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Between Kremlin influence and Ukrainian independence: The presidents of Ukraine from Kravchuk to Poroshenko

SUMMARY The article analyzes the Kremlin's influence on the presidents of Ukraine from Leonid Kravchuk to Petro Poroshenko, highlighting the complex relations and efforts to gain independence from Russia. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Ukraine struggled to build its independence amid strong pressures from the Kremlin. Each president had a different approach to relations with Russia. Leonid Kravchuk tried to balance cooperation with independence – an extremely challenging task for the newly formed state. Leonid Kuchma, after initially seeking to build positive relations with the West, turned significantly towards the Kremlin during his second term. His presidency was marked by corruption and the strengthening of oligarchic structures. Viktor Yushchenko, emerging from the Orange Revolution, aimed to make Ukraine independent despite internal conflicts and pressures from the Kremlin. Viktor Yanukovich strengthened ties with Moscow, leading to massive social protests during the Maidan and his eventual escape to Russia. Petro Poroshenko, who took office during a crisis, sought to strengthen Ukraine's independence and tighten relations with the West. Despite some successes, his term was also marked by difficulties related to corruption and oligarchic structures. The current situation, a full-scale war initiated by the Russian Federation in 2022, highlights that the challenges of maintaining Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity remain relevant. The pursuit of complete independence from Russian influence remains a priority, requiring consistent actions and international support.

KEYWORDS Ukraine, Russia, president, independence, oligarchy

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Introduction

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Ukraine faced the challenge of building its independence and sovereignty amidst strong Russian influences. Ukrainian presidents, from Leonid Kravchuk to Petro Poroshenko, had to navigate between the pursuit of independence and avoiding antagonizing the Kremlin, which employed various forms of pressure.

In this context, the article poses the research question: how did the Kremlin limit Ukraine's political autonomy, and particularly, what impact did it have on the foreign policy orientation of individual Ukrainian presidents?

The article hypothesizes that although individual Ukrainian presidents employed various strategies to limit Kremlin influence, their choices were determined by the changing internal and external factors. As a result, not all presidents consistently pursued full independence from Russia, and some were even compelled to make compromises leading to dependence on Russia.

The article outlines the evolution of Ukrainian presidents' policies towards the Kremlin, their efforts to maintain independence, and key events that influenced relations between Ukraine and Russia. It thus highlights the complex struggle for Ukrainian sovereignty in the shadow of Russian influence.

Constitutional competencies of the President of Ukraine

The fundamental legal act in Ukraine, the Constitution, adopted by the Verkhovna Rada on June 28, 1996, dedicates one chapter (Chapter V – Articles 102–113) to the rights and duties of the President. The Constitution stipulates that the President of Ukraine is the head of state and acts on its behalf, and is the guarantor of the state's sovereignty, territorial integrity, adherence to the Constitution of Ukraine, and the rights and freedoms of individuals (Art. 102 of the Constitution of Ukraine). The President of Ukraine is elected for a term of 5 years through universal, equal, and direct elections. The most important competencies of the President of Ukraine include (Art. 106 of the Constitution of Ukraine):

- a) representing the state internationally, shaping foreign policy, conducting negotiations, and concluding international treaties,
- b) making decisions on the recognition of new states,
- c) appointing and dismissing ambassadors and representatives in international organizations,

- d) managing early parliamentary elections and nationwide referendums on constitutional amendments,
- e) appointing and dismissing the Prime Minister of Ukraine with the parliament's consent,
- f) appointing and dismissing government members on the Prime Minister's recommendation,
- g) appointing and dismissing the Prosecutor General with the parliament's consent,
- h) appointing half of the National Bank Board members, half of the National Television and Radio Broadcasting Council members, and one-third of the Constitutional Court judges,
- i) serving as the Commander-in-Chief of the Ukrainian Armed Forces
- j) chairing the National Security and Defense Council,
- k) declaring mobilization, introducing martial law, and deciding on the commencement of hostilities with parliamentary consent.

