

The Christian Science Monitor – 23.12.2014

By Howard LaFranchi

Ukraine pokes Russia, makes move toward NATO. Was it really necessary?

Взявши курс на НАТО, Україна дразнить Росію. А чи була в цьому необхідність?

Те, що українська Верховна рада проголосувала у вівторок за скасування позаблокового статусу країни, є в значній мірі символічним жестом і не означає, що Україна найближчим часом буде прагнути вступити в НАТО. А ось що точно відбудеться в результаті такого рішення, так це посилення напруженості між Україною та Росією.

<http://www.csmonitor.com/USA/Foreign-Policy/2014/1223/Ukraine-pokes-Russia-makes-move-toward-NATO.-Was-it-really-necessary-video>

Washington — The Ukraine parliament's vote Tuesday to nullify the country's non-aligned status is largely a symbolic gesture and does not mean Ukraine will seek NATO membership any time soon.

What the vote does promise is further ratcheting up of tensions between Ukraine and Russia, and between Western leaders and Russian President Vladimir Putin – who considers Ukraine an inseparable piece of Russia's backyard, and Ukrainian membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization a red line.

The vote represents one step toward fulfilling “all criteria of membership” in the North Atlantic Alliance. Perhaps the biggest impact of the vote will be to stir up waters that had begun to calm concerning embattled eastern Ukraine, some Russia analysts say. The

vote came just hours after new talks were announced for this week aimed at ending Ukraine's conflict with pro-Russian rebels in eastern Ukraine.

Recommended: How much do you know about Ukraine? Take our quiz!

"The real question is, why did this vote happen now, when the situation in eastern Ukraine is relatively calm?" says Paul Saunders, director of the US-Russian relations program at the Center for the National Interest in Washington.

The Ukrainian government probably felt "a little emboldened" to act as a result of the dire signs from Moscow concerning the Russian economy, Mr. Saunders says. But he adds that economic considerations are not likely to moderate Russia's reaction to the parliamentary vote.

"From Moscow's perspective this is clearly a provocative and inflammatory step," he says. Indeed, on Tuesday Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said the vote would have "extremely negative consequences," while Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev wrote on his Facebook page that the vote is tantamount to "an application to join NATO."

However, the parliamentary vote is highly symbolic and has little concrete impact. Ukraine President Petro Poroshenko has said a decision to seek NATO membership would come from the Ukrainian people in a referendum vote, and that such a referendum would not take place before the end of the decade.

But the parliamentary vote will add to keeping tensions alive because it feeds the perceptions that each side in the larger Ukraine-Russia conflict has about the other, Saunders says.

"If we're objective about it, how could the Kremlin annex Crimea and not expect a vote like this?" he says. "On the other hand, no one should be surprised by the Russian response. No leader," he adds, "would want to see a neighboring country move toward joining what people in his country perceive to be a hostile military alliance."

Events in Ukraine like the parliamentary vote are also part of what will be a sustained period of unpredictable tensions between Russia and the West, other analysts say.

Ukraine is not the primary cause of a "new rivalry" in Russian-Western relations, but it is "the main geographical locus and symbol" of it, says Dmitri Trenin, director of the Carnegie Moscow Center, a regional branch of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in Washington.

Russia under Mr. Putin has embarked on a new foreign policy course that aims above all to secure Russia's sovereignty and independence from foreign influences and to ensure Russia's interests in its "former borderlands," Mr. Trenin says in a new Moscow Center paper.

This new course, which is steering Russia away from any integration into Western institutions, reflects resurgent nationalism in Russia, Trenin says. But it is also winning widespread support among ordinary Russians because of the Ukraine crisis and the Western sanctions related to it, he adds.

Trenin says he sees no reason to expect "any letup in the US-Russia confrontation" for years to come, in part because the United States will "not accept Russia carving out a sphere of influence in its neighborhood." But at the same time, he says the Ukraine crisis in particular must not be allowed to "escalate dangerously" given the potential for a "direct military confrontation of former cold war adversaries."

The Ukrainian parliament's vote to in effect turn westward may be within Ukraine's rights, Saunders says. But he also says the vote illustrates how every party asserting its rights is not a formula for a secure and stable Europe.

“Ukraine and the Ukrainian people have the right to decide whether or not they want to join NATO, NATO countries have the right to decide if they want Ukraine as a member, and Russia has the right to decide how to react to a decision by Ukraine to join NATO,” Saunders says.

“But the important question is not one of rights,” he adds, “it’s whether European security is strengthened or weakened, whether Europe is more stable or less stable with Ukraine inside NATO.”

He says that’s the question all sides with a hand in the Ukraine crisis will have to think about.