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SUBJECT: UKRAINE-RUSSIA: IS MILITARY CONFLICT NO LONGER
UNTHINKABLE?

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SUMMARY

1. (C) Recent Russian actions have spurred a public discussion within the Ukrainian elite about Russian intentions toward Ukraine. The most systematic contribution to the debate has been made by former National Security Advisor Volodymyr Horbulin, who believes that internal Russian considerations are pushing Russia toward a confrontation with Ukraine prior to the expiration of the Black Sea Fleet basing agreement in 2017. Some of our contacts have echoed and even amplified Horbulin's sense of alarm; others have downplayed the risk of armed conflict while remaining concerned about the general trajectory of Russian-Ukrainian relations. The overall impression is that Russian military action against Ukraine, while still unlikely, is no longer unthinkable. End summary.

SHOTS ACROSS THE BOW?

2. (U) Russian President Medvedev's August 11 letter to Ukrainian President Yushchenko (refs c-d), followed by the September 9 passage by the Russian Duma of the first reading of a draft amendment to the Law on Defense, expanding authority for Russian forces to be deployed abroad (ref b), have generated a high-profile public discussion here about the parlous state of Russian-Ukrainian relations. The day after the Duma's action, an open letter by 29 Ukrainian intellectuals and public figures, including former President Kravchuk, took Russia to task for allegedly disregarding



Ukrainian sovereignty and trying to interfere in Ukraine's foreign-policy and security choices. "For the first time in many years," the authors warned, "there are signs that the Kremlin is not excluding the use of force from its arsenal of foreign-policy instruments toward Ukraine."

3. (U) Still more noteworthy were two long articles in

consecutive issues of "Dzerkalo Tyzhnya" ("Weekly Mirror") September 12 and 19 on Russia and Ukraine co-authored by Volodymyr Horbulin, currently Director of the Institute of National Security Issues and formerly National Security Advisor to President Kuchma. After a lengthy analysis of Russian politics, Horbulin concluded that various ideological and domestic factors "are forcing the Kremlin to make the extraordinarily dangerous and risky wager on Russian imperialist chauvinism and the fanning of militarist psychosis." While Moscow is not looking for a new global competition with the West, he wrote, Russia views the "taming" of Ukraine as the key task in restoring its regional domination.

4. (U) Because Russia's "aggressive policies" are driven by the needs of Russia rather than the actions of Kyiv, argued Horbulin, even a major change in Ukraine's political course would not produce any substantial change in Moscow's approach. Horbulin reckoned that Moscow realizes it has a relatively short window of opportunity offered by Ukraine's internal political squabbling and international isolation, so "the 'assault on Kyiv' will unfold in the nearest future and will be determined and merciless." Moreover, experience has convinced the Russians, he maintained, that "pro-Russian" politicians in Ukraine quickly adopt a pro-Ukrainian/pro-Western course as soon as they come to power. While Horbulin believed that Russia has many non-military levers with which to influence Ukraine (above all, by stirring up trouble in the Crimea), he did not rule out the use of military force, especially if Ukraine's new president proves not to be as pliable as the Kremlin may hope.

5. (C) In a recent meeting with Polcouns, Horbulin characterized the Medvedev letter as unprecedented in the brazenness of Moscow's attempt to interfere in Ukraine's upcoming presidential election, with the message that "whoever becomes (the next Ukrainian) president must follow in the wake of Russian policies." Since the 2008 Russian

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invasion of Georgia, Russian military action against Ukraine is no longer unthinkable. Russian journalists are already drawing analogies between Georgia and Ukraine, he alleged, adding that the "psychosis" created by Russian mass media, especially TV, could easily get out of hand and create a slide toward armed conflict.

6. (C) Asked about speculation that Ukraine could be divided into three parts (with the east/south annexed by Russia, a Russian-controlled central region, and a European-oriented rump Ukraine in the west), Horbulin dismissed it as largely a fantasy and part of the "information war" rather than a serious plan. He said the focus should be on the scheduled departure of the Russian Black Sea Fleet in 2017, which will be the main issue for the Ukrainian president(s) elected in 2010 and 2015.