The President of Ukraine, granted significant powers by the Ukrainian Constitution, plays a crucial role in shaping the country's domestic and foreign policy. It is no surprise, then, that from the Russian perspective, Ukraine's presidential elections are crucial for maintaining political influence in Kyiv, a strategy the Kremlin has pursued since the fall of the USSR.

Leonid Kravchuk: The beginning of independent Ukraine

Almost every newly elected president of post-Soviet republics had previously held high positions in their native communist parties, which was also the case in Ukraine. The first President of Ukraine, Leonid Kravchuk, was, among other roles, the head of the propaganda department in Ukraine from 1988 to 1990. Kravchuk was elected president on December 1, 1991, winning 60% of the votes in the first round. His main rival, Vyacheslav Chornovil, received 23% support (Olszański, 1994).

In 1990, future Ukrainian and Russian presidents, L. Kravchuk and Boris Yeltsin, participated together in negotiations with Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev regarding the future of the USSR. After the collapse of the Soviet Union and Ukraine's independence, Kravchuk and Yeltsin, who had previously been on the same side in negotiations with Gorbachev, found themselves on the opposite sides of political rivalry. The first conflict between the Russian Federation

and the newly independent Ukrainian state concerned the Soviet assets located in Ukraine and sovereignty over Crimea.

One of President L. Kravchuk's first decisions was to sign the treaty establishing the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) with B. Yeltsin and Stanislau Shushkevich (the then-chairman of the Supreme Soviet of Belarus) on December 8, 1991, in Viskuly in the Białowieża Forest in Belarus. This move could suggest a desire for close cooperation with Russia and thus a significant dependency on the Kremlin. However, differences in interests and visions of the CIS between Ukraine and Russia became apparent almost immediately. Kravchuk viewed the CIS as a way to civilize the separation from Russia. During subsequent CIS sessions, he skillfully maneuvered between declarations of cooperation, avoiding signing any commitments on behalf of Ukraine – such as avoiding deeper economic integration within the CIS or refusing to join the Tashkent agreement of May 15, 1992, on collective security (Chojnowski & Bruski, 2006).

After the collapse of the USSR and the emergence of independent Ukraine, a political transformation occurred – from socialist to democratic and from command-distributive to market economy. In each post-Soviet state, this transformation was associated with economic problems, but in Ukraine, it had particularly severe consequences: a significant increase in unemployment (from 50,500 to 1.5 million people) and the rapid devaluation of its new currency – the hryvnia, which had become the third official currency alongside the ruble and the dollar (Tokarski, Chugaievska & Chugaievska, 2019).

The growing impoverishment of society, coupled with supply restrictions, led to long queues in stores and almost immediate emptying of store shelves when goods appeared. These phenomena contributed to an unprecedented rise in inflation, which reached 2500% (data at the end of 1992). Additionally, the resolution of March 4, 1992, “On the Privatization of State Property,” required the government administration to privatize 65% of state enterprises by 1997. As a result, state property was sold off at relatively low values, benefiting mainly high-ranking officials of the previous regime (Serczyk, 2009). This led to significant enrichment and a rapid increase in wealth disparities within Ukrainian society.

Kravchuk's political actions can be described as an attempt to “slip away” from dependence on Russia. His efforts towards Ukrainian independence within the CIS and his firm stance on the Soviet legacy indicate a maximal attempt to free the state from Russian influences at that time. However, it should be noted that Russian troops remained stationed in Ukraine, and the economy

was strongly tied to Russia. The biggest challenge for President Kravchuk was the systemic transformation, which led to a severe economic crisis in the country.

Kuchma's presidency in the shadow of oligarchy and the murder of a journalist

The extremely poor state of the Ukrainian economy and the accompanying widespread social dissatisfaction led to early parliamentary elections (March 27, 1994) and presidential elections (June 26, 1994). In these elections, L. Kravchuk, seeking re-election, competed primarily with Leonid Kuchma. The first round of voting did not produce a decisive result: Kravchuk won 37.7% of the vote, while Kuchma secured 31.2%. In the second round, however, Kuchma gained greater support (52.1%) than Kravchuk (45.1%) and became Ukraine's second president. During the election campaign, Kuchma appealed to the nostalgia of a segment of Ukrainian society for the USSR, suggesting that his administration would seek closer cooperation with Russia. This strategy earned him significant support in the east and south of Ukraine, where the majority of Russian-speaking citizens lived (Serczyk, 2009).

