



Austrian National Defence Academy
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UKRAINE - A NATIONAL AND GEOPOLITICAL DRAMA

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The annexation of Crimea by Russia and the secessionist tendencies in eastern Ukraine have made it necessary to consider the events' strategic dimension. This is not only about the future of Ukraine, but also about the reliability of international treaties and security organisations, the relation between Moscow and the EU, the international position and status of Russia, European integration and energy policies, and the strategic orientation of NATO.

Annexation of Crimea and Ukraine's destabilisation counteract confidence-building

Russia's *Operation Crimea* of March 2014 meant that Ukraine lost a strategically important part of its territory. Subsequently, there were upheavals in the east and uprisings against the central power in Kiev. Hasty and questionable referenda in Donetsk and Luhansk led to unilateral declarations of independence by these areas. The aim is now to maintain Ukraine's territorial integrity, ensure its functioning as a state, and come up with a workable political solution for this riven nation. The annexation of Crimea is a clear breach of international law, and Moscow's – at least covert – support of the separatists is arguably unacceptable interference in the internal affairs of a sovereign state. All this violates the spirit and intention of the confidence-building measures which characterised the end of

the Cold War and were to result in a lasting *détente* between the countries of the former Soviet Union and the West.

In the course of the Ukraine crisis, established security organisations and existing conflict-resolution mechanisms were ignored or marginalised, and a multilateral agreement was violated. It was shocking to observe how diplomatic and political achievements of the last decades were cast aside in the turmoil of President Yanukovich's downfall, and that, instead of a solution by negotiation, military facts were swiftly established on Ukrainian territory. Apart from the fact that the appropriation of Crimea in a surprise coup had required months of precise advance planning and professional forces, there is also the question why all the instruments and organisations which had been created in the last decades to prevent such scenarios, failed. The dialogue fora of the OSCE, NATO, the

EU or the Council of Europe were in no position either to realize the developments or to prevent them, which means that the oft-quoted conflict prevention did not work. The incredible speed of the unfolding events was also surprising, which left little time and space for substantial negotiations.

Moreover, it has to be noted that an important agreement, on the basis of which all Soviet-controlled nuclear weapons had been withdrawn from Ukraine, was violated. In accordance with this Budapest Memorandum, which was signed by Russia, the U.S. and Great Britain in 1994, the signatory states had committed themselves to respect the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine and to support it in the event of a nuclear threat.

The European Union and Russia – a strained relationship

Following the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact and the Soviet Union, and the concomitant withdrawal of Soviet troops from Europe, a *détente* had begun between the European Union and Russia, which was to bring mutual economic and security-political benefits. The geographic proximity, which encourages trade, prompted intensified cooperation. Russia's gas and petroleum reserves and Europe's growing demand for energy led to numerous (additional) delivery agreements, while Western investors provided money and technological know-how for obsolescent Russian industrial plants.

These economic necessities and mutual interdependencies, however, did not succeed in eradicating the fundamental mutual distrust existing on both sides. Especially in the field of security-politics, Russia felt increasingly isolated, threatened and even betrayed due to NATO enlargements and the creation of a missile defence shield. A critical analysis may actually prove this assessment correct - to a certain degree. Moreover, with the EU's expansion towards Eastern Europe, a liberal political system

advanced on Russia, which to some in the Kremlin may appear as a threat to their own power or the implementation of strategic interests, such as the establishment of a Eurasian Economic Union. Furthermore, Russia's repeated blockade of natural gas deliveries made Europe more critical of Moscow.

Two irreconcilable positions increasingly characterised this development: On the one hand, the demand of numerous EU and, at the same time, NATO member states to choose their alliances themselves, as well as EU membership of all states in this region; and, on the other hand, Moscow's belief that it has the right to a say, or even a veto, in all strategic changes in its near abroad (former states of the Soviet Union). This is, of course, a red rag to those EU countries that were formerly Moscow-controlled. What is more, this problem is intensified by the fact that security-political changes are effected primarily within the framework of NATO and that the U.S. has a leading role in this process. A particularly controversial case in point is the creation of a Western missile shield.

Against this backdrop it is very difficult to achieve a united EU position. Individual EU member states' diverse political, economic and energy-political interests or dependencies therefore often prevail over better judgment, i.e. a strong stance at EU level. On 25 April 2014, the Swiss newspaper NZZ put this in a nutshell by using the headline: "Europe's weakness is Putin's strength". This means, by implication, that only a united EU, upholding a clear position, will be accepted by Russia as its equal.

Russia's position and significance

Russia sees itself as the political successor of the Soviet Union and also as the protecting power of ethnic Russians living outside the country. The Kremlin deals with open political conflicts at its borders in a rather reactive way, with the aim of maintaining the

status quo. Therefore, shortly after the brief war with Georgia in 2008, Abkhazia and South Ossetia were effectively recognised as independent states, even though their requests for annexation have been ignored. The upheavals in Kiev in March 2014, however, resulted in a proactive approach. By annexing Crimea, facts were created on the ground, and expectations raised among many members of the Russian ethnic group in Ukraine and elsewhere.

By annexing Crimea, Moscow decisively improved its military-strategic position. The forces are no longer subject to any limitation as to their number, and Russia can set up missile systems and strategic bases. The operational projection options in the Black Sea area and the Mediterranean Sea have considerably increased. Whether Russia will be able to obtain any political benefit from the developments in Ukraine remains to be seen, given the sanctions and its loss of status.

