**In Search of the Lost Balance**

The Role of External Involvement in the Ukrainian Crisis

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**I. Introduction**

On October 26th Ukraine voted for its next parliament. The outcome of the elections has been reported by the media as ‘pro-European’ because the parties that received the majority of votes base their political stance on Ukraine’s European course.[[1]](#footnote-1) Additionally, certain Ukrainian experts claim that “Moscow lost the Ukrainian elections”, because the ‘pro-Russian’ Oppositional Bloc received little more than 9% of electoral support and won several dozen majoritarian mandates in the Eastern and Southern regions of Ukraine.[[2]](#footnote-2)

In the light of the Ukrainian crisis and its implications for global political actors, Ukraine’s internal balance of political power has been increasingly topical for Western and Russian analysts. From the Western and Russian perspectives, the Ukrainian crisis is a foreign policy issue with serious, but yet controllable, consequences. For Ukraine, the mounting external involvement has an impact on its internal matters that is hard to measure or control.

The influence of the external factor on Ukraine is both direct and indirect. The direct influence can be illustrated by Russia’s military involvement in the actions in Eastern Ukraine or, conversely, the financial aid provided by the EU and US. Ukraine’s policy-making and governance are examples of indirect external factor influence, which can be visible in the outcome of the recent parliamentary elections and the tripartite conflict mediation.

This article examines the Ukrainian crisis through the dominant perspectives of international political actors. It is suggested that the complexity of conflict resolution in Ukraine can be partially explained by the West’s and Russia’s contradicting geopolitical and security concepts and the conflicting visions of Ukraine that follows. The article further aims to shed light on the role of external involvement in Ukraine’s current and future development. After a brief discussion of Western and Russian geopolitical and security concepts, the article will analyse the positions of the West and Russia in the Ukrainian crisis. Finally, the article will examine the impact of the West – Russia relations on Ukraine’s internal affairs.

**II. The West: Promoting Liberalism and Democracy**

John Mearsheimer, a contemporary political scientist and realist theorist of international relations, argues that the predominant political and security concept shared by the US, NATO and the EU in the post-Cold War era is liberalism.[[3]](#footnote-3) This concept is based on three principles: enlargement, democratisation and post-national order.[[4]](#footnote-4) In the region of Central and Eastern Europe, the three liberal pillars were embodied in three policy vectors:

1. NATO’s expansion to the East and South;
2. the EU’s enlargement and Eastern Partnership initiative;
3. Western social engineering.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Firstly, Central and Eastern European states accessed NATO in three rounds, which took place in 1999, 2004 and 2009 and resulted in the enlargement of the Alliance by twelve members.[[6]](#footnote-6) Additionally, the Bucharest Summit in 2008 agreed that Ukraine and Georgia would become NATO members, which, however, has not been fulfilled.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Secondly, between 2004 and 2013 the EU significantly expanded its territory to the East and South. Furthermore, in 2009 the Union launched the Eastern Partnership initiative, which envisaged establishing political and economic associations between the EU on the one hand and Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine on the other.[[8]](#footnote-8) Although this initiative aimed at supporting democratic governance and economic development, some experts interpreted this policy initiative as the EU’s attempt to build a ‘zone of comfort’ between its borders and Russia.[[9]](#footnote-9) As for Ukraine, the political and economic parts of its Association Agreement with the EU were signed in 2014.

Finally, in the former Soviet Union, democratic governance and values were promoted through what Mearsheimer calls “Western social engineering”.[[10]](#footnote-10) This policy implied providing support for civil organisations and initiatives that advocated the Western political course in their countries.[[11]](#footnote-11) In Ukraine, this mechanism was exercised through the instrument of the National Endowment for Democracy, a non-profit organisation that gives financial assistance to a wide range of Ukrainian NGOs, research centres, political and media projects.

