

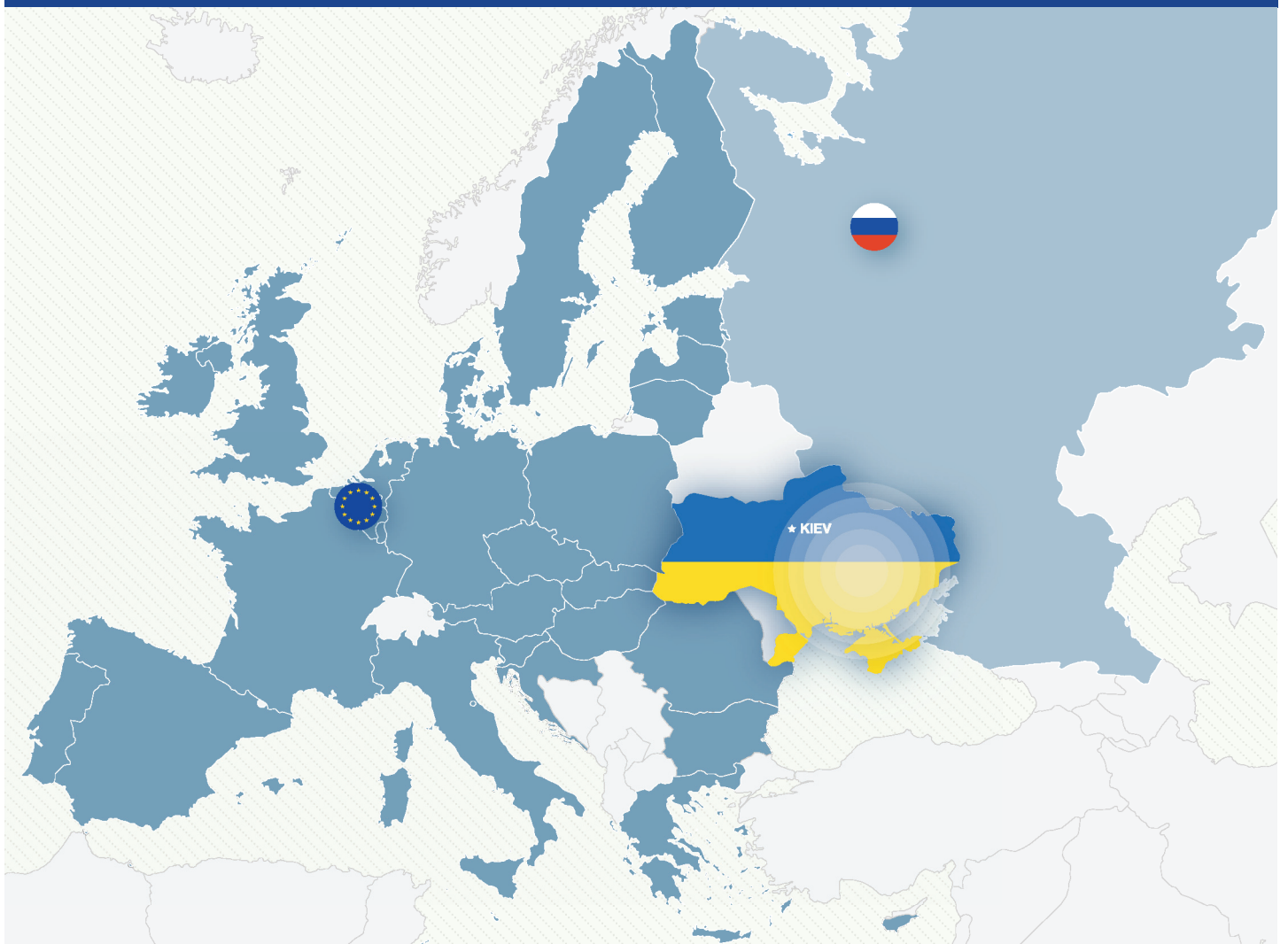
A challenge for liberal democracy

How to understand the Russian intervention in Ukraine

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The Russian intervention in Ukraine has provoked a deep crisis which will likely last for years, with profound consequences not only for Ukraine, Russia and Eastern Europe, but also for the internal situation in the European Union. The current Russian aggression is frequently seen as a profound violation of international law, breaking the rules that are fundamental for relations in Europe. It is perceived as perhaps a step towards rebuilding imperial Russia or, at the very least, an attempt to keep Ukraine within Russia's sphere of influence. However, one very important aspect is virtually neglected, namely, that Russia's Ukraine venture may have a significant impact on the future of liberal democracy in Europe and beyond.

It seems that the so-called "modern authoritarianisms," Russia among them, have become significantly more attractive to many countries and political parties in Europe and

around the world than they were just two decades ago after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union. In its report *Freedom in the world 2014*, Freedom House notes, "For the eighth consecutive year, *Freedom in the World* recorded more declines in democracy worldwide than gains."¹ The Bertelsmann Stiftung in its Transformation Index (BTI) 2014, which analyses and evaluates the quality of democracy, market economy and political management in 128 developing and transition countries, issued a "no positive transformation scorecard."² Russia is certainly one of the key players in this negative process, not only because of its domestic policy, which is becoming more and more autocratic, but also due to its foreign policy.

Against Russia's veto

In liberal democracies the free choice of international partners and alliances is a fundamental right for every country. Russia has broken this right in the case of Ukraine because it has stood firmly against Ukraine's closer cooperation and integration with the West. It has often been stressed that Russia is solely against Ukraine's potential membership in NATO. However,

¹ <http://www.freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/freedom-world-2014#.VBYDe1eHiuo>.

² <http://www.bti-project.org/reports/global-findings/>.

Moscow has all along been against Kyiv's association with the EU. Evidence of this is that Russian authorities have threatened to use protectionist measures in trade with Ukraine, if Kyiv implements the economic provisions of the Association Agreement between Ukraine and the EU, signed in June 2014, and ratified by the European and Ukrainian Parliaments in September 2014.³

