

# Brexit: The View from Ukraine

Written by Anna Bilous

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ANNA BILOUS, JUN 16 2017

The repercussions of Britain leaving the European Union (EU) go well beyond the borders of the union. In the EU neighbourhood countries, currently embroiled in military conflict, such as Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine, the issue was at the centre of public debates since the start of the referendum campaign. In Ukraine, where Russian soldiers and Russian-sponsored rebels continue to fuel geopolitical tensions, the support of Britain is of utmost importance. In the weeks preceding the referendum and months thereafter, Ukrainian media continuously discussed Brexit as a threat to Ukraine and Ukrainian independence.

The concerns over Brexit followed four main lines of arguments. First, Britain's exit from the EU would mean that Ukraine's fate might no longer be at the centre of attention for Britain, particularly since Moscow plays an important role for Britain's financial and legal sectors. With no borders to Ukraine, post-Brexit Britain might view Ukraine as less relevant to British politics and might take a softer stance on the issue of the annexation of Crimea and economic sanctions against Russia.

Second, Brexit would mean less pressure for sanctions against Russia inside the EU. As other countries have uncertain views on sanctions, and some strongly lobby Russian interests, Brexit will make it harder to keep the sanctions – the only instrument used so far in reaction to the Russian aggression in Ukraine – in place.

Third, Brexit may endanger trade relations between the Britain and Ukraine. The Association Agreement with the EU that came into effect from 1 January 2016 significantly simplified trade between Ukraine and EU member states. Britain, as Ukraine's 11<sup>th</sup> largest trade partner, plays a significant role in the country's exports. Hence, Prime Minister May's announcement that the UK will exit the single market in January 2017 comes as a disappointment.

Fourth, the reason for such an emotionally fuelled public debate had deeper cultural and historical roots. Brexit was seen as a sign of tendencies towards disintegration inside Europe. To Ukrainians, who have historically resided on the borderline of European civilisation, the idea of a disintegrated Europe increases uncertainty about the future.

Ukraine's location on the world political map, and the self-identification of its people, undoubtedly affected this immediate reaction to Brexit. Seeing British citizens willing to leave the EU challenged, and truly puzzled, many Ukrainians. For centuries the Ukrainian people have found themselves in the geographic conundrum between Europe and Eurasia. While Ukrainian history and culture speak in favour of it being a part of Europe, political realities and historic events have often separated it from other European states. With this sentiment, Ukrainian citizens eagerly awaited the outcomes of the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement negotiations in 2013. Furthermore, when the ex-President announced that there had been a decision to postpone negotiations, Ukrainians started a large-scale protest known today as "Euromaidan". Soon after Euromaidan started the main ideas shifted away from the country's integration to the EU, but the idea of being a part of Europe was never truly abandoned. Being part of the European project appeals to many Ukrainians as something to aspire for—a statement of high(er) quality, quality of life, governance and values. Hence, Brexit was seen as a fundamental challenge to the political institutions of the EU and a source of uncertainty and instability within the union of European nations.

Despite the initial shock following the referendum, subsequent events have shown that Britain will remain a strong Ukrainian ally. The debate in political circles turned from a traditional self-victimisation narrative to a positive search

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for productive grounds for cooperation. Suddenly, the Ukrainian political establishment tried to make Ukraine interesting for Britain, which did not go unnoticed.

The recent visits of Boris Jonson, Sir Michael Fallon, David Cameron and Theresa May to Kyiv have added some optimism to future UK-Ukraine relations. Prime Minister May met President Poroshenko for the first time in April 2017, at a bilateral meeting to mark the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the diplomatic ties between the two countries. Most importantly, Britain's commitment to economic sanctions against Russia is still clear.

Cooperation will continue in other areas. Britain provided a training programme for 1000 soldiers in 2014, reaching up to 2000 in 2015, and 5000 members of Ukrainian Army in 2017, 1000 more than previously agreed upon. In January 2017, Defence Secretary Sir Michael Fallon confirmed that the "British Army prepares to broaden its already extended training package to all of the country's armed forces".

British support to Ukraine was also reflected in the 2017 budget. Over the past few years Britain has expanded its programmes in Ukraine and now sponsors a variety of activities ranging from the funding of *Stopfake.org*, a multilingual platform that conducts fact-checking and data verification to address Russian propaganda, to WTO and good governance programmes.

Moreover, Britain is an important ally in developing aircraft manufacturing in Ukraine, a sector of strategic importance for the struggling Ukrainian economy. Previously, Britain and Ukraine had a fragmented history of cooperating in this field when Antonov planes transported British equipment during the missions in Afghanistan and Iraq. Since Ukraine has started attempting to reanimate its aircraft manufacturing, particularly during the years succeeding the start of the conflict with Russia, UK cooperation with Antonov, a Ukrainian national company, is also of a major importance.

On a more strategic level, Brexit has the potential to bring Ukraine and the UK closer than they have ever been before, vis-à-vis the EU. With Ukraine developing special relations with the EU that combine free trade as well as military and defence cooperation, the country's model of cooperation with the EU fits within the main parameters of the aspired future British model of interaction with the EU. The two large countries, on the opposite sides of the geographic borders of Europe, could offer a new model of collaboration with this entity and change the way we conceptualise European integration.

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### **About the author:**

**Anna Bilous** holds an MPhil in Development Studies and is currently a Ph.D. Candidate at the Centre of Development Studies, University of Cambridge. Her PhD research concentrates on the analysis of the history and potential aircraft manufacturing in post-Soviet countries from the perspective of social and economic development. Anna is also a Cambridge Trust scholar.