

UKRAINE – STUCK BETWEEN RUSSIA AND THE WEST

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Abstract: *For some time now, Ukraine has been internally divided between those who support Russia and those who fight for the westernization of the country through its affiliation with NATO and the EU. Both the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) – and later the Eastern Partnership (EaP) policy – as well as Russia’s foreign policy, have been fuelling more and more this internal divide, with every strategy implemented by the EU in that direction leading to violent responses from Russia, which had very significant consequences on Ukraine. This paper aims to present, through qualitative analysis, the present geopolitical situation of Ukraine, which seems to be unable to move forward in a definitive direction. Throughout this essay I will analyse the events that led to the impasse in which Kyiv is stuck now, also touching upon the tense relation between the EU and Russia. Towards the end of the paper, further possible strategies and scenarios are suggested, considering and examining the tense situation in the whole Eastern Neighbourhood. Comparisons between other EaP states and Ukraine are also going to be presented in order to obtain a complete picture of the situation.*

Keywords: *Ukraine; Europe; the Eastern Partnership; Russia; NATO; the European Union; strategic forecasting; geopolitics.*

Introduction

Ever since it became an independent state in 1991, Ukraine has slowly, but steadily, detached itself from the influence of Russia and shifted towards the West. Ukraine’s NATO accession has been negotiated since the 1990s, at the moment being a non-associated member of NATO and having participated in several military operations (Olech 2019). Russia has always had its reservations towards NATO, perceiving the organization as an instrument of the US for expanding its sphere of influence. Therefore, when not only NATO but also the EU through its Eastern Partnership (EaP) policy initiative started to implement closer cooperation with the Russian perceived “near abroad” states – but especially Ukraine – Russia felt both humiliated and threatened (Sauer 2017). Since the inauguration of the Eastern Partnership (EaP) in 2009, the EU integration of the Eastern Neighbourhood states has been in continuous development. This has raised some severe issues for Russia, as the objectives of the policy initiative directly clash with Moscow’s interests. Russia has always been sensitive when it comes to the post-Soviet states, as it perceives their cultures to be deeply interconnected, considering the history they share. Thus, it did not come as a surprise when Russia publicly expressed its opposition to the EaP, NATO, or any other Western affiliation of its “near abroad”. At the moment of writing, the situation is probably the tensest it has ever been since the Cold War, and not only for Russia and the European Union. The EaP states also find themselves in an impasse. If they choose to have deeper forms of integration with the EU and thus break away from Russia’s influence, then not only the support previously offered by Russia is going to be challenged, but also the assurance of peaceful coexistence (Delcour 2018). The crisis in Ukraine exemplifies in the best possible way how the ‘peaceful coexistence’ can be significantly threatened when Russia feels that its sphere of influence is being jeopardized. Thus, by

analysing the case of Ukraine, which can be argued that represents a 'soft spot' for Russia, predictions about the relation between Russia and the EU can be made, especially in what concerns the policies directed towards the EaP states.

1. The Ukrainian Crisis and its implications

From Russia's perspective, the European Union's involvement in the post-Soviet space does not only present great obstacles for further Russian integration of the former Soviet Republics but is also a direct threat to the Russian security and status in the international arena. On the one hand, economic integration with the near abroad states represents an essential objective for Russia, which has been hindered by those states' interest in tying closer relations with the EU. Until recently, the EaP states were greatly dependent on Russia, thus contributing heavily to Moscow's economy. However, in the past years, the dependency on Russia has been drastically decreasing as a result of the deeper EU integration. This has been a great concern for Russia, especially in the case of Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova, which each signed an EU Association Agreement that incorporates a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA). Through the signing of the DCFTAs instead of adhering to the Eurasian Economic Union, the three eastern nations clearly stated their choice for the EU to the detriment of Russia (Koeth 2014). This further increased the tensions between Russia and the EU, as the three states are very important trade partners for Russia, in particular Ukraine, which is still Moscow's main trading partner from the region, even though the crisis of 2014 has halted the growth of both imports and exports between the two (Socoliuc and Maha 2019).

