

The Zenovia Sochor Parry Memorial Lectures in Ukrainian Politics

(2001) Sherman Garnett, Dean of James Madison College at Michigan State University, former U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense. "The Geopolitics of Muddling Through".



The second biennial Zenovia Sochor Parry Memorial Lecture entitled "The Geopolitics of Muddling Through" was delivered on November 8, 2001 by Dr. Sherman Garnett. Dr. Sherman Garnett is the Dean of James Madison College at Michigan State University, former U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense. He authored "Keystone in the Arch: Ukraine in the New Political Geography of Central and Eastern Europe" (1997), "Limited Partnership. Russia-China Relations in a Changing Asia" (1998), "Getting It Wrong: Regional Cooperation and the Commonwealth of Independent States" (with A. Aslund et. M.B.Olcott)

(2000), and has published widely in such national and international journals as Foreign Affairs, the Christian Science Monitor, the Washington Post, Nezavisimaya Gazeta, Rzecz Pospolita and the IISS Strategic Survey.

The real problem, Garnett argues in his lecture, is that Ukraine is a state that has survived but not flourished. It is a country mired in transition. Garnett does not see a serious challenge to Ukrainian sovereignty today, yet there is a threat to her capacity to determine her own place in Europe. There is a structural resistance to the change she needs to better fit with Europe. The state is astonishingly weak where it counts. It is particularly true of its institutions that promote basic laws and policies, establish political and social well-being. It is against this institutionally weak state and weakened civil society that the politics of muddling through is emerging. In this respect, Ukraine is best described as a very competitive oligarchy, mitigated by a set of important democratic features. The competing factions in the oligarchy are primarily concerned about their own wealth and power, not about the economic and social good.

In his "Reflections of the Revolution in France" (1790), Edmund Burke thought that difficulties in France were arising from giving supreme authority to men "who could not be expected to bear with moderation, or to conduct with discretion, a power which they themselves, more than any others, must be surprised to find in their hands. [...] Who could doubt that, at any expense to the state, of which they understood nothing, they would pursue their private interests, which they understand but too well?" In Garnett's opinion, this characterization well fits the Kuchma government. Since 1995, politics in Ukraine has progressively contracted to one central issue - how to secure Kuchma's hold on power.

This creates an image of Ukraine not moving in the desired direction, it is certainly not Soviet, but it is not European either. Its political system and economy seem to be particularly hostile to the kinds of things that membership in NATO and European institutions would require. The enormous creativity, shown by Ukraine in its diplomatic and military activity in mid-90s, has been largely exhausted. The things that it accomplished, for instance, such as strategic partnerships, its diplomatic recognition, settled border questions, eliminated some sources of external conflict, but they did not require fundamental change in the society. No diplomacy can sneak Ukraine into the European Union, or hide structural and other problems that Ukraine presents.

In Garnett's opinion, this is the worst time for Ukraine to present such an image to the West, to appear lost and muddling through, to retreat from grand ambitions of finally finding its place in Europe. At the time when Ukraine looks lost and muddled, Russia looks

decisive and, in a way that it has not in a long time, pro-Western. President Bush is deeply serious about Putin as a partner. So is Mr. Putin about President Bush. After meeting him in Lubiana, Mr. Bush thought of him, to quote Margaret Thatcher, as of the man he "could do business with". This is part of the strategic landscape - the juxtaposition of these two factors - Ukraine's seeming to be content sliding to the periphery, muddling through, and Russia trying to seize the center.

The situation creates a potential problem not in the sense that all that Ukraine has accomplished in its relations with the West is lost, but in that now much American attention is going to be focused on the war with terrorism and not on such issues as debt rescheduling, or Ukraine-Russia relations.

Even if Russia seems to be climbing out of the economic quagmire and moving forward, there is a huge set of constraints on Mr. Putin's ability to exert a strong impact on the economy. Many of the indictments that Garnett makes of Ukrainian politics and economics could be made of Russia as well. Putin has brought back some control and vision to Russian foreign policy, has worked hard to eliminate the extremes of governmental fragmentation. He still has to overcome a set of significant problems. The major change that happened in Russian history is that the state does not control the kind of resources the old USSR had. The Russian economic power has declined. Russia's per capita basis is somewhere near Thailand. Its military continues to be in crisis.

Dr. Garnett predicts that, in the next couple of weeks, there will be enough momentum, in the "honey moon period between the United States and Russia", to lead to a deal on the ABM Treaty, possibly NATO enlargement, or economic concessions for Russia to join the WTO. It is of considerable concern to Garnett that such serious issues as nuclear proliferation, Russian recklessness and its technology transfers may start being seen in "a much more optimistic and cheery light at least for a few months". It is important therefore to dampen expectations. Russia, in his opinion, is still a country that does not offer the US all that much. Problems continue to exist that will ultimately disappoint people who expect too much from this rapprochement.

At the same time, every positive thing in the US-Russian relations should not be taken as meaning the end of US-Ukrainian partnership. In Garnett's opinion, there is no inherent inconsistency between Ukraine's and Russia's success. It is not a choice between one and the other. Russia's success in the long run depends on the success of its neighbors more than most people in Moscow could imagine.

It is important to guard against the US conceding too much to the Russians, giving them either a free hand in Chechnia or, even worse, accepting Moscow's position that Chechnia is somehow explained by terrorism. One thing that could kill a positive internal development in Russia, warns Garnett, is ceding to it the responsibility for managing all of its neighborhood.

Garnett finds it impossible to imagine any concession, even from the present US Administration, on Ukraine that would make the integration between Ukraine and Russia sensible or even likely. A more realistic scenario, in his opinion, is Ukraine's sliding gradually toward a comfortable place in Europe's periphery and coming to resemble the more unstable and underdeveloped states of the Third World, and not its immediate western neighbors - Poland, the Czech Republic, Hungary.

A certain period of muddling through is not necessarily bad, admits Garnett, it is something to be expected from a new country, like Ukraine, burdened with its Soviet past. However the internal trends and especially the politics of the last couple of years do not produce a solid status quo, they are more characteristic of a state in decline. There is a basic pattern in Kyiv's politics - first muddling through, then a breakthrough, then again back to muddling through. The longer this pattern continues, the weaker Ukraine becomes.

In the next five-ten years, some fundamental issues will be decided in the West. The possibility of Europe's expansion, of Ukraine's full participation should be kept open. But these options will be closed by the shortsighted policies in Kyiv. The success of Ukraine and Russia's neighbors, argues Garnett, will be key to a "happier expansion of the European Union, to insuring the long-term success of what the EU is about".

In Garnett's opinion, it is important to urge the policy-makers in Kyiv to restore the sense that the West matters and not to settle for peripheralization Of Ukraine to the edge of Europe. The West does not require from Ukraine to choose between Russia and Europe. Hostility between Russia and Ukraine makes inclusion of Ukraine in NATO or European Union even more difficult.

Even in the time when terrorism is and should be the most important thing, the US still has to do other business. A strategy is needed that would recognize Ukraine for what it is now and for the foreseeable future, as a country that fell short of making a serious claim for membership in either the NATO or the European Union. It would be a strategic mistake, cautions Sherman Garnett, to say that this is a permanent situation, to declare Europe closed and its institutional expansion completed.

The events of September 11 bring to light the fact that there are security challenges not encompassed by membership in or outside the NATO. The states outside the NATO or any EU security structures still need security engagements, programs, relationships and cooperation. Another important factor, in Garnett's opinion, is that the US-Russian relations are never as good as promised. He doubts that the Bush-Putin partnership can overcome and erode ten years of positive work in the US-Ukrainian strategic partnership.