UKRAINE 'IN BETWEEN': THE ROAD TO WAR AND KYIV'S REACTION TO THE RUSSIAN AND EUROPEAN INITIATIVES IN THE POST-SOVIET SPACE

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ABSTRACT

The regional integration initiatives undertaken by the Russian Federation and the European Union (EU) in the post-Soviet space since the 1990s and the Ukrainian response to such initiatives constitute one of the main factors (and yet not sufficiently explored) behind the geopolitical tension involving the current war in Ukraine. This research shows how Kyiv's reaction towards the aspirations of both Russia and the European Union in the post-Soviet space spurred an acute competition between Moscow and the West, which set the scene for the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

Keywords: Ukraine, Russia, European Union, Eurasian Economic Union, Integration, Geopolitical conflict.

INTRODUCTION

After the end of the Cold War, academic and political debates on the post-Soviet space revolved around not only post-Communist economic transition, but also around the European Union's (EU) and Russia's policies of institutionalization and integration in the region during the 1990s. These projects bore the same overall objective of exerting an influence over their neighbourhood to guarantee their own security and political objectives. In Averre's words: "Moscow's aim is similar to that of Brussels - to shape its external environment by establishing stable and friendly States on its periphery as a prerequisite for security" (Averre, 2009: 1696). However, the remarkable difference between the EU's and the Russian approach to their neighbourhood lies in the means employed to achieve their political aims. If, on the one hand, Russian-led initiatives such as the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) symbolized attempts to reinforce Moscow's influence in its neighbourhood, EU's policies towards the post-Soviet space, notably the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) and Eastern Partnership (EaP), adopted an approach based on the attractiveness of the EU project for countries in its vicinity. While the EU, on the one hand, represents "an economic entity tasked with managing functional integration […] Russia is a nation-State wielding the whole array of coercive and co-optative tools, much like other sovereign actors" (Bechev, 2015: 341).

Nevertheless, both the EU and Russia "are still in a state of profound mutual ambiguity" (Emerson, 2005: 1), not exactly knowing how to properly coexist within the 'same European home', and how to conciliate their interests in the post-Soviet space. On this note, Ukraine is one of the countries that better represented the clash between the Russian and the EU projects in the post-Soviet area, due to its (geo)strategic importance for both actors. Especially in the aftermath of the Ukrainian crisis of 2014, Europe witnessed a "shift from uncomfortable coexistence to competition between the EU and Russia in their common neighbourhood" (Bechev, 2015: 340), amplifying the political tensions in the post-Soviet space.

Ukraine is the country that better represents the clash between the pre-war Russian and the EU political approaches to the post-Soviet area, due to its (geo)strategic importance for both actors. Especially in the aftermath of the Ukrainian crisis of 2014, Europe witnessed a "shift from uncomfortable coexistence to competition between the EU and Russia in their common neighbourhood" (Bechev, 2015: 340), amplifying the political tensions in the post-Soviet space. Furthermore, Kyiv provides the most evident instance of the difference in means used by Russia and the EU in the implementation of their strategies toward their neighbourhood. On the one hand, the EU instruments of attractiveness based on economic incentives strongly motivated Ukraine to participate in the EU's projects in the neighbourhood. But, most importantly, the Ukrainian aspiration to become someday a member of the EU motivated Kyiv to be an active partner in the EU policies towards its Eastern neighbourhood. Indeed, in Ukraine's view, stronger relations with the EU and coveted membership would have been a crucial security guarantee for Ukraine against Russian geopolitical ambitions in the region.

While the European Union's increased presence in the post-Soviet space exacerbated Russia's concerns over a possible encroachment in the area perceived by Moscow as its sphere of influence, for the EU itself Russia represented an

inherently geopolitical actor, willing to assert its Great Power domination in the region (Ademmer et al., 2016; Browning, 2017). At the same time, much like Russia, the EU is also "impregnated with geopolitical visions aimed at ordering and organizing the space beyond its borders" (Browning, 2017: 106), whose instruments are composed of economic incentives and the attractiveness of its values (or 'Soft Power').

