

Why Ukraine Matters

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神戸学院経済学論集

第52巻 第3・4号 抜刷

令和3年3月発行

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Abstract

The article depicts the role of Ukraine's sovereignty and security in preserving peace and cooperation in Eurasia. The author elaborates the nature and specifics of relations between Ukraine and the Russian Federation in view of crucial transformations of the liberal world order caused by assertiveness of Russia, rise of China and gradual withdrawal of the United States from the world affairs. Economic and political potential of Ukraine is being discussed with special emphasis on the positive visionary role that Ukrainian intellectual elite could play in the positive development of the CIS countries in Central Asia and creation of new alliances in Eurasia.

Key words: liberal world order, political transformations, Eurasia, economic development, Russian aggression

1. Introduction

Second decade of the XXI century brought new unprecedented challenges for the world order based on liberal values and the soul of freedom and entrepreneurship. End of history, as it was predicted by Francis Fukuyama (1992) did not materialize with the end of the Cold War. Moreover, geopolitical environment of the post-cold war world turned out to be more complicated with the rise of China, military assertiveness of Russia and growing withdrawal of the United

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States from the world scene just two decades after the West's victory over the "axis of evil". Today groupings, connections and alliances that seemingly were so well established by the US and its European partners are being re-evaluated and new forms of partnerships are being formed. It is still too early to say what kind of new environment will be born out of this mess but it is critically important to understand what reasons lies behind driving forces in Eurasia that has always been and still is the most important continent on Earth. And yet there is one important distinction of the current state of affairs from the all known precedents: the epicenter of world politics is gradually moving from Europe to Asia. And it brings unresolved "European" issues to Asia too.

In 90s the common perception that Russia could be transformed into democratic state if not similar to the Central European model, but at least peaceful and cooperative prevailed in the political thoughts in the United States and later on in Europe. Similar approach of 70s failed with China too. Instead, in case of Russia old Soviet paranoia about "threat" from NATO and the EU enlargement has become a centerpiece of the foreign policy of the Russian Federation. Moscow considers the vision that world should be divided into "spheres of influence" as rightful approach to the Eurasian political landscape and whatever configuration is under discussion in this regard Ukraine is at stake. Aggression against Ukraine in 2014 invoked a comprehensive but still insufficient response from the civilized world in the form of the regime of sanctions. Being sanctioned Russia decided to pivot to Asia and that was clearly stated and re-stated by the Russian officials and political scientists (Karaganov et. al., 2020). Such policy brings European unresolved problems including the "Ukrainian issue" to Asia.

2. Ukraine as intrinsic part of Europe and Eurasia

Whenever you touch Europe you see Ukraine right in the center of it. And yet

by geography Ukraine is situated on the border of Europe with Eurasia, if the vision that Russia is Eurasia is correct. In his iconic book “The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and Its Geostrategic Imperatives” the former National Security Adviser to the President Carter Zbigniew Brzezinski (1997) justified the key role of Eurasia in the fundamentals of the world politics. And it was him who predicted that probably one of the most prominent role in the future on the continent is attached to Ukraine. Being of Polish decent he understood well what does it mean to border Russia for centuries and what does it mean to be a key menace for Russia up until now. It does not matter who is in power in Moscow, what is the name of the “tsar” since, as the famous phrase goes the “Russian liberalism ends where the Ukrainian question begins.”

It is true that Russia is an entity of its own. It is true that Russia cannot be part of any alliances because it is doomed to dominate. And yet it is true that this giant has its own Achilles’ heel, namely – Ukraine. Because the very heart of Slavic civilization, its source and soul, its foundation is in Ukraine. Russian historians and mythologists tried hard to derive the current “Russian World” idea from its Slavic past. For that they have invented many false narratives trying to present Moscow as a successor of the Kyiv Rus, Byzantine and even Rome. And only recently they finally recognized that real source of Russian soul is in its Golden Horde’s nature. But this happened only after Russia went into a war against its “eternal” neighbor and “brotherly” nation – Ukraine. Ukraine lost 14000 people in this war and it is hard to believe that was done with the idea of brotherhood in the Russian heart.

