



Call for Papers "Geopolitics & Values: what is the real power of the EU?"

**TOWARDS A MORE EFFECTIVE EU DIPLOMACY: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS
OF THE EU SOFT POWER IN UKRAINE AND BELARUS**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The COVID-19 outbreak may represent a catalyst for the European Union and its soft power approach in neighboring countries. Particularly, as Belarus struggles in its post-election period, the EU aims to push the Belarusian government to repeat the elections under OSCE/ODIHR's supervision. Given the lack of military means to support any hard solution, having NATO unavailable due to the COVID-19 outbreak (as it was possible to witness after the suspension of the main NATO training exercise – Defender Europe, in May), the EU policy makers will have to face this strategic challenge by further developing soft power capacities.

The paper's objective is to compare the policy of the EU towards Ukraine before and during the revolution of 2014, seeing the situational analogies between Ukraine and Belarus in the geopolitical chessboard, and provide viable policy recommendations to tackle the ongoing situation. The paper will analyze the main EU soft power offensive means to challenge Russia in the region while the COVID-19 pandemic reshapes the current geopolitical landscape, long term objectives and strategic interests of the main players in the international arena.

Short bio

Christian Contro graduated at University of Glasgow with a thesis on EU intelligence culture. Soon after a 6-months training on intelligence analysis in Regensburg, Germany, he started working for Intelligence Fusion, as analyst on security issues in Indonesia and later intern at Finabel - European Army Interoperability Center, in Brussels. Following a Traineeship in the EU Delegation in Venezuela, Christian currently works for the European Commission, Unit for Latin America and Caribbean of DG DEVCO, Brussels.



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1. Introduction and structure

This paper will explore how and why the EU should sharpen its soft power tools for security reasons, especially in the eastern European region, which since the Ukrainian crisis became, once again, central in the discussion of the role of the European institutions as an international actor (Gotev & Radosavljevic, 2020). The structure is the following. Firstly, the analysis will concentrate on what triggered the Ukrainian crisis in 2014, underlining the role of the EU's soft power as an actor in the regional context. A brief SWOT analysis (Strength, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats) will give a final overview on the situation in Ukraine considering the actors involved. In the second part of the paper, the focus will move towards the current political crisis in Belarus. The analysis foresees the building of a cross-impact matrix which includes the actors present in the crisis, and also the possible actions that these might engage with. The use of the matrix is a forecasting exercise classically used in intelligence analysis to build potential scenarios in crisis regions. In this case, the purpose of the matrix is to build two possible scenarios which will develop from the actions of the EU, if and when undertaken. Eventually, the conclusion will sum up the scenarios underlining the importance of the UE soft power, followed by a series of brief policy recommendations

2. The EU in the Ukrainian Crisis

In her speech at the Corvinus UUniversity in Budapest in 2011, the former High Representative Catherine Ashton stated how “the EU has soft power with a hard edge, more than the power to set a good example and promote our values. But less than the power to impose its will.” Throughout her speech the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy explained in its entirety the concept of soft power according to EU policy.¹ The actual need shown by different countries to enhance their partnership with the EU represented for the past decade, and still represents, one of the pivotal elements of the soft power of the European Union. (Ashton, 2011)

It could be argued how the crisis in Ukraine illustrates that the EU soft power can have immense backlashes in the international stage. By proposing the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement in 2014 the EU contributed strongly to trigger a conflict in which hard power tools have been widely used by the different actors (Russia and Ukraine) putting NATO at a high level of alert, leaning

¹ “One of the things I find wherever I go – perhaps the only thing that is common to each country I visit – is that every political leader, and everyone in business, the professions and civil society too, wants to be our partner. Sometimes the partnership they seek concerns trade, sometimes it concerns security, sometimes development, sometimes human rights. Whatever the subject, the ambition of countries around the world, from the biggest and richest to the smallest and poorest, is the same: to make the EU their ally.” Catherine Ashton, 2011, Corvinus University Budapest



towards the institution of various multinational military exercises in European territory. The position of Brussels' policy makers was based on the assumption that the entire country was ready to close its gaps with the EU, in a rising interest of European countries to lean towards east (Association Agreement between the European Union and its Member States and Ukraine, 2014). The rejection of the Association Agreement sparked the tensions that were already building up in the country during the Yanukovich presidency, and not adequately addressed by the diplomacy of the EU (Robertshaw, 2015). Ukraine, due to its history and complexity, maintained strong economic ties with Russia, with moments of serious tensions. The succession of president Yuschenko and Yanukovich, for example, shows this pattern. Yuschenko was elected following the Orange revolution in 2004, and suffered immediately a poisoning incident, allegedly ordered by the Russian establishment (Feifer, 2010). On the other hand, Yanukovich, who succeeded Yuschenko, reformed the government leaning towards the Eastern part of the country, ethnically closer to Russia (Motyl, 2010). Nonetheless, both Yuschenko and Yanukovich were conscious of the possible outcomes of closing their political gaps with the EU. Once ruled out the possibility for Ukraine to join NATO, it seemed that Ukraine could have a chance of gradually closing in with the European market, excluding the possibility of a conflict.