In this paper, we analyse pre-war European and Russian approaches towards the post-Soviet space and Ukraine's response to such initiatives during the 1990s and 2000s. The aim is to reach an understanding of how Kyiv reacted to Moscow's and EU's influence within the region and how did the past competition between these parties over their common neighbourhood prepare the ground for the present situation in Ukraine. To do that, we scrutinize the main political initiatives undertaken by Russia and the EU in terms of their regional projects and the engagement – or lack thereof – of Ukraine vis-à-vis such projects.

We found best suited to focus our attention on the political relations between Ukraine, the EU, and Russia since the 1990s, describing the gradual implementation of EU's framework policies (such as the ENP/EaP) and the Post-Soviet regional cooperation initiatives patronized by Russia (the Commonwealth of Independent States, CSTO and EEU), while evaluating Kyiv's political response. In Ukraine, both the EU's attempt at getting closer to post-Soviet countries as well as Russia's Great Power game and efforts to consolidate a sphere of influence in the region can be observed. Structurally, our first section will be dedicated to Russia's model political moves in the post-Soviet space, whereas the second one will concentrate on the EU's initiatives towards Eastern Europe. Both sections will present Ukraine's response vis-à-vis both players, exploring the political dynamics involving Kyiv, Moscow and the European Union.

RUSSIAN-LED INITIATIVES OF INTEGRATION IN THE POST-SOVIET SPACE

Ukraine's Importance to Russia

After the fall of the USSR, not only the post-Soviet space was left on the periphery of global regionalization, but Russia "went through a period of revolutionary turmoil, characterized by chaotic and haphazard decision-making" (Trenin and Lo, 2005: 4), which hindered the country's ability to exercise any role of regional leadership. Moreover, the loss of its "buffer zone" as the Eastern European States after the Soviet dissolution in 1991 cut down Russia's area of influence and, in the eyes of Moscow, left the country more vulnerable in both military and political terms. As a legacy from its period of post-Soviet weakness, authorities in Moscow had the perception that the West (including Europe), 'took advantage' of the country's debilitated economic and political state – especially during the 1990s - to undermine Russia's national security (Averre, 2009) and one of the key elements to understand this situation is Moscow's political relationship with Ukraine.

Ukraine's importance for Russia can hardly be underestimated. In short, "their shared history and the long Russian domination over parts of the Ukrainian territory left very strong cultural, ethnic, economic and political ties" (Adam, 2011: 56; Authors' translation) between these two countries. The very formation

of the Old Russian State during the 9th century resulted from the historical development of Eastern Slavic tribes, whose first political associations were centred around Kyiv (today's capital of Ukraine), constituting what became later known as the Kievan Rus; it was by that time "that an ancient Russian nationality was formed with a single language, a single culture, common State borders and history, representing the cradle of three future Slavic peoples - Russians, Belarusians and Ukrainians" (Pushkin Institute, n.d., our translation).

Both Russia and Ukraine are also considered part of an 'Orthodox civilization', sharing similar cultural values, religion, and traditions, differentiating them from other civilizations (Huntington, 1996), such as the Western one. On this note, in the year of 988 AD, by the will of Prince Vladimir I (r. 980–1015), the principality of Rus adopted Christianity as its official religion, by means of a "mass baptism" in Kyiv; not long afterward, the newly adopted Christianity would expand rapidly within Slavic lands (although not without resistance), with the so-called "Baptism of Rus" becoming one of the most influential events in the history and spiritual life of the Slavic peoples, and one the most important dates for Russians and Ukrainians alike (Bezerra, 2019). Up to this day, for example, the sign of the principality of Vladimir I (or Volodymyr the Great for Ukrainians) is the main element of the State Emblem of Ukraine (Constitution of Ukraine, 1996, Article 20).

