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Ukraine's Nuclear Nostalgia

Mykola Riabchuk

KIEV—In 1994, after three years of procrastination, Ukraine abandoned its nuclear weapons, joining in this adventure the post-Soviet states of Kazakhstan and Belarus. The denuclearization of Ukraine was the first such instance in history, and was achieved voluntarily through negotiation and diplomacy. Ukraine's action and that of its post-Soviet counterparts set an important precedent. Today, 15 years later, many Ukrainians, especially their politicians, like to praise the country as an exemplary case of nuclear disarmament, sheer humanitarian goodwill, and compliance with international norms and obligations. Yet, at the same time, many of them express a bitter resentment about the consequences of that step, and question—in various aspects and to different degrees—the ultimate expediency of the deal.

Ukraine still retains the technological and economic ability to produce and deploy nuclear arms. In what is termed a "threshold country," a number of important questions remain. Indeed, the concept of a nuclear-armed Ukraine is once again part of the public discourse in Kiev and across the nation. More than half the population suddenly now backs such a concept, which has become reinvigorated by last year's war between Russia and Georgia, and especially the West's flaccid response. So, while much of the world seems focused on a dangerously nuclear-armed North Korea or nuclearized Iran, ignoring the potential of a renuclearized Ukraine could ultimately prove even more dangerous and destabilizing. How strong and widespread is the resentment toward Ukraine's disarmament? How easily and under what circumstances might this resentment be translated into the practical politics of nuclear arms reacquisition? And how may we avoid worst-case scenarios and promote more positive developments?

Ukraine was effectively born nuclear. Its history as a nuclear state began with independence. In 1991, when the Soviet Union suddenly and dramatically collapsed, the country inherited 15 percent of the Soviet nuclear stockpile: some 130 liquid-fuel SS-19 missiles, each with six nuclear warheads; 46 solid-fuel SS-24 missiles, each with ten warheads; and 44 Tupolev-95 and Tupolev-160 strategic bombers, with a total of 1,081 nuclear cruise missiles. Before it even had a constitution of its own, Ukraine possessed the third-largest nuclear arsenal in the world.

This newfound largesse, however, was more a liability than an asset. All technical control over the weapons (primarily electronic codes) remained in Moscow's hands,

enabling, in principle, the launch of "Ukrainian" missiles by an enemy power—thus making Ukraine the unwitting object of retaliation. Beyond this nightmare scenario, Ukraine faced a serious problem in caring for the missiles housed in its territory, particularly the SS-24s, as there was little indigenous competence for maintaining solid-fuel missiles. Throughout their history in Ukraine, nuclear weapons were cared for, guarded by, and armed by Russian military and KGB officers. And considerable maintenance was required. By the winter of 1997–98, the SS-24s would have decayed to the point where they would have been no longer be serviceable, turning them into a stockpile of extremely dangerous scrap metal and radioactive material. Each of the 460 warheads had a yield of 440 kilotons, 22 times more powerful than the bombs dropped at Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

On the political front, the situation was not much better. Since the 1970s, when the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) came into force, the international environment for any state daring to join the nuclear club had become most uncomfortable, even more so for Ukraine. Though a nation with an unquestioned international legitimacy, it was challenged by Russia on one side and neglected by the West on the other. On the Russian side, there was a clear attempt to undermine Ukraine's independence by representing it as a "temporary phenomenon," a "seasonal state," a barely viable brainchild of local communists and nationalists with little if any popular support. On the Western side, there was also a great readiness to accept this view—since no other image of Ukraine had ever existed on mental maps of Westerners (with some minor exceptions). Indeed, Ukraine was a "nowhere nation," or a "nasty Ukraine," as the *New York Review of Books* reported on its cover. For most Western politicians who bet initially on Gorbachev, the reformer, and later on Yeltsin, the democrat, Ukraine was merely a nuisance, an "unwanted step-child of Soviet perestroika," as Martin Sieff of the *Washington Times* sniffed.

