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**Bilateral**

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## Bilateral Relations

### Editors

Dr. Hanna Shelest  
Dr. Mykola Kapitonenko

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### Contacts:

website: <http://ukraine-analytica.org/>  
e-mail: [Ukraine\\_analytica@ukr.net](mailto:Ukraine_analytica@ukr.net)  
Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/ukraineanalytica>  
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# THE 2016 U.S. ELECTIONS AND THE CRISIS OVER UKRAINE

*Dr. Volodymyr Dubovyk*

*Director, Center for International Studies,  
Odessa National University*

***2016 is the U.S. presidential elections year. In the meantime, Ukraine is still going through its tests of war effort, reforms and fight against corruption. The U.S. assistance to Ukraine is critical; Washington recognizes Russian aggression against Ukraine as a major challenge to the established international order. However, it does not mean that the crisis over Ukraine is looming large on the agenda of the elections. The foreign policy, as usual, is taking a backseat when it comes to the domestic concerns in the election debates. Neither the crisis over Ukraine, nor even the unravelling situation in the broader Middle East (including the Syrian crisis) are rated high in the list of priorities this election year. As for suggestions as to what the U.S. role with regard to the crisis over Ukraine should be, the responses vary from staying out of it and reconciling with V. Putin to taking a tougher stance on Moscow. The nominee from the Republican Party D. Trump sticks to the distancing, isolationist tune. The Democratic Party nominee H. Clinton advocates a more forceful approach and tough line dealing with Russia. However, while it is hard to predict what policies D. Trump will pursue if elected, with H. Clinton, as a new president, there is a high probability of her following the policies of the current administration.***

The year 2016 is an election year in the United States. Every elections seem to be a watershed event in the American politicum, a defining moment. However, this time it might become a really decisive moment, perhaps, both for the American domestic

**« Neither the crisis over Ukraine, nor even the unravelling situation in the broader Middle East (including the Syrian crisis) are rated high in the list of priorities this election year**

and foreign policies. Ukraine, in the meantime, has been living in extraordinary and very much strained times ever since the late 2013, when the so-called Euromaidan

protests took place. The acute political crisis, then complemented by an external aggression against Ukraine by the Russian federation created a full-fledged “crisis over Ukraine” with many international actors taking their roles in it. All of this was coupled by the dire situation in the Ukrainian economy, which was hit hard by endemic corruption and consequences of the de-facto annexation of the Crimea and some segments of the Donbas region, as well as by the price of war in the east of the country. As Ukraine is struggling through these manifold tests, it has also embarked on a journey towards ambitious reforms. In all of this – war, fight against corruption and the introduction of reforms – the United States is seen as a vital partner. Even now, when the U.S. often appears as a reluctant

superpower, unwilling global power, there is much it could do to assist Ukraine. The election year is a logical point to assess what place the crisis over Ukraine has in the context of American political life.

In this piece we will look at the following: the role of the foreign policy in the 2016 US elections, the role of the crisis over Ukraine in 2016 elections, including the positions of the candidates on the crisis over Ukraine and, finally, what we can expect from a potential president with regards to the U.S. policy towards Ukraine and the crisis over it.

It often comes as a surprise to an uninformed onlooker that foreign policy rarely makes it big in the U.S. presidential elections. Given the amount of power and influence that the U.S. wields in the world, and considering how much people outside of the U.S. wonder about its international policies, one would expect that this domain take a dominant place in the election years. But it does not. Being the citizens of a superpower, potential voters are primarily focused on issues of social, economic, and domestic nature. Jobs, taxes, immigration matter more than foreign entanglements. This year is no exception. In fact, the last time when foreign policy issues mattered rather significantly was back in J. Carter – R. Reagan contest in 1980. Considering that since 1980 we witnessed the upheaval and then demise of the “cold war”, the emergence of the bipolar world with an outsize American role in it, the events of 9/11, a bunch of pretty long U.S. military engagements abroad, the fact that foreign policy still failed to register among the pivotal issues in the number of presidential election campaigns is rather amazing, but that is how it was.

Most of the people in Ukraine also live in a very much Ukraine-centric world if you look at interests, concerns, attitudes, fears, and expectations. Given the extraordinary

challenge that the country is facing these days it was expected that the rest of the world should be attuned to the Ukrainian troubles on a 24/7 basis and be glued to know what happens in this country and around it. This is far, as bitter as it comes across, from how things really stand. People around the globe, people in the U.S. (and by people we mean broad public, political elites, media, etc.) do not see events in and around Ukraine through the same prism, the same magnifying glass as we do here in Ukraine. When we often iterate that someone ought to do something to help Ukraine, refer to certain (what appears to us) obligations and commitments (Refrain from the threat or use of force against Belarus, Kazakhstan and Ukraine, Refrain from the use of nuclear arms against Belarus, Kazakhstan and Ukraine) – say, to the Budapest memorandum of 1994 – on the part of particular actors, including the U.S., this is often not how they see it.