Apart from religious similarities, Ukraine and Russia for centuries shared important political ties as well. During the 18-19th centuries, parts of the current Ukrainian territory (especially the central and eastern parts) were controlled by the Russian Empire, while during the 20th century, shortly after the 1917 Russian Revolution, Ukraine, under the rulership of the Bolsheviks, became a socialist soviet republic, included later in the USSR. When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, Ukraine and all the former Soviet republics declared their independence with the next decade being marked by attempts to foster a particular Ukrainian identity, this time detached from the Russian one.

Moscow's Approach Towards the Post-Soviet Space and Ukraine's (Dis) Interest

During the 1990s, a multilateral forum for political concertation between the former Soviet republics was established to regulate future relations of the post-Soviet nations, namely the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). Founded on December 25, 1991, the CIS was comprised of the following signatories: Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Moldova, Azerbaijan and Armenia. Based on promises of cooperation and partnership, the CIS would prove inefficient in terms of consolidating stronger institutional ties within the post-Soviet space, which was not a priority in Russia's foreign and economic policies. According to analysts "it is not much of an overstatement to say that the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) is little but an institutionalized gathering of the sovereign post-Soviet presidents" (Trenin and Lo, 2005: 9), while Moscow's relationship with the newly independent States in its neighbourhood became marked by a "regression of the empire" (Freire, 2008).

Since its inception, the CIS didn't exert any significant impact on the most important political decisions taken by its members (Weitz, 2014), and no general leadership was exercised by Russia in terms of implementing a serious integrative

project for the region (Dugin, 2016). Ukraine, for its part, saw the organization not as a platform for multilateral concertation, but as the 'definitive instrument of the end of the USSR' (Adam, 2011), an institutional representation of the country's independence from Moscow. In that regard, it is telling to observe that on the CIS official website, there is no single quotation from Ukrainian leaders about the importance of this political forum for the country.

At the beginning of the new century, however, to develop further cooperation in the military-political sphere with neighbouring countries of the post-Soviet space, Russia launched the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), considered by Moscow as an important factor "to maintain stability and ensure security in the CIS area" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2008) and a key element "of the modern security system in the post-Soviet space" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2016). The organization, while focused on the fight against international terrorism, extremism and separatism, was joined by Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan (the latter three countries are located in Central Asia). The absence of Ukraine in the CSTO, in turn, switched the geographical focus on Central Asia, whereas historically it is Russia's western borders that represent a focal point of Moscow's security concerns due to negative perceptions about NATO's [North Atlantic Treaty Organization] military encroachment.

NATO is seen by Moscow as dominated by American strategic interests, with its post-Cold War expansion perceived by Putin as an 'unwelcomed militarization' of Russia's western borders (Oldberg, 2010; Freire, 2008). While Realists have considered NATO as "essentially an American tool for managing power in the face of Soviet threat" (Mearsheimer, 1995: 14), its expansion after the end of the Cold War - when the Soviet threat no longer existed - could only be explained, in Russia's view, as directed against itself. According to the Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation of 2016, for example, Moscow sees the US (together with its Western allies) once again conducting a policy of containment to weaken Russia (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2016).

This interpretation held by Russian leaders (and by Vladimir Putin in particular) about NATO´s expansion during the late 1990s and early 2000s, as well as the installation of anti-ballistic missiles in countries such as Poland and Romania, objectively nurtured Russia's concerns about the advances of the Atlantic Alliance. By 2008 Russia openly expressed its discontent towards NATO's further expansion to the East and "notably to the plans of admitting Ukraine and Georgia to the membership in the alliance […] bringing NATO military infrastructure closer to the Russian borders" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2008). In effect,

> The admittance of Ukraine […] into NATO was considered by the Russian leadership to be a logical limit, a kind of "red line" in the realm of NATO expansion […] the possibility of admitting two neighbouring countries [Ukraine and Georgia] to the inimical military bloc looked like it could be a crushing blow to Russian strategic interests (Tsvetkov, 2017; our emphasis).

