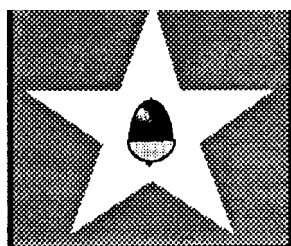


Conflict Studies Research Centre

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As Ambassador to Ukraine**

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The decision announced on 10 May to replace Russia's low-profile Ambassador to Ukraine, Ivan Aboimov, after less than two years in his post with its former Prime Minister, Viktor Chernomyrdin, represents the launch of a new stage of Russian policy, designed to lock in a significant, but far from complete change in Ukraine's geopolitical and geo-economic course. Significantly, Chernomyrdin has not only been appointed Ambassador, but, also Special Presidential Envoy for the Development of Russian-Ukrainian Trade and Economic Ties. No less significantly, Chernomyrdin can boast a personal relationship with President Kuchma surpassed only by that which existed between Kuchma and former President Yel'tsin.

The transformation of the Russian vector from the secondary into the primary one of Ukraine's 'multi-vector' foreign policy - and the primacy assigned to Russia in the 'economisation' of Ukraine's foreign policy - is tribute not only to the success of Putin's 'cold', 'more active' and 'more aggressive' policy since December 1999; it is also testimony to a process of mutual estrangement between Ukraine and West which began with EU refusal to place Ukraine on the list of Group 2 applicant countries, which deepened with the 1999 Kosovo conflict and which intensified further with President Kuchma's evident refusal to support his pro-Western and reformist Prime Minister, Viktor Yushchenko, between his appointment in December 1999 and his dismissal on 27 April 2001. The Chernomyrdin appointment is designed to strengthen Kuchma's confidence that he is reliably backed by Russia. At the same time, it gives him a powerful new ally at home.

Russian influence, steadily and appreciably strengthened by a 'far tougher' and more 'pragmatic' application of the energy card after December 1999 (the date of Russia's fifth major oil supply cut-off), changed in form after the November 2000 Gongadze affair (and subsequent tape scandal) drove a further wedge between Ukraine and the West. Between January-February 1994 (the months in which, respectively, the Ukraine-US-Russia Trilateral agreement was signed and Ukraine joined PfP) and May 1997 (the month in which the Russia-Ukraine 'Big Treaty' and Black Sea Fleet accords were concluded), NATO and the United States in particular were regarded in Kyiv as de facto guarantors of Ukraine's sovereignty. The tape scandal (which has led not only to Western recriminations, but moves to expel Ukraine from the Council of Europe) has now enabled Russia to assume this role - a role which most Ukrainians and Westerners would have found implausible, if not unimaginable even a short time ago. Almost alone amongst other European

countries, Russia has portrayed Western entreaties and pressures as blatant attempts to interfere in Ukraine's internal affairs and alter its economic and foreign policy course.

Despite increasingly strong Russian assertions that the former Soviet Union is 'our territory, our sphere of interest',¹ Russia's charges that it is the West which is interfering now have resonance in Ukraine itself. This is particularly so within the Presidential Administration, where several believe (and several more claim) that the tape scandal is a provocation by Western special services. Anatoliy Orel, Deputy Head of the Presidential Administration, and one of the architects of Ukraine's geopolitical turn, appears to believe this himself, and President Kuchma has dropped strong public hints that he agrees with this verdict. To those who have been inclined to accept this version of events - and to many who were not - the decision by the United States on 13 April to grant political asylum to SBU Major Yuriy Melnychenko, who claims to have recorded the conversations allegedly implicating Kuchma in Gongadze's murder and in other abuses of power, appeared to clinch all doubt. It is therefore ironic that the prestigious Russian daily, *Izvestiya* has implied - to be sure, with delicacy - that the principal beneficiary of the scandal, the Russian Federation, is more likely than the West to have been its author.² To those even remotely acquainted with the *Sluzhba Bezpeki Ukrainiy* (which has close operational ties with Russian special services and virtually none with Western ones), there are grounds to suspect that Melnychenko is postman rather than 'whistle blower'. Equally, there are signs that Putin is supporting more than one set of protagonists in Ukraine's political struggle - and has been rather effective in neutralising those (like Yushchenko and former Deputy Prime Minister Tymoshenko) whose ascendancy could damage Russian interests.³

At roughly the same time as the tape scandal, Russia also began to alter its means of economic influence from pressure to support. The 24 December Minsk accords deferred Ukraine's gas debt to Russia for ten years and under remarkably lenient terms, but at a price: conclusion of agreements (November 2000 and February 2001) transferring to Russian entities de facto ownership of most of Ukraine's energy transport infrastructure.⁴ The conclusion on 14 May of a five-year gas supply agreement with Turkmenistan - presented by Ukraine's state television as a means of diversifying gas supply and by Kuchma as a 'historic event' - is a further sign of such support, as Turkmen gas must transit the same Russian owned distribution network which blocked the conclusion of similar deals in the past.⁵

