GEOPOLITICAL IMPLICATIONS AND CHALLENGES OF THE CORONAVIRUS CRISIS FOR UKRAINE

Pavlo Klimkin
Andreas Umland 🆔
Ukrainian Institute for the Future

Among various geopolitical repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic are redefinitions of the short-term priorities of many international organizations. Among others, the European Union (EU) and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) are becoming absorbed by new internal challenges, and are thus even less interested in further enlargement than before. Against this background, Kyiv, Tbilisi, and Chisinau, as well as their Western friends, need to seek new paths to increase the three countries' security, resilience, and growth before their accession to the West's major organizations. Above all, an alternative way to decrease Ukraine's current institutional isolation is to develop more intense bilateral relations with friendly states across the globe, including Germany and the United States. In Eastern Europe, moreover, Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova should attempt to create new multilateral networks with post-communist member countries of NATO as well as the EU, and try to become part of such structures as the Three Seas Initiative or Bucharest Nine group.

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Implicaciones Geopolíticas Y Desafíos De La Crisis Del Coronavirus Para Ucrania, Georgia, Y Moldavia

Entre las diversas repercusiones geopolíticas de la pandemia de COVID19 se encuentran las redefiniciones de las prioridades a corto plazo de muchas organizaciones internacionales. Entre otros, la UE y la OTAN están siendo empujados por nuevos desafíos internos y, por lo tanto, aún menos interesados en una ampliación más próxima que antes. En este contexto, Kyiv, Tbilisi, y Chisinau, así como sus amigos occidentales, deben buscar nuevos caminos para aumentar la seguridad, la resilencia, y el crecimiento de los tres países antes de su acceso a las principales organizaciones de Occidente. Una forma alternativa de disminuir, sobre todo, el actual aislamiento institucional de Ucrania es desarrollar relaciones bilaterales más intensas con estados amigos en todo el mundo, incluidos Alemania y Estados Unidos. Además, en Europa del Este, Ucrania, Georgia, y Moldavia deberían intentar crear nuevas redes multilaterales con los países miembros de la OTAN poscomunistas, así como con la UE, y tratar de formar parte de estructuras como la Iniciativa Three Seas o el grupo Bucharest Nine.

Palabras clave: Pandemia, Coronavirus, COVID-19, Respuesta a la crisis global, Geopolítica, Europa del Este, Unión Europea, UE, OTAN, Ucrania, Georgia, Moldavia, Política de seguridad.

冠状病毒危机对乌克兰产生的地缘政治意义及挑战

*COVID-19*大流行的不同地缘政治影响包括许多国际组织对短期优先事项的再定义。其中欧盟与北约组织正被新的内部挑战所包围，因此比以往任何时刻都更没有兴趣在近期进行组织扩大。以此为背景，基辅、第比利斯、基希讷乌方面及其西方盟友需要寻求新的路径以便这三国在正式加入西方主要组织前增强其安全、韧性和发展。一个减少乌克兰当前最重要的组织隔离情况的替代性方法则是与全球友好国家建立更深的双边关系，包括德国与美国。此外在东欧，乌克兰、格鲁吉亚、摩尔多瓦应试图与北约组织及欧盟中的后共产主义成员国建立新的多边网络，并试图成为这类组织的一部分，例如三海倡议或"Bucharest Nine"九国集团。

关键词： 大流行, COVID-19, 冠状病毒, 国际组织, 欧洲联盟, 欧盟, 北约组织, 东欧, 后共产主义国家, 乌克兰, 格鲁吉亚, 摩尔多瓦, 国际关系.

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In their seminal 2012 study *Why Nations Fail: The Origins of Power, Prosperity and Poverty*, Daren Acemoglu and James A. Robinson identified the Bubonic Plague of 1346–1353 not only as one of the greatest calamities in human history. The Black Death—as the pandemic is also called—acted as a critical juncture in European political history. While the 14th-century pestilence encouraged the gradual abolition of feudalism in Western Europe, it led to the so-called Second Serfdom in most of Eastern Europe—not the least, in parts of today's Ukraine. The Black Death thus fundamentally reset European affairs during the Middle Ages, resulting in consequences that reach as far as today. The COVID-19 pandemic will presumably result in far fewer victims than the Bubonic Plague, which claimed the lives of between 70 and 200 million people. Yet the coronavirus crisis could also become a critical juncture in human history, with far-reaching repercussions for both states' domestic affairs and their international relations.

