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Moscow issues Eurasian ultimatum

By M K Bhadrakumar

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In politics or diplomacy it is seldom, if ever, that anything could be reduced to a matter of "all or nothing". Yet that's how Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev saw the choice before Ukraine.

He was laying down the stark choice Russia would give its biggest neighbor (population 46 million) in the post-Soviet space. The context was the momentous decision by the Ukrainian government to approve the text of the country's Association of Agreement with the European Union.

Moscow had fought a rearguard battle to preempt the development. The future trajectory of Ukraine's EU enterprise is poised to become a fateful issue in Russia's troubled relations with the West. Medvedev used blunt language: The situation is quite simple: accession to the Customs Union will be practically closed for our Ukrainian colleagues if they sign the Association Agreement with the EU states.

The Ukrainian leadership hopes to sign the Association Agreement at the EU's Eastern Partnership summit due to be held in Vilnius, Lithuania, on November 28-29.

Ukraine is not a member of the Moscow-led Customs Union (at present composed of Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Russia), but Medvedev added that that even the grouping's special partnership regime will not apply to Ukraine after its EU integration. Moscow had envisaged that the regime would incrementally lure Ukraine into the Customs Union tent.

The Customs Union is Ukraine's number one trade partner, with a two-way turnover of US\$63 billion last year, which accounted for 36% of its overall exports.

Evidently, Moscow is drawing new battle lines. The Russian calculus shows that the war is not yet lost, and Moscow cannot afford to lose, either. The EU is an elusive enemy, which slithers away in daylight but then is also never too far away, leaving Moscow guessing how tenacious it could be when it comes to Ukraine. Besides, the EU also happens to be Russia's partner.

All the same, Moscow would factor in that the Ukrainian public opinion is divided over the issue. Half the population supports the EU integration but there is an ethnic and regional divide here with the Russian communities in the eastern regions bordering Russia opposed to the gravitation away from Moscow toward Brussels.

This contrarian nature of national opinion finds reflection within the ruling Regions Party and the Communist Party and gives a plausible basis for Moscow to work on as the next presidential election approaches in 2015. Then there are the Ukrainian oligarchs who make big money in Russia and there are invisible cords that tie them to corridors of power in Moscow.

Ukraine's geography becomes crucial for Russia's perennial need of a buffer zone vis-a-vis the West and the fear is that alongside the EU integration there could also be membership of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Moreover, Moscow's Eurasian Union project, which aims at integrating the former Soviet republics under its leadership, loses its shine without Ukraine's inclusion.

Over and above, Ukraine is a key interlocutor in the transcendental Orthodox unity of Eastern Slavs, which in turn provides stimulus for the Kremlin's ideology of conservative nationalism - an ideology that also seeks a distinct international role and, therefore, becomes a template of Russian foreign policy.

Lest it got overlooked, it was on the Dnieper that the original baptism of Rus was held in 988 when Grand Prince Vladimir accepted Orthodox Christianity as the religion of his lands. Vladimir's conversion also began a tradition that has run virtually unbroken throughout the history of the Russian Orthodox Church, namely, of religion serving political interests.

Suffice to say, Russia can be expected to use all its powers of persuasion - and coercion if need be - to sway Ukraine toward Eurasia. But then, this runs into the West's geopolitical agenda of extending the NATO alliance system to Ukraine, which was the after all *raison d'etre* of the US-sponsored color revolution in Kiev in 2006.

The objective is to create on Russia's western doorstep - indeed, in the very heart of "Rus" - a western liberal democracy that will also be a NATO member country.

Interestingly, Putin last week reappointed the colorful Kremlin ideologue of the past decade, Vladislav Surkov - variously compared by his Western critics and detractors to Rasputin in the Czarist court, Mikhail Suslov of the Brezhnev era or France's Cardinal Richelieu - as his advisor,

and the Moscow rumor mill promptly added that he will be in charge of the mission to persuade Ukraine to look eastward. It was Surkov who expounded the ideology of Russia's "sovereign democracy".

The EU has so far acted coyly. It would encourage Kiev to keep the flame of hope of EU membership burning but is in no tearing hurry to make haste in this regard, which would involve extending huge financial subsidies that Brussels can ill afford at present.

Thus, EU commissioner Stefan Fule recently signaled that import tariffs could be lowered for Ukraine to compensate for any loss of Russian market but it will be up to Ukraine to perform competitively in the European market.

The Russian strategy, on the other hand, will be to exploit this EU ambivalence (which also stems from concerns regarding Kiev's dismal record of cracking down on political opposition, rampant corruption and appalling human rights record.)

To be sure, Russia will play on the gnawing doubts in the Ukrainian mind that its EU expectations are unrealistic, whereas, Moscow is offering Customs Union membership, which is tangible and of immediate benefit. But the big question is how far Russian diplomacy will go to push the envelope. The Ukrainians have a reputation of stubbornness.

A Kremlin adviser Sergei Glazyev openly warned over the weekend in Yalta at a meeting of European politicians, "Russia is the main creditor of Ukraine. Only with customs union with Russia can Ukraine balance its trade." He did not rule out there could be Russian sanctions if Ukraine signs the agreement in Vilnius.

Glazyev warned there could be a political and social cost of EU integration insofar as separatist movements might spring up in the Russian-dominated eastern and southern regions of Ukraine, which may in turn prompt Russian intervention. He said,

We [Russia] don't want to use any kind of blackmail. This is a question for the Ukrainian people. But legally speaking, by signing this agreement of association with the EU, the Ukrainian government violates the treaty on strategic partnership with Russia.

Glazyev explained that that Russia would also be compelled to regard as void Ukraine's borders according to the treaty provisions. That is to say, Russia could no longer guarantee Ukraine's status as a state and could possibly intervene if the Russian regions of the country appealed to Moscow directly for help. He concluded,

Signing this [EU] agreement will lead to political and social unrest. The living standard will decline dramatically ... there will be chaos ... The Ukrainian authorities make a huge mistake if they think that the Russian reaction will become neutral in a few years. This will not happen.

Arguably, "Old Europe" has so far had no stomach to precipitate issues, unlike "New Europe", especially Poland. But that could be changing in the new climate of rising tensions in Russia's relations with the US and the West in general.

It is a matter of time now for the West to shed its ambivalence and to seriously work on Ukraine's integration. For both sides - Russia and the West - the stakes are high. Ukraine's "defection" at once deprives Russia of "strategic depth."

On the other hand, the West's project does not end with Ukraine's integration, but its aim extends to challenging the edifice that Putin hopes to build around the Eurasian Union idea.

The West has never been in doubt that Russia's integration will become feasible only through its transformation as a market-based liberal democracy according to European norms. The best hope of the West would be that the baptism on the Dnieper would lure the Russian people too to have their own baptism on the Moscow River.