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**THE PRO-RUSSIAN INCLINATION OF THE «MULTI-VECTOR»  
DISCOURSE OF THE UKRAINIAN POLITICAL CENTRE**

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The present article analyses the ideological foundations of the discourse of Ukrainian centrist forces concerning Ukraine's foreign trajectory. Following independence the discourse of the major political groups, which can be identified as centrist, was rooted in the so-called «multi-vector» doctrine. It is argued that, despite its inherent logic of pragmatism and balancing between «East» and «West», their multi-vector discourse was in fact dominated by a pro-Russian inclination. This feature of the vision of Ukraine's international standing formed an important ideological background for some key geopolitical decisions of Yanukovich administration.

**Key words:** centrist forces; Ukraine's foreign trajectory; «multi-vector» discourse; pro-Russian inclination.

In November 2013 Yanukovich refused to sign the previously approved Association agreement with the EU and chose to fully side with Russia instead. This step came as a shock for Ukraine's Western partners and evidently contrasted with his administration's alleged 'pragmatic' and 'balanced' approach to Ukrainian foreign policy. Yanukovich's decision immediately provoked a passionate reaction on the part of Ukrainian civil society, which soon evolved into a mass protest dubbed as 'Euromaidan'. Eventually, these events have brought about an overturn of Yanukovich's decision and dumped his regime altogether.

In order to fully comprehend the roots for the questionable decision by Yanukovich, it is important to understand the ideational foundations of the foreign-policy thinking of the part of the political elites that he represented. To this end, this article seeks to analyse the ideological roots of the centrist discourse on Ukraine's foreign trajectory. More specifically, this analysis will focus on the so-called «multi-vector» doctrine, followed by the representatives of the political centre. The main objective of the present analysis, therefore, is establishing the ideological roots as well as dominant geopolitical inclination of the centrist discourse in the period prior to Yanukovich's election to the president in the early 2010.

Yanukovich and his closest allies belonged to the section of the Ukrainian political spectrum that can be qualified as political centre. However, in the Ukrainian post-independence political reality the centrist camp comprised of two main groups: the post-communist «party of power» and, later, political projects controlled by financial and industrial groups and oligarchs, who mainly concentrated in the Eastern Ukraine. The ideological underpinning of these groups was vague and often not really spelled-out. In the first place, their «centrism» reflected the middle political position

that these centrist forces took regarding acute political issues. They were keen on emphasising the need for political stability, which, it was argued, could only be attained in contemporary Ukraine by an evolutionary path and not radical democratic and economic reforms.

In the domain of international relations the centrist political forces were best known for their discourse, anchored in a specific multi-vector doctrine. In general, this doctrine presupposed a simultaneous development of strategic relations with the Western and post-Soviet powers and international organisations. In practice, however, this meant a dubious attempt to move in both the Western and Eastern directions. This vague doctrine fit well the centrists' fuzzy ideological underpinning as a whole.

During at least the second half of the 1990s the centrists and their ambivalent attitude to Ukraine's foreign trajectory was represented by the early post-communist centrists. While President Kravchuk and his administration earned themselves a rather anti-Russian image in the first years of independence, his successor Kuchma fully personified this dubious «multi-vectorism». Kuchma administration was the first to quite consistently utilise this approach and officially proclaimed it as the country's foreign strategy.

Kuchma won the 1994 presidential election on a largely pro-Russian ticket. Contrary to general expectations, however, his administration took up a flexible position in international affairs, devoting considerable attention to the relations with the Western powers and international organisations. His early successes in this area included enhanced cooperation with the key European institutions as well as the US and NATO. Ukraine swiftly became a member of the Council of Europe, boosted its relations with the US and EU and was the most devoted CIS participant in the NATO Partnership for Peace programme.

Kuchma's turn to a more flexible geopolitical approach was significantly influenced by the very problem of viability of the Ukrainian state. Its weak international position in the region and a miserable social and economic situation inside the country urged the ruling elite to turn its head toward the West. Firstly, Ukraine needed to diversify its international standing in order to reduce a mounting political, economic and cultural pressure from its Russian neighbour. Kuchma skilfully used the progress in relations with the West as a certain counterbalance for this pressure, which led to normalising of the Ukrainian-Russian relations. The politics of strategic balancing between Russia and the West became a cornerstone of foreign and security policy of Kuchma administration.