The ongoing pandemic's various aftereffects on the contemporary world system will be especially far-reaching for weak states located in geopolitical gray zones between adversarial defense coalitions (Bond 2017; Hamilton and Meister 2016; Rotaru 2018; Tyshchenko 2018). Countries like Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova—that are neither military or economic great powers nor embedded in relevant security alliances or trading blocs—are at special risk (Balmaceda 2001; Härtel 2012). For Kyiv, Tbilisi, and Chisinau, the evolving world crisis will have, among others, the unpleasant consequence that their nations' already stalling integration with the West may slow down further (Appel 2014; Getmanchuk 2019; Pifer 2017; Umland 2016c).

Some already existing special outreach programs in which Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova are included, such as the European Union's (EU) Eastern Partnership initiative or the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO) Individual Partnership Action Plan scheme, will probably remain in place and may even be strengthened (Rinkēvičs *et al.* 2019). Moreover, in 2019, Ukraine put the aim of full membership in NATO and the EU demonstratively into its Constitution (Klimkin 2019). Yet these organizations will probably be turning ever more inward, as international and national instability may be growing in 2020 and, perhaps, beyond. At least, it seems unlikely that the ongoing crisis will decrease skepticism toward further EU and NATO enlargement, especially in Western Europe.

Kyiv's Ambivalent Relationship with Western Europe

Already in 2019, Ukrainian politicians and experts were dismayed by a number of, in Kyiv's view, scandalous West European decisions and

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signals. This included the unfounded readmission of the Russian delegation to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, from which it had been excluded in view of Moscow's attack on Ukraine in 2014 (Gigitashvili 2019), and a strangely conciliatory turn in French President Emmanuel Macron's rhetoric *vis-à-vis* Moscow (Leonard 2019). Moreover, as became clear after Macron's unexpected advance, the French president has numerous supporters in Western Europe in his stated intention to change the current character of EU–Russia relations and begin a new security partnership with Moscow.

Germany has, in many ways, been supportive of Ukraine since 2014 (Härtel 2019). The Federal Republic will probably continue or may even strengthen its support for Ukraine in the future (Umland 2020). Yet Berlin continues to irritate Kyiv with its myopic insistence on the completion of Gazprom's Nord Stream 2 pipeline through the Baltic Sea (Fischer 2016; Goldthau 2016; Lang and Westphal 2017). The German and Austrian governments have not changed their strong support for the controversial underwater conduit even in view of growing resistance against the dubious project in Eastern Europe and the United States throughout 2019 (Assenova 2018; Gawlikowska-Fyk *et al.* 2018; Heinrich and Pleines 2019; Przybyło 2019).

The geopolitical surroundings of Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova will seemingly worsen further during 2020. Since the outbreak of the coronavirus epidemic, world politics has become more complicated with every passing week. The EU and its member states are today confronted not only with the pandemic and its uncertain economic repercussions (Schwarzer and Vallée 2020). They simultaneously face a new refugee crisis in the South, complicated situations in the Middle East and Africa, increasingly difficult relations with Turkey, and an awkward U.S. president with a different understanding of transatlantic solidarity than previous inhabitants of the White House.

Russia's Weakening as a Result of the Corona Crisis

To be sure, not all recent foreign trends may be disadvantageous for Ukraine. The currently multiplying economic and social repercussions of the pandemic for Russia could, so hopes not only Kyiv, dampen the Kremlin's traditional foreign adventurism (Kushnir 2018; Plokhy 2018; Torbakov 2018). Moscow made an ill-conceived attempt to push back against producers of shale oil and gas in the world's energy markets—especially American ones (Gould-Davies 2020). Russia's nonagreement to an Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries' (OPEC) proposal to cut

the extraction of oil so as to hold up prices may have also been meant to be the Kremlin's rebuttal to the United States' sanctioning of Gazprom's controversial Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline project via the Baltic Sea in December 2019 (Łoskot-Strachota 2020).

As of late April 2020, however, it looks as if this attempted Russian manipulation is backfiring. The recent decline of world market price for crude oil seems to have been much deeper and may turn out to last much longer than the Kremlin probably intended to. If one believes recent research on a causal link between economic well-being—largely determined, in Russia, by world energy prices—and a Russian inclination toward foreign adventurism, this should be good news for countries like Ukraine (Snegovaya 2020a, 2020b). Also, as a result of the deep impact of the drop in energy prices and pandemic on Russia's economic and social life, there is now an increasing likelihood that a disruption of Putin's regime may, at some point in the future, happen (Kragh 2020; Shagina 2020). Arguably, that scenario will have positive rather than negative repercussions for countries like Ukraine (Umland 2017a).

