

Political weakness of the European Union and its causes – the case of Ukraine.

A study of the causes which have led to Ukraine's decision to withdraw from signing the Association Agreement with the European Union in the late November 2013 should account for a wide range of diverse factors. The factors form a "web" of closely interrelated determinants and various contributing circumstances. The overwhelming majority of such factors have their root causes in Ukraine itself and in the policies of its government. The developments have also been affected by the approach of two external actors, i.e. the Russian Federation and the European Union.

The aim of this study is to assess the European Union's association policy towards Ukraine in view of opinions by some experts and politicians who have suggested that "the Union has done far too little for Ukraine". In assessing this claim, one should identify the underlying reasons behind the present state of affairs.

The most commonly named factors contributing to the present European Union policy towards Ukraine include the lack of political will and unanimity among some political elites regarding Ukraine's future membership in the EU, the related dilemmas surrounding the Union's further enlargement and its funding of the Ukrainian association process, awareness of the immense magnitude of Ukraine's problems, discords of ideological, geopolitical, social, economic, historical and ethnic nature which need to be addressed, the Ukrainian policy of "striking a balance between Moscow and Brussels", the determined approach of Russia and the fears of deteriorating relations with Russia expressed by certain EU member states.

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On top of the above, there is the frequently neglected consideration of the present weakness of the European Union which is not only economic but also institutional and political. The weakness can well be seen in some of the EU's foreign policy efforts as well as other areas. Examples include the Union's treatment of Syria, Afghanistan, Belarus and Ukraine. Although each of these countries are a different case which arises from different international and domestic contexts, all of them reveal, more or less clearly, rifts in the Union's unity, weaknesses in its foreign policy and limitations in its capacity to influence international developments even (as in the case of Ukraine) in its own immediate neighborhood.

The EU's political feebleness has been caused by a multiplicity of factors, the most notable of which are:

1. An absence of clear political leadership in the European Union capable of not only adopting but also enforcing a robust and effective foreign policy, e.g. on Ukraine. To compound the problem, members of the Union vie for "leadership" dragging the EU into an increasingly more severe crisis over whether it should be led by a single country or perhaps two or three countries sharing their leadership, and, if so, in what configuration, on what terms and to what extent.

2. The financial crisis and its various implications for foreign policy, further EU enlargement and other issues. A reference to "Europe of many crises" perfectly reflects the circumstances as the difficulties faced by the EU do not end with finance alone and extend to social and institutional affairs, leadership in policy making, legitimacy, etc.

3. The lack of a vigorous debate on and perhaps even a vision of EU policies and the EU's position in the international community. The problem is associated with a number of questions and dilemmas, some of which concern the objectives and concepts for the EU's further enlargement and ways to solve the Union's key problems. The lack of debate is manifested by e.g. an absence of a comprehensive foreign policy strategy for the EU and the divided opinions by the member states on the EU's priorities, the proper extent of its interference and the appropriate methods for achieving its goals. In view of the great number and complexity of such problems, the deficiency severely undermines the EU's position and image.

4. A factor which thoroughly undercuts many EU initiatives is the necessity to secure the support of its member states. Where the member states diverge in their opinions, the decision-making process gets drawn out, occasionally reaching a point where initiatives are completely derailed. Owing to the great number of member states and their diverse views and interests, predicaments of this sort are far from rare. Historic examples of the



problem include the EU's stances on conflicts in the former Yugoslavia, Iraq and Libya and on the missile defense project. More recent instances can be found in Syria, Afghanistan and Ukraine.

5. There is notable decline in interest in the further enlargement of the European Union. Distracted by the economic recession and social problems, some political elites and the public at large have been losing interest in enlargement issues. This is clearly true for Ukraine.

6. The member states tend to put their national interests before those of the Community. This is particularly evident in the European Union's foreign policy. As a consequence, the EU is losing not only its potential but also its coherence and unity.

7. Another factor impeding the Union's international engagement is the multiplicity and diversity of challenges and the rapid pace of change observed in the global environment. As a consequence, the European Union is forced to engage on many fronts diluting its impact in any particular field. A further difficulty lies in the fact that certain states, such as the Russian Federation and China, have stepped up their activity in many realms ranging from economic and the military to geopolitical and even espionage.

8. Proper note needs to be taken of the wrangling over political and jurisdiction issues among various EU institutions and member states. Examples include the Syrian crisis, the Palestinian issue and the Ukrainian transitions.

9. A cause as well as an effect of the EU's weakness is its lengthy decision-making. This is due partly to the "endless" consultations with the member states and their specific bodies as well as the convoluted administrative and legal procedures.

10. A particular challenge, not only for the EU, lies in finding the right responses to breaches of the rules of democracy by certain states. This goes especially for superpower states and countries which, like Ukraine, are in a critical geopolitical position.

Needless to say, the above enumeration of causes contributing to the European Union's political weakness is only general and selective. Due to its complexity, the matter requires further in-depth research. The author has nevertheless demonstrated the broad scope and great diversity of the issue and signalled the multiplicity of interactions among the factors at play. The author has also noted an urgent need for comprehensive research on the Union's foreign policy, including that on Ukraine. In formulating and pursuing such policy, it is essential precisely to identify long-term objectives, secure proper means, activate proper mechanisms and have the member states reach a consensus which will enhance the EU



politically and financially, bolster its logistics, enhance its image, strengthen its policies and make it a significant global player.

The theses and opinions included in this text do not constitute an official standpoint of the Institute for Western Affairs; they express the opinions of the author only.

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