

U.S. Policy Must Be Sensitive to Ukraine's Balancing Act

By Robert M. Cutler, Carleton University

Ukraine's positioning makes it a natural bridge between East and West. A wise U.S. foreign policy would be one that is sensitive to Ukraine's function as a bridge between Russia and the Western military alliance.

Ukraine was justifiably disappointed with the Western response to its own antinuclear and military policy in the early 1990s. As a newborn nuclear power, Ukraine ratified the agreement on Conventional Forces in Europe without hesitation and agreed to transfer all nuclear weapons and matériel to Russia for storage and destruction. Since this effectively neutralized Russia's nuclear muscle, Ukraine expected that it would be rewarded with more than sympathetic words.

In the end, Russia and Ukraine had similar interests in dismantling their nuclear weapons, and the U.S. played the broker between them. However, whereas American interest in Russia was obvious, Ukraine, having no guarantee that it would not simply be forgotten after the nuclear issue was settled, for a long time felt that the nuclear card was its final ace vis-à-vis the U.S. and the West.

Western inattention to Ukraine parallels a similar inattention to Belarus (see "The Unanticipated Consequences of Policy Blindness: Why Even Belarus Matters" at <http://www.foreignpolicy-infocus.org/>

[commentary/0101belarus.html](http://www.foreignpolicy-infocus.org/commentary/0101belarus.html)). However, whereas Belarus is merely a "regional" country, Ukraine is a "strategic" country. And yet, Ukraine feels that it is not taken seriously as a fully "adult" state by either Russia or the West. Ukraine's connection to Russia constitutes an obstacle to its integration into the West. The country's advances toward political and economic liberalization, however, are not challenged by the ever-present Slavophile/Westernizer dichotomy that burdens Russia's own transition.

Ukraine's balancing act between Russia and the West is a function not only of its geography but also of its demography. Western parts of the country are historically linked to Poland and the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and ethnic Hungarians still live in the so-called Transcarpathian region of Ukraine. These territories became part of Ukraine only after the end of the Second World War. The population is more Europeanized in culture and worldview, and the experience of an agriculturally based market economy still exists in living memory.

By contrast, in the eastern part of Ukraine one finds the old Soviet heavy-industrial concentrations, now in decline, including the famous Donbass coal pits and their associated iron and steel works. This region has established various forms of transborder cooperation with the corresponding region of the Russian Federation, cooperation sponsored by both Moscow and Kiev. Rates of Russian-Ukrainian intermarriage are high in this part of the country, Russian is often spoken even more than Ukrainian, and even ethnic Ukrainians grow up feeling at least partly Russian.

So Ukraine finds itself periodically required to desist from drawing nearer to European institu-



tions and politics, so as to reinforce its ties with Russia, with which it remains highly interdependent economically. In the early 1990s, aware of these wide divergences, Ukrainian constitution writers decided to make the country a unitary state rather than a federalist one. They had a fear that giving the provinces autonomy would lead the country eventually to lose what cohesion it had. The result has been largely to restrain local initiative in economic reform and international policy conduct.

It was in the mid-1990s that newly independent Ukraine's relations with Europe underwent an important shift. The late 1994 G-7 meeting in Winnipeg, Canada, which focused to a large degree on examining and promoting Ukrainian reform, gave a big boost to Ukraine's aspirations to join the West. However, the preeminent symbol was its acceptance in 1995 as a member of the Council of Europe and its simultaneous signature of a Partnership and Cooperation Agreement with the European Union. The Ukrainian leadership considered that these achievements showed Russia that Europe considers it a partner of mainstream Europe.

However, Ukraine remains dependent on Russia for its energy supplies,

particularly natural gas from both Russia itself and from Turkmenistan, whose gas flows through pipelines over Russian territory. Russia has periodically threatened to close the valves to Ukraine, and has actually done so on a few occasions, in retribution for nonpayment of accounts. Last year there were disputes over alleged Ukrainian pilfering of Russian gas exports to Europe, which travel through pipelines across Ukrainian territory. The energy sector in Ukraine has been especially resistant to economic restructuring, and the country's political leadership has been subject to internal conflict over the plans for liberalization of the domestic energy market.

Ukraine's potential economic appeal to Europe lies in its manpower, its agriculture, and perhaps its energy resources, if a way is found to develop these on a market basis. Ukraine needs ties with market economies, and the newly independent states cannot really provide those ties at present. Both resistance among bureaucrats and political problems in parliament have blocked the success of the country's efforts at economic reform. Further NATO expansion before Ukraine's economy is viable could risk driving the country back into a Russian sphere of influence. Ukraine's

best destiny in Europe is as a bridge between Russia and the West, always following a careful balancing act between the economic pull to the East and the political aspirations to the West.

If the Bush administration decides to pursue the enlargement of NATO to include the Baltic states, this must be done with sensitivity to European stability as a whole and Ukrainian security in particular. Such a policy should continue to be guided by the doctrine of "cooperative security" formally adopted by the Defense Department under Secretary Perry. That means, among other things, that any such effort should not seek to establish an incontrovertible situation that would ossify a security system. Rather, all security moves should become building blocks in a broader European context that is adaptable to the sort of rapid and unpredictable change that everyone has been trying to get used to since the end of the cold war.

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