Moreover, some domestic political developments in the West may also be—at least, indirectly—to the advantage of Ukraine. Both Russia and Ukraine will apparently be topics in the U.S. electoral campaign throughout summer and autumn 2020. Kyiv may well benefit from further discussion of Moscow's continuing malevolent actions against the United States and its allies, as in the case of Congress' December 2019 decision to sanction Nord Stream 2 (Polyakova and Boyer 2018). As time goes by, various details and a better comprehension of Russia's past, current, and possible future covert intrusion into American and European electoral and other political affairs are accumulating in Western societies (Kragh and Åsberg 2017; Polyakova 2018; Shekhovtsov 2017, 2020; Vilmer 2019; Weiss 2020).

Certain purely domestic current and future developments in a number of EU and NATO member countries can be to the advantage of Ukraine. In October 2021, for instance, the German parliamentary elections may be resulting in an entry of the relatively pro-Ukrainian Green party into the Federal Republic's new government (Kefferpütz 2019; Rohac 2017; Umland 2020). Yet these possible and other positive developments abroad and their presumably benevolent effects for Ukraine remain uncertain as of spring 2020.

The Distant Prospect of EU and NATO Accession

Concerning Ukraine's two major foreign political targets, accession to NATO and the EU, the prospects today look gloomier than before

the start of the ongoing worldwide crisis. Already after the victories of the 2004 Orange Revolution and 2014 Revolution of Dignity, Ukraine's political and intellectual elite was repeatedly disappointed by Brussels. For instance, during the April 2008 NATO summit in Bucharest, Kyiv's and Tbilisi's official applications for membership in the Alliance were not rejected. The summit's final declaration even stated that Ukraine and Georgia will become NATO members. Yet the two countries' actual admissions to the Alliance were curiously postponed to an uncertain later period (Hagedorn 2008). Neither Membership Action Plans nor any other road maps for accession were adopted, in response to Ukraine's and Georgia's formal requests for entry into NATO.

In 2014, after the Revolution of Dignity's victory, Kyiv's and the EU's conclusion of a far-reaching Association Agreement did not lead to a formal change in Brussels' traditionally uncommitted position on the possibility of Ukraine's future Union membership. An accession has also never been excluded by Brussels. Yet the texts of Ukraine's as well as Georgia's and Moldova's especially large Association Agreements do not include any reference to the option of a future membership in the EU (Umland 2013).

It is true that Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova are far from the standards required for EU accession today. However, those Western Balkan countries, which have not yet joined the Union but have an official membership perspective or are even already negotiating their accession, are not more (or not significantly more) advanced than Ukraine or Georgia. The latter continue to be hampered by an inability to move beyond their post-Soviet oligarchic form of governance to a more modern model. However, Brussels' lack of long-term strategy, absence of political will, and excessive fear of Russia are the main reasons for the dearth of clear language in the decisions of the EU Council or Commission concerning the possibility of future accession of Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova (Klimkin 2017).

Currently accumulating domestic issues in the member states of NATO and the EU, as well as mounting tensions within these international organizations, are bad news for such aspiring applicants as Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova. NATO's and the EU's ongoing enlargement in the Western Balkans may still continue more or less unhampered, as North Macedonia's recent accession to the Alliance illustrated. Yet that is because the former Yugoslav republics and Albania are already partly members of, and surrounded by, NATO and the EU. With the partial exception of Serbia, they have thus more or less clear membership

prospects (Dabrowski and Myachenkova 2018). Current and future Western integration successes of the Balkan nations may thus imply only little for Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova. In contrast, possible future setbacks in the former Yugoslavia may have also negative repercussions for the chances of other formerly communist countries to ever enter NATO and the EU.

A Reboot of U.S.–Ukraine Relations

All this means that Kyiv, Tbilisi, and Chisinau need to rethink their tactical short- and medium-term foreign policy priorities and the means of their implementation. Achieving EU and/or NATO membership will certainly remain their top aim. But these targets should, in view of growing geopolitical instability, be acknowledged to be achievable only in the long term. Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova may instead have to make plans of what to do within a more or less prolonged interregnum during which their current lack of international embeddedness and gray zone status will continue for a number of years (Umland 2017b).

The most obvious interim solution for Kyiv will be to deepen as quickly and as much as possible bilateral ties with those countries that already have or may soon have more or less pro-Ukrainian leaderships. Thus, Kyiv could seek an upgrade of the little-known 2008 Charter on Strategic Partnership between Ukraine and the United States. Kyiv could refer *vis-à-vis* Washington to the American respect for Ukrainian borders, sovereignty, and integrity expressed in the famous 1994 Budapest Memorandum on Security Assurances in connection with Ukraine's accession to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (Budjeryn 2014; Budjeryn and Umland 2017; Umland 2016b). The content of an update of the 2008 bilateral Charter could be (1) a clearer formulation than was the case in the Budapest Memorandum of the United States' security guarantees for Ukraine until it accedes to NATO, and (2) a new package of security cooperation between Washington and Kyiv.

