

## 18

### THE STRATEGIC OUTLOOK

#### *The fifth anniversary of independence*

With the first fundamental stage of state-building now successfully completed, and no doubt also relieved by Yeltsin's comfortable victory in the runoff, the Ukrainian leadership prepared to celebrate with added aplomb the fifth anniversary of the declaration of independence. But the preparations were marred by the wage backlog and an ensuing new wave of strikes launched at the beginning of July by one of the miners' trade unions, which was supported by about a fifth of the country's more than 200 mines.

The protest action soon took on a more threatening character when some of the more radical miners in the Donbas blocked road and rail lines to demand several months of unpaid wages. Lazarenko, who was overwhelmingly endorsed on 10 July by the parliament as prime minister, declared the crisis in the coal industry as the country's most urgent problem. He and other government officials made it clear that the government was severely stretched to meet the demands for the payment of wage arrears and blamed factories which had not paid for coal deliveries for aggravating the situation. For his part, Kuchma called for emergency economic measures and appealed to Western leaders for soft-term credits to enable the Ukrainian leadership to deal with the crisis.'

When, on 15 July, government negotiators headed by First Deputy Prime Minister Durdynets agreed to pay most of the wage arrears by mid-September and the moderate miners' unions had condemned the wildcat strikes still affecting about thirty-six pits, the crisis appeared to have been defused. But the following day, as the prime minister was being driven to Kyiv airport from where he was due to fly to Donetsk, a bomb exploded along the route damaging his car. The identity of those responsible was unknown. Lazarenko

<sup>1</sup> Reuter, 4 and 10 July 1996.

himself ventured that this had been the work of 'criminal structures' opposed to the government's plans to restructure the coal industry and close down unprofitable mines. He also claimed that funds allocated by the government to pay off the wage backlog in the Donbas were being misappropriated.<sup>2</sup>

With the entire country shaken by the bomb outrage, the secretary of the National Security Council, Horbulin, announced that 'elements of a state of emergency' would be introduced. What these measures actually amounted to was a toughening of the Ukrainian leadership's policy in the Donbas: the head of the regional administration of the Donetsk region, Volodymyr Shcherban, who was regarded as a long-standing regional rival of Lazarenko in Eastern Ukraine, and other local officials were replaced and several leaders of the miners' protests who had blocked rail routes were arrested. The crackdown on the militant strike leaders precipitated accusations that Kyiv was violating workers' rights, which in turn drew protests and expressions of concern from international trade union organizations.<sup>3</sup>

In a long newspaper interview, Durdynets attempted to place the developments in the Donbas in a broader context. He explained that because of its difficult social and economic conditions the Donbas had become the country's 'most complex' region and also a major centre of organized crime. He revealed that in recent months the law enforcement agencies had 'liquidated' no less than eleven strong bandit groups responsible for robberies and murders. Corrupt or incompetent mine managers and local officials had also been removed. In an attempt to pull the Donbas's coalmining industry 'out of the abyss', 103 unprofitable or dangerous mines had been slated for closure, about fifty of which the government was planning to close before the end of the year. Durdynets claimed that although the government was well aware of the social consequences of the

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 16 and 17 July 1996.

Among those who protested on behalf of the arrested strike leaders was the Donbas-based Civic Congress, which united former Interfront activists opposed to Ukrainian independence. It appealed for support to the Council of Europe and various international trade unions. UNICAP, 19 August 1996. Concern about alleged 'anti-union repression' in Ukraine was subsequently expressed by, among others, the Chemical, Energy, Mine and General Workers' Union (ICEM) (see its statement, no. 42/1996 of 17 August 1996 and the President of the AFL-CIO, John Sweeney (Ukrinform, 6 September 1996).

closures, and, at a time of continuing economic difficulties and hardship in the country, was seeking to deal with this problem with the help of international assistance, local militants were stirring up the miners in an attempt to force the central authorities to their knees.<sup>4</sup>

The message Kyiv seemed intent on sending was that the government, with international help, was determined to move ahead with its restructuring of the coal industry and that, having paid the miners their arrears out of the central government's almost empty coffers, it would no longer be prepared to bail out the inefficient coal mines in the south-east; furthermore, it would not tolerate actions by militants who broke the law and threatened national security.

Fresh trouble also loomed on the horizon in Crimea where, in mid-August, pro-Russian deputies, led by Tsekov and the Rossiya bloc, narrowly failed to pressure the Crimean parliament to press for greater autonomy than foreseen in the Ukrainian constitution and also to oust the Crimean prime minister, Demydenko. There was a sinister twist when, on the night of 24-5 August, just after his return from independence anniversary celebrations in Kyiv, the Crimean speaker, Suprunyuk, was apparently abducted from his home by unknown armed persons; fortunately, though badly beaten up, he eventually managed to escape from them. To add to the complex picture, at the beginning of July, the Crimean Tatars had held their third Kurultai, or national congress, at which the impatience of the more radical groups with the moderate Crimean Tatar leadership had become apparent.<sup>5</sup>

Despite these problems, perseverance with the state-building and reform processes was beginning to pay off. *The Economist*, which had been a stern observer of Ukraine's often dismal post-independence reform record, now noted that 'reforms begun in 1994 are showing signs of success' and advised investors 'that Ukraine finally deserves a serious look'.<sup>6</sup> This encouraging trend, combined with the adoption of the new constitution and Ukraine's growing ties with Western institutions, as well as the added pride of seeing the country's athletes win twenty-three medals, nine of them gold, at

<sup>4</sup> See *Kievskie veAomosti*, 23 August 1996.

<sup>5</sup> See the report by Tatyana Korobova in *Kievskie veAomosti*, 9 July 1996.

\* 'Ukrainian Finance: Wild, Wild East', *The Economist*, 31 August 1996.

the Olympic games in Atlanta, helped raise spirits during the fifth anniversary of independence.

The official celebrations lasted from Friday 23 August to Monday 26 August. In his anniversary address, President Kuchma opted for a balanced tone, tempering self-congratulation with self-criticism. 'Having started practically from nought, and in conditions which were far from optimal, all the attributes of statehood, from borders to an honours system, [have been created],' he declared. 'The transitional stage of the state's self-determination has been completed', symbolized by the adoption of the new constitution. Ukrainian society had 'received a clear and definitive answer to the question: what are we building and where are we headed?' But much work still lay ahead if the problems accumulated from the previous decades were to be resolved. Ukraine's experience with reforms had exposed the flaws and ugly features inherited from the past, and these, together with the mistakes that had been made, had not allowed Ukraine to achieve more. The president acknowledged: 'Our achievements could have been more substantial and the price of reform considerably lower for people had we been able to foresee at the start of our state-building the entire depth, complexity and multifaceted nature of the problems and to respond properly to them.'<sup>7</sup>

Indicating the Ukrainian leadership's confidence and determination to keep the reform process on track, during the anniversary celebrations it was announced that the interim karbovanets-coupon was finally being replaced with the long-awaited permanent national currency, the hryvnya. The transition was carried out relatively smoothly during the first half of September 1996. By the time the parliament reconvened in mid-September, the government had also managed to complete the draft of the state budget for 1997, which foresaw the first economic growth since independence and a further reduction of inflation.<sup>8</sup> Reform of the tax system was also at the top of the agenda.<sup>9</sup>

Rather impulsively, the Ukrainian president declared very prematurely on 16 September that he would be standing as a

Excerpts translated by the author from the official text of the president's speech delivered in the Ukraina Palace, Kyiv, on 23 August 1996.