Secondly, seriously delayed structural reforms in the Ukrainian economy had to be eventually tackled and the government increasingly looked to the Western institutions for financial aid and investments. «The policy of [economic] reforms pressed for a continuance if not strengthening of the Western orientation: Ukraine required credits, [new] technologies and investments, none of which could be provided by Russia» [3, p. 63]. In return for their support the European and American governments and financial institutions (such as the IMF, World Bank and EBRD) demanded a certain degree of convergence of Ukraine's political and economic structures with the Western standards.

Another important rationale of the multi-vector policy for the ruling centrist elites lay in its potential for gripping to power as well as for sheer rent seeking. The ambivalent nature of the multi-vector strategy suited the post-communist centrists precisely because of its ambiguity, allowing for a high degree of political flexibility and manipulation both inside Ukraine and in the relations with its international partners.

The «East-and-West» type of rhetoric was used to justify a subsequent slowing down of the declared reforms: the radical reforms were described as simply too Western and hence either not suitable or too quick for Ukraine. In this respect this multi-vectorism was convenient for justifying the failures of the half-hearted transformation efforts as well as conserving lack of government transparency and corruption. Also, this rhetoric became a populist cover for lobbying the circles' particularistic (and mostly dishonest) business interests in the East, namely the bargains with their post-communist counterparts from the CIS countries [15].

Self-seeking motivations also seemed to make for an important impulse for a cautious pro-Western vector of the centrists in the 2000s. Most of these groups were sponsored and controlled by powerful oligarchs, largely based in the Eastern part of the country. Exposing of Ukraine to the West had an evident advantage to offer to these groupings – namely, an access to the vast Western markets. Such groupings followed the official discourse in the part of support for Ukraine's gradual advancement to the European community. The integration to Europe also had a very personal dimension: the “nouveau riche” preferred to keep their fortunes in the European banks and educate their children in the Western schools.

This did not mean, however, that the oligarchic centrists became an unequivocal supporter of the European trajectory in their programmes and rhetoric, let alone the daily political decisions. For one thing, a fully-fledged integration into the European community would bring a more transparent political and economic climate in Ukraine, something that could challenge their economic and political domination. On the other hand, they had no intention to cut off or even limit their ties with the East. As was already mentioned, many Ukrainian oligarchs shared business interests and political and economic connections with their counterparts in the CIS region, and hence were careful not to upset Moscow with a too enthusiastic stance on European integration.

However, apart from the pragmatic and rent-seeking considerations the utilisation of the multi-vector strategy drew on a deeper ideational foundation. Such attempt to simultaneously follow both the Eastern and Western trajectories also reflected confusion of the post-communist elites over identification with either of these models of development. Moreover, multi-vector policies, pursued by the post-communist centrists, became a certain external projection of a cultural ambivalence of the key representatives of these elites. Having stripped themselves off the communist ideology after the demise of the Soviet system, the bulk of the former communists (as well as their successors) were significantly disorientated in their social and economic views and geopolitical preferences.

Kuchma could be regarded as one such example. His policies were significantly ambivalent concerning the end-goals of the transition process that he was in charge of

for many years. Such ambivalence was typical also for the next generation of the centrists. Although many such politicians and their bosses formerly did not belong to the cohort of communist «apparatchiks» and managerial elite (the so called «red directors»), their ideological and geopolitical preferences were significantly confused as well. According to one observer, the Ukrainian oligarchs were «split personalities», looking East or West, speaking Russian or [Ukrainian], acting aggressively or amiably...» [13, p. 79].

Thus, at some point of Kuchma's term in office the intrinsic ambiguity was even attempted to be used to the advantage of nation building. The upper echelon of the ruling class and their loyal intellectuals tried to promote a new kind of Ukrainian national identity, resting on a fusion of the «Western» and «Eastern» civilisations. They were keen on emphasising Ukraine's unique geopolitical and cultural position between Europe and Eurasia (mainly represented by Russia). Correspondingly, a metaphor of 'bridge' featured prominently in the official discourse. It was suggested that «Ukraine's identity effectively bridges and connects East and West, and hence the East cannot be simply blocked out from Ukraine's identity, culture and history» [14, p. 683]. According to this rhetoric, keeping a balance between the Western and Eastern orientations of the country matched Ukrainian cultural and political traditions and corresponded to the present-day interests of the Ukrainian society.

