

DOES «THE SLAVIC TRIANGLE» EXIST FROM KYIV'S PERSPECTIVE?

Desire to preserve its status leads the Ukrainian elite to refuse to join the Russian—Belarusian Union, and to develop relations with the two neighbouring countries on bilateral basis. As a result, declarations on the 'Slavic Triangle' are used in Ukraine mainly for domestic purposes—first and foremost by the left. Moreover, the left's position on 'Slavic unity' has softened; they understand that these slogans cannot be turned into practical decisions.

Introduction

In Ukrainian politics the idea of the unity of the three East Slav states (Russia, Ukraine and Belarus) exists mostly in the form of rhetoric. The first and the only practical embodiment of this idea, so far as it went, was the creation of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) agreed at Belavezh, Belarus, on 8 December 1991 by the leaders of the three Slavic republics of the former Soviet Union—Boris Yeltsin of Russia, Leonid Kravchuk of Ukraine and Stanislav Shushkevich of Belarus. However, it could not be considered a Slavic union, even formally. The three leaders declared that the CIS 'is open for all the states members of the USSR to join, as well as other states which share the aims and principles of this agreement'¹.

On 21 December 1991 the trilateral Agreement became a multi-lateral one and expanded the CIS to almost all of the post-Soviet space (except the Baltic states). However, the leaders of Ukraine viewed the CIS with suspicion. They were disturbed by the possibility of integrationist trends within the CIS which could lead to the creation of supra-national structures and the restoration of Russian dominance over Ukraine in a new form.

Ukraine's foreign policy throughout the 1990s was therefore formed under the influence of two main factors: (a) the need to provide stable relations with Russia without binding commitments within the CIS; and (b) the gradually increasing involvement of Ukraine in the transformations in Central and Eastern Europe, which led to the expansion of NATO and the European Union (EU).

Until the mid-1990s Ukrainian diplomacy viewed Belarus as a component of Central European processes and even a possible participant in the 'Baltic-Black Sea belt' - the potential community of states lying between the EU and Russia. Thus, from the

beginning of the 1990s relations with Russia and with Belarus were viewed, to a great extent, as separate issues.

Attitudes in Ukrainian society to the idea of 'Slavic unity' are something of a paradox. A large segment of the population favours these ideas and at the same time is in favour of joining the EU. The Ukrainian elite can capitalize on this ambivalence: on the one hand, Ukraine is economically dependent on Russia; on the other hand, desire to preserve its status leads the Ukrainian elite to refuse to join the Russian-Belarusian Union, to develop relations with the two neighbouring countries on bilateral basis, and to move politically towards the West. As a result, declarations on the 'Slavic Triangle' are used in Ukraine mainly for domestic purposes - first and foremost by the left.

Ukraine's approach to the CIS: through 'civilized divorce' to bilateral relations

The future of the CIS was seen in Moscow and Kiev from opposite positions - as reintegration or 'civilized divorce', respectively. Ukraine favoured developing bilateral relations within the CIS. It has not signed the CIS Charter. Although one of the 'founder countries', Ukraine was formally not a member of the CIS, thereby avoiding binding political commitments. At the same time, in 1999 Valerii Pustovoytenko, then Prime Minister of Ukraine, chaired the Council of Ministers of the CIS. For Russia, this confirmed Ukraine's participation in the CIS. For Kuchma, the decision to make Pustovoytenko chairman[^] taken in the course of the 1999 presidential campaign, helped to attract the electorate in the east of the country.

In 1990 both Ukraine and Belarus proclaimed their neutrality as a means of securing their sove-

¹ See the text of the joint declaration in 'Holos Ukrainy' (10 December, 1991).

reignty from the Soviet leadership. However, afterwards they moved into different directions. Ukraine refused to sign the 1992 Tashkent Treaty on Collective Security. The gradual process of expanding relations with NATO started. The term 'non-aligned status' was preferred instead of 'neutrality', and then both these terms were omitted from the 1996 constitution.

