EARTHLY PROBLEMS AHEAD OF SPACE MEETING IN DNEPROPETROVSK

February 01

Just as officials regained their breath after Kuchma's blitz-visit to Russian Federation in December, Ukrainian press and media informed us about the forthcoming meeting between the presidents of Russia and Ukraine on February 11 in Dnepropetrovsk.

L. Kuchma does not come empty-handed to this meeting. On January 30, President of Ukraine signed the Verkhovna Rada Ratification Memorandum on the USA and USSR agreement on the Anti Missile Defense Restrictions. On the same day, President signed the Law on Verkhovna Rada Ratification agreement between Ukrainian and Russian governments 'On missile warning system facilities and space control'.

The intensity of Russian-Ukrainian contacts has surprised even the most experienced diplomats. There were eight meeting on the highest level in the last year alone.

There is no doubt that such meeting between the presidents push the intergovernmental agenda ahead, allowing the closer circle of president's officials to concentrate on bilateral problems. Nevertheless, the increasing frequency of such meetings not only indicates the importance of the problems backlog (the list changes each year), but also the slips in the traditional bilateral mechanisms of decision-making.

Let us leave the space topic to the presidents and talk about more earthly matters, such as effectiveness of bilateral cooperation mechanisms and some of the problems in Ukrainian-Russian relations.

Searching for a new blueprint, or on a difficulty of transition of quantity into quality.

On October 2nd President L. Kuchma, when introducing the new Minister For Overseas Affairs, said, 'It is essential to find a constructive way of working with Russia, directed to mutually beneficial cooperation, not confrontation'. It is reasonable to assume that this quest was made in two fundamental directions. Firstly, building up the intensity of contacts with Russian counterparts. Secondly, attempting to re-new acting bilateral mechanisms and to build new structures.

Let's start with contact intensification. At the end of October, Moscow was chosen as the destination of the new Minister For Overseas Affairs first foreign visit. After that there was a series of meeting between prime-ministers, ministers for internal affairs, prosecutors etc. The President of Ukraine have met with Russian governors, opened Taras Shevchenko monument in Saint Petersburg, spoke to Russian and Ukrainian businessmen in Moscow. Signing of 'gas' memorandum at the end of December was the culmination of this process. Then there was Russian Defense Minister's visit to Ukraine, which left puzzled western observers talking about 'Russian tendencies' in Ukraine's foreign policy. Following the defense minister, came the 'nuclear' minister, Mr Adamov, carrying a number of proposals, including Ukraine's annexation to Putin's initiative on making a new safe nuclear reactor...

It is essential to point out, though, that livening of the contacts with Russia can also be viewed as an attempt to appease the domestic situation as well as to compensate the weakening of the relations with the West. However, in spite of such activity, there is no sign of serenity in the Ukrainian-Russian relations. The times of economical and political exchange have passed, and Ukraine was clearly told about that. For instance, on January 16 ITERA stopped supplying gas to four biggest Ukrainian electrical stations. The new promises, that followed, made by V. Yuschenko, for some reason, were not heard. At the same time, 'Transneft' has started the construction of Sukhodolskaya-Rodionovskaya oil pipe, going around the territory of Ukraine. On January 22, the Russian Federation Minister for Finance, Mr Kudrin, publicly accused Ukrainian pipe producers in dumping and asked for corresponding measures of protection. At the same time, on Ukrainian side, certain scaling down of the Gen Sergeev's [Russian Minister For Defense] visit results was made...

In other words the quantity of political and diplomatic contacts does not a priori change the quality of bilateral relations. In February of this year, Razumkov Center conducted a national survey on problems of Ukrainian-Russian relations.

Despite series of 'break-through' meetings, 'significant' agreements and positive dynamics of trade in the last year, Ukrainians remain skeptical towards the current state of relations between the two countries. Two thirds of people surveyed (65.4%) characterized them as 'unstable', 10.5% characterized them as 'bad' and just 18.2% of the population thinks the relations are good.

Notably, our people are quite critical of the current Ukrainian policy towards Russia. 38.7% reckon that the policy is 'uncertain and contradictory', 11.8% define it as 'desire to improve its affairs at the neighbour's expense', 4.4% consider the direction of Ukrainian policies towards Russia to be unfriendly. In other words, 55% view current policy negatively.

Correspondingly, 28.1% of survey view Ukrainian policy as 'pragmatic mutually beneficial cooperation', 17.1% as 'friendly'.

Russian policy towards Ukraine is assessed similarly (with some insignificant variations). In other words, so far Ukrainians don't feel any positive results coming from any of the recent meetings, blaming both sides equally.

Nomenclature channels of cooperation

Another direction of the search for the new way of cooperation was the renewal of cooperation mechanisms. It was a year ago that Mr Kuchma and then president-elect V. Putin decided to renew the work of the Strategic Group on issues of Ukrainian-Russian relations. Head of Administration of the President of Russian Federation's January visit to Kiev signifies new attempts to revive this work.

During their meeting in Moscow in December, both Presidents criticized the work of the Joint Ukrainian-Russian Commission on cooperation. A month later Ukrainian government is commissioned with developing the Doctrine of External Economic Relations with Russia for 2001-2004 and reviving of the joint commission activities.

And on January 12 President of Ukraine founded the Working Group on the development of new initiatives for deepening of economic relations with Russia. However despite some shuffling of officials in between the new founded triangle: Joint Commission – Strategic Group – Working Group, the main question remains, how effectively the system of bilateral contacts will work on the middle level.

