

A partnership in time of crisis: U.S. - Ukraine relations during the Obama administration

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Abstract: *Since it gained its independence in 1991, Ukraine received great attention from the United States. With its strategic position, between East and West, Ukraine and its democratic development after the dissolution of the Soviet Union became a key interest in Western politics. Thus, for almost two decades, U.S. policy towards Ukraine has been centered on achieving and consolidating a democratic, prosperous, and secure country, more closely integrated into Europe and Euro-Atlantic structures. But the large size of Ukraine and its ethnic diversity have made it difficult to consolidate its identity as part of the European models. Besides that, Ukraine's political scene was dominated by oligarchic „clans” that led the state toward corruption, personal conflicts, and a perilous balancing act in foreign policy. For President Barack Obama, the U.S. – Ukraine relations were not a priority in the first years of his administration, but as much as Kyiv entered into a*

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political crisis at the end of 2013 and Russia started its incursion in Ukrainian territory, the Obama administration began to give Ukraine much more importance on its foreign policy agenda. The annexation of Crimea in March 2014 and the Russian backing of separatists from eastern Ukraine created an international crisis that tested American leadership and the future of U.S.-Russia relations. This article aims to offer an analysis of the U.S. – Ukraine relations during the Obama presidency, with a primary focus on the measures that the U.S. took after the anti-government protests erupted on the streets of Kyiv in November 2013. The article addresses the problem of NATO enlargement to include Ukraine, why American relations with Kyiv were also viewed as part of U.S. relations with Russia, and why Moscow perceived the U.S. activities in Kyiv as a way to undermine Ukraine's sovereignty.

Ukraine at the crossroads of West and East

Ukraine achieved its independence from the Soviet Union in 1991 and since then has tried to find its place in Europe as a unified and prosperous society. As one of the USSR's largest successors, by territory, population, and economy, Ukraine rapidly gained importance on the international scene. Its democratic development was considered essential for a stable European security system. A successful Ukrainian political system would promote stability in the region and curb Russia's imperial ambitions which became a security concern for the U.S. and its allies gradually.

Relations between the U.S. and Ukraine begin with Ukraine's transition to democracy. At the time of the Soviet Union's collapse, Ukraine had the world's third-largest strategic nuclear arsenal on its territory. Because of its nuclear inheritance, Ukraine became rapidly a priority on the foreign policy agenda of

the U.S. during the '90. In January 1994, Ukraine, Russian Federation, and the U.S., after a series of negotiations, signed the Trilateral Agreement in which Ukraine committed to full nuclear disarmament, in exchange for economic support and security assurances from the U.S. and Russia. To solidify security commitments to Ukraine, the U.S., Russia, and the United Kingdom signed the Budapest Memorandum on Security Assurances on December 5, 1994. According to the Memorandum, the U.S., Russia, and the U.K. reaffirmed „their obligation to refrain from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of Ukraine, and that none of their weapons will ever be used against Ukraine except in self-defense or otherwise in accordance with the Charter of the United Nations.”²

The denuclearization of Ukraine was a real success in the American nuclear non-proliferation effort after the Cold War and opened the way to an expanded bilateral relationship. As part of the doctrine of democratic enlargement, President Bill Clinton began his support for democratic and market reform in Ukraine, including a comprehensive assistance package.³ A Joint U.S.-Ukrainian Statement on Friendship and Partnership was issued in 1994 and, two years later, Ukrainian President Leonid Kuchma and American Vice President Al Gore announced a new U.S.-Ukraine „strategic partnership” that was a further manifestation of the ever-improving relationship.⁴

Ukraine seemed to be on its way to becoming a functioning democracy, forging strategic partnerships with other democratic countries. After being one of

² „Memorandum on Security Assurances in connection with Ukraine’s accession to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons”, Budapest, 5 December 1994 <https://bit.ly/3Vm9Tl6>

³ „A National Security Strategy of Engagement and Enlargement: February 1995”, in *Historical Office – Office of the Secretary of Defense*, p.5 <https://bit.ly/3EAXpYu>

⁴ „U.S.-Ukraine Relations”, in *U.S. Department of State – Archive* <https://bit.ly/3SYD1Vm>

the first countries to join the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) Partnership for Peace, Ukraine agreed to become part of a distinctive partnership with NATO in 1997 that established the NATO-Ukraine Commission. This level of cooperation, which was only offered to two countries – Ukraine and Russia – confirmed the special interest that NATO and its western allies had in the region. An independent, democratic, and stable Ukraine was one of the key factors for ensuring stability in Central and Eastern Europe and the continent as a whole, according to the Charter on a Distinctive Partnership between the two countries.⁵ A partnership with NATO offered more incentives for building more transparency and stability in a volatile region that struggled to create its own national and political identity after the communist regime.

In the late 1990s, Ukrainian President Leonid Kuchma often described his foreign policy as a „multi-vector” reaching out to Russia, Europe, and the U.S. During the time he concluded partnerships with Washington, Kuchma signed with Russian President Boris Yeltsin a Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation, and Partnership. President Yeltsin stated that he and Kuchma have solved all outstanding questions in their countries’ bilateral relations and had „left no problems behind”.⁶ The treaty, lasting for 10 years, made Russia recognize Ukraine’s sovereignty, including sovereignty over the city of Sevastopol, where Russia’s Black Sea Fleet was stationed. The Friendship Treaty was a turning point in Ukraine – Russia relations, and Kuchma’s balancing act in foreign policy seemed to be an apparent success for a time. However, anti-democratic practices

⁵ „Charter on a Distinctive Partnership between the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and Ukraine”, in *North Atlantic Treaty Organization – Official texts*, 9 July 1997 https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_25457.htm

⁶ Floriana Fossato, „Russia: Kremlin Chooses Pragmatic Approach--An Analysis”, in *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, June 09, 1997, <https://www.rferl.org/a/1085096.html>

that Ukrainian President Kuchma started to apply after winning his second term led to growing concerns in the U.S. and European governments. His efforts to control the Parliament, the coercion of the opposition, and the possible involvement in the murder of the journalist Georgiy Gongadze in 2000 were signals to the Western governments that the democratic reform of Ukraine was far more difficult than it was expected.⁷

As NATO was extending into Central and Eastern Europe, Ukraine found itself in a so-called „gray zone“, bordering two key Euro-Atlantic institutions, NATO and the European Union (EU), and a lengthy border with Russia. Even if Ukraine’s defense and security council chief, Yevhen Marchuk, announced in 2002 that Ukraine wanted to join NATO, the prospects of the country’s admission to NATO were far from being considered at that moment. Ukraine was suffering from a „post-Soviet syndrome“⁸ that made it difficult to adopt the kinds of democratic, economic, and military reforms that the alliance asked of other aspirants. The political system became corrupt, the economy was controlled by a small elite with close ties to the political leadership, the rule of law was weak, and the commercial ties between Russian oligarchs and wealthy businessmen reinforced the influence of Russia on its neighbor.

When American President George W. Bush came into office in 2001, U.S. – Ukraine relations took a negative turn. The anti-democratic practices of Leonid Kuchma transform Ukraine into a „hybrid state with a competitive authoritarian

⁷ Paul D’Anieri, „Ukrainian foreign policy from independence to inertia“, in *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, Vol. 45, No. 3/4, Special Issue: Disintegration of the Soviet Union. Twenty years later. Assessment. Quo Vadis? (September/December 2012), p. 449 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48610366>

⁸ Angela Stent, *The Limits of Partnership: U.S.-Russian Relations in the Twenty-First Century*, New York, Princeton University Press, 2014, p.136.

regime”.⁹ Besides the fact that he allowed corruption to proliferate in the state, Kuchma was suspected of approving the sale of a new type of aircraft tracking system to Iraq. This violation of the embargo imposed by the United Nations Security Council determined the Bush administration to suspend \$55 million in aid to Ukraine.¹⁰ Bush’s suspicion was also highlighted when the Ukrainian presidential election was due to take place. The U.S. President warned President Kuchma in a letter from 20 November 2004 that the U.S will have to review its relations with Ukraine if the electoral process is characterized by fraud and manipulation.¹¹ Eventually, the incumbent Ukrainian President and his chosen successor backed by Russia, Viktor Yanukovych, tried to steal the election by adding votes to Yanukovych’s tally in the second round.