It is important to note that Russian President Vladimir Putin believes that Russia must have a sphere of influence in its neighbourhood, particularly among the former Soviet republics, due to its Great Power status and security needs. In that sense, Russia usually did not treat post-Soviet states (such as Georgia and Ukraine) as truly sovereign, once the Kremlin leadership believes it has the

right to set conditions on their policy choices, ensuring that these States do not take actions that undermine Russian interests. The blatant evidence of Moscow's opposition to the influence of Western organizations in its neighbourhood came with the Russian military intervention in Georgia in 2008, following Tbilisi's attempt to re-establish control over the separatist regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

Justified by authorities in Moscow (and especially by Dmitry Medvedev, President at that time) as an intervention intended to defend the civil populations of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the brief Russia-Georgia war of 2008 demonstrated Moscow's will of using its military power to curb NATO's advance towards its southern borders, while improving its military position and regional pre-eminence in the post-Soviet space (Oldberg, 2010; Mazat and Serrano, 2012). Similar aspects of that justification and geopolitical goals were also levelled by Russian authorities in the moments before the outbreak of war in Ukraine in 2022.

In 2010, by its turn, much due to Russia's political pressure and frequent altercations with its Ukrainian counterparts, Ukraine's president Viktor Yanukovych (who governed the country between 2010 and 2014) cancelled Kyiv's aspirations of joining NATO. In that year, the Parliament of Ukraine (Верхóвна Ráда) decided to withdraw the country's application for NATO membership (sent some years prior), a decision motivated by the desire to keep stable relations with Russia and by the realization that a Ukrainian candidacy to the Atlantic Alliance was - by that time – still premature (Mazat and Serrano, 2012).

In 2011, Moscow formed the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) alongside Belarus and Kazakhstan "to make the best use of mutually beneficial economic ties in the CIS space" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2013), while aiming to stimulate: 1) free flow of goods, capital, services and labor 2) equal access to transport and energy infrastructure and 3) common rules of customs and tariff regulation among its participants. The EEU, under the leadership of Moscow, "actively sought to attract new members, or at least to dissuade potential members from pursuing closer economic integration with the EU" (Ademmer et al., 2016: 2). For some analysts, the establishment of the EEU was an attempt by Moscow to control the post-Soviet space, creating a transnational entity that could potentially become a stronger global Eurasian actor (Cohen, 2013). Dugin (2016), for instance, asserts that behind the regional economic integration lies a greater geopolitical goal, to create a supranational Eurasian space based on civilizational ties, like the European Union.

When initial conversations were held back in 2003 on the establishment of a legal framework for a future Common [Eurasian] Economic Space between Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan, Ukraine was actively involved in the process; by that time, around 17.3% of Ukraine's exports were directed to Russia, while imports from Russia accounted for 32.9% of the country's total (Observatory of Economic Complexity, n/d). Russia then represented the single most important trade partner of Ukraine, a situation that was used by Moscow to keep Kyiv under its sphere of influence (Ademmer et al., 2016). However, on April 2011 the President of the European Commission Jose Manuel Barroso mentioned during a visit to Kyiv that Ukraine could not simultaneously join the Russian-led EEU and expect its acceptance into a Free Trade Zone (FTZ) with the European Union (Deutsche Welle, 2011).

In fact, by 2010 a law passed by the Ukrainian parliament affirmed Kyiv's commitment to ensure its integration into the European political, economic and legal space to attain [a possible] membership in the EU (Law of Ukraine on the Foundations of Domestic and Foreign Policy, 2010) thus benefitting from an economic cooperation with the bloc. With the EEU, Ukraine signed only a memorandum for 'intensified cooperation' (TASS, 2013), while not excluding a potential admittance into the Customs Union that already existed between Russia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan. However, that policy of balancing between the EU and Russia "resulted in a political crisis and a split in the Ukrainian society" (Lagutina and Vasilyeva, 2017), consisting of those who favoured a definitive approximation with the EU versus those who favoured stable and closer relations with Russia.

