

## **UKRAINE IN SEARCH OF A REGIONAL POLICY**

By Vladimir Socor

Ukraine's independence from Russia is the single largest geopolitical gain to the free world and Ukraine's neighbors, resulting from what Russian President Vladimir Putin bemoans as "the 20th century's greatest geopolitical catastrophe." Ukraine's independence has transformed the politics of European security generally and the international politics of Europe's East directly, shielding the region from Russia and enabling most of its countries to join NATO and the European Union without fear of Russian countermeasures.

None of this implies reducing Ukraine's role to that of a mere buffer or some other function traditionally associated with the status of an object of international relations. Ukraine had variously served as buffer, outpost, imperial periphery, and battlefield during its history as a territory without statehood. Today's geopolitical processes involving Ukraine differ qualitatively from those of the past. The Ukrainian nation is now in charge of its own state, the weightiest by far in Europe's East and aspiring to close ties with the institutional West. All this entails commensurate responsibilities for Ukraine as its policies in the region.

Whether in its own name or as part of groupings -- and in all cases as a partner of the EU and NATO -- Ukraine can significantly contribute to the resolution of conflicts and other security challenges in the region and the development of a culture of regional cooperation. Fulfillment of this potential depends in large measure on a consistent strategic vision at the top and the capacity of institutions charged with implementation. Neither of these assets seems commensurate with Ukraine's potential, however.

**MOLDOVA/TRANSNISTRIA:** Undoubtedly the most serious security challenge in Ukraine's neighborhood is Russia's attempt to create a Kaliningrad-type enclave in Transnistria; and, as a maximal objective, Russian dominance of all Moldova through power-sharing between Chisinau and Russian-installed authorities in Tiraspol.

The 2005 plan for political settlement in Transnistria, credited to Ukrainian President Viktor Yushchenko, displays serious flaws:

- a) it fails to call for the withdrawal of Russian troops, ignoring their presence altogether;
- b) it stipulated OSCE-supervised "democratic" elections in Transnistria and recognition of its Supreme Soviet as a democratic representative body in October 2005, despite the obvious absence of conditions for such elections there;
- c) while envisaging rapid adoption of a special status for Transnistria, it says nothing about disbanding the armed forces and pervasive security services in Transnistria; and
- d) it would empower Russia, Ukraine, and the OSCE, "possibly assisted by" the United States and European Union, to arbitrate disputes over interpretation and/or implementation of Moldova-Transnistria power-sharing arrangements -- a system clearly weighted in Russia's favor, and in no way balanced by the doubly restrictive codicil on "possible assistance."

In March 2006, at the European Union's insistence, Ukraine joined Moldova and the EU's Border Asion (EUBAM) to implement border and customs regulations in line with EU norms on the Ukraine-Moldova border, including the Transnistria sector. However, following the August 2006 change of government, some Ukrainian diplomats criticize the customs regime for cutting the revenues (even if illicit ones) of the port of Odessa and other entities, while the Ukrainian state railways company has re-routed some traffic that was circumventing Transnistria. Any erosion in the post-March 2006 customs and border regime must be avoided; if anything, that regime needs to be strengthened further. The EU regards Kyiv's position on this issue as one of the credibility tests of Kyiv's aspirations to draw closer to the EU.

GUAM: Official Kyiv has intermittently and rather fleetingly focused on the GUAM group of countries (Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, Moldova) as a possible format for exercising Ukrainian regional leadership. Created in 1997 at Azerbaijan's initiative as a four-country caucus in negotiations on the Treaty on Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE), GUAM never found a wider role and was vegetating by 2002 for want of a mission. At that point, then-president Leonid Kuchma took the initiative of holding a GUAM summit in Ukraine, drafting a charter and other basic documents, creating a Secretariat based in Ukraine, and announcing a start to GUAM's institutionalization, with Ukraine as presiding country. The results were almost nil, again, for want of a wider plausible rationale for GUAM. Kuchma's rapprochement with the Kremlin in 2003-2004 ruled out any development of GUAM and brought the group to the verge of extinction. The 2005 Chisinau summit, anticipated as a "GUAM Revival," led nowhere in the absence of any guiding concept or funding from member countries. Finally, the April 2006 GUAM summit, hosted by Yushchenko in Kyiv, reached back to the 2002 institutionalization scheme of forms without content. Moreover, the Ukrainian president instructed his relevant officials to introduce legislation on a GUAM free-trade zone within a few weeks. Nothing further seems to have been heard about any of these initiatives since then.

Meanwhile, GUAM continues playing a useful if limited role, pooling the four countries' efforts within the OSCE regarding implementation of the adapted CFE Treaty and unfreezing negotiations on the "frozen" conflicts. The group (minus Moldova) met in August to consider the possibility of creating a peacekeeping unit. Last month, GUAM registered an unprecedented diplomatic-symbolic success at the United Nations, garnering a narrow majority in favor of including a debate on frozen conflicts and the unlawful stationing of foreign troops on three of the GUAM countries' territories. The group intends to continue such efforts at the UN, OSCE, and other international organizations irrespective of institutionalization projects of leadership issues.

COMMUNITY OF DEMOCRATIC CHOICE: This group apparently ceased to exist soon after holding its inaugural summit in December 2005. In retrospect, it seems clear that the CDC was poorly conceived in that it divided the region into approved and less-approved countries, doing so moreover on questionable criteria. The color revolution's end in Ukraine and the way it ended has brought a new appreciation of evolutionary

political and institutional development and stability. President Yushchenko's September visit to Azerbaijan has signaled, however belatedly, the end of the exclusionary approach toward friends in the region.

**KOSOVO:** Official Kyiv takes the position that international recognition of the independence of Kosovo (which is anticipated) could create a "precedent," triggering chain reactions by secessionist forces other areas and because it could jeopardize political settlements in Transnistria, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Karabakh. Ukrainian Minister of Foreign Affairs Borys Tarasyuk has argued along these lines for some time, most recently in his speech to the U.N. General Assembly (Interfax-U view may be termed a "negative" precedent, as distinct from Moscow's and the four secessionist leaderships' view that Kosovo independence would constitute an immediately usable, "positive" precedent or model. Both of those views posit a direct linkage between the outcome in Kosovo and outcomes in the post-Soviet conflicts and invoke formal logic to rationalize the purported linkage.

Fear of a "precedent" on Kosovo could turn into a self-fulfilling prophecy regarding the post-Soviet conflicts. The United States (which favors independence for Kosovo) and most of its allies insist that the vastly different characteristics of these conflicts rules out any linkage between Kosovo and the post-Soviet conflict. Using linkage to sound the alarm only reinforces Moscow's thesis that linkage exists. The most effective defense against the use of a Kosovo "precedent" is building a conceptual and political firewall, declaring the Kosovo outcome in advance to be wholly irrelevant to the post-Soviet conflicts.