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COMMENTARY: Ukrainian Domestic and U.S. Foreign Affairs—Regarding a 2021 Washington Debate and the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Regime

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A think-tank debate in the United States that emerged in the summer of 2021 illustrates challenges to Western policy toward Eastern Europe in general, and to U.S. policy toward Ukraine in particular. Stereotypes of a post-Soviet Ukraine characterized by ultra-nationalism and authoritarianism spread by Russian propaganda resonate not only in leftist but also in other political circles. This commentary responds to two recent contributions by Ted Galen Carpenter calling for an end to U.S. support for Ukraine.

Keywords: Ukraine, U.S. Foreign Policy, Eastern Europe, Propaganda, Russia, Non-proliferation, Nuclear Nonproliferation, Geopolitics, Post-communist Politics, Ultra-nationalism, Authoritarianism, Ted Carpenter.

Comentario: Los asuntos internos de Ucrania y los asuntos exteriores de Estados Unidos: A propósito de un debate en Washington en 2021 y el régimen de no proliferación nuclear

Un debate de un grupo de expertos en los Estados Unidos que surgió en el verano de 2021 ilustra los desafíos a la política occidental hacia Europa del Este en general y la política estadounidense hacia Ucrania en particular. Los estereotipos de una Ucrania postsoviética caracterizada por el ultranacionalismo y el autoritarismo difundidos por la propaganda rusa resuenan no solo en los círculos de izquierda

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sino también en otros círculos políticos. Este ensayo examina críticamente una contribución reciente de Ted Galen Carpenter que pide el fin del apoyo de Estados Unidos a Ucrania.

Palabras clave: Ucrania, Política exterior de Estados Unidos, Europa del Este, Propaganda, Rusia, No proliferación nuclear.

评论文章。乌克兰国内和美国外交事务——关于2021年华盛顿辩论和核不扩散制度的 关于2021年的华盛顿辩论和核不扩散制度

2021年夏天在美國出現的一場智庫辯論說明了西方對東歐政策的總體挑戰，特別是美國對烏克蘭的政策。俄羅斯宣傳所傳播的以極端民族主義和威權主義為特徵的後蘇聯烏克蘭的刻板印像不僅在左翼而且在其他政界引起了共鳴。這篇文章批判性地考察了泰德·蓋倫·卡彭特（Ted Galen Carpenter）最近的一篇呼籲美國停止對烏克蘭的支持的文章。

關鍵詞：烏克蘭，美國外交政策，東歐，宣傳，俄羅斯，核不擴散。

Over the last eight years, Ukraine has—in connection with its pro-Western Euromaidan Revolution of 2013-14, as well as following territorial conflicts with Russia—become a major issue in recent U.S. and European Union foreign policies. Today, Ukraine’s domestic and foreign affairs are having geopolitical repercussions that reach well beyond Eastern Europe, especially regarding its confrontation with Moscow and ongoing Europeanization. These repercussions affect the recent tensions between Russia and the West, transatlantic relations, European integration, the work of the UN Security Council, international energy affairs, and other issues. Given this, it is unsurprising that the temperature of controversies about Western policies toward Ukraine had risen already before the major escalation in Russia’s war against Ukraine on February 24, 2022. This concerns not least the debate about which approach Washington should take toward Kyiv.

The Start of an Odd Discussion

On May 30, 2021, *The National Interest* (TNI) published a harsh critique of U.S. support for Ukraine, by Ted Galen Carpenter (2021a), under the title

“[Ukraine’s Accelerating Slide into Authoritarianism](#).” Carpenter’s text not only disarranged a number of facts about Ukraine. It is a strange statement in view of the author’s listed affiliation—Washington, D.C.’s famous right-libertarian Cato Institute. The attack that Carpenter presented on the (certainly imperfect) Ukrainian state is typical of many left-wing writers rather than of conservative authors, and of Kremlin-linked rather than independent U.S. commentators. The author alleged that Ukrainian politics is beset by deeply anti-democratic and ultra-nationalist tendencies. These putative features, Carpenter (2021a) argued, make this post-Soviet state unfit for U.S. support. Why the Cato Institute’s fellow, who seems to have neither much interest in nor ever published any research on Ukraine, came out with a categorical judgement on this country remains a mystery.

