

FOOD-FOR-THOUGHT

Inter-regional Workshop on the Regional Security and Confidence Building *Kiev, Ukraine, 28-30 October 2009*

*Sergiy Gerasymchuk, International Programs Director, Strategic and Security Studies Group;
Advisor, Scientific Expert Council, Parliamentary European Integration Committee, Ukraine*

1. Introduction

The enhancement of regional cooperation in the target regions and follow-up project can be based upon most burning issues within the field of soft/societal security also the threats of hard security cannot be ignored as well.

From the perspective of soft security we should consider the fact that the vulnerability of Ukraine to the range of societal security problems is determined by a number of fundamental parameters out of which the following deserve for special attention:

- social and economic aspects (including corruption as one of the roots of the problem), in particular connected with inequality in development of the regions and the practice of artificial urbanization inherited from the Soviet times through creation of mono-industrial cities;
- Russian minority issue (subsequently the language issue), the most fundamental component because of the existence of the large segment of the Russian-speaking population;

The external aspect of societal security in Ukraine – the factor of Russia that has the most powerful influence and dominates in the energy sector deserves particular attention; also the factor relevant within our project and connected with the proclamation of Kosovo's independence and possible consequences of this event for Ukraine.

2. Overview

2.1. Societal Security Threats

The regional diversity of Ukraine has evident social implications. Some of them can be considered as providing grounds for social tensions. Economic disparities determine frustration of those who feel themselves poorer than others (in a regional dimension), as well as of those supposed to be much richer due to the well-rooted stereotype according to which “the poorer regions live at the expense of the rich ones”. The latter kind of feeling is obviously present in the industrial Eastern regions of Ukraine.

Some specific features related to the socio-economic structure should be considered. Mono-industrial cities in the East have inherited their social composition from the Soviet period: some of them are still structured around one large enterprise, which substantially limits local labor markets and restrains social mobility.

Disparities in the socio-economic development of Ukraine's regions are caused by long-standing deficiencies in the key factors of competitiveness – Soviet legacy, lack of reforms, poor infrastructure, maladjustment of workers to the market conditions, insufficient support for business, and inadequate innovative capacity of enterprises, degrading environment and resultant low investment attractiveness of territories.

Structural imbalances remain the most sensitive point of Ukraine's economy. Its deformation, high energy and capital intensity of production were inherited from the previous administrative system. Over the years of reforms, the situation did not improve. Regional asymmetry in investments in fixed assets is growing. Thirty percent of all foreign direct investments stay in the capital city.

The development of the human potential of Ukraine's regions is affected by the difficult situation on the labor market, the low accessibility and poor quality of social services and education, low personal incomes and consumption, spread of poverty, etc. Economic and social factors brought to light problems such as unemployment, spread of illegal employment, and impairment of the national intellectual and educational potential, striking stratification of the population by the level of incomes.

The state regional policy in Ukraine pursues solutions of the key problems, including low investment attractiveness and innovative activity of regions; undeveloped physical and social infrastructure; growth of regional disparities in the socio-economic development; weak inter-regional ties; irrational employment of the human potential.

The problem is deeper due to the problem of corruption. Usually experts define corruption as one of the major threats to Ukraine national security and a reason for country's poverty. There are no genuine consolidated efforts aimed at combating this phenomenon. The measures taken against corruption by some ministries and central executive agencies are uncoordinated and cannot influence the situation in the counter as a whole. The high level of corruption in the country is supplemented by the lack of transparency and accountability in the state authorities, the pervasive permitting and regulation system, the low level of protection of the ownership rights. Regrettably the parliament of Ukraine did not manage to adopt a number of important anti-corruption laws due to the blocking activities and lobbyism.

2.2. Potential hard security threats

Regarding hard security field and considering the Soviet heritage in the field of democratic control there are some dangerous trends observed regarding politicization of the activities of some law enforcement agencies, which are used as tools in the political struggle (Interior Forces of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Ukraine, the Security Service of Ukraine, the Prosecutor General Office). Civil democratic control over the security sector requires further improvement. Mechanisms of the parliamentary control are also mainly politicized, while the opinions of provisional special commission have not infrequently become tools in the political competition. The most recent example was totally politicized functioning of the parliamentary commission which was investigating the supplies of military equipment to Georgia.