The Aftermath of 2014's Turmoil and Russia-Ukraine Relations

At the beginning of 2014, in response to President Viktor Yanukovych's suspension of Ukraine's association agreement (AA) with the EU, Ukrainians in favor of an approximation with Europe started to protest on the streets, claiming a change in the government in Kyiv. The social discontent behind the so-called 'Revolution of Dignity' also originated from the deep inefficiency of Ukraine's institutions, discriminations along a West-East divide and, most of all, the incapacity of the central government to implement reforms in a context of economic crisis. During that time Russia "used diplomatic persuasion to try to convince Kyiv not to align with the West" (Mazarr et al., 2018: 16), although without achieving its desired results. Years prior, the increasingly pro-EU discourse among Ukrainian circles caused "a rhetorical backlash by Russia framed as resistance to Western meddling in its privileged sphere of cultural influence" (Bechev, 2015: 345). Some even contend that for President Vladimir Putin "all nominally independent border land States […] including Ukraine, [are used] as weapons in the hands of Western powers intent on wielding them against Russia" (Kotkin, 2016: 4). For most Russian politicians,

> There were no doubts that as a result of the pro-Western revolution in Ukraine, the country would renew its efforts toward attainting membership in NATO, and in this new situation Russia would have no chance to slow the process down with negotiations (Tsvetkov, 2017; our emphasis).

To complicate things further, in March 2014 Russia annexed Crimea and started to support separatist movements in Eastern Ukraine, putting Moscow at odds with authorities in Kyiv and the EU. By that time, Russia invoked historical narratives to justify its ownership over Crimea. Historically, the Crimean Peninsula became part of the Russian Empire in 1783, during the reign of Empress Catherine II "The Great" (1762-1796), after a military victory over the Ottoman Turks who held control of the region. In 1954, however, USSR's Secretary-General Nikita Kruschev ceded Crimea to the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic. Be it as it may, since the end of the USSR in 1991, Moscow interpreted the Ukrainian sovereignty in Crimea "as the most humiliating loss of all the territories left outside of Russia after the disintegration of the Soviet Union" (Lukyanov, 2016: 35). Therefore, Crimea's annexation by Russia meant the 'correction of that historical injustice' (ibid.)

According to opinion polls, between 2014 and 2015 more than 80% of Russians were in favor of Crimea's accession to Russia, and more than 70% believed that

the event indicated the country's return to its 'traditional role of Great Power' (Levada Analytical Centre, 2016: 270-273) in world politics. The EU, by its turn, declared it wouldn't recognize "Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea nor accept the destabilization of eastern Ukraine" mentioning that "peace and stability in Europe are no longer a given [due to] Russia's violation of international law" (ibidem). Within that context, Moscow was perceived as a "political rival to Brussels and consequently as the main stumbling block to any EU–Russia cooperation" (Averre, 2009: 1708; Bechev, 2015).

For Europeans, what the 2014 crisis seemed to demonstrate was that "Russia has proven not only capable but also willing to use military force […] to maintain its primacy in the post-Soviet space" (Bechev, 2015: 341). In Ukraine, on the other hand, many started to feel as if their country was once more slipping behind a new kind of 'iron curtain', with Moscow's actions provoking "even deeper hostility toward Russia not only among Ukraine's elites but also among its broader population" (Trenin, 2016: 26). In 2015 for instance, in a discourse before the UN, Ukrainian president Petro Poroshenko (who governed the country from 2014 to 2019) exposed his personal views about the situation involving Crimea, mentioning,

> My country has become the object of external aggression. This time the aggressor is Russia - our neighbouring country, a former strategic partner […] All this is happening against the background of treacherous rhetoric about fraternal peoples, common history, related languages and a "destined"common future. We are dealing with a desire to return to imperial times with spheres of influence, representing a desperate attempt to assert itself at the expense of others.