The primaries campaign of 2016 had its share of moments when foreign policy related issues were brought up. However, it did not happen too often, and when it did, there was no exclusive focusing on the crisis over Ukraine. Other issues factored in, including, but not limited, to the situation in the broader Middle East, specifically in Syria, unravelling of post-Qaddafi Libya, Iran nuclear deal, Israel/Palestine knot, Afghanistan, the end of the Cuban isolation, a growing assertiveness of China in the Asia-Pacific area and globally, the rise of the Islamic fundamentalism throughout a number of regions. The situation in and around Ukraine was frequently mentioned but only among other foreign policy priorities and concerns for the United States, and not necessarily as its top priority. The crisis over Ukraine is most typically listed among many various upheavals in today’s world with which the United States would have to deal in one or another manner. This manner might vary from the principled, protracted and close

engagement (H. Clinton calls for US military support for Ukraine<sup>1</sup>) to distancing from the problem, ignoring it and/or solving it by some sort of a magic stick (D. Trump has no Ukraine policy yet <sup>2</sup>).

Another thing that one can notice is that there were very few significant statements (not to mention full speeches) on the foreign policy as such. In most cases only fragments of candidates' remarks would touch upon foreign policy and, quite frequently, only when prompted by a particular question from the audience. Certainly, there were segments in election debates within both parties that were dedicated to the foreign policy, but here is the point: the candidates had to address this field exactly because that was a required theme. It is quite striking, in our view, that even the most experienced and qualified candidate in the realm of foreign policy, Hillary Rodham Clinton did not feel a need to have a major coherent speech on the subject until June 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2016<sup>3</sup>.

### **The Republican Party position**

The Republican Party has had a long and highly calamitous election season. It initially registered a huge number of contenders, many of whom were in the position of a front-runner at some point. The attempt to make GOP a party of a "big tent" (to include various views and platforms) and modernize the party failed utterly. The certain faction is running with a ball, and the one that is hated by the establishment of the party, which, however, found no leverage to prevent that faction from triumphing and, therefore, ultimately

chose to embrace it. From the outset of the campaign, moderate republicans appeared out of fashion and did not stand much of a chance. The previous elections of 2008 and 2012 were naturally seen by Republicans as unsuccessful ones, specifically due to the reason of failing to present a candidate who could be an appealing and unifying force. By that account, obviously now (even if Republicans come to ultimately win the presidency), the party will find itself in a state of unprecedented division. Whether this will come to affect the foreign policy if a Republican candidate is to take the White House is an open question.

As it comes to the positions of the Republican candidates, there was a noticeable divergence of their views on the crisis over Ukraine and the required course of action for the U.S. with regard to that crisis. There was a visible strain of one traditional Republican view, which had its suspicions of Russia and its intentions all along and which saw the Ukrainian case, also, through the prism of the values of the American international policy, that should, in their minds, include a strong, forceful policy of "democracy promotion". The Russian onslaught on Ukraine through such a prism appeared not only as a certain geopolitical or regional security challenge but also as a civilizational one. The United States in such a view emerged not only as an ultimate legitimate guardian and protector of the world order under Russian attack, but also as a leading "force of good" that should preside in a fight with "evil".

There were several Republican contenders for the nomination who subscribed to the

<sup>1</sup> Hillary Clinton calls for US military support for Ukraine. UA Today. 22.01.2015. Accessed at: <http://uatoday.tv/politics/hilary-clinton-suggests-us-military-support-for-ukraine-404369.html>

<sup>2</sup> Donald Trump foreign policy adviser: Trump has no Ukraine policy yet / Deutsche Welle. 25.05.2016. Accessed at: <http://www.dw.com/en/donald-trump-foreign-policy-adviser-trump-has-no-ukraine-policy-yet/a-19280416>

<sup>3</sup> Read Hillary Clinton's Speech on Donald Trump and National Security / Time. 02.06.2016. Accessed at: <http://time.com/4355797/hillary-clinton-donald-trump-foreign-policy-speech-transcript/>

above-mentioned view. Among them, the most notable were the governor of Ohio John Kasich, former CEO of “Hewlett Packard” Carly Fiorina, a senator from Texas Ted Cruz and a senator from Florida Marco Rubio. They had some differences regarding the details but all shared the view that the Russian President V. Putin’s aggressive policies was something that constitutes a major blow against the established world order and international law, puts America’s allies and partners, its interests in the region in a position of harm, and deserves a strong, forceful American response<sup>4</sup>. Over a period of time senator M. Rubio emerged as, perhaps, the most audible voice in this grouping.