<sup>7</sup> Reuter, 13 September 1996.

<sup>8</sup> Ukrinform, 10 September 1996.

candidate in the presidential elections in 1999. This throwing down of the political gauntlet had the effect of encouraging the disparate political groupings within the Verkhovna Rada to begin coalescing around other prospective candidates — Moroz, Marchuk (who now headed the Social Market Economy faction) and Lazarenko. Since the new constitution was adopted, the prime minister was no longer so dependent on the president and therefore was clearly becoming more of a political force to be reckoned with. Although at this expressed disinterest in running for the presidency, it remained to be seen whether he and his team would manage to avoid coming into conflict with a presidential administration in which the powerful figures of Tabachnyk and Horbulin had become used to shaping domestic and foreign policy, and what sort of working relationship he would establish with Moroz and the Verkhovna Rada.

The new constitution had built checks and balances into the political system and inevitably it was going to take some time to see how effectively they would operate. In mid-October progress was achieved when a dispute between the president and the Verkhovna Rada, mainly its left-wing deputies, over the role of the Constitutional Court was resolved and on 18 October sixteen of its eighteen judges were sworn in. Ivan Tymchenko, formerly a legal advisor to both Presidents Kravchuk and Kuchma, was elected chairman.<sup>10</sup>

Less encouraging, however, as far as the independence of the country's media was concerned, was the president's assertion of control over this vital sphere at the expense of the parliament's and government's influence. Eventually, in mid-November, Kuchma was to issue a decree creating a Ministry of Information and appointing a controversial loyal conservative accused of censorship, Zinovy Kulyk, to head it. The new ministry was to be responsible for television and radio broadcasting and the National Information Agency of Ukraine (DINAU), which replaced the former Ukrinform (National News Agency of Ukraine), which had been under the control of the Cabinet of Ministers." Tabachnyk, who was coming under increasing fire in the parliament for alleged misuse of his office and corruption, was believed to have been behind this move, which was widely seen as an attempt to strengthen Kuchma's re-election prospects.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 18 and 21 October 1996.

" *Ibid.*, 15 November 1996. See also OMR I Daily Digest, 1 November 1996.

*The Ukrainian-Russian impasse*

At a time when the future political and economic configuration of Europe was being decided, and the dispute between Russia and NATO over the latter's enlargement was intensifying, the main challenge in the external sphere remained the buttressing of Ukraine's balancing position between East and West.<sup>13</sup> The main problem was not NATO's expansion; indeed, the Ukrainian president had made it quite clear that, as long as nuclear missiles were not deployed on the territory of its western neighbours, Kyiv did not object to Poland and the Baltic States becoming members of NATO, and in fact was itself seeking a 'special relationship' with the North Atlantic Alliance and associate membership of the WEU; rather, it was how to remain on good-neighbourly terms with Russia (which did have nuclear arms and was in the process of consolidating its new political, economic and military 'community' with Ukraine's northern neighbour Belarus), while staying out of its economic and political orbit.

Back on 11 June, Kuchma had declared that there had been a significant shift in Europe's view of the role and position of Ukraine and, for its part, Kyiv had clearly defined its 'strategies for integration into Europe'.<sup>13</sup> In speeches and comments delivered during the first half of July in Kyiv and at a East-Central European economics summit in Salzburg, Kuchma continued to expound on Ukraine's goal of achieving fuller integration into European structures and close partnership with NATO. However, he also reminded senior foreign ministry officials that stable relations with Russia were not only a cornerstone of Ukrainian national interests but an essential factor of European and global security. The top priority for Ukraine in the east, he stressed, remained to 'achieve the final normalization of relations' with its northern neighbour through the signing of a bilateral framework treaty.<sup>14</sup>

Yeltsin's victory over Zyuganov, though, did not bring any signs that the Ukrainian-Russian logjam would be broken. In fact, a new complication developed: even before his eventual election triumph, the Russian president had been afflicted by a debilitating heart

In late September 1996 Ukraine affirmed its non-aligned status by becoming an observer in the Non-Aligned Movement.

<sup>13</sup> Ukrinform, 11 June 1996.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 16 July 1996.

condition and all but vanished from public view; his illness set off a new political struggle in Moscow, leaving it unclear who was, or would be, in control.

Within days of Yeltsin's victory, Kyiv called for the resumption of Ukrainian-Russian negotiations on unresolved issues. When Udovenko met with Primakov, Lebed and Chernomyrdin in Moscow on 1 August, both sides stuck to their respective positions but it was agreed that negotiations about the Black Sea Fleet would continue, as well as bilateral talks on trade and economic relations, and consultations on the demarcation of the Russian-Ukrainian border.

Any hopes that the new talks would, as Udovenko put it, give 'a new boost to Ukrainian-Russian dialogue'<sup>15</sup> were soon dashed, though, by a decree issued by the Russian president on 18 August: despite the free-trade treaty between the two countries, Yeltsin imposed a 20% value-added tax on imports from Ukraine, beginning on 1 September. With 37.7% of Ukraine's total exports during the first half of 1996 having gone to Russia — its largest trading partner<sup>16</sup> — this protectionist measure threatened to seriously damage bilateral trade and hurt the fragile Ukrainian economy just as the country was introducing its own national currency. Furthermore, four days later, Yeltsin appointed Aman Tuleev, a Communist ally of Zyuganov known to favour the restoration of some form of the USSR, as Russia's new minister for cooperation with the CIS countries.<sup>17</sup>

Efforts by Lazarenko and Pynzenyk to persuade the Russian government not to levy the tax on Ukrainian imports succeeded only in achieving a partial deferral of the tariff for a month.<sup>18</sup> Barely restraining himself, Kuchma warned on 7 September that the new

<sup>15</sup> Reuter, 1 August 1996.

<sup>16</sup> *New Europe*, 15-21 September 1996.