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Looking at the bright light of personalities through the prism of sociology

The results of February survey, conducted by Razumkov Center, have shown some curious tendencies in the way our countrymen see the influence of our state and political activists on development of Ukrainian-Russian relations. (see the Diagram)

Influence on on development of Ukrainian-Russian relations

Names - check

1. Positive influence, 2. Negative influence, 3. No influence 4. Not familiar with his or her activities, 5. Find it difficult to answer

As can be seen Kuchma leads the'positive influence' section (60.6%). Not surprising, taking into account general stereotype of highest authority – everything is decided by the President – coupled with recent intensification of high level contacts. It is little surprising too find V. Yuschenko, who can hardly be accused of pro-Russian sympathies, in second place. It might be explained by his post as such, but let us also not forget about economic successes of his government. Still the Prime Minister has never made any public statements, indicating his foreign economy sympathies. Differently put, Yuschenko's 52% percent can be considered as an advance for the future.

Communist leader's, P. Simonenko, 29% can easily be explained by the post-Soviet nostalgia. He is closely followed by A.Zlenko (27%). The fourth place comes at cost, if we recall that the former Ukrainian Ambassador to France only became the head of Ministry for Overseas Affairs four months ago.

In terms of the evaluation of Russian statesmen influence on Ukrainian-Russian relations, opinions are roughly similar. 'Positive influence' rating looks as follows: V. Putin (68.1%), I. Ivanov (27.4%), M. Kasyanov (18.9%), G. Zyuganov (17.4%), I. Sergeev (15.6%), G. Seleznyov (15.2%), E. Primakov (11.9%), G. Yavlinskii (10.5%), Y. Luzhkov (9.4%), E. Stroev (7.2%), R. Vyakhirev (6.6%), V. Zhirinovskii (5.8%), V. Khristenko (3.7%). Notably, majority of the respondents (63.5%) are not familiar with the activities of V. Khristenko, Russian Deputy Prime Minister, in spite of him being in the front line of Ukraine-Russia gas negotiations as well as heading the commission on the Russian citizens affairs overseas.

And today we are going to talk about....

The issues at Ukrainian-Russian negotiations hardly change. Still recently there were some signs of improvement. There was gas memorandum, return of Mikhajlovskii Sobor frescos, livening of economic contacts. Last year, to certain extent, became show *de force* of Russian capital investment in Ukraine.

Still, although the memorandum was signed, the total of debt did not decrease and the exact sum is still not known. Russian investors won several privatization tenders, but there was no serious competition on behalf of the western businesses.

There are many difficult issues in Ukrainian-Russian dialog. According to Ukrainians the biggest problems are in the gas sphere. (See Negative Factors in Ukrainian-Russian relations Diagram).

Diagram.

1. Ukrainian debt for used Russian gas (check)
2. Negative attitude to the Russian-Belorussian Union on behalf of Ukrainian leadership
3. Restriction on trade
4. Ukraine's deepening relations with NATO
5. Black Sea Fleet and Sebastopol
6. Ukraine's vague foreign policy towards Russia
7. Current system of custom border controls
8. Skeptical attitude towards CIS on behalf of Ukraine's political elite
9. Declaration of Ukraine's policy towards integration with European Union
10. Economic immigration
11. Problems of Russian speaking population in Ukraine
12. Ukraine's participation with GUUAM

Notably, the highest positions are held by geopolitical issues (difference in attitudes towards direction of integration of post-Soviet states, NATO contacts). Almost a half of respondents registered negative influence of trade restrictions. Traditionally, attention also was fixed on Black Sea Fleet problems.

Curiously, Ukrainians don't see the problems of Russian speaking population and Ukraine's participation in GUUAM as a big issue.

On GUUAM, Ukraine's initiatives on regional integration were supported by US State Administration and caused some mild irritation on behalf of Russia, periodically compensated by Mr Kucma's 'friendly sessions' with B. Eltsin and imitation of the Commonwealth reforms. Last year, situation has dramatically changed.

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West[illegible] analysts agree that 2000 was the year, most favourable in terms of Russia's strengthening of its position in post-Soviet geopolitical space. Having minimized G[illegible]M influence on [illegible] Soviet territories by publicly refusing to sign gas agreement with Moldova's president, restricting visa regime with Tbilisi, lowering debt pressure off U[illegible]e at the time of i[illegible]nal problems etc, Russia has declared contacts with CIS countries as the main priority of its overseas policy.

Problems of Russian speaking population were the popular topic of discussion at all level meeting for years. The number of Russian speaking schools, institutes, libraries, theatres, newspapers in Ukraine was counted each year. Humanitarian pressure on Ukraine was exerted methodically and single-mindedly.

However, Ukraine's population looks at this problem slightly differently. When asked, if they think that the national and cultural needs of Russian speaking populations are satisfied within Ukraine, 44.4% of people survey replied, 'yes, satisfied in full', 36.8% - 'partially satisfied', 7.6% - 'not satisfied', 11.2% could not answer. In other word, the threat of obligatory ukrainization of 11 million strong Russian speaking part of population is exaggerated.

Problems of Ukrainians living in Russia are considered to be worse. Just 9.7% of people thinks that needs of Ukrainians are met, 36.7% reckon the needs are met partially, 26.6% sure they are not met all, 27% could not answer. Notably, Ukrainians do not think that such attention should be paid to the humanitarian contacts. (The priorities are given in the following order: economic contacts 78.2%, power supply and energy – 59%, politics – 37.8%, security – 23.3%, finance 20.9%, science and technology – 19.7%, ecology – 15.1%, and humanitarian – just 6.4%).

Of course, Russian president's visit at the moment, when Kiev goes through an escalation of the tape gate, is a sign of help. Hardly surprising then, help might be very expensive in politics.

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