



**Into Reverse?  
The Dismissal of Ukraine's  
Minister of Defence**

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## **Key Points**

- \* Defence Minister Marchuk was closely identified with Ukraine's bid for NATO membership, and with Ukraine's commitment of forces to Iraq. His dismissal is a snub to the West and a major blow to Ukraine's developing relationship with NATO.
- \* His replacement by former Defence Minister Kuzmuk reflects President Kuchma's determination to have a loyalist in charge of the MOD in the run-up to the 31 October presidential elections.
- \* Kuzmuk's appointment will also reassure those opposed to Marchuk's force reductions and efforts to bring the MOD's commercial interests under control.
- \* NATO's failure to recognise Ukraine's aspirations and efforts by holding out the promise of eventual access to the Membership Action Plan (MAP) – reinforced by the EU's cool attitude towards Ukraine – fatally weakened NATO's standing in Kuchma's eyes and reinforced the trends towards Russia and authoritarianism.
- \* This is reinforced by Putin's use of political and economic levers to ensure that a pro-Russian candidate wins the forthcoming presidential election.

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President Leonid Kuchma of Ukraine dismissed the country's sixth Minister of Defence, Yevhen Marchuk, on Wednesday 22 September. On 24 September, he reinstated his longstanding ally, Oleksandr Kuzmuk, to the post. These decisions are a blow to Ukraine's relationship with NATO. They reflect the President's deep discontent with the results of the NATO Istanbul summit, as well as his determination to have a loyalist in charge of the country's pre-eminent power ministry before the presidential elections, scheduled for 31 October. They also reflect the strength of Russian leverage during the critical pre and post-election periods and provide further grounds to believe that the elections will not be fair.

The President's decision followed his visit to the Pavlohrad chemical plant, one of three munitions recycling plants in the country. His announcement squarely blamed Marchuk for irregularities in storing and recycling munitions – and by implication for the May explosion at another plant in Melitopol which resulted in millions of dollars of damage. These events will kindle a strong sense of *déjà vu*, for the dismissal of Marchuk's predecessor, Army General Volodymyr Shkidchenko in June 2003, Black Sea Fleet Commander Mykaylo Yezhel in April 2003 and Kuzmuk himself in October 2001 all followed surprise presidential visits or accidents. Accidents will happen in a chronically over-laden and under resourced military establishment, and they provide an infinite reserve of raw material for intrigues against bureaucratic and political opponents. Not surprisingly, some of Marchuk's supporters – and opponents – were convinced that the Melitopol 'accident' was no accident at all but a provocation designed to further political struggles within Ukraine's power ministries and the country at large. Whatever the truth of the matter, deficiencies in munitions recycling are unlikely to explain the President's decision.<sup>1</sup>

Marchuk was appointed on 20 June 2003 to reinvigorate the NATO-Ukraine relationship in the wake of the debilitating Kol'chuga scandal, arising from taped conversations allegedly linking President Kuchma to the dispatch of advanced radar systems to Iraq. As an intensely pragmatic centrist, Marchuk has long accepted the 'necessity' of Russian influence, but has always considered it vital to counterbalance it by achieving the maximum possible integration between Ukraine and NATO. For him this has always been a realistic objective, given NATO's 'open door' policy and a longstanding and remarkably extensive programme of NATO-Ukraine defence cooperation. Equally, Marchuk has been fully aware that integration with the EU has not been a realistic prospect given the semi-reformed condition of Ukraine's economy, the absence of an EU 'open door' policy and a considerable degree of irritation and coolness at working level. The presidential elections, which have already provoked domestic turbulence (and an apparent attempt to poison the leader of the opposition) have added urgency to Marchuk's convictions.<sup>2</sup> Whatever happens internally, Marchuk and a substantial number of

other figures in Ukraine's political establishment are determined that international gains not unravel and Ukraine not be forced back to the geopolitical drawing board.

In advancing the cause of NATO integration, Marchuk had been remarkably effective. As former Prime Minister, past Secretary of the National Security and Defence Council, former Member of Parliament and former Chairman of the Security Services (SBU), he had the broad inter-agency experience as well as the political skills and executive ability to implement radical change – something that his predecessors lacked. In May 2002 Marchuk was instrumental in establishing 'ultimate membership' of NATO as the country's official goal. He was equally instrumental in securing presidential and parliamentary approval for the deployment of 1,600 Ukrainian peacekeepers to Iraq, the fourth largest Coalition deployment. He also used his brief tenure as minister to intensify the pace and depth of the country's defence reform, which since 2000 has been sound in conception, but uneven in implementation and egregiously underfinanced. These measures included (over the objections of much of the military establishment) deep and rapid force reductions, which are seen by NATO as an essential prerequisite to successful defence reform.

