

Ukrainian President Yushchenko presses for closer ties with European Union

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New Ukrainian president Victor Yushchenko visited Berlin two weeks ago, under conditions in which the foreign policy of the German government of Gerhard Schröder, with its orientation towards Russia, is coming increasingly under pressure. A section of the ruling elite in Germany and Europe as a whole wants to use the change of government in Kiev to prosecute, alongside the US, a more aggressive foreign policy in eastern Europe.

The show of unity with which the German government received Yushchenko in the capital was barely able to conceal the political tensions that lay beneath. Newspaper articles reported the relationship between Schröder and his guest as one of “coolness” and “stiff gestures.” The recent visa scandal surrounding German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer, which was accompanied by an anti-immigration witch-hunt, particularly against Ukrainians coming to Germany, also became a sticking point during the official reception.

The visit was preceded by a potential confrontation with Germany’s main opposition party, the conservative Christian Democratic Union (CDU). This was due to the actions of Volker Rühe (CDU), chairman of the Bundestag (parliament) Committee on Foreign Affairs, who bypassed the government to organise a speech by Yushchenko to the Bundestag. This made Yushchenko only the 22nd foreign guest since 1949 to receive this privilege. Never before had any head of state been invited to speak before the Bundestag so shortly after coming to office.

The background to the tensions surrounding the Yushchenko visit is the discussion on how Germany, working together with Russia, can take forward its interests in the countries constituting the former Soviet Union. Since the outbreak of the Iraq war, the German and French governments have been the strongest advocates of a more forceful foreign policy, independent of the US and in cooperation with Russia.

Since Yushchenko’s coming to power, more and more voices have spoken out against this orientation. Although most of the criticism has come from the conservative Union party camps, sections within the Social Democratic Party (SPD)-Green Party ruling coalition government itself have criticised Schröder for placing too much emphasis on Germany’s relationship with the Kremlin and Vladimir Putin, instead of taking forward Germany and the European Union’s (EU’s) interests in closer cooperation with the US. During the Beslan hostage drama last year, Schröder characterised Putin as a “flawless democrat.”

Yushchenko took the same line when he thanked the German

people, the parliament and the government for having played a significant role in “inspiring” the “orange revolution.” He affirmed that “democracy” and “freedom” were now finally making their way to Ukraine, 15 years after the fall of the Berlin Wall. This was meant as a clear attack against Schröder, who was decidedly reserved during the Ukrainian presidential elections last autumn and repeatedly sought to support Putin. The regime change in Kiev was the result of massive political pressure by the US, to which Yushchenko feels especially indebted.

Yushchenko pressed for Ukraine’s swift entry into the EU and presented his case with various economic and political benefits that would occur as a result: “A country with 48 million people, with strong industry and a highly specialised armaments sector that builds the most modern ships and rockets that are used throughout the world. A country that supplies important raw materials must of course be of economic interest to Europe. Ukraine can also be the guarantor for stability, security and finally democratisation in the region,” he explained in an interview with the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* newspaper.

Berlin and Brussels are both keen to open up the country to foreign investment by EU member states. Yushchenko is working intensively to implement a liberal economic program over the next thousand days, which is supposed to create a million jobs per year—mainly cheap labour positions for European companies. The Ukrainian working class will be used as a lever with which to drive down the living standards in Europe even further.

The new Ukrainian government also provides the opportunity for the EU to reduce its dependence on Russian energy supplies. The long-disputed oil pipeline from Plock in Poland to Odessa and the Black Sea will be put back into operation. Up until now, Russia had diverted oil in this pipeline—which stretches from the Russian Magistrale region to western Europe—to Odessa, and from there sold on the world market. Oil is now to be pumped from Georgia through Odessa and directly to Europe.

Germany and Europe are, however, cautious not to make long-term agreements with the new Ukrainian government. The German government only offered Yushchenko support for the development of a “market economy” and with Ukraine’s entry into the World Trade Organisation by 2006 at the latest. No decision has yet been made about when to start formal negotiations regarding Ukraine’s entry into the EU. Even from the camp of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and its perspective of “privileged partnership” between the EU and the Ukraine, no opposition was

voiced.

