

Kyiv – *in memoriam*; Brussels - think big; Moscow - big rethink

Michael Emerson

24 February 2014

After the traumatic events of the last week in Kyiv, all parties will be reflecting on their positions. Already on February 3rd we suggested that the EU make serious preparations for a post-Yanukovich Ukraine, which would be run by pro-European democrats, who in turn would have to manage immediately a disastrous financial situation.¹ Many people seemed to think that this would only come in 2015. Instead it came suddenly, and with a vengeance, as a bloody escalation of the conflict left nearly a hundred dead after Yanukovich had authorised the use of lethal weapons, in line it seems with advice he was getting from Moscow. For example Prime Minister Medvedev had said that there could be no continued financial support for a regime that allowed itself to be treated as a ‘doormat’ by its people.

Kyiv *in memoriam*. This last weekend has seen profoundly moving scenes on the Maidan. On Saturday morning huge crowds of ordinary people gathered there peacefully, but tearfully, to pay homage to the hundred who had lost their lives earlier that week. Yanukovich had gone – his presidential office in Kyiv simply vacated, his sumptuous residence outside the capital now open for visitors, being dubbed the ‘Museum of Corruption’. The new politics of Ukraine are going to be complicated to say the least. But first it was the moment to listen to dignified speeches being made on the Maidan, such as from the mother of the young dead Cossack lying in his coffin before the crowd, crying even for forgiveness for her son’s assassin in the hope that unity and love would return to the people of her country, even if the scars of this dreadful episode will take decades to heal. And so followed innumerable further speeches, trying to make of this moment an act of spiritual cleansing for all the people of Ukraine, from West to East.

On Saturday evening Yulia Tymoshenko arrived in Kyiv, liberated that day after 30 months in prison, and went straight to the Maidan, entering the stage as a semi-invalid on a wheelchair, to deliver an immensely powerful speech charged with emotion and many messages. One was that if again now some official asks for a bribe, he will fail, because standing in his way will be dead heroes of the Maidan – our heroes will never die. Another message was that we the people of Ukraine will wake up all in the former Soviet space to oppose repressive authoritarianism. So here too the soul of the Ukrainian people was being

¹ <http://www.ceps.eu/book/preparing-post-yanukovich-ukraine>

Michael Emerson is Associate Senior Research Fellow at the Centre for European Policy Studies.

CEPS Commentaries offer concise, policy-oriented insights into topical issues in European affairs. The views expressed are attributable only to the author in a personal capacity and not to any institution with which he is associated.

Available for free downloading from the CEPS website (www.ceps.eu) • © CEPS 2014

uplifted, beginning the long process of overcoming the weeks and months of vicious and bloody conflict.

The EU's next move - think big. In Brussels and of course the whole European Union there is huge relief that the persistent work of High Representative Catherine Ashton and Commissioner Stefan Füle, and then the last minute mediation of the Polish, German and French foreign ministers, helped Ukraine step off the escalator towards full-scale civil war and disintegration of the state. In passing, the recent pejorative language of the US assistant secretary of state gets its reply.

But within days, the EU will have to decide what it can offer to help a new democratic and reformist administration survive enormous financial and economic as well as political challenges. The history of revolutions is full of good people rising to power after victory at the barricades, but who then prove incapable of handling a disastrous economic situation, and so lose control to wilder, more radical and destructive forces. The EU now has to think big and fast. Fortunately the instruments are there, waiting to be developed and used.

First, the EU can up its pledge to co-finance an IMF rescue operation, to contribute 50% of the total, which overall could displace the need for Russian credits. There could be renewal of the idea vaguely floated a few weeks ago that the EU and US would assemble an international financial package, with possibly a first tranche in advance of an IMF operation. And maybe even a revolutionary idea. Could Russia, recently chair of the G8, be induced to join in a financial cooperative operation with the EU, US and IMF? Of course this hangs upon whether Russia can set aside its model of the zero-sum game, geo-political competition of neighbourhood policy towards Ukraine, a big 'if' to which we return below.