It has to be remembered that Ukraine is not the only geopolitical hotspot in which Western and Russian interests meet or collide. This is also the case in the Middle East (especially in Syria and Iraq), in northern Africa (Egypt!), and also in the western Balkans and the Arctic. Peace talks on the situation in Ukraine, the developments in Syria or also Iran's nuclear programme will most likely not be successful without Moscow's support.

EU-internal conclusions and consequences

In view of many EU states' high dependence on Russian natural gas and oil, an EU Energy Strategy 2020 has already been called for. The fact that some 70 percent of Russian natural gas exports go to the European Union (and Turkey), and that approximately 75 percent of oil exports go to Europe, in turn, puts the EU in quite a good position. After all, a sudden drop in deliveries or a stop of exports would hit Russia hard, since

sales of natural gas and oil amount to some 20 percent of Russian GDP. Should Europe stop being a customer, China alone could not possibly compensate this shortfall, simply because it lacks the necessary pipelines.

The EU's hesitation, despite being urged by the U.S. to enact substantial economic sanctions against Moscow, is understandable. These would not only affect Ukraine, but also European states and Russia. In 2013 the EU's trade turnover with Russia amounted to \$ 470 bn (€ 330 bn), while that of the United States was only approx. \$ 28 bn. In the fields of security and defence policy, the question arises as to whether the crisis in Ukraine will lead to intensified cooperation within the framework of the CSDP or to an increase in defence expenditures. Sweden's prompt reaction to revise the White Book on Defence and to, e.g., procure 70 instead of 60 combat aircraft, as previously planned, could remain a national exception in view of unchanged Europe-wide austerity requirements.

The signing of the association agreement by Kiev and Brussels shows that both sides are interested in fast progress. Ukraine's economic viability and political transformation have a top priority in this, full membership, however, is still a long way away. Any purposeful EU involvement in Ukraine and the further steps to be taken *vis-à-vis* Russia require an answer to the decisive and fundamental strategic question: is Russia a partner, a competitor or an adversary?

Effects on NATO

Some observers suspect that Russia's course of action plays into the hands of NATO strategists since it highlights the need for a collective defence capability *vis-à-vis* revisionist Russian intentions. The Baltic States have already demanded NATO protection with regard to Russia, with the result that NATO member states in turn bolster airspace surveillance in Poland and Romania.

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The crisis in Ukraine rekindled NATO's internal debate on the Alliance's future strategic alignment. The supporters of a more defensive approach are expected to speak out massively against the adherents of an increased global NATO commitment. This may become an internal test of strength. The question is whether NATO attaches so much importance to the events in Ukraine and Russia's behaviour to bring about a lasting change in its thinking.

In the medium and the long term, even the extreme case of a revival of the conventional defensive approach on the part of the Western countries and Russia is conceivable. Enlargement policy is also becoming an urgent topic again, as Ukraine and Georgia were offered membership in the course of the 2008 Summit, however without a concrete roadmap.

Conclusions and recommendations

- The annexation of Crimea and the manifest support of separatist pro-Russian forces by the Kremlin pose a lasting threat to the stability of Ukraine and the entire region.
- Going back to business as usual in foreign policy would not do justice to the magnitude of the events, many positions must still be clarified and reviewed. The crisis in Ukraine should, however, not make us fall back into Cold War paradigms.
- The stabilisation of Ukraine and the normalisation of the relations between the West and Moscow are of utmost importance.
- Top priority is that fighting in Ukraine is stopped. The international community should demand and support negotiated settlements, which include all conflict parties. The Geneva Agreement of March 2014 may be a workable concept.
- Subsequently, the continued political and economic existence of Ukraine is to be supported. Due to the manifold challenges, this ought to be achieved by

systematic cooperation between Europe and Russia.

- Should Russia be interested in a lasting *détente*, this would have to be demonstrated by concrete measures. In the event of a lasting destabilisation of Ukraine with Moscow's involvement, a further stepping up of sanctions seems unavoidable.
- The strategic relations between the EU and Russia require a fundamental review. Only a united and self-confident European Union will be regarded by Russia as strong actor.
- The EU's position should be developed in close coordination with the U.S., but on the basis of independent European interests. To achieve this, primarily the political, economic as well as energy and security-political goals in the eastern regions and vis-à-vis Russia must be determined.
- The crisis in Ukraine clearly proves the necessity of coordinated and diversified energy supplies in Europe. Unilateral dependencies (Russia, Arab region, U.S.A.?) must be reduced systematically.

Personal Data:

Since 2002, Brigadier General Mag. Dr. Walter Feichtinger has been heading the Institute for Peace Support and Conflict Management, based at the National Defence Academy in Vienna. From 1979 to 1998, he served with the armoured corps, his last position being that of the Commander, 10th Tank Battalion; from 2001 to 2002 he was the security policy counsellor in the Federal Chancellery. Training: Graduate of the Theresian Military Academy, doctoral degree in philosophy from the University of Vienna in 2002.

Numerous contributions and media appearances on the topic of crisis and conflict management, Austrian and international security policy, the development of the conflict and war scenario as well as strategic analyses. Editor of the publication series "IFK AKTUELL" and of "International Security and Conflict Management" by the Böhlau Verlag.

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