Not only Poroshenko, but other Ukrainian politicians started to label Russia as an 'aggressor country' and as an 'occupying power', which violated Ukraine's sovereignty by disobeying international law. The post-revolution government in Kyiv was thus became characterized by its sympathy for the West and its anti-Russian rhetoric. According to the Kremlin, the events of 2014 in Ukraine consisted of a full-fledged coup d'état to topple a pro-Russian leader, a coup that was supported and welcomed by the West. Notwithstanding, in 2019 an amendment to the preamble of the Ukrainian Constitution affirmed "the European identity of the Ukrainian people and the irreversibility of the European and Euro-Atlantic course of Ukraine" (Constitution of Ukraine, 1996, preamble; our translation), while a different addition to the Constitution established that the president should work for the "implementation of the strategic course of the State towards the acquisition of full membership […] in the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization" (Constitution of Ukraine, 1996, Article 102; our translation).

THE EU'S MODEL OF INTEGRATION IN THE POST-SOVIET SPACE

EU's Importance to Ukraine and Kyiv's Long-Term Aspirations

At the root of the relations between Ukraine and the EU lies the ontological question about the nature of Europe and what could and could not be considered as 'Europe'. Ukraine has long aspired to join the European Union. Under Leonid Kuchma's administration during the 1990s, a vast program of reforms

was adopted in Ukraine to strengthen ties with the West and the EU (Kubicek, 2005), while at the same time keeping stable relations with Russia. The rhetoric adopted by Kuchma stressed how Ukraine should endeavour to create a link with the EU from a cultural as well as from an institutional point of view.

At that time, the legal framework for EU-Ukraine relations was based on the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement signed in 1994, representing the first agreement of this kind between the EU and one of its neighbours in the East. However, even after numerous political contacts, parliamentary exchanges and meetings at ministerial levels, in practice the PCA signed in 1994 had mainly an economic character; on the one hand, the EU lamented the slow pace of Ukraine's implementation of legal provisions, whereas Ukraine was dissatisfied with the restrictions imposed by the European bloc on its exports of steel and textile (Kubicek, 2005). Already in 1996, Kuchma announced that one of the main priorities of Ukraine's foreign policy was to obtain EU membership.

The presidential decree "Strategy of Ukraine's Integration in the European Union" issued in 1998 and others that followed further emphasized the so-called 'European choice' of Ukraine, based on the consideration that the EU membership could provide Ukraine not only political but also economic development while securing Kyiv against the 'Russian menace' (Kubicek, 2005). For its part, the EU was aware of the importance of showing engagement with Kyiv, considering that instabilities in Ukraine could have negative effects on the entirety of the bloc. However, Ukraine was excluded from the group of countries to join the EU during its first 'big' enlargement in 2004, when the Czech Republic, Estonia, Cyprus, Latvia, Lithuania, Hungary, Malta, Poland, Slovenia, and Slovakia achieved EU membership. Nevertheless, when the Orange Revolution happened in Ukraine in 2004, the EU's interest in Kyiv grew stronger, culminating in Ukraine's inclusion in the European Neighbourhood Policy and the Eastern Partnership (EaP).

EU's Approach towards its Eastern Neighbourhood and Ukraine's Participation

Following its 'big' enlargement in 2004, suddenly the European Union was surrounded by a 'new' neighbourhood of States, which required the elaboration of new policies to deal with Europe's neighbours under a single political framework, represented by the European Neighbourhood Policy (European Commission, 2004). The ENP encompassed 10 southern neighbours (Morocco, Egypt, Algeria, Tunisia, Lebanon, Libya, Jordan, Palestine, Israel and Syria) and 6 Newly Independent States (NIS), namely: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Ukraine, Moldova, Belarus and had the purpose of stabilizing - politically as well as economically – Europe's neighbourhood, protecting the EU from potential instabilities at its borders.

One year prior, according to the Commission of the European Communities (2003: 6) the ENP was intended to "avoid […] new dividing lines in Europe and to promote stability and prosperity within and beyond the new borders of the Union". To that end, and to foster democracy, rule of law and respect for human rights in Eastern Europe, the EU's strategy consisted in offering participation in the bloc's market to those partners that successfully implemented reforms in accordance with the EU's Acquis Communautaire (a whole set of duties and

rights deriving from the European Union's law). Nevertheless, since the ENP covered only those countries that were excluded from any perspective of EU membership, its efforts to incentivize States to align with EU's legislations showed little results (Delcour, 2011).