Throughout 2013 and 2014, major protests supporting Ukraine's cooperation with the EU took place all over the country as a result of President Yanukovich's decision to suspend the signing of a political and economic association agreement with the EU to the detriment of a financial and economic package coming from Russia. The protests ended with Yanukovich's resignation, the unfolding of the events coming as a complete shock for Russia. Feeling threatened by the sudden change of heart of the Ukrainian population, as Moscow perceived it, Putin reacted immediately and put into action a plan that would prevent Ukraine from joining NATO – the annexation of Crimea (Trenin 2014).

Even though Russia's fault in this crisis is obvious and cannot be denied by anyone, many scholars were quick to acknowledge the West's negligence too, or at least its inability to foresee the risks that their actions bore. The literature has heavily debated NATO's decision to invite Ukraine into the organization, as Russia has repeatedly stated, ever since the 1990s, that it would react in the case of Ukraine joining a western alliance such as NATO or the EU. Thus, the West could not have been that oblivious to not realize the most probable consequences of its actions. The only explanation found to rationalize the alliance's decision lies in its naïve faith in the evolving liberal world order which implies worldwide peace and mutual understanding. However, this argument is severely flawed because, even though it explains NATO's enlargement to the East, it does not justify the exclusion of Russia from this 'perceived East' (Sauer 2017). Moreover, it partially explains Russia's distrust of the 'military' nature of the organization. Considering Moscow's point of view, as its borders were threatened by stationing Western troops, it is legitimate to say that Russia's hostile actions were not driven exclusively by an imperialist desire to take back its sphere of influence (Mearsheimer 2014).

Especially in the case of Ukraine, Russia perceives NATO as a military extension of the EU. The cases in which NATO has served the interests of the EU under the condition of safeguarding the independence and territorial integrity of EU member states and its allies has led Russia to be more and more suspicious of the association between the two actors. In its view, the plans of the EU and NATO are deeply interconnected, with the accession of Ukraine to NATO automatically leading to further integration with the EU and vice versa. Therefore,

Russia's hostility towards Ukraine is explained by the support it received from the West. After the 2014 events, both NATO and the EU imposed significant sanctions on Russia, showing their uncontested sympathy for Ukraine. What is interesting to point out is that the EU member states agreed to a stern common response to the crisis in Ukraine. This came as a surprise for the whole world, as the EU is known for being quite divided when it comes to its foreign policies, especially on a subject on which its member states' interests greatly varied. Some member states (as Italy, Greece and Hungary) were heavily economically dependent on Russia, making them more reserved to a harsh response. However, the common decision to support Ukraine was based rather on the perceived European norms of sovereignty and self-determination than on the member states' interests, as Russia's intervention was unanimously considered "a fundamental breach of the Ukrainians' right to self-determination" (Sjursen and Rosén 2017). This common decision of the EU showed the gravity of the problem, as it was perceived from a Western liberal perspective, especially as the member states rarely agree to a common approach to foreign affairs. In this case, they found it completely necessary to show a united front in condemning Russia for its actions and supporting Ukraine in tackling this crisis. Considering that the Western powers continued to show even greater support for Ukraine after Russia's annexation of Crimea, one can conclude that Ukraine finds itself in a paradoxical situation. On the one hand, Russia is still extremely sensitive to the Western assistance that Ukraine has been increasingly receiving, thus maintaining a tense relation with Kyiv through its support for the separatist groups in Eastern and Southern Ukraine. On the other hand, Ukraine is not yet ready to detach itself completely from Russia and join the West, as it is still dependent on Moscow, at least from an economic perspective.

2. The path towards "Europeanization"

Bringing Ukraine closer to the EU, thus drastically undermining the influence that Russia still has over the country, is not essential merely for economic and ideological reasons. Security also represents a great part of the EU's interest in Ukraine, especially if we consider the theory that the EU adopted an imperialist geopolitical model in the creation of the ENP, which further merged with various geopolitical strategies. In this sense, the EU aims to create a security buffer zone, which aims to soften the external borders with the immediate neighbours, more specifically the ENP countries (Browning and Joenniemi 2008). In this case, Ukraine is of great geostrategic importance for the EU, especially for its Baltic member states, as any aggression happening in Ukraine would rapidly escalate the concerns about the Baltic states' own security. This was the case with the 2014 Crimean crisis when the peninsula was annexed by the Russian Federation and the three Baltic states (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania) put significant pressure on the EU to implement policies that would create closer partnerships with Ukraine, thus leading to the EaP (Wilson 2017).