In his inaugural address as President of Ukraine, Kuchma emphasized the need to establish good relations with Russia, although his administration's priority was to strengthen the presidency and implement necessary economic reforms. Shortly after taking office, he made visits to Canada and the United States and began cooperation with the European Union. However, his presidency also saw the clear formation of powerful industrial-financial clans in Ukraine. These groups, built on financial magnates who had enriched themselves through the privatization of state property, began to play a key role in Ukrainian politics and the economy (Leusz, 2019). Initially, these clans supported their own deputies who looked after their interests. Over time, however, the financial magnates themselves actively sought to acquire power. President Kuchma encouraged the development of these financial elites, as evidenced by the decree on the creation of Financial-Industrial Groups (FIGs) (issued December 21, 1995). This decree allowed FIG members to make key decisions, such as granting monopoly status, without government or presidential interference, if it was in the economic interest. Financial magnates successfully utilized this group to achieve their objectives and amass wealth. This process led to the oligarchization of the economy in a manner similar to Russia, where financial elites gained increasing influence

over the country's politics and economy, leading to the concentration of power in the hands of a small group of individuals (Felshtinsky & Stanchev, 2015).

The next presidential elections took place on October 31, 1999. Seeking re-election, Kuchma received 36.5% of the vote. His main rival was the leader of the Communists, Petro Symonenko, who garnered 22.3% support. The second round, held on November 14, 1999, ended with Kuchma's victory, who received the highest level of support in western Ukraine, where he achieved a 90% result. The second round of elections was characterized by high voter turnout – up to 74% of citizens participated. Although Kuchma advocated for cooperation with Russia, his victory in western Ukraine can be explained by his pragmatic approach to foreign policy, which at that time also included a pro-Western vector. At the beginning of his presidency, Kuchma sought to maintain good relations with Russia, but over time, in response to internal pressures and the changing international situation, he began to balance his policies by trying to strengthen relations with Western countries. Additionally, his opponent, P. Symonenko, more strongly emphasized the need for close cooperation with Russia, which may have alienated some voters in western Ukraine (Serczyk, 2009).

However, Kuchma's second term was overshadowed by the murder of journalist Georgiy Gongadze. Gongadze, the founder of the online news service *Ukrayinska Pravda* [Ukrainian Truth] was sharply critical of President Kuchma and his administration, revealing numerous abuses. In recorded conversations between Kuchma and Interior Minister Yuriy Kravchenko (illegally taped by Mykola Melnychenko, a member of Kuchma's security detail), Kuchma spoke very negatively about Gongadze and his portal, even suggesting his forced deportation to Georgia (Gongadze's birthplace) or abduction by Chechen militants. The discovery of Gongadze's body in November 2000 sparked widespread media outrage, as well as condemnation from EU countries and the United States, which blamed Kuchma for the murder. Nevertheless, Kuchma completed his term until 2004. The investigation did not produce direct evidence linking Kuchma to the crime. The main suspect became Interior Minister J. Kravchenko, who, however, could not be interrogated, as he allegedly committed suicide by shooting himself twice in the head before his arrest. Methods such as intimidation and the elimination of journalists critical of the authorities resembled Russia under Vladimir Putin's regime, with the famous assassinations of Anna Politkovskaya, Yuri Shchekochikhin, and Paul Klebnikov, who were bravely revealing inconvenient facts about the Kremlin. Thus, Kuchma's presidency increasingly began

to resemble the authoritarian rule of the Kremlin, deviating from democratic values (Felshtinsky & Stanchev, 2015).