<sup>17</sup> Monitor, 23 August 1996. When, on 9 September, Tuleev outlined his programme to promote integration processes in the CIS, he called for, among other things, 'merging the member-countries' energy systems into a single CIS energy system through co-ownership arrangements between Russia and the individual countries' and 'massive Russian acquisition of industrial equity in CIS countries to offset debts owed to Russia by those countries'. Monitor, 10 September 1996.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 28 August and 3 September 1996. The tariff went into effect on 1 October 1996. Monitor, 2 October 1996.

Russian tax on Ukrainian imports could result in 'economic war' and claimed that it was politically motivated.<sup>19</sup>

A few days later, Russia went ahead and introduced a 10% tax on Ukrainian sugar imports. The atmosphere was further strained by what seemed to be an attempt by leading Russian political figures, while Yeltsin was indisposed, to reopen the issue of the ownership of the Black Sea Fleet and Sevastopol. They included Lebed and Moscow City Mayor Yuri Luzhkov, who declared that Sevastopol could not be considered part of Ukraine. All this prompted Ukraine's security chief, Horbulin, to comment on the eve of a visit to Washington: 'We said that pressure would increase on Ukraine' after the Russian presidential elections.<sup>20</sup>

An unexpected brief visit to Moscow by Kuchma on 28 September for talks with Chernomyrdin, and the latter's agreement to go to Kyiv to continue negotiations, helped clear the air somewhat. But Lebed, whose political reputation had risen even more as a result of his role in negotiating a peace settlement in Chechnya, subsequently publicly reiterated his position on Sevastopol in an open letter published in early October in Russian newspapers in Crimea. His action drew criticism from the Ukrainian Foreign Ministry — Udovenko described it as 'an unfriendly act and tantamount to interference in Ukraine's affairs'<sup>21</sup> —and an official repudiation from Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Krylov."<sup>22</sup>

With President Yeltsin awaiting a heart operation, the struggle for power in Moscow intensifying, and the attention in Russia shifting away from Chechnya, Kyiv could only expect more trouble of this sort. Defying the Russian president, on 16 October the Russian Duma went ahead and approved a bill (by 370 votes to 5) urging an immediate halt to the division of the Black Sea Fleet. An extremist deputy (Makashov) even called for the imposition of a fuel embargo on Ukraine and claimed that Eastern Ukraine and Crimea were prepared to join Russia.<sup>23</sup> Predictably, the Duma's action outraged the Ukrainian leadership and parliament. In the presence of President Kuchma, the Verkhovna Rada adopted a strongly-

<sup>19</sup> *The Ukrainian Weekly*, 15 August 1996.

<sup>20</sup> Reuter, 14 September 1996.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 19 October 1996.

<sup>22</sup> See Monitor and OMRI Daily Digest, 14 October, 1996.

<sup>23</sup> OMRI Daily Digest, 17 October 1996.

worded statement which denounced the Duma's bill as 'a gross violation of the most basic norms of international law, an encroachment on Ukraine's sovereignty' and a 'territorial claim against Ukraine', and warned that if the Russian lower house proceeded with making it law, the Ukrainian parliament would demand the immediate removal of Russian forces from Ukrainian territory. Even the Socialist chairman of the Ukrainian parliament, Moroz, who had remained unenthusiastic about Kyiv's growing accentuation of its Western orientation, warned that such actions were undermining bilateral relations and called on Russia to build a naval base on the Russian coast of the Black Sea if it did not want share the facilities in Sevastopol with Ukraine.<sup>24</sup>

Kuchma sought to defuse the situation by asking for a meeting with the hospitalized Russian president. By now the maverick Lebed had increasingly alienated himself from Yeltsin's team and on 17 October was abruptly dismissed by Yeltsin. Perhaps sensing a fleeting new opportunity, Kuchma attempted to clinch a deal with the Russian president before he was operated on and Russia was plunged into even greater uncertainty. The Ukrainian president and Horbulin seem to have gambled on making additional concessions, even in the face of opposition from within the Ukrainian armed forces, for on the eve of Yeltsin's short meeting with Kuchma on 24 October the sudden resignation of Ukraine's three top naval officers was announced."

The two sides did in fact seem to have narrowed their differences significantly, leading Horbulin to comment that they were now 'closer than ever'. Apparently, the Ukrainian side now agreed to lease the naval base in Sevastopol to Russia for twenty years (Russia had reportedly initially insisted on fifty years) and to make do with only one of the port's five bays.<sup>26</sup>

When, however, on 23 October the Russian Duma nevertheless proceeded to pass a law on the suspension of the division of the Black Sea Fleet (by an almost unanimous vote of 331 votes to 1),

<sup>24</sup> Monitor, 18 and 22 October 1996; and 'Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine Denounces Russian State Duma's Anti-Ukrainian Act', Press Release, Permanent Mission of Ukraine, Geneva, 18 October 1996.

<sup>25</sup> Reuter, 23 October, and OMRI Daily Digest, 24 October, 1996.

<sup>26</sup> See Monitor, 25 October, *The Fortnight in Review*, 1 November, and Reuter, 1 November, 1996.

and with Mayor Luzhkov continuing to reiterate his position on Sevastopol, the painstaking work that had been carried out to bring the two sides over the final hurdle in their protracted negotiations over the division of the Black Sea Fleet seemed to have been all for naught.

Initially, though, the meeting between Kuchma and Yeltsin seemed to produce the magical breakthrough. Yeltsin's press spokesman, Sergei Yastrzhembsky, announced that the two presidents had managed to resolve all the problems connected with the Fleet and Sevastopol and that Russian Prime Minister Chernomyrdin would be travelling to Kyiv before the middle of November to sign the relevant agreements. In a televised statement, President Yeltsin also promised that his first official trip after recovering from surgery would be to Ukraine to sign the long-delayed bilateral friendship treaty.<sup>27</sup>

But, as on previous occasions when breakthroughs had been announced in resolving Ukrainian-Russian disputes over the future of the Black Sea Fleet but had proved premature, no specific details were announced and negotiating teams continued their work. Moscow's mayor and other Russian politicians persisted with their claims that Sevastopol was part of Russia and a group of deputies within the Duma announced their intention to introduce a bill on the status of the city. Subsequently, while Yeltsin was recovering from a successful heart operation carried out on 5 November, the negotiations broke down again; indeed, on 6 November the Russian delegation left Kyiv before the closing session of the latest round of talks and a planned dinner. Horbulin was left to comment that both sides had reached the point where no further concessions could be made.<sup>28</sup>

According to Ukraine's first deputy defence minister, Ivan Bizhan, the Russian side remained 'categorically opposed' to Ukraine's naval command being based in Sevastopol, which he said was an internal matter for Ukraine and not for discussion.<sup>29</sup> It also emerged that the Russian side was insisting that the coastal infrastructure at Sevastopol be recognized as Russia's property and therefore not subject to leasing arrangements, and that it had rejected Ukraine's

<sup>27</sup> Reuter, 24 October 1996.