When widespread electoral fraud has been revealed, thousands of protesters gathered on the streets of Kyiv demanding that the election have to be rerun. The protests, known as the Orange Revolution, had set a landmark in the post-communist history of Eastern Europe and show the desire of Ukrainians to shift Westward. With two presidential candidates, Viktor Yushchenko and Viktor Yanukovych, that seemed to represent either the pro-Western camp or the pro-Russia one, the events that happened in Ukraine turned soon into a competition for influence between Washington and Moscow. In the election campaign, several prominent American personalities, including former President George H.W. Bush and former U.S. National Security adviser Zbigniew

⁹ Taras Kuzio, „ Regime type and politics in Ukraine under Kuchma”, in *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, Vol. 38, No. 2, Special Issue: Ukraine: Elections and Democratisation (June 2005), p. 175 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48609535>

¹⁰ „U.S. checks into report of Ukraine sale to Iraq”, in *CNN*, October 2, 2002 <http://edition.cnn.com/2002/US/10/02/ukraine.iraq.us/>

¹¹ „Bush Warns Ukraine To Conduct Fair Election”, in *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, November 20, 2004 <https://www.rferl.org/a/1055987.html>

Brzezinski visited Kyiv to raise the importance of free elections and democratization as a prerequisite for Ukraine's Euro-Atlantic integration. On the other hand, Russian President Vladimir Putin visited Ukraine to express his support for Yanukovich and praise the Kuchma's government for positively structuring the relationship with Russia „not only in economics... [but] in politics as well”.¹²

Intending to turn the Ukrainian state towards Western values, the U.S. has invested since the '90s in organizations such as the *U.S. Agency for International Development* or *National Endowment for Democracy*, which aimed to develop democratic institutions in the country by providing grants and technical assistance to Ukrainian civil society. But instead of promoting measures to advance democracy, Moscow saw these organizations as orchestrated conspiracy funded by the American government to undermine Ukrainian sovereignty, weaken Russia's sphere of influence, and expand Washington's imperial reach.¹³ The Orange Revolution was considered the most obvious example. Then, American organizations focused their resources on creating the conditions for free and fair elections, providing training and direct assistance to election monitoring organizations and independent media. Additionally, although the U.S. did not express any explicit preference for a candidate in the 2004 Ukrainian presidential election, Viktor Yushchenko was popular in Washington due to the time he spent as chairman of the Central Bank.¹⁴ After the Ukrainian Supreme Court declared the election null and demand a rerun of the election, which

¹² Nick Paton Walsh, „Putin's Kyiv visit 'timed to influence Ukraine poll'”, in *The Guardian*, 27 October 2004 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2004/oct/27/ukraine.russia>

¹³ Michael McFaul, „'Meddling' In Ukraine: Democracy is not an American plot.”, in *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 21 December 2004 <https://bit.ly/3t0V9Tp>

¹⁴ Angel Stent, *op.cit.*, p. 151.

would result in the victory of the pro-Western candidate Yushchenko, a consensus has emerged in Russia that the West – especially the U.S. – engineered the entire revolution on the streets of Kyiv to ensure that their candidate will come to power.

For Russia, this alleged Western intervention in Ukraine was considered a danger to national security interests. 80% of Russia's gas exports to Europe passed through Ukraine, the Russian Black Sea fleet was stationed in the Crimean Peninsula, and about 17.3% of the country's population was ethnic Russian. The continued enlargement of NATO, the expansion of the EU, and the promotion of democracy in Ukraine created an increasingly strong sense of threat for the Kremlin.

Once he became president, Viktor Yushchenko indicated a desire for a stable relationship with Russia, but the focus of his foreign policy would be to bring Ukraine closer to the West, including integration with NATO and the EU. But his tensions with prim-minister Yulia Tymoshenko and the failure to combine the ideals and aspirations of the Orange Revolution with the competence to govern made it difficult for the U.S. and the EU to help Kyiv accomplish much in the reform area.

At the beginning of 2008, Yushchenko was determined to attach high priority to securing a Membership Action Plan (MAP) from NATO at the Bucharest summit scheduled in April. President Viktor Yushchenko, Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko, and Parliament Chairman Arseny Yatsenyuk sent a joint letter to NATO Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer declaring Ukraine's readiness to advance to a MAP, which is an essential step towards membership. The three Ukrainian leaders' letter states that the country sees itself as part of the

Euro-Atlantic security space and is determined to counteract threats to common security alongside NATO countries.¹⁵ Nevertheless, the potential accession of Ukraine to NATO was prevented by the lack of public support for accession in Ukraine, Russia's opposition, and the slow progress in security sector reform.

The lack of consensus on NATO membership in Ukrainian society was split largely along regional lines. Those living in the southern and eastern parts of Ukraine, whether ethnic Russians or Ukrainians, tend to oppose NATO membership and support close ties with Russia. Supporters of NATO membership were concentrated in western Ukraine, where Ukrainian speakers are suspicious of Russia and prefer a western orientation.¹⁶ By 2008, less than one-quarter of the population supported NATO membership.

A harsh critic of NATO enlargement since its first wave of expansion, Russia didn't hide away its opposition to the possible accession of Ukraine in the Euro-Atlantic alliance. After the Ukrainian officials made public the letter in which they express the aspiration of joining NATO, Russian President Vladimir Putin rapidly declared his discontent. Alarmed by the potential deployment of a U.S. missile shield in Ukraine when the country would become a NATO member, Putin said that he would be forced to target Russian rockets at Ukraine in response: „I am not only terrified to utter this, it is scary even to think that Russia ...would have to target its offensive rocket systems at Ukraine”.¹⁷ To defuse Russian criticism over the decision to seek MAP, the Ukrainian President said

¹⁵ Vladimir Socor, „Ukraine's top three leaders request NATO Membership Action Plan”, in *The Jamestown Foundation*, January 18, 2008 <https://bit.ly/3g43LW3>

¹⁶ Paul Gallis, Paul Belkin, Carl Ek, Julie Kim, Jim Nichol, Steven Woehrel, „CRS Report for Congress: Enlargement Issues at NATO's Bucharest Summit”, in *Congressional Research Service*, March 12, 2008, p. 23 <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/row/RL34415.pdf>

¹⁷ Rosalind Ryan, „Join Nato and we'll target missiles at Kyiv, Putin warns Ukraine”, in *The Guardian*, 12 February 2008 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2008/feb/12/russia.ukraine>

that his country would not allow the establishment of NATO bases on Ukrainian soil: „If the Russian side is worried about military bases then Ukraine will never go for that ... We are ready to underpin that constitutionally“, according to Yushchenko.¹⁸

Even in that case, Russia's opposition remained strong. At the NATO Bucharest summit in April 2008, the alliance welcomed the Euro-Atlantic aspirations of the two former Soviet republics, Ukraine and Georgia, to join NATO. Although the statement was a vague pledge to invite the two to join the alliance at some point in the future, it managed to trouble Russia once again. Shortly after the summit, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said that Moscow will do everything it can to prevent the two countries from becoming NATO members: „We will do all we can to prevent Ukraine's and Georgia's accession into NATO and to avoid an inevitable serious exacerbation of our relations with both the alliance and our neighbors.“¹⁹

As it said, Russia was ready to take all the necessary measures for ensuring its interests along its borders. In August 2008, after Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili ordered his troops to capture the capital of South Ossetia, Tskhinvali, Russia launched a full-scale military invasion, moving troops to the border and carrying out airstrikes on Georgian positions in Ossetia and Abkhazia, the two separatist regions openly supported by Moscow. Russia defeated the Georgian forces in five days and then recognized the independence of the two regions. Occupied by Russian troops, Georgia couldn't fit anymore

¹⁸ „Ukraine says will not allow NATO bases“, in *Reuters*, 13 February 2008 <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-ukraine-idUSL1388247420080213>

¹⁹ „Russia Talks Tough in Response to NATO's Eastward Expansion“, in *Deutsche Welle*, 11 April 2008 <https://www.dw.com/en/russia-talks-tough-in-response-to-natos-eastward-expansion/a-3261078>

into the NATO criteria for joining the alliance. The Russian-Georgian conflict significantly complicated not only Tbilisi's efforts to join NATO but also Ukraine's. The Russian threat seemed to hang over Ukraine if Kyiv wanted to move closer to the West.