In summing up Kuchma's two terms, it is worth noting that his promised strengthening of the presidency, opening to the West, and reforms did not yield the expected results. His rule was marked by an authoritarian style, a lack of proper cooperation with parliament, and often disregarding the interests of Ukrainian society in favor of wealthy industrial-financial clans (and his own). The privatization process led to the illegal enrichment of individuals connected to power, particularly representatives of the previous regime. Financial magnates increasingly took control of new areas of public life. President Kuchma, as demonstrated by the Gongadze case, was involved in numerous scandals. The journalist's murder is seen by commentators as a "symbol of the era" – a period in which Ukraine was just beginning to shape democratic and legal standards, still burdened by the legacy of the previous political system.

During Kuchma's second term, authoritarian tendencies in his style of governance became more apparent, resembling the system being developed concurrently by V. Putin in Russia. Both leaders sought to centralize power, restrict media freedom, and marginalize political opponents. Like Putin, Kuchma used the mechanisms of power to suppress criticism and control key state institutions. The intimidation of journalists, such as Georgiy Gongadze, and the rise of oligarchic influence provided a stark example of how presidential power was being used to strengthen the position of the ruling elite at the expense of democratic values. As a result, under Kuchma's leadership, Ukraine became a country where the rule of law and transparency were often ignored, and authoritarian tendencies increasingly mirrored those observed in Russia. Similar to Russia, oligarchs gained more influence over politics and the economy, taking control of key sectors and using their wealth to manipulate democratic processes, which weakened state institutions and stifled the development of civil society.

When assessing Kuchma's dependency on the Kremlin, it should be noted that in the early years of his presidency, he demonstrated skill and decisiveness in his actions. He did not succumb to Russia's blackmail over gas supplies to Ukraine, which began in 1994 and concluded with an agreement in 1997. Moreover, Kuchma resolved the dispute over Crimea by adopting solutions deemed more favorable to Kyiv, according to experts. Another example of his efforts to distance Ukraine from Russia was the creation in October 1995 of GUAM (an organization for democracy and development aimed at cooperation with the USA, EU, and NATO), which included Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, and Moldova,

as an alternative to Russia's CIS. Kuchma also initiated talks with the European Union to increase economic exchange with its members. The situation changed radically after Gongadze's murder. The USA and EU condemned the killing and directly accused Kuchma of involvement in the crime, leading to a cooling of political and economic relations with the West. Russia exploited the situation, intensifying diplomatic contacts with Ukraine. Russian delegations, including the Russian president, increasingly visited Ukraine on official visits.

Russian President Vladimir Putin attempted to bring Ukraine into the sphere of influence of the Russian Federation in a more subtle manner than his predecessor. The Kremlin's support for Kuchma became evident during Putin's visit to Kyiv in August 2001 for the celebration of the 10th anniversary of Ukraine's independence. Western European and US presidents, in line with their criticism of Kuchma for Gongadze's death, did not attend the celebrations – the exception was Aleksander Kwaśniewski, then president of Poland (Kwaśniewski and Putin were the only presidents present at the event). From that moment, Kuchma's drift towards Russia became noticeable. This was confirmed by his stance during the Orange Revolution, where he advocated for resolving the protests by force and supported the pro-Russian presidential candidate, Viktor Yanukovich.

Victor Yushchenko: Orange Revolution and unfulfilled hopes

The 2004 presidential elections were perceived by Ukrainian society as a critical turning point for the country. After a decade of Leonid Kuchma's presidency, dominated by financial-industrial clans and threats to media freedom, citizens hoped for change. There were high expectations for Viktor Yushchenko and Yulia Tymoshenko, who, while serving as prime minister and deputy prime minister, had taken a firm stance against financial-industrial clans, forcing them to emerge from the shadow economy and pay taxes. Their actions yielded tangible benefits for the state budget, such as a more than sixfold increase in energy sector revenues after suspending promissory note transactions. On the other hand, as the elections approached, with the first round scheduled for late October 2004, Kuchma's administration increasingly followed Kremlin suggestions (Felshtinsky & Stanchev, 2015).

