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Ukrainian foreign policy from independence to inertia

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ABSTRACT

In the early years of independence, Ukraine's crucial accomplishment was the establishment a degree of sovereignty and independence that few thought possible. Since that time, Ukrainian foreign policy has largely stagnated. Despite attempts of various internal leaders to adopt decisive policies, and despite significant external pressure, Ukraine has done very little. This paper reviews the first 20 years of Ukrainian foreign policy and accounts for the inertia that has developed. Ukraine's foreign policy passivity results from three uneasy balances: an external balance between the pulls of Russia and the West; an internal balance between Ukraine's regions, and an internal balance between forces of democracy and authoritarianism. These balances mean that while few are happy with Ukraine's policy, no one has been able to decisively change it. While Ukraine's domestic regional division is unlikely to change, change in the balance between domestic political forces or that between international forces could reduce the inertia in Ukrainian foreign politics, most likely leading to a drift toward Russia.

1. Introduction

Twenty years after Ukraine declared independence, the country has been hugely transformed, as has the world around it. Yet after a period of rapid evolution in the early 1990s, Ukraine's foreign policy has largely stagnated. In many important respects, the policy questions that face Ukraine and the explanatory questions that face students of Ukraine's foreign policy are the same that have recurred repeatedly since roughly 1994. Every time it seems that Ukraine might make a decisive move, and might put one of these questions behind it, the opposite somehow occurs. To cite just one example, a major issue putting Ukraine in the news in mid-2012 is whether Ukraine would join a customs union with Russia and other post-Soviet states. This exact question has been addressed repeatedly since 1991, and indeed the economic relationship between Ukraine and Russia was an issue even prior to Ukraine's independence. This paper explores the sources of this continuity, while also discussing important changes that have occurred.

To summarize the argument, continuity and repetitiveness in Ukraine's foreign policy have been driven by continuity and repetitiveness in Ukraine's domestic politics as well as in the international situation the country has to confront. Domestically, the country continues to lurch from a path of greater democratization to one of greater authoritarianism, with neither trend thus far having been decisive. Moreover, having chosen gradual economic reform (or non-reform), the country still confronts fundamental economic issues. Regional and national identity cleavages continue to be salient, and neither the east nor west has been fully able to establish its preferred view. Internationally, Ukraine's foreign policy remains heavily constrained by the dynamics of the triangle with Russia, Ukraine and the US at the vertices (Bukkvoll, 2000; D'Anieri, 2001). US–Russian rivalry in the region, after easing briefly in the early 1990s, has become firmly reestablished, ensuring that Ukraine faces an impossible choice of sides (both in political and identity terms) and providing some opportunity to play one against the other.

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The weakness of Ukraine's state might, paradoxically, make Ukraine more resistant to external influence, because the government has a limited ability to fulfill commitments, even when those commitments are coerced. Because it is difficult to move decisively in one direction or another, Ukraine remains where it is.

It is always hazardous to portray the current state of affairs as overdetermined and to view change as impossible. In 2012, it appears once again that the country has passed a tipping point on the path to authoritarianism. Yet the striking thing about Ukraine in recent years is that even a "revolution," such as that which occurred in late 2004, turned out to have much less impact than anticipated. When expected change does not occur, one is prompted to look for structural sources of continuity (D'Anieri, 2011), and that is the tack taken in this paper.

The paper proceeds as follows: Section 2 surveys the substance of Ukraine's foreign policy since 1991, introducing a periodization for the sake of discussion. Sections 3 through 5 examines three broad categories of constraint on Ukrainian foreign policy. Section 3 looks at the international tug between East and West, Section 4 looks at the domestic regional division, and Section 5 looks at the weakness of the Ukrainian state. Section 6 brings domestic and international politics together. Section 7 speculates about the potential for fundamental change.

