The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Ukraine's False Choice

By Samuel Charap

February 10, 2014



The recent headlines about the alleged leaked recording of U.S. officials discussing the crisis in Ukraine are all focused on an expletive spoken in a moment of pique about the European Union. The press seems to have faithfully done the bidding of the most likely suspects behind the leak -- one assumes either the Russians themselves or pro-Russian elements in the Ukrainian government -- and focused on the alleged U.S. dissatisfaction with a supposedly weak-kneed EU.

That such tensions exist even between the closest allies during a difficult crisis is hardly shocking. What is surprising about the conversation, if it did in fact occur, is that the U.S. still believes it can unilaterally create sustainable political outcomes in Ukraine while keeping Moscow in the dark. Lost in the reporting is that most of the alleged conversation is about cobbling together a political compromise and sealing the deal -- before Russia has time to react.

Ironically, the EU seems to have already responded to the implicit call to action in the period since the recording was allegedly made and its publication today. On Feb. 3, the EU

announced that it is considering a new financial aid package for Ukraine. Given Moscow's recent suspension of its own $15 billion unilateral aid package and distraction with the Sochi Olympics, Brussels has apparently decided to strike back against Russia's previous moves to block Ukraine's EU Association Agreement. (Details about the EU package are apparently still being finalized.) While a decision to extend assistance to Kiev, if taken, might answer the call to "do something" about Ukraine, in the long term it would almost certainly backfire -- as the plans discussed in the leaked alleged call between U.S. officials already have.

It is precisely this 20-year tradition of geopolitical one-upmanship that led to this crisis in the first place, by allowing a parasitic political-economic system to bargain its way out of reform, and by sharpening the existing divisions in the Ukrainian polity. The fact that neither the West nor Russia seem ready to accept is that one side acting alone cannot resolve the crisis. In fact, unilateral action is likely to make it worse. The dysfunctional, deeply corrupt political-economic system that caused so many Ukrainians to take to the streets depends for its very survival on the absence of Russian-Western substantive exchanges about Ukraine policy. All Ukrainian governments since independence have been able to defer the structural reforms needed to change that system thanks to mastering the art of triangulating between partners who are chronically incapable of mutual dialogue. Kiev's success in playing the two sides off of one another in order to reap ever-greater geopolitical rents is a direct function of both sides acting alone, and keeping each other in the dark.

The pattern of unilateral action and lack of dialogue also sharpens the regional divisions that are currently threatening to tear asunder the delicate fabric of the Ukrainian polity. Both Russia and the West have themselves to blame for the highly divisive, widespread perception in Ukraine that the country faces a binary choice between Europe and Russia. While many in western Ukraine -- and a large number of those still protesting on the Maidan -- might support a move toward Europe that entailed cutting ties with Russia, clear majorities in the economically dominant south and east of the country do not. The nine regions there account for 21.5 million of the country's 45 million population; whereas about 7 million live in the seven western regions.

So when Jose Manuel Barroso, president of the European Commission, said on Monday that "most Ukrainians ... want to come closer to the European Union," one has to wonder where he gets his polling data. A USAID-sponsored survey released in December shows the percentage of Ukrainians who say that the country should have closer economic relations with Russia statistically equivalent to the number who say it should have closer economic relations with Europe. Thus, it's simply not politically sustainable for any Ukrainian government to decisively move toward Europe in such a way that threatens ties with Russia.

By the same token, a definitive alignment with Russia and a severing of ties with Europe is also not a viable option. After all, even President Viktor Yanukovych to this day proclaims his intention to pursue Ukraine's "European integration," if on different terms than the EU is currently offering.

In short, either side acting alone can succeed in scoring points in the geopolitical tit-for-tat, but in so doing they deepen the structural drivers of Ukraine's troubles --bankrupt governance and a divided polity. The only international mediation effort likely to foster a viable long-term solution to Ukraine's crisis is one that both Russia and the West can support.

Such common ground seems like a pipedream given current tensions. But the alternative is perpetual crisis. And in the short term, even greater mutual transparency would be a major improvement over the status quo, under which, as we have learned, signals intelligence is apparently the only way to understand what the other side is planning.

The pattern of Russia and the West refusing to talk about, let alone cooperate on policy in their so-called "common neighborhood" has deep historical roots. In the eyes of many in Moscow, the U.S. and the European Union have long been engaged in a strategy of neocontainment in Ukraine, striving to minimize any and all Russian influence. They see no need to talk openly to Western counterparts whose mission, they believe, is to undermine their interests.

On the other side, Western decision-makers' resistance to dialogue is driven by an assumption that any dialogue with Moscow about Russia's neighbors would inevitably involve imposition of outcomes against their will. It evokes a lingering revulsion at the Yalta Agreement, the deal that gave the Soviet Union free rein to impose Communist regimes on the states of Central and Eastern Europe. These historical associations explain U.S. and EU officials' constant repetition of support for the principle that the former Soviet countries should freely determine their own foreign-policy orientation. This is certainly a fine principle, but it has become a trope for reasons besides its inherent virtue. As a result, both Russian and Western decision-makers view each other's actions in Ukraine as inherently hostile to their respective interests. That might explain the current state of non-dialogue. But it's no excuse.

Indeed, simultaneous to their studious avoidance of engagement on Ukraine's crisis, Russia and the West have been in regular, intensive dialogue on the crisis in Syria. Despite serious disagreements, their diplomacy culminated in a first-ever face-to-face meeting between the Syrian parties after three years of horrific civil war. Of course, getting to that point was not easy, and the results of the so-called Geneva II process leave much to be desired. But Russia and the West demonstrated an ability to work together constructively regarding Syria. They should begin the process of trying to do the same about Ukraine, a crisis that is far less severe but far closer to home.

Reaching a consensus might prove impossible due to accumulated mistrust and resistance from hardliners on both sides, but if common ground can be found on Syria, surely Russia and the West can at least have a substantive dialogue about the crisis brewing in the heart of Europe. The time to start talking is now.

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Original url: https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2014/02/10/ukraines-false-choice-a31940