Left-wingers and pro-Putin observers around the world dislike post-Soviet Ukraine because its recent revolutions and subsequent governments have been too pro-Western and too pro-American. Moreover, many leftists are confused that the manifestly anti-imperial nationalism of the Orange Revolution of 2004 and Euromaidan Uprising of 2013-14 was *not* rejecting U.S. or/and Western hegemony.² Instead, Ukraine’s fierce resistance against foreign domination was, and is, entirely focused on the imperialism of Moscow, and sees the United States as an ally rather than threat in defending Ukrainian independence. Today, Putin’s Russia is one of the Northern hemisphere’s few remaining places that has continued successfully to withstand the promotion of liberal democracy by Washington and its allies across the world.

Above all, for over eight years, Ukraine has been fighting a multi-faceted war for survival against the world’s largest nuclear-weapon country and second-largest conventional military power. Putin’s Russia is attempting to bring down the Ukrainian state with a shrewd combination of military, paramilitary, and nonmilitary means. Curiously, this aspect is entirely missing from Carpenter’s depiction of Ukraine—an omission also customarily found in the Kremlin media’s portrayal of Ukraine. The Cato Institute’s TNI author instead made accusations against post-Soviet Ukraine that repeat arguments proposed by numerous leftist and pro-Putinist commentators across the world since 2014, if not before. Carpenter (2021a) painted a dark picture of allegedly rising Ukrainian authoritarianism, oppression, and ultra-nationalism. The same kind of caricatures have been spread via the Kremlin’s massive propaganda campaign against Ukraine for many years (see Heinemann-Grüder 2015).

Carpenter (2021a) was especially unhappy about two former U.S. ambassadors to Ukraine, Geoffrey Pyatt and William Taylor, who have supported Ukraine’s assertion of national sovereignty and demonstrative turn to the West. What needs to be added to Carpenter’s critique is that all other U.S. ambassadors to Ukraine over the last 30 years—from the first envoy, Roman Popadiuk, to the most recent

2 For an in-depth analysis, see Marples and Mills (2015).

and now most famous American diplomat representing Washington in Kyiv, Marie Yovanovitch—could be accused of similarly “biased” attitudes toward Ukraine. A main reason behind the U.S. ambassadors’ differences with Carpenter seems to be that, by virtue of their professional specialization, they know a great deal about Eastern Europe. Carpenter, in contrast, has seemingly scant sustained interest in the post-Soviet region—at least not one demonstrated by his previous publications. He reproduces, in his TNI article, distorted images the exact origins of which one can only speculate about. This commentary endeavors to dispel those distortions on a number of fronts.

Ukraine’s Imperfect Democratic State

Ukraine is no ideal liberal democracy. In Freedom House’s (2021) latest rating of the world’s countries according to their political and civil liberties, Ukraine received only 60 out of 100 possible points. It thus lags far behind Norway, Finland, and Sweden, the only three countries assigned 100 points in this democracy ranking. Carpenter (2021a) indicates some possible reasons for Ukraine’s unsatisfactory result correctly.

Yet within the peculiar regional and historical context of the post-Soviet space, Ukraine is rather more democratic than one would expect in view of its location and past. By comparison, in 2020, the equally post-Soviet, Eastern Slavic, and Christian Orthodox Republic of Belarus and Russian Federation received, respectively, only 11 and 20 out of 100 points in the Freedom House (2021) ranking. In the Freedom House (2021) table, with 60 points Ukraine is designated as relatively free and democratic. Its mass media and political landscape are distorted by oligarchic influence, yet not dominated by a national autocrat, as in other post-Soviet states (Umland 2009). Ukraine’s electoral campaigns suffer from distortions and manipulations (Fedorenko, Rybiy, and Umland 2016), but Ukraine’s citizens have a real choice, and their votes are not rigged on a significant scale. Ukraine has a number of far-right parties, but they are weaker than in many other European countries and not represented in the national parliament, as I discuss in more detail shortly. Ukraine is infamous for its corruption, but has, in recent years, introduced a number of new laws and institutions designed to prevent graft. Ukraine is not a member of NATO and the EU, but wants to enter them and is working toward accession (Vereshchuk and Umland 2019; Klimkin and Umland 2020).

