



Andrew Wilson

Has Europe forgotten about Ukraine?

Europe has become steadily more introspective since the financial crisis broke out in 2008, writes Andrew Wilson. Moreover, with the refugee crisis and the Paris attacks grabbing European and global media attention, and Russia suddenly becoming an ally in the fight against ISIS, it seems that Ukraine has become a topic of the past. But should the West lose focus, Ukraine's chances of success will be very slim.

Europe was always going to forget about Ukraine. In recent times, western societies have developed a chronic case of Attention Deficit Disorder. Or perhaps that should be in "post-modern times". An over-supply of 24/7 conventional mass media, with declining journalistic standards and fact-checking abilities, works on a constant cycle of replacement, moving from one narrowly televisual event to the next. Social media works on an even quicker cycle of superficiality and specialist focus. There is no joined-up conversation anymore. Any given news cycle is lucky to last more than a few days. As a result, Ukraine is, inevitably, just so 2014.



One evening in Kyiv. Photo: beerlogoff. Source: [Shutterstock](#)

Furthermore, Europe has become steadily more introspective since the financial crisis broke out in 2008. The euro's travails are never-ending. Sovereign debt crises may have been isolated, but much of Europe is stuck in a deadening low-growth trap. Greece's third bailout in the summer of 2015 is unlikely to be the last time it hogs the front pages. The refugee crisis has grabbed attention, deepened internal divisions and radically transformed politics, even in seemingly stable heartland states like Germany. Even Angela Merkel now has to watch her own back.

Reality bites

The Paris atrocities in November 2015 created another set of diversions and temptations. Enter Russia, with its own brand of superficiality. The Russian intervention in Syria is many things, but it is first and foremost an attempt to shift the *dramaturgia* away from Ukraine. It only takes a few phone calls for this to happen on Russian TV, but Russia is clearly hoping the rest of the world will follow suit. However, to paraphrase *Wag the Dog*, Russia is seeking a "small, diversionary war", rather than a "small, victorious war". It is enjoying being back on the world stage, but that will not bring "victory", however it is defined. Russia will not get too involved on the ground. It can launch a few cruise missiles from the safe haven of the Caspian Sea and drop as many bombs as it likes, but it does not have the military capacity to destroy ISIS.

Plus, reality bites, and the Kremlin will not want too much reality ruining the TV shows at home. And despite the immediate blowback, probably including the loss of 224 lives on Flight 9268 in the Sinai desert and two aircraft over Syria and Turkey by the end of November 2015, terrorism against Russia has never really changed policy before. It is unlikely to make the Kremlin switch targets to a real revenge mission against ISIS. This will be the key litmus test for the rest of the world in the long term.

Further information

This article is a highlight from the latest issue of New Eastern Europe, entitled [Losing focus? Eastern fatigue vs reality](#).

Yet, you can see the temptation for France to make the shortest of short-term alliances with Russia. European politicians, especially weak ones like François Hollande, also need PR. To this end, Vladimir Putin is Yin (the shaded side) to Hollande's Yang. After the Paris attacks, Hollande talked of "war" but not of revenge. Putin has no such compunctions and there is nothing to stop him boasting that "We will search for them everywhere, no matter where they are hiding." Putin can provide the instant bombing that is slow to materialise in the West. France also flew some immediate sorties, but had to wait for other western allies to join in. The invocation of European Union, rather than NATO, collective defence articles was designed to make it easier for others like the United Kingdom to opt in to military action against ISIS, something which may well have happened by the time you read this, but was never going to happen overnight. Russia may be a useful instant ally, but it is an awful long-term one. Russia was barely targeting ISIS before the Paris atrocities. It still supports Bashar al-Assad. If the West really wants to destroy ISIS bases, it will have to do so by itself.

Is rapprochement with Russia likely?

Ukraine is right to feel neglected, or even like a potential pawn in this geopolitical chess match. There are few scenarios in which one can imagine a direct trade-off between Syria and Ukraine, but Russia is hoping the context, priorities and language of the main actors will all change after Paris, or have already changed, particularly because the Paris atrocities occurred when the chorus of voices calling for a "normalisation" of relations with Russia was already rising in volume. However, before the Paris attacks, those calling for some kind of rapprochement with Russia were largely the usual suspects, Trojan Horse states like Cyprus, southern European countries with recession and migration on their mind and Hungary. Yet if France were to be added to this list, the dynamic would obviously change, and Hollande would come

under enormous pressure from both Le Pen and Sarkozy to begin the rapprochement.

Russia is also banking on exploiting the rising tension between the eastern and western parts of the EU over the migration issue. Part of the reason for its Syrian intervention is surely to increase the flow of migrants towards Europe. However, it is still unlikely that the EU will fully lift its sanctions against Russia in January 2016 (and the original round of sanctions imposed after the annexation of Crimea remain a separate issue), by which time this piece will be out. The approach in Brussels, linking sanctions to the "full implementation" of the second Minsk Agreement, is not always helpful. The Minsk Agreement is full of holes. Yet that is precisely what makes it hard for both Ukraine and Russia, as well as Russia's proxies, to fulfil the agreement. Not enough boxes will have been ticked by January, assuming that Brussels does not forget its own mantra.