An upgrade of the existing U.S.–Ukraine Charter could even lead to a qualitatively new agreement between the two countries. (It could also include Great Britain as another signatory of the 1994 Budapest Memorandum, or Canada and other especially pro-Ukrainian Western countries.) Ideally, a newly defined pact between Kyiv and Washington would contain provisions approaching those of the 1953 Mutual Defense Treaty between the United States and Republic of Korea, or similar security guarantees that the United States has given to its closest non-NATO allies around the world.

While the prospects of such a fundamental change in Kyiv's international embeddedness are not clear, other directions for the improvement of Ukrainian foreign affairs are less uncertain. Ukraine's relations to several East European countries with pro-Ukrainian or/and Russia-skeptic governments can and should be improved already today. This concerns both smaller countries like Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Slovakia and larger states like Poland and Romania.

Toward an Intermarium Alliance

Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova should, with regard to these countries, not only seek closer bilateral ties. They should also try to build with them as well as other East European states multilateral networks that transcend the borders of NATO and the EU. In fact, this was already tried in December 2005 when Estonia, Georgia, Lithuania, Latvia, Moldova, North Macedonia, Romania, Slovenia, and Ukraine founded the so-called Community of Democratic Choice in Kyiv. Some of these nine countries were then members of the EU and/or NATO, others were and/or are neither. However, the Community never got off the ground and is today largely forgotten.

A different strategy for Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova would be to try to enter already existing multilateral regional projects. This includes, above all, the Three Seas Initiative of twelve Eastern EU members states (Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia) established in 2016 and the Bucharest Nine group of countries constituting NATO's East European flank (Hungary, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Romania, and Bulgaria), formed in 2015 (Rotaru and Umland 2017). While the Three Seas Initiative focuses on infrastructure and transportation, the Bucharest Nine is about security and defense. Both networks thus touch upon issues that are central to the geopolitics and geoeconomics of Eastern Europe and that are of crucial relevance to the protection, resilience, and development of Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova. An Eastern enlargement of the Three Seas Initiative could happen with simultaneous support from Brussels and Washington, and an extension of the Bucharest Nine could be envisaged within NATO's already existing special partnerships with Ukraine and Georgia (Fedorenko and Umland 2017; Umland 2016a).

Another strategy for Georgia and Ukraine as NATO applicants—as well as perhaps Azerbaijan and Moldova, with no such ambitions—would be to persuade the United States to support more intensely these four countries' already existing Organization for Democracy and Economic

Development (GUAM) founded in 1997. Washington might be even persuaded to create with these four countries an equivalent to the U.S. Baltic Charter founded in 1998 with Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania or the U.S. Adriatic Charter founded in 2003 with Albania, Croatia, and North Macedonia. A U.S.-GUAM Charter would upgrade Washington's already existing bilateral Charters of Strategic Partnership with Kyiv and Tbilisi, and provide the four former Soviet republics with at least a modicum of international security (Vereshchuk and Umland 2019).

Conclusion

The above-mentioned possible scenarios do not exclude an emergence of absolutely new formats of interaction in East-Central Europe. They should all make better use of the region's human and economic potential by way of relying on a common Central European identity as a specific subset of European civilization. Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova—as well as their international friends—could and should think about different schemes that would strengthen their international embeddedness. There are a number of alternative avenues for Kyiv to pursue its Western integration even without yet starting accession procedures with NATO and the EU.

In 2020, because of the effects of the coronavirus spread, geopolitical uncertainty is increasing by the month. Even before the pandemic, domestic developments in a number of countries (including Great Britain, the United States, Hungary, or France) created uncertainty about the identity and future of NATO and the EU. In such circumstances, the two major Western organizations have already and will continue to become less rather than more open for new applicants. For the years to come, increasing Ukraine's international security and her integration with the world's still existing liberal democracies is a moving target. Accordingly, Kyiv and its partners will need creativity, resolution, and flexibility in exploring new paths of international cooperation.

Acknowledgments

ORCID iD

Andreas Umland [iD] https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7916-4646

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About the Authors

Pavlo Klimkin was, among other things, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine in 2014–2019 and is director of the Program on European, Regional, and Russian Studies of the Ukrainian Institute for the Future in Kyiv.

Andreas Umland is editor of the book series *Soviet and Post-Soviet Politics and Society* published by *ibidem* Press in Stuttgart and senior expert at the Ukrainian Institute for the Future in Kyiv.

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