

Ukrainian Sovereignty: stakes of Pan-European and occidental scale

By Jean-Sylvestre MONGRENIER



Associated Fellow at the Thomas More Institute and Fellow at the Institut Français de Géopolitique (Paris VIII Vincennes-Saint-Denis University). Author of the *Dictionnaire géopolitique de la défense européenne* (ed. Unicomm, 2005), and *La France, l'Europe, l'OTAN : une approche géopolitique de l'atlantisme français* (ed. Unicomm, 2006), co-author of *La Russie, de Poutine à Medvedev* (Institut Thomas More/DAS, ed. Unicomm, 2008).

Meeting in Paris on September 9th 2008, the EU-Ukraine Summit has laid the foundations for a future Association Agreement which could be concluded in 2009. The agreement would pave the way for a free trade area, reinforced cooperation in the field of energy security, and a scheme of free movement of persons between Ukraine and the EU. Against the backdrop of the Russian-Georgian conflict, diplomatic crisis between Russia and the West, and Russian threats towards Ukraine, the summit reiterated the importance of the principles of sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity. The next gathering will be the meeting of NATO member countries in December 2008. Eight months after the Bucharest Summit, the Allies will review Ukraine's and Georgia's applications. These nations will secure their political stability, both inside and outside, if they can benefit from an even closer association with the Western security community and from the perspective of a possible accession to the EU and NATO.

Independent since the 24 August 1991 and founding member of the CIS, Ukraine covers more than 603 700 km² and has about 47 million inhabitants. Strongly supported in its occidental aspirations by its Central-European neighbours, Ukraine is with Poland the other key-country of the Baltic-Black Sea isthmus, the continent's largest one, far behind European Russia. With its access to the Black Sea's northern shore, this plain country comes under median Europe, part of the European Orient ("Byzantine Europe") and the "kidnapped Occident" (Milan Kundera) at the same time. Its religious situation, highlighted during John Paul II's Ukrainian trip between 23 and 27 June 2001, expresses this geographical and cultural ambivalence: Ukraine is a territory with an orthodox majority, where a strong catholic minority lives, which represents a tenth part of its population and is well established in the western regions, formerly under Polish-Lithuanian and then Austrian sovereignty. These Catholics come under the Uniat Church, created in 1596 during an Orthodox Clergy's gathering in Brest-Litovsk. The Uniat Church recognized the Pope's authority and adopted the Roman dogmas at this time, whilst keeping Greek rites.

It is also in the West, in Galicia, that Ukrainian nationalism grew during the 19th century. At this time, many academic circles, high-level journals and a University were present in Lemberg (the current L'vov), an active intellectual capital. Vernacular language until then, Ukrainian became a language of literature. The Ukrainian-speaking people are numerically superior in the country's Western and Central parts; in the former Austrian provinces, they represent 90% of the population or even more. It is on these soils that Roukh, the nationalist and independence movement, developed during Gorbachev's "Perestroika." However, Ukrainian citizens with Russian origin and the Russian-speaking, that is to say a third of the population, constitute the majority in Ukraine's Eastern and coastal regions, notably in the large industrial areas inherited from the Soviet period. In the Crimean peninsula, the Russian Empire's outpost since Catherine the Great (and in the Sevastopol military harbour, founded in 1783), Russians represent 58% of the population, and the three quarters of inhabitants are Russian-speaking. Nevertheless, the weighty Tartar minority (the Crimean Tartars), massively deported under Stalin and hardly inclined to a return of Russian domination, have to be added to these figures.

