

## **Foucault pendulum of Ukrainian-Russian relations, or what is Russian for gas?**

Vol. 6, No. 184, July 31, 2000

Apparently, this time the front line of Ukraine's multi-vector foreign policy - that now increasingly resembles a geopolitical weathercock - moved even closer in Russia's direction, largely due to an usual issue that comes to the fore when the winter season draws near, i.e., gas debts to Russia, now in combination of accusations of suppression of the Russian language in Ukraine.

This weird combination is not something new in the Ukrainian-Russian relations that seem to have turned into a stale puff cake, inevitably served to the political table of negotiations between the two states on gas debt and other issues.

The situation could be observed half a year ago, when statements of Ukrainian and Russian Ombudsmen and diplomatic notes on humanitarian issues of treatment of ethnic Russians and Russian-speakers in Ukraine served as a background for debates between the governments and Russia's largest taxpayer, Gazprom over the amount of Ukraine's gas debt. Then, in late December 1999, the Russian Foreign Ministry voiced serious concern over the Ukrainian Constitutional Court's judgement of December 14 that Ukrainian should be the mandatory language of instruction in all state-owned educational institutions. The concerned statements accompanied the difficult negotiations that sought to achieve agreement that Ukraine would begin paying up its gas debts, supplied by Russia. The negotiations remarkably coincided with rumors about Ukrainian mercenaries who reportedly fought in Chechnya against the Russian troops.

The story seems to be repeated now with its traditional components - from the language issues to Chechnya. On June 29, 2000, First Deputy Commander of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces Col.-Gen. Valery Manilov argued that illegal armed formations in Chechnya could be financed by nationalist organizations of Ukraine and that Ukrainian mercenaries could be present on the territory of the Russian Federation (Uriadovyi Kurrier, July 6, 2000). The Ukrainian Foreign Ministry responded by expressing surprise, and arguing that no documented proof of the allegations had been found. First Deputy Foreign Minister of Ukraine Oleksandr Chalyi said the Ministry was concerned about the fact that Col.-Gen. Manilov's statements were in tune with recent anti-Ukrainian publications in the Russian media and the spread of those publications in Ukraine (Uriadovyi Kurrier, July 6, 2000). Hence, in summer the inter-governmental negotiations on energy issues had to take place in a similar information environment of the language issues and multiple allegations in the Russian media about violation of rights of Russian and Russian-speakers in Ukraine. The remarkable similarity of the processes suggests the emergence of a new trend that is likely to deteriorate into yet another serious problem of the troubled special relationship.

Ukrainian Prime Minister Victor Yushchenko met his Russian counterpart Mikhail Kasianov in Moscow on July 19, 2000 to discuss the issues of settling Ukraine's gas debts and promoting bilateral cooperation in the energy sphere. Note: by the end of 1999 Ukraine owed Russia US\$ 1.4 billion for the supplied gas, and, according to Vice Prime Minister of the Russian Federation Victor Khrystenko, the debt has grown by US\$ 700 million since January 2000 (Den, July 20, 2000). The meeting was designed to find a solution and restructure Ukraine's gas debt. One of the issues raised at the negotiations was the possibility of construction of alternative gas pipelines that would allow Russia to export its gas bypassing Ukraine. I will try to convince the Russian party that optimization of operation in the energy market for Russia means more active cooperation with the Ukrainian party and the maximum use of resources and potentials that are already in place, announced Victor Yushchenko before leaving for Moscow (Ukraina Moloda, July 19, 2000).

However, the meeting of the two prime ministers was not crowned with any specific documented outcomes. Victor Yushchenko explained that by the decision to establish an inter-governmental commission that would prepare its proposals for finding a compromise between Moscow and Kyiv in the near future. Instead, the parties preliminary agreed on Russia's involvement in finishing the construction of the Rivne and the Khmelnytsky nuclear power plants, as well as on supply of Russian nuclear fuel for Ukrainian NPPs and on covering the debts, owed to Ukrainians by the Russian Vnesheconombank.

