

**CICERO FOUNDATION GREAT DEBATE PAPER**

**No. 14/01**

*January 2014*

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**EUROMAIDAN:  
RUSSIA AND THE EUROPEAN CHOICE  
OF THE UKRAINIANS**

**JAN PIEKŁO**

*Director*

*Polish-Ukrainian Cooperation Foundation (PAUCI Foundation)*

*Warsaw and Kyiv*

Cicero Foundation Great Debate Paper No. 14/01

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## **The Cicero Foundation**

FRANCE

13, rue Washington

75008 PARIS

Tel. +33 1 45 62 05 90

Fax +33 1 45 62 05 30

Email [info@cicerofoundation.org](mailto:info@cicerofoundation.org)

THE NETHERLANDS

Hondertmarck D 45

6211 MB MAASTRICHT

Tel. +31 43 32 60 602

Fax +31 43 32 60 828

[cicerofoundation@gmail.com](mailto:cicerofoundation@gmail.com)

## **Euromaidan:**

### **Russia and the European Choice of the Ukrainians**

Jan Piekło

#### *Introduction*

The history of EU-Ukraine relations is a tale of missed opportunities, paradoxes, and misunderstandings. Almost a decade ago, just after the Orange Revolution, the EU and the Western political leadership missed a chance to involve Ukraine in the European integration process. At that time a wave of enthusiasm swept the world and expectations were high. The last months Ukrainians impressed the international community again, proving that they are an important and proud nation, which deserves to be treated as a valuable partner by the democratic West. The Orange Revolution of 2004-2005 had a potential to:

- Change the geopolitical balance in Europe
- Redefine the role of Russia as a European player
- Expand a culture of European democracy to the East
- Open a way for Ukraine to future integration into EU and NATO

However, these hopeful expectations survived only for a short while. When the new Ukrainian leadership expected from the EU a word of encouragement, Brussels, tired after the last wave of enlargement, kept silent. French and German objections plus Western fear of the Kremlin's reaction took away the best 'carrot', which worked well in the case of the Central European countries: an offer of an EU membership perspective. Instead the EU proposed Ukraine and other post-Soviet non-EU states a new instrument, the European Neighborhood Policy. Kyiv's immediate reaction was one of deep disappointment and frustration. Ukrainians consider themselves to be fully-fledged Europeans, not 'neighbors' of Europe, as for example the Maghreb countries. Although Ukraine accepted funding from the ENPI (European Neighborhood Policy Instrument), there was no widespread information about the structure of this assistance within the recipient countries. The monitoring

mechanism was weak and not transparent. This gave an impression that European bureaucrats transferred funds to Kyiv on the basis of an implicit deal: we pay you, you can spend it as you like and we don't ask, but instead you have to give up the rhetoric on an eventual future EU membership. It is not surprising that such an approach did not stimulate a genuine drive to modernize the country.

Other internal reasons were a lack of consensus among the main political factions in Ukraine, corruption, stagnation, and suspension of the necessary reforms. All this contributed to the emergence of a "Ukraine fatigue" in the West. On the other hand, a symmetrical syndrome of "EU fatigue" was born in Ukraine, deepening the frustration and giving munitions to supporters of a "pragmatic" approach, such as was supported by the Party of Regions.

### *The EU's Missed Opportunities*

The real cold shower came later, at the 2008 Bucharest NATO Summit, where Ukraine and Georgia were denied NATO MAPs (Membership Action Plans). Russian President Vladimir Putin was also invited to Bucharest and he managed to reach all his objectives. He successfully opposed the US plans to deploy a missile defense system in Poland and the Czech Republic, and with some help of 'old Europe' member states (France and Germany in particular) he killed Georgia's and Ukraine's NATO membership bids. It was the end of the transatlantic dream for Ukrainian President Viktor Yushchenko and Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili, the leaders of both post-Soviet countries. Then, in August 2008, Russia went to war in Georgia. The reaction of the West to this crisis was not very coherent and the protests were mostly limited to verbal declarations. Instead of condemning the Kremlin, many EU countries accused Georgian President Saakashvili of launching this war and provoking the Russian response.