With such sketchy credentials, it would have been suicidal to strive for an independent nuclear status—though, from a legal point of view, Ukraine was as much a successor of the former Soviet Union as Russia or any other post-Soviet republic. This meant that Ukraine was a legitimate owner of all the property on its territory, and the holder of some 18 percent of Soviet debts and assets abroad. Formally, Ukraine (as well as Belarus) was a founding member of the United Nations—at the insistence of Stalin no less, who could hardly have predicted that this pure formality would greatly facilitate Ukraine's emancipation drive and its international recognition four decades in the future. Ironically, in early 1990, Ukraine was not allowed to accede to the NPT as a non-nuclear state since it was still considered a part of the U.S.S.R. rather than a sovereign entity. Two years later, when Ukraine became sovereign—not only de jure but also de facto—its intention to accede became even more complex.

The problem arose primarily from Ukraine's ambivalent attitude toward its quasi-nuclear status and its process of denuclearization. Nobody denied that Ukraine should and would give up its nuclear weapons and join the NPT. But the threat of Russia still loomed large, and the country insisted that specific conditions on compensation and security guarantees first be met. This turned out to be a major irritant for the West, but the Ukrainian position was not merely a new negotiating tactic. It reflected in part Ukraine's ambiguous legal status within the Soviet quasi-federation—neither a colony nor a sovereign state. Even more important, the ambiguity regarding the nuclear issue spoke of Ukraine's internal uncertainty about its identity, international

Chernobyl: a nuclear horror that continues to haunt.

role, and the policies it should pursue both domestically and globally. This resulted in mixed signals sent by Ukrainian politicians, incoherent decisions adopted by legislators, and confusing, often opportunistic policies on disarmament pursued by the executive branch.

Dysfunctional institutions, legal chaos, and mounting economic problems only contributed to the confusion, while protracted disputes with Russia over the future of the entire Community of Independent States (CIS), internal borders, and deployment of Soviet military forces (especially the Black Sea fleet) further exacerbated matters. The West's ambivalent stance toward Kiev only intensified the problem. Was Ukraine a viable state? Could it truly adopt democratic institutions? Throughout the early 1990s, the predominant view in the West—both among politicians and in the media-cum-public opinion—was that a firmly pro-Western and democratic Russia would rightly head a confederation of all the former Soviet republics, except the Baltics. The outbreak of the fratricidal Yugoslav war had made Westerners understandably nervous about similar developments in Ukraine and strengthened their desire to disarm "nationalistic" Kiev as soon as possible, regardless of any attendant security and economic concerns.

The first alarm bell rang immediately after Ukraine declared independence on August 24, 1991, in the aftermath of the failed anti-Gorbachev coup in Moscow. Yeltsin's press secretary reacted to Ukraine's declaration by implying that Russia might reconsider its borders with Ukraine and reclaim its predominantly Russian-speaking

southern and eastern territories should Kiev decide to secede. The war of words and decrees only escalated—until the May 21, 1992, resolution of the Russian parliament that deemed the 1954 transfer of the Crimea from Russia to Ukraine illegitimate. In many cases, the legal situation was poorly defined or contradictory, and both parties had tried to use the uncertainty to their advantage, attempting to impose unilaterally a *fait accompli* upon the other. The competition over disputed military units, equipment, and facilities was especially dangerous. The issue screamed for international mediation, but not until May 1992 did the United States under President George H. W. Bush agree to facilitate talks between Moscow and Kiev on the terms and conditions of the transfer of nuclear weapons from Ukrainian territory to Russia.

Washington's involvement was justified not only by its prominent role as a leading promoter and guarantor of the NPT, but also by the substantial financial aid the Cooperative Threat Reduction Program (informally known as the Nunn-Lugar program after the two senators who authored the 1992 legislation) had provided the post-Soviet states, primarily Russia, to facilitate the destruction of weapons of mass destruction and associated infrastructure. An additional $175 million was promised to Ukraine for the program in October 1992.

