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How the Trump Administration's Contradictory Policies Impact Ukraine

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There was widespread anticipation of profound changes in relations between the United States and Ukraine in light of the 2016 U.S. presidential election results. As a candidate, Donald Trump openly praised President Vladimir Putin, questioned the previous U.S. administration's narratives about the Ukraine-Russia conflict, and even went so far as to suggest that Crimea could be recognized as part of the Russian Federation. Various factors led to Trump having such viewpoints. One was clearly his wish to distance himself from any determinations made by Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton. Indeed, during the elections, Trump carefully nurtured his image as a contrarian—someone who can change the ways inside the D.C. Beltway. Second, Trump is under the ideological influence of a political school of thought that is routinely and highly critical of the existing liberal-democratic world order, which includes NATO and the EU. Third, Trump admires the "strong" leadership, macho image, and bravado style of Putin, and the ways in which he has concentrated power in his hands.

Putting the blocks together, Trump's views toward Ukraine and Russia, in conceptual terms, can be seen through the lenses of libertarianism/isolationism and a certain strain of political realism. On the practical policy side, however, despite the U.S. president's reluctance to make calls for democracy promotion and stand firmly against Russia and by Ukraine's side, various official indications from Washington are that Ukraine's autonomy from the Kremlin is to be buttressed and sustained. A chief example if this is the support for Ukraine by U.S. Special Representative Kurt Volker, who regularly calls on Russia "to get serious about implementing the Minsk agreements and choosing peace for Ukraine." Still, in effect, the challenge is that United States has several foreign policies toward Ukraine (and other states) in action simultaneously. For Ukraine, which has two elections upcoming in 2019, inconsistencies toward it from Washington matter.

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Connections and Choices

Trump is known to be outspoken on issues but he has been rather cautious since his inauguration in his pronouncements on the subject of Ukraine and the Ukraine-Russia conflict. There was the sense that he was willing to pursue some sort of a new "reset" with Russia, which made Kyiv nervous. He encountered, however, resolute pushback in Washington, and for a while it appeared he was going to be content to delegate some key issues involving foreign, defense, and national security policies to officials with deep expertise. We saw several key positions in his administration filled with people who have advocated a tough approach toward Russia due its behavior toward Ukraine. Personalities and bureaucracy mattered.

Personnel and policy divergences are significant because there is a major link between U.S., Russian, and Ukrainian foreign policies. If indeed Trump was planning to modify or do away with the existing U.S. sanctions against Russia, nothing of the sort transpired, in particular because sanctions are congressionally mandated. (As this memo was being finalized, a debate is taking place in Washington about the White House seeking to remove sanctions on several companies directly linked to sanctioned Russian oligarch Oleg Deripaska). The prevalent sense is that it is a non-starter to reward Russia with eased sanctions without it changing its behavior on the ground. This sentiment stems from a correlation of forces within the U.S. government and also the intensive focus from the public, media, and American political class on the Trump campaign's alleged connections to the Kremlin.

A new round of sanctions against Russia was introduced by the United States in the summer of 2017. These new sanctions were tougher than any of the previous ones. They were introduced in reaction to, among other aspects, Russian interference in the U.S. elections in 2016, the very fact of which Trump personally continues to deny while calling it a hoax. As mentioned, Trump quickly discovered that the U.S. government's separation of powers was very real. On a number of issues, but, perhaps nowhere so vividly as with the Russia sanctions cases, he was checked by the U.S. Congress (if a bill is passed by enough members to make it veto-proof). Russian interference as well as ongoing Russian aggression in Ukraine has been a real concern among many in Congress and support for the 2017 sanctions was overwhelming and bipartisan. Having faced this movement, Trump reluctantly signed the law on August 2, 2017, although he added a grudging note as to why he disagreed with the decision and that it was an incursion into his presidential prerogatives.

It appears that the overall U.S. position is that the sanctions should remain in place as a lever on Moscow's behavior. Washington enacted more sanctions in the spring of 2018 on Russia for "malign activity around the globe" and as a response to the poisoning of the Skripals in Britain. Still, the main underlying aim of sanctioning Russian companies and individuals involves Russia's interference in the U.S. political process, with

Moscow's actions toward Ukraine as an additional, lower-priority rationale for the new sanctions. More, new sanctions are being contemplated via the Graham–Menendez bill that was introduced in August 2018, one year after the previous large package of sanctions. This new "sanctions bill from hell" was meant to be harsher than ever toward both Putin and Russia. Though not yet enacted, the legislation also expresses support for NATO and would require two-thirds of the Senate to be in favor of any effort to leave the alliance.

There is much debate on the efficacy of sanctions. Some point out that apparently they have not succeeded in altering Russian actions toward Ukraine, although one might suppose they prevented even more significant Russian aggressive behavior from taking place. Sanctions generally need to run their course—to be in place for a while—in order to be effective. Therefore, they should be kept and, moreover, current loopholes should be systematically addressed and closed, in order to increase the impairment they wreak on Moscow's top ranks.

Multi-Vector Foreign Policies and Lethal Weapons

Today, even with the extraordinary reluctance of the White House to confront Moscow's bellicosities in Ukraine, U.S. formal support toward Ukraine—that of the U.S. foreign policy establishment—has not wavered. These forces, both within and outside the government proper, have pushed back on Trump's apparent attempts to redraw the lines and perceptions of the issue. It has become a sort of truism that the United States now has several active foreign policies. One is anchored by the president's outlooks and impulses (as manifested by his tweets) while the other is pursued by the U.S. foreign policy elite, which includes numerous lawmakers, intelligence community members, and experts, who all share a baseline agreement about Russia's violation of Ukraine's sovereignty. Even with the senior leadership changes at the State Department, Defense Department, and National Security Council, the establishment's views have hardly changed. We can call to mind how former U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson said, "when one country invades another, that is a difference that is hard to look past or to reconcile" while current Secretary Mike Pompeo confidently says that Ukraine has "no greater friend than the United States."