This line of thought is nothing new, of course, and is present not just in the ranks of the Republican Party. However, Republicans were most active in peddling this view. This opinion is, also, often associated with the neoconservative program on foreign policy. At the same time, it should be mentioned, that the neocons are frequently mischaracterized and actually do not have a single party homeland. We can also recall those “neocons” in the G. W. Bush administration (R. Cheney, D. Rumsfeld, P. Wolfowitz), and they cooperated quite fine for a lengthy time with V. Putin, when it served their interests, even despite a growing evidence of an authoritarian drive in Moscow.

One other thing that, perhaps, needs mentioning, was an apparent lack of ideas on what else could be done (in addition to the steps taken by the B. Obama administration) to better control V. Putin and help Ukraine. Aside from a call to arm Ukraine with lethal weapons (which was shared by many in Democratic camp, as there was little on offer<sup>5</sup>. It became a sort

of an exercise in rhetoric, a competition as to whose criticism of V. Putin’s behaviour would be the loudest one. Also, perhaps, this endeavour was instrumental in building up credentials in the foreign policy background which could be of use in the future political battles (definitely true in case of M. Rubio).

A specific stand was taken by a senator from Kentucky Rand Paul, who, to his credit, stayed true to his long-expressed libertarian convictions. A libertarian view on both domestic and international matters has always had a strong presence in American discourse. It cuts across both political parties and appeals most definitely to a lot of independents. In foreign policy, it manifests itself as a sort of soft isolationism. In other words, it does not call for a total withdrawal of the United States from the international arena (people like R. Paul surely realize that this would be nonsense) but, instead, calls to lower a number and depth of American foreign entanglements. This certainly includes the US foreign military deployments, the take that would be currently very popular among many Americans on any side of the isle.

Rand Paul’s father, Ron Paul was one of the libertarian flag-bearers for quite a time. He, once a member of the House of Representatives, and, also, one of the presidential hopefuls, brought the libertarian position to its extreme. He was known, among other things, as an utmost sceptic when it comes to any sort of the U.S. involvement with Ukraine. Back in times of the “first” Maidan (2004), a so-called “Orange Revolution”, he claimed that the U.S. was behind it and launched investigations into how much funds had been invested

<sup>4</sup> Franklin D. Kramer: A Real Response to Russia / US News. 24.03.2014. Accessed at: <http://www.usnews.com/opinion/blogs/world-report/2014/03/24/how-the-us-and-nato-should-respond-to-russias-crimea-invasion>

<sup>5</sup> FACT SHEET: U.S. Assistance to Ukraine / White House. 07.12.2015. Accessed at: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/12/07/fact-sheet-us-assistance-ukraine>

in carrying out this revolution<sup>6</sup>. Naturally, he was identified as a useful person by Moscow. These days Ron Paul Institute for Peace and Prosperity has become a major outlet of the pro-Putin propaganda in the United States. His son Rand is much more careful and restrained in his statements. He has been an overall critic of V. Putin's moves against Ukraine, but, at the same time, questioned how closely involved the U.S. should be in helping Ukraine and on whether the Russian actions are really damaging American interests.

Much of the above-mentioned approach has been incorporated by another candidate—Donald Trump, whose campaign has become, among other things, an operation that is heavily influenced by libertarian views. He has never outlined any sort of a coherent stand on neither domestic nor foreign policy. This remains true paradoxically even now when he has emerged as an apparent nominee of the Republican Party. His campaign has been of a limitless populism and demagoguery, constant effort in avoiding real questions and not providing real answers. D. Trump, as his election motto states, aspires to make “America great again”. This does not include, though, any sort of active role for the U.S. at the international arena. He, perhaps, believes in American exceptionalism, but is fine with keeping it for America only (and in fact destroying many things that truly make America great). He postulates that America should not have a fix for any existing problem in the world.

When it comes to the crisis over Ukraine there could be a multiple choice of how you see it from the U.S.: as a direct threat to the U.S. interests, as an indirect threat to the U.S. interests and as a non-threat. D. Trump fluctuates between options two and three. Moreover, when it comes to what Washington should do about it, his response would most often be – nothing, not our problem<sup>7</sup>. He repeats that Ukraine is in Europe and, therefore, Europeans should deal with this issue by themselves<sup>8</sup>.