Disarmed by Default

Ukraine, in fact, had never intended to appropriate the Soviet nuclear arsenal on its territory or become a nuclear state—though the contrary had been broadly reported in Russian and Western media. Since the 1986 disaster at the Chernobyl nuclear power station (on Ukrainian soil), anti-nuclear attitudes across the country remained powerfully embedded in society. Indeed, much of the Ukrainian national liberation and democracy movement used Chernobyl as an anti-Soviet rallying cry against the sinister, imperial Kremlin. In July 1990, the Ukrainian parliament adopted a Declaration of Sovereignty that expressed the nation's desire to "become a neutral state that does not participate in military blocks and that adheres to three non-nuclear principles: not to maintain, produce, or acquire nuclear weapons." Of course, at the time, Ukraine still was a part of the Soviet Union, and the declared principles were mere rhetoric. Within a year, however, Ukraine won its independence. The clause on neutrality was quietly dropped and never repeated in any official document—replaced by a move toward Euro-Atlantic integration and membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Union. Yet adherence to the three non-nuclear principles was repeatedly affirmed as declarations of intent—establishing a legal framework and introducing a political discourse in line with international standards. No Ukrainian leader, no matter what his or her individual political view—parochial or immature, nationalistic or populist—could help but understand that possession of nuclear arms in the global environment of the day would not elevate Ukraine to the level of France, England, or China, but rather risked placing the nation among rogue states such as North Korea, Iran, or Saddam Hussein's Iraq.

From the very beginning, Ukraine objected to the conditions and terms of disarmament, rather than to disarmament per se. Ukraine's demands were two-fold: first, it required security guarantees from the declared nuclear states; and second, it insisted on technical assistance and financial compensation for the costs incurred in transferring radioactive fuel and other materials to Russia. Both demands were quite reasonable, though the form of guarantees and amount of compensation were subject to negotiation.

But post-independence euphoria gave way to a gloomier reality. Economic decline and growing Russian assertiveness quickly took hold. Though public opinion had been predominantly anti-nuclear before the country's independence, the mood increasingly shifted toward some form of nostalgia for nuclear status. Support for a Ukrainian nuclear program doubled from 18 percent in May 1992 to 36 percent in March 1993. By the summer of 1993, fully 45 percent of Ukrainians wanted to retain the nuclear deterrent.

Ukrainian politicians, primarily in the parliament, encouraged the swing in popular opinion by criticizing President Leonid Kravchuk for the unconditional renunciation and removal of tactical nuclear arms by May 1992. Some went so far as to accuse the president of betraying national interests. On May 23, 1992, Ukraine (along with Belarus and Kazakhstan) signed the Lisbon Protocol to the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START I), originally ratified by Washington and Moscow a year earlier, only five months before the Soviet collapse. The protocol's aim was to ensure the denuclearization of the three former Soviet republics by ensuring the return of nuclear warheads to Russia. It also sought NPT accession for Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Ukraine as non-nuclear states by 1998.

In a defiant move, however, the Ukrainian parliament refused to ratify the document without reservations, demanding security guarantees and compensation from Russia and the United States. Under populist pressure, President Kravchuk took an ambiguous, largely opportunistic stance on the issue. Internationally, he adopted a role of "good cop," that of a pacifist anti-nuclear proponent who wanted nothing more than to have Soviet missiles leave Ukrainian soil. At home, however, he allowed the parliament to play "bad cop," refusing to relinquish the missiles without security assurances and compensation. Later, in his 2002 memoirs, he admitted that his actions carried more than a touch of cynicism:

> But what else could I do? Altruism is unaffordable in great politics. Neither along the Potomac nor the Moscow River have I ever seen anybody who wished voluntarily to take care of Ukraine.... Russia wanted to get [its] nukes without any compensation. And the United States—the only geopolitical power that was able to influence Moscow—tried not to interfere in our quarrels, in order to spare uneasy relations with their strategic rival from further deterioration. So, how was it possible to get real economic dividends in those complex political circumstances? After some musing, I got it. One should make the Kremlin a bit nervous and the White House alarmed. How could that be done? Very simply. Just do not hinder those who defend vociferously Ukraine's nuclear status.

"Post-independence euphoria gave way to a gloomier reality: economic decline and growing Russian assertiveness."