Good reasons exist to criticize, for instance, Ukraine’s dysfunctional presidentialism, underdeveloped party-system, or incomplete cooperation with the International Criminal Court—a topic dealt with in TNI (Polunina and Umland 2016). Yet these are neither prominent themes in Russian propaganda nor issues that Carpenter raises. The Kremlin rarely speaks about such problems as they often also or even more apply to Russia. Carpenter does not mention these and similar topics, perhaps, because he does not read Ukrainian. Given the contents of his arti-

cles on Ukraine (Carpenter 2021a, 2021b, 2021c), he may not have even read much of the widely available English-language scholarly literature on post-Euromaidan Ukraine (e.g., in chronological order, Matsusato 2005; Likhachev 2013a; Grant 2015; Marples and Mills 2015; Bertelsen 2016; Grigas 2016; Kowal, Mink, and Reichardt 2019; Pifer 2017; Wynnyckij 2019; Averre and Wolczuk 2019; Hauter 2021).

Responses to Carpenter in Moscow, Washington, and Elsewhere

Carpenter's Ukraine article in TNI (2021a) triggered multiple reactions within the U.S. and beyond. The first came from Moscow, although Russia was only mentioned *en passant* in Carpenter's text. A day after the text had appeared in the United States, on May 31, 2021, the influential Russian state-owned online resource *inoSMI* (Foreign Mass Media) published a [Russian translation of Carpenter's article](#). The *inoSMI* editor introduced Carpenter's article, stating:

U.S. officials love to portray Ukraine as 'a courageous democracy that reflects the threat of aggression from an authoritarian Russia.' However, the idealized picture created by Washington has never really matched the darker reality, and the gap between the two, with Ukraine sliding increasingly toward authoritarianism, has now become a real chasm, the article notes. (Karpenter 2021a)

During June 2021, an interactive debate regarding Carpenter's (2021a) attack on Ukraine developed. In TNI, a response to Carpenter's initial article was published by [Doug Klain \(2021\) of the Atlantic Council](#). A fortnight later, my rebuttal to Carpenter appeared in the Atlantic Council's *Ukraine Alert* (Umland 2021a). In Ukraine, this text was translated into Russian (Umland 2021b) and Ukrainian and republished by the Kyiv website [Gazeta.ua](#). Further responses to Carpenter appeared on the Kyiv resource *Khvyliya* (Wave) in Russian (Umland 2021c), and on Berlin's Center for Liberal Modernity website [Ukraine verstehen \(Understanding Ukraine\)](#) in German (Umland 2021d). On June 28, 2021, Carpenter (2021b) responded to Klain's and my critique of his initial text with a second article entitled "[Why Ukraine Is a Dangerous and Unworthy Ally](#)," again published in the web version of TNI, and subsequently reposted on the [Cato Institute's website](#) (Carpenter 2021c).

While none of the responses to Carpenter were re-published in Russia, his rebuttal to them was again translated by the Kremlin-controlled *inoSMI* (Foreign Mass Media) website within one day. Carpenter's (2021b) new article was reposted in Russian on June 29, 2021 (Karpenter 2021b), and introduced by an *inoSMI* editor, who wrote:

In May [2021], an author of *The National Interest* took the liberty of criticizing the Zelensky regime for its authoritarian tendencies.

In response, the German “Ukrainianist” Andreas Umland and similar ‘Maidanists’ [a term referring to Kyiv’s Independence Square] criticized Carpenter so much that he decided to get even with them in this article “One Cannot Remain Silent: Accusations of ‘Russian disinformation’ are reminiscent of McCarthyism.” The defenders of the Kyiv regime have a powerful lobbying organization behind them, the Atlantic Council.

Also on June 29, 2021, a number of Russian-language outlets published sympathetic reviews of Carpenter’s (2021a) article.³ Among other Kremlin-controlled outlets, the website of the Crimean TV channel *Pervyi sevastopol’skii* (2021b) (“Sevastopol’s First”) briefly reviewed Carpenter’s June article. It had **already earlier introduced** Carpenter’s (2021a) initial May attack (*Pervyj sevastopol’skij* 2021a). Among other Russian-language video resources, the YouTube channels “Oleg Kalugin” and “Kognitive Dissonanz” published Russian audio reviews of Carpenter under the titles “**On Ukraine’s Lobbyists in the US**” (June 29, 2021)⁴ and “**Senior Research Fellow of the Cato Institute [...] Ted Carpenter on Ukraine...**” (July 1, 2021).⁵ Carpenter’s two TNI articles on Ukraine were thereafter discussed and commented on by numerous Russian outlets.⁶

