

Ukraine's European integration: between mayhem and opportunity

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Nine years since Ukraine's Orange Revolution, a new national movement is under way, with hundreds of thousands of Ukrainians flooding into the street despite clashes with security forces.

As in 2004, Ukraine's President, Viktor Yanukovich, is the target of the demonstrations following the decision of the government to "suspend" an Association Agreement with Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA), which it had hoped to sign at the Vilnius Eastern Partnership Summit. While the government said the decision was made in the interests of Ukraine's national security, following a period of intensive economic and political pressure from Moscow, the decision was interpreted by many as a move to bring Ukraine closer to Russia.

This decision, coming after Armenia ditched its own agreement some two months earlier, has not only thrown Ukraine into turmoil, but has also knocked the stuffing out of the EU's Eastern Partnership and taken the shine off the Vilnius Summit. Furthermore, it has underlined the fact that almost ten years since the launch of the European Neighbourhood Policy, the goals laid down – bringing peace, stability and security – are little closer to being met.

Russia has managed to further fragment both the Black Sea and South Caucasus regions, and will work to consolidate this. To what extent the EU is ready to rise to the challenge remains to be seen. But so far, its reaction has been rather uninspiring – in stark contrast with that of Ukrainian society.

A controversial decision

Ukrainians demanded that their authorities reverse a decision that was taken without due consultation and contradicts the Constitution and a number of Ukrainian laws. How can it be that in a country where, according to recent polls, nearly 60% of the population support European integration, the government can decide to make such an announcement without consulting with the opposition parties, members of parliament, civil society and other actors and in contradiction to government competence and national legislation, including laws on international treaties and the Cabinet of Ministers. If, as President Yanukovich stated in a speech on 25 November, the decision was taken to help the country, it would have been wiser to do this in a more inclusive fashion, whether through a vote in the Rada (Ukraine's parliament), a meeting of the National Security Council or even a public referendum.

The EU voiced little, if any, criticism over how the decision was taken without an "inclusive process"; there was no strong message that the leadership in Kyiv should listen to its population. While some in the EU have now taken a more critical line, the EU's initial reaction was to express "disappointment", state the agreement remained on the table, and blame Russia.

Ukraine is clearly both a national and personal issue for Putin: the Russian leadership has a predictable foreign policy and a very broad set of tools which Moscow has been utilising for many years. So its pressure came as no surprise to those observing the region closely. Ultimately, Ukraine's leadership itself did not want the agreement badly enough. If it did, they would and could have held on to the path which had allegedly been chosen despite Russian pressure, not least because they had political consensus and a large chunk of society behind them. For many in Ukraine, European integration is more than a piece of paper or an agreement; it is a vision, a way that the country can remain integral and finally modernise; it is a civilisation project which has a broad base of support – something which the Russian-led Customs Union does not have. Moreover, the authorities could have flagged up the need for financial assistance to help them through Russian pressure much earlier, rather than at the last minute, and they could have intensified their efforts to pass the important laws required by the EU.

This is the difference between Ukraine and Moldova, Georgia and other countries before them, including the Baltic States. The leaderships of the latter were ready to forge ahead despite an often weak and irritating EU approach and Russian saber-rattling because, ultimately, they want(ed) a better future. This situation, to a certain extent, reflects the problems intrinsic for Ukraine's internal state of affairs: an unfinished transition, weak statehood and democracy, fragile civil society, extractive political and economic institutions, and oligarchic economic model. Decision makers are more interested in staying in power than in the quality of life of the population.

Given that the EU has been so focused on "Russian bullying", and in light of how the EU reacted to Armenia's decision – almost seeing Armenia as a victim – Yanukovich may have hoped to extract a similar reaction. However, Armenia's case is significantly different to Ukraine's. Russian influence and leverage on Armenia is greater; Armenia is much less "Europeanised" than Ukraine, and its society does not have the grass root and civil society backing for European integration, and Yerevan announced it would join the Russian-led Customs Union. In Ukraine, the European choice is legally binding and any move towards the Customs Union may ignite something close to civil war.

Future scenarios

The situation in Ukraine is changing day-by-day with the country now in a period of instability and uncertainty. Furthermore, there are a number of triggers, including further meetings between Yanukovich and his counterpart in Russia, Vladimir Putin, which could lead to a further escalation of the situation. There seem to be three possible scenarios on the horizon: firstly, the current uproar will die down and focus will shift to the 2015 Presidential elections, with a battle for Ukraine's future to be played out. Secondly, the ongoing protests and discontent may lead to the resignation of the government – as protestors are demanding –which could serve to reduce the growing tension and confrontational curve, although there is no sign of this yet. It is also not ruled out that the Ukrainian authorities might further crack down on protestors, including attempts to impose a state of emergency which could turn very ugly. The violent actions of the police on 30 November, never before witnessed in Ukraine, as well as massive provocations during the impressive half-million demonstration on 1 December, are a dangerous signal that a move towards greater authoritarianism is also a possibility.

In this respect, it is important to underline the fact that European integration was the key factor which made the situation in Ukraine different from Belarus. Now that European integration is under threat, there is a serious danger that democracy will be further undermined and rolled back. The Rada session on 3 December, the first since the controversial decision, may offer a signal as to in which direction we are heading.

During this period of turmoil, Ukrainian society needs EU support more than ever. It is not enough to simply criticise the Ukrainian authorities for excessive use of force; the EU needs to maintain a proactive dialogue with the Ukrainian leadership, encouraging Yanukovich to continue with his declared goal of European integration, reiterating that the Association Agreement is still on the table, while also showing solidarity and support for those who are protesting and pushing for change. The EU needs to be visible and active at the highest possible level, including at the forthcoming OSCE Ministerial meeting at the end of this week. After all, if Ukraine implodes into chaos as a result of an attempt to move closer to the EU, it will bring further into question the ability of the Union to act in its direct neighbourhood.

Hence after Vilnius, it is clear that the challenges in the EU's eastern neighbourhood will not lessen, but will become greater. The EU's ability to react to this in a more robust and proactive manner is going to be severely tested, more so in a year when the EU is tied up with internal cuisine. However, as European Commissioner for Enlargement and European Neighbourhood Policy, Stefan Füle, correctly stated, the transformation of the whole European continent and the lives of millions of people are at stake.

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