The shift in Western European and U.S. attitudes towards President Kuchma, combined with pressure from financial magnates fearing a new government, had a significant impact on Ukraine's political situation. The Council of Europe, the U.S. Congress, and the President of the United States called for free

and fair elections, warning that sanctions and the freezing of foreign accounts of Ukrainian officials could be imposed in the case of irregularities. In response to these concerns, Western nations and the U.S. financially supported non-governmental organizations tasked with monitoring election integrity, including training volunteers (Kowalov, 2009). During this period, many Western politicians visited Kyiv, emphasizing that electoral fraud would not be tolerated. These actions alarmed Russia, and President Putin accused the West of sabotaging Ukrainian-Russian diplomatic relations. It became clear that any election result unfavorable to Russia would provoke a strong reaction.

Two main candidates emerged during the election campaign. The first was Viktor Yanukovych, then prime minister, who was expected to continue Kuchma's policies and maintain pro-Russian diplomatic relations. Although the opposition failed to unite behind a single candidate, Yushchenko, who was also supported by Tymoshenko, became Yanukovych's most formidable rival (other opposition candidates included Oleksandr Moroz, Petro Symonenko, Anatolii Kinakh, and Oleksandr Omelchenko). The opposition had limited access to media – Yushchenko appeared only on Petro Poroshenko's *Channel 5*, while independent media were systematically suppressed (e.g., the shutdown of the *Silski Visti* newspaper in Donetsk and the revocation of the broadcast license for *Kontinent radio*, which retransmitted foreign stations such as *Radio Polonia*, *BBC*, *Radio Svoboda*, *Voice of America*, and *Deutsche Welle*). The most significant attack on the opposition was the poisoning of Yushchenko with TCDD dioxin in early September 2004. His life was saved in Austria's Rudolfinerhaus hospital, but the effects of the poisoning were particularly visible on Yushchenko's face, which became severely disfigured. Russian President Vladimir Putin also became actively involved in the election campaign, making a three-day visit to Ukraine in the final stage of the campaign, during which he almost constantly accompanied Yanukovych (Chojnowski & Bruski, 2006).

The first round of the presidential election was held on October 31, 2004, but the results were announced only after ten days. Despite the opposition's dispersed support and the intensive smear campaign against Yushchenko, he managed to win the first round, receiving 39.87% of the vote, while Yanukovych secured 39.32%. This narrow margin created a tense atmosphere ahead of the second round, held on November 21, 2004. The official results of the second round declared Yanukovych the winner, sparking mass protests known as the Orange Revolution. Ukrainian citizens believed the second round had been rigged. Over half a million demonstrators gathered in Kyiv's city center to protest the fraudulent

election. The protesters, creating the so-called “orange tent city,” aimed to force a repeat of the second round of the presidential election. The situation was further exacerbated by President Putin’s early congratulations to Yanukovich before the official results were announced. On November 27, 2004, Ukraine’s Verkhovna Rada annulled the results of the second round of the presidential election. Subsequently, the Supreme Court also declared the results invalid and scheduled a new second round for December 26, 2004. In this repeated second round, Yushchenko won (Felshtinsky & Stanchev, 2015).

Despite support from former Ukrainian President Kuchma and Russian President Putin, Yanukovich failed to secure the presidency. This failure demonstrated the independence of Ukraine’s new president, Yushchenko, from the Kremlin. The defeat of the pro-Russian candidate led to a significant cooling of relations between Russia and Ukraine. Although Ukraine made several gestures towards Russia following the Orange Revolution (e.g., Prime Minister Tymoshenko, one of the revolution’s leaders, halted efforts to join NATO), diplomatic relations with Russia did not improve.

