

Ukraine's Unrequited Passion for Europe

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The history of EU-Ukraine relations tells of missed opportunities, paradoxes, various sets of misunderstanding and of expectations. We can start our story like a classic fairytale: 'Once upon a time, just after the Orange Revolution, Ukrainians had a great chance to reform their country and join the community of European democracies, but the EU and the Western political leadership successfully missed an opportunity to include Ukraine in the European integration process.' This also happened thanks to significant Russian interference and conflicting interests of the corrupt Ukrainian oligarchic elites.

It was a time when a wave of enthusiasm swept through the world and expectations were extremely high. Andrew Wilson, a well-known British expert and author of numerous books on Ukraine and the region ('The Ukrainians: Unexpected Nation') impressed the international public and presented Ukrainians as an important and proud people, which deserved to be treated by the democratic West as a valuable partner. It's worth adding that in spite of the tensions and significant security threats, the Orange Revolution was bloodless – with not a single shot fired, no death toll, no brutal violence.

However, soon frustrated and tired of the constant political in-fights within the ruling Orange camp, Ukrainians decided to change sides and gave the political mandate to Viktor Yanukovich's Blue camp. The fragmented Orange camp was driven into opposition.

Although the potential of the Orange Revolution wasn't fully exploited, its legacy remained. The old EU Member States' objection against Ukraine's membership eliminated the use of the 'carrot' which had worked so well and speeded up transformation in the central European countries. The various internal reasons in Ukraine: the lack of consensus between the main political factions, corruption, stagnation and suspension of the necessary reforms resulted in the emergence of 'Ukraine fatigue' in the West. A symmetrical syndrome of 'EU fatigue' developed in Ukraine, deepening the frustration and giving munition to the supporters of the so-called 'pragmatic' approach of the Party of Regions. The EU pretended to keep the dialogue with Kyiv and its elite pretended to listen to Brussels when finalising the procedure of negotiating the Association Agreement and Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (AA + DCFTA) with the EU. In the meantime Russia secretly began making plans for annexing Crimea and subordinating Ukraine to the Kremlin's rule.

Yanukovich's refusal to sign this Agreement in Vilnius in November 2013 came as a surprise. Suddenly, the Ukrainian president put a new condition on the table: the EU should invite Russia as a participant in the negotiations. This was the end of the illusions for Brussels, but not the end of the pro-European saga in Ukraine. The Ukrainian civil society, social activists, students and opposition leaders took to the streets of Kyiv and other Ukrainian cities, demanding the government to resign and sign the AA with the EU. This ended in bloody clashes with security forces and provocateurs, the death of hundreds of young activists and finally the escape of the ousted Yanukovich to Russia. Ukrainians again heard emotional words of support from the West and prominent EU and US politicians paid a visit to greet protesters at Euromaidan in Kyiv (such visits had never happened at the time of the Orange Revolution).

The real full scale crisis came soon with the Russian annexation of Crimea, the hybrid war and the military invasion of eastern Ukraine. With these aggressive and hostile acts Moscow reacted to the Euromaidan Revolution (called also ‘Revolution of Dignity’) in Ukraine and the decision of Kyiv’s new, democratic government to sign the Association Agreement with the EU. With this confrontational act and the violation of the territorial integrity of Ukraine, Russia invalidated the fragile, existing European security architecture based on the Helsinki Accords, the Charter of Paris and it broke the UN Charter. The world’s democratic community reacted to these developments using the existing international diplomacy instruments (OSCE, UN, Council of Europe). The new ad hoc created initiatives as the Minsk contact group, Normandy and Geneva formats were also set up to negotiate conditions for a cease-fire and the prevention of violence. Russia, as a signatory and co-founder of global and pan-European institutions used its membership for manipulating and blaming the West, EU, NATO and Ukraine for provoking this deadly confrontation. This situation created a deadlock in which it was impossible to solve the most serious crisis on the European continent since the Balkan War. The already existing security instruments the West had at its disposal proved to be mostly ineffective and ill-suited for dealing with its former partner, who changed unilaterally the rules of the global geopolitical game. At the same time the EU became a target of numerous terrorist attacks (Paris, then Brussels). The massive and uncontrolled migrants flow plus the economic and political crisis the EU faces today (including Brexit) made the European response to these security threats weak and inadequate. The spirit of solidarity faded away, replaced by growing insecurity, uncertainty and isolationism.