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All this is in the face of reality where Europeans show inadequate capacity and willingness to deal with it. The major mechanism to provide collective security of American allies in Europe – NATO – has also come under D. Trump's attacks. He says that NATO is obsolete and useless, and costs Americans too much<sup>9</sup>. Finally, when it comes to his view on V. Putin, D. Trump stops short of admiring the strong Russian leader and promises that he would be able to get along with him just fine<sup>10</sup>. Here, like with any other question, he does not provide any explanation of what does he

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<sup>6</sup> Ingmar Bredies, Andreas Umland, Valentin Yakushik. Aspects of the orange revolution. The content and Dynamics of the Ukrainian Presidential Elections, 2007 p. 222

<sup>7</sup> Donald Trump: Ukraine Crisis Is Problem of Europe, Not US / Sputnik, 17.08.2015. Accessed at: <http://sputnik-knews.com/us/20150817/1025818360.html>

<sup>8</sup> Trump says Germany should deal with Russian invasion of Ukraine / UA Today. 15.08.2015. Accessed at: <http://uatoday.tv/politics/trump-says-germany-should-deal-with-russian-invasion-of-ukraine-475633.html>

<sup>9</sup> Trump: NATO Is Obsolete and Expensive, “Doesn't Have The Right Countries In It For Terrorism” / RealClearPolitics.com. 27.03.2016. Accessed at: [http://www.realclearpolitics.com/video/2016/03/27/trump\\_europe\\_is\\_not\\_safe\\_lots\\_of\\_the\\_free\\_world\\_has\\_become\\_weak.html](http://www.realclearpolitics.com/video/2016/03/27/trump_europe_is_not_safe_lots_of_the_free_world_has_become_weak.html)

<sup>10</sup> Damian Paletta. Donald Trump Goes His Own Way With Vladimir Putin / Wall Street Journal. 13.05.2016. Accessed at: <http://www.wsj.com/articles/donald-trump-goes-his-own-way-with-vladimir-putin-1463172396>



mean by “getting along fine” and at what expenses, and what might be a formula to get to this outcome.

There is no way to predict what D. Trump will do if elected president. This is the scariest thing about him, in fact. He has been constantly flip-flopping, changing his positions on the fly, often within just one short interview. He is “tabula rasa”, specifically when it comes to foreign policy. Normally, there is a solid amount of continuity between successive administrations. For example, despite the expectations of “Obama revolution” in the foreign policy back in 2008, nothing of the sort took place. With D. Trump, there is no way of knowing. One might have placed some hopes on him assembling a respectable team, the one that would offset his lack of knowledge and ill temperament, but so far, he is being avoided by each and every seasoned or experienced figure of weight within his own party. Things might change eventually with a Republican establishment very reluctantly and slowly embracing D. Trump as their candidate.

### **Democratic Party**

As for the Democrats, their formal position is actually presented by Barack Obama as a sitting president and a leader of the party. He speaks in the name of all Democrats and any other members of the party are not going to undermine his position unless something really extraordinary happens. However, apparently, B. Obama is a lame duck already not standing on the ballot this year. This means, as we continue to monitor statements and moves of the current administration, that all eyes in terms of the prospects are on the Democratic presidential hopefuls.

A former first lady, a senator from the state of New York, the Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton and a senator from Vermont Bernard Sanders quickly established themselves as the only real candidates for the nomination within their party. Originally, it looked like H. Clinton would have the nomination “signed, sealed and delivered” for her, but then the “ghosts” of 2008 re-emerged in this year’s campaign. Back then, of course, her nomination was torpedoed by the current president B. Obama. This time, even though B. Sanders appeared as a formidable contender, it became clear, in a due time, that H. Clinton is going to weather the storm and steer herself to an eventual nomination. As for B. Sanders, the foreign policy domain does not register among his strong feats and his very few crossovers into this sphere only proved this. Now that H. Clinton emerged as the nominee from her party all eyes are naturally directed at her.

There is no shortage of public statements by H. Clinton on the subject of the crisis over Ukraine. There is no ambiguity about her view: she is a consistent critic of V. Putin’s actions vis-à-vis Ukraine and a proponent of strong American support for Ukraine<sup>11</sup>. The political arena anywhere could sometimes be a place for opportunism, situational stands and flip-flopping, of course. U.S. is no exception. However, there is no reason to believe that H. Clinton’s public stand on the crisis over Ukraine is any different from her actual inclinations or internal views of her campaign. In other words, there is no ground to question her sincerity.

