

The United States and the Ukrainian Election Political Crisis

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Clearly there is a need to analyze in close detail, both in content and essence, the evolution of the U.S. position toward the recent Ukrainian election political crisis. Much has been written on the subject. In the United States, however, most of the attempts to look at the problem lacked comprehensiveness and were not systematic. They were dealing with one or another aspect of the issue, but not considering the whole picture. Moreover, Ukrainian perspectives on U.S. foreign policy should also be taken into account. Finally, there is no doubt that such an attempt to address the subject helps to fill the niche that exists outside the United States (specifically in Ukraine itself) in terms of understanding what actually was the U.S. stance on Ukraine in those turbulent times, how it evolved, and what factors and actors drove it.

Certainly, there are difficulties to be faced when trying to look at the subject. The events are still quite recent (the first version of this memo was written at the end of what might be called the initial phase of the crisis – the decision of the Ukrainian Supreme Court to invalidate the November 21st vote). There is no doubt that some essential pieces of information did not reach the author because of the timeliness of the topic or due to the protected nature of the information. Surely, there was and still is a huge amount of distortion in portraying what the position of the U.S. administration actually was.

In fact, views on the subject varied from that in which the United States did not have a clear position, to the view that Washington's position was as clear as possible, leaving no room for misinterpretation. There is also the added question of how much influence the Americans had over the situation. Finally (not implying, however, that this is a fully inclusive list of the issues that should be researched further), much of the discordance takes place when talking about whether the U.S. position was proactive, prepared prior to the crisis, or reactive, having emerged on an ad-hoc basis.

The Background of the U.S. Position (the eve of crisis)

Much was written on the status of U.S.-Ukraine relations in the years and months preceding the Ukrainian election crisis. Most, however, agree: there is good reason to believe that bilateral relations were stymied to the point of noncooperation or, more exactly, to very limited cooperation in a few realms. There were many reasons for the decline in positive relations between Ukraine and the United States since the 1990s, but a main factor was the degradation of Ukraine's ruling regime. This degradation was

characterized by the deterioration of the regime's ability and willingness to act responsively to liberalize the political situation in the country and proceed with sound economic reform, the failure to honor its pledges to respect human rights and the basic freedom of the press, and the subversion of European and Euroatlantic dimensions of its foreign and security policies.

The overall dynamic of American foreign policy has also contributed to the decline of relations. The events of September 11, 2001 have dramatically altered the course of American global and regional policies. The "Bush revolution" has brought profound changes to both the theoretical background behind the policies and to their actual implementation. The post-Soviet space has suddenly dropped out of sight for the Washington administration; this space is no longer considered an area of strategic importance for American interests and thus does not inspire urgent and decisive actions on its behalf. The few exceptions to the shifting focus of American foreign policy were cooperation with Russia in the war on terror and engaging the Caucasus, Caspian region, and Central Asia. Ukraine was not in that group and slid down the list of U.S. priorities. Ukraine has earned less attention in the eyes of Washington strategists due to events that gave it the image of an unreliable partner. The stagnation of Ukraine did not call for urgent measures to be taken by the United States. The Gongadze case, "Kolchuga" affair, Macedonian affair, and others did affect many in Washington, turning even some of the supporters of the "Ukrainian cause" into harsh critics. The once widespread view of Ukraine's importance vis-à-vis Russia had faded away when faced with the reality of having a bunch of crooks in Kyiv and a relatively reliable partner in the Russian leadership. "Russocentric" sentiments have resurfaced yet again.

In previous Ukrainian elections, we saw the United States stand for particular values within Ukraine. It has always refrained from explicitly supporting certain politicians or, even, political parties, blocs, or coalitions. In this way, Washington has maintained some influence on the situation in Ukraine, without interfering.

What was true in 1994, 1999, and 2002, has become even truer in the period prior to the elections of 2004. First, as stated above, Washington's priorities have shifted away from Ukraine both specifically and regionally. The values that the United States based its policies on were at stake, but perhaps not its interests. That is, at least, apparently how decisionmakers in Washington chose their actions. The once prevailing view of Ukraine as a cornerstone of European security and, therefore having a clear impact on American interests, has now almost vanished.

