Research Paper

Geopolitics: The case of Ukraine

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, geopolitics has had a great importance, in terms of national and international interests of some countries or groups of countries, in particular the United States, Russia and the European Union, among others. The interests of each country sometimes do not coincide with the benefits of some of its regions, especially when there are inner forces standing against the government or proclivity for other countries, sometimes leading to internal or international conflicts, as in the case of Ukraine.

Key words: Ukraine, Russia, United States, European Union.

INTRODUCTION

Ukraine is located in the southern part of Eurasia. It has borders with Russia, Byelorussia, Romania, Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, Moldova, with the Black Sea and with the Sea of Azov. That makes Ukraine very attractive from the geopolitical point of view. The important factors include its population, by 2017 counting 42 million inhabitants; the size of its territory, which could be the biggest in the European Union, if it was a part of it, in fact, it’s the second largest country in Europe after Russia; and its great industrial potential, especially concerning coal; its relief constituted mainly by plateaus, steppes and important rivers such as the Dnieper and the Donets among others. It is also important to emphasize its importance in agriculture, in the production of cereals, vegetables and fruits (Otalora, 2014).

After the separation from the Soviet Union, the rulers of Ukraine have sought to strengthen its collaboration with Russia, the United States and with the European Union, etc. However, this rapprochement with the neighbors has caused the division of Ukrainian people, as their intentions do not coincide, and even the internal politics of the country hybridizes with its neighbors.

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, there was formed the Russian Federation. Along with Ukraine and Belarus, it founded the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), December 1991 (Claudin, 1992). However, there is some inequality between these republics: “The dependence of the Kazakh economy, the radicalization of the Ukrainian national consciousness and the rebirth of the Russian national consciousness detached from its assimilation to the Soviet one” (Claudin, 1992: 175). That is to say, in the first moments of the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the nations that used to form it tried to break the bonds that united them. Nevertheless, these relations are not only political and economic, these are very profound geographic, historical and cultural relations. The tries of some presidents, with their potential, to break them only caused more internal division of the country.

Since 1990, Ukraine wanted integrity of its borders, its own citizenship, ownership of natural resources, right to have its national armed force and rapprochement with Europe (Claudin, 1992), but on the other hand, the Crimean region, that was mainly inhabited by people of Russian origin, wanted its separation from Ukraine and sought to be an autonomous republic. In December of the same year, Leonid Kravchuk was elected as the president of Ukraine, his policy was oriented towards market economy, the defense of national interests and, in general, construction of a Ukrainian state (Garcia, 2015).

However, in 1992 the problems of the Black Sea Soviet Fleet and the Crimean Peninsula received the first priority (Garcia, 2015).

Leonid Kravchuk relied his policy on the nationalists by approving measures against aspects of Russian culture and
launched an anti-Russian foreign policy (Garcia, 2015). In 1994, the internal situation in the country forced Leonid Kravchuk to hold presidential elections in which he was defeated by Leonid Kuchma who put forward the idea of maintaining good relations with Europe and Russia (Garcia, 2015).

His policy was oriented on facilitation the export of Russian hydrocarbons to Europe and on the Non-Proliferation Treaty as a condition of the United States to be able to receive economic support. Ukraine deactivated its ballistic missiles, transferred the last units to Russia, reduced the problem of the Crimean peninsula, calmed the pro-Russian separatist sentiments, signed some agreements such as the division of the Black Sea Fleet, the Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Partnership between Ukraine and the Russian Federation, the twenty-year lease of the naval base in Sevastopol, supported Russian shareholders' interests in Ukrainian companies etc. (Garcia, 2015).

What concerns the European Union, in 1995 Ukraine became a member of the Council of Europe, in the end of 1997 President Leonid Kuchma signed the Charter on a Distinctive Partnership with NATO, as well as the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement which included the provision of evaluation to the free trade area. In its turn, the European Union continued to appeal to Ukraine a common strategy for the development of stable democracy (Garcia, 2015). It should not be forgotten that in 1997 NATO and Ukraine signed the Charter on a Distinctive Partnership which provides the basis for Euro-Atlantic security issues as well as proves Ukraine's intention to integrate into European structures. There was also founded the NATO-Ukraine Commission to coordinate cooperation activities.

As for its relationship with the United States, Ukraine was officially offered direct aid. At the end of Kuchma's presidency, the USA accused Ukraine of resorting to authoritarianism, for example, in 2000, during the referendum on approval of the series of constitutional amendments increasing the president's powers in relation to the Parliament, Ukraine was accused of intention to establish an authoritarian regime. In its turn, the Council of Europe along with the United States expressed their disagreement with the referendum, considering it incompatible with Western standards of democracy, but did not take any preventive measures (Garcia, 2015).