Jon Lerner (2021) of the Hudson Institute reviewed the debate surrounding Ukraine in English on June 28, 2021, in TNI. The English versions of the Russian websites *TopWar.ru* (2021) and *Oreanda.ru*, published brief reviews of Carpenter’s arguments under the titles “**Strategically, Ukraine is a ‘trap’ for the United States**” and “**American Political Scientist Called Ukraine a Dangerous and Unworthy Ally**” (*Oreanda-News* 2021). *Oreanda.ru* remarked that, in Ukraine,

[A] coup in 2014 was carried out with the help of ultra-nationalist and neo-Nazi groups. Carpenter noted that these organizations with their ‘ugly values,’ continue to influence Kiev’s [sic] politics. Supporters of an alliance with Ukraine try not to notice these facts, the article says. The author of the material noted the deplorable situation with human rights and freedoms in this country. (*Oreanda-News* 2021)

3 See for instance, [the major daily Izvestiia](#) (2021) (Messages) as well as the popular [internet resources Lenta.ru](#) (2021) and [Gazeta.ru](#) (Demidov 2021).

4 See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=grnsAlb302A>

5 See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XBYZhM7nsK8>

6 Including [Yandex.ru](#), [RIA.ru](#), [MK.ru](#), [Sputniknews.ru](#), [Regnum.ru](#), [News.ru](#), [Tsargrad.TV](#), [KP.ru](#), [PolitRos.com](#), [Life.ru](#), [Argumenti.ru](#), [Actualcomment.ru](#), [RUnews24.ru](#), [PolitExpert.net](#), [Versia.ru](#), [Ridus.ru](#), [360TV.ru](#), [Riasev.com](#), [Inforeactor.ru](#), [Glas.ru](#), [Riafan.ru](#), [Newinform.com](#), [SMI2.ru](#), [Iar-ex.ru](#), [TopCor.ru](#), [InfoRuss.info](#), [Profnews.ru](#), [Rusevik.ru](#), [Alternatio.org](#), [News2.ru](#), [News22.ru](#), and others.

The Ukrainian news agencies UAzmi.org and UAinfo.org quoted, on July 1, 2021, the prominent [Odesa blogger](#) Oleksandr Kovalenko, who had written on June 30, 2021 about Carpenter's articles on Ukraine. Kovalenko's post noted that:

Interestingly, he used as arguments what we have regularly heard from Russian propagandists since 2014, namely that neo-Nazism is rampant in Ukraine, rights and freedoms of citizens are trampled in Ukraine, there is no freedom of speech in Ukraine, wild monkeys and crocodiles are in Ukraine . . . In fact, a full set of Kremlin fakes about Ukraine is heard from the mouth of an American expert on the pages of a respected and influential publication in the midst of the international exercise SeaBreeze-2021. (Zloy-Odessit 2021)

Ukraine's leading English-language newspaper *Kyiv Post* declared Carpenter—with reference to his articles in *TNI*—[Ukraine's "Foe of the Week"](#) on July 2, 2021 (Ponomarenko 2021).

The varying responses in Russia, the United States, Ukraine, and elsewhere indicate the main issue that many commentators have with Carpenter's (2021a) arguments. What raises eyebrows about his statements on Ukraine is less their critical tone. Rather, it is surprising that Carpenter chose to remark on certain sensitive political topics that have been popular in Russia's state-controlled mass media during the last eight years, if not before. The Cato Institute's researcher makes far-reaching claims about an alleged prevalence of ultra-nationalism and putative slide to authoritarianism in today's Ukraine—claims also pushed daily in Moscow's propaganda channels and by pro-Kremlin public figures for many years. Kremlin-guided newspapers, TV channels, and websites have therefore, and unsurprisingly, eagerly quoted and reviewed Carpenter's two articles. Here comes a senior American commentator working at a leading Washington think-tank publishing in an influential U.S. political magazine and repeating exactly those talking points that the Kremlin has been spreading to justify its thinly veiled hybrid war against Ukraine since 2014 (see Hauter 2021). Carpenter unapologetically calls for an end of Washington's support for Kyiv, with clear reference to the Kremlin's favorite narratives about Ukraine (cf. Bertelsen 2016, 2021). What more could Moscow hope for?

