

Ukraine: A New Geopolitical Europe with Less European Union?

SANDRA FERNANDES

Research Unit in Political Science and International Relations (NICPRI), University of Minho

“People across the world – not least in nearby Ukraine – are voicing their aspirations for universal values we in Europe and America cherish”.¹

“These last days have seen perhaps the most serious challenge to security on our continent since the Balkan Wars”.²

Last November, when President of Ukraine Viktor Yanukovich suspended the process of closer relations with the European Union (EU), he initiated an internal crisis with serious strategic consequences in Europe. Ahead of the November 2013 Vilnius summit, President Viktor Yanukovich decided to suspend temporarily the preparations for signing two agreements that would have been a milestone for the country’s relationship with Brussels. The third summit of the Eastern Partnership (EaP) – an EU policy launched in 2009 to tighten Brussels’ offer towards its Eastern neighbors – marked a decisive failure in Ukrainian path towards the West. In fact, the summit ought to be an historical moment towards Ukrainian’s course of integration in the EU – together with Moldova and Georgia – based on the Association Agreement (AA) and the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA). Instead of opening a “new chapter”

in EU-Eastern partner relations,³ the Vilnius summit has shown that Brussels needs to rethink strategic relations with Russia and the neighbors in order to avoid the return of confrontational, zero-sum relations in Europe. Additionally, Russian backing of Yanukovich’s positions through diplomatic and military escalation puts at risk Ukraine’s sovereignty.

This article explores the idea that the Ukrainian crisis exposes a strategic and a normative gap between the EU (and the US/NATO) and Russia that is prone to change the European security architecture. The issue of Russian non-convergence with Europe has already been confirmed, *manu militari*, by the Georgian crisis of 2008. I argue here that the ongoing events in Ukraine further acknowledge that the cooperative “acquis” in EU-Russia relations,⁴ and Russian acceptance of Brussels’ soft power influence in the East European neighborhood, are under threat from Russia’s confrontational posture.

President Yanukovich’s decision in November provoked popular outcry, in which protestors occupied the main squares of Kiev. Protests then spread to other parts of the country. Since then, the crisis has escalated into deadly political upheaval pitting supporters of the in-

1 President of the European Council, “Opening Speech by the President of the European Council Herman Van Rompuy at the Munich Security Conference” (Munich, 1 February 2014).

2 President of the European Council, “Remarks by the President of the European Council Herman Van Rompuy following the extraordinary meeting of the EU Heads of State and Government on Ukraine” (Brussels, 6 March 2014).

3 Catherine Ashton, “Remarks by EU HR Ashton following the Foreign Affairs Council” (European Union, 21 October 2013).

4 On the institutional framework of cooperative between the EU and Russia see Sandra Dias Fernandes, *Europa (In)Segura. União Europeia, Rússia, Aliança Atlântica: A Institucionalização de uma Relação Estratégica* (Lisboa: Principia, 2006); and, Sandra Dias Fernandes, *Multilateralism and EU-Russian Relations: The praxis of a competitive relationship* (Villeneuve d’Ascq: ANRT, 2012).



terim government and presidential elections in 25 May (the EU and the US) against Crimean secessionist, supported by Russian diplomatic and military heft. The military support includes the presence of unidentified pro-Moscow gunmen in Crimea that are allegedly backed by the Kremlin and armed forces exercises at Ukrainian borders. The use of military moves has been a recurrent Russian reaction in crisis contexts in Europe. For instance, the Kremlin stationed Iskander missiles in Kaliningrad (at the border of the EU) in response of the US/NATO planned antimissile shield.⁵ With similar political symbolism, in late February 2014 Russia launched a military preparedness exercises along its Ukrainian border.⁶ The turning point of the crisis came on 20 February. That day government snipers killed 70 protesters, so far the deadliest day of the crisis. This event led to Yanukovich's removal as an out of law president who took refuge in Russia. At the same time, a pro-Russian figure was appointed the new *de facto* mayor of Sevastopol; meanwhile, armed men seized parts of Crimea. The Kremlin and the Russian Federation Council launched a military occupation of the peninsula on 2 March, claiming the need to protect Russia's Black Sea Fleet stationed in Sevastopol. A few days later, a Crimean parliament voted in favor of joining Russia (the pro-Kiev opposition has been blocked from entering into the house), as did the city of Sevastopol.

