

Ukraine: A Future Anchor of Stability in the New Direct Neighbourhood of the European Union

Ukraine: simply an instrument to curtail Russia's ambitions?

After the break-up of the Soviet Union, one of the principle aims of the EU and the US has been to preserve and strengthen the sovereignty of Ukraine. The real strategic goal of the EU and the US behind their Ukrainian policy was, of course, to prevent Russia from resurrecting a new empire to the East of the European continent. A Great Russia was perceived as a threat to the future of a democratic Europe in the 21st century. Geopolitical rivalries between Russia and the West in the post-Soviet space remain on the global agenda until the present day and complicate the EU/US partnership with Russia.

However, such a pure geopolitical approach towards Ukraine is cynical: in a sense Ukraine is forced to view itself not as a subject but an object of Western policy, an instrument to curtail Russia. The West helped Ukraine to stand on its own feet, but one cannot avoid getting the impression that many in the West never expected Ukraine to become anything more than a buffer state between the West and an unpredictable Russian neighbour. Real Western interest towards Ukraine developed only when relations between the West and Russia soured. Each time their relationship normalised (like presently under Vladimir Putin), Ukraine is forgotten again.

Typical for this approach has been the Western pressure on Kiev to abandon its Soviet nuclear weapons in the beginning of the 90s, without offering any real security guarantees in return. Ukraine has not been granted a NATO membership perspective as an award. The recent Western grumbling over Ukraine's joining of the new Single Economic Space with Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan was another example for Western attitudes towards Ukraine: Kiev should abstain from any kind of reintegration with Russia, but not expect any compensation in terms of a possible EU-membership in return.

Naturally, such Western behaviour failed to preserve Ukrainian elite and society orientation towards membership in EU and NATO. There is a clear feeling inside Ukraine that the West has abandoned the country, at least for now.

The best Ukraine could do is try and convince the West that it belongs to the European civilisation, but that it will need at least twice as much time to adopt to the EU value system and criteria for membership than the Central East European states. If the US and the EU had the means for a Marshall plan like that of the 40s/50s that could repair all the economies of Eastern Europe after the fall of Communism, they would have certainly done more to assist Ukraine. Stated bluntly: the West lacks the means to lure Ukraine away from its dependencies on the Russian economy and to take full responsibility for Ukraine's reform path. The scarce resources of the EU will first be poured into the economies of the new full and candidate members (Balkan states) of the EU. Before money goes to Ukraine, resources can be expected to be shifted to the "Greater Middle East", where the greatest security challenges for the West can be found.

Such reappraisals are not making Ukraine more relevant for the West. Valuable time has been lost; the ruling elite in Ukraine has become less enthusiastic about the West than in the beginning of the 90s. The present Ukrainian politicians are far more reluctant to accept Western political influence over Ukraine than those 10-15 years ago. The victory of Leonid Kuchma in 1994 with support of the eastern parts of Ukraine, which differ ideologically from the western parts, already

ten years ago characterised the political change in Ukraine's attitude towards the West. During this past decade, the pro-Western and anti-Russian national-liberal elite, which took power in Kiev during the days of the fall of the USSR, was gradually replaced by representatives of the new financial-industrial groups, which have their roots in the eastern parts of the country.

At the upcoming presidential elections the West wants Ukrainians to send a clear signal for the country's return to a Western pro-integrationist course. Yet the outside world may receive a totally different signal than it expects.

Ukraine's skilful manoeuvring. For how long?

The independence of Ukraine in 1991 was praised by the West as one of the greatest gifts of 20th century history. The Soviet Union and Communist ideology collapsed without a major war, democracy triumphed in the northern hemisphere of the world. Three major republics of the former Soviet empire, Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus dissolved the USSR in order to facilitate their common integration into the West. The so-called Paris Charta (1990) was aimed at adopting the former Warsaw Pact countries and the new independent states in the post-soviet space to the EU. The Council of Europe expanded far into the former Soviet territory. The present EU-concepts of "Wider Europe" and "Direct Neighbourhood" continue to pay tribute to the idea of a "Common European House".