The Russian political elite considers Ukraine to lie within Russia's sphere of influence and vital interests which the West cannot deny them. Putin sees Ukraine more as a territory than as a state.⁴ The change of authorities in Kyiv in February 2014

was seen by Putin and his inner circle as a challenge to the status quo that was planned, prepared and implemented by the US. The past months have shown that Russia is doing and will do all that is possible to keep Ukraine within its sphere of influence. Russia's determination and readiness to achieve this goal by defying the conventions of international law through actions such as the annexation of Crimea and military intervention in Eastern Ukraine is very high. Ironically, the Russian ruling elite (in a strange twist of reality) portrays itself in the role of the victim rather than the aggressor.⁵ Russia has been trying to depict itself as a defender of so-called traditional values, culture and religion, which, according to Moscow, are similar or even the same for Russians and Ukrainians – a bastion against the decadent and aggressive West. All of this practically means that Russia is against Ukraine's becoming a well-functioning liberal democracy.

The position of the EU and the US, that Russia does not have the right

³ Russia regards the delay of the implementation of the agreement until December next year as a victory and on 16 September 2014 repeated its threat to impose trade penalties against Kiev as soon as the deal enters into force. Financial Times. Sep 16, 2014, <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/1051b562-3d8b-11e4-8797-00144feabdc0.html#axzz3DZFMFblp>.

⁴ See, for instance, Putin's Sep 4, 2013 interview with the Russian state broadcaster Channel One - <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AAxjVjmlJrk>, commentated by Alexander J. Motyl - "Putin refers to Ukraine as a 'krai'—purposely avoiding the Russian word for country, 'strana.' I've translated it as 'land' — which is the way it frequently appears in patriotic Russian verse or songs — while the translator prefers 'territory,' which, while more prosaic, also conveys the non-state quality of Ukraine. Either way, Putin comes across as believing that Ukraine is just a place, populated by people who resemble Russians, and not an independent state with a national identity of its own." <http://www.worldaffairsjournal.org/blog/alexander-j-motyl/deconstructing-putin-ukraine>.

