

Ralf Dahrendorf Taskforce on the Future of the European Union

Working group II “Foreign, Security and Defence – strong cooperation for a stronger Europe in the world”

Ukraine as a bridge to Russia

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Current situation

- The results of the general elections in Ukraine have brought a convincing victory of moderate parties and a total defeat of fascist movements. They have proven that there is a great pro-European momentum that can lead to a firm change of the political as well as the economic system in this country.
- Russia's aggressive political response to the pro-Western moves of Ukraine may be understood as an attempt to protect their traditional zone of influence, but also as a move to defend Putin's regime. A westernization of Ukraine would undermine the foundation of the Russian system and encourage political change in this country. Consequently, the war in Ukraine is no longer only about Ukraine but also about transformation in Russia. Russian leaders "exploited every post-Soviet and neo-Soviet atavism and made it real because an alarming proportion of the population believes it. This is how they have refuelled their regime"¹
- The Russian conflict with Ukraine leads to the destabilization of the eastern European neighbourhood and has created a direct threat for gas supply to the EU. Moreover, aggressive behaviour of Russia is perceived by some of the member states as a direct threat to their statehood. The Baltic States, with their strong Russian minorities, are afraid of being the next aim of Putin's neo-imperial policy.
- European policy towards Russia is now based on economic sanctions and a firm political disagreement on a partition of Ukraine. The political consensus between member states over the policy response seems to be fragile. The economic sanctions that reflect negatively on the economy of many member states prove, however, that EU-governments do not accept the aggressive policy of Russia against Ukraine and want to find a common minimum denominator to express this.²
- Since the beginning of the year, the value of the rouble has dropped by 20 percent against the dollar. Such a fall in the value of the national currency is going to lead to higher inflation and shrinking currency reserves. This, together with an arms embargo, should limit Russia's military capabilities as well as the political and economic foundations of the regime.

Long-term goals of European policy

- The primary long-term goal of the European foreign policy towards the Eastern neighbourhood is stated in the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) and can be summarized as strengthening prosperity, stability and security in Eastern Europe.
- Russian policy towards the region has proven that achieving this goal is only possible if Russia transforms itself into a prosperous, democratic state. Autocratic, neo-imperial Russia is going to undermine any major pro-Western political changes in Ukraine, Belarus, Georgia and other post-Soviet republics. In consequence, the EU cannot put Russia in brackets when promoting deep and sustainable democracy, accompanied by inclusive economic development of Eastern European countries.
- The successful transformation of Russia into a stable, prosperous and democratic state should be the long term vision of European politicians aiming at ensuring security in Europe. All political activities in the Eastern neighbourhood should be subordinated to this. It should not be understood as a "Russia first" policy, but rather a "Russia too" policy that emphasizes the necessity of political change in this country in order to stabilize the whole region.

¹ <http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2014/10/vladimir-putins-coup-112025.html#ixzz3HRLKZf3l>

² Acknowledgments to Johan Ekman, Svenska Bildningsförbundet, for his comments on the draft version of this paper.

- In consequence, support for changes in Ukraine and strengthening cooperation with this country should not be an end in itself and westernization of this country should be perceived only as a leaven for the political transformation of the whole region.
- In setting the long-term goal of transforming Russia, the EU should be very clear about its limited, supportive role. The process of transformation has to be initiated by Russians themselves. However, Russian opposition should be completely sure that during and after a regime change they can count on European support.

Short-term political response of the EU

- European leaders should be firmly against any attempts to forcefully redraw borders within Europe. The Kremlin has to be assured that no border changes are going to be accepted by the international community.
- Europe should try to confront Russia only in the areas where it has a much better position than its rival. Therefore, economic pressure on the Russian financial sector and oligarchs linked to the Kremlin should be continued, but on the other hand a careful approach is needed when trying to influence the Russian gas sector.
- A strong political and economic support for Ukraine in the next few years should be the cornerstone of European Eastern policy. The EU should insist on the full implementation of the Association Agreement, demanding deep political reforms in Ukraine and support it fully with technical assistance as well as financial aid. Success of reforms in this country could be a pattern for the whole region.
- The western choice of Ukraine is the new evidence that European soft power is not a myth, but can be a real political instrument. The “European dream” brought thousands of Ukrainians out on the streets of Kiev to protest against the political regime that wanted to reject an association with the EU. Many of them were killed – during the revolution in Kiev or later when fighting against Russian intervention forces in Donbas. That is why the EU and European member states should not resign from developing various contacts with all post-Soviet societies (Russian including) through the promotion of European culture, students exchange programmes, academic cooperation etc.

Bottom line

European support for Ukraine should be only part of a greater project of the whole region’s transformation, which is very much in line with liberal principles of the EU. European liberals should be the strongest advocates of taking advantage of this window of opportunity that is now open. Deep liberal changes in Ukraine could create a chance to build “a bridge to Moscow” that could help to prevent Russian isolation and consolidation of Putin’s autocratic regime.

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