The Problems with Carpenter's Portrayal of Ukraine

Carpenter's insistence on the large role of party-political ultra-nationalism in Ukraine is plainly wrong. Unlike various other European parliaments elected via a proportional representation system, the Ukrainian *Verkhovna Rada* (Supreme Council) has not housed a far-right faction since late 2014 (Umland 2020). It briefly did harbor such a faction for two years only, from 2012 to 2014 (Likhachev

2013a, 2013b, 2013c; Shekhovtsov 2014; Shekhovtsov and Umland 2014).

In 2019, Ukraine’s far right—for the first time in its history and unlike many other nationalists around the world—ventured into parliamentary elections with a united list. As Table 1 shows, despite such rare harmony, the list of the right-wing Freedom Party (which also included representatives of the other two major ultra-nationalist groups, the Right Sector and National Corps) received 2.15 percent of the vote—a result roughly equal to, or even below, what many single far-right parties in European countries receive in national elections (Umland 2020; see also Polyakova 2015, 2014). In the 2019 presidential election, the candidate of the united far right gained 1.62 percent. Those who have followed European elections in recent years may note that radical nationalists, in a number of NATO member countries including some older democracies, have received larger or significantly larger support than the Ukrainian united far right.

During its entire post-Soviet history, Ukraine has indeed—as Carpenter (2021a) indicates—been exceptional in terms of support for ultra-nationalism (Likhachev 2015; Polyakova 2014; Umland 2020). However, Ukraine’s distinction here lies not in the political *strength* of the far right, but in its electoral *weakness*, as demonstrated in Table 1’s list of results of various far-right presidential candidates and parties since the introduction of proportional representation in 1998. The only period during which the far right was able to gain notable nationwide support was during the notorious presidency of Viktor Yanukovich in 2010–14 (Polyakova 2015). Yanukovich both triggered nationalist mobilization with his pro-Russian policies and directly promoted Ukraine’s extreme right, as a convenient sparring partner during elections (Likhachev 2015).

Table 1: Vote Shares of Major Ukrainian Far-right Parties in Presidential Elections (shaded rows) and the Proportional-representation Parts of Parliamentary Elections, 1998–2019 (in percentages)

Party or alliance	Bloc “ <i>Natsionalnyy front</i> ” [National Front] (KUN, UKRP & URP) / URP / KUN	UNA / <i>Pravyi sektor</i> [Right Sector]	Bloc “ <i>Menshe sliv</i> ” [Fewer Words] (VPO-DSU & SNPU) / VOS
National election			
1998 (parliamentary)	2.71 (NF)	0.39 (UNA)	0.16 (MS)
1999 (presidential)			
2002 (parliamentary)		0.04 (UNA)	
2004 (presidential)	0.02 (Kozak, OUN)	0.17 (Korchyns’kyy)	
2006 (parliamentary)		0.06 (UNA)	0.36 (VOS)
2007 (parliamentary)			0.76 (VOS)
2010 (presidential)			1.43 (Tiahnybok)

2012 (parliamentary)		0.08 (UNA-UNSO)	10.44 (VOS)
2014 (presidential)		0.70 (Iarosh)*	1.16 (Tiahnybok)
2014 (parliamentary)	0.05 (KUN)	1.81 (PS)	4.71 (VOS)
2019 (presidential)			1.62 (Koshulyns'kyy)
2019 (parliamentary)			2.15 (VOS)**

Source: Umland (2020).

Notes: * In the 2014 presidential election, Dmytro Iarosh formally ran as an independent candidate but was publicly known as the leader of Pravyi sektor (PS).

** The 2019 Svoboda list was a unified bloc of most of the relevant Ukrainian far-right political parties, but was officially registered only as a VOS list.