The first element put into practice to achieve the objectives of the ENP was the elaboration of Action Plans (AP), which established the political and economic reforms required for each partner country to strengthen their cooperation with the EU (European External Action Service, 2016). At the same time, the EU recognized the 'conspicuous divergences' of the partner countries and consequently the necessity to adopt a tailored approach to each of them. The AP signed between Ukraine and the EU in 2005, for instance, had the following requirements: compliance with electoral standards established by the OSCE both in parliamentary and presidential elections, approximation of the country's legislation with that of the EU, implementation of independence for the judiciary branch and the development of better administrative capacities.

Partner countries were incentivized to proactively set goals and implement the reforms agreed upon with the EU. When it comes to the EU's relations with Ukraine, more specifically, "the European Commission proposed to move beyond mere cooperation to a significant degree of economic integration in return for concrete progress in terms of legal approximation" (Loo et al., 2014: 4). In fact, the ENP promoted "a comprehensive and ambitious agenda for domestic political, economic and institutional reform [in Ukraine] converging towards what is seen to be an 'EU model'" (Bechev and Nicolaïdis, 2010: 478). However,

> Being included in a single policy framework together with countries that had no accession perspective [to the EU] was considered by Ukraine as a way to discard its European aspirations. As Ukraine considered its position within the ENP to be quite specific, it met any EU attempt to develop multilateral instruments with reluctance (Delcour, 2011: 76).

Under the auspices of President Viktor Yushchenko, who assumed power after the 'Orange Revolution', Ukraine's integration with the EU and NATO became once again a guideline for Kyiv's foreign policy (Sasse, 2008). In 2006, the European Union stepped up its commitment to achieve economic integration with countries outside the block through its "Global Europe Strategy" and Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreements (DCFTAs). Notably, Ukraine was the first ENP country to open negotiations for an Association Agreement already in 2007, whereas negotiations for a DCFTA between Kyiv and the EU were launched one year later.

In 2009, the ENP was further complemented by the Eastern Partnership, including once again: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Ukraine, Moldova, and Belarus and aimed to foster multilateral cooperation between the EU and countries in the eastern region of Europe. However, the EaP still did not address Kyiv's ambitions to join the EU. The ENP and EaP were both reviewed twice, in 2011 (after the Arab Spring) and in 2015, as a result of the Ukrainian crisis. The latter, particularly, had an important impact not only on future EU policies towards the post-Soviet space but also on Kyiv's foreign policy orientation towards Europe and NATO.

The Aftermath of 2014's Political Turmoil and EU-Ukraine Relations

The basis upon which the Association Agreement (AA) between Ukraine and the European Union was created involved Kyiv's aspiration to be considered not only 'as a mere neighbour's to Europe, but 'as part of Europe' itself. Although it did not openly mention any EU membership perspective for Kyiv at that time, the document nevertheless did not exclude such a development in the long term either. However, on the eve of the EaP Vilnius Summit in 2013, Ukraine announced that it would not sign the AA with the EU, so as not to upset its economic as well as political relations with Moscow. That decision sowed discontent among the Ukrainian population, initiating what became later known as the 'Euro-Maidan revolution'.

The acting Ukrainian president Viktor Yanukovych was forced to flee the country and in June 2014 the temporary Ukrainian president appointed by the parliament, Oleksandr Turchynov, proceeded to finally ratify – through a 'fast-track' procedure - the whole content of the Agreement, which was signed later the same year. Nevertheless, even after Kyiv's approval, some EU members were still not favourable to the signature of the AA with Ukraine (the Netherlands for example), so the document entered into force only in 2017. The most contested points of the AA concerned EU membership perspectives for Ukraine, as well as the free movement of labour and access to EU funding programs.