2. Historical overview

2.1. Independence and aftermath

The dramatic collapse of the Soviet Union in the latter half of 1991, and the simultaneous establishment of a Ukrainian state, presented a complete breakdown of the existing system, and contrary to the overarching thesis of this paper, a great deal was up in the air. It is easy to look back and see the result that emerged — a fully independent Ukraine — as inevitable, but it was not. Initially, many anticipated that Ukraine would not reach fully sovereign status, and would instead remain part of some post-Soviet confederation, such as the Commonwealth of Independent States, or would remain in a clearly subordinate position, even if technically sovereign. Many in Ukraine did not seek full separation from Russia, many in Russia opposed it, and many around the world felt that, especially in economic affairs, a complete separation would be disastrous. The Russian government, initially preoccupied with its own affairs, soon sought to bring Ukraine back under its control, and exercised various forms of coercion to limit Ukraine's sovereignty and freedom of action. In sum, it was not widely accepted in the early 1990s that Ukraine would become a "normal" sovereign state like any other. Bit by bit, however, first under Leonid Kravchuk and then under Leonid Kuchma, Ukraine defied expectations by insisting on total separation and achieving it. By 1997, when the two countries signed the "big treaty" resolving the status of the Black Sea Fleet, Russia and the rest of the world had come to accept that Ukraine was indeed an independent state and that it would retain that status. The contentious relations over Ukraine's status that have persisted since that time have been based on that understanding, rather than fundamentally questioning it. As inept as Ukraine's government has been in many respects, the consolidation of its sovereignty was a major accomplishment that few outside the country anticipated.

When Ukraine declared independence in August 1991, there was no consensus on what was meant by "independence" (a 1990 Ukrainian "Declaration of Sovereignty" clearly presumed remaining within the Soviet Union). The Soviet Ukrainian governmental apparatus successfully recast itself as the government of independent Ukraine, and seized the initiative on establishing and defending Ukrainian sovereignty. Speaker of the Supreme Soviet Leonid Kravchuk worked assiduously throughout the fall of 1991 both to establish the state's complete independence from Russia and to ensure that he won the presidential election held in December 1991. Bold policy decisions in Kyiv (most notably the claim of control over all military assets in Ukraine), coupled with disarray in Moscow, allowed Ukraine to create facts on the ground about which neither the Russian nor Soviet leaderships (both persisted in late 1991) were powerless. Boris Yeltsin found that in order to finalize the defeat of Soviet power, he had to consent to the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Once this was done, Ukraine could not be reeled back in, but for six more years, Russia continued to question Ukraine's sovereignty.

From the declaration of independence through late 1994, Ukraine was the isolated member of the Russia–US–Ukraine triangle (D'Anieri, 2001). Russia–US relations were generally positive in this period, and the US viewed Ukraine primarily through the lens of nuclear weapons. The US and Russia agreed that Ukraine was obligated to surrender its nuclear weapons. Ukrainian leaders, faced with Russia's unwillingness to embrace Ukraine's sovereignty and its veiled threats toward Ukraine, demurred, seeking to use the weapons to gain some measure of security, preferably a US security guarantee (for a detailed discussion of the nuclear weapons issue, see Pifer, 2011). At the September 1993 Massandra summit, Russia cut off gas supplies to Ukraine in order to force Ukraine to surrender its nuclear weapons and control of the Sevastopol naval base. This was the first of many instances of overt coercion using Ukraine's dependence on Russian energy. Kravchuk initially capitulated, and then backtracked in the face of widespread domestic opposition. Eventually a deal was negotiated in January 1994 in which, in exchange for Ukraine's denuclearization, both Russia and the US appeared to recognize Ukraine's sovereignty. The nuclear deal opened the door for Ukraine to join NATO's Partnership for Peace the following month, much to Russia's concern. This was a significant victory for Ukraine, but the nuclear disagreement had delayed serious discussions with the US for nearly three crucial years when US–Russian relations were deteriorating and when Ukraine desperately needed economic help. At the same time that Ukraine's nuclear weapons hampered normalization of relations with both Russia and the US, Ukraine's domestic political and economic situation delayed any fundamental reorientation of the country.

Throughout this period, there were competing beliefs in Ukraine concerning the effects of separating its economy from Russia. Some looked at the exploitation Ukraine had experienced under the Soviet Union and assumed that the Ukrainian