Abbreviations: KUN: *Konhres ukrains'kykh natsionalistiv* (Congress of Ukrainian Nationalists); UKRP: *Ukrains'ka konservatyvna respublikans'ka partiia* (Ukrainian Conservative Republican Party); URP: *Ukrains'ka respublikans'ka partiia* (Ukrainian Republican Party); VPO-DSU: *Vseukrainske politychne ob'ednannia "Derzhavna samostiynist' Ukrainy"* (All-Ukrainian Political Union "State Independence of Ukraine"); SNP: *Sotsial-natsionalna partiia Ukrainy* (Social-National Party of Ukraine); OUN: *Orhanizatsiia ukrainskykh natsionalistiv* (Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists); UNA: *Ukrains'ka natsionalna asambleia* (Ukrainian National Assembly); UNSO: *Ukrains'ka narodna samooborona* (Ukrainian National Self-Defense); VOS: *Vseukrains'ke ob'ednannia "Svoboda"* (All-Ukrainian Union Svoboda).

In 2014, something close to panic among many anti-fascists around the world concerning Ukraine's far right generated tension and debate. The Ukrainian ultra-nationalists still had their faction in parliament. They had also been highly visible during the Euromaidan revolution and had entered the first post-Euromaidan government for several months with four ministers (Umland 2020). Above all, the Russian propaganda machine and its various Western branches were, on a daily basis, hammering into worldwide public opinion the idea that former President Yanukovich had been thrown out of power by a "fascist coup" in Kyiv. In fact, Yanukovich only left Kyiv after violence had already ended, and was officially deposed by the same parliament that had earlier supported him. Few non-Russian observers bought the Kremlin's horror story in full. Yet a widespread approach among Western politicians and commentators has since been that there can be no smoke without fire. If Russia is so concerned, ultra-nationalism must be a major problem in Ukraine.

The few academic experts who had researched Ukraine's far right before it became a popular theme and studied it from a cross-cultural perspective warned already in 2014 that the media hype around this topic was misplaced. The Russian historian Viacheslav Likhachev (2015) (Zmina Human Rights Center, Kyiv), Ukrainian political scientist Anton Shekhovtsov (2014) (Center for Democratic Integrity, Vienna), and American sociologist Alina Polyakova (2014, 2015) (Center for European Policy Analysis, Washington, D.C.) had researched pre-Euromaidan

and non-Ukrainian permutations of the far right before 2014. From their historical and comparative points of view, they and others warned early on that alarmism is inappropriate. They spoke out against an emerging mainstream Western opinion that ultra-nationalism is a major issue in Ukraine (Polyakova 2015). Some of these researchers explicitly predicted in 2014 that the prospects of Ukraine's far right are limited. Since then, it has indeed turned out to be again only a tertiary national political force, as it had been before its only notable electoral success (10.44 percent) in 2012 (Umland 2020).

Today, the overall domestic political impact of Ukrainian right-wing extremists is lower than in many far richer and securer countries of Europe. Even the highly publicized participation of many radical nationalists in Ukraine's defense against Russia's hybrid war since 2014 has not had much effect on their electoral fortunes. In 2019, Volodymyr Zelensky with his openly Jewish family background won, against a powerful incumbent, in Ukraine's presidential elections with a result of 73 percent.

This leads to the second main point in Carpenter's (2021a; 2021b) portrayals of Ukraine—allegedly authoritarian tendencies disqualifying Ukraine to receive U.S. support. Here again, Carpenter's argument is questionable. Ukraine has indeed been exceptional, within the post-Soviet context, yet in the opposite sense in which it has been presented in TNI. Already early in its post-Soviet history, Ukraine passed, after its emergence as an independent state in 1991, one of the crucial tests that political scientists use to determine the democratic potential of a nation: is an electorate able to evict a country's top official and most powerful politician via popular vote? In 1994, the Ukrainians deposed their incumbent regent in a presidential election. As a result, Ukraine's first president, Leonid Kravchuk (1991-94), was replaced by its second head of state, Leonid Kuchma (1994-2005). The much older and richer Federal Republic of Germany, founded in 1949, passed this particular democracy test only four years *after* Ukraine. In 1998, the Germans, for the first time in history, deposed a sitting Federal Chancellor, the CDU's Helmut Kohl (1982-98), via parliamentary elections that were won by the SPD. The Social Democrat's then-leader, Gerhard Schroeder (today an employee of the Russian state), became the new head of government until 2005 when he too was deposed via popular vote.⁷ In the 2010 and 2019 national elections, Ukrainian voters again evicted their sitting heads of state with embarrassing results for the two moderately nationalist incumbents. Outgoing Presidents Viktor Yushchenko and Petro Poroshenko manifestly wanted second terms in Ukraine's highest political office. Yet the one-term presidents were spectacularly beaten by opposition candidates, and duly stepped down after their crushing defeats.