⁵ See, for instance, Sergey Karaganov's comment: "Westerners need to understand how their governments made a potential foe out of what was once an aspiring ally. Russia will not yield. This has become a matter of our nation's life and death." Sergey Karaganov, "Western delusions triggered conflict and Russians will not yield," Financial Times 14.08.2014, <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/05770494-3a93-11e4-bd08-00144feabdc0.html#axzz3DOO0cfoN>.

to veto Ukraine's aspirations and cannot impose its political system on its neighbours, surprised the Kremlin. The Russian ruling elite wrongly assessed the situation in two crucial aspects. Firstly, they underestimated Ukraine's ability to resist. It seems that this was because Putin and his colleagues saw Ukraine as an artificial state. In the spring of 2014, they thought that they would be able to provoke huge political protests in all the regions of Eastern and Southern Ukraine – from Kharkiv through Donbas, Kherson and Mykolaiv to Odessa – protests which would destroy Ukraine. They tried to do it, but it didn't work out as planned. The protests were too feeble and ended quickly. Therefore, they instigated the war in Donbas. Secondly, they thought that the West, particularly the EU, was weak, incoherent and not prepared to act against Russia. Probably the Kremlin was certain that the situation would be similar to the situation after the Russian-Georgian war in 2008, and that the West would acquiesce to Russia's actions. The successive waves of sanctions imposed by the EU, the US and other countries came as an unpleasant surprise to the Russian ruling elite.

Does the Western response matter?

The US and the EU have imposed limits to their actions. Military engagement is out of the question,

as has been made clear publicly many times. Therefore, the West's toolbox is limited to economic pressure, first of all sanctions, which by definition do not have an immediate impact. As mentioned above, Russia's readiness to act is profoundly different in nature. Therefore, Russia's position in the short-term is stronger than the EU's position since Russia is willing to use tools such as military aggression and the annexation of a neighbouring country's territory. Therefore, tactically, Russia is a step ahead of the EU and the US. On the other hand, strategically, the situation is much worse for Moscow – the EU and the US are not in a losing position.

First of all there is an enormous difference in the economic potentials of Russia and the West (EU and US). Russia cannot withstand long-term economic pressure. The situation can be seen as, at least to some extent, similar to the last decade of the Soviet Union, marked by the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan. Sanctions, together with lower prices of crude oil, could have a damaging impact on the Russian economy in the medium-term perspective, possibly even within one or two years. The Kremlin is aware that this scenario can materialise. This understanding provokes growing irritation in Moscow as they didn't think that EU and US reaction would be so resolute and subsequent waves of sanctions would be introduced.

The events of the last twelve months have shown that Russia has lost its position vis-à-vis Ukraine. In autumn 2013, when the then president Viktor Yanukovich decided to reject the Association Agreement with the EU and instead chose Russian aid, Putin was almost certain that Ukraine would be in his hands for many years to come. The Euromaidan changed the situation dramatically and now Ukraine is closer to the West than ever before. One can say that it is a paradox – Russia's actions which were aimed at destruction of the links between Ukraine and the West brought the totally opposite effect.

Today, the main challenge for the EU and the US is how to oppose Russia's actions and assist Ukraine in the short term. Ukraine is in an extremely difficult economic situation. The recession will reach at least nine percent of GDP and probably even more. This can provoke social tensions during the coming winter and the next year as a whole. Therefore, well-prepared long-term therapy will not be sufficient.

But a strong and decisive response against Russia's intervention in Ukraine, both in the short- and long-term, should be seen in a broader perspective. One can say that this response will play a very important role for the future of liberal democracy not only in Ukraine but also in other countries. Three issues seem to be crucial:

the choices of the Ukrainian society; the EU's role in the neighbourhood; and, last but not least, Russia's attractiveness in the EU.