Significant as the changes in Ukraine's direction might be, the fact is that Ukraine continues to pursue a 'multi-vector' foreign policy, and its leaders, officials and diplomats remain habituated at balancing steps in one direction with corresponding steps in another. In contrast to its vastly more unfortunate neighbour, Moldova, Ukraine officially rules out membership of the Russia-Belarus Union; the majority of its political and administrative elite are (declaratively) adamant that the 'European course' is 'irreversible'; and NATO-Ukraine cooperation, whilst politically downgraded since Kosovo,

has within the past year acquired greater military-technical content and momentum than it ever possessed in the past. In Ukraine, neither disillusionment with the West, nor even a sense of betrayal, lead inexorably to a greater love of Russia. Unlike Belarus, it is very unlikely that Ukraine will quietly, let alone gratefully return to Russia's embrace.

Confident, even over-confident as Russians are that a fundamental convergence of interests now exists between the key economic players in both countries and that, without Russia, Ukraine lacks the 'ability to stand' (*samostoyatel'nost'*)⁶, Russia is at pains not to challenge Ukraine's formal 'independence' (*nezavisimost'*),⁷ and even today Russian feelings of optimism are tinged by caution and irritation. Only recently, Deputy Foreign Minister Valeriy Loshchinin, appointed to supervise relations with CIS countries in April 2001⁸, stated on the one hand that the building of 'allied and neighbourly relations with Ukraine is a strategic priority in Russia's foreign policy', whilst on the other hand noted that the countries 'do have disagreements':

*above all in estimating the consequences of NATO expansion eastwards ... Forms and methods of cooperation with NATO, including that in the military sphere, is a delicate issue.*⁹

No less irritating is the fact that what appear to be major steps forward (most recently the November 2000 and February 2001 accords between Kuchma and Putin), have more than once been diluted, circumvented or sabotaged by people and structures in Ukraine which are opposed to them. In the case of the recent agreements, designed *inter alia* to achieve a substantial unification of the Russian and Ukrainian energy complexes, irritation was all the greater as the (still unpublished) accords were supported by the heads of these respective complexes. Nevertheless, Prime Minister Yushchenko, who saw evident contradictions between the accords and his efforts to establish a more open and transparent energy market, raised questions in Moscow and Kyiv which put implementation in doubt.¹⁰ His opposition placed him on a collision course with Ukraine's energy oligarchs (and President) and is a key factor which led to his dismissal by the *Verkhovna Rada*.

The meaning of Chernomyrdin's appointment is therefore twofold. First, it is designed to strengthen and consolidate the Russian vector in Ukraine's policy. By the same token, it is designed to consolidate the supporters of this vector by giving them a powerful ally in residence, who can act with the authority of the President and the leading economic powers of the country.¹¹ *Ukrayina Moloda* (12 May) is surely wrong to say, 'he is rather the ambassador of *Gazprom* than Putin'. He is both.

Second, Chernomyrdin has been appointed in the expectation that he will be an executive power in Ukraine. Few figures can be better qualified (or better connected) to bridge what in post-Soviet conditions is often unbridgeable: the gap between agreements and their implementation.¹² His key role will be arbitrator and ombudsmen, overcoming blockages created not only by Ukrainians opposed to closer integration with Russia, but by the large

degree of 'multi-voicedness' (*mnogogolosiye*) which still exists in both countries. As Anatoliy Hrytsenko notes, in this respect Chernomyrdin's influence could prove positive:

*Chernomyrdin is a business person, a practical person, and I think he will be able to push forward many of the problems that have been 'left hanging' within the framework of the long-term programme for bilateral cooperation to 2007. These programmes really could help create jobs and ensure access for our joint products to international markets.*¹³

But there is also a negative potential, and here for once *Ukrayina Moloda* is right:

*He will not care about how a collective farm field is divided on the border between Luhansk Region [Ukraine] and Voronezh Region [Russia]. He will not care for opening some PC-equipped Pushkin-named village library for ethnic Russians somewhere in Dzhankoy Region [Crimea]. He will supervise Russia's participation in big privatisation and gas debt settlement. He will do everything to make Kyiv sell Russia part of its transit gas pipelines ... It is no coincidence that even now, Ukrainian patriots are bitterly ironical, saying that Chernomyrdin will be a governor of Ukraine or its new Prime Minister, rather than an ambassador.*¹⁴

Three days after these 'bitterly ironical' reflections were written, they were echoed by Dmitriy Rogozin, Chairman of the Committee on International Affairs of the Russian State Duma:

*Of course, Chernomyrdin should not just conduct himself as an ambassador in Ukraine. He should be taking a more active part in the solution of, well, I am not afraid to say this, some Ukrainian problems, too...I think that Viktor Stepanovich will have to act as a kind of arbitrating judge in the solution of numerous conflicts, even those of an internal political nature. Here he will have to display such high statesmanship and wisdom as will make it possible for him not to involve Russia directly in the internal affairs of Ukraine.*¹⁵

Intervening but in ways which do not 'involve Russia directly' is a well established art, but it has not been always delicately performed by Russian emissaries or graciously received by their hosts. How Chernomyrdin performs may depend less on *whether* he strengthens the Russian vector than whether he does so by producing economic results tangible to ordinary Ukrainians. Should he succeed in accomplishing this feat, the challenges for the West in Ukraine will become even more insuperable than they appear to be today.