7 In 1969, then incumbent CDU/CSU Federal Chancellor Kurt Georg Kiesinger (from 1933 until 1945 a member of Hitler's NSDAP) had been replaced by the SPD's Willi Brandt. Yet, this was the result of a change of Germany's governing coalition and not of that year's parliamentary elections that had been won by Kiesinger's CDU/CSU.

Over the last 30 years, Ukraine has conducted dozens of highly competitive rounds of presidential, parliamentary, and local elections, most of which fulfilled basic democratic standards (Fedorenko, Rybiy, and Umland 2016). This experience is in sharp contrast to almost all other post-Soviet states that had been part of the USSR when it was founded in 1922. What is special about Ukraine, as a successor country of the original Soviet Union, is the opposite of what Carpenter (2021a) asserts: it is not the relative authoritarianism, but the relative *democratism* of Ukraine that is remarkable, and that makes this state more worthy of general Western (not only U.S.) support than other founding republics of the USSR.

Carpenter's (2021b) confusion about these issues became especially visible in [his second TNI article of June 28, 2021](#). He compared various post-Soviet states and concluded that:

Umland stresses that other countries emerging from the former Soviet Union are noticeably more autocratic than Ukraine, noting that [in a [recent Freedom House democracy ranking](#) in which Ukraine had received 60 out of 100 points] Russia received a rating of twenty points and Belarus received eleven points [out of 100 possible 'Global Freedom Scores']. He could have added that Kazakhstan was in the same dismal category with twenty-three points. But no one expects the United States to defend such countries militarily or praise them as vibrant democracies. Umland, Klain, and other fans of Kiev [sic] expect Washington to do both.

However, that is exactly the point: if Russia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan had achieved the same Global Freedom Scores as Ukraine in the quoted Freedom House table, they should be treated like Ukraine. If they were partially free rather than unfree, the three countries would be worth Western support—including assistance by the United States, which received 83 points in the Freedom House (2021) ranking.

What Carpenter Did Not Say

What is most surprising in Carpenter's (2021a; 2021b) articles is not what he writes about, but the preeminent security issue he is entirely silent about: the narrowly understood national interest of the United States in Ukraine's fate as a former atomic power and today a non-nuclear-weapon state. As detailed elsewhere, the United States played a major role in the nuclear disarmament of Ukraine in the early 1990s (Umland 2021d). Together with Moscow, Washington pressured Kyiv at the time to give up a major part of the huge arsenal of weapons of mass destruction that Ukraine had inherited from the USSR when achieving independence in 1991. Russia and the United States also made sure that Ukraine would be deprived of *all* its strategic and tactical nuclear warheads and ammunition (Umland 2021d). Today, Moscow's and Washington's concerted efforts from a quarter of a century ago

look like direct preparations for Russia's annexation of Crimea and for the start of a covert war in Eastern Ukraine in 2014 (see also Vereshchuk and Umland 2019).

The only relevant political concession that Washington made in the 1990s to Kyiv was that it agreed to supplement Ukraine's accession to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) as a non-nuclear-weapon state with the—now infamous—1994 Budapest Memorandum on Security Assurances signed by Ukraine, Russia, the United States, and the United Kingdom.⁸ The latter country also underwrote this fateful document, although Great Britain had not taken part in the trilateral negotiations about Ukraine's nuclear disarmament with the United States and Russia. London supported this deal, however, with its official signature because the UK had, in 1968, been one of the three founding countries of the world-wide non-proliferation regime, together with United States and the USSR (for the history, see Kohler 1972). It has since been, together with Washington and Moscow, a so-called “Depositary Government” of the NPT. At a CSCE summit at Budapest in December 1994, Washington, Moscow, and London assured Kyiv, in connection with its signing of the NPT, of their respect of Ukrainian sovereignty, integrity and borders (see Budjeryn and Umland 2021).