The choices of the Ukrainian society

The Euromaidan was a public expression of ordinary Ukrainians who decided to oppose the authoritarian regime of Viktor Yanukovich – a state where corruption and nepotism infiltrated the judicial system, business relations, public administration and almost every aspect of everyday life.

Over the past twenty-five years Ukraine has been regularly witnessing politically motivated massive protests. At the end of the Soviet era (1990), the Revolution on Granite took place and ten years later, the Ukraine without Kuchma movement shook the country. In 2004 people took to the streets to question the legitimacy of the second-round presidential elections, which sparked the so-called *Orange Revolution*⁶. Each of the mentioned protests can be perceived as a step toward the rise of a modern nation in Ukraine, with the Euromaidan offering a clear sign that Ukrainians want a state that is based

⁶ For more, see: Gromadzki, Grzegorz and Wenerski, Łukasz. Society – the decisive player in Ukrainian politics? Bertelsmann Stiftung, February 2014. <http://isp.org.pl/uploads/pdf/625488679.pdf>.

on the rule of law and human rights instead of chronic corruption and the lawlessness of authorities. Sociological research shows that today's Ukrainians seem to be determined to demand profound changes in the country. According to opinion polls conducted in March 2014 by the Rating Sociological Group, two types of reforms are particularly desired – anti-corruption (63%) and economic reforms (61%). Other important issues were reform of the army and defence (42%) and of health care (33%).⁷

The events in Ukraine, i.e., the Euromaidan protests and the ensuing conflict with Russia, have acted as a pro-EU factor that has united Ukrainians in the idea of closer integration with the EU. The results of Rating Group research conducted in June and July show 61% of interviewed Ukrainians support EU integration of Ukraine, while only 20% prefer integration with the Customs Union

of Ukraine, Belarus and Kazakhstan (the CU). Just two month earlier in April, EU integration was preferred by 55% and the CU by 24%.⁸ Similar research conducted in February by Rating showed that EU association was supported by only 41%, while CU association was supported by only five percentage points less.⁹

These two factors – increasing support for EU integration and widespread expectations of reform – should mobilise not only the EU, but also other Western countries that consider themselves to be liberal democracies to effectively support Ukraine in creating functioning democratic institutions and implementing the rule of law. Lack of such support for Ukrainians could have multidimensional negative consequences, affecting not only Ukraine, but the entire region of Eastern Europe. If left without strategic support from the West and unsuccessful in the process of reforms, Ukraine can lose faith in liberal democracy in the country. Results of opinion polls conducted in December 2013 and January 2014 show that 51% of Ukrainians see democracy as the best political system, but 20% still prefer authoritarianism. In the event of problems with reforms, the latter percentage can quickly rise, since for 12% of the population the type of political system doesn't matter – it simply has to be effective.¹⁰

⁷ Rating Sociological Group, Attitude to situation on the East, July 22, 2014 (date of publishing) <http://www.ratinggroup.com.ua/en/products/politic/data/entry/14098/>.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Rating Sociological Group, New IRI Ukraine Poll: April 2014, Apr 25, 2014 (date of publishing), <http://www.ratinggroup.com.ua/en/products/politic/data/entry/14091/> The question asked in February by Rating does not correspond exactly with the other questions about the preferred geopolitical choices of Ukrainians cited in the text. In this survey apart from the answers: "EU" or "Customs Union" or "It is hard to say", respondents could also chose the response "other."

¹⁰ www.pravda.com.ua/rus/news/2014/01/21/7010505/.

At the same time, it should be strongly emphasised that even though the functioning of liberal democracy in Ukraine is not a foregone conclusion, there seems to be no going back to the authoritarian regime we saw before the Euromaidan or to the creation of a Russia-style authoritarian regime in Ukraine. The people of Ukraine will strongly oppose such attempts and resist again and again. Therefore, Ukraine, left to itself by the West and embraced by Russia, would be a long-term source of instability in the region.