When viewing Ukraine through the Western policy perspective, it is clear that it has been in the orbit of the three policy vectors described above. However, it has rarely been envisaged as part of Euro-Atlantic system on the grounds of full membership. It can be suggested that the NATO’s and EU’s interest in Ukraine is mainly driven by geopolitical reasoning: a stable and democratic partner on the Eastern borders. The Ukrainian crisis has actualised the debate on Ukraine’s place in the Euro-Atlantic environment; however, it has not drastically changed the EU’s and NATO’s visions of Ukraine. D. Trenin, a Russian analyst and director of Carnegie Moscow Centre, has summarised the West’s current position in the Ukrainian crisis in the following points:

* Ukraine is seen through the lenses of Russian policy, therefore, tackling the Ukrainian crisis implies “dealing with Russia”.[[12]](#footnote-12)
* At the moment, there is no support for Ukraine’s membership in NATO.[[13]](#footnote-13)
* Ukraine’s chances to become an EU member in the nearest future are rather low.[[14]](#footnote-14)
* Apart from the Ukrainian crisis, there are other issues on the US, NATO’s and EU’s agenda, which are more topical and require an urgent and efficient response, for instance, ISIS and Ebola.[[15]](#footnote-15)

**III. Russia: ‘A Besieged Fortress’**

According to Mearsheimer, as opposed to West’s liberalism, Russia’s predominant geopolitical concept after the end of the Cold War was realism.[[16]](#footnote-16) Under Putin’s presidency, the realist tendencies can be seen in the following pillars:

1. NATO’s expansion imposes a threat near the borders of Russia;
2. Ukraine is perceived as a buffer state of enormous strategic importance;
3. Ukraine’s NATO and EU accessions are unacceptable.[[17]](#footnote-17)

Seen in such a way, Russia’s geopolitical and security visions contradicts the principles and policies of NATO, the EU and US in Central and Eastern Europe. At the same time, the actions of Western political actors provided the grounds for Russia’s reacting strategy of a ‘besieged fortress’, which is based on a principle of ‘action-reaction’.[[18]](#footnote-18) Apart from this, Russia’s geopolitical strategy comprises the concept of Eurasian integration, designed to prove Russia’s self-sufficiency on the global arena as opposed to the perception of Russia as ‘a lagging behind periphery’.[[19]](#footnote-19) This project principally entails creating a common Eurasian customs and economic union. However, at the moment it is mainly supported by three states: Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan.

The Ukrainian crisis was a challenge that stimulated the Russian state to make critical decisions.[[20]](#footnote-20) Russia’s approach to crisis-management has highlighted both its strengths and weaknesses. On the one hand, Russia proved its ability to apply military force in innovative ways, which are not accessible to its neighbours.[[21]](#footnote-21) Moreover, Russia has demonstrated its influence over Crimea and the Eastern Ukrainian regions by manipulating existing issues, which heated up the conflict and deepened the Ukrainian crisis.[[22]](#footnote-22) Additionally, Russia showed a political will for risky experiment and decisive counteraction to the West’s pressure.[[23]](#footnote-23)

On the other hand, Russia’s international reputation has been significantly damaged by its recognised violation of Ukraine’s national sovereignty.[[24]](#footnote-24) Apart from this, Russia has faced several rounds of economic sanctions imposed by the EU and the US. Finally, NATO members responded to the challenge of the Ukrainian crisis by the increasing consolidation, mobilisation and reconceptualising of the Euro-Atlantic security principles.[[25]](#footnote-25)

**IV. Ukrainian Politics: The Power of External Involvement**

As a result of the Ukrainian-Russian conflict, the settlement of governance in Donetsk and Luhansk regions has been subject to several rounds of Minsk negotiations between Ukraine, Russia, OSCE and the Eastern republics. Paradoxically, the negotiations are officially referred to as ‘tripartite’, implying that they are held between Ukraine, Russia and OSCE.[[26]](#footnote-26) In practice, the representatives of Donetska People’s Republic (DNR) and Luhanska People’s Republic (LNR) are a single side of negotiations with a declared stance, which is taken into consideration in the negotiation process. This can be seen as a necessary precondition for a peaceful conflict resolution and ceasing fire in the Eastern regions of Ukraine. However, as the military actions are still ongoing, the negotiations have not been efficient.

It is noteworthy that Ukraine’s territorial integrity and the change of state borders have not been subject to negotiations. On 16 September, the Ukrainian parliament adopted a law on establishing a special status of self-governance in Donetsk and Luhansk regions, which provides enhanced powers to the local self-government and envisages a special economic regime aimed at social and economic recovery of the regions.[[27]](#footnote-27) However, any scenario that involves remaining part of Ukraine will hardly be accepted by DNR and LNR.

