

Ukraine and EU: the Politics of Changing Generations

Article by Anna Korbut

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While the future of enlargement is unclear within the EU, in Ukraine the push to move closer to the EU and NATO has kept momentum. Chatham House Fellow Anna Korbut analyses the evolutions in this push against the backdrop of political change and conflict with Russia. German Presidency of the EU Council in mid-2020, she argues, is an opportunity to develop connections and strengthen both the EU and Ukraine in the face of common challenges like climate change.

In February 2019, the Ukrainian Parliament integrated the European and EuroAtlantic vector for Ukraine into the Constitution with 335 votes out of 450, a step which reflected the previous years' push from within Ukraine to bring the country closer to the EU and NATO. This push has intensified at a time where membership prospects for Ukraine are distant at best and many politicians and intellectuals from the current generation in the West – including contributors to the initial stages of this European and Euro-Atlantic architecture, and many who will become leaders of the next generation – shun even the idea of new members in their community. In Ukraine, however, this push is seen as an opportunity to build a wealthier, more just and secure state and society, and an effort to counter the rebuilding of spheres of influence by the more powerful states where the law of power would replace the power of law.

Two presidents, one goal

A key component of former Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko's political agenda which was supported by the governing coalition, this push towards the EU and NATO mostly stood on three pillars during his presidency (2014-2019).

One was assertive pro-integration rhetoric domestically and internationally. Poroshenko's administration used every opportunity to remind the EU and NATO of their open-door policy towards new EU members and to rebuff talk of changing the principles of Western blocs to accommodate a Russia forcefully seeking to bring its neighbours into its exclusive orbit of influence. According to a survey by the Democratic Initiatives Foundation and Kiev International Institute of Sociology, 53 per cent of Ukrainians supported integration with the EU when polled in November 2019. Just 13 per cent would have opted for integration with the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union (the survey did not cover the Russia-annexed Crimea and the parts of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions not controlled by Kiev).

The second pillar was the implementation of the technical component envisaged by the Association Agreement with the EU, harmonisation with NATO standards and other frameworks. A crucial aspect of the integration effort, this process was intense in some aspects, half-hearted in others, and produced uneven results. Ukraine started building an infrastructure to fight high-level corruption and kicked off reforms to public administration, decentralisation and the banking system. The rule of law reform, key to any transformation, was launched but it has failed to ensure meaningful results. Ukraine embarked on legal approximation with the EU's *acquis communautaire* (the body of law accumulated by the EU), something the EU met with a mix of political,

macrofinancial and technical support, as well as pressure on those in power to deliver on their commitments and on the requirements of Ukraine's civil society. All this in the context of enormous political, economic and psychological strain caused by the war in Donbass and the security threat from Russia.

The third pillar of Poroshenko's push towards the EU and NATO was the need to respond to the changing European, Euro-Atlantic and global environment by developing new partnerships and contacts with third countries to expand opportunities for Ukraine's diplomacy, economy, trade and more.

With comedian-turned-politician Volodymyr Zelensky's presidency as of May 2019 and the domination of his party, the Servant of the People, in both legislative and executive powers, the pattern of Ukraine's international relations, including those with the EU and NATO, changed tactically but not strategically.

The implementation of the technocratic pillar is the new administration's priority. It focuses on deepening and expanding Ukraine-EU relations on the pragmatic level. This includes broader sectoral integration with a focus on the digital, energy and customs markets; more European integration for the regions as Ukraine decentralises; and – importantly for Ukraine and beyond – battling climate change and increasing Ukraine's energy efficiency.

The rhetoric of integration has softened – something which looks like an attempt to avoid putting Ukraine's Western counterparts in the uncomfortable position of having to speak about membership commitments at a moment when there is little appetite for it.

The new government inherits Ukraine's chronic problems of unreformed rule of law and oligarchic influence on the country's politics and economy. These will be a test of Zelensky's political will, as well as his and his team's independence from oligarchs and representatives of the pre-Euromaidan establishment who now seek power, assets and revenge. Again, all this in the context of continued strain caused by the war and constant security threat from Russia.

War and peace: the Normandy battles

Zelensky's administration is the second to have had to deal with the war on Ukraine's territory and the annexation of its southern peninsula, Crimea, by Russia in 2014. 9 December 2019 saw Zelensky's first encounter with Russian President Vladimir Putin in the Normandy Four framework created with Germany and France to mediate the diplomatic effort to seek a solution to the conflict. Expectations for this encounter varied from overly optimistic to extremely negative. The former came from many international observers and politicians: they hoped that a change of administration in Ukraine, especially for one that seemed softer on Russia, could lead to more concessions on Ukraine's part and create an impulse for a change of the Kremlin's position. More importantly, this would serve the political interests of some European leaders – for example, French President Emmanuel Macron in his push for normalisation and rapprochement with Russia despite the fact that it has not changed any of the conditions for which it faced sanctions and relative isolation in the first place – quite the contrary.