Ukraine – the uneasy beginning

Crimea became a part of the newly independent Ukraine, after Ukraine’s independence in 1991 had been backed by more than 90% of citizens. Independence was supported by a [referendum](#) in all regions of the then Ukrainian SSR, including Crimea. 54% of the Crimean voters supported independence (in Sevastopol 57%). Leonid Kravchuk, the former communist apparatchik and last [Chairman of the Supreme Soviet of the Ukrainian SSR](#), was elected as the first President of an independent Ukraine. In 1994, amidst hyperinflation and claims of corruption and economic mismanagement, he was defeated by another former Soviet apparatchik Leonid Kuchma, who also won the 1999 presidential election.

Kravchuk (born on the territory of pre-war Poland as a citizen of the Polish Republic) attempted to strengthen Ukraine’s identity as an independent nation, while later Kuchma adopted the so called multi-vector policy and started building closer ties with Russia. Since gaining independence Ukraine had struggled to build democratic and accountable state institutions. Kuchma’s second term was characterised by corruption scandals and human rights’ abuses. As the 2004 presidential election approached, a growing dissatisfaction and frustration developed among Ukrainians. The two main presidential candidates in the 2004 election were: Viktor Yushchenko, the ‘opposition candidate’ and Viktor Yanukovych, the candidate of the ruling establishment. For a while it was not clear which candidate enjoyed greater support. Despite the state’s pressure directed against his campaign, Yushchenko managed to secure a narrow lead after the first round but had insufficient votes to win outright. In the second round electoral fraud affected the outcome but the election commission declared Yanukovych the winner. Massive protests and a political crisis forced the Supreme Court to repeat the second round. This was won by Yushchenko, who became the third president of an independent Ukraine.

What sparked off the Orange Revolution was electoral fraud, but popular resentment had been building for some time, and civic groups anticipating that electoral fraud would occur had already decided on a counter strategy.

The revolution also highlighted Ukraine's pre-existing historical and cultural division. Yushchenko was backed by voters in western and partly central Ukraine who had a stronger national consciousness and were generally pro-European. Yanukovich's electorate populated the south and east; areas where Russian was more commonly spoken and where citizens were more attached to Ukraine's Soviet past. The protests, which started in Kiev and were financially supported by several oligarchs and small and medium businesses, spread to other cities, particularly in western Ukraine. From 22 November 2004, demonstrations took place daily and were attended by hundreds of thousands of people. Yanukovich's supporters, who had chosen blue as their colour, organised counter demonstrations, often transporting people from the east to Kyiv. Importantly, even while the atmosphere was tense, there were no brutal, deadly clashes between the rival groups.

High level figures including Aleksander Kwaśniewski (President of Poland), Valdas Adamkus (President of Lithuania), Javier Solana, (EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs), Jan Kubis (Secretary General of the OSCE) and Borys Gryzlov (Chairman of the Russian Duma) were active in mediating a solution to the crisis.

The scale of the protest put the state authorities in an extremely difficult position. Those with the legal authority to order the suppression of the protests were unwilling to do so fearing it would lead to bloodshed. Nevertheless, in late November the situation almost became catastrophic when troops of the Ministry of Interior received a mobilisation order and the movement of army special units towards Kyiv was reported. In the end top army commanders and intelligence services decided to take the side of the Orange opposition and the troops were ordered to halt.

The newly elected President Viktor Yushchenko inherited a Parliament that was elected in 2002. On 24 January 2005, a new coalition government was formed with strong parliamentary backing for the new Prime Minister, Yulia Tymoshenko. Expectations in the pro-democracy camp that the government would begin the reform and democratisation process were very high. However, instead of focusing on the reforms Ukrainians wanted, citizens watched, with growing frustration, the emergence of a protracted and bitter power struggle within the 'Orange' camp, which was proved to be mutually destructive for both Tymoshenko and Yushchenko.

