

Bulgaria vs Ukraine: Don't blink

Written by Eric Walberg
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Obama's geopolitical demarche in Russia's backyard is moving ahead nicely -- for the present, notes Eric Walberg

First there was the election in Bulgaria 5 July which brought a new party to power -- Boyko Borisov's Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria. Borisov, or Batman, as he is affectionately called, was a Communist-era policeman who subsequently established a prosperous private security business and has been the mayor of Sofia since 2005. He campaigned on the usual -- to fight corruption and secure a better economic future. The Batman bragged in an interview with Der Spiegel of receiving "letters of accolade" from the CIA and FBI, presumably for his battle with the dark forces. One of the first things he did as PM, however, was to suspend the existing energy contracts with Moscow, both the South Stream and a nuclear power plant project.

This triumph of "democracy" has "made in USA" written all over it. In 2007, Moscow laid out two alternate pipelines, bypassing Ukraine and Poland -- the North Stream under the Baltic Sea into Germany, and the South Stream under the Black Sea into Bulgaria and on to Europe. The government in Sofia, though a member of the EU and NATO, nonetheless signed energy agreements with Moscow in 2008. This and the gas crisis between Ukraine and Russia in January 2009 made regime change in Bulgaria essential, and the services of the US government-funded National Endowment for Democracy -- they helped overthrow the Bulgarian government in 1990 -- were clearly made excellent use of. Just a week after elections marred by vote buying (despite or due to the NED?), Bulgaria's new PM cancelled the Russian deal.

Borisov went to Ankara a week later to sign on to the EU Nabucco pipeline. Democrat Richard Morningstar, US special envoy for Eurasian energy, and Republican Senator Richard Lugar (note the bipartisanship) joined him in Ankara on 13 July for the signing ceremony. If all goes according to plan, the Nabucco project will upstage South Stream, bringing gas from the Caspian region and Middle East to Central and Western European markets, with possible suppliers Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Iran and Iraq.

Senator Lugar said -- with a straight face -- the Nabucco agreement signed in Turkey "is a signal to the rest of the world that partner governments will not acquiesce to manipulation of energy supplies for political ends. It also has the potential to build new avenues for peaceful cooperation." Obama served up more such tripe during his "Moscow speech" on 7 July: "In 2009, a great power does not show strength by dominating or demonising other countries. The days when empires could treat sovereign states as pieces on a chess board are over."

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However, Azerbaijan may have problems providing enough gas to make Nabucco feasible, as it initialed a deal in June with Russia's Gazprom for gas from the Shah Deniz field -- the same field Nabucco needs for its pipeline. Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev is caught in this competition between Russia and the West, with a bottom line -- who will pay the highest price? Even if Nabucco strikes a deal to buy Azeri gas at the price already agreed with Gazprom, according to F William Engdahl, there just ain't enough to go around. And there are problems with all the other potential suppliers as well.

Senator Lugar told the Senate -- again, with a straight face: "Ideally, in the way of the world, the natural gas -- and maybe in due course oil supplies -- coming out of a united Iraq might provide this kind of capital, which would be a miraculous happening and a wonderful ending to a very tragic period in their history." If, of course, Iraq acquiesces to its US-client status. Even so, Iraqi gas to Turkey would pass through Kurdish areas, a hotbed of separatism against both Turkey and the current Iraqi government. The other main source of gas would be Iran.

For all the Obama hype, his advisers are really playing the same geopolitical game as Cheney and Bush. It is a clash of "civilisation", with the US the so-called civiliser and everyone else the to-be-civilised. But Iran and Russia are not as easy to "dominate or demonise", to borrow a bit of Obama-speak, as certain other countries. It will take an invasion of Iran to change Washington's dynamic with that country. And all the hot air coming from Washington will not dissipate the Russian cloud of suspicion caused by the missile bases and NATO's vow to swallow Ukraine and Georgia.

The degree of "civilisation" in the latter two countries is far from clear at present. The Georgian opposition continues to call for Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili's resignation in the wake of his disastrous war against Russia last summer. Counting on Georgia in its present mess as a key link in the Nabucco pipeline project is quite a gamble.

In Ukraine opinion polls reveal something quite remarkable. "If we were to fantasise, and pretend that Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin would run for the post of Ukrainian president, then according to opinion poll results he would win right off," says Alexei Lyashenko, an analyst at Kiev's Research & Branding (R&B) polling institute. "His only serious competitor would be Russian President Dmitri Medvedev." This is not new according to Lyashenko. Putin's rating was over 50 per cent even during the 2004 "Orange Revolution". Opinion poll results published in May indicate that 58 per cent of Ukrainians have a positive attitude toward Putin, and 56 per cent approve of Medvedev. The pro-Russian head of the opposition Party of Regions Viktor Yanukovich currently enjoys a 30 per cent approval rating, and Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko 15 per cent. A shade more than five per cent of Ukrainians would vote for

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the anti-Russian President Viktor Yushchenko in the upcoming elections in January of 2010. According to Kiev International Institute of Sociology (KIIS) President Valeri Khmelko, "The main reason why Medvedev and Putin score so high is the endless conflicts and score-settling in Ukrainian politics, which make the Russian politicians look good." "The Ukrainian preference for Russian state-controlled television and the desire for strong leadership in the times of crisis also play a role," said R&B's Lyashenko.

A KIIS poll found that 25 per cent want full unification with Russia, and 68 per cent want an EU-style border-free regime with Russia, with Russia and Ukraine being "independent but friendly states" without a visa regime or custom controls. Polls consistently show more than half of Ukrainians are opposed to joining NATO, for which a referendum must be held in any case. "Over 90 per cent of people in Ukraine have a positive attitude toward Russia, and it has become even better over the past year," KIIS President Valeri Khmelko noted. Nor do Ukrainians have much sympathy for Yushchenko's friend Saakashvili. According to Lyashenko, 45 per cent have a negative opinion of Saakashvili, and only 11 percent have a positive one.

Washington is still officially supporting NATO membership for both Ukraine and Georgia, as Vice President Joe Biden travels to Georgia and Ukraine this week. "Our efforts to reset relations with Russia will not come at the expense of any other countries," Biden's national security adviser, Tony Blinken, said. "Our hope is these leaders will live up to the promise of the revolution and make the hard choices to work together," Blinken said, referring to Ukraine's Orange Revolution. He said the Obama administration -- like the Ukrainian people, we might add -- was concerned about the "political paralysis" in Kiev. Concerning NATO, he said it was up to Ukraine and Georgia to decide whether they wanted to join the alliance. Given US reliance on Russia for transit of its troops and arms to Afghanistan, Blinken's less than ringing rhetoric -- and Obama's virtual silence -- suggests that this will not happen any time soon.

Yes, it's clear now that Obama must have winked at Putin at the Moscow summit when the subject of Ukraine, Georgia and NATO came up. That was the only way he could get his troops through Russia to the killing fields in Afghanistan. But the Nabucco pipeline success surely irks Russia, as do continued NATO "exercises" in the Black Sea and the close ties between NATO and all the Black Sea countries -- except Russia. And Poland has boldly announced its first missiles are expected this year.

Faced with these games, Moscow will have to be sure not to "blink" first, avoiding any diplomatic faux pas which could provide fuel for Washington hawks. In any case, Obama's senior Russian adviser Michael McFaul's derisive "We don't need the Russians" prior to Obama's Russian summit is simply not true. Washington's Bulgarian-Ukrainian-Caucasus

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intrigues could easily unravel -- in the twinkling of an eye.