The political nature of the pursued multi-vector policy was highly volatile. In the beginning of Kuchma's second term in office his administration officially declared an intention to follow a pro-European and pro-Atlantic course. In his inaugural speech in November 1999 Kuchma affirmed Ukraine's European choice and defined the goal of joining the EU as a strategic one for the country [4]. The shift in the official discourse was confirmed in numerous presidential decrees and resolutions as well as governmental programmes, all expressing determination of the Ukrainian government to join the EU and NATO and overall pursue the Western trajectory [7, p. 8].

However, soon the resoluteness of the formal pro-European policy changed to a fairly vague approach. Then, president Kuchma and top governmental officials (including Yanukovich who became the prime-minister in 2001) indicated that the planned joining of the European and Atlantic structures did not have to happen any time soon. The new gradual approach, in Kuchma's words, was designed to «take into account the risks and threats of a forced European integration» [11, p. 63]. Closer to an end of Kuchma's second presidential term the multi-vector policy in fact took a U-turn. Complications in the relations with the West, which aroused not in the last instance due to a growing authoritarianism of the regime in Ukraine, prompted Kuchma to re-orientate the state's foreign course to deepening the relations with Russia. In this period, contrary to the logic of the formal political documents, Kuchma administration was hastily building up strategic relations as well as informal ties with Russia and other CIS states.

The ambiguity and hollowness of the pro-European and pro-Western rhetoric was also inherent to the oligarchic centrists, which took over the amorphous post-communist «party of power». Many centrist parties formally declared their support for some form of multi-vector policy. This was, for instance, the case during the 2002

parliamentary election campaign. «The most common foreign policy concept in the programmes of the centrist parties was that of «multi-vector» foreign policy» [12, p. 261].

Some conceptual variants of the multi-vectorism in the pronouncement of the centrist parties were not just controversial but simply unrealistic, if not absurd. Such was Andrii Derkach's political project «Into Europe together with Russia!» launched in the early 2000s. One of the leaders of the Labour Ukraine, an influential Dnipropetrovsk-based party (and later a satellite of Yanukovich's Party of Region), suggested that Ukraine ought to integrate into Europe only together with Russia. Drawing on De Gaulle's concept of Europe from «the Atlantic to the Urals» and stressing cultural proximity of Ukraine and Russia, he and his political force advocated for a «process of European integration, synchronised with Russia» [2].

The major problem of such strategy was that, if applied in practice, such accession strategy would mean no European integration for Ukraine at all, since Putin's Russia was not really interested in this project. Despite its obvious practical infeasibility, in the early 2000s the concept was a common feature in the rhetoric of the highest Ukrainian officials, closely related to the centrist «party of power». «President Kuchma, former Foreign Minister Anatoliy Zlenko, then head of the presidential administration and the For United Ukraine bloc Volodymyr Lytvyn, and chairman of the State Committee for the Military-Industrial Complex Volodymyr Horbulin constantly repeat «To Europe with Russia!» in different variations» wrote Kuzio [10, p. 447].

The multi-vectorism of the powerful Party of Regions and its leader Yanukovich, who served as prime-minister for the second time in 2006–2007 and eventually became the president of Ukraine in 2010, was not void of the weaknesses of their predecessors. On the one hand, the Party of Regions formally supported the European aspirations of Ukraine – in contrast to the policy aimed at joining NATO. References to «inevitability of the European choice of Ukraine» and calls to follow European standards in all areas of social life of the country became ordinary speech conventions in the discourse of Yanukovich and his allies [8; 9].

On the other hand, following the Orange Revolution Yanukovich and his allies became the most influential advocates for fostering Ukraine's relations with Russia. In this regard, the official platform of the Party of Regions stated that Russia was Ukraine's «closest strategic partner» and proposed a «joint entry of our countries into the contemporary European economic and cultural space» [6]. The party leadership never missed an opportunity to repeat that the development of the relations with the West (including the integration into such institutions as the EU and WTO) was not to happen at the cost of Ukraine's pro-CIS and pro-Russian course.