Yushchenko repeatedly emphasized that his foreign policy would be pro-European, aiming for Ukraine to become at least an associated member of the European Union, with the prospect of full membership in the future. Yushchenko began his presidency with bureaucratic changes, including reducing the administrative apparatus and replacing all regional administration heads, leading to the dismissal of 18,000 officials – an unprecedented change on such a scale. Many of the fired officials had pro-Russian sympathies, which quickly provoked a reaction from Moscow. The first major confrontation occurred after the appointment of Tymoshenko as prime minister of Ukraine – Russia initiated a criminal investigation against her for corruption, conducting an international inquiry. In the autumn of 2005, Russia began negotiations with Ukraine over fuel and gas supplies. After Yanukovich’s election loss, Gazprom decided to increase the price of gas nearly fivefold, from \$50 to \$230 per 1,000 cubic meters (by comparison, Belarus paid \$43, and other European countries paid an average of \$120). The Ukrainian economy was highly dependent on trade with Russia, and this conflict slowed economic growth (from 12.1% to 2.6% by the end of 2005) and raised inflation to 14% (data for the end of 2005). Another move was to limit gas transit through Ukraine, affecting gas flow to Europe and straining the Kyiv government economically (Chojnowski & Bruski, 2006).

Yushchenko’s presidency did not meet the expectations of Ukrainian society. The biggest issue was the internal disunity within the victorious opposition and

numerous conflicts, particularly between Yushchenko, Tymoshenko, the head of Presidential Administration Oleksandr Zinchenko, and National Security and Defense Council Secretary Poroshenko. Russia benefitted the most from these internal conflicts, eventually positioning Yanukovich, its previous presidential candidate, as prime minister. Ukraine's economic problems and scandals involving the leaders of the Orange Revolution (e.g., Tymoshenko accused of financial malfeasance, and Yushchenko accused of illegal campaign financing) led to a decline in trust in Kyiv's government. Additionally, infighting and a lack of cooperation among pro-Western parties contributed to the rise in support for pro-Russian parties (Serczyk, 2009).

Evaluating Yushchenko's presidency in terms of dependence on the Kremlin, it is evident that he sought greater independence compared to previous Ukrainian presidents. However, he did not achieve the full rapprochement with the European Union that most Ukrainians had hoped for. Yushchenko failed to reform Ukraine's political system or reduce corruption effectively. During his tenure, party-oligarchic structures in Ukraine became even more entrenched.

Victor Yanukovich: From election victory to escape to Russia

The first round of the 2010 presidential election took place on January 17, 2010. The main contenders were Viktor Yanukovich on one side and the sitting president Viktor Yushchenko, Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko, Arseniy Yatsenyuk, Petro Symonenko, and Serhiy Tihipko on the other. Yanukovich won the first round with 35.32% of the vote, with Tymoshenko, who received 25.05%, becoming his main competitor in the second round (Yushchenko garnered only 5.45% of the vote). In the second round, Yanukovich triumphed with 48.95%, while Tymoshenko received 45.47%. Although Tymoshenko raised allegations of electoral fraud, the Supreme Court of Ukraine upheld the election results, and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and international observers raised no significant objections (Felshtinsky & Stanchev, 2015).

Yanukovich's election marked a return to authoritarian rule similar to that of Leonid Kuchma, with closer ties to Russia and a reduction in Ukraine's engagement with European integration. A key example of Yanukovich's dependence on Russia was the signing of the Kharkiv agreements on April 21, 2010, which regulated the stationing of Russia's Black Sea Fleet in Crimea and the conditions for gas transit through Ukraine. This agreement was signed without prior consultation with Ukraine's parliament or public and violated diplomatic

norms, as the document was drafted solely in Russian. The deal set the price for gas delivered from Russia to Ukraine and the conditions for its transit to Western Europe, but most importantly, it extended the Black Sea Fleet's presence in Crimea by 25 years, until 2042, and allowed Russia to modernize its fleet (Górska & Wołowski, 2010). This was a violation of the Ukrainian Constitution, which prohibits foreign military bases on its territory (Art. 17 of the Ukrainian Constitution). For Russia, the agreement was crucial as it maintained strategic dominance in the Black Sea. Despite Yanukovich's signature, the agreement still required ratification by Ukraine's parliament. The process was contentious – opposition MPs blocked the podium, threw eggs at the speaker, and used smoke bombs, yet on April 27, 2010, the agreement was ratified. In the Russian parliament, the ratification proceeded without issue.