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In this light, Yanukovich's decision to halt closer ties with Brussels has been informed by pressure from Moscow. In this context, Kiev's financial distress has been a key factor aggravated by a Russian "commercial war" initiated last summer to pressure Kiev,⁸ including the threat of economic sanctions such as higher gas prices. The fact that the EU refused to discuss short-term financial needs at the Vilnius summit also highlights the issue of quality of the EU offer towards the East. The EU has based its relations with its Eastern partners on "conditionality", a principle implying the convergence of third parties with a Western European set of norms and values. Thus, the Union assesses, at least theoretically, the legitimacy of third actor's actions under the scrutiny of norms and values observance (normativity). In this perspective, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine have internal issues, such as corruption, that call into question the

path towards political reform in each country,⁹ and creates strong demands on political leadership.

5 Steve Gutterman, "Russia has stationed Iskander missiles in western region: reports" (*Reuters*, 16 December 2013).

6 Steven Lee Myers, "Putin Drills Ground Troops at Doorstep of a Fragile Ukraine" (*The New York Times*, 26 February 2014).

7 Dmitri V. Trenin, *Getting Russian Right* (Washington D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2007).

8 Inna Bogoslovskaya, "Crise en Ukraine: les relais de Moscou à Kiev ont gagné la partie" (*Le Monde*, 5 December 2013).

9 The other three Eastern Partners (Armenia, Azerbaijan and Belarus) have shown few or in-existent signs of willingness to converge with Brussels. The lack of membership perspectives in the EaP is a weakness, as is the EU approach to reform in each of the EaP countries.



Before Yanukovych departed, Ukraine's next presidential elections were due in 2015, and many observers understood that former president's decision to halt negotiations with Brussels was related to his pledge for reelection by avoiding high EU demands for internal reforms. The current Ukrainian crisis raises the point that Brussels can't continue offering Eastern neighboring countries loose alternatives because Russia's resurgence changes European geopolitics. Brussels needs to build on its capacity to become a more constructive change promoter in the Eastern neighborhood, while at the same time preserving workable relations with Moscow. Since the 1990s, Moscow has lost allies, many of which were former Soviet satellite states, and has sought to maintain a relevant position in a Europe defined by EU expansion. Russia needed to find a constructive role and place in Europe, despite the unavoidable facts of the EU Eastern enlargement process and the European Neighborhood Policy, both materialized in 2004. The results of the Vilnius summit may well represent a shift in this post-Cold War pattern on the European continent. The Kremlin's attempts to maintain an enhanced role in the "EU's Europe" are now producing tangible results that shed light on the problems of compatibility that have arisen in the relation with Brussels, namely because of different interpretations of sovereignty and integration.

Geopolitics informs European countries' choices and policies. As Richard Youngs and Kateryna Pishchikova underline,¹⁰ the EU needs to promote "successful geopolitics" in order to compete with Russia on a different ground. Brussels has a *sui generis* perception of geopolitics and of its role that is based on values and on a positive-sum perspective of external relations. Instead of becoming an idealized European partner sharing views on common norms, Russia is becoming, in the EU perspective, a challenging foreign policy actor, as the Coun-

cil conclusions of 3 March 2014 on Ukraine illustrate:

[T]he European Union strongly condemns the clear violation of Ukrainian sovereignty and territorial integrity by acts of aggression by the Russian armed forces as well as the authorization given by the Federation Council of Russia on 1 March for the use of the armed forces on the territory of Ukraine. [...] The Council recalls the EU's ambitions and openness to a relationship with Russia based on mutual interest and respect and regrets that these common objectives have now been put in doubt.¹¹

According to Michael Emerson and Hrant Kostanyan,¹² Russia has a "grand design" to damage the EaP in favor of its own neighborhood policy. Thus the Ukrainian crisis illustrates Russia's own view about stability and sovereignty in Europe, condemned by the EU and the US because of the Russian military escalation as a response to the crisis.