In the elections of 1999, Leonid Kuchma was reelected and appointed Viktor Yushchenko prime minister. He used to occupy the position of the Chairman of the National Bank of Ukraine since 1993, played an important role in the creation of Ukraine's national currency, the hryvnia, and the dialogue with the International Monetary Fund which granted permission to carry out the necessary structural reforms requested by international organizations (Garcia, 2015). Russia did not approve these measures.

However, the president could not decide which direction to lead. "This indeterminacy was making Russia impatient, but at the same time in Ukraine the left and the right were giving rise to political tensions. Kuchma seemed to be annoyed by the inability to obtain support from the West for his economic policies, which was criticized to be vacillating" (Garcia, 2015).

In 2001, President Leonid Kuchma carried out actions that were considered authoritarian, for example, disposition of the deputy prime minister for the fuel and energy sector, Yulia Tymoshenko. This action was considered as a provocation against Viktor Yushchenko. Kuchma was also accused of ordering to murder the journalist Georgiy Gongadze, who was investigating cases of corruption. Kuchma denied his relationship with the murder, however, there was found a tape recording of the voice, similar to the one of the president, ordering the journalist's disappearance. It all provoked demonstrations in several parts of the country requesting the clarification of the circumstances of the murder and Kuchma's disposition (Garcia, 2015). Another action, which provoked common disapproval was the dismissal of Viktor Yushchenko, who had become the most popular politician in the country.

In 2002 Kuchma announced a strategy, according to which Ukraine should enter the European Union in the following years. However, Europe and the Atlantic Alliance considered that the country was far from fulfilling the necessary requirements and did not admit it. The truth was the following: "There was not shown any interest in the admission of the country of 49 million inhabitants, being in an unbalanced state, with a comparatively low level of development and with democratic institutions getting less and less democratic" (Garcia, 2015: 20).

At the end of the year, relations with the United States changed to the worse, and the economic aid program was suspended. It was revealed that Leonid Kuchma had authorized the sale of high-tech anti-aircraft radars to Iraq two years earlier. The president said he knew nothing of the matter and to reassure the Americans, he sent a military contingent to Iraq. But again he was seeking for Russian support for the 2004 elections facing organized and growing opposition. The signing of a bilateral agreement between Ukraine and Russia to create a gas transport consortium to Europe was seen as political support (Garcia, 2015).

Leonid Kuchma stated that he would not run for the 2004 elections and recommended Yushchenko for the post of prime minister.

The elections were held on October 31, 2004, and demonstrated the choice divided between Yanukovych and Yushchenko, prompting the second election. Along with the elections there was confirmed the internal division of the country between the pro-Russian East, a supporter of Viktor Yanukovych and the pro-Western West, a supporter of Viktor Yushchenko (Garcia, 2015). It can also be said that there was demonstrated the same sympathy to the West as
Yanukovych won the elections with a minimum margin, and his opponent did not accept his defeat, so it was necessary to go again to the polls. On 22 November Yanukovych won again, however Yushchenko, did not accept his victory and claimed there was an electoral fraud, so he, along with his followers, decided to go out in the streets with a protest. The participants of it were dressed in orange, which was the color of Yushchenko’s political party. Nevertheless, the situation got more complicated and, instead of being a protest, it transformed into so-called Orange Revolution; it was acknowledged that there was fraud and the election was held again. On the 22nd of December Viktor Yushchenko became the winner. On 23 January he officially took the power of the country (Garcia, 2015).

These political changes also benefited Yulia Tymoshenko’s political party, she was appointed prime minister, but her programs for the new government were not in line with that of the president. That might be an obstacle to the country’s development. In October 2005, the president dismissed the entire cabinet and appointed an interim government; in addition, there was a problem of Russian gas supply to Ukraine. Viktor Yushchenko turned his government towards the West, which caused difficulties for Russian energy policy. Russia did not want to continue subsidizing the price of gas anymore, and Ukraine did not want to pay the price of gas without subsidy, which provoked the break of negotiations between two countries on 1 January 2006 (Garcia, 2015).

However, this was not the main problem. Breaking the negotiations affected not only Ukraine, but also Europe, as 80% of gas flows through Ukrainian pipes to Europe. On 4 January there was reached an agreement according to which Ukraine committed to pay the price set by Russia and also increased the price of gas passing through its territory to Europe. Nevertheless, this policy did not last long because by the end of 2008, Ukraine refused to pay the price that Russian company Gazprom demanded and on 6 January 2009 Russia interrupted the gas shipment, which affected Europe. On 20th January of the same year, the situation was normalized again.