The broader trend is clearly towards a softer approach, or to find ways of talking to Russia in other fora and other contexts. The barrier for new sanctions, if there were to be a sharp uptick in fighting in eastern Ukraine, is ever more blurred. The Juncker letter to Putin in November 2015 expressed frustration at deteriorating relations, "which to my regret have not been able to develop over the past year", and largely blamed un-named EU member states for blocking rapprochement (which ironically advertised Juncker's impotence). However, the letter did endorse the idea of direct talks between the EU and the Eurasian Economic Union, a classic "alternative channel".

In Germany, there is a clear desire to invent some kind of successor dialogue to the Trilateral Process (the EU "reassuring" Russia over the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area deal with Ukraine), which looks like it will end when the DCFTA comes into force in January 2016 (About time too. There could be no clearer case of hypocrisy concerning Russia's "national interests". The whole time that Germany has been reassuring Russia over mythical threats to trade, Russia has been busy destroying Russo-Ukrainian trade). Yet, the desire to talk remains fundamental. Berlin will find something.

Pragmatism is back

Where this leaves the Eastern Partnership is far from clear. The review announced in November 2015 had already shifted its emphasis towards the new buzzword of "stabilisation", rather than transformation. There are voices in southern Europe denouncing the Eastern Partnership as a failed project. This is premature. EU initiatives never formally die. However, the other rapprochement, between the EU and Turkey in November 2015, further complicates the issue. It puts pragmatism back in fashion. Three billion euros of annual funding and visa-free travel for Turks represents a massive gamble that Turkey will stop more migrants passing through its territory. It is also a massive gamble with conditionality, given the deteriorating quality of democracy in Turkey, to put it mildly, under Recep Tayyip Erdogan. What is the current price for the necessary reforms for visa-free travel in Kyiv? The deal with Turkey even risks sending a completely contradictory message to Ukraine: the EU is equally likely to deal with you, regardless of whether you are a problem or an asset.

At the moment, Ukraine is at risk because it is not delivering at home. Reforms are proceeding painfully slowly, with every measure sweated through after pressure from civil society and abroad to counteract brinkmanship by the

authorities. Ukraine has also shot itself in the foot by inventing the new phrase "de-oligarchization", an unfortunate, as well as clumsy, neologism, because it draws attention to the fact that this is not what is happening on the ground. De-oligarchization led by oligarchs was always a suspect process. This is so depressing. It took about one year for the Orange Revolution to reach the point where the system was able to regenerate itself, roughly around the time of the political crisis in September 2005. Yet this was because the Orange Revolution had advanced on a narrow front. The Orange protestors of 2004 put their faith in a group of leaders who proved to be quarrelsome, incompetent and corrupt. The 2013–14 EuroMaidan protest was a more profound challenge to the system. Despite this, we now seem to be reaching the point, predicted by Henry Hale in his excellent book *Patronal Politics: Eurasian Regime Dynamics in Comparative Perspective* (2014), when the post-Soviet patronal system reconstitutes itself.

At least in political science terms, it is interesting to see these mechanisms at work. The Ukrainian terminology is also instructive. Too many vicious circles are eddying around Ukraine's brave minority of real reformers. Political success depends on the mass media, which is owned by oligarchs and depends on money. Politicians have to raise money in order to compete, but are then dependent on their sponsors. Politicians are also connected to money through a series of *smotriashchy* (literally "watchers"), *hroshovi mishky* ("wallets", or more precisely "money bags", allies placed in strategic state positions) and placemen in state-owned enterprises, all of whom then fund the politicians who appointed them. The point of politics then focuses on keeping the cycle going, so that debts are repaid. Politicians are not casually corrupt but become *korruptionery* (corruptioneers), professionals preoccupied and dedicated to nothing but corruption.

Vicious circles

There are a few attempts to break these cycles, and one has to hope that they will succeed. Countervailing forces are much stronger than they were in 2005. Even if the *sistema* reconstitutes itself, it will be opposed. A new law on state financing for political parties will make a difference if it is properly funded and implemented. Non-systemic parties like the Democratic Alliance and the Force of the People tried to campaign for the recent local elections, mainly on social media. Unfortunately, at the moment, the vicious circles seem to be wining; in Kyiv you can almost hear the low sucking sound of the *sistema* drawing everybody back in. The leaders of the "reform" coalition that took office in December 2014 are not just tolerating oligarchy, they are a part of it.

Of course, all of this creates an opportunity for Russia to regain influence. Russia is banking on more than just the occupied areas of the Donbas to expand its channels of influence within Ukraine. The public mood is febrile, many politicians are hedging their bets and many oligarchs could easily be co-opted by Russia if the mood was to change.

This would only create another vicious circle, furthering the already growing "Ukraine fatigue" in the West. Despite that, now is not the time for Europe to lessen its attention or lose faith. It would help if Ukraine were making its own plea more robustly, both by doing more and advertising it better. In both cases, that would require more activity that goes against the grain. Otherwise, Ukraine risks only attracting global attention the next time it explodes.

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