Even though the EaP implies that Ukraine should adopt the EU *acquis communautaire*, the process is significantly more complex in a country severely influenced by the personal interests of the Ukrainian political elites and powerful local groups. Ukraine's reforms are usually disrupted by its oligarchy, as it mostly controls the process of decision-making through the leverage it has on the corrupt Ukrainian political class (Wilson 2016). The democratic reforms that are being pushed by the EU on Ukraine's institutional framework, but especially on its judicial system, are either reinterpreted or directly blocked by the richest people in Ukraine if their interests are not fulfilled by EU law (Terzyan 2020). Many scholars (Wilson 2016; Terzyan 2020; Åslund 2014) argue that the only solution to improve Ukraine's responsiveness towards the EU policies is to deoligarchize the system, thus separating and balancing the executive, legislative and judiciary powers. However, I believe that

deoligarchization is very unlikely to take place in Ukraine, thus being much easier to cut the ties between the political elites and the oligarchs. This process would be dependent on anticorruption work within the state but is much more accessible than reframing the economic legislation of the country. Furthermore, the push for international partnerships, especially opening the market for international trade outside of Russia's sphere of influence, is argued that might promote a change in the oligarchs' perception of formal, democratic institutions (Melnykovska and Schweickert 2008).

3. The “Worst Case Scenario”

Ukraine is of great geostrategic importance for both Russia and the EU, as it can serve as a buffer zone for both actors. The clashing interests in Ukraine can be easily explained by geopolitics, as great powers do not respond well to potential threats close to their borders (Mearsheimer 2014). Furthermore, Russia is still the main trading partner of Ukraine, mainly because it is still dependent on the Russian refined petroleum. Ukraine has spent 6,62 billion dollars on imports coming from Russia alone in 2019 (OEC 2021). Therefore, Russia's fears are not limited to its security dimension, the prospect of Ukraine integrating with the West having great economic repercussions for Moscow too. At the same time, Ukraine is very important from this point of view to the EU too. Ukraine represents the main trading partner of the EU out of the EaP states (WITS 2021), thus occupying an even more important role to Brussels than Belarus and Moldova (Socoliuc and Maha 2019). Once again, Ukraine finds itself between the EU and Russia from an economic perspective too. If Kyiv continues on the same indecisive path, being unable to choose a side and continuing alternating between the two actors, it could end in a military altercation between Russia and the West. Ukraine has been constantly fuelling the tensions between the two sides, driving them to act recklessly, without considering the strategic long-term consequences. Therefore, the lack of cooperation between the West and Russia, particularly concerning the situation of Ukraine, could lead to the nation becoming a literal fighting front.

This scenario could be possible especially if one considers Russia's view of its status as a great power being undermined by the West. Ever since President Putin's Munich speech, Russia has repeatedly stated its dissatisfaction with the decision-making process in Europe, as it feels left out of major decisions that have consequences for the whole European continent, Russia included. Moscow drastically opposes the role of the leader undertaken by the West in Europe through both the EU and NATO. In 2007, Putin argued that the only actor that should have the authority to use military power is the UN, as the organization does not have a leading state that takes all the important decisions, in contrast to the EU and NATO (Pacer 2016). In this sense, Russia still perceives the world as bipolar, with the West being fully controlled by the US. According to Putin, both NATO and the EU are just instruments of propagating American views and interests overseas. Nevertheless, the EU has evolved significantly since the end of the Cold War, being able to assure its members' economic and political safety without the support of the US for a long time now. Over the past few years, Russia has been trying to challenge the liberal international order created by the West at several levels (diplomatic, political and security) through its approaches in foreign policy, doubting the motives behind every action taken by the West in Moscow's sphere of influence (Kanet 2018). However, even if Russia hunts for every chance to contest the liberal international order, the reality is that the liberal values are so deeply rooted all around the world that even Moscow is dependent on them to a certain degree (Ikenberry 2018).