John Paul II, aware of Ukraine's political and religious role as a "bridge" between the two parts of the European continent ("Christendom's two lungs"), had integrated his trip in the frame of a reconciliation effort with the Orthodox nations. To do so, he had called up the memory of Prince Vladimir, who was baptized in

Kiev in 988, as a common reference for Catholics and Orthodox. The hostility Moscow's patriarch, Alexis II, had demonstrated against this papal trip recalled that Ukraine has been an important "square on the chessboard of Latin and Byzantine influences" (1) for centuries. Indeed, the difficult diplomatic relationships between Kiev and Moscow – hydrocarbon transit and gas price, payment of the Ukrainian debt, the issue of the Russian fleet's pullback from Sevastopol and Ukraine's inclusion in Euro-Atlantic institutions (EU-NATO) – have to be put into perspective. The cradle of medieval Russia, Ukraine's current territory was incorporated in the Russian Empire only at the end of the 18th century. Between 1917 and 1920, Ukraine was independent, until the Bolsheviks won the civil war. Ukraine paid a heavy tribute to "Russia-Sovietia": the genocide-famine from 1932-1933 alone caused about six million deaths, i.e. a quarter of the Ukrainian population at that time.

However, the length and insistence of the ethno-linguistic divides going through Ukrainian populations mustn't overshadow immediate history and the reality of a Ukrainian national feeling able to counterbalance centrifugal forces. Indeed, independence was approved on 1st December 1991 by 90% voters, this strong consensus presupposing the agreement of the greater number of Ukrainian citizens with Russian origins and language. The bridge-building policy with Euro-Atlantic institutions has for its part been implemented since the mid-1990's, long before the "Orange Revolution" and the pro-occidental president Victor Yushchenko's election in 2004. A partnership and cooperation agreement had been signed by Ukraine and the European Union ten years before, in 1994. In 1996, Ukraine got the status of "transition economy," which facilitated the access to Ukrainian products in EU markets. Three years later, the European Union adopted a common strategy for Ukraine (democratisation and economic reforms; cooperation in the fields of environment, energy and nuclear safety).

Yet, the European Union and its main member states demonstrate a certain distance towards Kiev, not wanting to damage the EU-Russian partnership or make the enlargement question more complicated: "Even if the most important donor remains Brussels, having given nearly one billion dollars to Ukraine since 1991, until the elections it gave above all the impression of trampling and hesitating in front of the nature and the deepening of its relations with Kiev. As for the EU, Ukraine clearly belongs to these regions at the Union's borders with badly-defined identities and marks of Russian influence or even presence, like Moldavia, Belarus, Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Georgia, and Nagorno-Karabakh in Azerbaijan" (2).

Therefore, Ukraine comes under the Union's "neighbourhood policy," on the same level as a South-Mediterranean State like Morocco, and it is in this frame that the "EU-Ukraine action plan" from 21 February 2005 is to be found. According to Cyrille Gloaguen, the European hesitations were added to internal political contradictions (conflicts of interest between "clans") to provoke a stability rupture during the years 2003-2004. So whilst staying the course towards European Union, Ukraine signed the agreement founding the Common Economic Space (CEES) promoted by Russia.

The exasperation in front of this pivotal period's unbalance led to the "Orange Revolution" and the election of Victor Yushchenko, a determined supporter of a Euro-Atlantic political orientation. The day following the "Orange Revolution," the EU discovered a new candidate for accession, whose geographical, historical and ethno cultural legitimacy does not stand the comparison with Turkey. On 13 January 2005, the European Parliament adopts a resolution in favour of the Ukrainian application, calling the Union to "offer a well-defined perspective," but the Commission and the Council, like many member states, consider this accession as premature. The real emergency is to deepen the neighbourhood policy and the "everything but accession" remains EU's program towards Kiev, as the relationship between Kiev and Brussels must not deter the partnership with Russia.

Nevertheless, the "orange coalition" benefits from Poland's and other Central European countries' support. The strategic importance of the energy issues and the EU member States' will to reinforce the common energy policy also play a notable role; at the beginning of 2006, the Russian-Ukrainian "gas war" provoked a widely shared realization. The Odessa-Brody pipeline, maybe extended to Gdansk, would permit opening up Kazak oil and transporting it towards the European consumption centres. To Brussels, this would be a way for Ukraine to value its territory as Europe's energy supply pivot. The security and defence issues (frame-agreement EU-Ukraine on the involvement into ESPD, 2005) and Kiev's active role in favour of the settlement of Transnistria's conflicts (EU mission on the Moldavian-Ukrainian frontier, 2005) have also to be taken into account.

