



James Sherr

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Borys Tarasyuk**

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THE DISMISSAL OF BORYS TARASYUK

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[Digest: The Ukrainian Foreign Minister's dismissal signals a realignment of Ukraine's geopolitical stance towards Russia.]

On Friday, 29 September 2000 President Leonid Kuchma dismissed the member of his government most conspicuously associated with the country's long proclaimed European and 'Euro-Atlantic' course, Foreign Minister Borys Tarasyuk. Three days later, on 2 October, Kuchma named as his replacement the 62 year old Anatolii Zlenko, a professional diplomat since 1967, a former Foreign Minister of Ukraine (July 1990 to August 1994), then Permanent Representative and Ambassador Plenipotentiary to the UN (September 1994 to September 1997) and, from September 1997, Ambassador to France.

Tarasyuk's 'certain' and 'imminent' dismissal has long been the subject of rumour, and there is no doubt that President Kuchma was under strong pressure to sacrifice him once NATO launched its bombing campaign against Yugoslavia on 24 March 1999 (a campaign which Tarasyuk consistently and publicly opposed). It is an open secret that, well before Kosovo, Moscow regarded Tarasyuk as an impediment to 'good neighbourliness'. Inside Ukraine, Tarasyuk has not only had a predictable range of left-wing and Russophone enemies, he has also had some pro-Western critics. Outside the Foreign Ministry, a range of politicians and officials have regarded him as uncollegial and inflexible; inside it, many of his subordinates have found him unapproachable and had come to resent his dictatorial style of work. But inside as well as outside Ukraine, Tarasyuk has had immense stature and has been widely regarded as a symbol of the country's Western orientation. Although he lost some credibility in recent years with the European Commission – where some see him as hectoring and unrealistic – and which he, like many Ukrainians, views as cool towards Ukraine and dangerously Russo-centric – he has a profound knowledge of NATO and immense standing within it. He has had the staunch backing of the United States, and pressure from Washington certainly played a role in postponing his supposedly 'certain' and 'imminent' departure.

However, from his first briefing to the press about Tarasyuk's 'transfer to other work', Kuchma let it be known that international rather than domestic factors lay behind his decision:

There is no intrigue. I want to tell you absolutely honestly that Borys Ivanovych has done an awful lot as the Foreign Minister. And that his appointment then was my personal choice, and it was naturally clear why Borys Ivanovych filled that post. Today, the situation in the world, in Europe and in Ukraine is somewhat

different, as they say. Hence, we need different people...Given the current situation, we need a balanced person, a diplomat by nature who will never say either yes or no. And Anatoliy Zlenko, as you well understand, is a good professional...¹

In the corridors of power in Kyiv, the term 'balanced' frequently denotes 'acceptable to Russia'. Subsequent commentary indicates that the President and his new Foreign Minister agree with this definition. Kuchma chose the occasion of his presentation of Zlenko to the press corps to emphasise that the 'Russian component' of Ukraine's foreign policy could not be of secondary importance. 'It is necessary to find an effective algorithm of work with Russia and to be oriented to mutually advantageous cooperation with this country'.² Kuchma also faulted Tarasyuk for 'miscalculations in implementing European integration' - veiled reference to the view, held not only in the Presidential Administration, that Tarasyuk overestimated what Ukraine could achieve in the West.

During the same briefing, Zlenko stated:

We have to put relations with our neighbours on equal terms, *especially* with Russia. *And I will not explain why.* Maybe someone perceives this as some sort of a new policy, as they are writing about it everywhere now. No, it is a normal policy which was laid out in the blueprint of the main areas of our state's foreign policy [emphasis added].

'Normal policy' it might be and doubtless *should* be not only for the pro-Russian tendency in Ukraine, but for strict adherents to the 'multi-vector' policy and those who believe that the country's senior diplomat should be a person who 'by nature ... will never say either yes or no'. It is plainly this 'normal policy', not Tarasyuk's policy, which Kuchma was invoking at the same briefing when he declared that 'there has been no change in foreign policy.' Towards the close of his briefing, Kuchma endeavoured to give substance to this claim when he declared that 'the main task of the Ministry is to create an attractive investment climate' [query: *for whom?*], adding that 'the development of Russian and US areas of foreign policy is a special topic'.

Are some vectors more equal than others? One answer was provided by Mykola Tomenko, the Director of the Institute of Politics, whose analysis is often consistent with that of the Presidential Administration. According to Tomenko, Tarasyuk's position 'was largely incompatible with the official hierarchy of strategic partners' of which 'Russia is the most important one at the moment'. Tomenko also dismissed speculation that the President took his decision in response to a letter, jointly signed by the US and Canadian

¹ Ukrainian Television First Programme, 30 September 2000 [cited in BBC Summary of World Broadcasts (SWB)].

