

Brussels to the Rescue?

Written by Nienke de Deugd

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NIENKE DE DEUGD, FEB 18 2014

Following the 2004 round of enlargement, the European Union (EU) felt the need to engage its neighbours. To this end, it designed the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), whose goal was to avoid the creation of “new dividing lines in Europe” and to develop a “ring of friends” instead.^[1] More specifically, in an attempt to enhance its relations with neighbouring countries in Eastern Europe, the EU initiated the Eastern Partnership (EaP), which spoke of the need to build a “more ambitious partnership” by offering “political association and economic integration”.^[2] With regard to the EU’s relations with Ukraine, the signing of an Association Agreement during the Eastern Partnership Summit that was held on 28-29 November 2013 in Vilnius was supposed to be an important and tangible step on a road that could take Kyiv closer to Brussels.

Russia, however, was worried that this would lead Ukraine to leave the Russian sphere of influence. Instead of signing an Association Agreement with Brussels, Moscow preferred Kyiv to join the Common Economic Space. And as it turned out, Russia had the means (and the political will to use those means) to pressure Ukraine into doing its bidding.^[3] On the one hand, it made it very clear that it would not shy away from imposing sanctions; sanctions that would cripple the already weak Ukrainian economy. On the other hand, once the deal with the EU was off, it coughed up a substantial aid package. In December 2013 President Vladimir Putin promised his counterpart Viktor Yanukovich to buy Ukrainian government bonds up to a sum of 15 billion dollar as well as lower gas prices.

Yet, what neither Yanukovich nor Putin (nor anyone in Western Europe and North America for that matter) had seen coming, was the reaction from the part of the Ukrainian population to their president’s decision. Under the heading ‘euromaidan’ (derived from *maidan nezhaleznosti*, or independence square: the main square in Kyiv where the bulk of the demonstrations takes place) the mass protests are currently in their third month and show no sign of letting up.

What started out as an expression of discontent with the decision to put Ukraine’s relations with the EU on hold in favour of closer ties with Russia has developed into a much wider call for reform. Spearheaded by the three main opposition leaders – Arseniy Yatsenyuk from the *Batkivshchyna* (Fatherland) Party, Vitaliy Klitschko from the Ukrainian Democratic Alliance for Reform (UDAR, which also means ‘blow’ in Ukrainian; a reference to Klitschko’s successful career as a professional boxer) and Oleh Tyahnybok from the *Svoboda* (Freedom) Party – demonstrators are now calling for early presidential elections, a return to the 2004 constitution, a reshuffle of cabinet, the repeal of a set of laws that was passed on 16 January 2014 and that put severe restrictions of freedom of assembly and expression, the release of political prisoners (most notable among which is Yulia Tymoshenko), and a general amnesty for people arrested for their participation in euromaidan.

What this list of demands testifies to is the desire of the people of Ukraine to decide upon their own fate, without undue interference and pressure on the part of Moscow. Ukrainians desire to live in a European country, by which they do not necessarily mean a EU member state. Rather, they want to live in country where the government is honest instead of corrupt, where the rule of law is upheld instead of having to make way for cronyism, where democracy is real instead of just a catch-phrase to please the West, and where police are there to protect the people and not use force to dispel protesters. As a young woman put it quite forcefully in a YouTube video that was posted just a few days ago: “we want to be free from dictatorship, we want to be free from politicians who work only for themselves”.^[4]

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In order to help them realize their dreams and hopes for the future, Ukrainians have repeatedly asked the EU for help. In response, the EU has sent some of its top-diplomats to Kyiv, most notably Štefan Füle, the EU Commissioner for Enlargement, and Catherine Ashton, the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, to hold meetings with both Yanukovych and the leaders of the opposition. So far, however, attempts to negotiate a way out of the persistent crisis have largely failed. In the meantime, disappointment with the EU is growing. American Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs Victoria Nuland may have been rather blunt when she expressed her frustration by saying “f**k the EU”, but her feelings are mirrored by the euromaidan protesters.

Perhaps the EU should consider adopting a Ukraine Recovery Programme (URP). In an article for the Kyiv Post Daniel Bilak made a passionate plea for something similar to the Marshall Plan to be developed for Ukraine. As Bilak argues, the URP should be composed as follows:

in return for starting to implement pre-agreed structural reforms (and only then), a new reform-oriented Ukrainian government demonstrably committed to (and capable of) implementing reforms should be offered a substantial 3-4 year aid package that 1) facilitates the democratic transformation of Ukraine's governing institutions; 2) stimulates the modernization and competitiveness of the Ukrainian economy; and 3) by offsetting the adverse socio-economic consequences of Russian economic retaliation, provides a social cohesion cushion in three key sectors: energy, state-owned enterprises, and the pension system.^[5]

By offering this proverbial light at the end of the tunnel, Brussels would offer Kyiv an alternative to Moscow.

^[1] Commission of the European Communities (11-03-2003) *Wider Europe — Neighbourhood: A New Framework for Relations with our Eastern and Southern Neighbours*, Brussels.

^[2] Commission of the European Communities (03-12-2008) *Eastern Partnership*, Brussels.

^[3] 'Ukraine and the EU: Politics of Brutal Pressure', *The Economist* (22-11-2013).

^[4] 'I am a Ukrainian' (10-02-2014) <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hvds2AliWLA>

^[5] Daniel Bilak 'A 'Marshall Plan' for Ukraine: a Strategic Imperative' *Kyiv Post* (11-02-2014).

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