However, internal problems of the country remained at play. Yulia Tymoshenko’s political party with its conciliatory policy with Russia was strengthened during this time, as well as the position of Viktor Yanukovych, who was the main opponent of Viktor Yushchenko. In this political, economic and social situation, the elections were appointed on 17th of January 2010. On the 14th of February, when all the votes were counted, it was clear that Viktor Yanukovych won the elections. On 25th of February, he took the oath.

On the 12th and 13th of April, Yanukovych attended Washington. Among some of the issues, he dealt with, there was the renunciation of NATO, along with the desire to achieve a balance in relations with Russia, trade liberalization and elimination of visas. For Ukrainian citizens with the European Union. On the 21st of April, Yanukovych met his Russian counterpart to find the solution of gas tariff problem. The result was a 30% discount on the gas price in exchange for the renewal of Sebastopol’s rent for the Russian naval base for 25 years, with a possible extension until 2047. In May of the same year, they met again to discuss demarcation and cooperation in different fields such as banking, culture and education. On the 13th of June, the bill introduced by president Viktor Yanukovych was approved. It abandoned the intention of joining NATO and later refuse to fully recognize the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, as well as the independence of Kosovo (Garcia, 2015).

On the 22nd of November, Ukraine and the European Council agreed to abolish visas for short visits. However, in 2011, the country’s democracy was questioned when an arrest warrant was issued for Yulia Tymoshenko who was charged with exceeding her authority and misusing state funds while working on Russia–Ukraine gas dispute in 2009. She was pronounced guilty and sentenced to 7 years in prison. The European Union claimed that the underlying motive was probably political. In its turn, Russia demonstrated its disagreement because the signed contracts were nullified.

In July 2012, Ukrainian Parliament passed the law that made Russian a co-official language in 13 of 27 countries’ regions. In February 2013, the European Commission and Russia pressured Ukraine. Russia requested payment of 7 billion dollars for the gas consumed in 2012, while the European Commission requested reforms, necessary for the Association Agreement, and liberation of Yulia Tymoshenko. To calm tensions with its European partners on the 7th of April, Viktor Yanukovych released two ministers of Yulia Tymoshenko’s government (Garcia, 2015). On the 7th of November, the European Union requested Ukraine to release Yulia Tymoshenko and gave Ukrainian Parliament a week to pass legislation allowing Yulia Tymoshenko to get medical treatment. On the 12th and 13th of November, the EU demonstrated disagreements with the government of Ukraine. It was stated that the government was yielding to Russian pressure. On the 21st of November, the EU refused to sign the EU Association Agreement. On Maidan Square (center of Kiev), there appeared the first demonstrators requesting to resume the agreements with the European Union. On the 24th of November, the parties of the liberal pro-Europeans and the nationalists along with the neo-Nazis threatened to storm the official buildings. On the 27th of November, they demanded the resignation of the government, integration into the European Union and the release of Yulia Tymoshenko, otherwise the government would face trial (Garcia, 2015 and Scream de Ucrania).

It is important to note that each country is free and independent and no other country or group of countries should dictate it what to do with its internal and external
problems. International law and international institutions must not be ignored.

The demonstrators attacked the police, threw firecrackers and broke the barrier that separated them from the police, in response, the police used tear-gas. Through the following months of 2013 the protests were getting more radical.

From his point of view, Garcia mentions that: "On the 1st of December, hundreds of thousands of oppositionists, with their revolutionary rush were gaining momentum on Kiev’s Independence Square, renamed Euromaidan. They were demanding the resignation of Yanukoych and the fall of the regime. However, it should be noted that this reaction appeared due to rejection of violence by part of citizens, general tiredness of corruption and widespread impunity and the degradation of government institutions of defense, health and education. Eventually, there was such a mobilization that it gained significant support from a big part of society at all levels and from the inhabitants of Kiev whose participation was sometimes decisive for the continuation of the protest" (Garcia: 28, 2015).

From our point of view, Garcia forgot to add the external factor, that is, the interests of the United States, the European Union and Russia. These are not only internal problems that the country has to solve, but also the “external aid” that benefits the ruling coterie and not the majority of Ukrainian citizens. Ukraine cannot solve its problems itself but it should not be ruled by geopolitical force that “supports” the country and dictates it how to form its democracy.