Yanukovich's term began with purges in parliament and state administration, including the arrest of Tymoshenko on charges of financial malfeasance. This enabled Yanukovich to pursue a pro-Russian policy that aligned with the interests of financial-industrial clans and his own. Although Yanukovich visited EU countries and suggested a desire to join the organization, he took no concrete steps in this direction. A significant step was supposed to be the signing of an Association Agreement with the EU, which the pro-Western segment of Ukrainian society hoped for. However, under pressure from Russia, Yanukovich abruptly broke off negotiations and, just days before the scheduled signing of the agreement (November 21, 2013), announced that he would not sign it. This decision triggered mass social protests, which grew into the movement known as Euromaidan.

Citizens took to the streets of Kyiv to protest against Yanukovich. The president, along with the pro-Russian Party of Regions, attempted to suppress the protests by force. On November 30, 2013, the special police unit Berkut, using live ammunition, was ordered to stop the demonstrators, but this had the opposite effect – the number of protesters in Kyiv grew. On December 1, 2013, about 800,000 people gathered in Maidan Square. The conflict escalated between February 18 and 20, 2014, when Berkut clashed with demonstrators, resulting in hundreds of deaths and injuries. Under public pressure and growing outrage, Yanukovich announced early elections. On February 22, 2014, the Ukrainian parliament removed Yanukovich from office, and he fled to Russia. The conflict between Ukraine and Russia intensified. Russian authorities took measures to maintain influence in Ukraine, this time through the annexation of Crimea and the instigation of fighting in the Donbas region (Felshtinsky & Stanchev, 2015).

Petro Poroshenko: A president facing open conflict with the Russian Federation

The loss of Crimea to Russia and the ongoing fighting in the country's east led Ukrainian society to decisively reject the idea of a pro-Russian president. Against this backdrop, the election campaign began, with Petro Poroshenko emerging as the main candidate. The election took place on May 25, 2014, and Poroshenko decisively won the first round with 54.7% of the vote, more than four times the support of his main rival, Yulia Tymoshenko. Commentators noted that Poroshenko enjoyed widespread popularity and had received a strong mandate to lead the country. In the eyes of most Ukrainians, he was seen as the only leader capable of halting the deepening economic and political crisis (Wierzbowska-Miazga & Olszański, 2014). Radosław Sikorski, then Poland's Minister of Foreign Affairs, described Poroshenko's victory as a defeat for Russia.

Poroshenko's presidency was marked by military conflict with Russia and efforts to increase Ukraine's independence from the Kremlin. As Russia lost influence in Ukraine, it took unprecedented actions such as annexing Crimea through a referendum and supporting rebels in eastern Ukraine, particularly in the Donbas region. In response to these aggressive moves, Poroshenko refused to recognize Crimea's independence and its annexation by Russia and launched "anti-terrorist" operations in eastern Ukraine. Poroshenko appealed to the Ukrainian and international communities for support in resisting Russian aggression, which led to the imposition of economic sanctions on Russia. He also sought to accelerate Ukraine's integration with the EU and NATO (Jureńczyk, 2019). However, the promised political renewal in Ukraine did not materialize. Poroshenko failed to dismantle the "old" system, and his presidency reinforced the country's oligarchic structures. He was accused of economic and political malfeasance, which contributed to a decline in his popularity. His term ended in 2019, with the presidential election held on March 31 of that year. The first round was decisively won by Volodymyr Zelensky, a 41-year-old actor and representative of the Servant of the People party, with 30.24% of the vote. His main rival, the incumbent Poroshenko, received 15.95%. In the second round, held on April 21, 2019, Zelensky won a landslide victory with 73.22% of the vote, while Poroshenko garnered 24.45%.