For the European Commission, the Agreement was "the main tool for bringing Ukraine and the EU closer together […] [promoting] deeper political ties, stronger economic links and the respect for common values" (European Commission, n.d.). In practical terms, Kyiv benefited from the implementation of the economic measures included in the Agreement with the EU, above all in terms of the abolition of tariffs on many agricultural and industrial products exported from Ukraine to the bloc. As a result, in 2017 the European Union accounted for approximately 40% of Ukraine's total exports; later on, in 2019 Ukraine's exports to the EU amounted to €19.1 billion, representing a 48,5% increase in comparison to 2016, whereas the number of Ukrainian companies with access to the European went from 11.700 in 2015 to more than 14.500 in 2019 (European Commission, n.d.).

However, despite improvements in bilateral economic relations, Ukraine still faced difficulties in terms of aligning its legislation with EU's regulations and standards (above all in the judicial sector) (Romanyshyn, 2019), with a possible future accession to the EU and NATO being complicated by the annexation of Crimea by Russia and by political and military disputes over territories in Donetsk and Luhansk in the eastern parts of the country. At the same, this understanding of Ukraine as 'EU's neighbour', rather than the 'centre of its world', of an adjacent element to a 'wider' Europe, places Kyiv not quite on the same 'footing' with other members of the bloc.

> At the heart of the EU's relationship with surrounding countries lies a fundamental asymmetry of power which in turn feeds the EU-centric nature of the enterprise […] even […] the more inclusive notion of 'neighbourhood' – still reflects the centrality of the EU [...] an exercise of a central power 'managing' its periphery (Bechev and Nicolaïdis, 2010: 479).

Thus, Ukraine's position vis-a-vis the expanding normative and value-driven initiatives undertaken by the EU on the one hand and Russia's security-motivated institution building on the other put Kyiv at a crossroads, whilst the country was seen by both the EU and Russia as an important element for their strategies in the post-Soviet area.

CONCLUSION

Years before the Ukrainian political crisis of 2014, European powers could hardly accept the continued existence of old-fashioned spheres of influence in the continent. On this note, the EU saw negatively any Russian attempt to increase its political hold within the post-Soviet space and especially towards Ukraine in particular. On the other hand, the process of EU enlargement during the 2000s was seen by Moscow as a challenge to its regional leadership, thus fomenting new divisions in Europe along the East/West cleavage. With NATO's post-Cold War expansion and the EU's addition of former Soviet satellites, a new cycle of mistrust took place between Moscow and European leaders, a situation that became even more acute after 2014 and in light of the events that led to the Russian-Ukrainian war of 2022.

In fact, since the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 Moscow feared the EU's gradual approximation with Ukraine. On the other hand, due to the size of its population, territory and geostrategic location, neither Russia nor the EU could refrain from engaging Ukraine politically to advance their interests. Russian-led initiatives, however, did not particularly attract the political elites in Kyiv whereas since the 1990s Ukraine seemed to gravitate more towards the 'European project'. Nevertheless, during the 2000s Kyiv still managed to not alienate Russia completely, as demonstrated by Ukraine's renunciation of its bid to join NATO in 2010.

Moscow's incorporation of Crimea in 2014 further antagonized the political elites in Kyiv, consolidating Ukraine's foreign policy orientation towards the EU and the affirmation of the country's 'European choice', jeopardizing its relations with Russia. Although being internally split between a pro-European and a pro-Russian side, especially in Eastern parts of the country, forecasts for the future normalization of political relations between Kyiv and Moscow are now extremely uncertain. In terms of Ukraine's future in Europe, it remains to be seen whether Kyiv will be able to regain control over its Eastern parts to renew its aspiration for candidacy to the European Union and maybe possibly even NATO. The fact is that: by being geographically positioned among two influential and powerful neighbours, Ukraine suffered the effects of both the EU's 'unwillingness' to accept the country as 'more than a neighbour' and Russia's 'willingness' to keep it under its sphere of influence.

The road to war in Ukraine, therefore, was marked by the perception of Russian authorities that Kyiv should not move on its own towards Europe and especially towards NATO, while Brussels - up until the outbreak of the conflict - was hesitant to take concrete steps to attend Ukraine's long-held aspirations to be accepted in the European block.

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