In return, President Kuchma expected a clear signal from NATO about future admission to the MAP process. He did not receive one. Throughout the country, the results of the 28-29 June NATO Istanbul summit were regarded with disappointment. The final communiqué's failure to raise the question of a Membership Action Plan or cite Ukraine in the section on Open Door Policy, but only in the paragraph following that on NATO-Russia cooperation, was regarded in presidential circles as insulting. Although NATO staff had worked hard with Marchuk to set up a PFP Trust Fund (which, ironically, would have set aside funds for munitions disposal), this initiative was not adopted at Istanbul either. The EU-Ukraine summit of 7-8 July was greeted with similar, if more predictable disappointment. At the end of June, Marchuk privately warned that the results of Istanbul would greatly weaken NATO's standing and influence in Ukraine. Indication of this was provided on 15 July when President Kuchma, without consulting the Ministry of Defence or Ministry of Foreign Affairs, deleted the reference to NATO membership from Ukraine's latest Military Doctrine (adopted in draft form by the Cabinet of Ministers in April 2003).

Absent incentives from NATO, President Kuchma has given undivided attention to what has always concerned him most: the question of power. It is becoming an ever more painful question, given the failure of economic incentives, media dominance and other 'administrative resources' to diminish Yushchenko's edge in opinion polls over the regime's leading candidate, Prime Minister Viktor Yanukovich. Marchuk, once Kuchma's rival, has never been more than an uncertain ally. Like Ihor Smeshko, Chairman of the Security Services (SBU), he has opposed any attempt to involve his ministry in the succession struggle.<sup>3</sup> From the outset of the campaign, he forbade all political activity in the armed forces and any displays of political partisanship. In doing so, he has reinforced the tradition of the armed forces, who see themselves as defenders of the country against external enemies rather than defenders of the regime against the country's citizens. This is not the tradition of several other power ministries – notably the Ministry of Internal Affairs (*MZS*) – and, according to the opposition, these ministries have not been neutral in practice. At a time when events might take a disturbing, not to say unconstitutional turn, the last thing Kuchma needs is uncertainty about the country's military leadership. What he needs is a safe pair of hands.

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Kuzmuk not only meets this specification. He is also the ideal figure to shore up the MOD's old guard, whose political and economic allies happen to be the President's own. Marchuk's determination to bring financial discipline and accountability to the MOD's management and sale of property and materiel had aroused heated opposition from several potent financial-political groups, not least that headed by Ihor Bakay, Chairman of the opaquely named Directorate for State Affairs. Marchuk's predecessor, Shkidchenko – a Kuzmuk protégé, but a thoroughly apolitical professional – tiptoed around this problem and gingerly advanced defence reform without ruffling feathers. Marchuk believed that the next stage of defence reform could not possibly proceed with Kuzmuk's team and 'replaced virtually all officials in key posts. But he did not complete the job.'<sup>4</sup> So long as this process was geopolitically advantageous and politically acceptable, Kuchma allowed it to advance. Today it is not, and he has acted accordingly.

His decision is reinforced by Russian policy. Since becoming Acting President in December 1999, Vladimir Putin has sought to turn Russia's regional economic strengths into geopolitical assets and has astutely grasped the interplay between external and internal factors. These factors have presented both risk and opportunity. Although Ukraine's very tough and apparently pragmatic Prime Minister, Viktor Yanukovich, is not the first choice of Putin – who has always preferred dealing with a weakened Leonid Kuchma – an election victory for the liberal, Western orientated former Prime Minister, Viktor Yushchenko, would be perceived by most of the Russian political spectrum as ruinous to Russia's interests. Putin is therefore providing overt as well as covert backing for Yanukovich through business and long-term energy contracts and very aggressive political, informational (and possibly active measures) support.<sup>5</sup> In return, Yanukovich is reported to have provided 'guarantees' for the unfettered operation of Russian business in Ukraine and its participation on favourable terms in Ukraine's highly politicised privatisation process. These guarantees will surely increase what is already an unhealthy degree of Russian influence over Ukraine's economy, its business culture and its structures of power.