Second, the EU could resort to a typical feature of its association agreements, namely to sign an 'interim agreement' with immediate effect and without ratification delays. This interim agreement would see the EU immediately scrap its tariffs for imports from Ukraine, while Ukraine itself would only begin a gradual multi-year schedule for tariff reduction. This would give an immediate shot of incentives and encouragement for Ukrainian businesses to expand their exports to the EU market.

Third, the EU should send a set of linked messages to Moscow to further deepen economic cooperation around the EU-Russia-Ukraine triangle: i) that the EU was willing now to start talks over free trade with Russia and its customs union, ii) that Russia should itself invite Ukraine to open friendly talks to improve their existing free trade agreement, and abstain of course from further pressure to join the customs union and iii) that the three parties could examine how to design a model for, ultimately, the three bilateral free trade agreements (EU-Ukraine, Russia-Ukraine, EU-Russia) to function compatibly and efficiently together. (Negotiations for the latter set of agreements could take place in trilateral dialogue, or, if that were a too-sensitive proposition for the time being, start with three parallel bilateral.)

Russia's post-mortem - a big rethink. What does this whole episode mean for Russia? After celebrating the successful end to the Olympic games in Sochi, Russia's political elite has to take stock of the colossal and tragic failure of its strategy of trying to pressure its big neighbour into joining the customs union. Who is to blame for the hundred dead? Yanukovich in the first place, but with Putin right in there behind him. Russia's set of serial diplomacy errors has been truly amazing. First, Russia backed the wrong horse in the politically incompetent and totally corrupt Yanukovich. Second, it sought to push onto Ukraine a misconceived economic flagship project in the customs union. Third, instead of deploying Russia's huge cultural soft power potential towards Ukraine, it resorted to blackmail, and counterproductive diplomatic psychology ('tell me that you love me, or I hit

you where it hurts”). Fourth, it blinded itself into not seeing that Ukraine’s civil society and sense of independent statehood has transformed itself over the last two decades.

Russian diplomacy has been producing a stream of statements that earns it no respect, which would be fit for an Anthology of Obsolete Diplomatic Discourse. A first entry would be from Lavrov’s recent address to his corps of ambassadors, at which he criticised the EU for “penetrating Russia’s geo-political space”. A second one would be criticism of EU efforts to mediate between Yanukovich and opposition leaders as “interference, destabilising legitimate authority”, whereas these mediation efforts helped Ukraine reverse its awful slide towards full-scale civil war and disintegration. When Moscow saw that the three EU foreign ministers were getting traction in Kyiv, Vladimir Lukin was sent to join in as Putin’s special representative. Lukin did participate to the point that the text of the agreement published by the German foreign ministry had his name there as signatory. But then Lukin departed without signing, muttering that Russia should have been involved from the beginning. At this point, Russian diplomacy seemed to have become totally confused and disconnected from reality.

It is surely time for a big rethink in Russian foreign policy, at least in its European theatre of operations. Many observers are pessimistic over this happening under Putin’s leadership. An alternative view is that Russia’s foreign policy bottom line is pragmatism and realism. If its policy is found to have gone down a losing track, then it should be changed. At least such views begin to surface in the Russian press, with a first article already this last weekend beginning the post-mortem after the big failure in Ukraine.² The big rethink now due in Moscow has to take on board elementary facts. Coercive policies towards this most important neighbour that prefers independence and democracy do not work. Such policies not only fail, but also cause huge collateral damage for Russia’s international reputation at a time when its economy desperately needs modernising investment from abroad, and first of all Europe and the West.

² Владимир Федорин «Конец доктрины Медведева - Украина покидает постсоветское пространство. Что делать России?» (The End of the Medvedev Doctrine - Ukraine leaves the post-Soviet Space. What should Russia do?), *Vedemosti*, 22 February 2014.