

# Tracing the origins of the Ukraine crisis: Should the EU share the blame?

The EU didn't create the Ukraine crisis, but it must take responsibility for ending it. **Alyona Getmanchuk** traces the origins of Europe's dangerous stand-off between East and West and warns that Brussels must unambiguously define its own goals and intentions

**T**he European Union played a significant role in the Ukraine crisis long before the Euromaidan protests began late last November. Its involvement goes back to the moment in 2009 that the EU became an attractive development model for most Ukrainians. That was the year when, for the first time in Ukraine's history, economic integration with Europe became equally attractive as closer integration with Russia, and when the number of people wanting integration with Europe caught up with those who favoured Russia.

From the Ukrainian point of view, when the EU made it clear that it was willing to sign an Association Agreement with Ukraine, Brussels took at least partial responsibility for developments in our country. Responsibility is not of course the same as blame, and the EU can be blamed for only one thing; it overestimated the European aspirations of the Ukrainian government at that time, and underestimated the anti-European Russian authorities' plans for Ukraine.

The EU has also underestimated the importance to so many Ukrainian people of the 'European idea.' When talking about the benefits of the Association Agreement, EU leaders were not fully aware that the agreement was more than just a document. It signalled the inevitability of change, and was widely perceived as a watershed marking the end of post-Soviet reality, soaked with corruption, and the country's bright future. The Association Agreement was also seen as a chance to finally say goodbye to Russia. Ukraine was relying on Europe as a guarantor to prevent a



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slide into dictatorship, as in Belarus or Russia itself. Its outlines had become more and more pronounced with every passing month of Viktor Yanukovich's presidency.

All these inflated expectations among the pro-European section of Ukrainian society had a lot to do with the high level of paternalism in Ukraine, which had previously been manifested in expectations from the presidencies first of Yushchenko by Orange Revolution supporters, or of Yanukovich from his electoral base in eastern Ukraine. When confidence in those leaders proved to be misplaced, it was the EU that took their place.

As the internal conflict in Ukraine escalated, the perceptions of the EU and its role also changed. Some were disappointed when the EU linked the signing of the Association Agreement with the case of imprisoned ex-prime minister Yulia Tymoshenko. The majority of EU supporters in Ukraine were also disappointed when European heads of state and government proved reluctant to impose sanctions against Ukraine's former leaders until the moment that blood began to be shed on the streets of Kiev. Their frustration is today being further compounded by the lack of determined EU sanctions against Russia. Ukrainians feel that they stood up to bullets and even died in support of European values, so introducing tougher sanctions should at the very least be the duty of the European Union.

But this is no reason for self-flagellation by the EU for being the cause of the protracted Ukrainian crisis. Had there never been an Association Agreement, people would not have taken to the streets in the first place to protest a system personified by President Yanukovich that was saturated with corruption and criminality. The agreement was only a detonator.

But, the indecisive – often inadequate – EU response to events in Ukraine has deprived Ukrainians of many illusions about Europe and has made their perceptions of the EU more realistic. Yet the EU's weak response hastily reduced the numbers of the EU's supporters. A surge in support for EU membership and the Association Agreement was recorded right after the Euromaidan protest movement began, even though it has to be said that Russia's own military actions contributed substantially to this. A year ago, Ukrainians felt they had a choice between the European Union or a Customs Union with Russia, but the intervention in Crimea removed this choice; support for the Customs Union has simply collapsed with only 22% in favour according to recent polls. Support for EU membership meanwhile stood at a record high in May reaching 52%.

Support in Ukraine for the EU is more of a conscious decision now than it was a year ago because EU and Russian interests in Ukraine have in many people's minds become mutually exclusive: europeanisation versus sovietisation, modernisation versus conservation, and stabilisation versus destabilisation.

What then, is most important for Ukraine today from an EU's perspective? First, it is now crucial that the EU should finally determine where it wants to see Ukraine in the long term: Within the European Union, or outside it? One the main problems contributing to this crisis is that Russia knows exactly what it wants from Ukraine, while Ukraine clearly knows what it wants from the EU; but the EU has no clear policy goal.

The EU must recognise that its Eastern Partnership initiative – the project to further its relations with the six post-Soviet states of Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine – has not proved itself to be an adequate substitute for EU membership. Instead Brussels' proposals within that framework, like the association agreements, were a destabilising rather than stabilising factor, because Russia was angered by the prospect of its former allies moving toward EU membership.

So a clean prospect of Ukrainian accession to the EU could remove a very serious counter-argument of the pro-Russian supporters in Ukraine that "no one waits for us in the EU." The powerful anti-European lobby keeps pushing through its propaganda channels that the EU only sees Ukraine as "a market for low-quality products" and its citizens as "third class people". And if the EU doesn't see Ukraine joining its ranks, it has to make an alternative offer and suggest a relationship that makes it much clearer where implementation of the Association Agreement could lead.