The EU's role in the neighbourhood

The EU's performance will be a litmus test for its position as a representative of liberal democracy not only in Ukraine but in the EU neighbourhood as a whole. The question is whether the Union will be sufficiently active and effective in the Russia-Ukraine conflict and be able to efficiently support Ukraine in its efforts against Russia and assist in Ukraine's transformation into a mature democracy.

This question is extremely important for Moldova and Georgia which have signed Association Agreements along with Ukraine. They have very high expectations, both their authorities and their societies. Moldova's prime minister, Iurie Leanca, said in an interview in June

2014: "I am confident [in what] the European Union means for us, not just a kind of civilizational choice, but also the best instrument to modernise all our institutions, the best assistance, financial expertise but also pressure for us to fight against corruption, to reform the justice, to build accountable institutions..."¹¹

These countries, similar to Ukraine, are also under Russian pressure and this pressure can be turned up in the near future. For instance, Moscow can try to destabilise the situation in Moldova before and/or after the upcoming parliamentary elections on 30 November 2014. These elections are of key importance for Moldova's ability to draw closer to the EU in the coming months and years.

The actions of the EU and the West as a whole in the Russia-Ukraine conflict are being watched carefully by other East European countries participating in the Eastern Partnership, namely Belarus, Armenia and Azerbaijan. The EU's performance can also have an impact on Russian and Turkish society.

All these players, from Moldova to Turkey, are trying to assess whether the EU (and the West as a whole)

¹¹ <http://www.france24.com/en/20140617-interview-iurie-leanca-prime-minister-moldova-eu-association-agreement-chisinau-transnistria-putin-russia/>

can be a real force against an authoritarian regime. Ultimately, this is a very important test for the EU itself because it will show whether the EU is still a vibrant or already a waning power.

Russia's attractiveness in the EU

Over the last few years, especially since the outbreak of the financial crisis in 2008, an intensive growth in the popularity of anti-liberal and eurosceptic parties has been witnessed within the EU. These parties confirmed their strength in the last elections to the European Parliament, winning seats for MEPs from such countries as the UK, France, Poland, Germany, Italy, Hungary, Greece, the Netherlands and Finland. Apart from their euroscepticism, it is difficult to find another common denominator among these parties. Yet, there is another unifying element in a majority of these parties – a positive attitude towards Russia and its foreign policy.

Nevertheless, at this stage a real problem Europe has to face is the current policy of Viktor Orban, prime minister of Hungary. Unfortunately, after four years in power with a constitutional majority in the parliament, the road of changes that Orban has chosen seems to be veering away from cooperation with the EU and instead leaning towards Russia in both a real and

metaphoric sense. Orban, similarly to his counterparts from Russia, stands openly against liberal democracy, a view he proclaimed recently when addressing the Hungarian minority in Romania at the end of July 2014. During his speech, he stressed that Hungary is now undergoing the process of the construction of a state that will be an “illiberal or non-liberal” one.¹² Orban has also been considering “how systems that are not Western, not liberal, not liberal democracies and perhaps not even democracies, can nevertheless make their nations successful.” Orban sees Russia, together with Singapore, China and Turkey, among these success stories.

The Hungarian prime minister seems to be drawing closer to the Russian authorities not only in his rhetoric, but also in practice. Bearing in mind that Hungary still remains a liberal democracy and that the scale of antidemocratic actions cannot be compared with the situation in Russia, examples of similar antidemocratic policies already do exist. The latest and most spectacular is the attack of the Hungarian government on non-governmental organisations that are fully or partially financed with funds from inter-

¹² <http://www.kormany.hu/en/the-prime-minister/the-prime-minister-s-speeches/prime-minister-viktor-orban-s-speech-at-the-25th-balvanyos-summer-free-university-and-student-camp>.

