

Ukraine v. Russia: *Diminishing Russian international influence?*

By John Bruni

At the time of writing, Russian military forces have been placed on high alert. Political unrest is taking place in the strategically important autonomous Ukrainian province of Crimea, a long time Russo-Ukrainian fault-line. Pro and anti-Ukrainian ethnic groups, Russians, Tartars and Ukrainians have taken to the streets calling for loyalty to either Moscow or Kiev. This complex tinderbox looks likely to be the next flashpoint in the continuing evolution of Russian-Ukrainian relations, the outcome of which may determine the fate of Russia's Black Sea fleet and, should Russia lose, change the power equation from the Black Sea to the Eastern Mediterranean – by affecting Russia's ability to influence the Caucasus and the Levant. Within Kiev, the Ukrainian capital, there is a sense of unease as pro-Western forces, triumphant at the downfall of pro-Russian president Viktor



Fedorovych Yanukovich, tries to consolidate political order and authority. Ukraine's acting president, Oleksandr Turchynov and

his inner circle are hoping that promises of Western financial and political support will



be enough to protect their hard fought victory over the Russian yoke. Yes,

Ukraine has a substantial military force, (159,000 regulars and some 1,000,000 reservists), but this military force is essentially Russian trained, equipped with Russian-designed weapons, and fuelled by Russian oil and gas. It can be safely assumed that Russia has an intimate knowledge of Ukrainian tactics and levels of actual strength and force dispositions. In the still hypothetical scenario of a military confrontation, turning off the energy spigot may send the Ukrainian currency into free fall, destroying the already fragile economy and severely cripple the Ukrainian military's ability to fight a sustained campaign against Russia.

Observing recent events in the Ukraine, it is hard to imagine that Russia can draw this key strategic piece of post-Soviet territory closer to Moscow's orbit.

What happened in the Ukraine is part of a drawn out game between post-Soviet Russia and the West. Following the fall of the Warsaw Pact and the Soviet Union (1989-92), Moscow was acutely aware of its strategic vulnerability to Western encroachments on its former Eastern European 'domain'. An awareness that quickly became a reality when former Warsaw Pact states, newly independent from Russian political influence during the 1990s, chose to join NATO as a guarantee that their countries' respective sovereignties would never again be taken from them by Moscow. Nonetheless, Russia, the core-state of the former Soviet Union, with its own legitimate strategic fears and concerns, was and

continues to be eager to keep countries close to its borders free of direct Western influence and interference. It has funded and supported a number of strategies designed to show that Russia still has the ‘teeth’ necessary to protect what it considers important. Of those countries, Ukraine is central. Long considered the breadbasket of Europe and with a population of some 44.5 million, Ukraine and its people are historically considered, (from a Russian perspective), ‘little Russia’ – an essential part of the Russian homeland. Ukrainians on the other hand, especially after their independence from the Soviet Union (1991), revelled in their newfound political freedom. The Ukrainian political elite tried (and failed) to find a balance between its Russian neighbour and its more distant supporters in the EU. In this game, geography is king. But so are resources. Russia has invested heavily in becoming Western Europe’s most significant oil and gas supplier. This reality, coupled with the fact that Ukraine is almost totally dependent on Russian oil and gas, means that it can (and has)¹ turn off the spigot, leaving Ukraine without the means to fuel its industries and businesses, sending the prices for these precious commodities through the roof. It will take many years for Ukraine to find alternative sources of supply (possibly through Turkey and Iran). Western European countries are currently attempting

¹ The 2008-09 Russo-Ukrainian gas dispute. This trade dispute was not simply confined to the two states in question, but involved eastern and central European Russian gas recipients leading to a suspension of some Russian gas supplies during an especially cold winter.

to find alternatives to ensure they never become subjected to the threat of Russian blackmail. But this project is also long term and the costs involved, staggering.² It would be easier and cheaper for Western Europe to continue using Russia as a main oil and gas supplier; however, politics will rule this out unless there is a sea change in the political leadership in Moscow.