The above-mentioned problem is closely linked to the very existence of frozen conflicts problem. The activities related to the settlement of frozen conflicts were to a great extent hampered by the exacerbation of the frozen conflicts in the Caucasus, which culminated in the August 2008 war between Russia and Georgia and the subsequent recognition of self-proclaimed independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia by Russia. This destroyed the international consensus on the territorial integrity of Georgia. The military presence in secessionist regions as well as in Transdnistria causes even more complications since it marks the whole GUAM region as the one deeply affected by Russian post imperial ambition.

3. Case Studies

3.1. Russia case

Despite relatively positive perception of Russia and Russians by the Ukrainian society (according to the results of numerous reliable public opinion polls), the transition paths of the two countries demonstrate the development differences which cause tensions existing at different levels of political elite, government and society. The turning point might be identified with a period preceding, coinciding with, and following the events of 2004.

Mounting societal concerns are visible in several areas. First of all, the very nature of the two countries' relationship – immediately after they became independent sovereign states – have been marred by Russia's inability to treat Ukraine as an equal partner rather than a former Soviet Republic. Accelerating race of statements issued by high-level Russian officials has become especially evident during Ukraine's attempts to get the Membership Action Plan (MAP) at the Bucharest NATO summit, when even president Putin resorted to comments unacceptable in view of dealing with a sovereign country that, paradoxically, was named, until recently, a "strategic partner". Ukraine's sovereign right to define its own future, seeking a membership in this or that alliance is perceived in Russia as a kind of "treason", which has become evident during Putin's speech to the NATO-Russia Council.

Next, major societal concerns relate to energy issues, where the assertive positions of Russian authorities and state-controlled monopoly "Gazprom" are often perceived as a tool to "punish" Ukraine for its course towards European and, especially, Euro-Atlantic integration (instead of accepting integration to Russia-dominated structures: e.g. Single Economic Space). It should be admitted that Ukraine took measures focused on the improvement of the energy efficiency; however the technological upgrades of facilities in energy sector are relatively sluggish. Besides that Ukraine lost its chance to join Nabucco project and used to be quite passive in respect to the White Stream project suggested by an international engineering consortium.

The issue of concern which can potentially turn into hard security threat for the Wider Black Sea region is the problem of the future of the Russian Black Sea Fleet, which would remain in Ukrainian bases, according to bilateral agreements, until 2017. Russia pays for it a very low rent: \$100 million per year; moreover, the fleet illegally occupies numerous land infrastructures, including lighthouses, and some land plots are used for commercial purposes. The Black Sea Fleet's personnel takes part in anti-NATO and anti-American protests, and sometimes conducts naval troop exercises without proper official notification of the Ukrainian authorities. Moreover, obvious Russian unwillingness to withdraw from Sevastopol in 2017 causes concerns.

The recently voiced Ukraine's intentions to observe the bilateral treaties and not to prolong the presence of Russia's military forces on its territory aggravated the accumulated tensions, in particular, by Russia's "blackmailing" Ukraine, using energy and prices for its supplies as a political tool instead of trying to properly negotiate the issue.

"Humanitarian" issues, in fact purely identity ones – like language, Church, and history – are also marked by deepening misunderstandings between the governments and societies of the two neighboring states.

It looks like Ukrainian elites and public at large are deeply worried by the prospect of the relations between Ukraine and Russia continuing to deteriorate, and regard these developments as detrimental for the societies of both countries.

3.2. Kosovo case

On February 17, 2008 Kosovo declared officially its independence from Serbia. The very next day, on February 18, 2008 the United States and several major European countries recognized Kosovo as an independent state, while the Russian Federation claimed that Western recognition of Kosovo's secession, without UN approval and lacking Belgrade's acquiescence, constituted the "precedent" for the recognition of the post-Soviet secessions. The United States, European Union, and other Western states responded by stressing that Kosovo is a unique combination of factors requiring this particular solution, and hence is inapplicable as a "precedent" elsewhere.