Parochial, Yet Provincial

The disarmament issue remained deadlocked for a year and a half, causing considerable fuss on all sides. Kiev, ever wary of its big brother to the north, was concerned with Moscow's increasing belligerence and

repeated warnings to Ukraine that, if it pursued an independent course, reprisals would be forthcoming. To drive home the message, Russia closed the spigots on gas exports to Ukraine in the winter of 1992. Parliamentarians in Kiev began to see their inherited nuclear arsenal as a useful bargaining chip, and held out for security and economic assurances from the West. Meanwhile, the Kremlin took full advantage of Kiev's intransigence to portray the leadership of its former satellite as ugly nationalists intent on retaining a nuclear arsenal. Only when the Clinton administration took office did diplomatic efforts intensify, taking a more even-handed, less Moscow-oriented approach. Eventually, Ukrainians were offered some carrots besides the traditional sticks, breaking the standstill. In October 1993, in Kiev, Secretary of State Warren Christopher and his Ukrainian counterpart, Anatoliy Zlenko, signed an agreement providing American aid for Ukraine in exchange for the destruction of nuclear weapons and extensive weapons of mass destruction (WMD) non-proliferation measures. Finally, in January 1994, Ukraine signed the Trilateral Statement with Russia and the United States. The agreement set in motion Ukraine's disarmament by providing security guarantees from nuclear states and adequate compensation for nuclear materials transferred to Russia.

These guarantees, in a somewhat vague and non-obligatory form, were finally endorsed in December at the Budapest summit of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), following the Ukrainian parliament's ratification of the nation's accession to the NPT as a non-nuclear state. By May 31, 1996, the last nuclear warhead was removed from Ukraine. On October 30, 2001, the last launch tube for a transcontinental SS-24 missile was shuttered in the southern Ukrainian town of Pervomaysk.

Still, Ukraine's claimed compensation of an estimated $520 million proved to be unsatisfactory, and went, for the most part, to American companies and advisors. Moreover, the political, if not the judicial, character of the memorandum signed in Budapest failed to provide any real security guarantees to Ukraine. Indeed, as proponents of a re-armed Ukraine point out, all the nuclear states ever promised in the memorandum was "to refrain from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of Ukraine, and that none of their weapons will ever be used against Ukraine except in self-defense or otherwise in accordance with the Charter of the United Nations." They also agreed to refrain from use of any economic coercion against Ukraine. But these "assurances" only guarantee that military or economic coercion would not be used against Ukraine by the West. What about defending Ukraine against attack? In such a case, the nuclear states would simply "seek immediate United Nations Security Council action to provide assistance." Not much comfort there. In fact, the memorandum contains no security guarantees that go beyond the feckless mechanisms of the UN Charter and the NPT. Moreover, Russia's veto power allows it to block any decision within the Security Council, meaning that the practical weight of the memorandum is close to nil.

There remains a deep inferiority complex within Ukraine based on the pain of being sidelined and marginalized by the West in lieu of Russia, which still dominates policy toward the region. Today, dissatisfaction still reigns among Ukrainian politicians and the population at large.

Nuclear Nostalgia

For the average Ukrainian, there is a profound gap between their low international status of post-Soviet losers and rather high

self-image of a large and venerable European nation. On one hand, they are aware of their medieval Kievan Rus and Cossack heritage; of substantial natural, agricultural, industrial, and human resources. On the other hand, they cannot but feel institutionally excluded from Europe's visa-free space of liberty and prosperity, and callously shoved back into the murky Eurasian corner known as "Russia's backyard." Thus Ukrainians have come simultaneously to envy and resent the West, which they widely believe has misunderstood and underestimated them. Moreover, many Ukrainians feel betrayed by what they perceive as Europe's cynical deals with Russia at their expense.

This sentiment can be found virtually everywhere—from top politicians and leading intellectuals to common folk, who care little about details of nuclear swaps, but who say with certainty that it was "stupid Kravchuk who gave away our nukes for nothing." Even the Western-leaning president, Viktor Yushchenko, admitted during a 2005 visit to Japan that, on one hand, "I feel like millions of the people who are happy to be far away from this danger. On the other hand, have we done everything under those circumstances coherently, comprehensively, in a well-coordinated manner? I am not quite sure. I feel Ukraine's step still is not properly appreciated, and this brings me some discontent."