Groups of radicals in masks, with the help of security forces and a violent skirmish, took control of town council of the capital. There was a lot of damage and dozens of injured people from both sides. On the 18th February, the opposition demanded to re-establish the Constitution of 2004. In the early hours of 20th February, there were confrontations with the use of firearms resulting to 60 deaths, according to the official line (black Thursday). On the 21st February, Viktor Yanukoych and the opposition leaders signed the Agreement on settlement of political crisis in Ukraine, however, on 22nd February, the president fled and found refuge in the city of Kharkov, without a desire to renounce his presidency. Later he emigrated to Russia. In its return, the Ukrainian Parliament dismissed him and appointed Oleksandr Turchynov as interim president. He ruled the government until 7th of June 2014. The elections were hold on 25 May. The new president declared bankruptcy of the country and asked for assistance from the United States and the European Union, which promised to lend support through the International Monetary Fund (IMF) (Garcia, 2015).

In their turn, the pro-Russian regions saw these changes as a coup d’état of the neo-fascists. In addition, the Parliament overturned the law that established Russian as a co-official language. As a result, on the 22nd of February, citizens of Crimea protested against the pro-European government and started to approach with Russia. The number of demonstrations increased and the mayor of Sevastopol was dismissed. On the 16th of May, there was held a referendum to decide whether the Crimean peninsula should become part of Russia or keep on being a part of Ukraine. The majority of the population decided to join Russia (Garcia, 2015).

“The result of the referendum in the Crimea was overwhelming: with a participation of 83.1% of voters, 96.77% voted in favor of the annexation to the Russian Federation. In Sebastopol, the result was 95.6% in favor of annexation, and participation was 89.51%” (Ballesteros, 2014: 17).

On the 18th of May, the agreement between Russia and the Crimea was signed. Crimea was incorporated as a republic, and Sevastopol as a federal city (Garcia, 2015). NATO affirmed its support for Ukraine by recognizing its sovereignty and independence and declared the referendum illegitimate.

In May, Petro Poroshenko won the elections with 54.1% of the votes. He is the current president of Ukraine (July 2017). The policy of the new president has been oriented towards Europe which has caused distancing from Russia.

Other areas, such as Donetsk, Luhansk, Sloviansk, Kramatorsk, Avdiivka and Horlivka, also sought their rapprochement with Russia. There has been an armed conflict in these areas (2017). One of the events of international importance was the airliner shootdown killing of 298 passengers and the crew on 17th of July 2014. Ukraine, the United States of America and some European nations accuse Russia, and, in turn, Russia accuses Ukraine (Ballesteros, 2014).

It is important to mention that during the conflict in these areas a big part of Ukrainian population has emigrated to Russia where it has been given jobs, housing, food and education; many people have sought Russian citizenship.

On the other hand, the US government reported supporting Ukraine with $9 million to train and arm Ukrainian National Guard and with $8 million to reinforce Ukrainian border security (Ballesteros, 2014). The President Petro Poroshenko has sought a rapprochement with the European Union and the United States and has tried to dissociate from Russia. For example, on the 28th of April 2017 at the initiative of the president, Russian networks and television in Ukraine were banned. There were also attempts to ban the use of St. George Ribbon, to put a restraint upon activity of the Russian Orthodox Church and Russian banks etc. (Sacalovs, 2017).

On the one hand, Ukraine has an authoritarian and hybrid regime which has failed to meet the democratic standards of the West and, on the other hand, Russian foreign policy has prevented Ukrainian rapprochement with Europe. Moreover, the European Union refuses to accept Ukraine as its member, and on the contrary, Russia wants to accept it as the member of the customs union (Zarembo, 2011). In
general, Zarembo concludes that future relationships between the European Union and Ukraine are uncertain.

From our point of view, the uncertainty mentioned by Zarembo will disappear when Ukraine decides for itself, that is, when Ukrainian citizens decide for themselves what kind of future they want for their country, but, as we see, this is not easy to take this decision because it already corresponds with the interests of the two powers, that is, the United States and the Russian Federation. However, Ukrainian citizens should not forget that geographically they belong to the Eurasian continent and not to the American one, that this unity is not only territory, but also blood, history, culture, traditions, etc., that it is possible to have diplomatic relations with distant friends without forgetting their own roots, and that they should not change human lives, for money, which only benefits a small group in power.

Conclusions

The conflict in Ukraine is a permanent conflict between the interests of the powers, especially between the United States of America and the Russian Federation, which are the only ones who have political autonomy in their decisions. Europe, as it has been seen in recent years, depends on the political and economic decisions of the United States of America, but its role in integrating Ukraine into NATO is fundamental for the relations of military cooperation. For this reason, this organization, led by American military leaders, seeks its annexation to the EU, which would provide a privileged military position in Eurasia.

However, from our point of view, Ukraine must not forget the geographical, linguistic, historical, political, economic and blood ties that it has with its neighbors, because otherwise the present conflict will be permanent and the only thing provoking it will be the indebtedness of the country and the impoverishment of citizens. Absolutely, the country will be more dependent on “external support” and will only be a geopolitical instrument.

REFERENCES


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