On the opposite side, with the signing of the Tashkent Treaty (1993) Belarus became an ally of Russia in the military sphere. President Aleksandr Lukashenko, elected in 1994, proclaimed the creation of a union between Belarus and Russia as his strategic priority: the union was formalized through series of bilateral treaties in 1996-1999'. For Russia this was one of its few successes in the CIS. The Ukrainian left praised the policy of Lukashenko and demanded that Ukraine join the union. For the first time, the proponents of Slavic unity had a model to refer to. However, the development of the authoritarian Lukashenko regime in the centre of Europe led to Belarus becoming isolated from the international community, and above all from the West.

Lukashenko's orientation towards Russia and international condemnation of his authoritarianism were the two main reasons why Kuchma, who in 1995-1996 started to seek support from national-democrats within Ukraine and from the West, could not afford to be associated with Lukashenko.

Societal preferences in Ukraine were changing as well. The proportion of those who favoured unification with Russia fell drastically, from 41 per cent in 1993 to 26-27 per cent in 2001-2002². As Paul d'Anieri wrote, 'The most important change in society is the increasing acceptance by all citizens of Ukraine that Ukraine will indeed remain separate from Russia and that it is their country'³. On foreign policy orientations, the Ukrainian electorate remains ambivalent. In a survey carried out in January and February 2002, 57.6 per cent of respondents were in favour of joining the EU and only 16.2 per cent against. At the same time, the overwhelming majority supports deepening cooperation with Russia (62.5 per cent) and joining the union of Russia and Belarus (45.2 per cent for, 27.2 per cent against).

Perhaps this union is associated with the possibility of gaining more out of cooperation with Russia. The issue of Ukraine's joining the Eurasian Economic Community (EAEC) is more controversial: 31 per cent are for, 20.6 per cent against⁴.

However, if the question implies not the deepening of cooperation but a firm geopolitical choice (of joining a 'bloc with Russia or with the CIS countries'), the number of supporters of the 'eastern vector' drops drastically. Only 15.2 per cent of those polled support accession to the Tashkent Treaty (40.7 per cent were against)⁵.

The 'multi-vector' external policy of the government was only partly based on the ambivalent attitudes of Ukrainian society. It would be more exact to conclude that until 2001-2002 the elites often manipulated public opinion. In its turn, the Ukrainian left appealed to Soviet-time elements of public opinion and continued to use symbolic, pan-Slavic rhetoric without having to take responsibility for practical action.

The fact that this rhetoric has not been translated into election results and policy is explained by the following factors. First, the Ukrainian population is afraid of the possibility of becoming involved in military conflicts within the CIS. Second, Ukraine's policy towards its ethnic minorities allows them to feel quite secure without appealing for Russia's protection. The 1996 Constitution defined 'the Ukrainian people' in its preamble as 'citizens of Ukraine of all nationalities'. Since independence the number of pupils and students studying in the Russian language has been falling, but it is still considerable (29 per cent of school pupils, and 27 per cent of university students in academic year 2000/2001, and it is possible that in real life the figure is higher than in the official statistics). The Russian language predominates in schools and universities in the east and south of the country. By 1 January 2001, only 27 per cent of the national circulation of newspapers and 23 per cent of journals were published in Ukrainian⁶.

A number of factors have hindered the formation of powerful organizations of Russian-speakers. Socio-economic and political opportunities are not limited by ethno-linguistic criteria. The boundaries

¹ These were the Belarus-Russia Community (2 April 1996), the Belarus-Russia Union (2 April 1997) and the Union State of Belarus and Russia (8 December 1999).

² Kiev International Institute of Sociology, *Politychna dumka* [Political thought], № 3 (2001), pp. 42-44.

³ *Taras Kuzio, Robert Kravchuk and Paul D'Anieri (eds). State and Institution Building in Ukraine*- NY: St Martin's Press, 1999.- 336 p.

⁴ Opinion poll conducted by Ukrainian Center for Economic and Political Studies (UCEPS). See *Mikhail Pashkov*. Ukraine's foreign policy: the positions and assessments of citizens / National Security and Defence.- № 2- March, 2002.- P. 36, 40 (in English).

⁵ *Ibid.*- P. 39.

