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Why Can't Ukraine be the Switzerland of Eurasia -- central Asia?

By Dmytro Firtash

Almost 8 years ago, on May 21, 2014, I published an [op-ed for the Kyiv Post](#) with a headline – “Ukraine must be strong, independent and neutral.”

With Russian military forces gathered on Ukraine's border and President Biden and NATO allies warning of the serious consequences if Russia violates our sovereignty and invades, the headline of my Kyiv Post op-ed eight years ago remains just as relevant to the current crisis. And more important, it offers a likely answer to it.

My question today is: Why must Ukraine be forced to choose between being anti-Russia and a member of NATO or pro-Russia and anti-NATO? Why can't we be neutral – the “Switzerland of Eurasia?” This would be consistent with Ukraine's historic position, going back to the middle ages, of being at the trading crossroads between Europe and Asia.

I reminded readers eight years ago in my op-ed of Ukraine's proud ethnic and cultural diversity. The people of Ukraine speak different languages, and follow different religions. About three-quarters of our people are like me, ethnic Ukrainian, with a bit more proportion of them in the west compared to the east. About one-fifth of the population, primarily in the east, is ethnic Russian and has family and cultural ties to Russia. There are also Byelorussians, Moldovans, Poles, Jews, Tatars, Bulgarians, Hungarians and many other ethnic groups living in Ukraine. While we may speak in different languages and have different cultural traditions, we are all Ukrainians with a common, historic national identity.

About 500 million people live in the European Union, to the West of Ukraine, and about 140 million people to the east in Russia. Ukraine is not just a point on the map. Ukraine is, by territory, the largest country in Europe and by population the sixth largest, with a population of more than 45 million people. We have well-developed infrastructure – roads, railways and pipelines as well as many ports on the Black Sea. We have fertile land, water, minerals, and natural resources. But our most important resource is our people – highly-educated and hard-working.

This is my point pertinent to the current crisis: America, Europe and Russia can all benefit by a neutral Ukraine as economic and trading partners with all, military allies of none.

I am a businessman. I am not interested in the political views of my business or trading partners. I started as a young man with nothing in the early 1990s, and my country was in a chaotic situation after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Ukraine declared her independence and we started to build a new democratic system of government in very difficult times. We had no national currency and no public institutions to ensure order and stability. For many years, the main problem for most of us Ukrainians has been how to go about finding basic food, shelter, and security for our families and ensure the future of our children.

I have little doubt I speak for many Ukrainians who would like to have the best of both worlds – neutrality, trading with all, good relations with all. And why not? This would mean more jobs and prosperity for Ukraine. A neutral Ukraine should not be seen as a threat to America, Europe, or Russia. The attitude of “if you are not with us, you are against us,” is not only wrong. Under the current circumstances, it is dangerous.

To repeat my headline from years ago: I believe in a united, independent, and neutral Ukraine. We can and should remain neutral – like Switzerland. I believe that is the best way to end the current crisis -- with everyone agreeing to respect Ukrainian neutrality and our sovereignty.

As Abraham Lincoln said in 1864, “The dogmas of the quiet past are inadequate to the stormy present. The occasion is piled high with difficulty, and we must rise — with the occasion. As our case is new, so we must think anew, and act anew. We must disenthral ourselves, and then we shall save our country.”

*Mr. Firtash, a successful Ukrainian businessman, for the last nine years has been forced to reside in Vienna, Austria, where he has resisted extradition to the US for an indictment based on allegations of a “scheme to bribe” Indian officials – not actual bribery – having nothing to do with the US. He has categorically denied those charges.*

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