Endnotes

¹ Following the Eighth Meeting of the Ministerial Council of the OSCE on 27 November 2000, Deputy Foreign Minister Yevgeny Gusarov, stated: "We have been warning our western partners that we oppose the use of the OSCE for interference in the internal affairs of the countries situated to the east of Vienna [sic]". According to Charles Clover of the *Financial Times*, Andrey Fedorov, former First Deputy Foreign Minister has stated, "Today we are speaking more or less openly now about our zone of interests. In one way or another we are confirming that the post-Soviet territory is such a zone ... In Yel'tsin's time we were trying to wrap this in a nice paper. Now we are saying it more directly: this is our territory, our sphere of interest". (Charles Clover, 'Putin: Good Neighbour or Great-Power Politics?', *Financial Times*, 23 January 2001.)

² 'Kuchma - Our [P]resident: Putin Had to Meddle in the Internal Affairs of Ukraine' (*Kuchma - nash (p)rezident: Putinu pridetsya vmeshat'sya vo vnutrennie dela Ukrainiy*), *Izvestiya*, 13 February 2001. Resident is the Russian term for the chief intelligence officer posted to a foreign country.

³ One sign of this neutralisation is Yushchenko's unqualified public endorsement of Chernomyrdin's appointment, curiously out of kilter with the apprehensions of several of his political supporters. These issues and other related ones will be more fully explored in a larger paper, *The Geopolitical Uses of "Kuchmagate"* to be published by the author in summer 2001.

⁴ These include a minimum market interest rate and provision that payment for the procurement of subsequent gas deliveries will be made only 50% in cash, the rest of the payment to be deferred again for 8-9 years.

⁵ Ukrainian Television, 14 May 2001, cited in *BBC Summary of World Broadcasts* (hereafter *SWB*).

⁶ In the post-Soviet as in the Soviet period, one often hears the refrain in Russia that 'Ukraine will never be able to stand by itself' (*samostoyatel'noy Ukrainiy nikogda ne budet*).

⁷ Nevertheless, the manner of Chernomyrdin's appointment is a good illustration that mistakes are made. Not only did Putin announce the appointment before its approval by the Russian State Duma, he did so before receiving Ukraine's consent. As Anatoliy Hrytsenko, President of Ukraine's Centre for Economic and Political Research noted, 'I do not think Putin would have acted this way with any major Western country ... It is roughly the same way Putin appoints his governor-generals, or, as they call them nowadays, permanent representative of the Russian Federation president in the federal districts. Obviously somewhere in the subconscious Ukraine is still perceived as a kind of south-western special federal district of Russia', *Strana.Ru* web site, 11 May 2001.

⁸ Ukraine regards itself as a founder, but not a member of the CIS, not having signed the 1993 CIS Charter. The Russian Federation does not accept this distinction.

⁹ *Interfax*, 14 May 2001, cited in *SWB*.

¹⁰ According to Government sources, only a summary of the accords was made available to Prime Minister Yushchenko and the Cabinet of Ministers.

¹¹ As President Putin stated after making the appointment, "Trade and economic ties lie in the foundation of our relations with Ukraine. And certainly we are unlikely to find a man in our country who knows the character of relations between the two states in this sphere and the features and pluses and minuses of both the Russian and the Ukrainian economy better", *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, 12 May 2001.

¹² Former Chairman of *Gazprom*, he is widely believed to remain an authority if not the key authority within it. His personal assets have been estimated at \$5 billion. As Hrytsenko notes, 'he is a man who knows exactly the economic value of

everything that exists in Ukrainian-Russian relations. He knows not only the official reports of the state Committee for Statistics and the CIS Interstate Economic Committee, but also the shady schemes out of which both the Ukrainian and the Russian businessmen who now influence politics made their first capital. He knows exactly who owes how much to whom, which means that in this regard it will be both easy and difficult for the Ukrainian side to work with him', *Strana.ru* web site, 11 May 2001.

¹³ *Strana.ru* web site, 11 May 2001.

¹⁴ *Ukrayina Moloda*, 12 May 2001.

¹⁵ Interview to *Radio Rossia*, 15 May 2001.

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