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Ukraine Has Not Yet Died: The Path to Ukrainian Rejuvenation

In 2014, just a little over 20 years after gaining independence from the Soviet Union, revolution swept through Ukraine once more. This blossoming republic saw its pro-Russian president overthrown whilst the Russian Federation moved into the Ukrainian peninsula of Crimea amidst the chaos, an action that Ukraine is still fighting a war against today. Furthermore, Ukraine is plagued with rampant corruption, crumbling infrastructure, and chronic population decline. With all of this in mind, it may come to a great shock that Ukraine is exceptionally poised for a revitalization of its economy, agriculture, and government services.

Ukraine is situated next to Belarus in the north and Russia to the east; the Dnieper River runs through central Ukraine before draining out to the Black Sea in the south. Ukraine's population numbers 42 million total, 29 million living in rural areas and 13 million in urban cities. Ukrainians who are able often choose to emigrate, with a high preference for EU nations (Sutela, Pekka. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, *The Underachiever: Ukraine's Economy Since 1991*, 2012). Ukraine possesses a well trained labor force of 17.3 million. This can be further broken down by occupation with 67.8% of workers employed in the service industry, 26.5% in the industrial sector, and the remaining 5.8% in the agricultural field. For contrast, 10.9% of Americans work in agriculture (US Department of Agriculture, *Ag. and Food Sectors and the Economy*, 2021). Although economic diversity is vital to any nation, I believe this contrast demonstrates the potential of growth to Ukraine's agricultural sector. As of November 2019, the average wage of a full-time employee is the equivalent of \$458.40 a month; this differs largely depending on location. For example the average in Ukraine's richest region, Kiev, is \$685.80. The lowest is in the Chernihiv region, with an average wage of \$357.80 a month (State Statistics Service of Ukraine, 2021).

An important industry in Ukraine is agriculture, 70% of the land in Ukraine is agricultural land, a total of 103 million acres. Ukraine contains 30% of the world's black soil. Ukrainian black soil specifically is one of the most fertile in the world and covers two-thirds of all of Ukraine. The Ukrainian agro-industrial complex makes up a quarter of Ukraine's GDP (United Nations Development Programme, 2015). Its primary exports are wheat and corn. Ukrainian wheat is highly competitive in global food markets as a result of its lower prices, exchange rates, and geographical location (United States Department of Agriculture, *Ukraine Grain Transportation*, 2020).

As of 2020, the average household size in Ukraine is 2.5. The average housing consumption per person in Ukraine is 23.3 meters cubed. This average is comparable to other former eastern bloc nations like Belarus (23.6) and the Czech Republic (28.7); however, it is still significantly behind nations like Germany (41.9) and the Netherlands (41) (United Nations, *Country Profiles on Housing and Land Management-Ukraine*, 2013).

A 2018 report by the US Foreign Agricultural Service found that the average Ukrainian spent half of their paycheck on food. Furthermore, Ukrainian consumers tend to shop for food at supermarkets rather than traditional markets; 55% of consumers noted that supermarkets are their primary channel for grocery shopping. However, this still leaves a sizable minority of Ukrainians choosing to shop at local food markets instead of the supermarkets, an especially important statistic regarding the regions of Ukraine directly affected by the Russo-Ukrainian War.

In areas affected by conflict, particularly rural regions, many supermarkets close early due to the fear of being caught during active conflict. Supermarkets in such areas require customers to request items rather than purchase them directly as a result of limited supply. The situation is more dire in the Ukrainian countryside with war forcing people to travel under dangerous conditions just to search for markets selling food. In areas such as the Donbass region of Ukraine which sees the most fighting, many people note issues of electricity, gas, and heating shortages along with a lack or absence of kitchen and freezers to preserve food.

Outside the realm of conflict, there are numerous internal issues in Ukraine. Although spending is more in proportion to GDP (6%) than most European countries, the Ukrainian educational system consists of lack of transparency, academic corruption, crumbling infrastructure in most rural schools, outdated teaching methods, etc. For a nation that spends so much money on education, it may be perplexing that the Ukrainian educational system has such issues. This is a result of the inefficiency of how the money is used, a problem rooted in how Ukraine administers its schools. Ukraine funds its schools through regional state level governments rather than local (Kahkonen, Satu. World Bank Group, *Why Ukraine's Education System is Not Sustainable*, 2018). This incentivized small towns to keep inefficient schools open since they are not responsible for its finances, no matter how economically burdening for the regional government. These schools, often located in rural areas, sometimes do not have bathrooms and not nearly enough students to serve value to their community.