For one, the EU, after its expansion last year into eastern Europe and with official entry talks for Turkey now beginning, is hardly in a position to incorporate another bitterly poor country, especially as one as big as Ukraine. Further, as the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* put it, the “relationship between the EU and Ukraine cannot be established without considering Europe’s relationship with Russia.” Europe is also cautious about bringing another country into the EU which could, in the case of a conflict with the United States, side with the latter, as was the case with Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary at the beginning of the Iraq war.

The change of government in Kiev and the altered balance of forces within the republics that constituted the former Soviet Union pose a problem to the EU and in particular to the governments of France and Germany. They are now faced with redefining the Paris-Berlin-Moscow axis as a counterweight to the US. The election has reduced Russia’s influence, and with Yushchenko, the United States has won an influential figure to its side.

One of the most important political aims will remain the same, however—ensuring that Europe’s privileged access to energy supplies from Russia is not endangered. Germany alone absorbs 30 percent of Russia’s gas and oil supplies and has invested heavily in the Russian energy sector.

Europe also hopes to extend its economic influence in the region—by increasing its exports, importing cheaper raw materials and other supplies as well as through access to highly qualified labour. Last year, in Russia alone, the flow of foreign direct investment increased by more than 40 percent, the largest portion of which came from Germany and Europe. Germany remains Russia’s most important trading partner in terms of both imports and exports.

The economic interest in Russia, which in the case of Germany stems back to the 1970s and which has strongly increased in the last 15 years, is bound up with the European continent’s traditional export dependency on the United States. France also relies heavily on exporting to the US. Under conditions of sharpening economic and political tensions between Europe and the US, the calculation of the former’s interests is becoming more like a balancing act. Should the European bourgeoisie maintain its present relationship with the republics of the former Soviet Union as is, or should it pursue an alliance with the US—one that is just as difficult to manage. The answer to this question lies with political developments inside Russia itself.

If Russia were to experience a regime change similar to the one in Ukraine, this could be to the detriment of German interests. The decomposition of the country along a countless number of ethnic lines could have incalculable consequences and even lead to a long civil war. An article in the current issue of the *GUS-Barometer* journal, published by the Körber Centre Russia/Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), part of the German Association for Foreign Policy (DGAP), firmly backs Russia’s entry into the EU.

The article first lays out Russia’s declining influence since the Ukrainian election. It argues that Yushchenko’s victory has meant Russia has “lost its leadership in the post-Soviet space” and all but put an end to the project of a Russian-dominated union with

Ukraine, Belarus and Kazakhstan. Russia’s dream of “world power status” could only be realized, “if at all, only in the distant future.” Economic growth in Russia is behind that of Ukraine and Belarus, and the “dilettantish” cutbacks to social services recently provoked massive protests and a governmental crisis.

The article went on: “In the coming decades the security policies and economic interests of the EU will move even further toward Eurasia. The Black Sea could become transformed into a semi-enclosed sea within the EU. The post-Soviet regions will lose their political and historical significance. The Caspian Sea region will either be merged into an Eastern Europe or become part of the Middle East.”

The Russian elite would then have two possible options in the face of this development. The first would be “a confrontational stand against the West,” to secure the CIS federation. The article alerts to numerous indications of closer cooperation between Russia and China and India that should be a source of “uneasiness” for the West. In this case, the EU would be forced into a policy of containing Russian influence and intervening into local ethnic-territorial conflicts like those in Moldova and the South Caucasus.

The second option would be holding on to the “opening to the West.” “The German-Russian friendship” forms “the basis for the second option.” This would mean pushing issues such as human rights and demands for more democracy into the background—a clear blow to the United States, which uses such demands to place pressure on the Russian government. “To wait decades for Russia to implement a liberal model to proceed with a partnership with Moscow would be a waste of precious time in the development of a stable Europe,” explained the *GUS-Barometer*.

The “agreement of interests” must be placed at the forefront: “Russian oil and gas should not be used as an instrument by Moscow for its own great power ambitions, but rather should be put to use as strategic resources for the international status of all of Europe.”

However many times the words “democracy” and “freedom” were used during Yuchenko’s visit, the actual content of these words had little to do with the policies being pursued in both Ukraine and Russia—policies that are driven by an intense struggle for control over markets and resources, at the expense of working people in all the countries involved.



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