As an attempt to curb Russian aggression in the region, the Bush Administration was determined to reassure Ukraine of the American commitments and signed the U.S.-Ukraine Charter on Strategic Partnership in December 2008. The Charter highlighted the importance of the bilateral relationship and outlined enhanced cooperation in the areas of defense, security, economics and trade, energy security, democracy, and cultural exchanges. Furthermore, the text stated that deepening Ukraine's integration into Euro-Atlantic institutions is a mutual priority.²⁰

The American Administration saw the Charter as something of a consolation prize for the failure to get Ukraine a MAP. In the context of continuing political disarray in the Ukrainian government, of lack of consensus about the place of Ukraine on the international scene, and the assertiveness of Russia, the near future of Ukraine seemed to remain characterized by the same balancing act between East and West.

U.S. and Ukraine relations during first term of the Obama Administration

When Barack Obama took office as President of the U.S., the American and global economies were in the midst of the worst financial crisis since the

²⁰ „United States-Ukraine Charter on Strategic Partnership”, in the *U.S. Department of State Archive*, 19 December 2008 <https://2001-2009.state.gov/p/eur/rls/or/113366.htm>

Great Depression of 1929, and America's popularity worldwide was declining. The state of Ukraine was not a foreign policy priority for the U.S. President, who was heavily preoccupied with the financial crisis, two wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, Iran's nuclear program, and the emergence of China. The developments in Ukraine seemed to permit a relative retreat, although some concerns continued to be raised as part of its intention to reassure the old allies about American commitments.

Once the Obama administration announced its intent to „reset“ relations with Russia, it laid out its views about the Russian influence in the former Soviet space. In February 2009, during the Munich Security Conference, Vice President Joe Biden declared that in recent years there had been a „dangerous drift“ in the relationship between Russia and Western allies, which is why it is time to „press the reset button and to revisit the many areas where we can and should be working together with Russia.“²¹ To reassure Russia's neighbors that the U.S. would not ignore their security concerns while forging a new kind of relationship with Moscow, Biden stated that „we will not agree with Russia on everything ... We will not recognize any nation having a sphere of influence.“²²

By rejecting the notion of spheres of influence and stressing the importance of sovereignty and territorial integrity, the Obama Administration reiterated the position of the previous administration and reassured Ukrainian allies about American support. In his visit to Moscow, in July 2009, President Obama made a subtle criticism of Russia's actions and ensured American allies of

²¹ „Remarks by Vice President Biden at 45th Munich Conference on Security Policy“, in *The White House: President Barack Obama – Briefing Room: Speeches & Remarks*, 7 February 2009 <https://bit.ly/3ruVcGo>

²² *Ibidem*.

his view about Moscow's intrusion into the sovereignty of other states, declaring that „state sovereignty must be a cornerstone of international order. Just as all states should have the right to choose their leaders, states must have the right to borders that are secure, and to their own foreign policies. That is true for Russia, just as it is true for the United States [...] we must apply this principle to all nations -- and that includes nations like Georgia and Ukraine.”²³

However, his statements didn't convey the necessary trust. The so-called „reset” policy with Russia launched by President Obama at the beginning of his presidency raised some concerns in the post-Soviet space about what intentions the new American administration would have. Even if the „reset” was a strategy for achieving American security and economic objectives in dealing with Moscow, some thought that Obama would make concessions to the detriment of Russian neighbors. To counter those concerns, Vice-President Joe Biden visited Kyiv just after Obama's trip to Moscow and his meeting with Russian President Dmitry Medvedev. Biden's trip to Kyiv was viewed as an opportunity to demonstrate that Washington would not pursue its reset in relations with Russia at the expense of Russia's neighbors nor would pursue relations with these neighbors through a Russian prism.²⁴ In the meeting with President Viktor Yushchenko, the American Vice-President reaffirmed the strategic partnership between the two countries and reassured Ukrainians that the reset in the American relationship with Russia would not come at Ukraine's expense.²⁵ On

²³ „Remarks By The President At The New Economic School Graduation”, in *The White House – President Barack Obama: Speeches & Remarks*, July 7, 2009 <https://bit.ly/3Tt0LAV>

²⁴ David J. Kramer, „Biden's Critical Trip to Ukraine and Georgia”, in *German Marshall Fund of the United States*, 2009 <http://www.jstor.com/stable/resrep18785>

²⁵ „Statement by Vice President Biden After Meeting with President Viktor Yushchenko of Ukraine”, in *The White House: President Barack Obama – Speeches & Remarks*, 21 July 2009 <https://bit.ly/3POORbK>

the contrary, according to Biden, a good relationship with Moscow can defuse the zero-sum thinking about the relations with Russia's neighbors.

The American Vice-President's visit underscored that the U.S. wanted to deepen relations with Ukraine and its people regardless of the political disarray within the Ukrainian government. But regarding NATO-Ukraine relations the situation was different. Although Biden said in his visit to Kyiv that „President Obama and I have stated clearly that if you choose to be part of Euro-Atlantic integration -- which I believe you have -- that we strongly support that”²⁶, the possibility of granting Ukraine a MAP was far from happening. The lack of progress in the political, economic, defense and security sectors was still an impediment to Ukraine's path toward NATO membership. During the first NATO summit of the Obama Presidency, held in April 2009, the NATO allies made it clear that the enlargement would take a pause for Ukraine and Georgia. At the summit, they reaffirmed the commitment to assist the two states in their reform efforts, but reiterate that political stability is of crucial importance to the successful implementation of these reforms that make possible the integration into Euro-Atlantic structures.²⁷

President Obama approached the post-Soviet space by taking into account Russian concerns. In his first year in office, he avoided making statements that would have enraged Russia. He expressed his support for NATO expansion, declaring that „it was important to send a clear signal throughout Europe that we are going to continue to abide by the central belief ... that countries who seek and

²⁶ *Ibidem.*

²⁷ „Strasbourg / Kehl Summit Declaration”, in *NATO – Newsroom*, 04 April 2009 https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/news_52837.htm

aspire to join NATO are able to join NATO”²⁸, but he didn’t explicitly state that the U.S. supports Ukraine joining NATO or being granted a MAP. With his pragmatic approach, Obama wanted to make sure to maintain the U.S. – Russia relationship on a good path, at least until the U.S. goals were obtained. He needed Russia’s support for achieving some American security objectives like a new arms control treaty, reducing nuclear proliferation, expanding a northern supply route through Russia to Afghanistan, and preventing Iran from developing a nuclear weapon.