⁶ *Abetka ukrains'koi polityky* [ABC of Ukrainian politics], (Kiev: Smoloskyp, forthcoming 2002). In Crimea 98 % pupils studied in Russian-language schools in 2000-2001, although, according to the poll by the Crimean Ministry of Education, the proportion who wanted to study in Russian was lower - 89 %. See 'Den' (Kiev), 5 December 2000.

between the main ethno-linguistic entities are blurred, as the languages are very close. Most of the population is bilingual. Russian-speakers do not have their own clear-cut identity: they are split between 'Ukrainians', 'citizens of Ukraine', 'Russians', 'Russians in Ukraine', 'Russo-Ukrainians' and so on. Russian-speaking leaders do not feel excluded from the political struggle in Kiev and they feel that it is more realistic to compete for seats and resources in Kiev than in Moscow.

Independence transformed the status of what had previously been a provincial elite. The independence of Ukraine became one of the dominant values of the elite, even though Russian political and cultural influence was essential. The ambivalence of the electorate's foreign policy preferences gives the elite a free hand, to a certain extent, to pursue its own policy without being constrained by societal pressure (except at election time). Kuchma's evolution in foreign policy shows that the views of the Ukrainian elite are more pro-Western than the orientation of the electorate.

Thus, the practical steps taken by Ukraine in its relations with Russia and Belarus were not based on the concept of the Slavic Triangle. They were limited to bilateral ties.

Ideas of a Slavic Triangle in Ukraine's electoral cycle of 1998-2004

1998-1999

The apogee of the attempt by the left to move Ukraine towards a Slavic union coincided with the brief period on the eve of the 1999 presidential elections and the attempts to use the Kosovo crisis for domestic purposes (fall 1998 - spring 1999). Oleksandr Tkachenko, Speaker of the Parliament in July 1998 - January 2000 (formally a member of the left-wing Peasants' Party, supported Ukraine's membership in the union of Russia and Belarus and the creation of a common economic and legislative space. The Ukrainian press began to compare him to Lukashenko. However, Tkachenko's actions worked against the aspirations of the left. In fact, even his election as Speaker was part of Kuchma's strategy to discredit the left. Against the background of inter-ethnic conflicts in Yugoslavia and Russia, Kuchma's

supporters in the presidential campaign asked the voters to choose between 'peace and stability' and 'war' ('Would you like your children to fight in Chechnya?'). The only thing Tkachenko managed to achieve was a decision by the Parliament in March 1999 to join the Inter-Parliamentary Assembly of the CIS - a body which has only a symbolic role'.

Despite a significant presence in the Parliament, the left has not really influenced the decision-making process in the executive's foreign policy, first, because the influence of the President in this sphere is dominant, and, second, because the President's administration has a great deal of incentive to manipulate the position of some leftwing deputies.

In general, in comparison with the 1994 election campaign, the topic of relations with Russia in the 1998 parliamentary and the 1999 presidential elections declined in importance. Tkachenko's rating in the 1999 campaign was only a few per cent and he had to step down as a candidate even before the first round of voting. After the end of campaign he was ousted from the position of Speaker and became marginalized.

The Communist Party of Ukraine (CPU) is now the main left-wing force. It stands for a 'union of sovereign states of brotherly nations', the first step to this being the recognition of Russia and Belarus as strategic partners and the creation of a 'common economic space'². Its vision is now based on anti-globalization and resembles Samuel Huntington's concept of the 'clash of civilizations'. The CPU leader, Petro Symonenko, speaks of the 'Catholic threat to the whole Orthodox geopolitical space'. The Communists came out against the Pope's visit to Ukraine in June 2001. Of three Orthodox churches in Ukraine, the CPU supports the Ukrainian Orthodox Church under the jurisdiction of the Moscow Patriarchy. This is evidence that the CPU is counting on a clear and well-defined segment of the electorate, not the whole nation. At the same time, it limits the Communists' chances of winning on a national level.