By late 2005, Ukraine appeared to be in the midst of a constant power crisis. Ordinary Ukrainians lost interest in politics and the ruling elites which appeared more interested in their own self-serving agenda than in delivering stability and prosperity. Moreover, due to the energy crisis and the global economic downturn, most citizens were mainly concerned with their deteriorating living conditions. The well-developed civil society sector stagnated and was unable to act as an effective balance check against government inaction.

As mentioned before, the prospect of EU membership worked as an incentive for central European countries to speed up reform. However, due to objections from some old EU Member States, and misgivings about possible Kremlin reaction, the EU did not launch any

serious discussion with Ukraine over membership. This factor and the refusal of granting an MAP (Membership Action Plan) at the Bucharest NATO Summit in 2008 to Ukraine and Georgia contributed to the democratic slowdown and general insecurity in the whole region. Launching a military attack on Georgia in the summer of 2008, Russia started its plan of regaining the control over its peripheries. It wasn't really difficult to predict that Moscow's next target would be Ukraine.

Disappointments in blue and orange

Everybody will remember the scenes from the time of the Orange Revolution in December 2004 when the crowd of supporters on the Maidan applauded Viktor Yushchenko as a victorious challenger in the (due to fraud) repeated presidential election. Six years later, everything was different. In the first round of the last race on 17 January 2010 Yushchenko gained only 5.45 percent (compared to the 52 per cent in 2004), which eliminated him from the contest. The winner of the 2010 presidential race in Ukraine was Victor Yanukovych, the leader of the 'blue' Party of Regions, who lost the election to the 'Orange Revolution' coalition five years ago. Yanukovych voters believed he would finally bring 'order and stability'. Also a substantial part of the political elite in the EU believed that he was a 'pragmatic politician' who would be a 'credible partner' for business talks.

With growing concern, we soon had to watch the process of the reversal of democracy in Ukraine. The Party of Regions manipulated the local elections in 2010. Journalists and civil society started reporting cases of intimidation and violation of freedom of the press, local NGOs found themselves under heavy administrative pressure. Then came the selective arrests of and trials against Yanukovych's political opponents including former PM Yulia Tymoshenko and Yuri Lucenko, former Minister of Interior. In the Freedom House Index 'Freedom in the World 2011', Ukraine was downgraded from the 'free' to 'partly free' status. The country began moving into a 'soft authoritarian' model of governance. Yanukovych had already crossed the red line. If he had accepted the conditions of the EU, he would have lost the support of his oligarchs and the next presidential election, and, in result, he might even have landed behind bars. This urged him to follow the path of his northern neighbour – Aleksandr Lukashenka's Belarus. Yanukovych couldn't care less about Ukraine's engagement with the EU; he was minding his own business, i.e. defending his position of power with all possible means.

Yanukovych represented the Russian speaking region of Donetsk and the pro-Soviet tradition. At the time of the presidential election in 2004 he was supported by the Kremlin, and President Putin congratulated him twice for winning the election. Accordingly, he was perceived as the Kremlin's puppet, but Moscow treated him with a growing dose of distrust and contempt.

Yushchenko, on the other hand, was accused of being a weak and unprofessional politician. He was responsible for the country's political instability, corruption and the scale of economic crisis at that moment. Jokes circulating about his incompetence said that the only things he knew of were bees and the ancient history of the Cossacks. Indeed, Victor Yushchenko didn't meet the high expectations raised by the Orange Revolution and soon became a hostage to his own overwhelming victory. The same had happened before to Lech Walesa, leader of the Polish opposition movement Solidarity, who lost the presidential election in 1995 to Aleksander Kwaśniewski, the leader of the post-Communist party. The Orange Revolution's

