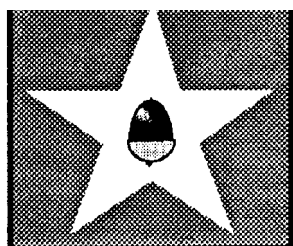


**Conflict Studies Research Centre**

**James Sherr**

**A New Defence Minister  
in Ukraine**

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## A New Defence Minister in Ukraine

James Sherr

*The replacement of Army General Oleksandr Kuzmuk by Army General Volodymyr Shkidchenko as Ukraine's Minister of Defence might have more serious implications than is widely assumed. The strong-willed and very capable former minister resigned on 24 October, twenty days after a Ukrainian S-200 surface-to-air missile accidentally downed a Russian civilian Tu-154. On the same day, the highly respected Shkidchenko, Chief of the General Staff since September 1998, was appointed Acting Defence Minister. Despite a brief period of speculation that a civilian – either Yevhen Marchuk, Secretary of the National Security and Defence Council, or Volodymyr Horbulin, head of the State Commission on the Military-Industrial Complex – might be appointed, President Leonid Kuchma firmly ruled out a civilian minister on 7 November and appointed Shkidchenko to the post on 12 November.<sup>1</sup> Although Shkidchenko is widely admired in the Armed Forces, there are reasons to suspect that his appointment could increase the influence of the President and Presidential Administration over Ukraine's unpoliticised military establishment.*

### Tragedy & Culpability

The downing of the Tupolev on 4 October, only 18 months after a Tochka-U training missile struck a block of flats in Brovary near Kyiv, was a serious blow to Ukraine's defence establishment. Although the missile was launched from a Russian training ground on Crimea's Cape Opuk during a joint Ukraine-Russia air defence exercise, and although the preliminary findings of an official Russian commission attribute the accident to a design flaw in the Russian produced missile, rather than to human or organisational error, Russia has not incurred any blame for the accident.<sup>2</sup> However, there are indications that the issue of culpability was discussed privately between the members of the Russian and Ukrainian state commissions which were promptly established to study the incident. This is suggested by the rather defensive comments of Vladimir Rushaylo, Secretary of the Russian Federation Security Council and Chairman of the Russian commission:

The side which organised the anti-aircraft defence training exercises, resulting in a S-200 missile striking the Russian Tu-154 airliner, should be the side which answers for the conduct of those training exercises ... [D]espite the fact that this is a Russian training ground, guaranteeing security is all that the command of the training ground is responsible for, and the Russian side cannot

answer for those exercises which the Ukrainian side conducted at the training ground.<sup>3</sup>

But on the same day as this statement, Yevhen Marchuk hinted that the issue of guaranteeing security of the training ground might be more germane to safety issues than Rushaylo suggested. Indeed, the Russian and Ukrainian experts had concluded that this was a 'principally new issue' and that it was now necessary to discuss 'the problem of enhancement of security at training grounds and the infrastructures used by the Ukrainian army, especially in Crimea'.<sup>4</sup>

Nevertheless, in the immediate aftermath of the disaster, it was the standing of Ukraine's Armed Forces which suffered and understandably so:

- Instead of reserving judgement, on 5 October Kuzmuk ruled out any connection between the exercise and the crash of the Tu-154. On the same day, Rushaylo stated that he had sent an official enquiry to Ukraine and received an official denial. Although initial evidence strongly supported Kuzmuk – as did the Commander-in-Chief of Russian Air Forces, who attended the exercise – the denial merely suggested that Ukraine's Armed Forces had learnt nothing from the Brovary tragedy.
- This lack of caution damaged the standing of Ukraine's Prime Minister, Anatoliy Kinakh, who on the basis of the MOD's conclusions announced that the Russian aircraft was well out of range of the missile firings.

On 24 October, the day of Kuzmuk's resignation, President Kuchma acknowledged Ukraine's complete responsibility for the tragedy.

