



Ukraine and the European security order

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Despite the apparent wind down of the war in Eastern Ukraine, we should not deceive ourselves. The crisis that started in Kiev in early 2014, and which took a profoundly destabilising international turn in the months since, is far from over. Several ceasefires have been signed but ultimately they have proved unsatisfying in the extreme. In September 2014, the first Minsk agreements were quickly forgotten as both parties in Eastern Ukraine took the opportunity to stock up resources and ammunition before launching new attacks. And at this game, the rebels of Novorossiia have a distinct advantage over the Ukrainian regular forces: Russia. No one can honestly believe that Russia is anything but a warring party in the war being played out in the Donbas. This is not civil strife, it is – and has always been – an undeclared and limited interstate war pitting Moscow against Kiev. And the object of Russian actions is not Ukraine, it is the entire European continent.

RUSSIAN RESPONSIBILITY

The truth of Russia's implication in Ukraine is hardly surprising when we

look at the nature of the conflict and at its inception. Hundreds of articles and extensive analysis has shown Russia's hand in the ongoing crisis. Without Russian action, there would be no war in the Donbas. The starting point in the conflict in the East can be set further West, in Kiev. On 21 November 2013, then Ukrainian president, Viktor Yanukovich decided to forgo an Association Agreement (AA) with the European Union which would have strengthened the ties between Kiev and Brussels and would have brought Ukrainians a little bit closer to the EU. This agreement was years in the making, negotiated by two presidents and their administrations, and [welcomed](#) by a large part of Ukrainian society. But at the eleventh hour, president Yanukovich turned it down. This was largely due to Russian pressures and to European shortsightedness. At the time, Ukraine faced serious economic problems and Yanukovich needed important financial support to stabilise the situation and preserve his own office. In Brussels, the diplomats and administrators in charge of the EU's Eastern Partnership initiative, under which the Association Agreement was to be signed, failed to un-

derstand the need to offer Ukraine a real incentive to closer relations.

The EU's idea was that the Association Agreement would provide Kiev with serious measures to prosper economically and improve politically. But this long term view lost sight of the fact that Yanukovich felt he needed aid now, not many years in the future. Then came Russia with its own incentives package. To get the [15 billion euros he needed](#), Yanukovich only had to refuse signing the agreement with Europe. And he did so, much to Brussels' dismay and to Moscow's delight. Even then, what could have been only a footnote in European history became a critical juncture when Ukrainians took to the streets in Kiev to protest Yanukovich's turnabout. For weeks, they stayed mobilised, clamouring for the president to sign the Association Agreement, in vain. The protests rapidly took a deeper political turn in the following days, when calls for a signature became calls for more openness, less corruption and ultimately, for a change in government. The largely corrupt political system of Ukraine came to be challenged in the streets of Kiev but, at the onset, the impetus

for this immense popular mobilisation was a demand for Europe. Most Ukrainians – and most Europeans for that matter – didn't understand the technical dimensions of the Association Agreement but they craved it anyway because it meant getting Ukraine closer to Europe. And it was this deep European aspiration, this longing for a European future, however vague and however far, which prompted the start of the crisis.

Unfortunately, the EU was slow in understanding this and in supporting the Ukrainian's aspirations. Russia, on the other hand, wasn't deluded and its subsequent reactions were tailored to prevent Ukraine's move to the West. Yanukovich's ouster in February 2014 and the subsequent arrival of a new distinctly pro-European government in Kiev only served to confirm the Kremlin's fears that Ukraine was shifting westwards. This prompted the hasty annexation of Crimea in March and the start of the war in the Donbas in April. Concerning Crimea, the interpretation of Russia's annexation (or "reintegration") as being a necessary means to protect the inhabitants of the peninsula from Kiev's "fascist" menace has been completely [debunked](#). A few days ago, president Putin himself admitted that the whole process was completely controlled from Moscow. Back in March, the popular referendum which led to the integration of Crimea in Russia was presented as a legitimate response to the new Ukrainian government's animosity towards the Russians and Russian speaking population in the autonomous region. Indeed, a law guaranteeing the status of Russian as an official language was almost scrapped by the new central authorities represented in the Verkhovna Rada before being preserved by the transitional president. This measure – though it would have been largely without effect¹ – nonetheless served as a symbolic catalyst to justify the