ruling coalition faced a similar dramatic internal division like the Solidarity movement in Poland. This demonstrated only too well that the further fragmentation of the once victorious pro-democratic movements in the central and eastern European countries was simply a transitional phase of the wider democracy building process. Blaming only Viktor Yushchenko was the easiest way to get rid of the frustration caused by the transformation turmoil. Yet we must point out that his presidency confirmed Ukraine's dedication to the democratic values praised at the time of the Orange Revolution. Yushchenko did not drift towards dictatorship even though he sacked some of the members of the Orange Coalition and dissolved the Parliament twice. What one can accuse him of is not being consistent in his political decisions and not making a clear cut from his predecessor's past in spite of his promises. Yushchenko failed to investigate the cases of wild privatisation which happened under Kuchma's Administration as well as the murder of the oppositional journalist Georgyi Gongadze and the alleged assassination attempt at himself through dioxin poisoning in 2004.

During Yushchenko's term Ukraine began its not totally successful courtship with the European Union and NATO and developed free media and a relatively strong civil society sector. A middle class was born and the free market economy matured challenging the mindsets of big oligarchs, who still influenced the country's politics. But Yushchenko didn't manage to combat corruption and reform the country, so the process that started with the Orange Revolution was not completed. The constitutional division of power pushed him into ongoing battle with the government and parliament causing an overwhelming feeling of frustration among Ukrainians. Still, under his presidency Ukraine became a member of the World Trade Organization (WTO), which anchored Kyiv in the Western economy.

After the Orange Revolution Ukrainians became wildly enthusiastic about travelling to the West; foreign tourists and Western investors developed an interest in the country of the Dnieper River. The disappointment came soon with the expansion of the Schengen zone to the central European states and grew with the economic crisis.

Yushchenko's efforts to strengthen the Ukrainian position in the Black Sea region and build a coalition of countries supporting democracy to balance the influence of Russia failed (the Community of Democratic Choice and the revitalisation of the GUAM initiative). Although he understood the importance of the strategic partnership with Turkey well, Yushchenko had no executive capacity to implement his ideas. His efforts to join NATO met the resistance of Berlin and Paris and failed. The Alliance's Bucharest summit in April 2008 rejected the Ukrainian and Georgian application for MAP (Membership Action Plan) formulating a statement on 'leaving the doors open if time comes'. In the meantime, Yushchenko's partner and personal friend – Georgian president, Michael Saakashvili – faced a growing opposition in his own country. In August 2008, Georgia was invaded by Russian troops under the pretext of retaking Tskhinvali. These events erased expansion to the east from the agenda of NATO for the time being. Moscow managed to demonstrate its proactive policy in the region leaving the role of reactive follower for the rest of the countries. At this point the Ukrainian-Russian relations reached boiling point. Yushchenko demanded the withdrawal of the Russian Black Sea Fleet from the Crimean port of Sevastopol by 2017 and accused Moscow of distributing Russian passports to the inhabitants of Crimea. He already sensed the emerging thunderstorm

Probably Yushchenko will be remembered as the founder of the modern Ukrainian identity. Not having enough courage and parliamentary support for launching the fundamental reforms

Yushchenko concentrated on history and the process of constructing a national identity. As a reference point he chose different moments of Ukrainian history – from promoting the ancient [Trypillya culture](#), through the Cossacks hetmanat's state, lost to the Russians in the battle of Poltava, to Semen Petlura's 1919-1920 war for independence, the 1932–1933 Holodomor (artificial famine in the then USSR) and the OUN national movement led by Stefan Bandera. Yushchenko's concept of nation was based on values which were not shared by the Russian speaking population of eastern Ukraine who were mentally still stuck in the Soviet era. Under his presidency, the use of the Ukrainian language increased widely spoken and it became the country's only official language of.

Yushchenko paid the price for being a democratic president confronted with challenges he simply couldn't conquer. He was not a strong, charismatic man with a strategic vision, his background was accounting and finance; he failed to pass the test on calculating in global political terms and leading his country in the very difficult time of transformation and crisis. Paradoxically, his term in office paved the way for his old rival Victor Yanukovich whose manipulation with voting results had initiated the Orange Revolution to winning fair and democratic election.

