Determinants of Ukrainian Foreign Policy: Foreign Policy-Making Since Independence

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Background

Country profile: Ukraine
Capital: Kyiv (Kiev)
Population: 45 million

Ukrainian foreign policy priorities have exhibited both remarkable continuity and change since independence from the Soviet Union in 1991. Ukraine, a country wedged between the Russian Federation and the European Union, is located in a geopolitically important region. Ukraine’s foreign policy priorities thus have a salient impact on the future of the pan-European project and relations between Russia and the West. Ukraine’s domestic politics are best described as tumultuous, with a clear political divide between the Ukrainian-speaking western regions of the country and the Russian-speaking east. A pro-democratic peaceful revolution in 2004 further complicated the country’s politics, and resulted in the emergence of political activism and a vibrant civil society. Despite these political divisions, and a current pro-Russian parliament and presidential administration, Europeanization goals remain central tenants of the Ukraine’s foreign policy objectives. However, regressive domestic politics and creeping authoritarianism have undermined the country’s goal of joining the European Union.

Methods

This project relied on secondary sources for the necessary background material about Ukrainian history, politics, and foreign policy since independence in 1991. After obtaining the necessary background material and an understanding of Ukrainian politics, I relied primarily on interviews and political conferences in the United States. I interviewed two former U.S. Ambassadors to Ukraine, and an assortment of experts and academics. In May and June 2012, I traveled to Kyiv and Odessa in Ukraine, where conducted various interviews with NGOs, and leading Ukrainian experts on foreign policy.

My research has produced several insights into the conduct of Ukrainian foreign policy and potential future trends. Since independence, several eras of foreign policy objectives are evident in Ukrainian foreign policy:

- Isolation (1991-1996)- Ukraine’s security imperatives, especially vis-à-vis Russia isolated Ukraine internationally as it held onto its Soviet nuclear warheads
- Balancing (1997-2004)- Ukraine establishes close ties with Russia and the West. Ukraine pledges Europeanization, even while remaining close to Russia
- Leaning Towards the West (2005-present)- After Ukraine’s Orange Revolution, new variables strengthened Europeanization objectives. Civil society and business interests mobilize behind the EU project. These objectives have largely failed in the face of political problems.

Despite these three periods of foreign policy objectives, domestic politics have greater impeded Ukraine’s policy conduct. Political dysfunctionality under the previous presidential administration, and political regression under the current one has isolated Ukraine from both the West and Russia. Despite these problems, the West must continue to engage Ukraine, promoting the rule of law and the proper functioning of civil society, which will foster Europeanization. This is ultimately in Ukraine’s interest.

Insight Into Ukraine’s Domestic Politics

GDP: $345 billion
GDP per capita: $7,600

Ethnicity in Ukraine

- Russian: 17.8%
- Ukrainian: 77.8%

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A full list of those interviewed, conferences attended, and secondary sources used can be found in my thesis paper.