Now, much was made of the “reset” policies that B. Obama administration entertained towards Russia in its first term. H. Clinton, of course, was a public

<sup>11</sup> Ben Schreckinger. Clinton urges more financial, military aid to Ukraine / Politico. 21.01.2015. Accessed at: <http://www.politico.com/story/2015/01/hillary-clinton-ukraine-aid-military-financial-114462>

face of “reset” as then the Secretary of State. The architects of “reset” are now often blamed (with a reason, in our view) for misreading Moscow, sending wrong signals to the Russian counterparts, displaying some degree of weakness<sup>12</sup>. However, as far as it can be discerned, H. Clinton was never among those architects and, most probably, simply felt that she needs to implement this idea since it was



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decided so by the president and his inner circle. This being, in fact, one of the first meaningful tests of her loyalty. The foreign policy of this administration was never, in fact, driven by the Department of State. There is no credible information, either, about her being critical of “reset” or being reluctant in implementing it either, as this administration is quite non-transparent, and B. Obama is still a sitting president of H. Clinton’s party, so understandably we are not hearing any evidence of her disagreeing with him on the issue.

Even previously to the Russian aggression against Ukraine, “reset” planners had admitted that it did not work. After a short interim period since “reset” was gone, the

negativism came to dominate the U.S.-Russian relations. The administration of B. Obama came up with a series of strong moves to challenge V. Putin’s aggression and support Ukraine. It seems that there is not much difference in how B. Obama and H. Clinton see the crisis over Ukraine. She is more prone to more vocal denunciations of V. Putin, being one of the first politicians of her calibre to compare him to “Hitler”<sup>13</sup>, for instance. (However, then, again, B. Obama is a current president and she is on campaign trail, so hence the difference in rhetoric. Also, B. Obama was always very careful in choosing words for his public statements, so no surprises.)

When it comes to the essence of the policies, H. Clinton does not offer any additional actions to what B. Obama has already put in place. She might appear as more sympathetic to the idea of sending lethal weapons to Ukraine, but there could be no confidence that she would actually do this if elected. She tends to lean towards a more “hawkish” faction of the Democratic Party than the president. At several occasions she was close to appear as critical of B. Obama’s inherent caution, particularly when uttering that “not doing stupid stuff” hardly qualifies as a foreign policy doctrine<sup>14</sup>. She has distanced herself from that saying since, willing to show her respect to the sitting president. In any case, that statement had nothing to do with the crisis over Ukraine and was aimed, primarily, at the president’s policy in the wider Middle East.

So, we might predict with a certain confidence that H. Clinton’s policy, if she is

<sup>12</sup> Putin Exploits Obama’s Weak Responses / Hartford Courant. 28.08.2015. Accessed at: <http://www.courant.com/opinion/op-ed/hc-op-wire-krauthammer-putin-exploits-obama-weakness-0828-20150827-story.html>

<sup>13</sup> Hillary Clinton says Putin’s action are like what Hitler did back in the 30’s / Washington Post. 05.03.2014. Accessed at: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-politics/wp/2014/03/05/hillary-clinton-says-putins-action-are-like-what-hitler-did-back-in-the-30s/>

<sup>14</sup> Caitlin Macneal. Clinton Knocks Obama’s ‘Don’t Do Stupid Stuff’ Foreign Policy Approach / Talking Points Memo. 10.08.2014. Accessed at: <http://talkingpointsmemo.com/livewire/hillary-clinton-obama-foreign-policy>

elected the next president, will be natural continuation of the current policy of the B. Obama administration. There might be some shifts in details, but no major changes. She might come up with some new initiatives, but not of the scale that would be in position to dramatically alter Moscow's course of action. This, perhaps, runs contrary to some unreasonably high and, in our view, unrealistic expectations in Ukraine about her being ready to employ some radical new methods of challenging V. Putin. Our best hope would be for H. Clinton to sustain the pressure on Russia at its current level, not to substantially elevate that pressure. At the same time, we believe

that she is not going to entertain the easing of that pressure until Russia complies with demands of the international community and alters its aggression on Ukraine.

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**Volodymyr Dubovyk** has been working at the Odessa I. Mechnikov National University since 1992. He is an Associate Professor at the Department of International Relations since 1996 and has acted as a Director of the Center for International Studies since 1999. Among his teaching and research interests are U.S. foreign policy, U.S. – Ukraine relations, Black Sea regional security, foreign policy of Ukraine. Dr. Dubovyk is a Fulbright Scholar 2016/2017.

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