consequent annexation. But even this version has been [contradicted by Putin](#) who conceded that the reintegration of Crimea was decided on the night of Yanukovich's flight from Kiev, before there was any mention of repealing the language law. Russia's actions have been coated in pretence and denial but it is clearer than ever that the Kremlin is the one taking the initiative in the crisis. Just as the Crimean annexation was designed in Moscow and pulled off by Russian operatives, so too was the insurrection in the Donbas planned by the Russian authorities and carried out by Russian-backed forces. The "little green men" of Crimea moved to Donetsk, Luhansk and Sloviansk soon after the annexation to try and repeat a similar scenario in the East. The important territorial gains that the rebels have made in August 2014 and early 2015 are due as much to Ukrainian military weakness as to the strength of Russian support. Moscow might not want to annex the Donbas – it doesn't – but its responsibility in the continuing war and the thousands of deaths in Eastern Ukraine is undeniable².

THE TRIPLE DIMENSION OF RUSSIAN AMBITIONS

A lot has been written on why keeping Ukraine inside Moscow's orbit was so important to the Kremlin. For the sake of brevity and clarity, we can analyse Moscow's strategy on three distinct levels: national, regional and international. The most obvious is the regional level. In this reading of events, Ukraine has a specific importance to Russia, on historical, cultural and economic terms. Hence, Russia can't allow Kiev to drift west or it would lose the strong ties that bind the two Slavic states together. Furthermore, Russia needs Ukraine for its own regional integration project: the Eurasian (Economic) Union (EEU). With this project, Moscow aspires to be recognised as an [integrative re-](#)

[gional hegemon](#), both by the members of the EEU (Belarus, Kazakhstan and Armenia) and by outside bodies like the EU. This was one of the stakes of the Association Agreement pullback in November 2013. Indeed, the free-trade agreement included in the AA is incompatible with the Customs Union that is put in place inside the EEU. Thus, Ukraine had to choose between both projects, and Russia made sure to incite Yanukovich to make the right choice by offering him strong economic incentives. This was important to Moscow because without Ukraine, the EEU is inherently limited. Ukraine is the second-largest market in the Former Soviet Union, a dynamic states by those standards, and no regional project can succeed without her³. Hence, back in November 2013, Russia wanted to make sure that the EEU would remain viable and that Ukraine would not go west. Events since then changed the situation dramatically – Russia can no longer dream of including Ukraine in the EEU – but this was the starting-point for the crisis.

On the national level as well, Russia has a lot of interest in controlling the crisis. The Euromaidan demonstrations in Kiev showed what could happen when a corrupt government loses the support of the people. Yanukovich was ousted not only because he refused to sign the AA, but also because he was not recognised as a legitimate authority anymore. The will of the Ukrainian people was violently demonstrated in the streets of Kiev and later confirmed in the presidential and legislative elections of 2014. Ukrainian society aspires for a more democratic, open and reform-driven government, on the model of the European democracies. Euromaidan is thus an even more profound revolution than the 2004 orange revolution was. Now, as then, there is a real desire for democracy, equated as a desire for Europe as a normative model. This democrat-