The old EU Member States' objection plus Western fear of the Kremlin's reaction prevented that Kyiv was offered EU membership perspective. Instead, the EU proposed Ukraine and other, including non-European, states a new instrument called the European Neighbourhood Policy. Kiev's reaction was one of disappointment and frustration; Ukrainians considered themselves to be a European nation and not neighbours of Europe, as for example the Maghreb countries. Although Ukraine accepted ENPI (European Neighbourhood Policy Instrument) funding, information about the structure of this type of EU assistance was not widely distributed throughout the country. Often even the staff of Ukrainian governmental agencies didn't know that part of their budget came from ENPI funds and the monitoring mechanism was not transparent and weak. This approach couldn't stimulate a genuine drive for modernising the country.

Eastern Partnership, the Polish factor and Russia

The Eastern Partnership (EaP) – a new Polish-Swedish initiative was announced on 23 May 2008. The Polish diplomacy secured the support of Sweden for proposing to Brussels a kind of 'eastern upgrade of ENP'. Soon afterwards, the events in Georgia demonstrated the weaknesses of the ENP. New ideas were needed to improve the EU's offer to the eastern countries. The EaP was set up as cooperation between the EU and six eastern countries which were part of the ENP: Ukraine, Moldova, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Georgia and Belarus. Ukraine welcomed this new initiative, finding it more convincing and attractive. It is important to stress that the new offer also included civil society: NGOs were invited to form an EaP Civic Forum consisting of EU and EaP partners. The launch of the EaP initiative provoked a sceptical response from Russia. The Kremlin claimed that EaP was aimed at undermining Russian interests in the region defined by Moscow as its 'close neighbourhood'.

In spite of 'Ukraine fatigue' in the EU and 'EU fatigue' in Ukraine, Kyiv continued the advanced negotiations with Brussels on the Association and the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) Agreement. President Yanukovich paid his first foreign visit to Brussels cancelling his previous plan to meet the Russian leaders in Moscow. This shows that the ties with the EU including access to available funding was the number one priority for the

new Kyiv administration. Yanukovich's declaration on the neutral status of his country met enthusiastic response in most of the old EU Member States and his statement about a 'pragmatic approach' was met with approval in Berlin, Paris and Brussels.

Later the news about the formation of a new majority government in Kyiv cooperating closely with the President cemented the hopes in the west that Ukraine could restore its stability and start moving into the desired direction without antagonising its eastern neighbour. Publicly the focus of Yanukovich's government lay on the economy. Ukraine needed drastic reforms in order to reset its cooperation with the International Monetary Fund and secure access to Western funds. The new cabinet in Kyiv pursued a policy similar to that of the Kuchma era – a two vector approach of cooperating with Russia and the Western democracies at the same time. This approach met the expectations of politicians from the big EU Member States, soothing their allergy against requests for Ukrainian EU membership. Unfortunately, fighting widespread corruption was not a priority for Yanukovich. His cabinet continued the tradition of oligarchic bureaucracy and defended its vital interests.

For Poland, Ukraine is a strategic partner in eastern Europe. Success of democracy in neighbouring Ukraine means stability and secure borders for Warsaw. These objectives determined the Polish support for Ukraine's revolutions and the backing of Kyiv's EU and NATO aspirations. Also, Poles and Ukrainians share the same history and culture.

Russia's view on Ukraine differs from the Polish: it sees Ukraine as its 'nearest neighbourhood', an imminent part of the Russian civilisation which should be returned to the motherland. For Russians, the western Ukrainians with their national ideas and UPA tradition are 'traitors and followers of fascism'. Since the moment of Ukrainian independence Moscow tried to regain its influence over the former Soviet republic by using different means. The Orange Revolution and then Maidan Revolution/Revolution of Dignity both ended with a spectacular failure of Russian diplomacy.