## **The Need for 'Civilian Control'**

On the same day, Kuchma announced that 'Ukraine must introduce civilian control over the military'. This statement aroused speculation that a civilian minister would be appointed. Yet on 7 November, Kuchma silenced such speculation, stating 'it is not yet time for a civilian Minister of Defence'. He also stated what few in Ukraine would question: that the tenure of the last civilian minister, Valeriy Shmarov (1994-96) was harmful not only to civil-military relations, but to military reform. Yet appearances of second thoughts on the part of President Kuchma are misleading. He does intend to impose 'civilian control over the military', but his own version of it and by a very different route: the appointment of a state secretary to the Ministry of Defence.

On 29 May 2001, barely one month following the dismissal of the radically reformist government of Viktor Yushchenko on 26 April, Kuchma announced that he would appoint state secretaries to all governmental departments.

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Like permanent under secretaries in the United Kingdom, these officials (with a rank equivalent to that of minister) are to remain in post irrespective of the government – ie the prime minister and cabinet – in power. They will also be reinforced by one or two deputies, and the number of deputy ministers reporting to the minister will be diminished accordingly. But Ukraine's political system bears very little resemblance to that of the United Kingdom. Ukraine has a presidential constitution, and the president appoints the government. Unlike British permanent secretaries, Ukraine's state secretaries are not civil servants, but presidential appointees. What is more, like other states of the former Soviet Union, Ukraine lacks a professional civil service – ie a corps of politically neutral, experienced and expert officials, guaranteed job security and legal protection from political pressure. What it has are civilian functionaries, 90,000 of whom work in the Ministry of Defence and Armed Forces.

Under the forceful direction of Kuzmuk, the Ministry of Defence succeeded in resisting the appointment of a state secretary and was the last ministry to hold out. The source of this resistance has now been removed. On 2 November Kuchma announced that a commission would examine the appointment of a state secretary in the Ministry of Defence. Already on 24 October, Kuchma took an equally significant step: the creation of a Main Directorate for the Activities of Military Units and Law Enforcement Agencies in the Presidential Administration. Whereas Ukraine's President is elected, and whereas the government is accountable to the *Verkhovna Rada* (parliament), the Presidential Administration is neither elected, nor accountable to anyone except the President himself.

The extension of 'civilian control' over the Armed Forces will therefore be an extension of presidential control. In the wake of the 'Gongadze affair' – the publication of taped conversations allegedly linking the President with the murder of journalist Grigoriy Gongadze and other abuses of power – many have questioned whether presidential control of force ministries is in fact synonymous with the 'civilian, democratic control' which Ukraine is pledged to develop. Many have also noted that whereas the Ministry of Interior (MVS) and Security Service of Ukraine (SBU) have been drawn into political struggle, the Armed Forces and Ministry of Defence have not.

## Policy Implications

Army General Volodymyr Shkidchenko is almost universally respected for his intellect, professionalism and commitment to reform. Unlike his authoritative but abrasive predecessor, he is liked by his subordinates and is known to consider their views. He is also highly respected by the NATO officers and officials who cooperate with Ukraine in realising its State Programme on Armed Forces Development and Reform, 2001-05. But in the words of Borys Andreysyuk, Chairman of the *Rada's* Standing Commission on Questions of Security and Defence, 'the only new experience for him will be political activity or the political aspect of his activities'. It is not

inconceivable that this inexperience will have mid-term implications for the reform programme, as well as the Ukraine-NATO relationship, given the institutional changes discussed above.

This possibility exists despite the fact that the State Programme – of which Shkidchenko was a key author – was drawn up in response to a decree from President Kuchma. It is a far-reaching programme, calling for the transformation of Ukraine's 310,000 Armed Forces into a substantially smaller force designed primarily for limitation of local conflicts and, alongside other force ministries, the resolution of complex emergencies on Ukraine's territory. These objectives, which entail a radical break with the concepts and ethos of the Soviet period, have provided a new impetus to NATO-Ukraine cooperation, including the establishment of joint mechanisms of consultation, audit and assistance. Over 500 bilateral activities have been scheduled between Ukraine and NATO Allies in 2001, as well as 250 activities with NATO's multilateral institutions.