Zelensky fueled this optimism by pledging to end the war without explaining how he planned to do so. While not offering rigid frameworks and red lines for negotiations may serve diplomatic or political purposes, leaving the negotiator with more flexibility to pursue their goals, this ambiguity left many in Ukraine jittery about how far the new administration was prepared to go. It also created space for speculation by Zelensky's opponents at home and for information manipulation by Russia. The increasing friendliness of some key international leaders towards Russia without any changes in its behavior fueled this anxiety further. Over 60 per cent of Ukrainians listed the war in the Donbas as the most important problem in a poll by the Socis group and the Committee of Voters of Ukraine in June 2019. But a survey by the Democratic Initiatives and Kiev International Institute of Sociology conducted in early November of the same year showed that just 14 per cent of Ukrainians would accept any compromise for

peace, 6 per cent down from June 2019.

The Normandy Four summit resulted in progress on a number of tactical steps, but so far a lack of progress on the strategic steps towards a real solution to the conflict.

The tactical steps advanced upon include further withdrawal of troops at points along the contact line to establish a more lasting and effective ceasefire. The previous 20 ceasefires announced since the beginning of the war were never implemented fully and 33 Ukrainian military personnel were killed by mid-November during the last one alone.

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Another tactical step which saw progress is a swap of prisoners. On 29 December 2019, 76 people returned from years of captivity in the self-proclaimed “republics” in the east. In exchange, Ukraine handed over 124 people. These included officers of Berkut, the riot police unit accused of killing 48 and injuring 80 protesters during the Maidan demonstrations in February 2014 (some of their colleagues escaped to Russia earlier and have since been spotted violently dispersing protests in Moscow), as well as perpetrators of a 2015 bomb explosion at a pro-Ukrainian rally in Kharkiv that killed four men, including one 15-year-old, and others convicted of different crimes. More remain jailed in the “republics” and Crimea remains an area of continued persecutions, especially of Crimean Tatars. The latest [Association Implementation Report on Ukraine](#) from the European Commission and High Representative for Foreign Affairs notes that the “human rights situation in the illegally annexed Crimean peninsula continued to deteriorate in 2019” as systematic repression of individuals seen to oppose de facto “authorities” continued unabated. The activities of the Crimean Tatar Mejlis remain banned since 2016 and wide-ranging intimidation and persecution of the community has continued, including via intensified arrests and searches of their homes.

Zelensky’s administration would like to hold local elections in the occupied areas of Eastern Ukraine as part of the nationwide local election campaign in Ukraine in fall 2020. But this is where the strategic dimension begins: security conditions have to be established first, including the establishment of a lasting ceasefire, the disbanding of illegal armed groups, and the withdrawal of troops and weapons. In a nutshell, the elections should take place under Ukrainian legislation. This includes access of all Ukrainian political parties and media to the territory, and the opportunity to vote being ensured for internally displaced persons who have fled the area escaping war and persecution. The Ukrainian administration wants control over its border before the election takes place – this is one of the numerous points of contention, as Russia demands that control over the border not be returned to Ukraine until after the election. While Zelensky’s preferred scenario is according to the Minsk Agreements concluded at Russian gunpoint, a credible election under such security circumstances is unlikely. The next Normandy Four encounter is expected in early spring 2020. Unless Russia demonstrates that it is ready to take meaningful steps towards resolution, Zelensky’s team speaks of de facto freezing the conflict as plan B.

Facing challenges together

While the war is a crucial part of Ukraine's domestic and international policies, the area beyond Kiev's control ultimately represents 7 per cent of Ukraine's territory. The rest needs to develop, and that is where Ukraine's future relations with the EU are likely to focus in the near to mid-term.

The Association Agreement and the Eastern Partnership (EaP) are the key frameworks where civil society and parts of the Ukrainian political establishment are pushing for new impetus. On 5 December 2019, the Ministries of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova presented a joint statement to EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell proposing their vision of differentiation between themselves as EaP participants that want deeper integration with the EU (at least until the latest change of government in Moldova) and the other three – Belarus, Armenia and Azerbaijan – that are on a different integration track. In mid-November, NGO leaders from the three countries signed a cooperation memorandum in an attempt to create a regional platform that could be more impactful than the individual efforts of each country.

On a broader level, it would benefit new political generations in Ukraine and EU member states to establish and expand contacts. This will enhance their understanding of each other's political contexts and goals, and build broader alliances. Politically, the European Green Deal offers one framework.

In mid-2020, Germany will take over the rotating presidency of the Council of the European Union, which is rethinking itself in a changing economic, political and security environment. There will be heavy focus on relations with China and the development of Africa's potential, amongst other issues. Yet Germany has been one of the top investors of resources and commitment to support transformations in Eastern Partnership countries – especially Ukraine – over the past years, and that momentum should not be lost.

On a broader level, it would benefit new political generations in Ukraine and EU member states to establish and expand contacts. This will enhance their understanding of each other's political contexts and goals, and build broader alliances. Politically, the European Green Deal offers one framework. Ukraine is interested in joining the effort to develop and implement this, and the government is elaborating proposals on how exactly Kiev could become part of this strategy. In parallel, the debate about environmental challenges and adjustment to those is increasingly active in Ukraine. Integrating it into the wider European discussion will help create more stability, better preparing the nation of nearly 40 million for the new era of economy, urbanisation, employment and consumption of resources.

Both Ukraine and the EU are going through a phase of profound transformation. As part of reality as we know it crumbles under the pressure of those changes, it is essential for new generations of politicians, civil society actors and opinion leaders to find points of contact, go beyond conventional geopolitical thinking, and expand the constituencies willing to face the common challenges.



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