Benefiting from the economic boom and high energy prices, Russia claimed to become an equal partner of the United States very soon. The EU was not even considered to be a serious competitor for Russia. The Kremlin knew well how to play the game of splitting European unity. Pro-Kremlin experts promoted a vision of Moscow and St Petersburg quickly becoming the new financial centres of the world, and proposed a big free trade zone stretching 'from Lisbon to Vladivostok'. In order to captivate Western minds, Russia used various instruments:

- energy/economy
- frozen conflicts
- propaganda
- hybrid technologies
- bribes and corruption.

For Russia losing Ukraine was an overwhelming trauma – Kyivan Rus' has always been a spiritual centre of the Russian Orthodox tradition. Moscow without Kyiv is an organism without spiritual meaning: its soul remained in the onion shaped golden copulas of churches on the hilly bank of the Dnieper, the same churches that the Soviet regime had tried to brutally destroy. This proves that history likes paradoxes. The former KGB colonel, later President Vladimir Putin pretends to believe in the same God as the Russian tsars ...

Russia is a challenging subject for EU Institutions and Member States, because in fact there is no such a thing as a common European eastern policy. The key EU countries are often driven by wishful thinking or a 'Russia first' business policy (like for example the Nord Stream 2 lobby in Germany). Russian propaganda even succeeded in influencing the thoughts of many people in the European Union. The Russian annexation of Crimea and the Russian aggression in eastern Ukraine have shown that the EU does not have a policy which can successfully oppose the neo-imperialistic ambitions of the Kremlin. This has caused uneasy feelings in central European and Baltic states, after all Russia could use similar arguments (and means?) for justifying the return of a stronger Russian influence in the region.

We can be sure that Putin will make good use of his time in office to expand his Euro-Asian Union project and for strengthening Russia's position as a 'global power'. The EU itself has a rather limited capacity to respond properly to this challenge, but in cooperation with NATO it should prepare a scenario for dealing with possible conflicts and growing chaos in the region. The renaissance of transatlantic relations and a rapprochement between the Old Continent and the US could be the only long-term option for reversing the backlash in the region. It will take time, the political will of both sides and a consensus among EU Member States.

Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia, three Eastern Partnership countries which decided to sign Association Agreements with the EU are now left without any form of security and political guarantees. Ukraine was even deprived of the territorial integrity assurance included in the Budapest Memorandum. Since the Bucharest Summit in 2008, closer links between NATO, Ukraine and Georgia were off the agenda. It looks as if after the Euromaidan Revolution and the death of numerous people who fought for 'European values' in Ukraine, the EU and the transatlantic community left their partners out in the cold without any constructive support. Fighting against a Russian backed and financed coup, Ukraine cannot even count on receiving the Western weaponry it has asked for.

With a war ongoing on the European continent (about 1000 km from the eastern EU border) and unable to respond to Putin's aggressive policy, the European Union has found itself in a situation where its basic credibility is at stake. Russia's destabilisation efforts can invalidate the Eastern Partnership Initiative and bring the partner countries back under the Kremlin's control. This would mean a fiasco for the EU as a successful political project. The result would be a Yalta-like new division of the world.

Recommendations for the European Union:

1. assistance and support for the implementation of AA, DCFTA and reforms in Ukraine;
2. helping to strengthen democracy and rule of law in Ukraine (with a special focus on combating corruption);
3. including a perspective of EU and NATO membership in the dialogue with Kiev;
4. providing training, intelligence and military equipment, which could help Ukraine to protect its sovereignty and limit the death toll among civilians and combat soldiers;
5. working on a new format of a peaceful solution for the Ukraine-Russia conflict, which will include the issue of Crimea;
6. helping to elaborate a strategic solution for dealing with the IDPs/refugee crisis in Ukraine;



7. support for generating growth of the SME sector and increase of foreign investment in Ukraine;
8. stimulating Ukrainian involvement in a wider regional cooperation within the framework of EaP;
9. engaging Ukraine (and the EaP countries which signed AA agreements with the EU) in a deeper cooperation on various levels with the EU partners.