The failure of Victor Yushchenko to combat corruption and unite Ukraine paved the way for Viktor Yanukovich to mount an unlikely comeback and win the 2010 presidential election race. The election took place on January 17, 2010. Yanukovich at 32% and Yulia Tymoshenko at 25% gained the most votes. The incumbent Yushchenko placed fifth, with less than 6%. In the February 7 runoff, Yanukovich outpolled Tymoshenko 48.9% to 45.5%.²⁹ Viktor Yanukovich, a candidate deemed as pro-Moscow and the Ukrainian opposition leader whose first presidential election victory was overturned by the courts after the 2004 Orange Revolution, promised to end years of turmoil. According to OSCE, Ukraine’s presidential election, the fifth since the country regained its independence when the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, was „democratic and organized in a transparent manner”.³⁰

²⁸ „Obama Voices Support for NATO Expansion Despite Russian Qualms”, in *Deutsche Welle*, 25 March 2009

<https://www.dw.com/en/obama-voices-support-for-nato-expansion-despite-russian-qualms/a-4126973>

²⁹ Steven Pifer, *The Eagle and the Trident: U.S. – Ukraine Relations in Turbulent Times*, Washington D.C., Brookings Institution Press, 2017, p. 290.

³⁰ Daryna Krasnolutska; Kateryna Choursina, „Yanukovich Wins Ukraine’s Presidential Election”, in *OSCE Parliamentary Assembly – News & Media*, 2010 <https://bit.ly/3VC4D4f>

Despite serious questions about Yanukovich's character, Washington was prepared to give him a chance. Shortly after winning the elections, Yanukovich was congratulated by the Obama administration. The White House said Obama wished Yanukovich „success in carrying out his mandate” and „commended the Ukrainian people” on the conduct of the vote.³¹ The democratic elections made him a legitimate President and a possible good partner for consolidating the bilateral relationship.

In April 2010, U.S. President Barack Obama and his Ukrainian counterpart issued a joint statement reaffirming the strategic partnership between the two states and the common interests of their countries. The partnership that the American administration forged with President Yanukovich seemed to be pragmatic, plainly aimed at getting Ukraine's cooperation on Obama's policy of building a world without nuclear weapons. In their meeting that preceded the 2010 Nuclear Security Summit, President Yanukovich announced Ukraine's decision to get rid of all of its stocks of highly-enriched uranium by the time of the next Nuclear Security Summit, while the United States would provide necessary technical and financial assistance to support this effort.³² In an effort to engage Obama and show his willingness to collaborate with the West, the Ukrainian President made one of the biggest commitments at the nuclear summit with his promise to dispose of all highly enriched uranium by 2012.

But unlike his predecessor, whose stance was more pro-Western, Yanukovich sought to improve relations with Moscow and keep a healthy

³¹ „Obama Congratulates Yanukovich On Victory”, in *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 11 February 2010 https://www.rferl.org/a/Obama_Congratulates_Yanukovich_On_Victory/1955681.html

³² „Joint Statement by President Obama and President Yanukovich”, in *The White House – President Barack Obama: Statements & Releases*, April 12, 2010 <https://bit.ly/3SctNUe>

balance between East and West. During his meeting with Russian President Dmitry Medvedev, the Ukrainian President said he would perform a sharp U-turn on the policies pursued by Yushchenko, ending the tensions between Moscow and Kyiv that arose in the wake of the 2004 Orange Revolution.³³ As a result, he agreed to extend the lease of the port of Sevastopol, which allowed the stationing of the Russian Black Sea fleet for another 25 years, and in June 2010 the Ukrainian Parliament passed the law prohibiting Ukraine from joining any military bloc. The law, however, allowed cooperation with NATO as a partner and possible accession to the European Union, this derogation leaving the image of a balanced foreign policy that Yanukovych wanted to follow.³⁴

The seemingly pro-Russian measures taken by the Ukrainian President gradually started to worry the American government. During a visit to Kyiv in July 2010, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton highlighted the importance of balance in Ukraine's foreign policy, declaring that „Ukraine is an independent nation, and we hope Ukraine will have good relations with its neighbors – including Russia – and that Ukraine will pursue close, constructive relationships with the United States and countries of the European Union.”³⁵ With a law that certified Ukraine as a European non-bloc nation and low public support for the country to become a NATO member, with only 28% of Ukrainians in favor of joining the Alliance,³⁶ the U.S. acknowledged that the support for NATO

³³ Luke Harding, „Viktor Yanukovych promises Ukraine will embrace Russia”, in *The Guardian*, 5 March 2010

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/mar/05/ukraine-russia-relations-viktor-yanukovych>

³⁴ „Ukraine's parliament votes to abandon Nato ambitions”, in *BBC News*, 3 June 2010
<https://www.bbc.com/news/10229626>

³⁵ „Remarks With Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych”, in *U.S. Department of State – Remarks by Secretary Clinton: July 2010* <https://bit.ly/38AktZK>

³⁶ Kathleen Holzward Sprehe, „Ukraine Says 'No' to NATO”, in *Pew Research Center*, 29 March 2010
<https://pewrsr.ch/3PPV9zx>

integration, even only at the declarative level, would no longer be well received. Thus, the Obama administration encouraged Kyiv to work more with the European Union to deepen Ukraine's links with the West and prevent backsliding in the Russian sphere of influence. The EU became Washington's one of the main tools for democracy promotion in Ukraine.

From the beginning of his presidency, Viktor Yanukovych stated that integration into the EU was still an absolute priority in terms of Ukraine's domestic and foreign policy. With his balanced foreign policy which recalled Leonid Kuchma's presidency, Yanukovych considered that links with Moscow were not incompatible with the goal of joining the EU. Indeed, the dialogue between the Ukrainian President and EU leaders was maintained despite the Russo-Ukrainian rapprochement and led to a certain amount of progress. Following the EU-Ukraine Summit, held in November 2010 in Brussels, the European leaders announced Ukraine's signature of the accession Protocol to the Energy Community, welcomed the Action Plan towards visa liberalization for Ukraine, and stressed the importance of the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement which was being negotiated. Moreover, the Ukrainian side welcomed the EU's commitment to provide additional support through a macro-financial assistance package of €610 million.³⁷

Quite soon, concern about Yanukovych's commitment to democracy grew and the measures implemented by Ukrainian authorities in terms of domestic policy hardly correspond with the EU's efforts to establish the universal values of human rights, democracy, and the rule of law in the Eastern neighborhood. In the

³⁷ „Media statement from 14th EU-Ukraine summit”, in *Kyiv Post*, 22 November 2010 <https://bit.ly/3VMcGEa>

autumn of 2010, Ukraine's Constitutional Court restored the constitution of 1996 that strengthened the powers of the President. This lack of checks and balances was considered an obstacle to building genuine democratic structures and a step toward an authoritarian regime. Furthermore, a criminal case against the former prime minister and opposition leader Yulia Tymoshenko accused of exceeding her authority while negotiating the gas agreement with Russia in 2009, became the main obstacle to signing the Association Agreement at the December 2011 Ukraine-EU Summit.³⁸

Eventually, the American Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and the High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Catherine Ashton, issued a joint statement in 2012 stating that the European Union and Ukraine had completed negotiations on an ambitious Association Agreement in December 2011, that would provide for the country's political association and economic integration with the European Union, including by establishing a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area.³⁹ The use of administrative resources in election campaigns to favor candidates of the ruling party or the imprisonment of opposition leaders without respecting international standards, as in the case of former Ukrainian Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko, were considered to be worrying trends that complicated the process of the possible accession of Kyiv to the EU shortly.

The U.S. and EU leaders had agreed on the importance of a coordinated Western message to Ukraine. The Obama administration's policy of „engagement

³⁸ Nazar Kholod, „Reforming the Ukrainian Economy under Yanukovich: The First Two Years“, in *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 02 April 2012 <https://bit.ly/3SbDVN9>

³⁹ „Ukraine's Troubling Trends“, in *U.S. Department of State - Remarks by Secretary Clinton: October 2012* <https://bit.ly/3NGI2Ph>

without endorsement”⁴⁰ of the Yanukovych regime was characterized by bilateral cooperation with Kyiv only where common interests collided and collaboration with the EU as a way to maintain Ukraine in the Western camp. Yanukovych’s balanced policy became to be seen as unsuccessful for the international position of Ukraine, his measures guaranteeing neither a stable partnership with Brussels nor with Moscow. This condition made Ukraine even more politically vulnerable.

