

## The Sources of Russia's Ukraine Policy

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### Abstract

Since the Orange Revolution in Ukraine, Russia's policy toward its western neighbor has evolved from unhappy relations with Victor Yushchenko to rapprochement with Victor Yanukovich and then confrontation over the revolutionary power change in Kiev in February 2014. In order to explain Russia's changing policy, one has to consider both values and interests that guide the Kremlin's actions toward Ukraine.

### Values and Interests in Russia's Foreign Policy

International relations theory offers us several ways of thinking about values and interests in foreign policy. Realism understands values in terms of power, status, and prestige—either as a resource of national consolidation and support of state policy abroad or a pretext for asserting state interests. However, the formation of values should not be reduced to considerations of state interests and power. Values are developed historically and establish cultural lenses through which nations form their international perceptions and assess their interests. When pressured from outside, nations tend to react defensively by embracing ethnic prejudices, empowering nationalist voices, and engaging in exclusionary practices at home and abroad.

This dynamics is common for Russia's relations with the EU and the United States. On the one hand, Russia has developed historically strong ties with Western nations and aspires to their recognition of its values and interests. On the other hand, The Russian system of values has been established as a culturally distinct. Russian values include an authentic concept of spiritual freedom inspired by Eastern Christianity and the idea of a strong, socially protective state capable of defending its own subjects from abuses at home and threats from abroad. Russia cooperates with the Western nations when its fundamental values and interests are not challenged. When they are challenged, Russia tends to turn to nationalist and assertive foreign policy, especially if it possesses sufficient power capabilities.

With respect to Ukraine, the dominant Russian perception stresses strong cultural and historical ties between the two peoples. Predominantly Slavic and Eastern Christian, they fought against common enemies at least since the 17<sup>th</sup> century and were members of the same imperial state. Russians consider Ukrainian people to be "brotherly" and are resentful of what they view as the Western nations' attempts to challenge the established cultural bond or try to convert Ukraine into their own system of values. This view is only partly shared by Ukrainians and not at all shared by the EU and the United States. Polls register that before 2014

Ukrainians were deeply divided in their views of Russia and the West. In the context of international competition for power, these diverging perceptions have the potential to be polarized further by leading the sides toward a conflict.

In addition to values, Moscow considers Ukraine to be vitally important for protecting Russia's geopolitical interests. A large borderland territory, Ukraine serves to protect Russia from potential military intervention by Western powers. Ukraine also connects Russia to Europe economically, as most of Russian energy pipelines run through Ukrainian territory by supplying the EU customers. Many in the Kremlin view the connection as the last pillar of Russia's stability and power that must not be undermined if Russia were to survive and preserve its sovereignty, independence, and authentic political culture.

### The Three Stages in Russia–Ukraine Relations

In November 2004, Ukraine went through a revolutionary transfer of power following the fraudulent parliamentary election. The new president Victor Yushchenko soon proclaimed his commitment to gaining membership in NATO, as the United States indicated its support for the new Ukrainian leadership. In response, Russia indicated that it saw these developments as threatening its national security and began to apply pressures to those in the former Soviet region, who wanted to gain membership in the Western military alliance. The Kremlin was determined to stop the alliance's expansion, and at the summit in Bucharest in April 2008, Russia managed to block issuing Georgia and Ukraine Membership Action Plans (MAPs). Russia's frozen relations with Ukraine's president culminated in President Dmitri A. Medvedev decision to delay sending a new Russia's ambassador to Kiev in August 2009. Medvedev denounced Yushchenko for conducting "anti-Russian policies" by citing interferences with Russia's Black Sea fleet in Sevastopol, support for Georgia during Russia's military conflict with it in August 2008, bid for NATO membership, and disruption of Russia's gas deliveries to Europe, mistreating Russian investors, and glorifying Nazi collaborators.

Another area of growing tensions with Ukraine concerned energy trade. In December 2005, Russia–Ukraine energy dispute culminated in the Kremlin-controlled Gazprom’s decision to terminate gas deliveries for the neighbor. The two sides then negotiated a contract for one year according to which Ukraine would receive gas at a subsidized price in exchange for a low pipeline transit fee. In December 2008, another crisis culminated in termination of energy deliveries for Ukraine. This time Moscow was able to negotiate a beneficial agreement by exploiting domestic political divisions. Putin in his capacity of Prime Minister brokered a ten-year contract with Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko who was planning to run for presidency and was eager to demonstrate her ability to work with Russia.

In February 2010 Victor Yanukovich was elected the new president. As the result, Russian–Ukrainian improved considerably. Following a change in government, Russia negotiated new terms for its political influence. In April 2010, the two sides agreed to extend the lease on Russia’s Black Sea Fleet for 25 more years in exchange for the reduction of gas prices by 30 percent. In October 2011, following the idea of strengthening Russia’s ties with its neighbors, Putin proposed to build a new Eurasian Union among the CIS states. With Ukraine in mind, he emphasized an open nature of the proposed union and laid out economic incentives from joining it, including increase in trade, common modernization projects, and improved standards of living. In 2011, Russia formally invited Ukraine to join a Customs Union, promising another major discount for gas prices. The Customs Union was created in 2010 and includes Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan—it became operative in January 2012.

Despite the improvement of relations under Yanukovich, the Russia–Ukraine partnership remained limited. Ukrainian leadership reversed the NATO membership course and indicated willingness to accommodate Russia in strengthening its presence in the Ukrainian economy. However, Yanukovich did not sell controlling shares of Naftogas and declined the Customs Union offer. Rather than following the example of Belarus and Kazakhstan, Ukraine wanted to establish a special, 3+1 format of relationships with the organization that would allow it to continue its integration with the European Union. In October 2013, in a hope to make Yanukovich change his mind, Putin went as far as giving Ukraine another major discount in energy prices and pledged \$15 billion in aid. In response, in November 2013, at the EU summit in Vilnius Ukrainian president announced his decision to postpone an Association Agreement with the EU.

