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Russia Is an Unreliable Partner for Ukraine

By Alyona Getmanchuk

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Relations between Ukraine and Russia have been remarkably cold since Viktor Yanukovych was elected president a year ago. It has been a long time since we saw the friendly hugs of Yanukovych and President Dmitry Medvedev.

Ever since pundits first started labeling Yanukovych as the "pro-Russian president," it sparked the opposite reaction. "Ukraine is not going to be a province of Russia" has become almost a catchphrase for the Ukrainian authorities.

Ukraine will not sacrifice its European integration for a closer friendship with Russia on the Kremlin's terms.

The reasons are more related to psychology than politics. Ukraine is not prepared to tolerate pressure from outsiders. Russians are still perceived as outsiders by most of the Ukrainian leadership.

Instead, Yanukovych has looked for a strategic partnership with the West, which has proven to be more reliable and flexible than Russia. Being a pro-European politician in Ukraine has become more beneficial than being pro-Russian. Politicians tend to visit Brussels more than they visit Moscow, and many of them know European Parliament members better than they know State Duma deputies.

In the beginning, a warming of Ukrainian-Russian relations looked promising. First, Ukraine extended the lease of the Russian Black Sea Fleet in Sevastopol up to 2042. Second, Kiev confirmed its non-bloc status, effectively killing its chances for NATO membership in the near term. Third, Yanukovych renounced most of the economic and political policies of his predecessor, Viktor Yushchenko.

But the honeymoon turned out to be short-lived.

First, Russia's pet energy project, the South Stream pipeline, will bypass Ukraine and subvert its role of the key transporter of gas from Russia to Europe, stripping Ukraine's budget of much-needed revenue.

In addition, Russia went on to set new demands for Ukraine's leaders. It expected Kiev to accede to the Customs Union with Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan, which would have jeopardized Ukraine's economic integration with the European Union. Russia also ignores the fact that Ukraine's membership in the Customs Union would contradict Ukraine's constitution.

Russia has turned out to be an unreliable partner for Ukraine. Moscow has also been ungrateful, asking for a lot and giving nothing. This is a poor formula for a strategic partnership.

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