As Obama’s first term drew to a close, so did the reset with Russia. Issues that were frozen during the *détente* at the start of Obama’s presidency were once again put in the spotlight. With the objectives of the „reset” agenda almost completely achieved, the Obama administration didn’t hesitate anymore to be more critical of Moscow’s actions. If in the first years of Obama’s administration, the criticism was made subtly, from 2012 onward the American officials spoke their minds more clearly about the Russian undemocratic practices and the influence that Moscow wanted to project in the former Soviet space.

Finding the developing partnership between the EU and Ukraine an economic and security threat, Russia tried to attract Ukraine into a Eurasian Economic Union, the Russian equivalent of the EU. In 2004, the Ukrainian parliament, together with that of Russia and Kazakhstan, ratified a treaty that established a Single Economic Space, a structure in which the regulation of the economies of the three states would be shared and trade tariffs abolished to ensure the free movement of goods, services, capital, and labor.⁴¹ The outbreak of the Orange Revolution and the coming to power of Viktor Yushchenko blocked, however, the process of Ukraine’s integration into Russia’s organizational

⁴⁰ Steven Pifer, *op.cit.*, p. 293.

⁴¹ Askold Krushelnycky, „CIS: Russian, Ukrainian, Kazakh Parliaments Ratify Treaty On Single Economic Space”, in *Radio Free Liberty*, 21 April 2004 <https://www.rferl.org/a/1052410.html>

structures. The return of a pro-Russian leader in 2010 was seen by Moscow as a possible resumption of such economic cooperation, which many considered a Russian imperialist move. In 2012, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton declared that „there is a move to re-Sovietize the region [...] It's not going to be called that. It's going to be called a customs union, it will be called Eurasian Union and all of that. But let's make no mistake about it. We know what the goal is and we are trying to figure out effective ways to slow down or prevent it.”⁴²

The Russian economic project wasn't just about the sphere of influence that Moscow wanted to re-established in the post-Soviet region, as the American secretary of state declared. It was also about the vital economic interests that Russia had to protect. The Russian-led community in Eurasia that Moscow began building would give Russia certain economic benefits and, no less important, better bargaining positions with regard to the country's big continental neighbors, the EU to the west and China to the east.⁴³ Incorporating a country with almost 45 million consumers like Ukraine into its economic sphere would have given Russia real economic advantages and a stronger position at any negotiation table.

The U.S. response to Euromaidan protests and the Russian annexation of Crimea

Yanukovich's efforts to continue its balanced foreign policy seemed to get more difficult. As it was for President Kuchma at the beginning of the 21st

⁴² Bradley Klapper, „Clinton fears efforts to 're-Sovietize' in Europe”, in *AP News*, 6 December 2012 <https://bit.ly/3NMaTlr>

⁴³ Dmitri Trenin, „The Ukraine Crisis and the Resumption of Great-Power Rivalry”, in *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, July 2014, p.4 <http://www.jstor.com/stable/resrep13067>

century, the policy of balancing relations between the West and Russia began to be more and more perilous. The apparent close relationship between the EU and Ukraine made Russia become wary about what the future might bring for its security and economic interests in the region. President Putin started to consider that EU ties could anchor Kyiv in the European structures just as much as a relationship with NATO would. So, to prevent such a move, Russia launched a campaign of both inducements and threats toward the Ukrainian President to make him abandon European integration.

Once EU negotiators announced that they agreed for Ukraine to sign the Association Agreement at the summit in Vilnius on 28-29 November 2013, Russia began to put increasing pressure on Yanukovych to rethink his plans. In July 2013, Russia started to impose trade sanctions on Ukraine. For several days in the following month, the Russian authorities applied extensive customs controls to all imports from Ukraine. Although normal trade resumed in less than a week, the message of these actions was clear: if Ukraine were to sign the Agreement with the EU, it should expect a disruption in bilateral trade with Russia.⁴⁴

Determined to prevent Ukraine from turning toward the West, President Vladimir Putin intervened personally and on 9 November he met at a military airport near Moscow with President Yanukovych. The meeting had the effect that the Kremlin desired. A week before the EU summit in Vilnius, the Ukrainian President announced that would suspend the preparations for signing the Association Agreement with the EU, citing national security interests and the need to restore lost trade with Russia and Commonwealth of Independent States

⁴⁴ Samuel Charap, Timothy J. Colton, *Everyone Loses: The Ukraine Crisis and the Ruinous Contest for Post-Soviet Eurasia*, Londra, Routledge, 2016, pp. 118-119.

partners.⁴⁵ A few weeks after the announcement, Putin welcomed Yanukovych to Moscow to celebrate his apparent triumph over the West. Russia has promised to purchase \$15 billion in Ukrainian Eurobonds and cut the price of gas offered to Ukraine by about a third.⁴⁶ Russia was prepared to pay a high price to block the possible expansion of the EU at its borders.

President Yanukovych's decision to suspend preparations for the signing of the Agreement with the EU sparked massive civil protests in Kyiv in late November, which would come to be known as „Euromaidan“. Despite the many EU flags on display, the focus of the protests gradually came to be on Yanukovych's removal from power. Violence escalated in the following weeks, with government snipers killing several protesters, and far-right groups, which were infiltrating through peaceful protesters, being responsible for the deaths of several police officers.

After three months of unrest, the political crisis in Ukraine reached a critical point in February 2014. EU and U.S. officials have urged Yanukovych and his ministers to reach a compromise with the opposition to end the violent clashes. In his State of the Union Address from January 2014, President Barack Obama referred to the situation in Ukraine and declared that the U.S. stands for „the principle that all people have the right to express themselves freely and peacefully, and have a say in their country's future.“⁴⁷

As the revolt and political instability continued, Ukraine moved back onto the American government's radar. The Obama administration tried to find a

⁴⁵ „ENP Country Progress Report 2013 – Ukraine“, in *European Commission*, 27 March 2014 <https://bit.ly/3MWA8RU>

⁴⁶ Samuel Charap, Timothy J. Colton, *op.cit.*, p. 121.

⁴⁷ „President Barack Obama's State of the Union Address“, in *The White House: President Barack Obama – Speeches & Remarks*, 28 January 2014 <https://bit.ly/3t5talR>

peaceful solution to stop the crisis in Ukraine. Vice-president Joe Biden urged the Ukrainian president in a series of phone calls to take steps to end the violence and to meaningfully address the legitimate concerns of protesters.⁴⁸ Moreover, several U.S. officials, alongside European dignitaries, visit Kyiv to show support for the anti-government protesters. In December 2013, American Senator John McCain met in Kyiv with protesters and opposition leaders who called for Yanukovich's government to resign and for early elections.⁴⁹ US Ambassador to Kyiv Geoffrey Pyatt and Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs Victoria Nuland also visited Kyiv's Independence Square (Maidan) where the riots took place and talk with protesters and the opposition. Along with EU foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton, they urged the government and the opposition to work out a solution to the crisis.⁵⁰

The U.S. efforts to de-escalate the situation fueled Moscow's suspicions that the West, especially Washington, is meddling in Ukraine's politics and preparing a regime change. A secret phone conversation between Ambassador Pyatt and Assistant Secretary of State Victoria Nuland that was leaked on YouTube further grew Kremlin suspicions. According to the recording, the two officials were apparently discussing not only how to mediate the situation in Ukraine, but also how the next Ukrainian government should be like.⁵¹ While not disputing the authenticity of the recording, U.S. officials have denied that

