

# Ukraine's Search for a Regional Foreign Policy

## One Year After the Orange Revolution

PONARS Policy Memo No. 377

*Oleksandr Sushko*

*Center for Peace, Conversion, and Foreign Policy of Ukraine*

*December 2005*

The Borjomi declaration of Ukraine and Georgia in August 2005, and the first summit of the widely-announced Community for Democratic Choice (CDC) scheduled for December 1-2, 2005, have set an ambitious agenda for Ukraine as a potentially influential regional power.

The Ukrainian experience has revitalized hope for the further spreading and maturing of democracy, rule of law, and other Western values in the institutionally fragile and fragmented eastern European margin. President Viktor Yushchenko proclaimed that Ukraine wishes to be a regional leader after his inauguration in early 2005. However, the content and instruments of this eventual leadership still remain unclear. Does Ukraine want to follow a Russian model of leadership by pursuing egoistic national interests? Or is it seeking a European model of leadership based upon common values and the responsibility of larger states before smaller ones?

The only means for Ukraine to become a center of gravity in eastern Europe and the Black Sea area is to become a true success story, not only in peaceful evolution toward freedom and democracy, but in converting those changes into consistent policies. This means strengthening the rule of law and market economy institutions within the country and promoting a new regional agenda that includes cooperation in

consolidating democracy, protecting human rights, ensuring faster economic growth, and solving frozen conflicts.

## **A New Regional Framework**

The year 2004 marked a new geopolitical situation, not only within the post-Soviet space but all over Europe. Democratic revolutions during 1989-1991 in the countries of the former communist bloc initiated a first stage of geopolitical changes that culminated in enlargement of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and accession of 10 central eastern European states to the European Union. European values and integration claimed a major part of central and eastern Europe on the borders of the former USSR.

The Orange Revolution in Ukraine and the Rose Revolution in Georgia, as well as Moldova's own evolutionary development, have launched a new stage in democratization and the promotion of European values further east on the continent.

This stage will likely be longer and more complicated than the central European path to NATO and EU membership. A year after the Orange Revolution, it has become clear that Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova have only begun a long-term trend that has yet to prove sustainable. Regional cooperation is needed in order to strengthen individual national capacities for consolidating democratic institutions, building nation-states rooted in the rule of law, and making joint efforts to satisfy EU and NATO membership criteria.

During the next decade, the territory from Minsk to Baku, and possibly points even further east, will become a zone of fundamental geopolitical change. Democratic changes support regional transformation by exposing the defeat of various scenarios for authoritarian pro-imperial developments.

A related trend has been the changing positions of some EU and NATO members regarding the Russian Federation and the potential for countries in the region to achieve European and Euro-Atlantic integration. These changes provide a new and powerful impulse to development in the region, and they stimulate the rise of regional organizations focused on European and Euro-Atlantic values. This creates a suitable background for Ukraine to intensify regional stability and cooperation and motivates a reconsideration of its foreign policy.

A new set of goals has emerged in the region alongside EU integration. Ensuring regional stability and security, democratization of the region, development of regional cooperation and integration, control over borders and illegal activity, a settlement of the Transnistrian conflict, and (eventually) the Europeanization of Russia have become key foreign policy objectives. European and Euro-Atlantic integration must continue

to be the top priority of Ukraine's foreign policy, but it must be supplemented by this intensive regional policy.

Any regional policy in eastern Europe is full of traps, reliance on the Big Brother of the state the most dangerous among them. Post-Soviet political culture retains a vulgar vision of leadership focused on power and an outdated *realpolitik* paradigm. Ukraine should take care when defining its national interests vis-à-vis smaller partners like Moldova. Neither power nor economic dependence can be used as tools of influence at the expense of smaller and poorer partners. Mutual progress is viable only if a new kind of leadership is offered. A typical post-Soviet statement like "Ukraine has its own interests in Transnistria" suggests a Kremlin-like policy and obviously would spoil the atmosphere between Kyiv and Chisinau.

Personal relations between state leaders cannot substitute for networking at the level of elites, societies, and business. In Ukraine-Georgia relations, for example, one can observe a visible bias toward inter-presidential relations (between Viktor Yushchenko and Mikheil Saakashvili) with a lack of development in horizontal communications on other levels.

## **Ukraine's Foreign Policy**

Ukraine's key foreign policy task is to promote EU values in the region, together with European civic, bureaucratic, and legal culture, as well as the more practical aspects of European integration such as transborder cooperation and energy networks.

Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus are natural areas of interest to Ukraine. Yet those interests must not be interpreted in the same way that Moscow has interpreted its interests in Russia's so-called near abroad. Ukraine should serve as an example for countries of the region and communicate a message of "do as I do" instead of "do as I said." Ukraine is interested in maintaining warm and friendly relations with its neighbors, supporting and defending them, and helping solve their problems as well to become fully-functioning democratic European states.