Although the influence of the decision on Kosovo and aforementioned debates were not influencing the level of societal security in Ukraine directly, its latent but multifaceted impact is worth attention, since it raised public interest towards a number of realistic or imagined threats. It is obvious that, currently, recognition is not on the "top priority list" of the Ukrainian political elite, nor does it cause any direct threat to societal security of Ukraine. However, using the "Kosovo case" as an indicator, or rather as a tool, to assess the potential or imagined threats is worth attention.

The absence of an official UN reaction, complemented by rather controversial positions of the world's major players, resulted in the mixed position of the Ukrainian political elite as well. For the time being, there is no decision on Kosovo. On the one hand Ukraine is interested in following the positions of the EU and the United States. On the other hand, because of a number of political and legal reasons, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the country's political leadership are not ready to define the official position yet. The existing uncertainty at both national and international levels leads to different speculations which can not only complicate the situation, but also result in a lower level of security.

The very process of developing Ukraine's decision on Kosovo independence is affected by political speculations rooted in the internal politics and even deeper, i.e., in geopolitics. If Ukraine supports the idea of Kosovo independence, the state's leadership is to be criticised by the number of political parties of pro-Russian orientation.

Moreover, the Party of Regions is also using the Kosovo issue as a media hook, linking it with the NATO integration issue. The Party of Regions leaders presume that the issue of Kosovo recognition, as well as that of NATO integration, inevitably lead to dividing Ukraine into Western and Eastern parts. Specifically, should the Ukrainian authorities support Kosovo independence, they will do it in favour of pro-Western part of society, whereas if they refrained from doing so, such a decision will be deemed to be in favour of the Eastern Ukrainians. Therefore, purely international politics are being used to raise the tensions within the Ukrainian society by raising the problem of two separate Ukrainian nations. Certainly, Kosovo is only one among the variety of artificial division lines, however if the media interest to the issue keeps high, the recognition of Kosovo will be interpreted more or less within the above-mentioned dangerous political context.

Besides that, the recognition of Kosovo independence not only stimulated the debates on the two separate parts of the Ukrainian state but also on the separatist regions which potentially might follow Kosovo's example. In this regard, Crimea and Transcarpathia are mentioned most often. The similarities in Kosovo and Crimea issues are rooted in the autonomous status both regions have (or used to have in case of Kosovo).

The interesting fact is that while speaking about possible separatist movements in Crimea, mostly pro-Russian parties and organizations are mentioned. However, the Kosovo case provided the floor for a different type of concerns. The indigenous people of Crimea – Crimean Tatars – have already expressed their support for Kosovo independence, emphasizing that such decision is rooted in their pro-Western orientation. Therefore, the pro-Russian movements in Crimea favour denying recognition to Kosovo, yet are willing to benefit from the outcomes of this “precedent”. On the contrary, Crimean Tatars support Kosovo’s independence, although stressing that it is a unique case which cannot be applied as a precedent elsewhere.

Regrettably, the aforementioned circumstances can be the factor jeopardizing societal security on the Crimean Peninsula and leading to tensions between the mentioned groups, which will be grounded not so much on the attitude towards the Kosovo precedent but rather on the perceptions about its relevance for Ukraine. Moreover, rather sharp invectives expressed by the Crimean Tatars’ leadership, who criticize the Ukrainian authorities for their impotence in the issues of the efficient ethnopolitics are drawing the experts’ and state leaders’ attention towards the unstable situation in Crimea. Since the representatives of pro-Russian parties and movements already perceive the Crimean Tatars as being the obstacle in their scenarios, they can use both recent statements of the Crimean Tatars and the Mejlis positive attitude towards Kosovo separatists in order to present Crimean Tatars as the potential threat and to shape a distorted perception of this nation in Ukraine. Moreover, there is no evidence that such imagined potential threat would not become a reality in case of the elites’ rotation in the Mejlis.

Another issue of concern which cannot be underestimated regarding the Crimean peninsula is the fact that artificial similarities between Kosovars and Crimean Tatars can be based on their belonging to the Muslim communities. This coincidence, as well as the Crimean Tatars’ attitude towards Kosovo recognition might be further used by those interested in lower security on the peninsula, in particular by stimulating Islamophobia. On the one hand, this will increase intolerance toward indigenous people of Crimea, and on the other hand it will strengthen the positions of the radical wings of the Crimean elites.