⁴⁸ „Readout of Vice President Biden's Call with Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich”, in *The White House: President Barack Obama – Statements & Releases*, 23 January 2014 <https://bit.ly/393mgqa>

⁴⁹ Gabriela Baczyńska, Alissa de Carbonnel, „Senator McCain meets Ukrainian protest leaders amid rival rallies”, in *Reuters*, 14 December 2013 <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ukraine-protest-idUKBRE9BD0E220131214>

⁵⁰ „Top U.S. official visits protesters in Kyiv as Obama admin. ups pressure on Ukraine president Yanukovich”, in *CBC News*, 11 December 2013 <https://cbsn.ws/3x0RFBx>

⁵¹ „Ukraine crisis: Transcript of leaked Nuland-Pyatt call”, in *BBC News*, 7 February 2014 <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-26079957>

Washington tried to meddle in Kyiv's internal affairs. The spokesperson for the U.S. Department of State Jen Psaki accused Russia of releasing the tape, saying in a press briefing that the U.S. believes the episode was „a new low in Russian tradecraft.”⁵² Triggered by President Yanukovich's refusal to sign the EU deal, the crisis in Ukraine was starting to become a new source of tension in U.S.-Russian relations and a geopolitical East-West tug-of-war in which Ukraine was once again at the center of it.

On 21 February, President Yanukovich and the opposition managed to reach a compromise agreement. The agreement, facilitated by the EU through the foreign ministers of Germany, France, and Poland, and witnessed by a Russian special envoy, called for constitutional reform to balance the power of the president, the government, and parliament, the formation of a government of national unity within ten days, presidential elections by December 2014, the handing over of illegal weapons to the bodies of Ministry of Interior and an immediate end to violence.⁵³

After the agreement was concluded, President Obama and President Putin held a telephone conversation in which they agreed that the political agreement reached in Kyiv must be implemented quickly and that all parties must refrain from further violence.⁵⁴ The agreement, which looked more like a truce between Russia and the West, fell through immediately. Soon after signing it, President Yanukovich lost his authority as the police left their posts across the

⁵² „US official apologizes to EU over disparaging remarks”, in *Deutsche Welle*, 7 February 2014 <https://bit.ly/3z2tdTc>

⁵³ „Agreement on the Settlement of Crisis in Ukraine - full text”, in *The Guardian*, 21 February 2014 <https://bit.ly/3GNFVap>

⁵⁴ „Readout of President Obama's Call with President Putin”, in *The White House: President Barack Obama – Statements & Releases*, 21 February 2014 <https://bit.ly/3LWo6Xz>

capital, and protesters were allowed into government buildings. Yanukovych fled Kyiv the next day, then the Ukrainian Parliament voted to remove him from office and called new elections. The Rada appointed Oleksandr Turchynov as interim president and Oleh Yatsenyuk as acting prime minister. The new Ukrainian transitional government, although more Western-oriented, was dominated by Ukrainian ethno-nationalist members, with one out of three ministries belonging to the far-right party, with virulently anti-Russian rhetoric, Svoboda.⁵⁵

From Moscow's point of view, the government installed in Kyiv was illegitimate. Dmitri Medvedev, who became prime minister with Putin's return to the Kremlin, issued a statement questioning the legitimacy of the Ukrainian government and saying the unrest in Kyiv posed a threat to Russian interests: „We do not understand what is going on there. There is a real threat to our interests and to the lives of our citizens.” Speaking about the way the U.S. and European countries reacted to the new government in Ukraine, he added that „some of our foreign partners think differently ... it seems to me it is an aberration to call legitimate what is essentially the result of an armed mutiny.”⁵⁶

With the impression that the collapse of the 21 February agreement resulted in part from a Western plot to install a loyal government in Kyiv that would move Ukraine toward the EU and even NATO, Russia started to act for defending its interests. Shortly after the new government in Kyiv was installed, armed men without identification marks began occupying key facilities and checkpoints in the Crimean Peninsula. Under the protection of these troops,

⁵⁵ Samuel Charap, Timothy J. Colton, *op.cit.*, pp.126-127.

⁵⁶ „Russia says doubts legitimacy of Ukrainian authorities”, in *Reuters*, 24 February 2014 <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-ukraine-crisis-russia-medvedev-idUKBREA1N0SF20140224>

pro-Russian separatists took over the local government, demanded the accession of the Crimean Peninsula to Russia, and held a referendum. Asked at the start of the operation if those fighters were Russian soldiers, President Putin said they were „local self-defense units“. At the same time, he recognized that any Russian intervention would be a humanitarian mission for the protection of ethnic Russians, in full compliance with general norms of international law.⁵⁷ Speaking about how legitimate Moscow’s actions are, the Russian leader recalled the U.S. actions in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya, saying that the U.S. government „either acted without any UN sanctions or completely distorted the content of such resolutions, as it was in the case of the intervention in Libya.“⁵⁸

In a telephone conversation, Obama told the Russian leader that if Russia has concerns about the treatment of ethnic Russian and minority populations in Ukraine, the appropriate way to address the issue is through peaceful means, engaging directly with the government of Ukraine and sending international observers under the auspices of the United Nations Security Council or the OSCE. The American President stated that Russia’s actions in Crimea were a clear violation of Ukrainian sovereignty and territorial integrity, including Russia’s obligations under the UN Charter, and of its 1997 military basing agreement with Ukraine, and inconsistent with the 1994 Budapest Memorandum and the Helsinki Final Act. Given this breach of international law, Obama has warned Putin that the U.S. will suspend Russia’s future participation in preparatory meetings for the G8, and continued violation of international law

⁵⁷ „Vladimir Putin answered journalists’ questions on the situation in Ukraine“, in *President of Russia – Events*, 4 March 2014 <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20366>

⁵⁸ *Ibidem*.

will lead to further political and economic isolation.⁵⁹ President Putin, however, drew Obama's attention to the provocative and criminal actions of the ultranationalists who are in fact being supported by the current authorities in Kyiv. The Russian leader stressed that in case of any further spread of violence to Eastern Ukraine and Crimea, Russia retains the right to protect its interests and the Russian-speaking population of those areas.⁶⁰

Convinced that his actions do not violate international law, on 18 March President Putin announced „the reunification of the Republic of Crimea with Russia.” He cited the result of the referendum, with over 96% of Crimeans voting for joining Russia. Furthermore, in an act of defiance to the West, he brought to attention the case of Kosovo. Then, according to Putin, the unilateral separation of the Kosovo region from Serbia, „exactly what Crimea is doing now”, was considered legitimate and did not require the permission of the country's central authorities: „For some reason, things that Kosovo Albanians (and we have full respect for them) were permitted to do, Russians, Ukrainians and Crimean Tatars in Crimea are not allowed. Again, one wonders why.”⁶¹

Following almost the same scenario as in Georgia in 2008, Russia acted militarily when it felt that the West is possible to get closer to its borders. He tried to take revenge on the West while sending a clear message: if Russia could not have a friendly government in Kyiv, plan B was to turn Ukraine into a dysfunctional state, torn by conflict. After the annexation of Crimea, in April

⁵⁹ „Readout of President Obama's Call with President Putin”, in *The White House: President Barack Obama – Statements & Releases*, 1 March 2014 <https://bit.ly/3M7oB15>

⁶⁰ „Telephone conversation with US President Barack Obama”, in *President of Russia – Events*, 2 March 2014 <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20355>

⁶¹ „Address by President of the Russian Federation”, in *President of Russia – Events*, 18 March 2014 <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20603>

2014, Russia started to support armed separatists in the ethnically Russian regions of Donetsk and Luhansk in eastern Ukraine, providing funding and weaponry. This led to an outbreak of a full military conflict between Ukrainian forces and Moscow. By creating a frozen conflict in Ukraine, Russia could again exploit the lack of consensus in NATO on the question of admitting a country with an unresolved conflict on its territory.