The Ukrainian healthcare system has its fair share of disappointing shortcomings. Ukraine spends 7% of its national budget on healthcare, on par when compared with other Eastern European nations. Its issues range from the everpresent corruption, the inaccessibility of some hospitals, privatization of treatments, artificially controlled prices of medicine, underpaid doctors, etc. These issues are exacerbated with how the Ukrainian government handles the leadership position of Minister of Health, which oversees the nominally public healthcare system of Ukraine. Firstly, a candidate for Minister of Health is appointed by the prime minister. Crucially, however, is that the Minister of Health can be dismissed anytime by the president. As a result, any Minister who wishes to reform the problematic healthcare system of Ukraine often finds themselves influenced by subversive political activities (Mendel, Iuliia. Politico, *In Ukraine Healthcare Is Free, Except When It's Not*, 2017). Most notably this occurred in 2019 when Ulana Suprun, a reformist Minister of Health, found most of her reforms rolled back when she was replaced by a conservative minister after just three years of service; three years being one of the longest terms a Minister of Health consecutively served in Ukraine.

My proposal and changes to Ukrainian policy starts with the public sectors that most affect everyday Ukrainians, namely education and healthcare. A revitalization of the Ukrainian education system starts with not necessarily more funding, but allocating the pre-existing funds much more efficiently. This starts with the administration of public schools moved from the responsibility of regional governments to municipal ones. Although financial reform is not guaranteed, it highly incentivizes communities to cut costs. However, in order to maintain the standard of education, I propose increasing teacher salaries to both increase teacher morale and their social status within Ukrainian society. Ukraine sports a student to faculty ratio of 9; this is not an achievement but rather a symptom of Ukraine's mismanagement of resources and failure to adjust for the necessary amount of teachers according to the number of students. Lastly, I propose changes to be made on how students are taught. It is common to find schools where rote recitation and lack of student engagement is common, resulting in students unable to apply knowledge learned in school to real-life vocational activities. Furthermore, this problem is worsened as a result of the outdated textbooks which do nothing to encourage student curiosity. As a result, my proposal also calls for the updating of teaching methods - with the use of technology in the classroom leading the forefront of this modernization - the diversion of funds for new, up-to-date textbooks and in-school vocational training.

Equal in importance is the Ukrainian healthcare system. As mentioned, corruption and privatization of treatment is becoming more common. This was not always the state of medicinal affairs in Ukraine. Before the collapse of the U.S.S.R. Ukraine boasted a single-payer healthcare system and high salaries and prestige for doctors. This could be interpreted as disappointing for such a high-potential nation like Ukraine, or can be seen as evidence of what was and still is achievable for this nation. The corruption that followed was worsened as a result of the prices of medicines and medical equipment being controlled by head doctors, with prices changing on no more than self-interested whims (Twigg, Judy. Atlantic Council, *Ukraine's Healthcare System is in Critical Condition Again*, 2020).

I propose for the Ukrainian Ministry of Health to have more oversight of such prices and for official investigations into these practices. Transparency could be implemented by shifting commercial responsibility of medicines and medical equipment from private shell companies to public departments in the Ministry of Health. Pre-existing options within the Ministry of Health include the Department of Pharmaceutical Activity, Department of Accounting and Financial Reporting, and/or the Department of Licensing and Quality Control of Medical Care. Ideally, these reforms would result in affordable prices of medicine and medical equipment, as it was in Ukraine thirty years ago.

Importantly, the salaries of doctors must be raised from their \$250-300 a month pay. Increased salaries would also help safeguard against threats of corruption. These reforms, if implemented, would be under the oversight of the Ukrainian Minister of Health. Although, as mentioned, this position is heavily subject to political influence and ministers often do not keep their position for more than two years. I propose that the Ukrainian parliament pass legislation to increase the term length of a Minister of Health by tying their terms with that of the Prime Minister (five years) who initially appointed them. Crucially, I also propose that changes be made so the Minister of Health would not be subject to the possibility of dismissal by the President, but rather the parliament. This would result in more effective healthcare reforms for Ukraine.