national donors. During his speech in Romania last July, Viktor Orban directly stated that NGOs receiving money from abroad are not representatives of civil society but paid political activists who realise the political will of foreign interest groups. To deal with such “political activists” the prime minister of Hungary has decided to use methods that are very well known in Russia, i.e., organised raids on the offices of such organisations and thorough investigations of their activities.¹³

Viktor Orban is not only trying to implement mechanisms of internal policy in Hungary following the Russian example, but he is also moving vectors of his foreign policy closer to Russia. Recently the Hungarian parliament, controlled by Orban’s party “Fidesz,” has approved a 10 billion EUR loan from Russia to expand the Paks nuclear power station.¹⁴ The Hungarian policy of shaping closer ties with Moscow also includes its reluctance towards the EU sanctions imposed on Russia.

Hungary is only the first example of a growing disinclination towards liberal democracy among EU member states. It is an especially important example now because its prime minister has the real power to replicate Russia’s way of governing in his own country. But followers of such policies are already waiting in the wings for their chance to come. Far-right parties from all over Europe are becoming stronger and at the same time appear to be seduced by Moscow.¹⁵ Leaders of these parties see Vladimir Putin symbolically – as a person who can sternly defend the national interest of his own country and openly supports “traditional values” as opposed to “liberal disease.” Voices of support for him and for his policies can be heard from far-right and eurosceptic parties all across the Europe. Marine Le Pen, leader of the National Front in France, stated recently that she has “a certain admiration for the man [Vladimir Putin]. He proposes a patriotic economic model, radically different than what the Americans

¹³ On Sep 8, 2014 police raided two Hungarian NGOs responsible for distributing Norwegian grants. A dozen civil society organisations had been besmirched earlier this year. <http://www.economist.com/news/international/21616969-more-and-more-autocrats-are-stifling-criticism-barring-non-governmental-organisations>

¹⁴ <http://www.globalpost.com/dispatch/news/afp/140623/hungary-approves-10-billion-euro-russia-loan-nuclear-upgrade-0>

¹⁵ Of course not only European far-right parties have been seduced by Moscow. The same might be said about many far-left parties. An example is the recent vote in the European Parliament on ratification of the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement. MEPs from the European United Left/Nordic Green Left – a political grouping of European far-left and communist parties – voted almost unanimously against the Agreement with Ukraine.

are imposing on us.”¹⁶ In Austria Heinz-Christian Strache, who leads the Freedom Party of Austria, confirmed that from his point of view Putin is a pure democrat.¹⁷ Nigel Farage of the British UKIP party has also declared his admiration for the president of Russia.¹⁸ Another example is Matteo Salvini, leader of the far-right Italian party Lega Nord, who publicly commented on the so called Crimea referendum: “Viva the referendum in Crimea! Viva the free choice of the people!”¹⁹

Leaders of far right parties usually have a distaste for liberal democracy and certainly admire Vladimir Putin. In the event that any of these parties win elections in their own countries, not only in the elections to

¹⁶ This opinion was presented in an interview Marine Le Pen gave to Le Monde in September. http://www.lemonde.fr/politique/article/2014/09/05/marine-le-pen-il-faut-revenir-au-peuple_4482554_823448.html; In April this year she paid an official visit to Moscow. During a meeting with Sergei Naryshkin, speaker of the Russian state Duma, she condemned the European Union for declaring Cold War on Russia - <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/04/12/us-ukraine-crisis-le-pen-russia-idUSBREA3B09I20140412>.

¹⁷ <http://www.newrepublic.com/article/117692/fascism-returns-ukraine>.

¹⁸ After the MH17 crash in Ukraine, Nigel Farage decided to revise his views. See more: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/vladimir-putin/10979362/MH17-Vladimir-Putin-is-callous-Nigel-Farage-says.html>

¹⁹ <http://www.businessinsider.com/paul-ames-europes-far-right-is-embracing-putin-2014-4>.

the European Parliament, we could be witnesses to a political experiment that could bring very negative consequences, not only to the country involved, but also to the entire EU.