Almost since day one of the conflict, the question of supplying U.S. lethal weapons to Ukraine has featured prominently in policy debates about the optimal U.S. approach toward the conflict. Former President Barack Obama and his advisors (both in Washington and Europe), while being mindful of "red lines" and conflict escalation, made the call against supplying lethal weapons to Ukraine. Nonetheless, the idea remained popular with many and was kept firmly afloat in the Trump era. When Trump became president, with all of his overtures toward Russia, many thought that the idea of sending lethal military aid to Ukraine was dead in the water. However, following some indeterminate high-level discussions in the fall of 2018, the White House agreed to

provide Ukraine with Javelin anti-tank missiles systems (for "enhanced defensive capabilities"), which the State Department and the Pentagon had signed off on earlier that year. It is hard to say if this was a first step toward more lethal weaponry being sent Ukraine's way or if it was just a one-time action. Javelins by themselves can hardly be a major game-changer in the Donbas war, even though they do serve to pause deeper incursions into Ukraine by Russian troops. The real power of the delivery of Javelins is their strong symbolic meaning and usefulness in negotiations.

Meanwhile, the United States continues to provide Ukraine with ongoing financial assistance, having spent about $1 billion on Ukraine since 2014, with U.S. Aid spending roughly $100 million annually on governance, economic growth, health, humanitarian, education projects, and more. Of note, in a December 2018 development after the Kerch Strait incident between Russian and Ukrainian ships, the State Department requested $10 million "to further build Ukraine's naval capabilities." The amounts allocated by the United States are not staggering, but they indicate the steadiness of commitment.

Folr his part, former U.S. Ambassador to NATO and current U.S. Special Representative for Ukraine Kurt Volker had made it known for a while that he supported the supplying of U.S. lethal weapons to Ukraine's troops. His appointment to Ukraine revitalized the discussion on the subject and most probably contributed to the decision being approved in Washington. Volker is deeply integrated into the Washington and Western establishment of analysts and foreign policy functionaries. His unequivocal position toward the Ukraine-Russia conflict, and his ability to be direct and forthcoming about the nature of the conflict and its many small transgressions, has impact and helps counter Moscow's narratives. At the same time, he has refrained from suggesting any abrupt, emotional steps, and advises everyone to tread carefully. Volker's position reflects his understanding that Washington could be in for the long game in Ukraine (apparently, so is Moscow).

The mention of the "Welles declaration," which pertains to the three Baltic states circa 1940, in U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's official "Crimea declaration" at the end of last summer tells us that Washington understands that there are no easy, obvious, or immediate solutions that would enable the return of Crimea to Ukraine in the near future. It is further indication of Washington's readiness to be involved over the long term, no matter the personal and possible fleeting geopolitical preferences of the current U.S. president. The July 28, 2018, "Crimea declaration" states that "the United States reaffirms as policy its refusal to recognize the Kremlin's claims of sovereignty over territory seized by force in contravention of international law." Quite frankly, there is nothing in the declaration to be disliked by a Ukrainian; it is a clear confirmation of U.S. support for Ukraine's territorial integrity. However, it raises some questions. Why was it released when it was? Apparently, the declaration was in the works for quite some time. It is hard not to see its public appearance as a result of a U.S. policymaking attempt to remedy Trump's public relations disaster about a week earlier in Helsinki on July 16

after he had met with Putin. At that press conference, Trump said nothing about Ukraine and Crimea, but Putin spoke for him saying: "President Trump and—well, the posture of President Trump on Crimea is well known, and he stands firmly by it. He continued to maintain that it was illegal to annex it. We—our viewpoint is different. We held a referendum in strict compliance with the U.N. Charter and the international legislation." For his part, at that press conference, when asked: "Do you hold Russia at all accountable for anything in particular?" Trump responded in a way that seems to be blaming everyone and no one: "Yes, I do. I hold both countries responsible. I think that the United States has been foolish. I think we've all been foolish."

Ambivalent words aside, it should be noted that U.S. financial assistance (and that from other international partners) has helped Ukraine step back from the brink of disaster post 2014. Today, the Ukrainian economy is showing some signs of growth, even with the ongoing war in Donbas. As with sanctions, the results of financial assistance and new economic policies unfold over time, therefore time should be allowed for new procedures and cash flows to take effect and be evaluated.

In addition to the actual war front in Donbas and the problem of the Crimean annexation, Ukraine is dealing with two internal battlegrounds: pushing reforms through and fighting endemic corruption. Reforms have been moving very slowly and there have been some setbacks. Washington remains influential and it retains significant leverage over Ukraine's elites. The United States together with the European Union (and other friends of Ukraine) have been able to push the country's reforms in the right direction, but gains are incomplete. It goes without saying that foreign assistance to Ukraine should remain strictly conditional and no blank checks should be written. Clear, visible progress of reforms should be the ultimate criterion for continued Western financial and technical support. Certainly, a close eye should be kept on Ukraine's dithering anti-corruption initiatives and programs.

Conclusion

While the Trump administration appears not to be particularly attentive to Ukraine's plight (or the long-standing U.S. business of democracy promotion), there is a tremendous amount that Washington can do to steer Ukraine further toward democratization and good governance. Surely, improvements in either of these two areas alone moves Russian influences further out of Ukraine's affairs. Now, as elections approach this year in Ukraine, there is a growing sense of urgency about this.

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