Ukraine's partnership with the NATO also dates from the 1990's and since then, the links between the NATO and Ukraine have constantly become stronger. In February 1994, Ukraine was the first country to accede to NATO's Partnership for Peace. On 8 July 1997, a NATO-Ukrainian "Charter for specific partnership" was signed, a document counterbalancing the "founder act" linking Russia to the NATO (in May 1997). In this cooperation

framework, Ukraine has regularly participated in NATO's manoeuvres: 250 annual activities were planned and in the month following the Charter's signing, naval forces of Ukraine and the NATO conducted common manoeuvres in the Black Sea ("Sea Breeze"). Since then, the Ukrainian army has reconverted one of its training centres into a NATO peace keeping training centre. Kiev and Warsaw combined their efforts to set up a joint peace keeping battalion, the UkrPolbalt, deployed within the KFOR (Kosovo), and then in Lebanon.

The accession application was formulated in May 2002, following the constitution of a US-Russian strategic partnership for the fight against terrorism and the setting-up of the NATO-Russian Council (COR). In addition to the Ukrainian air space's opening to NATO aeroplanes taking off to Afghanistan and Central Asia, the rapprochement between Ukraine and the NATO becomes a reality through several agreements and initiatives in the following years: the signature of an understanding memorandum concerning a facilitated access for NATO troops, planes, helicopters or ships to the Ukrainian territory (April 2004); the signing of a strategic air transport agreement (June 2004); positioning from the Ukrainian president (at this time Leonid Koutchma) in favour of the NATO reaction force and of the "Active Endeavour" operation in the Mediterranean (June 2004). In July 2004, Ukraine publicized a "military and strategic doctrine until 2015," a text focused on the interoperability of national and allied force. In April 2008, the NATO member states postponed their decision to give the official status of candidate member (through a Membership Action Plan) to Ukraine, as well as to Georgia, and the appropriate decision will have to be taken next December.

We remember the American Zbigniew Brzezinski, who is related to the former Lemberg by his family origins, strongly expressed the importance of Ukraine in the European geopolitical area: "Ukraine's independence changes the nature of the Russian state itself (...). Without Ukraine, Russia stops being an Empire in Eurasia. And even if it would try hard to recover such a status, its centre of gravity would be moved, and this empire, mostly Asiatic, would be fated to weakness, dragged into permanent conflicts with its Central Asian agitated vassals" (3). We also remember Lenin repeating: "If USSR loses Ukraine, USSR loses the head." As for Zbigniew Brzezinski, Ukraine is therefore a "geopolitical pivot," a concept referring to "the states whose importance comes less from their real power than from their geographically sensitive situation and their potential vulnerability, which influences the geostrategic players' behaviour" (4). However, it would be mistaken to see Ukraine as no more than a pawn in the US' hands in their only interest of power, as a result of these geopolitical views.

The NATO is not, and will never be, the Warsaw Pact's symmetry: within this occidental security community, decisions are taken following the principle of unanimity and thus the policy of close cooperation described above was conducted with the agreement of all the Allies. Besides, the different levels of partnership between the NATO and a non-member country are go along with the respect of good behaviour rules (primacy of civil over military, transparency of defence policy and budgets, rule of law, etc.), a series of norms recognizing the belonging to a common world.

Ukraine's integration into the NATO, as well as Georgia's, condition the solidity of the Euro-Atlantic security system, if we do not want to admit, even implicitly, that Russia keeps having a certain trusteeship over the ex-Soviet territory, or to believe that this acknowledgement as well as a Russian energy monopoly would lead to a deep understanding between the EU and Russia (this would divide the EU and let the "every man for himself" dominate).