In general, their rhetoric has softened. At the end of 2000 radical supporters of the restoration of the USSR were expelled from the CPU. In the course of the elections of 1999 Symonenko even promised to preserve the 'non-aligned' status of Ukraine. During the campaign, the Russian television channel ORT

¹ It was typical that in order to pass this decision the Speaker had to put the proposal to the vote five times during one day (thus, he violated the procedure) until it was adopted by 230 votes (226 necessary). This could only happen with the tacit support of some deputies from the pro-presidential camp. On the one hand, Kuchma wanted to discredit the Left; on the other, he wanted to show that he is not against deepening cooperation within the CIS. For more detail see Oleksij Haran', 'Tkachenko: ein ukrainischer Lukashenko? Ein politisches Porträt des Speakers des ukrainischen Parlaments', Aktuelle Analysen (Bundesinstitut für ostwissenschaftliche und Internationale Studien (BIOst)), № 9 (15 March 1999).

² There are some 'national-communists' within the CPU who criticize the practical steps taken by the Russian and Belarusian leaders in this direction. For example, after the 1996 Russian-Belarusian treaty was signed, the Chairman of the Parliamentary Committee on Foreign Relations, Borys Oliynuk, stressed that 'with Ukraine, the Belarusian model will not succeed'.

campaigned for Kuchma, emphasizing the impracticality of the CPU's rhetoric regarding a union with Russia.

As for the Socialist Party of Ukraine (SPU), a statement made by its leader, Oleksandr Moroz, on the eve of the 1994 presidential elections became well known: 'Those who do not care about the disintegration of the USSR do not have a heart. Those who advocate its restoration do not have brains'. During the 1999 presidential campaign, Moroz did not look nostalgically to a stronger CIS, but instead emphasized Ukraine's non-aligned status. The SPU's programme of 2000 reiterated this position: the party favoured 'brotherly relations with Russia, Belarus and other neighbours [which could mean Poland as well] and consolidation of the Slavic peoples' (with no further definition)². In fact, the Socialists are transforming themselves into a centre-left force and are definitely in favour of an independent Ukrainian state.

2002

In the course of the parliamentary elections of March 2002, foreign policy issues were muted, perhaps deliberately, as the main non-left forces did not want to concentrate on divisive issues of Ukraine's geopolitical choice (NATO and the EAEC). The position of the supporters of Slavic unity weakened further.

The radical populist Progressive Socialist Party of Ukraine (PSPU), led by Natalia Vitrenko, did not clear the 4 per cent barrier for representation in the Parliament. The same happened to the parties whose campaign was based on Slavic ideas - Rus'kyi bloc (the term 'Rus' - not Russia - makes a reference to the medieval Kiev Rus state) received 0.7 per cent, and the bloc called For Ukraine, Belarus and Russia (ZUBR: the Ukrainian abbreviation is the name of a type of bison which now survives only in the Belavezh region) only 0.4 per cent. This resembled the pattern of the 1998 campaign when the Social Liberal Organization (SLOn - the abbreviation spells out the Ukrainian word for 'elephant'), which campaigned on the issues of relations with Russia and the status of the Russian language, received only 0.9 per cent and the Union Party 0.7 per cent. Thus, Zubr appeared no stronger than Elephant.

This leads to the conclusion that the Communists are more attractive to the pro-Russian element of

the electorate than the parties that stood for the Slavic idea. Thus, ethno-political slogans have an effect in Ukraine only in combination with slogans about social security. Even so, support for the CPU dropped from 26.7 per cent in 1998 to 20 per cent in 2002. For the first time since independence, the winner was the centre-right - the Our Ukraine bloc, led by Yushchenko.

In the new Parliament there is no faction that objects to Ukraine's goal to join the EU, not even the Communists (at least, in their statements). A new Parliamentary Committee on European Integration has been formed, led by a pro-Western former Foreign Minister, Borys Tarasyuk (of the Reform and Order Party, which is part of Yushchenko's bloc). However, the Committee on Foreign Relations is chaired by Dmytro Tabachnyk (of the Labour Ukraine Party), a former head of the President's administration, who is associated with business-bureaucratic groups with a centrist orientation.