Second, the idea of a "strategic partnership" was forgotten when the Ukrainian side demonstrated on several occasions that it was not ready or willing to play by the rules. The Bush administration was disappointed and, to a certain degree, betrayed by its Kyiv counterparts. Even those individuals in the administration who were to be known as "pro-Ukrainian" have lost hope in Ukraine.

Third, Washington did not put much stock in what is now called the "Ukrainian opposition." It was known that there was no true opposition in Ukraine. What was in place were various factions and groups of people that could barely agree on one common theme: that there should be no continuation of Kuchma regime and Yanukovych should not be allowed to come to power. The various factions of the "opposition" have fought

each other intensely, many of them being bought by the party of power. Thus, the Bush administration found itself in a difficult situation when contemplating a possible candidate to support in Ukraine. It seems that what the administration was thinking was that Ukrainian politics is in constant turmoil, there is no one to be trusted, and, surely, no one to support.

Fourth, the Bush administration has shown no intention of endangering its current level of cooperation with the Russian Federation because of Ukraine. To maintain such cooperation, whether tactical or strategic, was a priority for Washington. The United States would not encourage a split with Russia on this issue and was not willing to see the whole thing portrayed as a fight between East and West.

Fifth, the United States was going through a busy election cycle of its own. Most of the political resources of both contending parties were tied up with issues quite far from Ukraine. Even though issues of foreign policy were central to the campaign, Ukraine was not among those topics discussed. Moreover, one might argue that the very process of monitoring events in Ukraine, let alone elaborating a method adjusting this approach to the developments within Ukraine, was close to being halted.

Finally, the few changes that were proposed by the Administration after the elections, did not indicate any change to Washington's stance on Ukraine, or bring about a more interventionist position. There were clear signals that the Administration had decided to stick with the "wait and see" approach. In any case, it was Fallujah and not Kyiv that attracted most of the attention.

All of this has led to a situation that while some politicians, experts and organizations have taken a solid position on the Ukrainian elections, the Administration has not. And even when we talk of those who have a stated position it should be noted that few have gone ahead and acted accordingly. The National Democratic Institute, National Endowment for Democracy, International Republican Institute, diaspora groups, George Soros, and others have had a very limited impact even when taken altogether. The funds that were gathered are no match to those invested in the "Yanukovych project." Yet most of the money collected by the above mentioned individuals and organizations was meant to accommodate observers, facilitate election monitoring, and provide general support for free and fair elections.

Given the heated political debate surrounding the Ukrainian election political crisis, is it credible that massive Western (American) contributions went to the Yushchenko camp and remained unnoticed and unreported in the media? Bear in mind how attentive Moscow and Kyiv were to the issue, and that the whole army of functionaries (fiscal administration, internal affairs, security services) was at the regime's service with a single objective: to disrupt the opposition's activities, let alone monitoring its external contacts.

Taking a Stance

It is not quite clear how well warned Ukraine's party of power was about the possibility that the Bush administration would take a tough stance in the case of massive fraud and falsifications everyone feared would materialize in the Ukrainian elections. First, even

though several statements were generated by the Department of State and Congress prior to the elections, they stopped short of actually saying definitively what sanctions could be taken. Therefore, the regime in Kyiv was allowed to think that it was facing a toothless threat, as Washington regularly makes with regard to dozens of elections throughout the world and which often are not followed by actual deeds.

Second, the ruling Ukrainian regime was hoping to get away with fraud as it has several times in the past. They had done it already a couple of times before, so why should this time be any different? The significance of having Western observers was also downplayed. The masterminds of the “elections” have been ready to face the usual murmurs of voting irregularities. For that purpose a whole army of “observers” loyal to the authorities was formed. When the first critical statements appeared from the West, the claim of the vote as being generally free and fair was advocated by those “observers.” However, this would not work this time and it is worth further exploration to find out why.