4. Policy Recommendations

The EU should treat the neighbouring countries differently than its potential members, especially as membership is out of the discussion for the EaP states. As the EaP's institutional design is inspired by the EU enlargement process, Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia can find themselves overwhelmed by the EU's demands, as their biggest goal (membership in the EU) is off the table. The EU should personalize its approach particularly for each of these countries, as their pace of development is not that similar. A 'one size fits all' concept might be very problematic, especially as the three countries have a strong record of democratic instability that is still fuelled, up to a certain degree, by Russia. Thus, the EU should not force its norms and values through the complete implementation of the European *acquis* on countries that are still heavily influenced by Russia. In the case of Ukraine, the internal division between those who support the EU and those who side with Russia made it clear that the full implementation of the European *acquis* can be too heavy on the present state of the country. Considering Russia's contestation of the international liberal order, the implementation of common European values by the Eastern Partnership countries – especially Ukraine – can be seen by Russia as a direct threat to its security and influence in the post-Soviet space.

Integrating Russia in its Eastern Partnership would be unacceptable for Moscow as it would not tolerate the same treatment the other near abroad states enjoy. However, the EU should treat Russia as their 'neighbour', meaning that it should handle Moscow as one of its partner nations. The EU should work together with the Russian Federation to achieve a compatible identity that would suit both parties, without negating either one's core values. The treatment of Russia should be indeed different from the other EaP states' treatment, but it should not emphasize Russia's 'normative otherness' (Delcour, 2018), thus not leaving any space for wrongful interpretation. Through these measures that would support proper cooperation between the two great powers, the EU could finally respond to the criticism it has been receiving for not doing enough to protect the liberal values all over Europe, all that without actually making the already tense relationship with Russia even worse. It would also provide the EU a more separated identity from the US, being able to pursue its interests without having its main NATO ally supporting their every move. At the same time, it would be beneficial for Russia too, as this minimal form of partnership would finally provide Russia the recognition it longed for, while also granting Moscow a right to participate in the decision-making process regarding the future of Europe. Moreover, a potential partnership could prove to be extremely beneficial for both actors, as it would present great economic advantages for both sides. This partnership would also provide more incentives for cooperation on several problems, leading to the minimisation of tensions especially on topics related to their own foreign policies.

Russia should have a more important role in the Euro-Atlantic security architecture. Since the suspension of the NATO-Russia Council (NRC) in 2014, the communication between NATO and Russia has been close to inexistent, with no practical cooperation taking place since 2014 (NATO, 2020). Therefore, it would be way too idealistic to consider a scenario in which Russia, together with Ukraine, accedes to NATO, but to relieve some of the tensions and provide Ukraine better chances of NATO membership, the NRC should resume its activity. Furthermore, cooperation between Western institutions and Russia should be an objective for both sides in order for Ukraine to not represent a sensitive spot in their communication anymore.

Furthermore, in order to start a minimum form of cooperation between the EU and Russia, the two sides should incorporate more 'high-level' topics within its already existing working groups which tackle 'lower-level' politics such as environment and health. Through these strategic engagements of high-level topics into regular communication, constant contact between Moscow and Brussels could be reimplemented. As the EU is founded on a principle

of economic interdependence between its members, it should use the same principle to better its relations with Russia. Instead of focusing on their differences regarding the Eastern Neighbourhood states, they should find other areas in which they could cooperate in order to find new ways to approach their disagreements.

Conclusion

At the moment, I argue that Ukraine has overcome its problem of indecisiveness between the EU and Russia. The majority of the Ukrainian population has repeatedly expressed its support for the EU, with only some small regions of Ukraine still being pro-Russia. Nevertheless, these regions are indeed very vocal in their support for Russia, support that Russia uses to justify its significant interventions on the territory of Ukraine. Today, this is the main problem with which Ukraine has to deal with in order to have any chance at a future integration within NATO and closer cooperation with the EU. As it is still dependent on its trade with Russia, Ukraine needs to find a way to gradually detach from Russia without greatly increasing the tensions between the Russian Federation and the EU. Recent history has shown us that Russia will go to great lengths to protect its image as a world's great power, especially when it comes to direct clashes with the West. Therefore, Ukraine needs to understand that the only scenario in which it will achieve both EU and NATO memberships is with the approval of Russia. The EU will not risk military confrontation with Russia for Ukraine, and Russia will not agree to such a breach in its sphere of influence without a literal fight.

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