After the disappointments of the Orange Revolution in 2004 and the political comeback of the Party of the Regions in 2006

and of the former President Yanukovych in 2010, Ukraine's balance proved unstable. The current path towards integration in the EU is ultimately not compatible with good relations with Moscow. Ukraine's desperate need for a financial rescue package made the country susceptible to Russian pressure. Until Brussels finally came up with a financial package to rescue Ukraine from bankruptcy in early March, Russia and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) were actually the two main potential sources of financial aid. By early December 2013, Moscow offered a similar amount of help but has since withdrawn the offer.¹³ Additionally, the EU will try to lower Ukrainian vulnerabil-

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10 Richard Youngs and Kateryna Pishchikova, "Smart Geostrategy for the Eastern Partnership" (*Carnegie Europe*, November 2013).

11 Council of the European Union, "Council conclusions on Ukraine" (European Union, 3 March 2014).

12 Michael Emerson and Hrant Kostanyan, "Putin's grand design to destroy the EU's Eastern Partnership and replace it with a disastrous neighborhood policy of his own" (*CEPS Commentary*, 17 September, 2013).

13 Neil Buckley and Roman Olearchyk, "Yanukovich seeks China backing as unrest imperils Ukraine economy" (*The Financial Times*, 3 December 2013).



ity concerning Russian deliveries of gas by providing the country with “reverse flows” of gas from the EU.¹⁴ This shift in the EU’s response towards Ukraine further questions the adequacy of its policies considering the geopolitical stakes of helping Ukraine finding a stable balance between it and Moscow. Ahead of the Vilnius summit, Yanukovich repeated his request for assistance and for the EU’s involvement in the IMF in order to soften the terms of the loan negotiated over previous months.¹⁵ Austerity demands and the unpopular need to raise household gas prices were a key issue for Kiev. Today, the EU conditions its financial assistance with a parallel deal with the IMF. It took military escalation of the crisis for the EU to finally change its approach to Ukraine, from a posture of high and encompassing reforms demands in the context of the EaP to financial rescue of the country in face of its threatened sovereignty. This change reveals at minimum that Brussels needs to revise terms of engagement in the “common neighborhood” with Moscow. A geopolitical approach reveals how far apart Russia and the EU are concerning the evolution of Europe and, thus, impacting negatively on Ukraine. Besides Russian actions and Ukrainian political developments, the lack of clear membership perspectives and the nature of EU policies also explain Ukraine’s break. Russia’s opposition to further NATO engagement in Europe (through enlargement to Ukraine and Georgia) was successful in 2008. Today, despite Brussels’ efforts to de-escalate the crisis, the issue of further EU’s engagement is also under jeopardy, besides the uncertain fate of Ukrainian sovereignty.

¹⁴ Luke Baker, “EU offers Ukraine \$15 billion, but help hinges on IMF deal” (*Reuters*, 5 March 2014).

¹⁵ David Herszenhorn, “Ukraine faces EU’s dismay on turnaround on accords” (*The New York Times*, 29 November 2013).

EDITOR | Paulo Gorjão
ASSISTANT EDITOR | Sean Goforth
DESIGN | Atelier Teresa Cardoso Bastos

Portuguese Institute of International Relations and Security (IPRIS)
Rua da Junqueira, 188 - 1349-001 Lisboa
PORTUGAL

<http://www.ipris.org>
email: ipris@ipris.org

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