In 2007, one of Yushchenko's former political and ideological rivals, Raisa Bogatyrova, expressed essentially the same resentment, albeit in much more aggressive and overtly anti-Western form: "It would be fair to say that had we not renounced our nuclear weapon in 1993, we would have already become an associated member of the G-7, without any humiliating bowing to the EU and NATO." she said. "Maybe, among other options, we should consider re-acquisition of our own nuclear arms and, to this end, conduct a referendum. International reaction to this decision would hardly be favorable for Ukraine. But we understand perfectly that the international community has not fulfilled its obligations to compensate our de-nuclearization expenditures. The shutdown of the Chernobyl atomic power station was left practically to us alone. Assurances we got from Europe, the U.S. and Russia were provisional, and they evaporated. Why, then, should we follow unwritten rules?"

> "There remains a deep inferiority complex within Ukraine, of being sidelined by the West."

Bogatyrova's remarks reveal the flagrant and depressing provincialism of Ukraine's post-Soviet elite—in both their infantile vision of contemporary world and feeble imitation of a crude, Russian-style nativist and anti-Western rhetoric, with all its xenophobic and paranoid arguments. What is rather interesting in all this is the attempt to introduce a Kiev-centric vision of a besieged fortress and to distance the nation from Moscow, though some traditional curtsies are made in that direction. The West remains the most perfidious "other." There has been, nonetheless, an important shift in the ideology of the major Ukrainian party that has been traditionally considered pro-Russian.

Since the resentment over Ukraine's denuclearization derives from a national inferiority complex, it might be of little surprise that both pro-Russian and pro-Western Ukrainian politicians (and the respective parts of society each side represents) are equally susceptible to this feeling. The

main difference between the two groups appears in the tone of the rhetoric. While the pro-Moscow camp expresses primarily economic dissatisfaction about the deal, observing that Westerners "haven't given us due compensation," the pro-West camp expresses primarily security concerns, observing that "they left us defenseless against Russia." Some differences can be discerned within each group, but in the end, Ukrainians seem to be rather unanimous in their negative attitude toward their own nuclear disarmament, or more precisely, in their dissatisfaction about how it was handled and the benefits it has brought.

Tuzla as a Touchstone

So far, however, there is no realistic danger that these resentments could translate into practical actions toward renuclearization. Even Bogatyrova put aside her flamboyant rhetoric once she was appointed to the president's National Security and Defense Council. Still, the perceived sense of injustice remains harmful. It distorts reality, distracts Ukrainian society from real security and economic problems, slows much-needed reforms, and supports, paradoxically, societal divisions that prevent the country's integration into NATO—the only viable solution for Ukraine's security problems. Meanwhile, Ukraine remains a "latent nuclear state," possessing both the technical and economic capacity to produce and deploy nuclear weapons.

Volodymyr Horbulin, a former secretary of the National Security and Defense Council and close associate of former President Leonid Kuchma (1994–2005) from the days both worked at the Yuzhmash missile factory in the 1980s, estimates that Ukraine could produce its own full-fledged nuclear weapon within five years if the government were to invest roughly $500 million in the program. He also notes that there is a simpler path. Tasking a small nuclear reactor to produce plutonium-239 and processing it into a bomb at a radio-chemical plant would cost only a few tens of millions of dollars. Yet as a competent specialist and responsible politician, Horbulin recognizes that such a move would be harmful to the country—not only in terms of negative international repercussions, but also by exhausting scarce resources while distracting from real challenges. Today, military invasion is a far smaller threat than structural weakness, institutional dysfunctionality, and political and economic backwardness. Horbulin suggests that national security could be enhanced in the short term simply by modernizing the country's stock of conventional arms. More effective, but taking far longer, are large-scale political, economic, and legal reforms that would make Ukraine fully eligible for NATO and EU membership.

Few beyond the extreme right and left reject this view, but some ambiguity remains in both political discourse and popular mood. Ukrainians are not politically mobilized on the issue of acquiring nuclear arms, yet they occasionally regret that nuclear weapons were surrendered. This is a discrepancy between the rational and emotional, between the reasonable recognition of objective international and domestic constraints and the feelings and displays of insecurity from abroad.

