



The EU's policy of democracy promotion and Ukraine's bumpy path to the Association Agreement – amidst a major crisis in Europe

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With the crisis in and around Ukraine continuing and no prospect of a way out, many are still asking what factors have generated this dramatic crisis in Ukraine, Europe and Russian-Western relations. This chapter gives some answers to this question by presenting background information on why and how the Ukraine crisis initially developed. It focuses on the EU's policy of democracy promotion in Ukraine. Starting with the 1990s, it goes through the turbulent period of transition from the presidency of Viktor Yanukovich to the presidency of Petro Poroshenko and the signing of the Association Agreement with the EU in 2014.

Throughout most of the post-Soviet period, EU-Ukraine relations grew closer, though there was little long-term commitment on either side. Even though the EU had slowly moved towards playing a greater normative role in Ukraine, promoting its values and norms, especially following the 2004-5 Orange Revolution, there was much mutual disappointment and a lack of significant progress.

After Viktor Yanukovich was elected president in 2010, the EU's policy of democracy promotion in Ukraine focused on the conclusion of the Association Agreement (AA). Contrary to his own policy of promoting closer links with the EU and his personal aspirations to sign the AA, and contrary to EU expectations that this would be done during the Vilnius Eastern Partnership Summit in 2013, Yanukovich decided not to sign. The AA was ultimately only signed after a major political crisis and change of government in Ukraine and amidst a most dramatic European crisis.

The EU provided various forms of diplomatic, political and financial/economic assistance to act as a normative power and influence the conduct of the Yanukovich government. However, these efforts were undermined by disagreements within the EU, its unclear position on the long-term membership prospects of Ukraine and, in particular, by the lack of political will to commit itself to it. Furthermore, the EU's policy was undermined by a number of misperceptions.

Russia was able to frustrate the EU's policy towards Ukraine by putting increased pressure on Ukraine in 2013, using both sticks and carrots to attempt to compel Yanukovich not to sign the AA. Most importantly, it was willing to give Ukraine the sum of around 15 billion US dollars in the form of loans, discounts and orders placed with Ukrainian enterprises without demanding difficult reforms. As a result, Russia's pressure turned out to be more effective in the short run than the EU's democracy promotion, which lacked strong economic incentives for Ukraine.

The EU was taken by surprise both by the strong pressure that Russia placed on Ukraine before the Vilnius Summit as well as by its aggressive actions afterwards. The EU thought that it could ignore the triangle of relations – Ukraine, EU and Russia – and just focus on its bilateral EU-Ukraine component.

* <http://www.ibidemverlag.de/Reihen-Schriftenreihen-Institutsreihen/Interdisziplinaere-Schriftenreihe-des-Centrums-fuer-interkulturelle-und-europaeische-Studien/European-Engagement-under-Review.html> · ISBN: 978-3-8382-0860-2, 3-8382-0860-9

In the EU's logic, since it was not a threat to Russia, it did not take into account how Russia viewed the EU – as a challenger and a threat to its strategic interests and values as well as to its policies domestically and in its immediate neighbourhood. The EU also overestimated the importance of the European foreign policy vector for Russia as a constraining factor. Nevertheless, Russia's pressure could have been expected. This shows that the EU did not have a clear Russia strategy nor did it understand Russian domestic developments and the motives behind Moscow's foreign policy. It also underestimated the importance of the Russian factor in its relations with Ukraine.

Whether it wanted to be there or not, the EU found itself in a geopolitical fight with Russia. In this contest, Russia wanted to win Ukraine regardless of the material costs, while the EU paid no heed to whether Ukraine fulfilled the conditions and followed the principles it had set, and was prepared to overlook negative domestic developments during Yanukovich's presidency.

Trying to walk a fine line between these two major actors since the collapse of the USSR, Ukraine was effectively forced by EU and Russian policies to make a choice of one over the other, thereby flinging its internal politics out of balance.

The EU's policy was also undermined by domestic factors in Ukraine and by Brussels' misperception and lack of understanding of these. The EU ignored the challenges the country was facing. The drastic economic situation in Ukraine, which pushed Yanukovich closer to Russia and further from the EU, had been there since 2008, but the EU did not do much to support Ukraine financially.

While the EU has strong normative attractiveness for a majority of the Ukrainian people, this was insufficient during the Yanukovich presidency, given the state of play in the internal power games prior to the elections and the influence of Ukraine's oligarchs. The EU's Ukraine policy was unrealistic: Brussels expected to be able to influence the Yanukovich government to adopt more elements of the EU *acquis* in its domestic policies, despite the high costs that this would entail, and the risks it would pose to the ruling regime. As a result, the EU set unrealistic conditions for Ukraine, which the then government was simply unable to fulfil.

However, the period under study shows a degree of evolution in the EU's policy in response to the dramatic developments in and around Ukraine. The EU is still acting as a normative power, but it has also shown that it can implement some tough measures and act more robustly. The EU was able to agree on sanctions on Russia, even though these go counter to the interests of some of its member states. The EU was able to use the acute crisis to find the political will and mobilize resources to support Ukraine. It proved that it could be flexible and decisive.

It is still unclear, however, how the Ukraine conflict will be resolved. The EU needs to find ways to act as an effective mediator and security provider in the region, to contribute to restoring peace on Ukrainian territory and to stop Russia from further aggressive actions. Already this task is one of the largest political and security challenges the EU has ever faced. Furthermore, the signing of the AA is not the end, but only the beginning of a difficult process of domestic change in Ukraine. The EU needs to support the country in implementing constitutional reform and decentralization, stabilizing the economy, fighting corruption and the rule of oligarchy and supporting a range of difficult reforms – and all this under even more challenging domestic political, economic and wider geopolitical conditions than before. It is unclear whether the EU realizes the scope of these tasks and how many financial/economic and political resources it will need to commit to Ukraine in the long run to help it – while simultaneously facing its own major crises, such as the refugee influx. The question of the EU's long-term strategy towards both Ukraine and Russia remains unresolved.



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