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UKRAINE'S INTERNATIONAL IMAGE: A VIEW FROM LONDON

How is Ukraine perceived in the international community? For the most part, the answer is "negatively." Some may argue that such a negative image is deserved, but some of the blame for such a poor reputation can be attributed to the inability of Ukraine's ruling elite to comprehend the importance of lobbying efforts and the power of influencing international opinion. The seven factors discussed below have contributed to the nation's rather dismal reputation.

The first area of weakness is Ukraine's dearth of experience in dealing with the outside world. After the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991, the majority of the Soviet experts on diplomacy and international affairs, who were, of course, all based in Moscow, transferred their allegiance to the Russian Federation. Press attaches and other individuals assigned to Ukrainian Embassies abroad had little or no training in image-making. Even now, Ukraine has very few trained specialists who could address the challenge of influencing Ukraine's international image.

As an example, when the Soviet Union broke up, Ukraine claimed its (approximately) 16 percent of the USSR's assets and accepted responsibility for the same proportion of debt. Russia, however, with support from the West, has not honored its commitments. A public relations professional in the country's political ranks would have been able to parlay this issue into a matter for European or international intervention and do more to resolve the stalemate than years of further negotiations could do. With no such talent available, the issue will remain a regional one, never inspiring outrage at Russia's shoddy treatment of its smaller neighbor.

A second factor which contributes to Ukraine's poor image is that, unlike the three Baltic states, it did not seek out experienced members of its Diaspora to develop the areas of media relations, image-making, and lobbying as it established its new post-Soviet government. The leaders of the fledgling Ukrainian state were former members of the Communist Party, which had openly disparaged the Diaspora, thus relations between the two groups were uncomfortable. (In the UK, for example, the Association of Ukrainians in GB, dominated by the Bandera wing of the OUN, has always been cool towards the Ukrainian Embassy. In North America the relationship was better.)

Ukraine, together with all of the other post-Soviet states (except Russia), still boasts no full-time, salaried foreign correspondent from any Western country. That can be regarded as the third reason the country suffers from a poor image - it simply does not attract much media attention. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, journalists who traveled to Kyiv were largely from Western newspapers. They viewed the experience of being posted in a region that was so rapidly evolving as a way of climbing the ladder to prestigious foreign postings. However, the number of Kyiv-based correspondents continued to drop during the 1990s. Today, "The Financial Times" is the only Western newspaper with a journalist still based in Kyiv. This means that many articles published in the Western media on Ukraine are written by Moscow-based correspondents who still cover the former USSR as a de facto unified entity. Influenced by Russian officials, the Russian media, and Moscow-based colleagues, these journalists inevitably adopt a russo-centric view of Ukraine.

Three factors probably led to this situation. The strongest of them is that the excitement of covering an emerging country has waned. Journalists who earn their money from published stories (known as "stringers") are unlikely to get enough material published in the Western press to make a living by writing stories on Ukraine. They move on to cover new, more glamorous topics. (The Financial Times stands as an exception to this rule.) Secondly, the West still views the former USSR (at the very least, the CIS) as one entity. Lastly, the cost of assigning salaried journalists in Kyiv and the other 13 non-Russian capital cities is prohibitive. All Kyiv-based correspondents were < and still are < stringers. This encourages some of them to write sensationalist stories on topics such as nuclear weapons, ethnic conflict, and corruption. Most Western articles devoted to Ukraine still only deal with corruption, such as reports on former Prime Minister Pavlo Lazarenko, the Chernobyl nuclear plant, and tensions with Russia. Rarely are positive articles on Ukraine published regarding, for example, this year's economic turnaround.

A fourth factor contributing to Ukraine's image problem is that the Russian media are still influential in Ukraine. The popular, largely Russian-language television channel Inter (formerly State Television Channel Three) is widely viewed in Eastern and Southern Ukraine. Inter retranslates Russian programming from channels such as Russian Public Television (formerly Ostankino). Therefore, Russia influences a large number of Ukrainian television viewers, which in turn influences the public's opinion on domestic and foreign questions. This is particularly important during elections. For example, if Russia chooses to support a parliamentary and/or presidential candidate (as it supported Leonid Kuchma in 1994 and 1999), Russian commentary aired in Ukraine can sway the opinion of the Ukrainian voters. Similarly, during an international crisis such as that between NATO and Serbia in Kosovo in Spring 1999, Russia was more hostile towards NATO military actions than Ukraine. Russian opinions broadcast into Ukraine affect public opinion.

The BBC and Radio Liberty have studios in Kyiv broadcasting to Ukraine in Ukrainian, but these broadcasts provide information to Ukrainian citizens who already can choose among many Ukrainian state and private radio broadcasts. These radio stations cannot begin to counter Russian influence via television and newspapers which are reprinted in Ukraine (e.g. Izvestiya na Ukraini, Argumenty i Fakty na Ukraini, etc). With the exception of members of the Diaspora, Westerners clearly do not listen to Ukrainian-language programs. As a result, the outside world sees Ukraine as being strongly influenced by its neighbor to the North.