The situation is less evident in Transcarpathia. Due to the fact that Transcarpathian region is not bordering Russia, the level of pro-Russian propaganda there is much lower than in Crimea. However, the regular separatist statements of Transcarpathian Rusyns are worth attention from the perspective of security level and within the context of Ukraine’s relations with the countries of V4 which do recognize Rusyns as a separate ethnic group.

It is not a secret that from the very beginning of the re-appearance of the Rusyn question in the then Soviet Ukraine in the late 1980s, their movement for emancipation became heavily politicized. The main issue at stake has not been the ethno-cultural identity of Rusyns as a separate sector of the Transcarpathian population, but, rather, the so-called “Political Ruthenianism” perceived as a potential threat to the territorial integrity of Ukraine in the early ‘90s because of its close connection with the recent policy of neo-Eurasian domination pursued by the Kremlin.

We should also take into consideration that this movement has been created and supported by a number of Russian politicians and enjoys great support and attention from some notorious movements and organizations from abroad – nowadays, for example, from “Proryv” (an extremist “International Youth Corporation” initiated by the security services of the Republic of Moldova’s separatist region – Transdnistria).

The fact of the recognition of Rusyns as a separate ethnic group in some of the EU states provides Ruthenian movement leaders with additional arguments in their claims for recognising the Ruthenians as an ethnos separate from the bulk of Ukrainians. Regrettably, the leaders of the mentioned states underestimate the “esprit d’aventure” of Rusyn movement and the threats which are arising following the independence of Kosovo.

Summarizing all the mentioned circumstances, one cannot deny that whatever Kyiv decision is regarding Kosovo independence will be, the outcomes might be the following:

- speculations over the legitimacy and applicability of Kosovo precedent in Crimea and Transcarpathia;
- raising tensions among the population of the Crimean peninsula;
- raising Islamophobia;
- using the differences in attitude towards Kosovo as the argumentation for questioning the unity of the Ukrainian nation and further political speculations.

All these outcomes can be perceived as threats to societal security which might convert into hard security threats later on.

4. Possible fields for cooperation.

As one might conclude from the above notes, Ukraine faces a number of challenging problems which are typical for GUAM region as a whole. Some of the mentioned problems have been successfully resolved in V4 region. Therefore, sharing V4 experience may be of added value especially in the fields which are perceived as success stories of V4 states and can provide GUAM states with the samples of best practices.

First and foremost cooperation is possible in the field of joint initiatives aimed at combating corruption. The experience of V4 will be beneficial for all parties of the project since it is widely spread opinion that not only GUAM but also Western Balkans who face the problem of corruption. Regarding the security dimension of the problem it seems to be relevant to share the experience of fighting corruption with a special emphasize on the issue of building up transparency in the field of arms control, civil control over security sector etc.

Another important field for fruitful cooperation is the field of “frozen conflicts”. Actually, GUAM countries as well as Western Balkans faced a number of conflicts based either on ethnic tensions or/and inspired from abroad. At the same time V4 states managed not only to avoid such conflicts but also to join the EU and NATO which indicates their strategic partnership in a long term perspective. It might be beneficial to focus on the best practices of V4 cooperation. However, sharing the experience on building up confidence by other countries of the project might be of interest as well (e.g. Poland – Ukraine, Georgia – Ukraine). At the same the lessons learned from current tensions in Slovakia – Hungary relations deserves for attention as well.

Another important outcome of the project might be the attempt to develop confidence-building concept in relations of V4 and GUAM with Russia. Although it might be a sensitive issue for the discussion, “an elephant is in the room”.

Common efforts of V4 and GUAM aimed at demilitarization of Wider Black Sea region and confidence building in the region also is worth discussion. Joint military trainings are not the best decision. Nothing better has been developed yet. It might be a task for the project participants to contribute in this field.

Finally, the project might be a contribution into defining the model of relations with Kosovo which have not been recognized by any of GUAM states.