Although Western officials acknowledged that there was a strong sentiment in Crimea for reintegration into Russia, they considered the referendum illegal under Ukrainian law, especially since it was also being held in the presence of 20,000 Russian troops. According to the Ukrainian constitution, any changes to Ukraine's territory have to be approved by a referendum of the entire Ukrainian people. The requirement was consistent with general principles of international law, which respects the territorial integrity of states and does not recognize a right of secession by a group or region in a country unless the group or region has been denied a right to „internal self-determination“ by the central government or has been subject to grave human rights violations by the central government.⁶²

Since the beginning of the Ukrainian crisis, President Obama signed a series of Executive Orders authorizing sanctions against individuals and entities responsible for violating the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine. On 20 March, several Russian and Ukrainian entities were additionally sanctioned, including 14 defense companies and individuals in Putin's inner circle, as well as

⁶² Interview by John B. Bellinger III, Interviewee Jonathan Masters, „Why the Crimean Referendum Is Illegitimate“, in *Council on Foreign Relations*, 16 March 2014 <https://on.cfr.org/3zgdhNn>

limiting certain funding to six of Russia's largest banks and four energy companies.⁶³

For the first time since the end of the Second World War, a European country had annexed the territory of another country. For President Obama, Russia's action was an expression of weakness rather than strength: „Russia is a regional power that is threatening some of its immediate neighbours, not out of strength but out of weakness“. He added that „the U.S. also has influence over its neighbours, but we generally don't need to invade them in order to have a strong cooperative relationship with them.“⁶⁴ Aiming to restore regional dominance, Putin's main strategic concern was to prevent NATO's eastward expansion. In the American President's opinion, a sense of insecurity gripped the Russian leader: „He felt as if he was being further and further surrounded by NATO members, folks who are looking west economically, from a security perspective.“⁶⁵

Instead of halting Ukraine's westward shift, Russia accelerated it with the actions in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine. Besides, U.S. support for Ukraine grew stronger. In March 2014, President Barack Obama met with Ukraine's interim Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk at the White House. In their bilateral meeting, Obama stressed that the U.S. stands with the Ukrainian people and announced that his administration has asked Congress „to act promptly to deliver on an aid package, including a \$1 billion loan guarantee that can help smooth the path for reform inside of Ukraine.“ To show how willing is Ukraine to resume European

⁶³ „Ukraine and Russia Sanctions“, in *U.S. Department of State - Economic Sanctions Policy, and Implementation* <https://bit.ly/38Z61KU>

⁶⁴ Julian Borger, „Barack Obama: Russia is a regional power showing weakness over Ukraine“, in *The Guardian*, 25 March 2014 <https://bit.ly/3x2KE4C>

⁶⁵ „Transcript And Audio: President Obama's Full NPR Interview“, in *National Public Radio*, 29 May 2014 <https://n.pr/3x4Euzw>

integration, prim-minister Yatsenyuk declared that „probably in the nearest future, next week or in 10 days, Ukraine is to sign a political part of -- association agreement with the European Union.”⁶⁶

In May 2014, pro-European businessman Petro Poroshenko won the presidential election in Ukraine with 56% of the vote.⁶⁷ To reiterate U.S. support, Vice-President Joe Biden attended the inauguration of Poroshenko together with the other members of the President’s delegation that were actively involved in the Ukrainian political transition since the Euromaidan protests erupted: Senators John McCain, Ron Johnson, Assistant Secretary of State Victoria Nuland, and Ambassadors Dan Baer and Geoff Pyatt. During the visit to Kyiv, Biden also pledged that Washington would contribute with additional financial aid to Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia for advancing their reforms and European aspirations.⁶⁸ Russia’s invasion of Ukraine made the U.S. administration rethink its priorities, the former Soviet space being now once again an important point on the American foreign affairs agenda.

Anyway, while battles in the Donbas region in Eastern Ukraine continued and Poroshenko asked the U.S. Congress for more military equipment, both „lethal and nonlethal”, Barack Obama kept a cautious strategy regarding the situation in Ukraine. He saw the crisis in Ukraine as an international security issue that has to be managed peacefully, without the use of armed force: „We are not taking military action to solve the Ukrainian problem. What we’re doing is to

⁶⁶ „Remarks by President Obama and Ukraine Prime Minister Yatsenyuk after Bilateral Meeting”, in *The White House: President Barack Obama – Speeches & Remarks*, 12 March 2014 <https://bit.ly/3scCT8O>

⁶⁷ Shaun Walker, Alec Luhn, „Petro Poroshenko wins Ukraine presidency, according to exit polls”, in *The Guardian*, 25 May 2014 <https://bit.ly/3goysou>

⁶⁸ „US to offer financial assistance to Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia”, in *The Guardian*, 7 June 2014 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jun/07/john-kerry-saint-briac-ukraine-tensions>

mobilize the international community to apply pressure on Russia [...] is not in the cards for us to see a military confrontation between Russia and the United States in this region.”⁶⁹ The American President realized that Ukraine was a core interest of Russia and a more peripheral one for the West. While was necessary for Russia to pay a price for its invasion of Ukraine, it was not necessary for the U.S. to go to war over the issue. It was essential to support the democratic aspiration of the Ukrainian people, but not to go to war for a state that didn't have the security guarantee of a NATO member. President Obama preferred to reassure the Allies about the U.S. commitment to NATO's principle of collective defense. He announced a military program called the European Reassurance Initiative to increase U.S. force presence in Europe and expand exercises and training with NATO Allies and partners.

His stance began to be antithetical to that of the American Congress. U.S. Senator Jim Inhofe, backed by several other senators, introduced a bill that authorizes the President to provide lethal weapons to the Government of Ukraine to defend itself against Russian-backed rebel separatists in eastern Ukraine. The idea to arm Ukraine was also supported by former senior-ranking diplomatic and military officials who called on President Obama to provide Ukraine with lethal weaponry and encourage other NATO countries – particularly those that possess and use former Soviet equipment and weaponry – to do the same.⁷⁰

In his press conference with German Chancellor Angela Merkel, President Obama stated that „if diplomacy fails [...] what I've asked my team to do is to

⁶⁹ „Statement by the President”, in *The White House: President Barack Obama – Speeches & Remarks*, 28 August 2014 <https://bit.ly/3x6MyBm>

⁷⁰ „Inhofe Authors Bill to Arm Ukraine with Lethal Military Aid”, in *James M. Inhofe – News: Press Releases*, 11 February 2015 <https://bit.ly/3CVa8LY>

look at all options – and the possibility of lethal defensive weapons is one of those options that are being examined.”⁷¹ The German chancellor, like Obama, rejected the notion that sending weapons to Kyiv would help resolve the conflict. At that time, Angela Merkel, alongside French President François Hollande, tried to lay the groundwork for new talks between Ukraine and Russia. After the Minsk agreement from September 2014 had been violated, Merkel, Hollande, Poroshenko, and Putin (the Normandy Quartet) negotiated a new set of measures for the solution of the conflict that would be known as „Minsk II”. The agreement, endorsed by the U.S. government, called for an immediate and comprehensive ceasefire, withdrawal of heavy weapons monitored and verified by OSCE, constitutional reform with a new Constitution entering into force by the end of 2015 that would provide decentralization of government authority, and special status for the Donbas region.⁷²

As the peace process stalled and violence escalated in Eastern Ukraine, pressure on the White House to provide Ukraine with lethal aid increased. Senator John McCain said that the response to Russia’s aggression had been insufficient. Referring to what Ukrainians were asking for, McCain declared that „they are not asking for a single boot on the ground [...] I am a bit taken aback by the vociferous opposition to weapons help.”⁷³ The American President’s hesitation reflected the long-standing concern that arming Ukraine would provoke Moscow into a further escalation that could drag Washington into a