As for Putin, recently named by Forbes Magazine as the most powerful political figure in the world,³ events in Kiev are not a ‘lay down misere’. Former pro-Russian Ukrainian President Yanukovich might be in hiding in the eastern part of the country and the pro-Western faction of the political elite ascendant, but this situation is one in flux. The forces of reaction are planning their move and those forces are not just pro-Russian Ukrainians who live predominantly in eastern Ukraine adjacent to Russia, they

² Landber R.V., *Europe Seeks To Cut Its Reliance On Gas From Russia (Update 3)*, Bloomberg, January 4, 2006,

<http://www.bloomberg.com/apps/news?pid=newsarchive&sid=aOEOC7LFhL7o> date accessed: 27/02/2014

³ RIA Novosti, *Putin Named the Most Powerful Person in the World By Forbes*, Moscow Times, 30/10/2013

<http://themoscownews.com/news/20131030/192015750/Putin-named-most-powerful-person-in-world-by-Forbes.html> date accessed: 27/02/2014

will inevitably involve Russia itself as we are currently witnessing.

Therefore, the central questions are:

- a) Can Russia reassert itself over the entire Ukraine?
- b) Will it be content with fuelling protracted Ukrainian internal instability?
- c) Will it take the step that no-one wants to see, but may in fact be the only rational, decisive move Putin can make and that is to, carve out an eastern Ukrainian sphere of influence by supporting a single or multiple secessionist groups.

Formalising the latter arrangement may well see Ukraine split into two or more entities, with Russian military forces free to patrol the streets of major eastern Ukrainian cities. There would be little that the EU, or even the US could do to prevent this scenario. Russia is still big enough to thwart Western agendas close to its own borders, especially were such agendas considered existential threats to Russian prestige and perceptions of power.

Right now, deep within the corridors of the Moscow Kremlin, planners are at work. They could set up a situation that bleeds an internally divided, but still unified Ukraine to a point where the pro-Western elite in Kiev is eventually forced from power and the pro-Russian elite regains the upper hand. This is a long, drawn out game and the resulting dysfunction within Ukraine could

have unpleasant side effects for Russia. Supporting secessionist movements is a medium term game play in which Russia might lose the entire Ukraine, but gain a loyal rump-state that would still be considered useful, while pressing western Ukraine into submission by using its oil and gas monopoly. On the other hand, it could simply send in the tanks to pro-Russian areas of eastern Ukraine. The mere presence of Russian military forces on Ukrainian territory would force Kiev's hand, especially during a time when the country is trying to sort out elections. The election process would be scuttled. Ukrainian military and security forces would need to be mobilised. The fallout would force Ukrainian military officers and other ranks into defining their allegiance between the elite in Kiev, or the former pro-Russian president Yanukovich. Such a stunning move would force the EU and the US to act, and if the resultant actions were akin to Western support for the Syrian rebels in the Syrian Civil War, the Kremlin would have snookered the international community.

This game being played is certainly one that has a smack of revenge to it. The West tolerates, but does not like Putin's government. It is an autocracy, and a successful one at that. It is busily involving itself in the affairs of states far from home. States like Egypt, Iran, and Syria. It has a benevolent, if not close relationship with the People's Republic of China, the 21st Century's 'workshop of the world'. Under Putin, Russia is a state to be feared, unlike the hapless post-Soviet rule of Boris Yeltsin.

True, modern Russia is no Soviet Union, and it has its fair share of domestic social and economic problems. But Vladimir Putin is a cunning game player, and in the asymmetric strategy he is using to ‘push back’ Western influence from Russia’s borders it is unlikely he will yield willingly to a unified, strong, pro-Western Ukraine on his country’s south-western frontier.

– Views expressed in this article are not necessarily those of SAGE International –

Images Accessed: 27/02/2014

Viktor Fedorovich Yanukovich

<http://1.bp.blogspot.com/-KjfeqKk-rb0/UtGEPTTcEpl/AAAAAAAAAOS0/bjVSxXU3VA/s1600/9749.jpg>

Oleksandr Turchynov

<http://www.inform.kz/fotoarticles/20140223175039.jpg>

Vladimir Putin

http://img.timeinc.net/time/daily/2007/0712/putin_illo_1219.jpg