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Demystifying “Finlandization”: What Can Ukraine Learn from Post-War Finland’s Relations with the Soviet Union?

With no quick solution for the Ukraine crisis in sight, “Finlandization” has been reborn as a buzzword of international politics. However, the term, which describes the asymmetric relationship between Cold War Finland and the Soviet Union, has been used rather ambiguously by journalists, politicians and scholars alike in reference to more recent political crises. Going beyond the rather simplistic media portrayals of the phenomenon, this paper explores the conceptualization of “Finlandization” and its application to modern-day Ukraine. The first aim of this article is to untangle the various interpretations and definitions of “Finlandization”, by providing evidence of the recent uses of the term from an analysis of 65 media articles. While some prescribe “Finlandization” as a viable option for Ukraine to become a neutral territory between East and West, most has understood it in a pejorative sense, as an infringement of sovereignty. The second aim of this paper is to explore to what extent can an academic conceptualization of Finlandization be an effective guide for Ukraine’s foreign policy at the present moment. After situating the term within small-state literature, this paper considers Hans Mouritzen’s (1988) “adaptive acquiescence” as the most appropriate theoretical framework to be applied to the experience of both Finland and Ukraine. The paper concludes that Finlandization, which developed organically into a specific political culture, was carried out successfully in Finland because of the personal agency of Finland’s political leaders, the country’s social unity, and already existing democratic institutions. The policy therefore cannot be carried out effectively in present-day Ukraine unless these aforementioned factors are taken into account.

Keywords: Finlandization, Ukraine crisis, Finno-Soviet relations, Ukraine, Finland, Soviet Union, Russia, small states, adaptive acquiescence