<sup>28</sup> OMRI Daily Digest, 7 November 1996.

<sup>29</sup> Ufa-inform, 12 November 1996.

insistence on the removal of Russian ground units which exceeded CFE limits. For its part, Ukraine was proposing to charge rent of between \$1.4 and \$2.1 billion annually depending on the size of the aggregate land and sea areas to be leased by the Russian fleet and was prepared to deduct the value of the rent from its debts to Russia or energy bills.<sup>30</sup>

Hardly surprisingly, therefore, Chernomyrdin's visit to Kyiv in mid-November did not materialize. Kuchma sought to keep emotions in check and to avoid any drastic actions. During an official visit to Greece in mid-November, he stated that forcing the issue of the Black Sea Fleet would only escalate tensions between Ukraine and Russia. Relations between the two countries were not limited only to this question, he emphasized, and there were a host of economic problems that also needed to be resolved.<sup>31</sup>

The outlook did not look promising. On 13 November, the Duma passed by an overwhelming majority a resolution describing the Transdnister enclave as a 'zone of special strategic interest' for Russia and calling for Russian troops to be permanently stationed there. This action also drew protests and condemnation from the Ukrainian Foreign Ministry and Verkhovna Rada.<sup>32</sup>

Shortly afterwards, the Russian press reproduced a letter from the commander of the Russian Black Sea Fleet, Admiral Viktor Kravchenko, claiming that President Yeltsin had issued a directive 'not to surrender anything in Sevastopol'.<sup>33</sup> Furthermore, the Russian president's foreign policy aide, Dmitrii Ryurikov, publicly expressed the opinion that 'the assertion of Ukrainian statehood to the detriment of close relations with Russia . . . is a temporary phenomenon'.<sup>4</sup> This seemed to reinforce the fundamental complaint — heard so often from Kyiv throughout the last five years —

' ' Monitor, 14 November, and *The Fortnight in Review*, vol. 1, no. 10 (15 November 1996).

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

' ' Monitor, 14 November 1996. On 24 November, the Ukrainian Foreign Ministry criticized this action as challenging Moldova's sovereignty and territorial integrity, violating 'universally recognized international legal principles and OSCE norms', and undermining the joint Moldovan, Russian and Ukrainian attempt to achieve a peaceful resolution to the Transdnisterian conflict. Ukrinform, 25 November 1996.

" *Nezavisimaya oazeta*, 14 November 1996.

<sup>34</sup> Monitor, 21 November 1996.

which Udovenko had reiterated the previous month at a CIS meeting in Moscow: 'Ukraine is concerned that that there are constant doubts being raised in Russia about Ukrainian sovereignty and independence.'<sup>35</sup>

*Neighbours, friends, partners and antagonists*

Developments in Belarus, where the authoritarian behaviour of the pro-Russian president, Lukashenka, who continued to enjoy mass popular support, especially in the rural areas, had led to a conflict with the Belarusian parliament, also posed a problem for Ukraine as well as Belarus' other neighbours. Ukrainian democrats had already been outraged by the fact that that in April the Belarusian authorities had imprisoned seven Ukrainian radical nationalists who had participated in a peaceful anti-Lukashenka demonstration in Minsk and had recently dismissed an appeal against their sentences. With the Belarusian president forcing a showdown with his country's parliament by calling a referendum in order to extend his powers and prolong his term in office, and the threat of destabilization and unrest growing, on 19 November the Ukrainian parliament issued a carefully-worded statement affirming 'non-interference' in Belarus' internal affairs but expressing 'deep concern' about the situation.<sup>36</sup> Furthermore, while Russia sought to mediate directly between the Belarusian president and parliament, the Ukrainian president joined his Polish and Lithuanian counterparts in a joint statement of concern about developments in Belarus.<sup>37</sup>

On 24 November, Lukashenka went ahead with his referendum, which, among others, the OSCE and Council of Europe criticized

Reuter, 19 October 1996. Some external observers saw the impasse in Ukrainian-Russian relations as part of a general hardening trend in Russia's foreign policy. For example, *The Economist* noted that Russia had been 'carving out a tougher yet more pragmatic foreign policy', reflected in its hostility to NATO's planned expansion and the Duma's refusal to ratify the START-2 arms-reduction treaty. 'In the "near abroad" . . . the foreign ministry [and the executive branch] were often content to see the Duma do the bullying'. It surmised that: 'The latest and biggest victim of this crude Russian mood has been Ukraine.' *The Economist*, 23 November 1996.

<sup>36</sup> Reuter, 19 November 1996.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, and Ukrinfonn, 21 November 1996.

as undemocratic. After having no problem winning, he proceeded to create a new parliament from the majority of the deputies who had supported him. Russia lost no time in recognizing the results while Ukraine continued to voice its concern along with Poland and Lithuania. In fact, at the beginning of December during the OSCE summit in Lisbon, at which Russia continued to oppose NATO's eastward enlargement and sought to cushion Belarus from direct censure in the final statement, the leaders of Poland, Lithuania and Ukraine held their own mini-summit and, among other things, issued a statement expressing 'grave concern' over developments in neighbouring Belarus and calling for democracy in their region.<sup>38</sup> Kuchma also made use of the occasion to voice Ukraine's enduring security concerns and to affirm once again his country's Western orientation. He also stressed that Ukraine was seeking to formalize good-neighbourly relations with Russia in accordance with OSCE principles.<sup>39</sup>

For Ukraine, there was also one other particularly noteworthy development at the Lisbon OSCE summit. President Kuchma met with Romania's newly elected president, Emil Constantinescu; after their meeting, the Ukrainian leader told the press that a Ukrainian-Romanian friendship treaty would be signed in 1997. For his part, Constantinescu reaffirmed that his country would seek membership of NATO and the EU, and declared that his government wanted good relations with neighbouring countries and to sign a basic treaty with Ukraine similar to the one which it had recently concluded with Hungary. Describing this as a matter of 'overriding importance', he conspicuously made no mention of Romania's territorial differences with Ukraine.<sup>40</sup>

The trilateral Polish-Lithuanian-Ukrainian initiative as regards Belarus underscored the emerging pattern of inter-state relations and alignments in Eastern Europe five years after the referendum on

<sup>-1</sup> Ukrinform and Reuter, 2 December 1996.

*Vseukrainskie vedomosti*, 4 December 1996.

