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The Ukraine Crisis – Lessons for the EU

First lessons and recommendations for the EU's Eastern policy have to take the fact into account that in the case of Russia the EU's post-modern strategy in international relations is confronted with traditional "realpolitik" of a great (and militarily not hesitating) power.¹ It does not mean that the EU should also become a more real-political actor, a process which would anyway last decades if it were successful at all. It means considering the Russian view and world interpretation when dealing with East European affairs. It also means to invest more into studying Russia of today since after "the end of history"² there is too little knowledge of Russia's ambitions and of the procedures of its foreign policy-making.

Through the escalation of the crisis in Eastern Ukraine after the coming into power of a new interim government, it has also become clear that acute crisis management in the EU's neighbourhood cannot be left alone with the External Action Service and the responsible EU Commissioner. What is necessary is the involvement of important member states like Germany, France and Poland in close coordination with the other EU member states as in the case of crisis diplomacy of the three foreign ministers of the Weimar triangle in February 2014.

1. Political integration

The EU is conducting a rather ambivalent Eastern partnership. On the one hand it wants to prevent its Eastern neighbours from applying for accession to the EU. On the other hand, it tries to tie them as closely as possible to its area of integration through the transfer of norms, standards and values linked to the rule of law, democracy and human rights and through the approximation of laws towards the EU *acquis* in the framework of the DCFTAs. The device is: Approximation to the EU through external governance yes (and as far as possible), membership no. Even if an accession perspective for Ukraine is not in the cards at present, successful transformation of Ukraine and political and economic reforms in this country are an essential interest of the EU. For such a transformation the democratic forces need be strengthened and the government and administration

need to have incentives and the corresponding will for conducting the necessary reforms. This depends, on the one hand, on the fact that the rapprochement with the EU will not negatively affect the trade with Russia, which is important for a large number of oligarchs in Ukraine.³ On the other hand, the European perspective of Ukraine needs to be made clearer. This involves various options. Beyond the recently signed association agreement Ukraine's future way could lead to a privileged partnership, an enhanced status or associate membership (without voting rights), or even membership - after the full implementation of the association agreement and total fulfilment of the necessary economic and political preconditions for accession to the EU. Whatever the incentives might be for moving from one step to the next the decisive point is to give Ukraine an orientation on its long way to Europe. Such a long-term and conditioned integration perspective for Ukraine can be used by the EU as a lever for fundamental reforms and genuine steps of Europeanization in the country. The reform menu would be long: After the holding of free and fair general elections in autumn this year, it includes a constitutional reform towards a federalisation of the state structures with representative participation of the regions, anti-corruption measures, a security sector reform and the banning of extreme right-wing political parties from government.

2. Economic integration

The conflicts about the signing of the Association Agreement including the DCFTA with Ukraine have shown that the EU needs to reconsider its free trade concept for the sake of greater flexibility and in view of a much larger regional context implying the compatibility or even cooperation with the customs union of Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan and the Eurasian Economic Union. Flexibility would mean facilitating trade with Russia and not hampering it. A larger economic region would build on ideas of a trade area from Lisbon to Vladivostok as suggested by the Russian president Putin and, already in 2002, by ex-Commission President Romano Prodi.⁴ Envisaging such a project could lead to a win-win situation for the EU, Ukraine and Russia.

3. Relations with Russia

However, the atmosphere of EU-Russia relations has become completely poisoned in the course of the Ukraine crisis. It will take years until the lost confidence will be slowly restored. As long as there is mistrust, the EU member states need to maintain strong unity among themselves in their policy towards Russia and may seek re-assurance through NATO. But EU policy-makers must also think beyond the Ukraine crisis even if that seems to be difficult at the moment. It might become necessary to draw up some sort of a road map for the step-by-step lifting of the sanctions against Russia should the ceasefire agreement in Eastern Ukraine hold and Russia refrain from direct or indirect military engagement in the Eastern part of the country.⁵ Even if that will be achievable it may well result in another frozen conflict in Eastern Europe. Such a solution cannot be in the long-term interest of the EU. In order to arrive at a lasting solution, negotiations on a bilateral level between the EU and Russia covering economic and political issues need to be re-launched at some stage in the nearer future. The objective of the EU must be to work for a stable European order by involving and not by excluding Russia.

4. The crisis as an opportunity for EU Eastern policy

The development in Ukraine has led to a more cohesive European foreign policy. This is true in the quantitative dimension when taking the extraordinary summits of the Heads of State and Government, the number of Foreign Ministers meetings, and the numerous contacts among the Europeans at the fringe of other events into account. And it is also true in the qualitative dimension when looking at the conclusions of the European Council, the sanctions of the EU and its member states against Russia, the mobilisation of loans of the IMF and the establishment of the Ukraine support group. The question however is whether all that signifies only acute reactions to rapidly developing events or whether a new level of integration in EU foreign policy making can be reached. Finding an answer to

this question will certainly be one of the first tasks of the new personnel in Brussels. In particular the new structure of competences in the Commission with a clear hierarchy between the High Representative and the ENP Commissioner should be really implemented for improving the EU policy towards its neighbours, notably those in the East. This would mean that Mogherini would indeed exercise her right of supervision over the ENP Commissioner and, on the other hand, would take up her responsibility not only in negotiations with Iran, as Ashton did it (and as important as this may have been and will be), but also in processing the conditioned step by step policy towards the non-trustworthy Russia. In order to terminate the more or less naive attitude in foreign policy, the EU also needs to pay greater attention to the economic and security implications of its Eastern Partnership. This includes taking the power interests of Russia better into account without accommodating Russian violations of international law. In view of increasing numbers of Ukrainians killed, injured or displaced the Ukraine crisis cannot be seen as a little accident on the way towards a successful Eastern Partnership of the European Union. It requires a careful and detailed analysis of the parameters of the Neighbourhood Policy in the East in order to arrive at useful conclusions for a long-term strategy which would embrace security and stability in the same way as democracy promotion and economic development.

References

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