That decision proved to be fatal for Yanukovich. In response to what was perceived as the leadership’s rever-

sal of the drive to join the EU, mass demonstrations took place in Kiev protesting Yanukovich’s decision and lack of internal progress in the country. Led by opposition and supported by Western nations, the Ukrainian protest reached an unprecedented proportion. On February 21, 2014 the EU-brokered compromise between Yanukovich and opposition collapsed. For unknown reasons, Yanukovich left the office and moved to Russia.

The Kremlin blamed the Western governments for collapse of the compromise agreement and refused to recognize the new government in Kiev. Russia then seized control over Crimea and, following a referendum on its status, incorporated it within its own territory. The Kremlin demanded that Kiev initiate new constitutional changes, guarantee protection of Russian speakers, and conduct a decentralization reform in the country. The Russian government also retracted its energy discount and financial aid for Kiev. Finally, Russia further amassed thousands of its troops on Ukraine’s border and provided various forms of assistance for protesters in the eastern Ukraine who refused to recognize the authority of Kiev’s government. In the meantime, instability and violence in the eastern Ukraine escalated. The summer saw especially intense fighting between the eastern rebels and Ukrainian army.

### Explaining Russia’s Ukraine Policy

By the time of the Orange Revolution, Russia’s interests had already been largely constructed as in conflict with those of pro-Western leadership in Ukraine. Historical developments with roots in the Cold War contributed to it by generating Russia and the West’s mistrust in each other’s intentions and strengthening the exclusionary value dynamics. Since the mid-1990s, Russia viewed the process of NATO expansion as threatening its security interests. In addition to promoting separate understanding of security interests, the Revolution began the process of forming Russia’s values as principally divergent from those of the West.

In Russia’s perception, Yushchenko failed to recognize Russia’s values and interests by pushing Ukraine to gain membership in NATO, promoting memory of nationalist fighters against the Soviets during the Second World War, and elevating status of Ukrainian language at the expense of that of Russian. In particular, the Ukrainian president called for the official recognition of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA) known for its crimes against Soviet citizens during the war and condemned during the Nuremberg War Crimes Trials.

What exacerbated the situation was that Western governments supported many of these policies. While challenging Russia not to meddle in Ukrainian elections in November 2004, the United States and the Euro-

pean Union provided considerable financial and political assistance for Yushchenko's campaign. The United States, strongly advocated MAP for Georgia and Ukraine. In 2008 Europeans proposed the Eastern Partnership (EP) program to build special ties with Ukraine and five other nations—Belarus, Moldova, Armenia, Georgia, and Azerbaijan—yet failed to extend an invitation to Russia. The fact that the program was initially proposed by Poland, Latvia, and Sweden known to be especially critical of Russia arose the Kremlin's suspicion that the EP was a Trojan horse for getting them to NATO. Western nations also largely ignored Russia's proposed a new all-European treaty, the Ukrainian historical revisionism, and lack of respect for language diversity.

By the time of Yanukovich's election as Ukraine's president in the early 2010, Putin had grown skeptical of relations with the West. The U.S. continued to develop the Missile Defense System jointly with the Europeans but separately from Russia. Tensions over handling of the Middle Eastern crisis grew. The West also increased criticism of the Kremlin's *many other* violations of human rights. In response, Putin's discourse obtained a new, ideological dimension. Since his election campaign, he began to promote the vision of Russia as committed to defending particular values and principles relative to those of the West and other civilizations.

Russia's relations with Yanukovich's Ukraine improved considerably. Yanukovich renounced any aspirations to join NATO and accommodated Russia's desire to renew a long-term lease on stationing the Black Sea Fleet in Crimea. He also cancelled the law awarding the medal of Hero of Ukraine to Nazi collaborators and publicly renounced the interpretation of Holodomor as genocide against Ukrainians. Finally, in 2012 Rada passed a new law that gave Russian language the status

of a "regional language" by approving its use in public places in regions with Russians exceeding 10% of the total population. The Kremlin was also encouraged by Yanukovich's refusal to sign an Associate Membership Agreement with the EU in November 2013.

However, with the ascent of Arseny Yatsenyuk's coalition in Kiev, Moscow had reason to believe that Kiev would resume its drive to join NATO and denounce the Black Sea agreement with Russia. By intervening in Crimea, Putin acknowledged that his leverage against Kiev—largely based on natural gas supplies and personal ties with Ukrainian pragmatists—was insufficient to ensure Ukraine's neutral status and preserve Russian fleet in the Black Sea.

In addition to security interests, the Kremlin was concerned about historical and linguistic ties between the two nations. Steps that followed the Euromaidan revolution activated Moscow's suspicions that Kiev would break cultural and historical ties to Russia. Kiev canceled the law on Russian language. In response to Ukrainians obtaining Russian passports, some deputies in Rada proposed to punish the second (Russian) citizenship with ten years jail time. Rada also restricted Russian media coverage and formed a new government with a heavy representation of nationalist figures who trace their political roots to UPA. The Kremlin now viewed new Ukrainian values as incompatible with those of Russia. In his press-conference, Putin referred to Ukraine as the "rampage of Nazi, nationalist, and anti-Semitic forces."

Any solution to the crisis in Russia–Ukraine relations is impossible without alleviating the Kremlin's fears that Kiev would seek membership in NATO, promote a nationalistic, UPA-centered historical memory, and treat ethnic Russians as a fifth column.

#### *About the Author*

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