<sup>4.1</sup> *Dm* (Kyiv), 4 December 1996, and Roland Eggleston, 'OSCE Summit: Romania Seeks Basic Treaty with Ukraine', RFE/RL News Report, 2 December 1996. Coincidentally, the following day, the Moldovan parliament ratified the friendship and cooperation treaty with Ukraine that had been signed in October 1992. The Ukrainian parliament had also only ratified the treaty the previous month, having insisted that border disputes between the two states be settled beforehand. OMR I Daily Digest, 5 December 1996.

Ukraine's independence, the final dissolution of the Soviet Union and the creation of the CIS. For Ukraine, Russia and Belarus were part of an evolving Eurasian bloc, to which it was still attached, whether it liked it or not, by strong economic cords, while Poland had become its main gateway to the West and undisguised strategic partner. This was graphically illustrated by two statements made by the Polish and Russian leaders during the first week of December. Addressing the Assembly of the WEU in Paris on 4 December, Poland's President Kwasniewski declared that 'the position of Ukraine' was a 'crucial issue of the European security architecture'. He recalled that in June President Kuchma had 'made a strong statement of his country's European aspirations', stressing that 'declarations of this kind must be built into our thinking on future security in Europe'. He added that 'strategic partnerships between various Euro-Atlantic institutions and Russia, as well as Ukraine' will be of key importance.<sup>41</sup> By contrast, the following day, President Yeltsin made a renewed call for closer ties within the CIS and accelerated integration. Defending the creation of the CIS, he explained that: 'The Soviet Union had become obsolete. We had to save what it was still possible to save.'<sup>42</sup>

<sup>41</sup> Statement by H.E. Mr. Alexander Kwasniewski, President of the Republic of Poland, at the Assembly of the Western European Union, Paris, 4 December 1996.

Reuter, 6 December 1996. Interestingly, that same week, another 'architect' of the Belovezhsky Agreement establishing the CIS, Burbulis, gave a somewhat different assessment of this event. 'The Soviet Union had already disappeared . . .

We were recognising formally the reality in which we were all living since the August coup [1991] . . . disintegration had become irreversible . . . We found a formula which ensured that the breakup of the Soviet Union took place with the minimum of losses and upheavals.' Burbulis confirmed, according to Reuter, that 'Yeltsin agreed to this only after Kravchuk, buoyed by a 90 per cent referendum vote in Ukraine in favour of complete independence, ruled out other options such as confederation'. Yeltsin's former aide also now felt though that the Russian side had made some blunders as regards Ukraine. 'It was our mistake that at the time we did not record Sevastopol, the Black Sea Fleet and Crimea as problems to be negotiated separately', he explained. He also acknowledged that Yeltsin's team had not anticipated that Ukraine would move so quickly to assert its control over Soviet troops on its territory. 'We believed there would be joint armed forces for a period of five or seven years.' See John Morrison, 'Russian Architect of 1991 CIS Pact Admits Regrets', Reuter, 6 December 1996. Another of the Russian team at the Belovezhskaya Pushcha, Sergei Shakhrai, shared his broadly similar views about why the CIS had been created in an interview published in *Den* on 10 December 1996. Five years later, however, Gorbachev was still continuing to call for a 'new

On 28 November, President Yeltsin vetoed the Duma's bill on halting the partitioning of the Black Sea Fleet. Kuchma responded by calling for the issue of the Black Sea Fleet to be separated from the Ukrainian-Russian treaty, the signing of which he argued remained a priority. 'It is impossible to find a solution today which would satisfy both sides on the question of the division of the fleet', he acknowledged.<sup>43</sup>

These moves were overtaken a week later, though, by another provocative action by the Russian legislature, this time by the upper house — the Council of the Federation. On 6 December, it approved by 110 to 14 a non-binding resolution proposed by Luzhkov demanding that Ukraine hand over Sevastopol, claiming that 'unilateral actions by the Ukrainian side aimed at tearing away from Russia a part of its territory (Sevastopol) are not only illegal under international law but also directly damage Russia's security'. The Federation Council also approved a document to set up a commission to prepare a draft law on the status of Sevastopol.<sup>44</sup> Among the few Russian politicians who publicly condemned this action was former prime minister Yegor Gaidar (who accused Luzhkov of 'electioneering'), the governor of Belgorod *oblast*, which borders on Ukraine, Yevgenii Savchenko, and the ethnic Russian mayor of Sevastopol itself, Viktor Semenov.<sup>45</sup>

Horbulin was the first to respond for the Ukrainian side. He told journalists: 'This is a crude piece of interference in the life of a neighbouring country. . . . [The Federation Council's] position is not just unrestrained but simply aggressive. . . . This will lead to a sharp worsening in Russian-Ukrainian relations.' He also stressed that despite Kuchma's meeting with Chernomyrdin at the Lisbon OSCE summit, 'from now on it will be difficult to achieve anything'.<sup>46</sup> Horbulin and other Ukrainian officials had also let it be known in recent weeks that in view of the continuing Russian claims to Sevastopol, Ukraine was considering raising the issue before the UN Security Council and also reviewing its position on seeking

voluntary union' of the former Soviet republics. Reuter, 16 December 1996.

" Russian Public Television, 30 November 1996.

<sup>44</sup> Reuter, 5 December 1996.

<sup>45</sup> OMRI Daily Digest, 9 December, Monitor and UNIAN, 6 December, 1996.

<sup>46</sup> Reuter and UNIAN, 6 December 1996.

membership of NATO.<sup>47</sup>

The Verkhovna Rada was quick to respond. Moroz declared the Federation Council's action had 'aggravated the situation to the very limit'.<sup>48</sup> The Ukrainian parliament immediately adopted a declaration denouncing the 'territorial claim and violation of Ukrainian sovereignty' as 'a deliberate attempt to undermine European security', and voted by 227 votes to 38 to begin debating a bill on the withdrawal of Russian forces from Ukrainian territory.<sup>49</sup> The Ukrainian leadership nevertheless sought to prevent the situation from escalating further. Foreign Minister Udovenko declared that Kyiv would not break off its 'negotiating process' with Moscow and Moroz appealed to the Verkhovna Rada to refrain from demanding the withdrawal of foreign troops from Ukrainian territory which could lead to 'dangerous consequences'.<sup>50</sup>

The Ukrainian leadership was reassured by the strong expressions of implicit support which their country received both at the Lisbon OSCE summit and at a meeting of NATO foreign ministers held in Brussels on 10 December. At the latter meeting, Udovenko reiterated Ukraine's security concerns and reaffirmed his country's desire, 'as part of... [the] Central-East European region', to become 'an inalienable part' of the 'future European security architecture'. The foreign minister presented Ukraine's position as follows:

Within the context of the NATO enlargement it is important not to permit the revival of some kind of 'spheres of influence' or 'zones of special interests', that would inevitably bring us back to the division of Europe. . . . It is important for us now, in particular taking into account recent Russian Duma's decisions on the so-called Russian status of Sevastopol. . . . Ukraine considers establishment of a special partnership with NATO as one of the main conditions for ensuring its national interests in the context of NATO enlargement, a guarantee against a new division of Europe and creation of a grey zone of security in Central and Eastern Europe. Good neighbourly relations — as the most important security principle — should remain in the focus of our future activities. In particular, within the context of NATO enlargement, it should become the major

<sup>47</sup> Monitor, 27 November, and Reuter 6 December, 1996.