The best time for strengthening the pro-democratic, pro-European, and transatlantic trends in Eastern Europe has passed, the goals were missed and people's enthusiasm wasted. Viktor Yanukovych, the presidential candidate of the Party of Regions who, in 2004, forged the presidential election (what triggered the Orange Revolution), won in 2010 the next

election, beating his Orange competitor – Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko. The OSCE reported that this election was fair and met the democratic standards. As the new president of Ukraine, Yanukovich declared to continue the European integration process and he began to consolidate his power. His declaration on the neutral status of his country got a positive response in most ‘old’ EU member states and his phrase about a ‘pragmatic approach’ was welcomed in Brussels, Berlin, Paris, and Rome. Yanukovich’s first moves were aimed at strengthening his position. By manipulating the judiciary he overturned the 2004 constitutional amendments (a move which was criticized by the Venice Commission), returning to a semi-presidential system. This decision raised questions about the democratic legitimacy and the rule of law.

With growing concern we observed the reversal of the democratic achievements in Ukraine. In 2010 the Party of Regions manipulated the local elections. Journalists and organizations of civil society reported cases of intimidation and violation of the freedom of the press, local NGOs came under heavy pressure. Then followed the selective arrests and trials of Yanukovich’s political opponents, including former Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko and Yuriy Lutsenko, the former Minister of the Interior. Ukraine was downgraded in the Freedom House Index “Freedom in the World 2011” from ‘free’ to ‘partly free’ status. The country began to move into a ‘soft authoritarian’ model of governance. Yanukovich has already crossed the red line. If he accepted the EU conditions, he would lose the support of his oligarchs and might, after the next presidential elections, even end up behind the bars. This pushed him to follow the path of his Northern neighbor – Aleksander Lukashenko. In fact, he didn’t really care much about Ukraine’s integration into the EU. He just minded his own business - keeping the power by all possible means.

The EU continued to treat Yanukovich and Prime Minister Azarov as credible partners when finalizing the procedure of signing and then implementing the Association Agreement (AA) with the EU. The refusal of Yanukovich to sign this Agreement in Vilnius in November 2013 came as a shock. Suddenly the Ukrainian president put a new condition on the table: the EU should invite Russia as a participant in the negotiations. This was the end of the illusions for Brussels, but not the end of the pro-European saga in Ukraine. The Ukrainian civil society, social activists, students, and opposition leaders went into the streets of Kyiv and other

Ukrainian cities, demanding the resignation of the government and the signing of the AA with the EU. Maidan - Kyiv's main square - was occupied by the demonstrators and rebaptized Euromaidan. The site became the theater of the biggest ever pro-European manifestation on our continent. Paradoxically, it is not taking place in the EU countries, which struggle with a deep crisis, but in Ukraine, a former Soviet republic, which gained independence in 1991, just 23 years ago. The Western world listens with admiration and astonishment to the voices of the Ukrainian civil society, protesting against the selective use of law and the violation of freedom. Ukrainians heard the emotional words of support and prominent EU and US politicians paid a visit to greet protesters at Euromaidan in Kyiv (this has never happened at the time of the Orange revolution).

The Ukrainian authorities' reaction to the developments is a mix of fear, disappointment, the temptation to use force in order to crush the protests, and a declared (but not proven) willingness to "renegotiate" the AA with the EU. This shows that the Ukrainian government's policy lacks a clear strategy and that the country is becoming less stable and more vulnerable to Russian pressure. Yanukovich is learning - like Lukashenko some time ago - that he got trapped: without Russian support his regime cannot survive. Support for Yanukovich and his Party of Regions in the Ukrainian population dropped to below 18 percent. The only way for him to win the 2015 presidential election is to falsify the results. This is only possible with strong Russian support.

### *Russia Does not Accept Ukraine's Statehood*

Russia has a problem with accepting Ukraine as a sovereign state. Losing Ukraine was a deep trauma. Kyievan Rus was the origin and the spiritual center of the Russian Orthodox tradition. Without Kyiv, is the Kremlin's message, Russia becomes an organism lacking in spiritual essence. Its soul remains enshrined in the onion shaped golden cupolas of the churches on the hilly bank of the Dnepr river. Paradoxically, these are the same churches, which the Soviets had once tried to destroy so brutally.