Two major factors fuel these Janus-like sentiments. First is a growing Russian aggressiveness that culminated last year in the military annexation of the Georgian territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia—an offensive action that was effectively accepted by the European Union and NATO. Second is a persistent tendency of the West to apply double standards when it comes to the relative strategic importance of allies and interests—placing access to oil and gas ahead of presumably universal values such as human rights and civic liberties. This double standard was particularly noticeable

in the different treatment accorded Ukraine versus the Balkan states of Albania, Macedonia, and Bosnia-Herzegovina, which had not performed any better than Ukraine, either politically or economically, but received a much more favorable response from the EU and NATO to their membership requests.

Even before last year's Russia-Georgia war, there was a minor incident in November 2003 at the small Ukrainian island of Tuzla in the Kerch Strait, which links the Black Sea to the Sea of Azov and borders Russia and Ukraine. Moscow was said to have authorized the construction of a dam, which would have exposed a spit of land, making the island a peninsula and thus part of Russia once more. It is not quite clear whether the Kremlin really expected to complete such a project or intended merely to probe Ukrainian vigilance and international reaction. Some conspiracy theorists suggest that it was merely a ruse commissioned by Ukraine's Russia-leaning president, Leonid Kuchma, to demonstrate his indispensability in negotiating with Moscow. (He was in Latin America when the news hit the streets and rushed back home, eventually settling the matter in a personal conversation with Vladimir Putin.)

Whatever the intention, the incident provoked enormous outrage in Ukraine against Russia's nefarious intentions. The Kremlin, for its part, merely said it was attending to the rights of some "17 million Russians in Ukraine" (a figure Putin has reiterated many times, deliberately doubling the actual number of 7.8 million) while claiming an even greater number of Russophones who are allegedly discriminated against and dream only of re-unification with Mother Russia. No opinion poll, however, reveals any serious drive for secession or independence in Ukrainian regions. The most fervent secessionist mood came in December 2004—at the height of the "Orange Revolution" that brought to power Victor Yushchenko's West-leaning democratic government—in the Crimea. But even there, only 8.1 percent of respondents supported the seccession option. Remarkably, Russian speakers express virtually the same attachment to their country as the Ukrainian population in general: 86 percent of them consider Ukraine to be their fatherland (the national average is 88 percent) and 72 percent say that they are Ukrainian patriots (the national average is 75 percent). Thus, it would be fair to say that Russophones may disagree with their Ukrainophone counterparts on many issues but are about as interested in actually joining Russia as are Spanish-speaking Americans interested in joining Spain.

> "Ukrainians occasionally regret that the nuclear weapon was so easily surrendered."

Today's Nuclear Discourse

Nuclear disarmament has once again emerged in public discourse. For the first time since 1994, the number of supporters that back Ukraine reacquiring nuclear weapons exceeds the number of opponents. (Until the Tuzla border dispute with Russia, it was roughly equal: 42.3 percent for versus 43.3 percent against.) The 2008 war in Georgia has apparently reinvigorated pro-nuclear sentiments, as has a recent open letter from Russia's president, Dmitry Medvedev, to President Yushchenko that was broadly perceived as another brusque attempt to influence the forthcoming Ukrainian presidential election. In the wake of another wave of belligerence from Moscow this

August, a group of right-wing Ukrainian parties has published a statement demanding Ukraine reconsider its non-nuclear status. Once again, experts and politicians are taking a critical look at the flimsiness of the security guarantees enshrined in the 1994 Budapest memorandum.

Though the probability of a full-fledged Russian military invasion of Ukraine remains low, there is a far greater likelihood that Moscow will attempt some provocation in the Crimea, the only Ukrainian region where it has a measure of strong grassroots support. Crimea's Russians were largely "newcomers," transferred to the region after World War II amid the deportation (or ethnic cleansing) of Tatars. This is likely to be a continuing flashpoint. In 2017, the agreement that allows the Russian fleet to dock in Sevastopol will expire. Kiev is insisting that Russian naval forces must prepare for a timely withdrawal. Meanwhile, anxiety is heightened by harsh anti-Ukrainian propaganda that flows unrelentingly from Russian media and is broadly available in even the most remote Ukrainian hamlet. It is no coincidence that recent Russian opinion surveys list Ukraine as the nation's third most-hated enemy.