After the presidential election, Ukraine faced an open door of opportunity to play a rejuvenating role in the region. Ukraine must actively promote European values in the region, both in bilateral and multilateral fora. This must be adequately reflected in Ukraine's foreign policy by actions and by rhetoric. Kyiv's policies should be less about expressing aspirations for EU integration and more about the promotion of EU values and standards.

The Borjomi declaration, followed by the establishment of the CDC, is a chance to provide structure and a framework for Ukraine's goals. However, the idea is still empty of a constructive and consistent plan of

action. There is still a debate going on about the core idea: whether CDC should promote the export of democratic values to countries like Azerbaijan and Belarus or work to advance domestic reforms within the newly emerging regional community. Ideally, the CDC will be able to do both, but Ukraine should begin with the latter.

In addition to a standard set of issues related to democratic transition, the CDC can also deal with the very specific regional problem of frozen conflicts, among which Transnistria is for Ukraine the most important. Ukraine is more interested in settling the conflict than any other outside actor. Prompt internationalization should be achieved through the expansion of EU involvement in the process. The opening of an EU representative office in Moldova in October and the signing of a protocol on an EU mission to monitor the Ukraine-Transnistria border proves that Brussels is becoming more serious about the country and region.

At the same time, the EU lacks instruments and the political will to deal with conflict regions. Among the EU's major tasks is to intensify pressure on the states that have the greatest capacity to influence the conflict, including Russia and Ukraine.

The shift of the Transnistrian issue to the top of the EU-Ukraine agenda has already occurred. Ukraine is the only player with the means to influence both sides and thus has a unique influence on Transnistria. Expectations are high, and, informally, this settlement is already presented as a key to EU membership.

International assessment of a Ukrainian plan for resolution of the conflict varies from approval to sharp criticism. The Ukrainian plan is far from perfect. It fails to refer to the Istanbul commitments to withdraw the Russian troops and lacks mechanisms for managing the Transnistrian regime prior to the elections. Some have warned that Kyiv plans to either destroy sovereign Moldova with a Ukrainian-Russian protectorate over Transnistria or ignore the people of Transnistria and its state system.

Positive feedback has already come from NATO, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, and the European Commission. The reaction of the United States was more cautious. In June, the U.S. Department of State sent recommendations for improving the plan to Ukraine's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Romania has been critical of President Yushchenko for not keeping a promise that obliges Ukraine and Romania exclusively to pursue common initiatives on Transnistria.

Until September 2005, Russia's position was wait-and-see. Moscow neither rejected nor supported the Ukrainian initiative, expecting that Moldova would reject it. The Ukrainian plan is, in fact, unacceptable to the Kremlin, since Russia would lose Transnistria as a satellite quasi-state. In early October, Russia submitted proposals which are effectively a compilation of elements of an earlier 2003 plan, the Kozak Memorandum,

which was already rejected by Moldova. It was welcomed by the government of Transnistria, whose foreign minister announced that Transnistria would follow only Russia's plan.

As of October, the prospects for a Transnistrian settlement remain uncertain. Ukraine and Western actors probably missed the best period for resolution in early 2005. Russia and Tiraspol prefer to continue talks while awaiting an international resolution on Kosovo, in order to use it as a precedent for recognizing the Transnistrian Moldovan Republic (TMR) as an independent state or an exclave of Russia: a Kaliningrad on the Dniester. It is still unclear whether Ukraine and the Western powers could or would counteract such a move.

## Conclusions

While pursuing national interests, Ukraine should clearly demonstrate in the process of settling the Transnistrian and other conflicts its commitment to the rule of common European and Euro-Atlantic values, and not egoistic national interests. This is exactly the wisdom of EU/NATO integration: to perceive common values and well-being of one's neighbor as one's own national interest.

Ukraine, together with other states of the former USSR that share common goals and values, should dismantle their post-Soviet identity and ensure a perception of their region as a continuation of Europe, with a European identity strongly devoted to democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. Having achieved this transition, Ukraine should then implement an active policy on the basis of European and Euro-Atlantic identity, avoiding any ideas of competing with Russia in a spheres-of-influence style of thinking.

The promotion of the CDC should combine intensive strategies such as strengthening democracy and the rule of law within CDC countries and extensive ones that provide stronger incentives for change and reforms in neighboring states. This can be achieved only if Ukraine and its partners are able to become attractive partners to those around them.

Ukraine's chance is in joining the West not in isolation. Ukraine's European and Euro-Atlantic ambitions do not stem from an egoistic idea of leaving the region where it was born. If successful, Kyiv has the perspective, resources, and ability to become a leader in dismantling archaic phantoms, and a gravedigger for the disorder that feeds neo-imperialism within the post-Soviet space. Ukrainian leadership makes sense for ensuring regional stability, security, and prosperity, with the aim of achieving compatibility and full-fledged membership in the EU and NATO as the ultimate goal.

