which had become obvious during the 2004 elections and had heightened perceptions of a threat to national sovereignty and integrity. The combination of these two elements clearly

indicated Yushchenko's wish to normatively and institutionally relocate Ukraine from the post-Soviet space into new Europe, thus following the pattern of the Central European countries. This relocation was also intended in the cultural domain, where he sought to replace the post-Soviet identity with a pro-European national one. It involved both raising popular awareness of the Ukrainians' suffering under the Soviet regime and enhancing the role of Ukrainian as the national language.

This unequivocal agenda ran counter to the ambivalent preferences of the majority of the population. While supporting the idea of European integration, most Ukrainians also wished to retain close relations with Russia. Moreover, the Orange Revolution deepened a split in the political class and the society, with the defeated group of Yanukovych supporters seeking revenge and willing to mobilize their constituency for the defence of their allegedly rejected interests. At the same time, considerable limitation in presidential powers introduced by the constitutional reform of 2006 left Yushchenko with insufficient leverage to ensure the implementation of his agenda. Therefore, he was increasingly challenged—not just by the parliamentary opposition but also by the prime minister, who had become much more powerful as a result of the reform.

Although the president retained exceptional prerogatives in the realm of foreign policy, even here Yushchenko's ability to implement his agenda turned out to be rather limited. In this case, external influences were no less important than internal weaknesses.

Imbalance of external influences

It is hardly surprising that the intended move "away from Russia" met with fierce opposition on the part of the Russian leadership, which during the presidencies of Vladimir Putin and Dmitry Medvedev has sought to reassert Moscow's power in the world, and particularly in the post-Soviet space. After a brief retreat following their discredited involvement in the 2004 election, the Kremlin reverted to the use of economic, political and communication means to influence Ukrainian politicians, businesspeople and society at large.

The most perceptible instrument was the price of the natural gas Ukraine buys from Russia. Also important were Kremlin-coordinated business activities intended to ensure Russian control over strategic parts of the Ukrainian economy, propaganda in the Russian media (which still have a large audience in Ukraine) and threats by political and military leaders to take resolute measures if Ukraine should continue to move towards NATO. These policies were facilitated by the willingness of the anti-Orange forces in Ukraine itself to side with Moscow in its criticism of Kyiv's actions and intentions, thus legitimising the position of Russia as a factor that must always be taken into account in Ukrainian policy-making. Moreover, Russia sought to discourage Western governments from offering Kyiv any prospect of integration. Moscow did this by warning these leaders of the negative consequences of such an offer for the West's relations with Russia, as well as by portraying the current Ukrainian leadership as weak, unreliable and destructively anti-Russian.

At the same time, the West did not counter Russia's efforts with meaningful encouragement for the Ukrainian leadership to continue its path towards European and Euro-Atlantic integration. Many West European leaders, concerned about internal EU problems and possible repercussions on relations with Russia, opposed Ukraine's rapid integration into the Union. Moreover, despite pressure from the Bush Administration, they objected to Ukraine's participation in NATO's Membership Action Plan, due to both Moscow's protests and strong opposition in Ukraine itself.

After the failure of Yushchenko's attempt to quickly bring Ukraine into NATO became obvious in 2008, European leaders did not offer Kyiv an alternative in the form

of a clear prospect of EU membership. Such a prospect would have been perceived as an adequate replacement for integration into NATO by pro-Western elites in Ukraine, while being less polarising within Ukrainian society and less confrontational vis-à-vis Russia. While rightly pointing to serious democratic deficits that had not been overcome after the perceived breakthrough of 2004, European leaders ignored not only the potential boost that a clear plan of integration could give to the Ukrainian elites, but also the possible exacerbation of the existing deficits as a result of disillusionment with the seemingly futile European path.

It is true that the EU suggested alternative mechanisms of co-operation with Ukraine, such as the Eastern Partnership and the Association Agreement. However, these have so far failed to provide perceptible benefits for the country in general and ordinary citizens in particular. Due to slower progress in negotiations on a free trade zone than on other sections of the document, the Association Agreement will not be signed in 2009. As they elect their next president in early 2010, the Ukrainians will be left with a perceived EU refusal to admit them to its institutions and an agreement on a supposedly simplified visa procedure, which turned out to be no easier or cheaper than before.

Changes and choices

It is thus a safe bet that the future president will be significantly less pro-European than Yushchenko. This is not to say that foreign policy will be drastically reoriented from the West to the East and Ukraine will discontinue its participation in existing European co-operation frameworks or cease negotiations on new mechanisms. More likely is a modification of the balancing act that Ukrainian foreign policy has been performing from the very beginning of the country's independence, and that will certainly continue for some time.

Rhetorically, relations with Russia will become as important as those with the West, and the emphasis will be shifted from mutual respect and benefit to partnership or even friendship. Practically, the new president will seek to demonstrate a breakthrough on some contentious issues where stalemate has widely been attributed, in both Russia and Ukraine, to Yushchenko's rigidity rather than to the intrusiveness of the Russian leadership. Along with giving up the goal of membership in NATO, this may include a willingness to allow the Black Sea Fleet to remain in Crimea after 2017 and acceptance of Russia's participation in the reconstruction of the Ukrainian gas transportation system, which many fear would pave the way for the loss of Kyiv's exclusive control thereof. In the case of a Yanukovych victory, these concessions will probably be supplemented by the elevation of the legal status of the Russian language. In any case, Moscow will do its best to transform Ukraine's disillusionment with the West into increased reliance and dependence on Russia, and the weak Ukrainian leadership—faced with the consequences of a devastating economic crisis and a lack of political consensus on many issues—will find it hard to resist Russian pressure. The resulting reorientation may thus be more far-reaching than most of the Ukrainian elite would like.

This prospect should compel the EU in general, and its leading Western members in particular, to make a choice. If they view Ukraine's eastern drift as a relief from the necessity to deal with its integration claims and as a resolution of existing controversies between Kyiv and Moscow, they may welcome or even somehow reward this evolution. However, if they do not want the eastward drift to ultimately put Ukraine under Russian control, they should clearly articulate their encouragement of Kyiv's European aspirations immediately after the election, provided that it can be recognized as free and fair.

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