But what can be Ukraine's answer to the West today? During the past decade, Kuchma managed to manoeuvre his country skilfully between Russia and the West. He had no alternative to such a policy. Kuchma's Ukraine was economically focused towards Russia, politically, however, towards the West. Ukraine managed to resolve major problems with Russia, which derived from the joint Soviet heritage. At the same time, she emancipated herself from Moscow's foreign policy. On the one hand, Kuchma joined the US-led war in Iraq (while Russia was fiercely opposing it), on the other hand, he entered the Single Economic Space with Russia, Belarus and Ukraine (without, however, supporting the creation of a Single Collective Defence Pact).

Ironically, throughout the 90s, Kuchma could rely on the simultaneous political support of the West and Russia: both sides regarded him as the only guarantor to keep the Communists in Ukraine away from power. But being himself an authoritarian leader, Kuchma came into serious conflict with the West in 2001-02 as a result of the so-called "tape scandal" affair which he survived. In the end, he seems to be in an advantageous position to choose his own successor and strengthen the political system which he regards as a guarantee for stability, but which is heavily criticised by the West because it is being opposed by Ukrainian liberals.

There is a clear danger of further alienation between Ukraine and the West. The Kuchma camp and the influential financial-industrial groups know: the West prefers to see the reformer Victor Yushchenko as a replacement of Kuchma in the forthcoming presidential elections. Should Yushchenko win, pressure on him from the West to radically change the present ruling system will mount. A result could be a major redistribution of power and wealth. A defeat of Yushchenko could lead to frustration in the West. Ukraine could, under certain circumstances, lose its fragile affiliation with Western institutions completely.

EU responses to Ukraine

Ukraine definitely deserves a different strategic approach from the West. Fatigue, frustration

with the pace of reform, criticism for her wrong attitude towards European values - these are dangerous and wrong arguments against further engagement with Ukraine.

- The EU offers Ukraine to concentrate on co-operation within the framework of the Partnership and Co-operation Agreement (PCA), which came into force in 1998 and has been evaluated in 2002. Although the evaluation stipulated that Ukraine has failed to meet the conditions for a membership in WTO and, consequently, for an associate status with the EU, it emphasises progress in certain other areas, such as co-operation on "soft security" issues after 9/11.

- Co-operation in future must take into account some new realities in Europe as a whole. The energy dialogue, which has not materialised yet, may become the top issue of EU-Russian relations in the following decade. Given the growing crises in the Middle East, Russia and the Caspian states will become the main energy delivering states to Europe. Ukraine needs to be embedded into the overall energy alliance. With the help of Ukraine, energy imports from the East could be diversified, and dependence on Russia reduced. So far, the US and the EU have supported Turkey's strategic aims and not Ukraine's vital interests in this "great game".

- A defence dialogue between EU and Ukraine is practically non-existent. Ukraine conducts a constructive security dialogue with the US on NATO. The US would like to extend the NATO infrastructure deep into the Caspian region. The build up of forces against Islamic terrorism will further increase. Ukraine, but also countries like Georgia and Azerbaijan, regard their inclusion into these new security frameworks as a chance for NATO membership. The EU has so far not found a common approach to these new security dimensions. However, it seems far from certain that the EU will wholeheartedly support US-policy in this respect.

The EU is presently building "four spaces" with Russia, as a means to incorporate Russia closer into EU economic and security structures. How can Ukraine fit into this perspective as the country in between?

- If the EU does not offer Ukraine new chances to close the gaps for co-operation and integration, it must honestly ask itself the question whether it would respect Ukraine's alternative choice - a further reintegration with Russia and other CIS states. If the idea behind the creation of the Single Economic Space is to bring Russia, Ukraine, Belarus and Kazakhstan closer to the EU, the West can hardly oppose it.

Few politicians remember how Russia, Ukraine and Belarus in 1991 dissolved the USSR in order to join the West. If the EU asks the Maghreb states within the framework of the Barcelona process to reunite within regional structures in order to facilitate the rapprochement with the EU, if the EU criticises the Central Asian states for the lack of a regional entity for better co-ordinating their efforts to join the West, it can hardly say No to similar developments in Eastern Europe. Or is the Western fear of a Russian "hegemon" still so strong?

- Finally, the last word remains with the Ukrainians themselves. The nations of Central Eastern Europe have joined the EU out of a desire to reunite with a historical Europe, which they had lost as a result of the Second World War. For them, joining the EU was like reunifying with the Federal Republic of Germany for the East Germans. Does the majority of Ukrainians feel that way? Or are organisations like NATO and EU still less attractive to the majority of Ukrainians than, say, a Single Economic Space with former Soviet republics?