Foreign Aid and the National Interest: Assisting Ukraine’s transition to a Western-oriented liberal democracy

Since Federation Australia has benefited from the Liberal International Order, which is now under threat from strong authoritarian regimes. This submission argues for Australia to support governance, education and democratisation initiatives in Ukraine – a large, emerging Western-oriented liberal democracy – as a bulwark against the rise of authoritarianism and as a trial for similar programs in influential developing countries.

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International Setting

Authoritarianism as a threat to National Interests

The liberal democratic international order within which Australia rapidly developed during the last century is being undermined by the advance of authoritarianism, particularly in major powers such as China and Russia. Their aggressive attitudes against established norms and international institutions have already proven to be against Australia’s national interest.

Australia has begun to reset policy to meet this challenge and in Foreign Aid policy, Australia is addressing China’s mounting interest in its “backyard” with the Pacific Step-Up initiative. We are also active in bringing Russia to account in multilateral organisations and in coalitions to bring the perpetrators of the MH17 tragedy to justice and to withdraw from Crimea and Eastern Ukraine.

Emerging liberal democracies

On their own, local or regional actions will not be sufficient to check authoritarianism. Western countries will need to actively seek opportunities to support potentially influential developing countries to transition to full liberal democracy. They would then be able to defend those principles on the world stage.

However they need to be supported to continue on the path to liberal democracies. Foreign aid has been used successfully to assist countries like Indonesia in establishing democratic and moderate credentials. While there may currently be several other emerging countries worthy of support, it is argued that Ukraine would be the most suitable to test a modest program to fund initiatives in governance, democracy and education.

Ukraine as a bulwark against authoritarian regimes.

Supporting large, developing countries to transition to liberal democracies will be crucial in meeting challenges from rising authoritarianism in the world order.

Most Ukrainians are more western-oriented than almost any other East European country. The people prize their recent democratic advances, extensive civil society and the liberalization of their economy.

Continuing support is needed to protect hard-won freedoms from the pressures of an autocratic regime.
Why Ukraine?

Liberal Democracy credentials

As a society Ukrainians greatly value individual freedoms and property rights, democracy, humanism, the separation of powers and the rule of law – the virtues of a liberal democracy.

During 2019 Ukrainians voted in three national elections, monitored by thousands of international observers. They found that the elections were largely run fairly with no systemic abuses apart from misinformation programs run by Russia. Ukrainians cherish their voting rights and demand free and fair elections.

Since 2013 and the fall of the Yanukovych regime, the Ukrainian people have clearly shown their desire for Euro-Integration: to live in a Western society. The people had protested peacefully to Yanukovych withdrawing, at Russia's behest, from an Association Agreement with the EU. Since then several thousand civic groups have been established to push for reforms in all sectors of society.

Ukrainians are particularly keen to rid their society of corruption, shown by the multitude of civic groups, media blogs and facebook/twitter accounts created to meet this challenge.

Potential as a future Regional Power

Ukraine is the largest East European nation in area and population (more than Poland, double Romania’s, 4-20 times larger than any other EE country & 7 times larger than the Baltic states combined).

In terms of military potential the 2020 Global Firepower Index ranks Ukraine in 27th position (Poland 21st, Czechia 34th, Canada 24th).

With a well-educated workforce, low wages and exchange rate, Ukraine is likely to be very competitive in attracting investment, with GDP promising to rise faster than any EE country.
Suggested Assistance

Extend current Australian aid programs to Ukraine

Australia funds many anti-corruption and justice initiatives across the Indo-Pacific several of which could be extended to Ukraine, eg Vanuatu Governance for Growth, Transparency International Ukraine, the World Bank’s Justice for the Poor and Stolen Asset Recovery programs may be quickly adapted for use in Ukraine.

Broaden and fund the current Embassy-based DAP to fund small and effective organisations to meet arising needs eg to educate communities and disadvantaged people, support resolution of expected conflict as a result of government land reform policies.

Engaging civil society and universities as part of the 2030 Agenda.

Work with aid partners (Canada, EU, US) to identify programs in Australia’s interest

For example to expand programs for internally displaced peoples and those in conflict zones to meet Australian priorities in democracy and education

Consider utilising existing non-foreign aid programs:

Temporary migration of unemployed farm workers to assist in Australia’s rural areas

Student and school exchanges and scholarships

Australian Sports Partnerships

Academic exchanges in fields of mutual interest: cyber, energy, agriculture and waste management

Law and justice programs funded by the AFP and Attorney-Generals

A successful liberal democracy in Ukraine will show people living in authoritarian regimes, not least in Russia and China, that they too can transition from repression to a free society.

The proposals enhance Human Development by investing in Australia’s foreign aid priority areas – Effective Governance and Education.

And they meet SDG 16 – promote peaceful and inclusive societies and provide justice for all and SDG 3 – lifelong learning opportunities.

The program should not be expensive – an initial outlay of some $1.3 mil over 3 years should suffice to provide some meaningful results.
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