⁷¹ „Remarks by President Obama and Chancellor Merkel in Joint Press Conference”, in *The White House – President Barack Obama: Speeches & Remarks*, 9 February 2015 <https://bit.ly/3eNrv0a>

⁷² „Package of measures for the Implementation of the Minsk agreements”, in *UN Peacemaker* https://peacemaker.un.org/sites/peacemaker.un.org/files/UA_150212_MinskAgreement_en.pdf

⁷³ Jennifer Steinhauer, David M. Herszenhorn, „Defying Obama, Many in Congress Press to Arm Ukraine”, in *The New York Times*, 11 June 2015 <https://nyti.ms/3yZOP1N>

proxy war. Obama's administration would focus instead on delivering security assistance to Ukraine in the form of counter-mortar radar, radios, vehicles, patrol boats, body armor, helmets, and night-vision goggles. In November 2015, the U.S. delivered two new anti-artillery radar systems to Ukraine, worth US\$10 million each. To avoid Russians' concerns, the systems had been modified to ensure that Ukrainian forces do not „escalate the current conflict by using the new systems to counter fire ... from Russian territory“, according to U.S. officials.⁷⁴ Until the end of 2015, the total security assistance committed to Ukraine in response to the crisis was more than \$265 million.⁷⁵

As the ceasefire was still in limbo, the leaders of France, Germany, Russia, and Ukraine agreed in a conference call on 30 December 2015 to extend the implementation of the Minsk II peace agreement beyond the 31 December 2015 deadline into 2016. Both parties seemed to carry significant responsibility for the blockage in implementing the Minsk deal. According to a December 2015 report by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) ammunition, weaponry, and fighters were still pouring in from the Russian Federation to the rebel-held areas of eastern Ukraine.⁷⁶ On the other hand, the constitutional reform in Ukraine hasn't been received with too much enthusiasm. The constitutional amendments on decentralization triggered a violent reaction from supporters of far-right groups who clashed with the police outside the parliament building. In addition, Ukraine was mired again in a political crisis.

⁷⁴ Julian E. Barnes, Gordon Lubold, „US to Ship Modified Radar Systems to Ukraine“, in *Atlantic Council*, 22 October 2015 <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/natosource/us-to-ship-modified-radar-systems-to-ukraine/>

⁷⁵ „United States Delivers Two Q-36 Counter Battery Radar Systems to Ukraine“, in *U.S. Embassy in Ukraine*, 14 November 2015 <https://bit.ly/3SF6dQt>

⁷⁶ „Report on the human rights situation in Ukraine 16 August to 15 November 2015“, in *United Nations Human Rights – Office of the High Commissioner*, p.5 <https://bit.ly/3MYuLIZ>

Ukrainians' support for the government has plummeted from 22% to just 2% because it has been able to do very little to combat corruption.⁷⁷ This loss of support led President Petro Poroshenko to ask Yatsenyuk to resign in February 2016.

When addressing the Ukrainian Rada, in December 2015, Vice-President Joe Biden noted the problems that Ukraine has with corruption. He praised the democratic aspirations of the Ukrainian people, but said bluntly that the government doesn't take the necessary measures to combat the rampant corruption: „It's not enough to push through laws to increase transparency with regard to official sources of income. Senior elected officials have to remove all conflicts between their business interest and their government responsibilities.”⁷⁸

A long supporter of pro-Western democratic movements in Ukraine for both ideological and geopolitical reasons, as was seen, the U.S. continued to assist Ukraine in the efforts to resist Russian invasion. The National Defense Authorization Act For Fiscal Year 2016 allocated \$300 millions to Ukraine for providing security assistance and intelligence support, including training, equipment, and logistics.⁷⁹ At the same time, in an attempt to find ways for implementing the Minsk agreement, Washington opened a bilateral channel with Moscow that operated without publicity. Assistant Secretary of State Victoria Nuland has been tasked to conduct unofficial discussions with Moscow about Ukraine. According to Nuland, this bilateral channel operated „in parallel with”

⁷⁷ Roman Goncharenko, „Looming government crisis in Kyiv”, in *Deutsche Welle*, October 2015 <https://www.dw.com/en/pressure-builds-in-kyiv-ahead-of-crucial-deadline/a-18910948>

⁷⁸ „Remarks by Vice President Joe Biden to The Ukrainian Rada”, in *The White House – President Barack Obama: Speeches & Remarks*, 9 December 2015 <https://bit.ly/3TuBYg3>

⁷⁹ „National Defense Authorization Act For Fiscal Year 2016 includes \$300 millions for Ukrainian military”, in *Embassy of Ukraine to the United States of America*, 7 October 2015 <https://bit.ly/3SxAUGR>

and as a „reinforcement of” the Normandy format, „by agreement with its participants”.⁸⁰ The chief of Russia’s presidential administration, Sergei Ivanov, declared the bilateral Russia-US format to be more effective than the Normandy format.⁸¹ This kind of format was embraced by Moscow because it allowed Russia to be perceived as a great power that can interact with the U.S. on an equal footing.

In late 2016, the conflict in Eastern Ukraine was defined by continuous low-level fighting punctuated by periodic upheavals in violence. Neither the Normandy format nor the bilateral channel between Washington and Moscow couldn’t put pressure on both sides to respect the Minsk II. The blockage of the peace process made the Obama administration turn its attention to other regions, like Syria, where the threats to international security had to be managed more urgently. As Barack Obama referred in an interview, Ukraine is a core Russian interest but not an American one, so Russia will always be able to maintain escalatory dominance there.⁸²

Conclusions

With its strategic position, between East and West, Ukraine moved over time in the shadow of great power rivalries. A combination of both internal and external factors placed Ukraine in a dangerous position that transformed its territory into a competition for influence that threatened the post-Cold War

⁸⁰ Vladimir Socor, „Surkov-Nuland Talks on Ukraine: A Nontransparent Channel (Part One)”, in *The Jamestown Foundation*, 27 May 2016 <https://bit.ly/3VUKVKA>

⁸¹ Vladimir Socor, „Obama Administration Undercutting Ukraine’s Position in the Minsk Armistice Negotiations”, in *The Jamestown Foundation*, 24 July 2015 <https://bit.ly/3z5R17W>

⁸² Jeffrey Goldberg, „The Obama Doctrine”, in *The Atlantic*, April 2016 <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/04/the-obama-doctrine/471525/>

international order. The Ukraine crisis that broke out at the end of 2013 seemed to be the last straw for all the parties involved in the standoff: Ukraine, Russia, and the West.

The U.S. – Ukraine relations have often mirrored America’s changing relationship with Russia. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the U.S. made continuous efforts to bolster Ukraine’s independence and its path to democratic reforms. But as Russia regarded Ukraine as being within not only Moscow’s economic and political sphere of influence but also within its core security zone, the two former adversaries engaged in a diplomatic tug-of-war that put Ukraine in a difficult position.

During the Obama administration, the relationship between the U.S. and Ukraine was characterized by the same cooperation and political warnings that featured the bilateral relationship since 1991. As was during Bill Clinton and George W. Bush administrations, the Obama administration has maintained engagement with Kyiv and support for democracy development but also alert its ally when the political affairs seemed to slip toward autocratic practices or Russia’s sphere of influence. With the everlasting domestic turmoil and balanced foreign policy between the West and Russia, Ukraine received from the Obama administration the same assurances and prudence that other American Presidents gave.

The response that the American administration has taken after the Euromaidan crisis and Russia’s annexation of Crimea seemed to be the anticipated one. The U.S. continued its unhindered support for democracy development and Ukraine’s westward shift without taking military steps that would have provoked Russia even more. Acting in a self-interest manner,

Washington considered that Ukraine was not a vital interest that would go to war for, especially at a time when other international crises more threatening to American national security were taking place.