It is true that when political analysts speak about important countries they may not even mention Ukraine – the key spot in Central Europe. And yet it is Ukraine who is defending Europe from Russian imperial aspirations for sixth year in a row. In 2014 Russia has occupied and illegally annexed the Crimean Peninsula and

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sent troops to seed war and violence in the Eastern part of Ukraine, its industrial heart. Annexation of Crimea was not and will not be recognized by the civilized world. The war in Eastern Ukraine is still ongoing and support of the United States, Canada, Great Britain and other free nations is crucial. Russian aggressive footprint could be found elsewhere in the region and far beyond it—most notably in Georgia, Moldova, Azerbaijan, Syria, Libya and North of Japan too.

Obsession is not a stable state of mind. Sooner or later it will burst into action and that is exactly what happened in 2014. Putin's regime needs an external enemy to survive and it has made its choice—NATO, the EU and those who want to establish an independent foreign policy were designated as enemies. Ukraine's rapprochement with the EU through Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement of 2014, close affiliation with NATO and strong will to get rid of Russian choking "brotherly" embrace most of all were duly noticed in Moscow. And Moscow responded by force as it always does.

Ukraine matters not just because it constitutes the key value for Russia. This is mostly negative part of the story. It is much more important to understand the positive parts and there are quite few of them. On first glimpse the country with GDP around 130 bln USD and 0.23% share in the global trade could be easily lost on the margins of the world politics. But Ukraine is right in the center of it. There are many reasons why. Let us talk about some of those reasons that are important for Central Europe, future of Eurasia and for Japan too.

3. Post-COVID world.

Pandemic of COVID-19 has changed the perception of the world's economic development. Restructuring of logistic chains and production of critical materials and goods, decreasing consumption of goods and services, deflation and especially growing inequality has become a new normal in 2020. It is clear that in the

nearest future simple goods and services like food and availability of medical supply will be more important than luxury or exotic products. Growing sense of insecurity will cause increasing flow of additional resources toward defense and weapons. Countries will be looking for a diversified network of production facilities, based in different countries in contrast with the recent situation when many major and critically important products have been produced in China only. Availability of favorable trade regimes with major markets will become an important part of the development of new logistic chains. That means that Ukraine with its Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement with the EU may become a major production base for Asian, specifically Japanese producers from one hand. Taking into account the new EU-Japan Economic Agreement signed last year Ukraine may serve as a production base for European companies aiming at Japanese market on the other. Being one among the few world nations with space and aircraft industries, major producer of agriculture products and growing quality of food production Ukraine simply should become a strategic production base for Japan.

China understands this well. Since 2019 China has become a major trade partner of Ukraine and one of the main potential investors. And yet Ukraine is the only country in Central and Eastern Europe that did not join the “17+1” grouping facilitated by Beijing to promote One Belt-One Road initiative in the region. Ukraine maintain strategic relations with the United States and will not abandon this partnership under any circumstances. Moreover, ones stayed in the shadow of Russian influence Ukraine is trying now to form a fully independent foreign policy based on liberal values and freedoms and open economic approach. Until recently it has had mainly European vector, but today it has got a new direction, to Asia.

If Ukraine succeeds in developing pragmatic and yet strategic relations with Ja-

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pan it would constitute an important example for others, especially Asian countries of the CIS. It is important for the whole continent to keep democracy and liberal values intact while trying to develop economically. The Ukrainian elite understands that. There are several intellectual groups that are working hard to imagine, to think and to construct a better future for Ukraine and for the whole region. It has to be built on a solid foundation of a mutually accepted social agreement that guarantees liberties and freedoms in exchange of security and equality. The current political architecture is no longer sufficient neither as internal nor as international framework (Fishman and Mohandas, 2020). It is true that Ukraine lost its momentum in 90s when other countries from the former Soviet block got out of the communist trap and eventually were admitted to the EU and NATO. But now the time has come for the biggest country in Europe to prove that Ukraine does matters.

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