Former President Yushchenko's concept of building a national identity made use of selected moments of common history when Ukrainians suffered most from the hands of Russians, or

(later) Soviets. He supported the regional Ukrainian tradition and promoted the Ukrainian language. Yushchenko used historical symbols and myths, which is characteristic for the Slavic tradition (Serbs did the same with the famous battle of Kosovo Polije). Yushchenko raised the issue of the Holodomor, the artificial famine engineered by the Soviets in the Ukrainian Soviet Republic in 1932 and 1933 at the order of Stalin. The death toll of this famine was around 3 million people. When Yushchenko demanded to recognize it as a genocide, Moscow reacted with anger and frustration. Yushchenko's policy on joining NATO, together with the war in Georgia, contributed to a further deterioration of the Ukrainian-Russian relations.

Yushchenko's successor Viktor Yanukovych represents the Russian speaking region of Donetsk, which has a completely different pro-Soviet tradition. At the time of the presidential election in 2004 he was supported by the Kremlin and President Putin congratulated him twice for winning the election. He was perceived as a puppet of the Kremlin. After his victory in 2010 over Yulia Tymoshenko the situation was not the same as 5 years before. Ukraine is no more the same country and also the Russian Federation has changed. Ukraine managed to develop a solid basis for a democratic system with a vibrant civic society, while Russia went in an opposite direction, strengthening the central power of the state and limiting individual freedoms. The oligarchic group Yanukovych represents is not interested in becoming completely subordinated to Moscow. And Moscow treats Yanukovych with a dose of distrust and skepticism, although right now it is difficult to say what kind of game both play.

In the Eastern European and Black Sea regions, Ukraine under Yanukovych followed the Kremlin line. This means that neither the new pro-EU Moldovan government, nor the government in Georgia can count on cordial relations with Kyiv. In spite of the Ukrainian 2013 OSCE chairmanship Europe also learnt soon that it was impossible to involve Ukraine in solving 'frozen' conflicts in places, such as Transnistria and the South Caucasus.

It is clear that it is Putin's top priority to strengthen the economic and military position of Russia vis-à-vis the West and NATO. His most ambitious political project is the creation of a common economic zone and the launch of a customs union, consisting of at least the

Russian Federation, Kazakhstan, Belarus, and Ukraine. Without Ukraine such a project makes only a limited sense. Therefore Moscow is using all possible means to keep this country out of the EU, wanting to bring it back under Russian control. After the crackdown on the opposition in Belarus, Moscow is in almost full control of Belarus. Now Ukraine is the main target for Russia. The Kremlin has reached an advanced stage of regaining influence over its 'closest neighborhood'. In such a situation European expectations concerning engaging Russia in a genuinely constructive cooperation, helping to stabilize the situation in Eastern Europe and the Caucasus, seem to be totally unrealistic. Moscow knows very well that it has a key to solve the regional 'frozen conflicts' (as a matter of fact Russia itself created them), as well as energy problems. Without Russian participation nothing can be done. We can even say that to some extent today's Europe with its frozen conflicts is hostage to Russia.

#### *The EU Needs a Common Eastern Europe Policy*

The EU itself is deeply divided over the issue how to approach Russia and there is no such thing like a Common European Eastern policy. The key EU country, able to initiate a European policy toward Moscow, is Germany. After the last election, however, and the formation of the Grand Coalition government, Social Democrats took over the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Germany's new Russia policy coordinator, Gernot Erler, who is known as a friend of Russia, believed that "Russia has played a very constructive role in dealing with international conflicts." He has already said in an interview, published on the DGAP website: "Russia sees the rapprochement of Ukraine toward the EU as a kind of border violation. You can't just ignore the centuries of relations between Russia and Ukraine. That isn't something that can be fixed through a technical process" (<https://ip-journal.dgap.org/en/ip-journal/topics/ukraine-eu-has-made-too-many-misjudgments>). This is a warning signal confirming that the EU will have a big problem with drafting a common policy which could oppose the neo-imperialistic policy of the Kremlin. This also means that Central European and Baltic countries might feel less comfortable, because similar arguments could also be used to justify a stronger Russian influence elsewhere in the region.

In 2014 elections take place for the European Parliament and a new European Commission will be appointed. We can be sure that Putin will make a good use of this time for expanding his Eurasian Union project, as well as for strengthening Russia's position as a 'global power'.

The EU has a rather limited capacity to respond properly to this challenge, but, in cooperation with NATO, should prepare a plan in case of a black scenario of possible conflicts and deepening chaos spreading through the region. The strengthening of transatlantic relations and a rapprochement between the Old Continent and the US could be the only long-term option for reversing this negative trend. It will take time and it needs a political will on both sides, as well as consensus among the EU member states.