So far, the discussions about possible construction of alternative pipelines through Belarus, Poland and Slovakia have not done any specific damage to Ukraine's interests, but Russia plans to start building the pipelines in 2001, and as soon as they are complete Ukraine may lose its annual 30 billion cubic meters

of gas received as commission for gas transportation services. The Ukrainian prime minister argued that such a solution would be generally politically incorrect from the point of view of bilateral relations prospects (Molod Ukrainy, July 21, 2000), but it looks like the bilateral relations prospects are not a priority for Russia's decision-making in the energy field. According to Gazprom chairman of the board Rem Vyakhirev, Russia will build the alternative transportation routes because, to put it mildly, Ukraine regularly engages in the unsanctioned withdrawal of Russian's gas and sells it further to Europe. There has not been a single day, a single year when Ukraine has not stolen gas, Vyakhirev announced publicly (Den, July 22, 2000). Hence, [we] will bypass Ukraine not by one route, but at least by two, said the Gazprom leader, known by his skeptical attitude to Russia's strategic partner. According to Mr. Vyakhirev, the solution could be to build a transit pipeline bypassing Ukraine through the territory of Belarus and Poland. However, the official Warsaw has not agreed to that yet. On the contrary, recently Polish Minister of Economy Janusz Steinhoff has announced his country does not wish to see the transportation of gas through the Polish territory harm Ukraine's interests, and, therefore, Poland cannot agree to the option, proposed by Russia. This development complimented another Polish idea, also expressed by Minister Steinhoff, - to extend the would-be gas pipeline from Norway to Ukraine. It is hard to say whether the Russian establishment was prepared to such statements, but Russian Vice Prime Minister Victor Khrystenko announced immediately that Poland's declared intention to prohibit the construction of the alternative pipeline through its territory will not break Russia's plans for creation of risk-free systems of supplying gas to Europe, for Europe consists not only of Poland, but also of Germany, Italy, France (Den, July 25, 2000).

Yet, the negotiations, conducted in the atmosphere, created by several months of allegations of problems of the Russian language in Ukraine were not limited to the gas issue. The traditional exchange of claims exceeded the usual vigor and deteriorated into explicit attempts of political pressure. During the meeting with Victor Yushchenko, Mikhail Kasianov stated he was concerned about the situation of Russian-speakers in Ukraine. His concern, apparently, was shared by the other branch of power: on the day of negotiations the Russian State Duma made a new present to the strategic partner by approving by 345 votes a statement on discrimination of the Russian language in Ukraine. Russian MPs formally accused Ukraine of failure to comply with the provisions of the bilateral Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Partnership in the humanitarian field and urged Russian President Vladimir Putin to solicit the Russian Foreign Ministry's proposals for necessary measures to be taken to counter the challenge...

The tragic introduction to Russian officials' statements about suppression of the Russian minority in Ukraine developed in May 2000 in Lviv. The escalation of this conflict deserves special attention, as it clearly represents stages and techniques of fueling an interethnic conflict where it would be otherwise absurd. Having reached its culmination, the conflict became an effective mechanism of political pressure - and a welcome argument: otherwise claims about suppression of rights of Russians-speakers have not sounded convincing in largely Russian-speaking Ukraine. The suppression theme sounds inadequate when countered by statistics: currently in Ukraine there are 2,399 public schools with Russian as the language of instruction; Russian is the school language for 2,106 thousand Ukrainian schoolchildren (31.7% of the total); almost 280 thousand children attend 17.5 thousand Russian-language kindergartens. 35% university students have Russian as their language of instruction. Today there are 14 state-owned Russian-language theatres; 1,195 Russian-language newspapers (49.7% of the total); 55% of library collections throughout Ukraine (440 million books) are in Russian.

The conflict has been built carefully and gradually. A significant part in the escalation has been played by the media - an integral ingredient of any conflict escalation in the contemporary information environment. The events in Lviv were mostly interpreted by the Russian media as a reprisal of the Lviv dwellers on anything Russian-language, including songs, television and the press. No intention to find out the causes of the conflict has been seen. The official Kyiv took too long before breaking its alienation from the conflict and vacantly watching it escalate.