Reuter, 6 December 1996.

<sup>49</sup> Radio Ukraine and Interfax, 6 December 1996.

<sup>50</sup> ITAR-TASS, 6 December and UNIAN, 7 December, 1996.

criterion and prerequisite for all countries without exception wishing to join the Alliance. Cooperation Partners have to conclude with all their neighbours bilateral agreements, which include clear-cut provisions on good-neighbourly relations, respect of the rights of persons belonging to national minorities, and, of course, on absence of territorial claims and recognition of existing borders.<sup>51</sup>

Despite continuing Russian opposition to NATO's enlargement, the ministerial meeting decided that the Alliance would hold a summit in Madrid in July 1997 at which new members would be invited to join. It also announced that the NATO would not deploy nuclear weapons on the territory of new members from Eastern and Central Europe. The meeting also addressed relations with Ukraine. The final communique stated that NATO intended to strengthen 'cooperative relationships with all Partners, including building a strong security partnership with Russia and a distinctive relationship with Ukraine'. In it, the NATO ministers declared:

We continue to support Ukraine as it develops as a democratic nation and a market economy. The maintenance of Ukraine's independence, territorial integrity and sovereignty is a crucial factor for stability and security in Europe. Ukraine's development of a strong, enduring relationship with NATO is an important aspect of the emerging European security architecture. . . . We are committed to the development in coming months, through high level and other consultations, of a distinctive and effective NATO-Ukraine relationship, which could be formalized, possibly by the time of the Summit, building on the document on enhanced NATO-Ukraine relations agreed in September 1995, and taking into account recent Ukrainian proposals.<sup>52</sup>

While attention had been focused on the impasse in Ukrainian-Russian relations, Kyiv had also been busy developing closer cooperation with several of the CIS states which were also not enthusiastic about Moscow's efforts to promote greater integration in the CIS. For instance, on 15 September, the Ukrainian and

<sup>51</sup> Statement by His Excellency Hennadiy Udovenko, Minister for Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, at the Meeting of the North Atlantic Cooperation Council, Brussels, 11 December 1996.

<sup>52</sup> Final Communique, Ministerial Meeting of the North Atlantic Council Held at NATO Headquarters, Brussels, on 10 December 1995.

Uzbekistani foreign ministers had signed an agreement in Tashkent on coordinating their policies towards CIS issues, leading Udovenko to announce that the two states had agreed to oppose the continued Russian chairmanship of the CIS Council of Heads of State and would be jointly proposing that Yeltsin be succeeded as chairman by either the presidents of Turkmenistan or Azerbaijan.<sup>53</sup> Furthermore, Ukraine had recently also concluded military assistance agreements with Uzbekistan, Georgia and Turkmenistan.

The search for alternative sources of fuel remained a major preoccupation. During the summer of 1996, for example, Ukrainian experts had conducted negotiations with the Turkish authorities about the possible construction of an oil pipeline from Ceyhan to Samsun, and, reportedly, also with Iraqi officials about the shipping of Iraqi oil to Ukraine via the Turkish terminal of Iskanderon.<sup>54</sup> Back in September 1995, Ukrainian, Turkmen and Iranian officials had agreed in Ashgabat on a triangular deal wherein Ukraine would pay off its debts to Turkmenistan for natural gas by delivering rails to Iran for the building of its Meshkheds-Serakhs railway - part of the planned international 'North-South transport corridor' designed to open up access to the Persian Gulf for some of the CIS countries.<sup>55</sup> In late June 1996, the first meeting of an ensuing Ukrainian-Iranian-Turkmen intergovernmental committee on trade and economic relations and investment cooperation had been held in Kyiv.<sup>56</sup> Meanwhile, the construction of a new oil terminal in Odesa, begun in 1994, had been plagued by financing problems; nevertheless, at the end of 1996 a project to build a new oil terminal south of Odesa at Kherson was also being promoted and funding sought from the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development.<sup>57</sup>

In the first half of November, Lazarenko visited Georgia, where he signed an agreement on the opening of a 'Eurasian transport corridor' stretching from Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan via Georgia, and from the Georgian Black Sea port of Poti by sea to Odesa. On his return to Kyiv, the prime minister also announced that Ukraine and Georgia were conducting negotiations about the construction

<sup>53</sup> Monitor, 17 September 1996.

<sup>54</sup> See Alexander Pivovarov's article in *Kommersant Daily*, 17 August 1996.

<sup>55</sup> Monitor, 14 September 1995.

<sup>56</sup> Ukrinform, 28 June 1996.

<sup>57</sup> Reuter, 28 October 1996.

of an 850-kilometre pipeline from Baku to Poti to transport Caspian oil to the Black Sea across Georgian territory.<sup>58</sup> The following month, he travelled to Uzbekistan where he concluded a number of agreements dealing with, among other things, the supply of Uzbekistani natural gas.<sup>59</sup> Visits by President Kuchma to Israel (during which he addressed the Knesset and also met with Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat) and Turkey in late November, and South Korea in mid-December, as well as by other officials at this time to China and the United Arab Emirates, attested to Ukraine's continuing broad-ranging efforts to develop and diversify its economic and trade links.

After his visit to Ankara, Kuchma confirmed that Ukraine and Turkey intended to go ahead with the construction of an oil pipeline from Ceyhan to Samsun.<sup>60</sup> On 16 December, Ukrainian, Georgia and Azerbaijani officials also agreed at a meeting in Odesa to create a sea transportation corridor from Ukraine (Odesa, Ilichivsk), to Georgia (Poti), connected by overland routes to a sea-link from Azerbaijan (Baku) to Turkmenistan (Krasnovodsk), which would form the western extension of a new Euro-Asian trade route linking Central Asia with the Black Sea.<sup>61</sup>

Whether coincidentally or not, the vulnerability of the proposed new sea-link between Georgia and Ukraine had, however, been graphically demonstrated by the arrest in early December by Russian border guard vessels patrolling Georgian territorial waters of a Ukrainian ship near Batumi. This incident, which drew protests from Ukraine and even stronger ones from Georgia, was another blow to relations between Kyiv and Moscow. Once again, though, the Ukrainian leadership exercised restraint. Kuchma continued to express the hope that 'good will, political wisdom and simple common sense' would prevail and that once President Yeltsin had recovered from his heart operation he would find it in himself to come to Kyiv to sign the long-stalled friendship treaty and thereby

*Ibid.*, 8 and 11 November 1996. See also Monitor, 6 November 1996.