² For good measure he added [according to a paraphrase from ITAR-TASS that possibly should be treated with caution] that as long as there were no Ukrainian ambassadors appointed to Japan, India, Pakistan, Argentina and Brazil, he 'would not even consider appointing ambassadors to European countries' [SWB 2 October 2000].

ambassadors as well as the heads of the EBRD mission and World Bank office in Ukraine, which criticised Kuchma for reneging on his commitments to reform Ukraine's budgetary process.³ But such speculation is certainly given credence by Tomenko's claim that:

'the West is lobbying the government's interests [ie those of Tarasyuk's staunch ally, Prime Minister Viktor Yushchenko]⁴ and interfering with Ukraine's internal affairs. *This interference has an anti-Ukrainian and an anti-presidential nature as well.*⁵

About one thing, Tomenko is doubtless correct: the joint letter did not cause Tarasyuk's dismissal. But it might have provided a good pretext.

AN ADVANCE FOR PUTIN?

Did Moscow have advance notice of Tarasyuk's dismissal? A strong indicator to this effect is the outcome of the fourth round of Ukrainian-Russian gas talks held on 30 September. These were noteworthy talks, according to Prime Minister Yushchenko, because 'the Russian side has seriously changed a number of its principles or at least has softened them'.⁶ Moscow's principles – payment 'in money or shares' for a gas debt very dubiously calculated as being well in excess of \$2 billion – have been put forward with unprecedented tenacity since Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin became Acting President in December 1999. Since the Russian oil cutoff to Ukraine that same month, they have been reinforced with an uncharacteristic degree of pressure.⁷ According to more than one reliable source, during his discussions with President Kuchma at the 15-16 April 2000 Kyiv summit, Putin openly linked the resolution of Ukraine's debt problems to a modification of Ukraine's geopolitical course. In April 2000, Pavel Borodin, State Secretary of the Russia-Belarus 'Union state' – and the figure who brought Putin into the Kremlin in 1996 – also made this linkage and went so far as to predict Ukraine's entry into the Russia-Belarus Union within two years. If the shift in Russia's negotiating position is unrelated to these declared aims – and to Tarasyuk's dismissal – then what prompted it? If it is related, it is hard to fathom how Moscow could have heard of Tarasyuk's

³ On the day of Tarasyuk's dismissal, the Russian language Ukrainian newspaper *Faktiy i kommentariy* roundly condemned the letter (which it partially published) as 'international blackmail'.

⁴ Yushchenko's public response to Tarasyuk's dismissal was predictably terse: the President's decision 'is sufficient in itself for the government' [*UNIAN*, 2 October 2000].

⁵ As reported by the Ukrainian news agency *UNIAN* [*SWB*, 2 October 2000].

⁶ *UNIAN*, 2 October 2000 and published by *SWB*.

⁷ Even publicly, President Kuchma came close to characterising this pressure as unprecedented. Speaking in Azerbaijan on 17 March, he declared, 'We have not received even one barrel of Russian oil since December last year. How can one speak about strategic partnership? Do partners behave in this way? Russia is doing its best to force Ukraine to look for alternative sources of energy'. [Azerbaijani news agency *Turan*, 17 March 2000]. For a fuller discussion of the role of economic pressure in Putin's policy, see James Sherr, 'A New Regime? A New Russia?' in Mrs AC Aldis (Ed), *The Second Chechen War* (CSRC Paper P31, June 2000).

dismissal on 29 September and 'changed a number of its principles' in time for a negotiating round the following morning.

One need not suppose that the President of Ukraine decided to readjust the country's geopolitical course as early as the aftermath of the April summit, albeit there are grounds for worst case thinkers to conclude as much. At the CIS summit of 21-22 June, Ukraine joined all other CIS members in becoming signatory to establish a CIS Anti-Terrorist Centre, coordinated by the FSB. This step, which in itself might be thought a reversal of Ukraine's long-standing policy of not participating with more than observer status in CIS security bodies, appears to be a substantial one, and there are signs that Ukraine's security organs are prepared to play a major role in the Centre's activities. In what might be seen as a further reversal, Ukraine for the first time participated actively in a CIS air defence exercise in Ashuluk (Astrakhan Oblast') in late August. Although Ukraine signed the February 1995 CIS joint air defence agreement (over much internal criticism), this was the first occasion in which its aircraft participated in CIS tactical manoeuvres.⁸

Nevertheless, the multi-vector policy has always entailed a mixture of steps towards Russia and steps away from it. Ukraine has been emphatic that its State Programme of Armed Forces Reform and Development, approved 30 March, is orientated exclusively towards 'Euro-Atlantic standards', and the partial release of the Programme for review by NATO has been accompanied by proposals for intensifying and further institutionalising NATO-Ukraine cooperation, including Ukraine's participation in NATO's Planning and Review Process (PARP). On the energy front, Kuchma warned forcefully on 17 March that 'Russia is doing its best to force Ukraine to look for alternative sources of energy'. Even as late as mid-August, very sharp exchanges took place between Ukraine and Russia regarding the issues of gas and debt. By connecting half the dots, it has long been possible to demonstrate that Ukraine's principal vector was the Russian vector - or, by connecting the other half, to demonstrate the opposite.