7. (C) Horbulin emphasized that Russia's window of

opportunity will close toward 2015, as a new generation of Ukrainian politicians comes to the fore ("the most important idea in my article"). In closing, he said he tells his Russian friends that Moscow's actions are only widening the split between Russia and Ukraine.

8. (C) Other Embassy contacts echoed much of Horbulin's thinking, with several of them recommending his second article, in particular, as a close reflection of their own thinking. The gloomiest assessment of Russian plans toward Ukraine was offered by the Foreign Policy Research Institute's Hryhoryi Perepelytsya, who had a book on the Russo-Finnish War of 1939-40 prominently displayed on his desk ("Ukraine needs a Mannerheim," he solemnly intoned). Moscow, he insisted, will not be satisfied with anything less than the incorporation of Ukraine, or most of it, into the Russian Federation. Perepelytsya and Stepan Havrysh of the National Security and Defense Council agreed with Russian analysts who surmised that the draft amendment to the Russian Law on Defense was undertaken with Ukraine principally in mind (ref b). Havrysh maintained that "the military threat (to Ukraine) is real," although he added that Russian saber-rattling ultimately works to undermine Russia's position in Ukraine.

THE SKY IS NOT FALLING -- BUT IT MIGHT BE STARTING TO CRACK

9. (C) Other Ukrainian analysts were less apocalyptic. MP Andiy Shkil, a Western Ukrainian member of the Yuliya Tymoshenko Bloc (BYuT) and head of the Ukrainian Rada delegation to the NATO Parliamentary Assembly, was unconcerned about any near-term outbreak of military hostilities between Russia and Ukraine, believing that some Ukrainians feel the need to exaggerate the threat in order to rouse the country out of its torpor. Nevertheless, a new element in the equation, he said, is the sense that Ukraine now stands alone vis-a-vis Russia, with no real guarantees or protector. Shkil was troubled by what he viewed as a Russian propaganda campaign against Ukraine, adding that Ukrainians were shocked to hear how many Russians in public opinion polling actually labeled Ukraine an enemy of Russia.

10. (C) Oleksandr Potiekhin, a former diplomat and currently an expert at the Institute of Global Economy and International Relations, maintained that President Yushchenko has exaggerated the Russian danger for his own political purposes. He agreed with Horbulin that Russian policy toward Ukraine is driven primarily by Russian domestic political considerations. Unlike Horbulin and Perepelytsya, Potiekhin argued that Russia seems to lack a strategy, with its approach to Ukraine driven more by emotion than calculation. He observed that Ukrainians continue to have warm feelings toward Russia, and most of them cannot even imagine an armed clash. Nevertheless, if it came to hostilities, Potiekhin said the Russians should not imagine that the Ukrainians would welcome them as liberators.

MISSILE DEFENSE: UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES

11. (C) Horbulin, echoed by others, was chagrined by the U.S. decision not to deploy missile-defense infrastructure in Poland and the Czech Republic. Whatever the merits of the decision, it had emboldened pro-Moscow elements in Ukraine

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and left pro-Western forces feeling even more beleaguered.

COMMENT

12. (C) As Oleksiy Melnyk of the Razumkov Center observed to us, recent Russian actions have certainly alarmed a large percentage of the Ukrainian political and intellectual elite, but the population as a whole seems untroubled. No one is digging tank traps around the northern approaches to Kyiv, nor do people appear to be making arrangements to send their families abroad, out of harm's way. There is a sense here that relations with Russia ought to improve after Yushchenko leaves office a few months from now (more septel on the Russia factor in the presidential campaign). And yet, there is also a palpable sense that Russia and Ukraine have moved psychologically in recent months in an unhealthy direction. The example of Georgia; the Medvedev letter to Yushchenko (the tone of which shocked even critics of Yushchenko's Russia policy); the amendment to Russia's Law on Defense (coming on the heels of the Medvedev letter); a perception (rightly or wrongly) that Ukraine is on its own, bereft of any concrete Western support; the troubling public-opinion disconnect (with Russians perceiving Ukraine as hostile while Ukrainians continue to view Russia and Russians positively); and the sense that even educated Russian friends just "don't get it" when it comes to Ukraine's independence and national aspirations -- all these factors have created a sense of disquiet about the trajectory of Russian-Ukrainian relations, and a fear that armed conflict, while certainly unlikely, can no longer be dismissed out of hand.

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