<sup>58</sup> Monitor, 9 December 1996.

*Den*, 4 December 1996.

<sup>61</sup> Ukrinform, 17 December 1996. On the plans for the new Eurasian trade corridor, see Bruce Clark, 'In Marco Polo's Footsteps', *Financial Times*, 19 December 1996.

remove the 'cold spirit of alienation and mistrust' threatening bilateral relations.<sup>62</sup>

In the meantime, the renewed 'interest' in Moscow in Sevastopol's status seemed to have an instant resonance in Crimea. In the first half of October, the speaker of the Crimean parliament, Suprunyuk, who was criticized for being too pro-Ukrainian, was removed by a vote of no confidence and a moderate pro-Russian deputy, Vasiliï Kiselev, elected to replace him. But as local observers pointed out, the political struggle in Crimea seemed increasingly to reflect a scarcely concealed struggle between rival economic clans or mafias for control of the peninsula's resources, rather than a battle over Crimea's relationship with Ukraine.<sup>63</sup> Nevertheless, the more militant pro-Russian forces remained active. For instance, at the end of November, a conference was held in Sevastopol at which complaints about alleged discrimination against Russians in Crimea were voiced and an appeal addressed to the Russian parliament calling for support. The gathering transformed itself into the founded meeting of a 'Russian Duma of Sevastopol'.<sup>64</sup>

Meanwhile, in the Donbas, the sentencing of the first two strike leaders to be tried for disturbing public order, who were given sentences of three and two and a half years respectively, had threatened to produce new protests. In the second half of November, however, the Verkhovna Rada decided to declare an amnesty for all the fourteen strike leaders who had been detained or imprisoned. The pro-Russian organizations in the Donbas, such as the Civic Congress of Ukraine, the Party of Slavonic Unity, the Union of Peace-loving Forces and the Inter-movement also kept up their separatist agitation. For example, the Civic Congress distributed leaflets arguing that there was no common language or interests between Western and Eastern Ukraine and condemning what were described as official efforts to integrate the two and thereby prevent the Donbas from achieving a union with Russia.<sup>65</sup> As in Crimea, on

Reuter, 14 December 1996. Horbulin, however, commented that the incident 'leads to the sad conclusion that if the Georgians can do nothing about the Russian military in their own port, then we will have to think very hard about Sevastopol'. Reuter, 12 December 1996.

<sup>62</sup> See for example Ron Popeski's report: 'Ukraine's separatist Crimea plunges into clan warfare', Reuter, 7 October 1996.

<sup>64</sup> UNIAN and *Flag Rodiny*, 30 November 1996.

<sup>65</sup> *Donetskii Kryazh*, no. 43, 1996.

29 November, a meeting was convened in Donetsk at which local trade union and political leaders condemned, on the one hand, the government's economic policies and called for President Kuchma's resignation, and on the other, defended the local dominance of the Russian language and denounced the activities of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church — Kyiv Patriarchate. At the meeting, the Donetsk regional council of trade unions proposed the founding of a public and political bloc — 'Working Donbas' — to promote the 'revival' and 'interests' of the region.<sup>66</sup>

But all this was overshadowed by the professionally-executed assassination on 3 November of a leading businessman from Donetsk and deputy in the Verkhovna Rada, Yevhen Shcherban, together with his wife and one other person in Donetsk airport, which had sent a shudder of revulsion through the country and once again fixed attention on the rampant growth of organized crime and corruption. Moreover, the fact that after the unsuccessful attempt on Lazarenko's life Shcherban's brother Volodymyr had been removed as the head of the Donetsk regional administration, and that the Shcherbans had become closely allied with Marchuk, set off all sorts of speculation.<sup>67</sup>

And, of course, all this time, the Ukrainian government was still continuing to grapple with its huge wage payment crisis, with arrears amounting in mid-October to an estimated \$1.7 billion. Little relief was to be gained from reports about similar difficulties and hardships in Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan and other CIS countries. In mid-October the Verkhovna Rada approved a three-year economic programme prepared by the government designed to accelerate market reform and structural change. It foresaw growth in industrial output during 1997, tax reforms and a further reduction of inflation, but also continuing state support for key industries and the agro-industrial sector. Lazarenko was able to promise workers only gradual relief in monthly installments from the hardships caused by wage arrears and appealed for more patience until production got going again.<sup>68</sup>

<sup>66</sup> UNIAN, 30 December, and Monitor, 2 December, 1996.

<sup>67</sup> See Oleg Varfolomeyev, 'Businessman's Murder Impacts on Ukrainian Politics', *Analytical Brief*, OMRI, Prague, vol. 1, no. 462 (14 November 1996).

Reuter, 15 October 1996. For a useful discussion of the programme, see Ben Slay, 'Ukraine's Economic Program - More Muddling Through?', *Analytical Brief*, OMRI, vol. 1, no. 395 (17 October 1996).

Soon afterwards, the Ukrainian prime minister warned the country of worse to come, announcing that the government would be drastically raising duties on food imports in order to protect domestic food producers. By early December, though, the first signs of a rift between the prime minister and the president began to appear as Kuchma criticized the government for seeking to reduce social benefits and accused it of 'inefficiency' and 'lack of responsibility'.<sup>69</sup> There was a further surprise when, on 11 December, the president suddenly sacked his embattled chief of staff, Tabachnyk, thereby removing a figure who until now had been his gatekeeper and his close and influential lieutenant. With the departure of Tabachnyk, who had also been Kuchma's presidential election campaign manager, questions immediately arose about how the increasingly isolated president would manage.<sup>70</sup>

The fifth year of Ukraine's independence drew to a close with the Ukrainian parliament and government struggling to agree on another austerity budget for 1997, the president still seeking to delineate his powers *vis a vis* the parliament and government, one of Chornobyl's remaining two reactors having been shut down but no alternative source of energy for the approaching winter found to replace it, and negotiations continuing with foreign donors and creditors about the level and terms of foreign financing for its reform programme. In fact, in a strong demonstration of support, on 17 December, representatives of donor countries and international financial institutions pledged, at a meeting in Washington, broad financial assistance for Ukraine of over \$5 billion over the next three years, providing the country stuck to its economic reform course.<sup>71</sup> Thus, despite the continuing difficulties with Russia, Ukraine's political independence seemed secure, but given the country's continuing difficulties in making ends meet and securing sufficient energy, it rested on a delicate new dependence on Western and Eastern credits and loans.

