

# The EU should abandon ‘soft power’ in Ukraine and adopt a new approach focused on geostrategic concerns

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*Ukraine’s refusal to sign an Association Agreement with the European Union has been seen as a significant blow for the EU’s neighbourhood strategy. **André Härtel** writes that this failure stems from the EU’s misunderstanding of Ukrainian politics, its inability to act coherently on foreign policy, and its preoccupation with normative aims such as democratisation. He argues that the EU requires a new approach which puts aside ‘soft power’ and seeks to integrate Ukraine into Europe – irrespective of the country’s progress in implementing democratic reforms.*



Following the Ukrainian government’s surprise decision not to sign an Association Agreement with the EU, Brussels has been left with the remnants of its European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP). Instead of the ‘ring’ of stable and democratising states it was hoping for, the EU is now confronted with a fierce and ever more escalating power struggle between pro-European protesters and a repressive government in its largest neighbouring state. As far back as last summer, when Russia banned Ukrainian imports for several weeks, the EU and most of its Member States have been little more than spectators in a Moscow-led reorganisation of the post-Soviet space. How could things get so bad and what are the ramifications for Brussels?

## EU Foreign Policy on Ukraine

Three factors were decisive in the failure of the European Neighbourhood Policy vis-à-vis Ukraine. First, Brussels and nearly all EU Member State governments have misinterpreted the intentions of the Ukrainian leadership. The regime, led by President Viktor Yanukovich, had in the past been regarded as tough and ‘semi-authoritarian’, but nevertheless reformable and ultimately geared towards improving the country. To the contrary, it is a well organised elite network which serves its own economic self-interest without any regard or the slightest sense of responsibility for its citizens.

This lack of attention by the EU is all the more puzzling, especially since Yanukovich’s power base – the so called Donetsk clan – had systematically infiltrated the entire political system since 2002. The shock experienced by the Brussels establishment at the EU’s Vilnius Summit in November 2013 is a direct consequence of the lack of understanding of Ukrainian politics. Ukraine’s foreign policy – due to the nature of the regime – does not reflect the foreign policy of consolidated Western democracies: it is geared toward providing the best possible outcomes for the oligarchy which is in control of the country. The slightest hint at a boycott by Moscow was sufficient to make Viktor Yanukovich pull back from *evrointegracija* (European integration), despite all the political capital invested by Brussels in the Association Agreement over the years.



Catherine Ashton and Viktor Yanukovich, Credit: European External Action Service (CC-BY-SA-3.0)

## Geostrategic Factors

Second, the EU's foreign policy, coming as it does from a self-proclaimed 'soft power', has been characterised by a distinct lack of geostrategic thinking. It was obvious, at least as far back as late 2011 – when Vladimir Putin announced his plans for a Eurasian Union – that Moscow would not let Ukraine walk into any trade or association deal with the EU.

Brussels, on the other hand, was totally unprepared to deal with this situation. For one, its own foreign policy has rested largely on conditionality and attempts at 'resocialisation' in place of the classic instruments of power. At the same time, there was hardly any consensus among the Member States regarding their approach to Russian opposition to Ukraine's association with the EU. The argument often made by EU leaders, including German Chancellor Angela Merkel in a speech shortly before the Vilnius Summit, that the Eastern Partnership (EaP) is not directed against Russia, has had little effect. Indeed, Moscow clearly perceives the ENP as a threat to its ambitions in its own neighbourhood.

### **Lack of Discourse on Ukraine**

Third, since Ukraine's independence, the EU has never had a proper strategic debate, let alone arrived at an agreement on where the country should fit in the European project. Nevertheless, it is clear that Ukraine's future could be the key to preventing a new division between a democratic West and an autocratic East on the European continent. Ukraine is also the strategic centrepiece of the EU's Eastern Neighbourhood, which at present is more a geopolitical grey zone, facilitating the domestic fragility Europe is now facing. Ignorance and scepticism on the issue are the prevailing themes among the large EU Member States, with the notable exception of Poland.

This failure is first and foremost an embarrassment for Germany, the EU's supposed Eastern interlocutor, which has consistently refused to lead the strategy on Ukraine. Even worse, Berlin has continuously pushed an appeasement stance toward Russia, which has only encouraged Moscow to flex its muscles in its Western neighbourhood. Considering the present circumstances and the EU's generally weak foreign policy, it is little surprise that the Member States have been unable to come together and keep up sufficient pressure on Kiev to choose a European future.

### **A New EU Policy on Ukraine?**

The conditionality approach and the linking of foreign policy incentives to domestic reforms and democratisation have not been effective. The regime is reorienting itself toward Russia; while despite all of the efforts to promote democratisation, the country's domestic political situation is in danger of mirroring that in Belarus. The EU should adopt a new three-point strategy to avoid this. First, Brussels should de-couple strategic and idealistic goals, as policy incentives are unlikely to prove successful with a regime that is unresponsive to societal demands and interests. It should instead foster a genuine geostrategic dialogue and make it clear that in the short term the Eastern Partnership is more important than democratisation.

Second, in order to be credible, the EU urgently needs to be seen as a 'hard power' in its foreign policy. This can be achieved by better policy coordination with the Member States. In this respect, getting Ukraine to integrate into Europe, leaving aside the idea of membership, will require a large amount of financial support to overcome the country's structural dependence on Russia. At the same time, sanctions should be applied against repressive leaders in a more systematic and assertive way. Finally, the EU institutions should be more active in supporting civil society and youth movements in Ukraine. In the long run, this kind of engagement is more effective at democratisation than wrangling with top-level politicians, who rarely implement significant reforms anyway.

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*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the Council of Europe, EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.*

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## About the author

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André Härtel is currently a political advisor and internal researcher at the Council of Europe. He holds a PhD from Jena University, Germany, and mainly works on the domestic and foreign policies of Russia, Ukraine and Belarus.



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