Yet whilst this process has been supported by President Kuchma, it has not been as firmly supported by a Presidential Administration which has become more 'centrist' and Russian-orientated since the dismissal of Borys Tarasyuk as Foreign Minister in September 2000. It is widely believed that Anatoliy Orel, Deputy Head of the Presidential Administration with responsibility for foreign policy has played a key role in these changes, which include an official revision of policy. Whereas 'Euro-Atlantic integration' was presented as Ukraine's aim during the Tarasyuk period, the aim is now characterised as 'European integration' and 'cooperation with NATO'.

Moreover, the NATO-Ukraine relationship is not supported by the Russian Federation which, ignoring Ukraine's policy of non-alignment, officially defines 'the building of allied relations with Ukraine' as a strategic priority. Although Russia has gained enormous influence over Ukraine in other key spheres, the NATO-Ukraine relationship has remained off limits. There is much resentment that Ukraine-Russia military cooperation, albeit increasing, is no greater than that between Ukraine and Poland. Nevertheless, there is recognition in Russia that 'forms and methods of cooperation with NATO, including that in the military sphere, is a delicate issue'.<sup>5</sup> Delicate issues are best handled in cooperation with internal allies, and there is reason to believe that such allies exist in the Presidential Administration.

## **Conclusion**

The establishment of 'civilian democratic control' over the Armed Forces became an official objective of Ukraine's political leadership well before the events of 4 October. It is also a core objective of NATO-Ukraine cooperation, as well as Partnership for Peace. Understandable as this is, it is only reasonable to ask how 'civilian democratic control' is best introduced in a country where civilian expertise is in deficit, where the institutions and

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instincts of civil society are weak, where democracy is undeveloped and where the minimal conditions of transparency – the ability to know *what* decisions are made, *where* they are made and *by whom* they are made – are not always present. On 7 November, President Kuchma stated that ‘a civilian minister of defence requires a civilian administration’. This, surely, must also be true if the appointment of state secretaries is to enhance democracy, rather than diminish it. Measured against a NATO template, standards of openness and accountability in Ukraine’s Armed Forces leave much to be desired. Measured against other force ministries under ‘firm presidential control’, these standards are impressive and enlightened. Moreover, the core attribute of any military force, professionalism, has only been strengthened since Army General Oleksandr Kuzmuk replaced the civilian, Valeriy Shmarov, in 1996.

Ukraine’s new Minister of Defence is a professional to the bone, not to say a committed reformer, a firm supporter of NATO-Ukraine ties and a ‘safe pair of hands’. His appointment is a positive development and an important one. Yet it must be understood in the context of an equally important development. President Kuchma has used the airliner tragedy as an opportunity to establish tighter personal control over the MOD. This, too, could have positive results. Yet it could also open the way to political intrigue and, in the mid-term, an increase of Russian influence.

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> On 13 November, Kuchma dismissed Colonel General Volodymyr Tkachev, Commander of Air Defence Forces. On 12-13, he also made changes in two other force ministries, dismissing Borys Alekseyenko and appointing Mykola Lytvyn (former Commander of MVS Internal Troops) as Head of the State Committee on State Borders and dismissing the head of the State Customs Service, Yuriy Sokolov.

<sup>2</sup> According to an article in the Russian paper *Fakty* on 10 November 2001, citing *Interfax*, rockets for the S-200 complex are produced by the Grushin Design Bureau near Moscow. ‘Openings in components of the plating covering the Russian Tu-154 are very similar to traces of shrapnel from the lining of the Ukrainian rocket’ [*Otverstiya na detalyakh obshivki rossiyskogo Tu-154 ochen’ pokhozhi na slediy shrapneli, kotoraya yavlyaetsya “nachinkoy” ukrainskoy raketiy*].

<sup>3</sup> *ITAR-TASS*, 2 November 2001 [BBC Summary of World Broadcasts: Former Soviet Union, hereafter SWB].

<sup>4</sup> Marchuk added that the experts agreed “to draw up and to offer to the leaders of both countries a set of measures aimed at the prevention of such disasters from the point of view of security, international law and environmental and economic principles, taking into account the tragic experience of events on 4 October”. *UNIAN*, 2 November 2001, cited in SWB.

<sup>5</sup> Valeriy Loshchinin, Deputy Foreign Minister with responsibility for relations with CIS countries, 14 May 2001 (Interfax), cited in SWB.

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