As a fundamental part of Ukraine my proposal also aims to improve agricultural efficiency. Ukraine is blessed with large amounts of highly fertile black soil and a strong agricultural base which it could utilize as leverage to gain admittance into the European Union. Not only would this provide trade benefits for both parties but it would also act as a step forward and away from Ukraine's Russian-influenced history. These past years have proven to be a critical political juncture for Ukraine; joining the European Union would provide social and economic stability for Ukraine in such a tumultuous time for this young nation.

For example, the national currency of Ukraine has been decreasing in value ever since Ukrainian independence. This has coalesced into weaker government action, low foreign investment, and low consumer confidence to the extent that most Ukrainians opt to use the US Dollar for most of their transactions. Officially adopting the Euro would provide an economic bedrock for the Ukrainian economy and its expansion. Additionally, this would further integrate the Ukrainian market with the international economy and EU-member states (Europa, *What the Euro Does For Its Citizens*, 2020). This would supplement Ukraine's top strength: agricultural trade. The EU has strict food standards and environmental regulations. The Ukrainian government is already expanding its austerity measures in order to have its domestic producers reach the food standards necessary to break into the EU grain and animal products market (Burakovsky, Igor. United Nations Development Programme for Europe, *Ukraine-Trade and Human Development*, 2011). A tightening of regulation is nothing new for food producers within Ukraine, joining the EU would streamline the process while also providing trade benefits.

The most crucial issue thus far to be addressed is the impact of the Russo-Ukrainian War. Ukraine found itself losing crucial urban regions to Russia both in the south and to the east. Apart from losing the valuable peninsula of Crimea itself, the Donbass region which contained 4 million Ukrainian citizens has also been conquered by Russian forces. My proposal calls on the United Nations' World Food Programme, to provide food and other means to those living in areas of conflict as a result of the

Russo-Ukrainian war. This aid would be specifically targeted to those living in the Donbass region which has seen the fiercest fighting and lowest amount of formal integration into Russia.

Specifically, this conflict's most drastic impact can be seen among the subsistence farmers in eastern Ukraine. The conflict has forced farmers to migrate, kill livestock due to no animal feed, plant less food, and enter inescapable financial debt (United Nations, *Desperate Farm Families in Eastern Ukraine Forced into "difficult choices" to survive*, 2015). This foreign aid would be especially directed to these subsistence farmers. Further action may also be warranted by the international community if such problems persist as a result of conflict. To believe Ukraine's current geopolitics is irrelevant to food security would be naive. Although beyond the scope of my proposals, the effects of the Crimean Conflict on Ukraine's agricultural capabilities cannot be understated and must be addressed.

In 1991, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics collapsed and Ukraine secured its independence. What Ukraine may not have been prepared for was for its healthcare and education systems to collapse with it. Corruption is rampant in nearly every sector of Ukraine. War consumes Ukraine's eastern border as Ukraine battles its former ally, and yet after seven years of ceaseless war, Ukraine still stands sovereign and independent. Furthermore, its 2014 revolution saw democratic reforms sweep across Ukraine as foreign investment poured into its grain industry. Ukraine has had an incredibly unfortunate past, rocked with violence and foreign rule. The very fact that Ukraine is a democratic republic while its neighbors (Belarus and Russia) have fallen victim to the cycle of being ruled by oppressive governments shows the exceptional nature of Ukraine. Its percentage of total black soil relative to agrarian land is unmatched and Ukraine is still one of the top grain exporters to Europe in spite of agricultural giants like China and the United States of America. Given proper reforms and implementation, Ukraine could realize its full potential as the breadbasket of Europe while also providing sufficient healthcare and education to its citizens. Since the 20th century alone, Ukraine has faced a civil war, two world wars, nearly a century of authoritarian rule, two genocides, and most recently a revolution. And yet Ukraine has always persevered as stated in its national anthem: "Ukraine has not yet died, nor her glory, nor her freedom." Its people are diligent, farms productive, soil fertile, and potential boundless.

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