«One should not place the course of European integration in opposition to [Ukraine's] accession to the [Russia-led] Single Economic Space», but approach the question of joining the WTO «with caution» – argued Yanukovich [1]. Moreover, developing of Ukraine's relations with Russia and joining the CIS integrationist projects, initiated and controlled by Moscow, was announced as the sine qua non for Ukraine's eventual European integration. A leading ideologist of the Party of Regions

during the first half of the 2000s called this «a realistic path of European integration of Ukraine» [5].

The ambivalence of the multi-vector policy in practice worked to the advantage of the Eastern-bound integration. The unfeasibility of the attempt «to have it all» became apparent soon after Yanukovich's election to the president. Due to a growing indifference to Ukraine on the side of the Western partners as well as Yanukovich's unskilful geopolitical balancing, the multi-vector policy of his administration actually meant opening the doors for unrestrained Russian political, economic, and cultural influences. Contrary to a pro-European rhetoric, the Russian influence was disproportionately strengthened and Ukraine was being drawn closer to Russia.

The Russian shadow over the multi-vector policy of Yanukovich and his Party of Regions was especially notable in the area of international security. The party leadership and rank and file fiercely opposed the course of seeking a full membership in NATO. Instead of the pro-NATO course, advocated by their political opponents, the Party of Regions endorsed a non-aligned status for Ukraine. Nevertheless, in view of the Black Sea Fleet stationed in Crimea and Russia's ever-present intense political pressure on Ukraine this could only shift the security balance in Russia's favour.

After regaining political power in 2010, Yanukovich administration on the whole continued the former approach to Ukrainian foreign policy and security. His administration renounced the policy of the previous government intended for joining NATO and made efforts to exclude any formal statements of such aspiration in the official documents determining the course of Ukrainian foreign and security policy. In April 2010 Yanukovich and the pro-presidential majority in the parliament prolonged a lease of the Crimean Base by the Russian Black Sea Fleet until 2042. This was an unprecedented unilateral move of Ukrainian government, made in defiance of the Ukrainian constitution. This move was never reciprocated by any proportional concession from the Russian side and, most importantly, later helped the annexation of this Ukrainian territory by Russia.

The hasty and, for the most part, one-sided rapprochement with Russia, initiated by Yanukovich and his team in 2010, could not be explained by the logic of strategic balancing inherent in the multi-vector doctrine. Such steps toward Russia underscored the predominance of the Eastern component in the foreign-policy thinking among Yanukovich's political allies. At the same time, this weighty pro-Russian inclination also correlated with the general character of the "multi-vectorism" of other groups and the previous generation of the Ukrainian centrists.

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## ПРОРОСІЙСЬКИЙ УХИЛ ДИСКУРСУ «БАГАТОВЕКТОРНІСТЬ» УКРАЇНСЬКОГО ПОЛІТИЧНОГО ЦЕНТРУ

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Розглянуто ідеологічні засади політичного дискурсу центристських сил щодо їхнього трактування вибору зовнішньополітичного вектора України. Протягом періоду української незалежності дискурс основних політичних груп, які можна ідентифікувати як центристські, перебував під впливом т.зв. «багатовекторності». Всупереч прагматичності та логіці балансування між Сходом і Заходом, їхній дискурс багатовекторності загалом характеризувався проросійською спрямованістю. Ця особливість тлумачення міжнародного становища України лягла в основу деяких ключових геополітичних рішень адміністрації президента Януковича.

**Ключові слова:** центристські сили; зовнішньополітичний вектор України; дискурс «багатовекторності»; проросійська спрямованість.

**ПРОРОССИЙСКИЙ УКЛОН ДИСКУРСА «МНОГОВЕКТОРНОСТИ» УКРАИНСКОГО  
ПОЛИТИЧЕСКОГО ЦЕНТРА**

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Рассмотрены идеологические основы политического дискурса центристских сил в трактовке выбора внешнеполитического вектора Украины. На протяжении периода украинской независимости дискурс основных политических групп, которые можно идентифицировать как центристские, находился под влиянием т.н. «многовекторности». Вопреки прагматичности и логике балансирования между Востоком и Западом, их дискурс многовекторности в целом характеризовался пророссийской направленностью. Эта особенность толкования международного положения Украины легла в основу некоторых ключевых геополитических решений администрации президента Януковича.

**Ключевые слова:** центристские силы; внешнеполитический вектор Украины; дискурс «многовекторности»; пророссийская направленность.