On May 30, 2000, the Lviv community was mourning the death of a popular Ukrainian composer Igor Bilozir. On May 8 he was violently assaulted by two unidentified individuals at a cafe where he was singing his songs in Ukrainian. Twenty days later he died in hospital from the injuries. The tragedy was interpreted by the majority of Lviv dwellers as a political killing caused, indirectly, by the official policy that was not sufficiently supportive of the Ukrainian language and culture. The funeral transformed in a rally attended by about 150 thousand people. The exalted crowd tried to demolish the cafe in which Igor Bilozir had spent the fatal evening. The circumstances of the composer's death remain an unresolved bad case, but the human tragedy has been rather cynically used for political purposes. Certain dividends on this case were made by Ukrainian extreme right political parties, primarily the Social National Party of Ukraine and the UNA-UNSO. The latter's statement published shortly after the funeral read: There is a specific monument to Igor Bilozir in Lviv now: the UNA-

UNSO fighters destroyed to pieces the Tsisarska Kava caf© in which, on May 8, the conflict exploded that ended tragically for the Ukrainian composer. By this, though scandalous, step the UNA-UNSO brought back to Lviv its glory of the Ukrainian culture Mecca, the glory of the safeguard of the language... (Ukraina Moloda, June 2, 2000). Shortly afterwards, derussification units were formed in Lviv. Inconsiderate - or, on the contrary, well-planned - statements and further developments offered new reasons for a variety of Russian forces to accuse Ukraine of consistent policy of suppressing ethnic Russians. The fire was fueled by a resolution of the Lviv city council on protecting the city's acoustic environment . It's author, city council official Orest Drul explained the emergence of the resolution by the threat of total Russification of the city , particularly through Russian-language songs. If there a threat from the Chinese music, [we] will adopt a resolution concerning the Chinese music, he responded when suggested that the term Russian-language should be substituted with foreign (Vysokyi Zamok, June 17, 2000), refusing to notice the absurdity of charges against vulgarity of the songs. The specific campaign wedged by the Lviv city council against Russification did not contain any details as to criteria of vulgarity , or who would be authorized to judge on acceptability of texts, or whether the same would apply to Ukrainian-language vulgar songs. So far, however, the resolution has not been signed by the mayor and, therefore, has not come into force.

Meanwhile, the developments in Lviv caused a visit of OCSE High Commissioner for minorities affairs Max van der Stool at the request of the Russian government to find out the situation with the observance of ethnic Russian's rights in Ukraine. However, the OCSE High Commissioner so far has refrained from stating official conclusions.

Instead, unequivocal conclusions were made by Russian Ambassador to Ukraine Ivan Aboimov who accused Ukrainian officials of encouraging anti-Russian sentiments, catalyzed, according to the Russian Ambassador, by the events in Lviv after the tragic death of Igor Bilozir. His compatriots' rights and freedoms were suppressed in the city, the Ambassador argued (Vechirniy Kyiv, July 20, 2000). Remarkably, the notion of compatriots has been significantly transformed in the light of Russia's recently adopted foreign policy concept. According to Ambassador Aboimov, compatriots are all those who regard Russian and their mother tongue (Den, July 19, 2000). As simple as that. Hence, under the new foreign policy concept, the Russian Federation will insist on adequate provision for rights and liberties of compatriots in states where they reside permanently, and develop utmost relations with them and their organizations. One of the priorities of the new concept is the formation of a good-neighborly belt along the perimeter of the Russian borders, contribution to elimination and prevention of potential seats of tension and conflicts, in the regions [that are] adjacent to the Russian Federation . Therefore, Ukraine - not mentioned in the concept at all, unlike, say, Latin America - is probably regarded as just a region adjacent to the Russian Federation . The Russian Duma's claim that the bodies of state power and the extreme nationalist forces of Ukraine took the great liability to our history, future generations, having tried to build an insuperable wall not only of territorial, but also of spiritual alienation between the brother nations (Den, July 21, 2000) match well the general canvas of the events and sounds like a Stay by the side! command given to a satellite that is too slow in searching alternative energy sources, too reluctant to repay debts, and too often inclined to talk about its multi-vector choice. Apparently, we will have to observe this situation and its twists in the Ukrainian-Russian relations, and see the same mistakes repeated in a circular movements of a political Foucault pendulum .