Yet even before Tarasyuk's dismissal, and the justifications accompanying it, there were signs that a definite step had been taken. Despite a predictable number of denials and contradictions, the balance of evidence suggests that Kuchma and Putin agreed to resolve the gas issue during their private meeting at the 18 August CIS summit, and in hindsight we might now infer that Kuchma proposed a geopolitical accommodation as well. After all, what measures would Ukraine have to take, *vide* the President's threat in March, 'to look for alternative sources of energy'? In the view of many experts, ample sources are available: in the short term on the spot market (for less than Ukraine pays now) and in the mid-term (5-7 years) from Ukraine's still

⁸ Ukraine's Minister of Defence Oleksandr Kuzmuk drew a distinction between the 'training' which took place and participation in the 'coalition system' of CIS air defence. He also connected the decision to safety considerations, which in the wake of the Brovary tragedy - the accidental destruction of a housing block near Kyiv by a training rocket - ruled out conducting a similar exercise in the Chauda special training ground in Crimea. [UNIAN and SWB, 26 August 2000].

unexploited oil and gas reserves. Yet the same experts also agree that they will only be available at a price: the opening of Ukraine's energy market. But that requires transparency and Western mechanisms of contract enforcement – and hence the undermining of the transnational networks and mode of business that have handsomely profited the leaders of Ukraine's industrial and energy complex. Speaking to the leaders of this complex in Kremenchuk on 28 August, Kuchma adopted a very different tone from that of five months previously. 'I am sure that neither Ukraine nor Russia will benefit from...a confrontation', he said, adding that he would never follow the advice of 'Ukrainian patriots' and head exclusively towards the West. Besides, he concluded, 'the West is closed for us now'.⁹

UKRAINE AND THE WEST: WHO HAS REBUFFED WHOM?

Ukraine's failure to reform its economy systematically – in other words, its failure to introduce taxation regimes, legal codes and enforcement mechanisms conducive to honest business and investment – is the major reason why 'the West is closed for us now'. Yet it is not the only reason. The European Union has been slow to recognise Ukraine's European vocation, let alone welcome it. Ukraine has had reason to be apprehensive about the dynamics driving EU enlargement, not to say the implementation of the *acquis communautaire* – and the Schengen agreement – by new member states. Although the EU's December 1999 Common Strategy for Ukraine is a positive document, although Schengen implementation promises to be less swift and less draconian than feared, and although the success of Yushchenko's reforms would diminish the rigours of Schengen still further, the fact remains that EU enlargement is more likely to push Ukraine further from Europe than accelerate its integration with it. Moreover, the reluctance of the IMF to hold Russia to the same exacting standards that it imposes upon Ukraine surely does not give substance to Western declarations of Ukraine's 'pivotal' importance.

In addition, the effects of Operation Allied Force are still felt. NATO's military intervention instilled the perception that instability and threat can arise from the West as well as the East. It heightened concerns that Ukraine – on whose territory the Black Sea Fleet is based – could be drawn involuntarily into conflicts outside its borders. It called into question the assumption that Ukraine can draw closer to NATO whilst remaining a 'strategic partner' of Russia. It created precedents which Ukraine feared could be used by Russia to weaken its own sovereignty in the name of human rights and 'support for the Russian speaking population'. Not least important, it created concern that the scale and complexity of NATO's commitments in the Balkans could diminish NATO's attentiveness to Ukraine and its responsiveness to pressures which other states might put upon it.

Therefore, justification can and certainly will be found for President Kuchma's decision to adjust Ukraine's geopolitical course. But however

⁹ *Intelnews* news agency, Kyiv, 30 August 2000.

strong the justification, the risk is that this decision will diminish short-term economic pressure at a potentially long-term political cost. In the nearer term, the dismissal of Prime Minister Yushchenko and his ally, fuel and energy minister Yulia Tymoshenko, cannot be ruled out. Some four years before the CIS Yalta summit, President Kuchma declared in his Independence Day speech:

A sign of sovereignty is a country's ability to develop its own course ... whereby external factors and influences are taken into consideration as long as they do not radically change this course. Therefore, independence is freedom to choose ...¹⁰

On the morrow of Borys Tarasyuk's dismissal, the question is whether the West can act with sufficient purpose to restore Ukraine's sense of choice and rekindle the courage of those who would grasp it.

¹⁰ Independence Day Speech, 26 August 1996.

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