Conclusions and recommendations

The issues analysed above demonstrate that Russia’s intervention in Ukraine can also be seen as a manifestation of the rivalry between liberal democracy and modern authoritarianism. The final result of this competition is still unknown. In the case of Ukraine, Russia still has many tools at its disposal (economic pressure, among others) to throw roadblocks, at least temporarily, in Kyiv’s path towards the West. Therefore, the EU should be prepared for a prolonged crisis in its relations with Russia. One can say that this situation will last until the end of the Putin era. The EU’s readiness to assist Ukraine on its way towards becoming a mature democracy should be made one hundred percent clear, leaving no room for the smallest doubt. Putin and his circle should know that regarding this issue there is no room for manoeuvre.

It should be strongly emphasised that in the longer term, only a mature, democratic Ukraine can provide stability in an important part of Eastern Europe which borders the EU. A democratic and thriving

Ukraine would be an important example, probably decisive, for other Eastern European countries and their societies, including Russia, which are autocratic now and may in the future seek their own way to democracy. Therefore, the containment of Russia's efforts to subordinate Ukraine is in the vital interest of the EU. However, it is true that in the short- and maybe also the medium-term, Ukraine's attempts to transform into a liberal democracy cooperating closely with the EU and US will provoke very serious tensions between the EU and the West as a whole, on the one hand, and Russia, on the other. Nevertheless EU policy should be strategically oriented towards the long-term goal, namely a democratic Ukraine, and at the same time should try to minimise short-term tensions with Russia – a task which will be, to be frank, extremely difficult and almost impossible to implement.

EU policy towards Russia should be consistent and unwavering. It cannot be changed on the account of the opportunistic position of some member states who would like to return to a policy of "business as usual" with Moscow and already are not in favour of economic sanctions against Russia. Even the smallest signals of internal quarrels in the EU concerning relations with Russia are seen in Moscow as proof of the inability of the EU to be a serious player. It should be noted that the Russian ruling elite

only takes seriously a state or power that has clear goals and an interest in its own policies. Therefore, the EU's policy in response to Russia's actions in Ukraine cannot be shifted before Moscow completely stops its interference in Ukraine. It should be understood that the EU sanctions will be imposed for a long time – not for months, but for years.

It is almost certain that Russia will try to provoke misunderstandings between EU member states which could lead to a split within the Union. Moscow could exert pressure on several member states which are particularly vulnerable (the dependence on Russian gas supplies for instance). Therefore, solidarity among member states is crucial.

However, a smart EU policy towards Russia is obviously not enough to achieve the main goal, namely, a democratic and prosperous Ukraine. The EU has to seriously assist Ukraine in its modernisation efforts, including the building of a state of rule of law without pervasive corruption. EU assistance must be conditional and the Union has to require real reforms from Ukrainian government. It is a tricky issue now due to the Russian aggression. While the intervention cannot be an excuse for the Ukrainian authorities to postpone reforms, the EU should understand the difficulties that official Kyiv faces. This means that EU policy towards Ukraine should be a

balanced mixture of understanding and conditions. It seems that at least a part of Ukrainian society can support such a policy because they are interested in the swift change of their country to a state respecting rule of law. However, under the current circumstances, the EU should offer a carrot to ordinary Ukrainians. A visa-free regime could be such a carrot. It would be clear proof for Ukrainian society that the EU is indeed willing to cooperate closer with Ukraine.

Russia's intervention in Ukraine should be also seen in the regional perspective. Therefore, the EU should consider not only Ukraine, but also the other Eastern European countries, especially those which have signed Association Agreements with the EU, namely, Moldova and Georgia. They can be the next targets of Russia's negative actions. The conclusions and recommendations presented above show that a complex and extremely smart policy is needed from the EU side. It should be strongly stressed, however, that the EU is not helpless – on the contrary, in long term, it holds a much stronger hand than Russia.

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