Due to the ongoing military conflict, the turnout of voters for the national parliamentary elections on 26 October was only slightly higher than 30% in Donetsk and Luhansk regions. The two regions will furthermore be underrepresented in the Ukrainian parliament by 15 majoritarian MPs.[[28]](#footnote-28) At the same time, on 2 November the two self-proclaimed republics conducted elections of the heads and members of the DNR and LNR councils. Apart from the Ukrainian government, these elections will not be recognised by the EU, UN and US.[[29]](#footnote-29) Meanwhile, the Russian Foreign Affairs Ministry declared “respect for the expression of will by the residents of South-East” and recognised that “in general, the elections in Donetsk and Luhansk regions were held in an organised manner with a high turnout of voters”.[[30]](#footnote-30) International recognition of the regional elections is a legitimising mechanism, which empowers the self-proclaimed republics to prove that they are supported and elected by the people of Donetsk and Luhansk regions. The discrepancy in assessment and position from the different international actors could thus serve as a destabilising factor for Ukraine.

The influence of the external factor can also be seen in the outcome of the recent national parliamentary elections. Firstly, the Ukrainian-Russian conflict influenced the electoral campaigns as the predominant discourse centered on the ideas of Ukraine’s unity, consolidation and European course. Added to the post-Maidan effect, the rhetoric of decisive “European” reforms and “renewal of parliament” was rather efficient. Another innovation of this electoral campaign was the inclusion of civic activists, journalists and commanders of voluntary battalions, formed to support the Ukrainian army in the East of Ukraine, into the party lists. Additionally, the labels “pro-European” and “pro-Russian” have acquired a specific meaning: the first one was represented as “pro-Ukrainian” and the second as “anti-Ukrainian”.

Secondly, the Ukrainian elections were a test of approval for Ukraine’s President and Prime Minister, whose parties won the elections. With a total public support of 44%, the two parties have started the negotiations on the formation of a parliamentary coalition. The composition of this coalition is not clear at the moment; nor is it clear whether the *Samopomich* (Self Help) party of “new faces” with a result of almost 11% will join the coalition.[[31]](#footnote-31) However, the key message of the election outcome is that the coalition will be based on Ukraine’s European course. For the Ukrainian citizens, this message should imply the parliament’s and government’s readiness for structural reforms; for the EU, this should be a signal of Ukraine’s irreversible European direction.[[32]](#footnote-32) For both the EU and US, the message should also be interpreted as a call for financial assistance.[[33]](#footnote-33)

However, it is important to remember that the balanced representation of all the Ukrainian regions is crucial for its stability. The fact that the Oppositional Bloc, which consist of the Party of Regions members and positioned itself as a representative of the Eastern and Southern regions, gained over 9% of national vote does not adequately reflect the electoral preferences in these regions.[[34]](#footnote-34) In fact, the capability of this party to represent national interests has been questioned due to its discredited public image as ‘the Yanukovych’s party’ and its anti-Maidan and pro-Russian stance.

It is worthy of note that only half of the Ukrainian parliament is elected through proportional representation. Almost 50% of the 198 majoritarian MPs are independent and do not officially belong to any of the political parties.[[35]](#footnote-35) Some of these MPs are ex-members of the Party of Regions, while others represent the interests of financial and industrial groups.[[36]](#footnote-36) The political positioning of independent MPs in the Ukrainian parliament is unpredictable at the moment but it will clearly play an important role in shaping future Ukraine.

**V. Conclusion**

The West’s and Russia’s conflicting visions of Ukraine could be seen as a confrontation of their current geopolitical and security concepts. While for Western political actors, Ukraine itself has not been a high-priority matter, for Russia Ukraine has a strategic importance, which helps explain the high-risk decisions of the latter. As a result of the escalated Ukrainian – Russian conflict, Ukraine’s internal affairs have become a focus of international scrutiny. This interest can be partially explained by the perception of Ukraine as a weak state, which is fought over by the West and Russia. Additionally, both sides appear to envisage Ukraine as an important comforting barrier between each other.

The strong influence of the external factor on Ukraine’s domestic matters has been aggravated by the increasing complexity within Ukraine. It is clear that the external influence of the West and Russia has had significant effects on Ukraine’s internal affairs due to its destabilised political system and economic hardships. Therefore, the internal and external components of the Ukrainian crisis have to be understood together.

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