Ukraine's membership of NATO is also seen as ruinous to Russia's interests. Although Marchuk has enjoyed a strong relationship with Russia in the past, he began to feel Putin's opposition midway through his tenure as Secretary of the National Security and Defence Council, as the genuineness of his commitment to NATO integration became apparent. The visit of Viktor Medvedchuk, Head of the Ukrainian President's Administration, to Moscow the day before Marchuk's dismissal to discuss 'tactics of cooperation' was probably the most recent opportunity to press these concerns and do so in a climate of 'full mutual understanding'.<sup>6</sup> According to opposition sources, this included an understanding that Marchuk was damaging Kuchma's interests internally and Russia's interests internationally. Important as Russian influence is today, it may prove all the more important *after* the elections, particularly if these are fraudulent and provoke a strong Western response. Never shy about naming his price, President Putin appears to understand this fact and is utilising it to advantage.

## Conclusion

Marchuk's dismissal is a rebuff to the West and a capitulation to the realities of power. Kuchma and his inner circle seem determined to maintain the current, oligarchic system, whatever the consequences for Ukraine's standing in Western capitals. For this, they need Putin's support, and they must accept his terms.

Western influence in Ukraine is now lower than at any time since independence. Since President Putin's accession to power, Russia has played to its strengths. Within the past two years, the West has been too divided, too distracted and too reticent to play to its own. Although he did much to reform the armed forces during his tenure as Minister between July 1996 and October 2001, Kuzmuk lacks the temperament, the interest or the political possibility to continue the course that Marchuk so courageously started and NATO so strongly welcomed. He is likely to maintain the appearance of Euro-Atlantic integration and, as far as possible, the substance of the UK-Ukraine Bilateral Programme (Ukraine's second largest bilateral defence cooperation programme after that with the USA). But future ties between NATO and Ukraine are likely to develop in a context of internal authoritarianism and subservience to Russia. Yushchenko's victory would dramatically alter these possibilities, but the current authorities appear unprepared and unwilling to accept this outcome.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Marchuk had made munitions disposal a top priority from the moment he became Defence Minister. Nevertheless, Kuchma never gave him the authority required. 'Matters related to the disposal of munitions are under the constant supervision of the Presidential Administration, and the President authorised Prime Minister Yanukovich to keep them under his personal control.' See Yuriy Butusov, 'Watch Out! There Goes Marchuk!' [*Ostorozhno! Idet snyatie Marchuka!*], *Mirror of the Week* [*Zerkalo Nedeli*], no 38 (513), 25 September 2004.

<sup>2</sup> In early September, Ukraine's leading opposition candidate, Viktor Yushchenko, was diagnosed with food poisoning. After his condition sharply deteriorated, he was flown for two weeks of treatment to Austria, where a team of doctors testified that the chemical substances discovered could only have been artificially induced. In an intensely emotional speech to Ukraine's parliament, the *Verkhovna Rada*, on 21 September, Yushchenko linked the episode to a string of murders of leading regime opponents in recent years and warned that 'the government is the murderer'. (Broadcast live by Ukrainian Radio First Programme, 21 September, cited in *BBC Summary of World Broadcasts: Former Soviet Union*). The Security Service of Ukraine (SBU) has opened an official investigation of the matter.

<sup>3</sup> Since arriving at his post, Smeshko has been determined to transform the SBU into an intelligence and counter-intelligence service, divested of law enforcement functions. According to *Zerkalo Nedeli*, his stance led the President to appoint Volodymyr Satsyuk First Deputy Chairman of the SBU and put him in charge of a new, politically tasked 'working group' with a direct line of subordination to himself. See Sergey Rakhmanin, 'The Beginning of the End' [*Nachalo Kontsa*] in *Zerkalo Nedeli*, op cit.

<sup>4</sup> 'Second Coming?', *Defence Express*, 24 September 2004, cited in *BBC Summary of World Broadcasts*.

<sup>5</sup> On 'active measures', see Taras Kuzio, 'Russia and State-Sponsored Terrorism in Ukraine: Part I' in *Eurasia Daily Monitor* (Jamestown Foundation 22 September 2004, Vol 1, Issue 90).

<sup>6</sup> Ukrainian 'One Plus One' TV, 21 September 2004, cited in *BBC Summary of World Broadcasts: Former Soviet Union*: (<http://news.monitor.bbc.co.uk>).

## **Want to Know More ...?**

See: James Sherr, *Another Ukrainian Minister of Defence*, Conflict Studies Research Centre, Occasional Brief No 98, 31 July 2003,  
<http://www.da.mod.uk/csrc>

James Sherr, *Ukraine: The Pursuit of Defence Reform in an Unfavourable Context*, Conflict Studies Research Centre, Central & Eastern Europe Series, 04/08, June 2004,  
<http://www.da.mod.uk/csrc>

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