Finally, the stakes for the rulers were too high. The very issue of preserving wealth, political influence, and even physical security was at stake. The regime felt a vital need for continuation and, therefore, they have opted for a confrontation with the West. The introduction of visa limitations for several people in Kuchma’s inner circle was not seen as a sanction, but a signal for Kyiv. It did not change these people’s behavior.

Having said that, one should realize that the Ukrainian leadership did not prepare itself for the possibility of Washington taking a tough stance. While claims that the elections were not free and fair were expected to surface, the blatant non-recognition of the results and illegitimacy of the appointed winner of the election were not expected. The Bush administration had concluded that the time has come, when faced with colossal falsifications in Ukraine, for more decisive critical statements.

What seems quite important in this case is that the position taken by Washington appeared to be coordinated with other actors of the West. Indeed, aware of the possibility that American comments would be rejected by Kuchma’s people simply because they were American and, therefore, biased, the Bush administration did a great job of pushing other actors to serve as a vanguard in forming a concerted position. Moreover, those actors, which include the OSCE, EU, and Council of Europe, were much better suited and prepared to deal with such issues as human rights, the nature of voting processes, and specificity of counting the results.

The joint position of the United States and common European structures was adequately supported by major European powers. This made it difficult to claim a Western conspiracy, or U.S. inspired plot. The Russian leadership and its Ukrainian protégés have obviously felt themselves victims of the notion that the West has been so deeply divided in the recent years. The lack of a common position that Western powers previously had on some significant issues has led both Moscow and Kyiv to think of the West as being incoherent, divided, and incapable of reaching a sound common position.

On the contrary, Washington has managed with great success and in a short period of time to put forward a stance that was carefully constructed in cooperation with its major European partners. In fact, this newly found unity may very well be seen as one of the primary results of the Ukrainian crisis. Ironically enough, Ukraine, even while being in a

deep crisis, has been an influential actor in international relations, one that has pushed various actors in the West to work together. This has reminded many in the West that they are, indeed, based on and stand for the same kind of values and principles, and that the very notion of Western civilization has not become irreversibly obsolete. The Ukrainian crisis has also presented a convenient chance for both “old” and “new” Europe to act in one voice with each other and with the United States.

President Bush is now able to present himself as someone who did not intervene in the affairs of another sovereign nation. In other words, Washington was free to say that this is not specifically its view of the situation, but rather the position taken by Ukraine’s immediate neighbors. There is no doubt that the Bush administration did not want to contribute too much to an impression that it has engaged itself in the fight for “control” over Ukraine with Russia. While the United States dispatched Senator Lugar to monitor the elections, it chose not to send its representative to take part in the multi-party roundtable that was assembled to mediate between the sides in the crisis. Russia remains a partner in the war on terror (even though not one of the first rank) and it has also remained a major priority for the United States in the post-Soviet space. It is not in Russia’s interests to deepen its disagreements with the United States over Ukraine and push it toward a full-scale bilateral conflict. Nonetheless, this did not prevent some commentators in Ukraine and Russia from speculating on how Washington actually stood behind this crisis and of accusing U.S. of having a game plan on Ukraine well in advance.

In conclusion, it could be stated that the position of the United States on the Ukrainian election crisis was of critical significance. It was one of those important external factors that have helped to stop an offensive on the remnants of Ukrainian democracy and allowed hope to stay alive. Certainly, this is not a West versus East, U.S. versus Russia scenario. This could be seen as an internal fight for democracy within Ukraine, also as a Ukraine versus Russia struggle, perhaps, as a decisive stage in the attempt of Ukrainians to determine where they fit, and what their geopolitical role should be. Ukraine stood strong and hopefully is to stand as one, despite the criminal efforts on the part of its masters on central and regional levels to divide the country. It will surely be remembered that the United States stood with the Ukrainian people when its very independence, freedom, and unity were at stake.

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