Second, Ukraine itself needs to adopt a similarly serious approach. There is strong internal pressure from civil society that is demanding the implementation by the government of reforms. But it won't be possible in the context of the Association Agreement without pressure from the EU. That means there should be more thorough and professional monitoring and supervision mechanisms on both sides. In Ukraine, the political will seems there, but the country's political elite have yet to develop an immunity to the infectious large-scale corruption. The EU would have a lot to gain by supporting reform in this area because that would demonstrate that successful europeanisation of Eastern Partnership countries is possible even if there is no membership perspective.

Ukraine has a government today, possibility for the first time, that finds more common ground with Europeans than Russians. That makes it doubly important that the EU should not repeat the mistakes it made in the case of Moldova, where it described the new government as "success story" and thereby deprived their government of the motivation for further reform, and so significantly increased support for the Moscow-backed "Eurasian Union".

A more coherent EU position on Russia itself is imperative if Ukraine is to achieve peace and prosperity. It is essential for we Ukrainians that in another year's time the EU will not find once again find itself in President Putin's embrace, as if the occupation of the Crimea and destabilisation of eastern Ukraine had never happened. Any normalisation of relations with Russia should involve Russian concessions in its approach towards Ukraine. That assumes, of course, that the EU still runs on values – not money. ■

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## Commentary

### Here's what Ukraine can reasonably expect of the EU

**A**lyona Getmanchuk is right to argue that "the EU can be blamed for only one thing: it overestimated the European aspirations of the Ukrainian government at the time and underestimated the anti-European Russian authorities' plans for Ukraine". But this 'one miscalculation' has had important consequences, and the management of the crisis in Ukraine is an example of strategic myopia on the part of the EU in failing to foresee Russia's likely reaction.

Under unfavourable geopolitical and economic circumstances, the EU decided to make a rather half-hearted attempt to draw Ukraine

– heavily indebted and highly dependent not just on imported Russian energy but also on its own exports to Russia – closer to the European orbit. This initiative gravely underestimated the importance in Russian eyes of a friendly or, at worst, neutral Ukraine. Ignoring the fact that President Vladimir Putin had the motive, the means and the opportunity to react strongly to Europe's openings towards Ukraine has been a fundamental mistake at the strategic level.

We also allowed ourselves to forget that Russia is not a post-modern power. Putin is playing by traditional foreign policy rules (the use of hard rather than soft power) and jumped at the opportunity to re-take Crimea



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and bargain with the West from a position of strength. At the same time, he spectacularly improved his domestic standing by rallying the Russian population around a nationalist cause. On the other hand, despite these early benefits, Putin is beginning to realise that the long-term costs to his country of his Ukrainian 'adventure' will be quite high, as he has been forced to push Russia deeper into China's embrace through an energy deal that makes Moscow the junior partner to Beijing. He has also alienated Russia from many former Soviet states with large Russian populations, is suffering from a damaged economy and is still set to lose most of Ukraine.

Alyona Getmanchuk asserts correctly that "the indecisive – often inadequate – EU response to events in Ukraine has deprived Ukrainians of many illusions about Europe". But she then goes on to speak about the pro-EU section of Ukrainian society and their ambitions to become more European. This raises the question, though, of whether these pro-European forces are strong enough to constitute a clear majority in what appears to be a bitterly divided society.

The EU's Eastern Partnership was conceived as a substitute for membership and, although a useful tool, it must be used with caution, taking into consideration Europe's wider neighbourhood policies and its relations with Russia. In Ukraine there is a common sentiment that

the Eastern Partnership was 'hijacked' by a fairly limited number of EU member states – rather than by Europe's traditional 'great powers'.

Among the EU's immediate priorities there should therefore be the development of a coherent position on Russia, with the aim of stabilising the EU-Russia relationship and laying the groundwork for more substantial improvements, perhaps in a post-Putin era, even though many experts believe he will remain in power for as long as another decade.

Predictably, and also understandably, Getmanchuk calls for determined EU sanctions against Russia and asks whether the "EU still runs on values – not money". The short answers are 'no' to sanctions and 'both' regarding values and money. Most EU member states view the cost of heavier sanctions against Russia as unacceptably high, and oppose their introduction unless Russia continues to create problems in Ukraine. And while values are still important for the EU, the world's first – and only – normative power, this approach has its limitations in a world where national and financial interests still weigh heavily. But the EU could at least offer more substantial economic assistance to Ukraine, support anti-corruption efforts and clearly state to Russia that 'business as usual' is no longer possible unless Russia displays the necessary goodwill in Ukraine and elsewhere. ■

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