Take just one recent instance of the level of vitriol between the two countries, as described by the Russian liberal journalist Andrey Okara. Recently, he turned on his television to watch "Honest Monday," a popular political talk show on Russia's national NTV network. Founded after the fall of communism as a subsidiary of Vladimir Gusinsky's company, Media-Most, the network was a pioneer of post-Soviet independent television, but was later taken over by the state-owned Gazprom conglomerate and has since loudly trumpeted the Kremlin tune. The two-hour program bashed Georgia and Ukraine unremittingly, while host Sergei Minaev and his young, hip guests discussed only "the possibility of economic sanctions against 'unfriendly' countries and 'criminal' regimes," wrote Okara. "But the tone, style, allusions, and attached videomaterial implied clearly that these countries should be wiped from earth as soon as possible, or at least, heavily bombed."

One of the most disturbing developments that occurred under Putin was the dramatic arrival in mainstream media of nationalists and neo-fascists who have moved rapidly from Russia's ideological fringe to the mainstream. Often supported by the Kremlin elite, they teach at universities, deliver warmongering speeches on national television, and publish hysterical, paranoid articles in what were once reputable newspapers and websites. Their main concern with respect to Ukraine is that the country be "liberated from 'Orange occupants,'" as they call the Ukrainian government. The proposals vary, but few Russians seem to doubt that "liberation" is legitimate, possible, or even desirable.

Such is the level of propaganda that many Russians actually view Ukraine as a failed state run by a nationalist, crypto-fascist regime that oppresses its Russian minority, discriminates against Russophones, "steals our gas," and refuses to fulfill its national and international obligations. The problem is that propaganda has real weight. The very intent of this rhetoric is to color the facts so that the Russian people are imbued with a sense of destiny and mission. This, as history has shown, can readily translate into political and military action. The risk, of course, is that the Russian elite becomes intoxicated by its own propaganda and is pushed along in a torrent of animosity that it has carelessly allowed to swell.

Meanwhile, Ukrainians have grown increasingly resentful of their government's nuclear self-disarmament. Still, it is quite unlikely that Kiev will attempt any move to back away from its non-nuclear status—as

long as the costs of exclusion from the international community are perceived as exceeding the benefits of inclusion and cooperation. This can actually happen only, if at all, as an act of despair, as a neurotic extension of the feeling of abandonment and betrayal. "Nothing in politics," as the noted nuclear analyst George Perkovich puts it, "animates people as much as perceived inequity and unfairness." Thus far, the Obama administration hasn't had much time for Kiev's complaints. It has been far too busy patching things up with Moscow—witness Washington's recent decision to scrap the proposed Central European missile shield, which sent shivers through Kiev.

It might seem an unlikely scenario, but if Russia moves on the Crimea over fears that it will forever lose its strategically important Sevastopol naval base, and Ukraine feels itself neglected and surrounded (much like Georgia today), the fear and loathing in Kiev may lead to nuclear re-armament—more as a symbolic, rather than a practical, act of protest. Analysts may deride such an eventuality as ridiculously unlikely, but the new Russian military doctrine stipulates such a possibility, allowing the government to use troops abroad to protect Russian citizens, a phrase that is open to any and all interpretations. If the West were again to back down, tacitly acceding to the Russian presence for fear of upsetting Europe's main gas supplier and America's much-needed, albeit reluctant, ally in dealing with Iran, one could imagine that Kiev might seek a more active deterrent. Of course, a nuclear weapon or two would not be much of a deterrent—either militarily or politically—given the massive differential in nuclear capacity between the two states.

Even if this does not happen—and it probably will not—Ukrainian nuclear resentment is harmful to the nation's development. It distracts from tackling the real problems, reinforces nativism and utopian third-wayism, and introduces an element of irrationality into the national *Weltanschauung*. As a prophylactic against this potential disease, Kiev must enact large-scale political and economic reforms —such as those in Poland and Central Europe—and enforce the rule of law. But the West can also play an important role by reacting more directly to Russian militant rhetoric and behavior, and by offering Ukraine engagement instead of the current policy of benign neglect. ●