ic experiment, if it succeeds, would pose a grave threat to the current authoritarian regime in the Kremlin. Ukrainian society is a smaller version of Russian society and it is [feared](#) that what happens in Kiev could happen in Moscow. Of course, this interpretation is simplistic – Ukraine is not actually a smaller Russia – but the worry is real in Russian decisional circles. To prevent a Euromaidan on Red Square, Ukraine’s experiment with European democracy must fail. And there is no better way to ensure that than by maintaining a costly insurrection in its Eastern regions. The war in the Donbas serves two purposes in this regard. The first is to bleed Ukraine dry and prevent any serious reform from happening. The second is to punish Kiev and serve as a warning to opposition forces in Moscow or in the neighbouring states. Whatever the cost, Russia will not permit colour revolutions on its border. By controlling the narrative in the media, the Russian authorities can present their action as a fight against a destabilising force, and thus Putin’s popularity remains sky-high. This has the benefit of creating a war mentality in Russia, distracting people from the increasingly bad economic situation. It’s a win-win-win for Putin: he ensures his popularity, he keeps Ukraine unstable and he warns the rest of the post-Soviet region.

Finally, on the international level, the conflict in Ukraine is viewed by the Kremlin – and presented by the Russian media – as a proxy war between Russia and the West. The Ukrainian army is “[NATO’s foreign legion](#)” bent on encircling Russia and weakening it. Regardless of whether this view is really shared by president Putin, it is evident that the actions taken by Russia in Ukraine concern not only Ukraine but Europe as a whole. The aim is to divide the European Union and to weaken transatlantic relations between Brussels and Washington. So far, it is succeeding. EU member

states have a difficult time agreeing on a common position, divided between a whole range of pro-Russian and anti-Russian sentiment. The latter position is represented by the Baltic States and Poland, who feel threatened by Moscow’s aggressive actions and who want the EU – and NATO – to take a firmer stand in the issue. On the pro-Russian part of the spectrum, we find countries such as [Hungary](#), [Cyprus](#) or [Greece](#) where the new Syriza government has made no secret of its closeness to Russia. This dissonance hampers attempts to present a common EU foreign policy and to have any significant impact on the ground. Furthermore, European disunion exacerbates the difficulty of finding a common Euro-American response to Russian actions. All this plays into the Kremlin’s hand and Vladimir Putin loses no opportunity to further deepen the transatlantic rift. Russian ambitions towards Ukraine go far beyond Donetsk, Mariupol or even Kiev. They embrace the entire European continent.

MINSK AND MESEBERG

The European Union’s response to Russia’s violent intervention in the Donbas has so far been woefully inadequate. Other than more-or-less strongly worded declarations or limited sanctions, Europe hasn’t done much. To be sure, given the inherent difficulties in setting up a common foreign policy, this is notable anyway. But given what is at stake, it is still not enough. Faced with an aggressive Russia determined to overturn the current European security order, sanctions are disappointing. Even more so when there [isn’t even a consensus](#) on keeping these sanctions going in the coming months.

On the diplomatic front also, the EU’s efforts are definitely less-than-stellar. The latest agreement signed in Minsk in February 2015 was signed not by EU representatives but by the leaders of the “Normandy group”

comprising Germany, France, Russia and Ukraine. Federica Mogherini, the EU’s High Representative, was nowhere to be seen in Minsk. For sure, this was Vladimir Putin’s aim when he agreed to a new round of diplomatic talks. He would much rather deal with a few countries on a bilateral basis than to deal with the EU as a whole, which would put him in a much weaker position. Thus, Russia manages – once again – to divide the EU. Germany has reluctantly taken the lead in Europe’s dealings with Moscow, joined by France which is all too eager to appear relevant on the European scene. On 11 February 2015, Angela Merkel and François Hollande met with Vladimir Putin and Petro Poroshenko to work out a deal on returning peace to Ukraine. The [Minsk II agreements](#) are largely favourable to Moscow. The ceasefire cements the rebels’ territorial gains while the constitutional arrangements to be put in place in Ukraine are dependent on the separatists’ – and Russia’s – goodwill. What is more, Crimea is never mentioned in the document. Russia’s unlawful annexation of a part of sovereign territory seems to be accepted as a *fait-accompli*. Obviously, no one expects Russia to return the peninsula to Ukraine. It has *de facto* become Russian land and will remain so in the foreseeable future. But to choose to ignore the crime is a mistake. We cannot allow Russia to get away with violating the main principle on which European security is based: territorial integrity of sovereign states. To brush aside the Crimean annexation would be to endanger the entire European order.