The position of these circles is regarded as much more important for the Russian vector of Ukraine's policy than the position of the left. It is evident that Ukrainian oligarchic groups do not desire to come under Moscow's control again as they suffer from competition from more powerful Russian business groups. At the same time, their economic interests concentrate mainly in the post-Soviet space. Thus, in some situations they could use the slogans of Slavic unity for definite political and economic reasons, especially in order to lobby for their interests in the economic sphere. One influential politician and businessman from the Labour Ukraine Party, Andriy Derkach, even formed a lobbying organization, called To Europe - Together with Russia. In his arguments there are also some references to the values of 'Slavic civilization'³.

The 'Russian factor' continues to play an important role in the domestic struggle in Ukraine, but not in the context of the Slavic Triangle. Moreover, its importance has decreased compared to what it was in 1994⁴. It includes (a) attempts to mobilize the Russian-speaking electorate and (b) attempts to use support from Moscow, first of all in media projects. It is not ruled out that, in their struggle against the opposition, oligarchic groups could try to accuse the centre-right forces of nationalism and to play the 'Russian card' against them⁵. To a certain extent this has been attempted by the United Social Democrats,

¹ Cited in Tovarysh, № 25 (1997).

² Tovarysh, № 23 (2000).

³ *Andriy Derkach*. Yevropeis'ky vybir Ukrainy [Ukraine's European choice].- Dzerkalo tyzhnia.- 27 April 2002.

⁴ *Arkady Moshes*. The Russian factor in the 2002 parliamentary election in Ukraine // National Security and Defence.- № 2.- Kiev, 2002.- P. 50-53 (in English).

⁵ Interestingly, contrary to this rhetoric, several representatives of Russian business in Ukraine were elected to the Parliament in 2002 on the list of Yushchenko's bloc.

whose 2002 parliamentary election campaign used the Kremlin's imagemaker, Gleb Pavlovskiy, and his media projects group as consultants. However, these attempts had limited success.

In the context of Ukrainian politics it seems that no prospective candidate from the 'party of power' who competes with Yushchenko or other centre-right leaders will be able to use the slogans of the 'Eurasian dimension' or the deepening of economic and historical ties with Russia as openly as Kuchma did it in 1994 in order to attract the votes of electors in the east and south of the country.

Conclusion

The foreign policy orientations of the Ukrainian electorate remain ambivalent: it supports joining both the EU and the union of Russia and Belarus. However, the latter issue is more divisive, and this prospect is firmly rejected by a large segment of Ukrainian society. Moreover, these orientations are not static. They are influenced, shaped and used by the elite in its international and domestic bargaining.

The orientations of the Ukrainian elite are more pro-Western than those of the electorate. The elite wishes to secure its independent position from Rus-

sia's influence. Official Kiev rejects the idea of joining the union of Russia and Belarus, preferring to develop relations on a bilateral basis.

The rhetoric of the Slavic Triangle is therefore used in Ukrainian politics mostly for domestic consumption. Between elections there are few constraints on the elite from society where foreign policy is concerned. The main proponents of Slavic unity are on the left. But their strength in the Parliament has weakened and they have no substantial influence on the position of the executive in the formation of foreign policy. Moreover, the left's position on Slavic unity has softened; they understand that these slogans cannot be turned into practical decisions.

Ukraine's official foreign policy priority has been formulated as joining the EU. However, it will be a long road and there are many obstacles along the way. In this respect, representatives of the EU stress that Ukraine should demonstrate its 'European choice' in deeds, not simply declarations. Simultaneously, the policy of 'good-neighbourliness' which was being formulated by the EU in the course of 2002 does not seem to be sufficient from Ukraine's point of view, as it does not provide a clear prospect of EU membership for Ukrainian politicians and Ukrainian society.

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ЧИ ІСНУЄ «СЛОВ'ЯНСЬКИЙ ТРИКУТНИК». ПОГЛЯД ІЗ КИЄВА

Прагнення зберегти свій нинішній статус змушує українську еліту відкинути ідею приєднання до союзу Росії і Білорусі й розвивати стосунки з цими двома сусідніми країнами на двосторонній основі. У результаті цього заяви про «слов'янський трикутник» використовуються в Україні насамперед для «внутрішнього споживання», передусім лівими. Позиція ж лівих щодо «слов'янської єдності» також зазнала змін: вони розуміють, що ці гасла не можуть перетворитися на практичні дії.