

Ukraine and the United States: Assessing their Relationship on the Eve of Elections

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With important elections looming on the horizon for both Ukraine and the United States, it is a convenient moment to assess U.S.-Ukrainian bilateral relations.

Between the two, elections in the United States are less important. It has long been up to Ukraine to take the necessary steps for a closer relationship with the United States. And despite drastic differences in outlook, President Barack Obama and Republican candidate Mitt Romney have not advocated substantially different approaches toward Ukraine. Romney has employed some tough rhetoric against Russia, which could have repercussions for Ukraine if he were to become the next U.S. president, but this remains to be seen.

What matters more is the course of Ukraine's own parliamentary elections, scheduled for October 28, 2012. The two dominant scenarios are that the ruling regime consolidates power, with the negative consequences many think this would entail, or that the loosely-integrated and ill-organized opposition has a breakthrough moment. Alternatively, the landscape could change little if neither side develops a decisive advantage. But how elections are conducted will also be important: Who will be allowed to participate? Will they be marked by massive fraud? Whatever happens, Ukraine's elections will have an effect on relations with a number of external partners, including the United States.

This observation, however, begs the question of how much Ukraine's leaders actually care about U.S. and Western pressure or incentives. They conduct themselves as if the imperative of political survival prevails over everything else, including what Washington says or does. Ukraine's leaders will thus probably stick to their current policies and continue to ignore criticism from abroad. Besides, they are aware that

Washington has limited leverage on Ukraine; they calculate that the West will not be capable of establishing a tough line of action vis-à-vis Kyiv.

This does not mean that the United States should not pursue a tougher line. The leaders in Kyiv are in the middle of a difficult balancing game, as they face many problems in dealing not only with the West but Russia as well. They would prefer to avoid being cast as pariahs by their U.S. and European counterparts. For them, what Washington and other Western capitals say or do about Ukraine is of ongoing concern. They also have trepidation about possible Western sanctions. In many ways, their personal lives and those of their families are deeply connected to the West.

A principled and forthright position from Washington is important to Ukrainians for various reasons, not least of which is that it would provide significant moral support for those in opposition and civil society. To some Ukrainians, it could become a rallying cry, a source of hope and inspiration. For millions of Ukrainians, it is vital to know that Ukraine has friends, that democracy can function, and that it still has a chance of becoming a part of the civilized world.

Paying Attention to Ukraine

Ukraine is clearly down the list of priorities for Washington right now. There have been times when bilateral relations looked rather promising – one might recall the mood after the Orange Revolution or the 2008 launch of the “strategic partnership” – but these now seem exceptions. The events of September 11, 2001, subsequent U.S. preoccupation with the broader Middle East, and the global financial crisis contributed to Ukraine being on the lower end of the U.S. global agenda. The failure of Ukrainians to seize the momentum created by the “Orange” opening also led to disillusionment among Ukraine’s Western partners, or so-called “Ukraine fatigue.” It is still often thought in Ukraine that the country lies in the midst of some kind of U.S. grand strategy, but it does not.

Does Ukraine merit more prudent action on the part of the United States? The United States has provided much assistance to Ukraine in past years, but that seems to have been of little help. Some might argue that Ukrainians do not want to follow U.S. advice and would rather be subdued by a stronger and more assertive Russia, which has always shown its intention to keep Ukraine on a short leash.

The truth, however, is that Ukraine is weak, fragile, and very much confused. This applies to both political elites and the public. Despite airs of self-sufficiency, Ukraine needs help from the outside, a push in the right direction, perhaps now more than ever. There are reasons to believe that if the West gave up on Ukraine, if it allowed Ukraine to slide toward ever more nondemocratic ways, this would constitute a terrible blow to U.S. interests in the broader region, of which Ukraine is a part.

The Tymoshenko Case

Of course, the United States and Europe have paid more attention to Ukraine in recent months due to the imprisonment of former prime minister Yulia Tymoshenko. For a time, it looked as if Tymoshenko was simply being subjected to political and legal

“pressure” without the prospect of actual imprisonment. However, it soon became evident that the “Khodorkovsky scenario” was being enacted in full force.

This caused the United States to release some more severe statements about Ukraine. This has indicated some dynamism and that Washington has been slowly, perhaps reluctantly and unwillingly, moving toward some sort of activism. After all, these last years have not been very active in terms of U.S. democracy promotion in Ukraine. The country’s drift away from the rule of law toward soft authoritarianism never met with an adequate response from the White House or the administration’s opponents. It took the “Tymoshenko case” to end this posturing and the turning of a “blind eye” toward events in Ukraine.

This has coincided with an awakening by an even slower moving giant, the European Union. Inaction in the face of the Tymoshenko case threatened to undermine the moral principles that both Europeans and Americans stand on in shaping their foreign policies. The turning point was the moment when Ukraine’s partners realized that not only was Tymoshenko put on trial, but convicted with a long prison sentence.

What Is To Be Done?

First of all, it is critical that Brussels and Washington coordinate. This does not mean that Washington should delegate its policies to its European partners, but it is essential that the EU and the United States sing from the same song sheet. Their coordinated policies will not cost much, so the ongoing economic crisis should not be viewed as an obstacle. This is because the issue does not concern financial assistance but principles. It is about showing the Ukrainian public that the West cares and can tell right from wrong. The Ukrainian economy would certainly benefit from external financial support, but given the current leadership and economic conditions, providing such support would be like throwing money down a bottomless pit.

Western pressure should also not only been in defense of Tymoshenko, who has never really enjoyed much affection or trust in Washington. The focus on her case should be kept intact, but it should be broadened to embrace overall deficiencies in Ukrainian politics, economic policy, and law. It would certainly be proper to have Tymoshenko (and other cabinet members imprisoned with her) freed, but this will not be a fix for Ukraine’s troubles.

Election campaigns in both Ukraine and the United States may spur Washington’s foreign policy deliberations. Likely, U.S. expressions of disapproval with Ukraine will grow, perhaps with some threat of sanctions. Certainly, there is a need to go beyond recent statements and to actually place pressure on the Ukrainian government.

But this returns us to the question of Washington’s toolkit. To what extent can the United States exert leverage on Ukraine’s leaders? For one, language and statements matter: elevate the harsh tone and be less diplomatic. Also, the United States could introduce visa bans to all those involved in the “Tymoshenko case” and many other similar cases, as it has done for human rights violators in Russia. This is long overdue. It could even examine the U.S.-based bank accounts of the most controversial Ukrainian

figures (again something it may do against Russian human rights violators). European governments could follow.

Is there a possibility that an increase in Western severity would push U.S.-Ukrainian relations toward the U.S.-Belarusan model? Could it counterproductively produce further isolation and bitter antagonism with the West? Any pressure or sanctions contain an element of such risk. However, in many ways, Ukraine is fundamentally different from Belarus. And the alternative is to let Ukraine anyhow follow the Belarusan path, sinking deeper into an undemocratic abyss.

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