Russophiles abound among Western institutions, academics, policy makers and government officials, a situation that provides the fifth factor affecting Ukraine's weak reputation abroad. Prior to 1992, Soviet studies largely dealt with the Russian republic within the USSR, ignoring the issues of nationality and the non-Russian republics. Contemporary Ukrainian studies is a relatively new area of study and has a large Russophile wing. The Western academic community has kept the nineteenth century imperial Russian historical perspective, assigning Ukraine and Belarus to the Eastern Slavic group as regional branches of Russians. Hence, it is not surprising that the prevalent opinion in the West during 1991-1993 was that Ukraine would not stand on its own for long, but that it, like Belarus under its maverick President



Alyaksandr Lukashenko, would soon return to Russia's embrace.

This Eastern Slavic view of Ukraine as organically linked to Russia still has many Western adherents. In 1999, Russian emigre and journalist Anatol Lieven published "Ukraine and Russia". This year, Jack Matlock, the last U.S. Ambassador to the USSR wrote a piece for the influential the New York Review of Books entitled "Ukrainians. The Nowhere Nation." The Review refused to publish any critical letters from academics and members of the Ukrainian Diaspora. British scholar Andrew Wilson also published a book in the fall of this year with the prestigious Yale University Press entitled "Ukrainians. The Unexpected Nation". Generally, these works portray Ukraine not as a "serious" country but as a nation that is unclear about its past history and its future direction.

Ukraine has never attempted to promote itself internationally by basing correspondents abroad. This is due not just to a lack of funds but also because authorities still underestimate the importance of projecting a healthy image of the country and of providing greater international news for their citizens. This is the sixth factor which has brought Ukraine image problems. Today, the only Ukrainian journalist accredited in the West is based in Brussels. He covers both EU and NATO affairs. Ukrainian leaders usually take Ukrainian journalists on international visits when making official trips abroad, but such occasions are too rare to provide Ukraine with international news on a regular basis. Not surprisingly, therefore, Ukrainian television often obtains its international news coverage from Russia. Ukraine also has not attempted to establish a satellite channel as Poland has done to reach its Diaspora. This is perhaps a bit ironic since Ukrainian-produced rockets send satellites into orbit for other countries to enjoy comprehensive and varied programming. In contrast, Russia inherited the ITAR-TASS and Novosti news agencies together with many established Russian newspapers, such as Izvestiya, all with a long tradition of having foreign-based correspondents. Some Russian newspapers even issue Internet versions of their news-papers in both Russian and English. Meanwhile, Ukrainian news-papers tend not to subscribe to news agencies such as Reuters or the Associated Press. Many still rely on ITAR-TASS. Russian newspapers are also far ahead in placing their papers in Russian and English on the Internet.

Finally, because Ukraine was a province of the former USSR, few people learned English as a foreign language. This is in striking contrast to other former communist countries such as Yugoslavia. At international conferences on post-Soviet affairs, two languages are often used in the proceedings - Russian and English (e.g. the recent international conference on Soviet and East European studies in Helsinki in late July). Many Ukrainian academics are forced to speak Russian at these events because they do not know English. This gives credence to the Western view that Ukrainians and Russians are not so different. (A Lithuanian or Estonian academic who did not know English would undoubtedly insist on an interpreter to avoid speaking Russian). Russia was the center of the former Soviet Union, and, as such, it inherited the majority of scholars, policy makers and officials who speak Western languages. In Kyiv, one needed to speak Russian to advance in Soviet times, but in Moscow, one required English- or German-language skills to advance (e.g. Vladimir Putin).

How then is Ukraine's image perceived abroad? In the first half of the 1990s, Russian authorities often referred to Ukraine as a "bankrupt country." Now, it is the country's regional divisions that provide fodder for exaggeration. The western half of Ukraine is the "nationalistic", Ukrainian-speaking half, and the eastern half is the "Russophile" Russian-speaking half. Its ruling, elite class is portrayed as corrupt and linked to organized crime. Businessmen and international financial organizations continually complain about Ukraine's complex and contradictory legislation. Ukraine's slow reform process and economic stagnation are viewed from abroad as problems that the leadership does not have the political will to address. Perhaps more importantly, its declared strategic foreign policy goals of "returning to Europe" do not harmonize with its domestic policy. In light of that, it may be a long time before Ukraine realizes its goal of close relations with the West. Indeed, it may be along time before Ukraine can repair its unfavorable reputation abroad.

Ukraine's multi-vector foreign policy, which tries to balance relations between Russia and the West, is perceived as a sign that the country cannot decide in which direction it would like to move. This two-pronged approach often results in periodic crises such as the removal of Foreign Minister Borys Tarasiuk in October 2000 when his pro-western views clashed with those of President Kuchma. A further illustration can be seen in Ukraine's refusal to sign the CIS charter although it routinely sends representatives to all of the meetings. Therefore, regardless of the views of Ukrainian diplomats, such an approach to international relations is derided both in the West and in Russia as an example of a "Nowhere Nation". Such ambivalence allegedly "proves" that Ukraine is an artificial construct.

Clearly, Ukraine's negative international image far outweighs its small number of important achievements such as internal stability, lack of ethnic conflict, and a balanced foreign policy. While it remains to be seen if Ukraine can successfully pursue two fully-fledged "strategic partnerships," with the West and NATO on one hand and with Russia on the other, such an ambitious goal almost certainly cannot be achieved if the country does not improve its negative image. Addressing the seven points reviewed above would begin the process of rehabilitating the country's reputation and regaining respect on the stage of global politics.

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