Conclusions

An analysis of the presidencies from Kravchuk to Poroshenko clearly shows that the Kremlin had a significant influence on Ukrainian politics, shaping the country's political direction. Kravchuk, as the first president of independent Ukraine, attempted to pursue policies to reduce Ukraine's dependence on the Kremlin, but his efforts were constrained by Ukraine's strong economic and political dependence on Russia and the difficult economic situation following systemic changes. His successor, Kuchma, after initially declaring greater cooperation with the West, especially during his second term, fully shifted to a pro-Russian stance, deepening Ukraine's dependence on Russia. His actions contributed to the rise of oligarchic structures, which continue to affect Ukrainian politics today. The next president, Yushchenko – elected after the Orange Revolution – despite attempts to strengthen Ukraine's sovereignty and increase cooperation with the West, failed to fully eliminate Russian influence. This was due to internal conflicts (a lack of parliamentary support) and pressure from the Kremlin (especially on economic issues), which led to a sharp decline in public trust and his defeat in the next presidential election.

Yushchenko's successor and Orange Revolution rival, Yanukovych, unequivocally sided with Russia, leading to a deepening political crisis. His presidency ended abruptly with his flight to Russia, driven by the mass protests in Kyiv, known as Euromaidan. Yanukovych's dramatic departure escalated the conflict with Russia, resulting in Ukraine losing part of its territory to the Russian Federation. The next president, Poroshenko, who took office during open conflict with Russia, sought to bring Ukraine closer to the West. However, his efforts were hampered by the ongoing war, pressure from Russia, and internal problems such as corruption and oligarchic influence.

In summary, the history of Ukraine's presidents from Kravchuk to Poroshenko demonstrates that the Kremlin had a substantial impact on Ukrainian politics, consistently seeking to block the country's aspirations for full independence and integration with the West. Ukraine's pursuit of closer ties with the West remains one of the main reasons for the ongoing armed conflict with Russia. Ukraine's future depends on its ability to ultimately free itself from Russian influence, which will require not only internal consolidation but also strong international support.

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Między wpływami Kremla a niepodległością Ukrainy: prezydenci Ukrainy od Krawczuka do Poroszenki

STRESZCZENIE Artykuł analizuje wpływ Kremla na prezydentów Ukrainy od Łeonida Krawczuka do Petra Poroszenki, ukazując skomplikowane relacje i próby uniezależnienia się od Rosji. Po upadku Związku Radzieckiego Ukraina zmagala się z budowaniem niepodległości w obliczu silnych nacisków ze strony Kremla. Każdy z prezydentów miał różne podejście do relacji z Rosją. Krawczuk próbował balansować między współpracą a niezależnością – co było niezwykle trudnym zadaniem dla nowopowstałego państwa. Leonid Kuczma, po początkowej chęci wobec budowania pozytywnych relacji z Zachodem, w drugiej kadencji zwrócił się mocno w kierunku Kremla. Jego prezydentura była naznaczona korupcją i wzmocnieniem oligarchicznych struktur. Wiktor Juszczenko, wybrany na prezydenta po Pomarańczowej Rewolucji, starał się uniezależnić Ukrainę, mimo wewnętrznych konfliktów i nacisków Kremla. Wiktor Janukowycz zacieśnił relacje z Moskwą, co doprowadziło do masowych protestów społecznych podczas Euromajdanu i jego ucieczki do Rosji. Petro Poroszenko, który objął urząd w czasach kryzysu, starał się umocnić niezależność Ukrainy i zacieśnił relacje z Zachodem. Mimo pewnych sukcesów jego kadencja również była naznaczona trudnościami związanymi z korupcją i oligarchicznymi strukturami. Obecna sytuacja, pełnoskalowa wojna rozpoczęta przez Federację Rosyjską w 2022 r., pokazuje, że wyzwania związane z utrzymaniem suwerenności i integralności terytorialnej Ukrainy są nadal aktualne. Dążenie

Ukrainy do pełnej niezależności od rosyjskich wpływów pozostaje priorytetem, wymaga konsekwentnych działań i międzynarodowego wsparcia.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE Ukraina, Rosja, prezydent, niezależność, oligarchia

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