

ANU Centre for European Studies Policy Notes

Issue 3, 2015



Failing Ukraine: EU appeasement toward Putin's Russia

Ukraine is too weak to fight its Russian aggressor alone. Apparent support from the EU is wavering and there are murmurs of lifting sanctions. Without tangible support from the EU, it is likely the conflict will become frozen – further plunging Ukraine into civil strife and leaving it vulnerable to Kremlin influence. Ukraine is facing the two-fold challenge of protecting her sovereignty and fortifying domestic political structures in the face of historical system decay. Ukraine's situation is also transnational in nature – not least as a result of the downing of MH17. Ukraine impacts EU security particularly in terms of exposing EU energy insecurity. Furthermore, the annexation of Crimea may potentially provide a precedent for the South China Sea.

A shared history not a shared destiny

The world has failed to realise the history of Ukraine. It is one that allows us to identify Ukraine and Russia as two distinctly separate countries. For Putin, Ukraine is a part of Russia – not only in terms of a shared history but also in shared destiny. The Ukrainian challenge is at once a struggle for existence in a common space with Russia as well as a fight for Ukrainian history. This is particularly evident in the case of Eastern Ukraine's fall. East Ukraine shares a common mindset with its Russian neighbour – evident in the propaganda of communism – one only needs to count the statues of Lenin. Failure to understand the historical roots of the Ukrainian struggle points to a deeper issue for Ukraine – the unfinished decommunisation of the nation.

The *Orange Revolution* demonstrated the naivety of Ukrainians relying on new political leadership. In fact, what Ukraine required was a new political system entirely. With a new system in place, the role of revolution was then to encourage a new collective identity as well as to develop a strong civil society. Still in its early days this new approach to reforming Ukraine is focusing on addressing economic and legal reform, as well as introducing wide anticorruption measures.

These systematic changes in Ukraine are important to ensure the move away from a vertical power system of leadership. These changes are crucial to the future

Ms Elizabeth Buchanan
PhD Candidate
ANU Centre for European Studies
elizabeth.buchanan@anu.edu.au

of a successful and independent Ukraine. Building strong institutions on a stable political grounding protects against destabilisation attempts from other political parties in Ukraine, and, perhaps most importantly, protects against oligarch power. It will be difficult to limit oligarch power in the short-term as there is a noted disjuncture with the EU still operating in terms of interests ruling values.

The energy chokehold

A crucial challenge to Ukraine is its overreliance on Russian gas. It is a critical requirement for the Ukraine (as well as the EU) to find alternative sources to Russian gas. Long-term solutions are evident by way of new pipelines from Central Asia. However, in the short-term Ukraine is entirely exposed to Russia's proclivity to employ energy as a foreign policy weapon. The gas 'wars' of 2006 and 2009 most recently illustrated Russia's approach towards Ukraine's unruliness. Furthermore, Ukraine's transit state power has diminished with Russia's Nord Stream pipeline routing EU supplies direct to Germany.

Perils of appeasement

Putin understands the power of strength and has a keen eye for identifying room to manoeuvre. Putin's blueprint for Ukraine is as follows: pay attention to the East and simply allow the rest of Ukraine to fail. Ukraine's time is spent focusing on war to the east, instead of being able to concentrate on reform. The EU has taken a hard line approach to Putin's Russia off the table leaving diplomatic avenues to prop up its support. Over a year into the conflict it is apparent that the EU *modus operandi* is appeasement.

It is evident that the EU response is too weak. Primarily, the EU does not want to go head-to-head with Russia. Neither does the US, failing to follow through with its proposition to arm Ukrainians. The current US administration is on the way out so loses

some legitimacy in its action. EU and US assurances have all but fallen through. In effect, the policy of appeasement provides Putin with further support for the notion that the EU is in trouble. Personally, Putin doubts the EU will exist in decades to come. For Russia, appeasement also exposes the palpable weakness of the Western alliance. Appeasement aims to secure the EU a better relationship with Russia going forward, with Ukraine ultimately losing out.

A Ukrainian standpoint

Sentiment among the Ukrainian people is coloured by an intense level of disillusionment. They feel let down. Sanctions have provided some assistance but as an instrument of punishment they are feeble. Ukrainians believe the EU should look to their nation as an opportunity not to be missed. The Ukraine could provide a large agricultural base for the EU given its climate. Furthermore, Ukrainian EU membership could legitimise and strengthen the region.

For Eastern Ukrainians, an information propaganda war is raging. Russia's media foothold is stagnating attempts to fortify a cohesive Ukraine. With an aging population in these occupied Ukrainian territories there is limited access and knowhow to alternative sources of information. This links to the wider issue of Russia's distinct information wars. Both NATO and Ukraine have taken some steps to counter Russian information propaganda, but there is still much room for action. Putin has found great success in destabilising neighbouring nations, within its 'sphere of privileged interests', with monetary investment in their media apparatuses.

Ukraine: a trigger to exit Russia's orbit?

Ukraine's struggle has highlighted the potential of the Eastern Partnership to provide EU stability. Both Moldova and Belarus have seen the influence of developments in Ukraine. Moldova has banned Russian military presence and denied requests for

border unit increases. There has also been an increase in trade and economic ties between Ukraine and Moldova. Likewise, Belarus has demonstrated its interest in exiting Russia's orbit. Belarus is actively seeking financial support from the IMF and the EU to help diversify its economy away from an overreliance on Russia.

Ukraine Going Forward

It is evident that there are an array of domestic challenges for Ukraine in the immediate future – namely the de-communisation and de-oligarchisation of Ukrainian politics. However it is also clear that there is a new wave of Ukrainians entering politics that are kicking off the transformation. All are fiercely driven to protect their values and identity. Ukraine will require serious support from the EU to ensure it can secure its future. It is difficult to chart the exact course Putin's Russia will take. The wheels are in motion for a Russia that seeks international relevance and prestige – at the expense of long-term domestic stability and a strong civil society. Ukraine provides Russia with a strongman narrative that is increasingly required at home. There is little hope for a change in the Russian course.

Certainly, while the EU decides just what serious support will look like, Ukraine will continue to fortify its political base ready for post-revolution. Ukraine's struggle poses yet another challenge to the international community – which must now decide whether it wants to merely exist with Putin's Russia, or get along with it. There are layers of complexity to Ukraine's struggle and it is crucial to approach the conflict not only in terms of curtailing an assertive Russia but also in terms of fostering Ukraine's domestic transformation. Both are unachievable without bolstered EU support.



CONTACTS

The Australian National University

Centre for European Studies

Director: Jacqueline Lo
jacqueline.lo@anu.edu.au

T: +61 2 6125 9896

E: europe@anu.edu.au