<sup>69</sup> OMRI Daily Digest, 5 December 1996.

Matthew Kaminski, 'Embattled Kuchma Sacks Aide', *Financial Times*, 12 December 1996.

<sup>71</sup> Reuter, 17 December 1996.

*Achievements and challenges*

After five years of independence, numerous other problems and challenges lay ahead. The economic recession and dismantling of Soviet structures had left Ukraine's science, education, culture and press, not to mention social and health services, exposed to the vagaries of inflation and market forces. The cultural renaissance that many had hoped independence would usher in had been less than vibrant, and the Ukrainian language found itself under renewed pressure; many Ukrainian publications had been forced to fold and Russian-language newspapers and books (many of them published in Russia) had increasingly flooded the market.<sup>72</sup> The regional and religious divisions in society, though gradually becoming less pronounced, persisted, and the ecological and demographic situation was hardly encouraging. Most of all, the continuing economic and social hardships and uncertain future, on the one hand, and corruption, crime and political confrontation hindering the reform of the political and economic system, on the other, had resulted in social exhaustion and widespread apathy.

Nevertheless, with every month and year that passed, Ukraine's independence was being consolidated, and the building of a new state, however run-down it might have appeared as result of the difficult political and economic conditions and squandered time, had continued. Judged by the pace of change in some of its former Soviet bloc neighbours to the west, Ukraine's progress had been disappointingly slow, but compared, more fittingly, to the record of most of the independent states which had emerged as a result of the collapse of the Soviet Union, including Russia, it could claim some distinction.

Despite all of its problems, Ukraine had managed to preserve peace and stability on its territory — which was no mean achievement considering the conflicts and bloodshed which had afflicted many

Indeed, in early December, President Kuchma instructed the government to draft a revised version of the Law on Languages with the aim of bolstering the Ukrainian language especially in the sphere of publications and education (Radio Ukraine, 7 December 1996). Typically, a meeting on 4 December chaired by Deputy Prime Minister Kuras to examine the implementation of the state programme for the development of the Ukrainian language in the Kharkiv region had revealed that only 23% of classes in the local junior schools were taught in Ukrainian and less than 8% in institutes of higher learning (Ukrinform, 5 December 1996).

of the other CIS countries — and avoided allowing differences with neighbours to get out of hand. While engaged simultaneously in quasi-decolonization, state-building, fundamental political and economic transformation, demilitarization and the conversion of a huge military-industrial sector to peaceful uses, it had sought to forge a sense of statehood built on modern democratic notions of political citizenship rather than ethnicity, and to base its external relations on openness and good-neighbourliness.

Determined to uphold its independence in the face of strong integrative pressures being generated within the CIS by Russia, and opposed to any new division of Europe into two political and military blocs, Ukraine's sovereignty and neutrality had become a key element in the new European security architecture. As Henry Kissinger put it in the summer of 1996: 'The long-term stakes are high. If Ukraine were to share the fate of Belarus and return to Russian satellite status, tremors would be felt all over Europe. A militarization of diplomacy would be nearly inevitable.'<sup>73</sup> This seemed to have registered with most of the leading Western states: after the caution and skepticism with which they generally responded to Ukraine's push for independence, led by the United States, they had increasingly embraced the country, helping it with internal economic and political stabilization and to anchor itself in Western institutions. This had come after a better understanding of Ukraine's security concerns and recognition that it did not in fact harbour ambitions of becoming a nuclear power. Because of geopolitical and economic realities, though, Ukraine seemed destined to remain a Janus, looking, whatever its actual preferences, east and west simultaneously and continuing the difficult balancing act.

For all the immense difficulties facing it, after five years of independence, Ukraine was recovering and strengthening its own sense of history, pride and identity; furthermore, its leadership was striving to move it towards a better future in which the potential and wealth of this large country would be put to better use. A new generation was growing up in a sovereign and by and large free country, and the hope was that it would be able to shed some of the complexes and neuroses of its parents.

Viewed from a historical perspective, Ukraine's national renewal and resurgent political assertiveness during the dramatic decade since

<sup>73</sup> Henry A. Kissinger, 'Beware: A Threat Abroad', *Newsweek*, 17 June 1996.

the apocalyptic visions of doom and gloom were released together with the deadly radiation by the exploding reactor in Chornobyl had indeed been remarkable. For all the mass rallies, political confrontation, strikes and heated emotions, it had been a singularly peaceful and self-restraining revolution, though not exactly a velvet one. The result was paradoxical: the new Ukraine was not what many patriots had hoped for; but then, it was also not what the opponents of Ukrainian nationalism had feared.

But five years after achieving independence, Ukraine was still not out of the woods: numerous economic, social, political and security problems were the trees that blotted out the light. The future was still full of imponderables. How soon would Ukraine be able to reverse the economic decline and begin raising productivity and living standards? Would the Ukrainian political elite manage to overcome regional, business or ideological interests, safeguard national unity and work jointly for the national good? Would the friction between the different branches of government be reduced, could the parliamentarians agree on a new election law opening up the system to modern political parties, and would the political system be able to combat crime and corruption? Would Ukraine manage to keep the centrifugal tendencies in the Donbas and Crimea in check and to accommodate regional pressures? How would the integration of the country proceed: was Ukraine destined to become an Eastern European variant of Belgium divided into two distinct linguistic communities? Relations with Russia and the West still needed to be formalized, but what form would this take? Would Ukraine's significance decline as Central and Eastern European states were absorbed into Euro-Atlantic structures and be sacrificed as a part of a new implicit division of Europe? Or would its importance as a bridge, indeed even a potential drawbridge, between East and West, remain? Was Ukraine destined to keep looking nervously over its shoulder at its northern neighbour and to remain exposed to the vicissitudes of Russian domestic politics, or would its gradual integration into European structures provide the security and stability it was seeking?

All these future uncertainties notwithstanding, though, the Ukrainian resurgence at the end of the twentieth century was indeed something of a miracle, and even 'believers' have had problems coming to terms with it. A country, one of Europe's largest at that, which had been partitioned for most of its history and until only

recently had seemed condemned never to reappear again on the map of Europe as an independent state, has emerged from historical and political oblivion and assumed responsibility for its own future. Despite fears and all sorts of gloomy predictions, the country has held together and stood its ground. Undoubtedly, the road Ukraine has embarked on has proved more painful and difficult than many had expected, or were prepared for, and more challenges and dangers still lie ahead. Recalling, however, W. B. Yeats's description of Ireland's experience 80 years earlier, Ukraine was certainly not the first 'terrible beauty' to be born; left only to regret that history had not been a kinder midwife in those years to their country as well, the builders of the new Ukraine nevertheless took pride in this late European child.