

Belarus and Ukraine Are Targetted as 'Rogue States'

by Rachel Douglas

Zealous campaigners for pre-emptive war on Iraq, such as Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.), have now trained their sights on two countries in the heart of Europe: Belarus and Ukraine. An array of Washington think-tanks and associated publications are applying the neo-imperial lingo of "rogue states" and "regime change" to these two countries, both of which were formerly within the Soviet Union. Superficially, they invoke the pretext of alleged human rights violations by President Alexander Lukashenko of Belarus and Ukrainian President Leonid Kuchma; but the circumstances of this agitation indicate that no real concern about human rights is involved. Rather, the campaign against the Belarus and Ukrainian leaders has to do with the Washington war party's desire to get the Iraq war under way—which is all the more intense for having been frustrated so far—and to drive home the point that national sovereignty is but a minor annoyance in a would-be one-empire world.

On Nov. 14, McCain keynoted an event called "The Axis of Evil: Belarus—the Missing Link," held by the New Atlantic Initiative (NAI) at the American Enterprise Institute's (AEI) Albert Wohlstetter Conference Center. The NAI, co-founded by Margaret Thatcher and Henry Kissinger, brings together British and American promoters of a *novum imperium*. AEI, which hosts NAI activities stateside, was home, during most of the 1990s, to the current Bush Administration's leading "chicken-hawks"—Richard Perle, John Bolton, consultant Michael Ledeen, with frequent participation from Douglas Feith, and also James Woolsey.

Joining McCain at the "Missing Link" event were Tom Dine, the former head of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), who now is president of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty; Mark Palmer, the former Ambassador to Hungary and a longtime crony/asset of Kissinger and George Soros; and Barbara Haig, vice president of the National Endowment for Democracy. The proceedings were co-sponsored by the NAI, the AEI, Freedom House, the National Endowment for Democracy, the International Republican Institute, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, the Pattis Family Foundation, and the U.S. Embassy in Minsk. Michael Kozak, current U.S. Ambassador to Belarus, greeted the participants.

Fanaticism was on display already in the invitation to the event, which proclaimed: "The world is an unwelcome place

for Saddam Hussein's cronies. Yet they are always welcome in Minsk—capital of Belarus. . . . In a land where the KGB (yes, still the KGB) runs roughshod over rights, no one is safe, and nothing is sacred. . . . Can the West work together to eliminate this shame of Europe?" The thesis of the conference was that Belarus President Alexander Lukashenka is Europe's last dictator, who consorts with the leadership of the countries President Bush has designated as the "Axis of Evil," including selling air defense weapons used against U.S. and British planes patrolling the no-fly zones in Iraq.

McCain declared that NATO should not tolerate a "black hole of tyranny" in Belarus, and that it is time for the United States and its allies to "roll back Belarus's dictatorship." He said that Russia is largely to blame for Lukashenka's dictatorship, but with what he called Russian President Vladimir Putin's recent repudiation of Lukashenka, if it proves to be real, "a balance of power for freedom will rise to challenge Lukashenka."

Disinvited to NATO Summit

The Washington agitation against Lukashenka came just one week before the so-called Big Bang NATO summit in Prague, where seven East European countries would be inducted into the military alliance. On Nov. 15, the government of the Czech Republic refused to issue a visa to Lukashenka, blocking him from attending the Nov. 20-21 summit. Belarus opposes NATO's planned eastward expansion, but maintains a limited partnership with NATO through the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council.

Belarus immediately recalled its Ambassador in the Czech Republic for consultations. Russia's NTV asserted that "all NATO" stood behind the Czech visa denial to Lukashenka, linking the move to "possible military cooperation with Iraq," among other things. The Czech Foreign Minister, meanwhile, insisted that the decision concerned "Lukashenka personally, not Belarus or its people"—yet, Lukashenka is the head of state.

Also disinvited from the Prague NATO summit was President Kuchma of Ukraine, although Ukraine signed a "Charter on a Distinctive Partnership" with NATO back in 1997. NATO decided to hold a meeting of the Ukraine-NATO Commission only at the level of foreign ministers, while not inviting Kuchma to address any gathering during the summit. Kuchma called a press conference on Nov. 16 to say that if he couldn't speak in Prague, nobody else would attend from Ukraine, though "European security cannot be constructed without Ukraine's participation." As of Nov. 21, the Ukrainian President's spokesmen still promised he would be in the Czech capital the following day.

The "Iraq" factor in this brusque treatment of the Ukrainian head of state takes the form of U.S. accusations that Ukraine sold a Kolchuga air defense radar system to Iraq. The source of the accusation is tape recordings of conversations in Kuchma's office, delivered to Western agencies by Ukrainian

security officer Melnychenko, who defected and who also accuses Kuchma of incitement to murder. Based on Melnychenko's tapes, the United States demanded and obtained an invitation for U.S. and British inspectors to visit Ukraine to investigate the matter. On Nov. 12, Ukrainian Presidential Administration chief Victor Medvedchuk said that Ukraine had revealed "top-secret information" on the serial numbers and current location of 76 Kolchuga radars, which were produced beginning in 1987. According to Medvedchuk, Ukrainian authorities intervened to stop talks between the state-owned arms exporting firm Ukrspetseksport and a prospective purchaser from Jordan, so that no Kolchuga system went to Iraq. Washington is not satisfied with the explanations.

In early November, Ukrainian Foreign Minister Anatoli Zlenko appealed to the UN Security Council to take up the allegations of sale of the Kolchuga system. Zlenko disputed U.S. and British complaints, that Ukrainian officials provided insufficient information to the inspectors from those countries. "We should not leave this situation in an ambiguous position," Zlenko said. "We need to appeal to the higher authority also, because Iraqi issues are not only [a matter of] American security and our bilateral relations, but are issues of world peace and security." U.S. State Department spokesman Richard Boucher countered on Nov. 6, saying, "If the Ukrainian government had wanted to clarify matters fully, they could have done so with the U.S. and the U.K. team."

Russian authorities are less than comfortable with this latest heavy-handed diplomacy vis-à-vis its close neighbors. Moscow's relations with Lukashenka are complicated—the projected Russia-Belarus union project fell apart during the past year, while disputes over natural gas debts and assets led to Russian gas supplies to Belarus being slashed during November—and Russia did not rush to Lukashenka's defense, when the Czech Republic denied his visa. Yet, when pressed on the point during a Nov. 16 interview on Russian state television, Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov expressed regret at the approach taken by NATO and Prague: "We believe that all such issues should be solved and dealt with through dialogue. To refuse visas or to try to isolate someone—these are survivals of the past, of the Cold War period. Now, dialogue should not be avoided even when, I repeat, there may be some grievances with regard to someone. We do not share and we do not support such an approach."

Enthusiasm for a campaign against Ukraine and Belarus is less than unanimous in Western Europe, as well. The foreign ministers of the European Union, meeting Nov. 19, announced that Lukashenka and six other officials of Belarus will henceforth be denied visas for travel to European Union countries. They cited human rights violations in Belarus and non-cooperation with representatives of the Organization for Cooperation and Security in Europe (OSCE). But Portugal, currently in the OSCE Presidency, voted against this ban. "We don't agree with the political timing of the initiative," said Portuguese Foreign Minister Antonio Martins da Cruz.