Of course, the picture Russian leaders in power today have of Ukraine's destiny is radically different. From a Muscovite perspective, Ukrainians are not considered as a distinct people but as Russians separated from their Northern "brother" by the 13th century's Mongolian shock – Kiev was demolished in 1242 – the point of departure of differentiated historical trajectories. The oriental Slavs' centre of gravity then moved to Muscovy, which was freeing itself from the Mongolian domination after having played the part of tax collector for the Khan. During the 17th and 18th centuries, Russia pushed towards the Black Sea. In 1654, the Zaporozhian Cossacks went under Moscow's protection, and the Ottomans were pushed back during the following century (1774). Poland's successive partitioning led to the incorporation of Ukrainian territories into the Russian Empire. Galicia and Volhynia remained under Austrian authority before going over to Poland after World War I, while the Bolsheviks were fighting against Ukrainian nationalists. The German-Soviet Pact enabled USSR to conquer territories which were under Polish sovereignty and Stalin integrated them to the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic. In 1945 he added Ruthenia, taken from Czechoslovakia, Bukovina and southern Bessarabia, taken from Rumania, to this territory. In 1945, Khrushchev gave the Crimean peninsula to Ukraine, nevertheless without significant immediate geopolitical consequences (5).

Consequently, Ukraine's independence was painful for many Russians, who interpret it as a betrayal by Ukrainians towards the Slavonic Community. Still, the decision to respect the state of USSR's internal boundary, transformed into new States' borders, is due to the post-Soviet leaders from the time, in Russia as well as in the other CIS member countries. Obviously, the Russian-Ukrainian friendship and cooperation agreement (1998) and the attempts to settle the most sensitive issues (nuclear arms, the Sevastopol naval base, Russian and Russian-speaking minorities' rights) were not enough to stabilize the relationship between Kiev and Moscow. The Russian interferences in Ukraine's internal affairs, and in Georgia's and other countries' ones, as well as the oligarchic transborder games, explain why Ukrainian leaders now turn towards the EU and the NATO to find guaranties of security. The Russian-Georgian war from August 2008 and the unilateral acknowledgement of the separatist territories (Abkhazia and South Ossetia) can only push in the same direction.

Let's summarize the stakes' importance using the words of François Gouyon, specialist of the Ukrainian issue: "Ukraine has a double importance to Russia. A symbolic one first, as Ukraine is considered as the oriental Slavonic culture's cradle. Then, a strategic one, due to the presence in Sevastopol of a part of the Russian fleet, to the transit of 80% of Russian gas to Europe through its territory, and thirdly to Ukraine's location, on the Black Sea and in the direct neighbourhood of five Central European countries" (6). Russia's ambition to dominate the area Black Sea-Caucasus-Caspian and the capacity to direct strength and power towards Turkish straits and the Middle East, have to be added to these stakes. Of course, there is no good strategy without empathy and we therefore have to take into account the Russian impressions and perceptions of the geopolitical situations in Central Europe, in the Black Sea and in South Caucasus. For all that, understanding does not mean basking in Russian patterns and even less legitimizing to policies implemented in an area leaders persist in considering as an exclusive sphere of influence (the "close foreigner"). Following different sources, Moscow would be distributing Russian passports to a part of the Crimean population and threatening Ukrainian leaders who intend on limiting the Russian naval units' liberty of movement and asking them to leave the Sevastopol base in due course. Confronted by these serious risks and threats, Ukraine can only turn towards the Euro-Atlantic bodies and it would be dangerous to postpone the outcome: Ukraine must stop being "Europe's ghost" (Leonid Plioutch).

Jean-Sylvestre MONGRENIER

Notes :

- (1) Henri Tincq, « Le voyage du pape en Ukraine assombri par le conflit avec Alexis II de Moscou », *Le Monde*, 28 juin 2001.
- (2) Cyrille Gloaguen, « L'Ukraine entre Est et Ouest : les limites des grilles de lecture héritées de la guerre froide », *Hérodote*, N°118, 3e trimestre 2005, p. 120.
- (3) Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Le grand échiquier. L'Amérique et le reste du monde*, Bayard Editions, 1997, p. 74.
- (4) Zbigniew Brzezinski, *ibid.*, pp. 68-69.
- (5) Charles Urjewicz, article « Ukraine », in Yves Lacoste (sous la direction de), *Dictionnaire de géopolitique*, Flammarion, 1993, pp. 1530-1535.
- (6) François Gouyon, « L'Ukraine aux limites de l'Europe ? », *Hérodote*, N°118, 3e trimestre 2005, p. 148.