Evidently though, this is exactly what Russia wants. One of the main objectives of Russian foreign policy is to become a pillar of the European security architecture and to gain a say in the EU’s and NATO’s policy decisions. In 2009, then president Medvedev proposed a new version of

European security that would have in effect made NATO redundant and put Russia on an equal footing with the whole of the EU⁴. A year later, Russia came up with another arrangement in the so-called [Meseberg Memorandum](#). This was the result of a bilateral Russo-German meeting which suggested the setting up of a joint “EU-Russia Political and Security Committee”. The first test of this Committee would have been to find a solution to the frozen conflict in Transnistria. Nothing came of the initiative – not least because Germany didn’t have the power to commit the EU as a whole – but, here again, the aim for Russia was to bypass NATO and create a new security order based on two pillars: EU and Russia. For this goal, Moscow was willing to pay the price of abandoning Transnistria. Just as now, the Donbas is merely a negotiating chip in Russia’s hand, on the road to creating a new European system.

A NEW ERA?

In the years to come, the annexation of Crimea will be regarded as a turning point in History, equivalent to the fall of the Berlin wall. In November 1989, we passed from one world to another when the Cold War ended as the bricks fell in Berlin. In March 2014, the uncontested annexation of Crimea inaugurated a new era in international relations – at least on the European continent. The crisis in Ukraine has demonstrated that Russia is unsatisfied with the current international rules and wants to build something new, maybe on the model of the 19th century “Concert of Nations” when a few Powers decided for the entire world, dividing inviolable spheres of influence between them. In this system there would be no place for sovereign states other than the deciding Powers. This is Europe as Russia wants it to be and it is prepared to pay a high price to build it. Of course, such a system would be

anathema to the European political and normative project. The European Union cannot accept dividing lines without sacrificing its own identity. Russian ambitions are incompatible with the EU’s vision, Russia wants a system based on autocracy and dominion, the EU’s essence is based on democracy and equality. The conflict in Ukraine is thus as much about the European order as it is about Ukraine’s integrity. The EU was directly implicated from the start of the crisis in Euromaidan and its response must acknowledge this. A long term strategy by the EU is necessary to take into account the changing European order and to remodel relations with Russia on a new uncompromising basis.

Many different options are on the table. We can send weapons to Ukraine, we can reinforce existing sanctions, we can severely limit our dependence on Russian gas. Most of all, we can call Putin’s bluff and admit Russia’s responsibility in the destabilisation of the European continent. Ukraine’s future is not the only one that is at stake, now is the time to take a firm stand and take clear decisions. Whatever they are, they will be hard. But taking a spectator seat and hoping that things will turn out for the best, that our “strategic partnership” with Russia can be salvaged is ill-fated. Whatever happens, we can never go back to the way things were before 18 March 2014. And whatever happens, we can no longer pretend that Russia is a partner, seeking the same objectives for Europe that we do. Change has come, and we would do better to control the change that is still to come than sit idly by and suffer the consequences.

(ENDNOTES)

1 P. Bonnard, “Ukraine. Enjeux du débat sur le statut de la langue russe”, *Le Courrier des pays de l’Est*, 2007/2.

2 At the time of writing, [more than 6000 people](#) have been killed in the fighting.

3 N. Popescu, “Eurasian Union: the real, the imaginary and the likely”, *Chaillot Paper*, n.132, September 2014 (<http://www.iss.europa.eu/fr/publications/detail-page/article/eurasian-union-the-real-the-imaginary-and-the-likely>).

4 P. Nopens, “A New Security Architecture for Europe? Russian Proposal and Western Reactions”, *Egmont Security Brief*, n.3, November 2009 (http://www.egmontinstitute.be/publication_article/a-new-security-architecture-for-europe-russian-proposal-and-western-reactions/)

