

The Russian March Starts in Kiev

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Russia has always had a thinking minority and a feeling majority. The latter were out in force last Monday during the National Unity Day, which, in classic Orwellian fashion, is now celebrated with the ultranationalist Russian March. This year, it came against the backdrop of intensified ethnic tensions, attacks on migrants and, especially, the highly visible pogrom in the economically depressed Moscow district of Biryulevo, after which the authorities staged yet another crackdown on illegal workers.

Ukraine was hardly mentioned during the Russian March, but its intention to sign

an association agreement with the European Union, gives all this nationalist hullabaloo a true historic poignancy.

Moscow wants Kiev to join its Customs Union with Belarus and Kazakhstan and threatens major retaliation against Ukrainian exports if it signs the EU deal. The Russian government mistakenly believes that Ukraine has a choice. But two decades of post-Soviet drift and three years of thuggish rule by President Viktor Yanukovich have brought Ukraine to the brink of disaster. It needs massive emergency loans to stay solvent. Over the long run, it needs a flow of quality foreign investment and reforms that only Brussels can provide.

Ukraine's road to Europe will be long and arduous, and it is too bad it is embarking upon it as an economic basket case. But in any case, the pull of prosperous and law-based United Europe on its Western borders was going to become irresistible sooner or later.

Ukraine is pivotal for Russia's role as a European power. Its acquisition made Russia an empire in the first place, thrusting it into the thick of Central European politics. Peter the Great's victory over Sweden at Poltava in 1709 marked the founding of the modern Russian state. If Russia severs its close economic ties to Ukraine and completes what the Germans call "abgrenzung," or disassociation, it risks permanently losing Ukraine as well as excluding itself from Europe.

But it would come as a logical extension of the Russian government's recent xenophobic rhetoric, rejection of Western values and promotion of obscurantist forms of Orthodox Christianity. It would be ironic if President Vladimir Putin, a native of Leningrad, completes Russia's withdrawal from Western civilization, which Lenin set in motion 95 years ago by moving Russia's capital from St. Petersburg to Moscow.

This would leave Russia a Eurasian country, with the policy vector inexorably shifting southeast. But while in the 19th century Russia entered Central Asia and the Caucasus as an imperial power, it will be entering a very different river now. Its policies on the post-Soviet space show that it has become hostage to its own imperial ambitions. It will go on wasting its treasures by supporting venal local clients and getting involved in pointless conflicts.

The thinking minority clearly sees that Russia is drifting away from Western civilization and bemoans this drift. The feeling majority senses that Russia is subtly changing its centuries-old orientation and entering into a geopolitical alliance with the native countries of those hated "nonwhite" migrants. Energetic, determined and hard-working migrants are here to stay. Their communities are suborning and appropriating the dysfunctional Russian state from the bottom up, changing the rules of the game in the process.

This is why the Russian March, instead of expressing national pride and strength, year after year turns into an orgy of fear, hatred and rage. These feelings will become even more acute as Ukraine turns itself toward the EU and away from Russia.

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