With its attack on Ukraine since 2014, and especially with its overt annexation of Crimea and escalation in 2022 (as well as also with some earlier and other actions), Moscow has for several years been undermining the logic of the non-proliferation regime (see e.g., Grant 2015). It is no longer clear that countries that refrain from possessing, building, or acquiring nuclear weapons would be secure, and especially be protected from countries that do hold atomic arms. Russia's officially permitted possession of nuclear weapons not only gave it a key military advantage *vis-à-vis* Ukraine. It was also the major reason the West—unlike in Yugoslavia, Iraq, or Libya—has not militarily intervened in the Russian-Ukrainian war.

A June 2021 incident with a British war ship near the port of Sevastopol in the Black Sea thus had a more than symbolic meaning.⁹ On a trip from Odesa to Batumi, the UK's destroyer ‘*HMS Defender*’ passed by Crimea without making a detour to avoid Black Sea waters claimed by Russia. This behavior of the UK was a peculiar form of validation of the 1994 Budapest Memorandum and 1968 NPT. Having received Kyiv's permission to pass Ukrainian waters, the ‘*Defender*’ lived up to its name by defending not merely general international law by taking the shortest path from the shores of Southern mainland Ukraine to its destination at Georgia's Black Sea coast. The British vessel also upheld the logic of the non-proliferation regime built on the premise that the borders of non-nuclear-weapon states are as respected as those of the official nuclear-weapon states, under the NPT.

With his explicit demand to end U.S. support for Ukraine, Carpenter (2021a,

8 For further reading on the Budapest Memorandum's conditions, see Galaka (2015) and Budjeryn (2014a). On its breach, see Budjeryn and Umland (2021).

9 For a synopsis of the incident and its implications for maritime and international law, see Serdy (2021).

2021b) calls not only for a betrayal of a beacon of democracy in the post-Soviet space. He also proposes to sweep under the carpet the normative and psychological foundations of humanity's non-proliferation regime. If, after Russia as the legal successor of the USSR, the United States, as a second founding country of the 1968 NPT, signaled to the world that Ukraine's territorial integrity and political sovereignty are of secondary importance, this could have far-reaching consequences for the international order. This is especially so as Kyiv once possessed an atomic arsenal that was significantly larger than those of Great Britain, France, and China combined (Budjeryn and Umland 2017).

The Kremlin's manifest violation of the logic of the non-proliferation regime since 2014 can be seen as a temporary and singular aberration of one guarantor of the NPT from a key international norm (see Budjeryn 2015). A U.S. withdrawal from support of the Ukrainian state, which Carpenter (2021b) proposes, would, however, create a pattern in the behavior of the non-proliferation regime's founders. It could signal to political leaders around the world that international law in general, and the NPT in particular, provide no protection for non-nuclear weapons states. Reliable national security can only be achieved through the production or acquisition of weapons of mass destruction. As the ultimate instruments of deterrence, nuclear warheads may also come in handy, if a government decides—as the Kremlin did in 2014—to annex to its state a neighboring territory and wants to scare away third parties from getting involved.

That Carpenter (2021a, 2021b) does not even mention these issues in his two TNI articles is curious. Insofar as Carpenter presents himself in his articles as concerned about core national interests of the United States, one would think that preventing nuclear proliferation is on his agenda. Yet he did not even take an interest in this topic after it had been explicitly mentioned in the first rebuttals to his initial May 2021 article. In fact, the discussion about the grave repercussions of Moscow's violation of the 1994 Budapest nuclear deal and the resulting implications for U.S. foreign policy has been ongoing for more than eight years. The debate has been taking place not the least on the websites of various Washington, D.C. institutions—from the influential Wilson Center for International Scholars to the oldest U.S. journal of its kind, *World Affairs* (founded in 1837) (see e.g., Budjeryn 2014a, 2016, 2019; Sinovets and Budjeryn 2017; Klimkin and Umland 2020; Umland 2016).

Carpenter departs from these debates in his proposal that the United States joins Russia in this signal to national leaders across the globe that international law will not protect their states. For that would be the conclusion for many politicians: if you want your country's national borders and sovereignty secured, you cannot rely on the NPT. What you rather need is "the bomb" (if you have no reliable ally with such a bomb). Is an encouragement of future nuclear proliferation so irrelevant to American national interests, as the Cato Institute's author, seems to imply?

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