Unfortunately, Brussels did not fully understand the social dynamics in the country, showing a lack of comprehensive capabilities of conflict prevention and misjudged the readiness of the two existing factions to start a fight (Mirimanova, 2011). Following the beginning of the crisis and the frozen conflict originated by the Euromaidan protests, the EU found itself in a position in which it could hardly take any additional step without igniting a potential further escalation. On the one hand, the EU did not have the credibility needed to provide a real diplomatic leverage against Russia. Such credibility was lost mainly due to the incapability, prior to the crisis, to read and forecast Russian interests in the region and its possible (and eventually, effective) reaction (Robertshaw, 2015); though it is also worth noting how the EU stood for its values, promoting a peaceful solution, in a general call and subsequent strategy aimed to defend human rights and democracy in Ukraine. On the other, Russia manifested itself as the actor with less respect for international law and the rules-based global order, making it an element of strong destabilization in the region (Mogherini, 2016). The sanctions subsequent to the Russian annexation of Crimea had a heavy backlash on the Russian economy, while Putin's realist approach forged a stronger Westernized Ukrainian society, putting other countries in the Eurasian Economic Union in a difficult position, having them partially lost enthusiasm for the Russian cause. Amongst these countries there was also Belarus. (McFaul, Sestanovich, & Mearsheimer, 2014). A SWOT analysis could provide a better understanding on the steps taken by the EU, underlining its criticalities, but also its stability in the process and its assets.



Strengths

The EU shows great reliability as an international partner, respecting and promoting the rules of the global-based order. Sanctions although not effective in the conflict itself partially weakened the Russian establishment as it weakened Russian economy, which was already struggling. In the long term this impact could push the Russian people to reconsider their support to the government. On the other hand, Russia does not have the possibility to challenge the EU economically.

Weaknesses

In terms of endogenous factors, the EU showed great lack of conflict prevention capabilities, overall shortcomings in analysis and forecasting efficiency and a dangerous misjudgment of the Russian position and will to pick a fight. Finally, the EU exposed the partial lack of understanding of the Ukrainian civil society, which felt, especially in the East, completely misunderstood in its identity needs.

Opportunities

The Ukrainian crisis also brought to the table some important discussions on the role of the EU in Europe as a soft power actor, highlighting criticalities on the top-down approach adopted in dealing with Ukraine in the months prior to the crisis outbreak. Secondly, it put Russia in the position of having to maintain a constant offensive stance, and momentum. In the short and medium term, such a position could be maintained, though in the long term it would represent a risk for the Russian establishment and economy, marking the EU as a unique solid security actor in the region. It also enhanced the debate on the strategic independence and initiative within the European Union.

Threats

The crisis underlined the current inadequacy of European security capabilities, representing a possible threat to European stability. It is also important to point out how the crisis contributed to an enhanced Russian interference in European matters with a destabilizing intention. Lastly, the crisis caused a frozen conflict and unstable situation in the East marking a temporary setback which does not benefit the European diplomacy, showing its fragilities.

Conclusions

The EU maintained a strong position of condemnation of the Russian aggression, calling Putin's government to take responsibility in the current frozen conflict. The credibility of the EU as a security actor has been damaged by the crisis, however, Russia did not comply with the rules of the international community, risking even deeper damages in the long term. It is important to remind, again, that it was the so-called "soft power with a hard edge" which triggered the eventual conflict; the fact that Russia reacted in such a violent manner once seen its regional interest in jeopardy by the EU initiatives, strengthens the overall impression of the effectiveness of such soft



power. Especially counting on the fact that Russia did never act in this pattern against European interests in other regional contexts, such as the Arctic (Tulipov & Tsarenko, 2019). The further analysis will acknowledge these elements, comparably, with the Belarusian political crisis, and consistent with the soft power tools at the EU's disposal.

3. COVID-19 and the Belarusian political crisis

The EU is not a hard power reality, and its effectiveness on foreign policy is surrounded nowadays by strong doubts (Nielsen, 2013). As it has been widely recognized, NATO is the security actor that in Europe maintains the reins of the discourse, enhancing capabilities, and bringing the national militaries to a common table improving interoperability capacities and building trust amongst hard power actors. However, COVID-19 put most of NATO's activity on hold, the last one being the 2020 exercise Defender Europe. When COVID-19 hit, the exercise was suspended. Defender Europe was to be the biggest military exercise in recent years, aimed at strengthening resilience and interoperability between European forces and the US troops in the continent. (Thomas, Williams, & Dyakova, 2020). As the exercise was rebuilt and reshaped in a smaller scale due to the pandemic, another political crisis broke out at the eastern border of the EU: the Belarusian political protests following the elections held in early August 2020. In this case, NATO's diplomatic response has been so far factually non-existent, leaving the Belarusian population alone to deal with the authoritarian government supported by Russia. The EU on the other hand, raised its voice against the Belarusian establishment, imposing restrictive measures against forty members of the government and the armed forces of Belarus (Council, 2020). The High Representative/ Vice President (HR/VP) issued a statement demanding free and fair elections, under the scrutiny of the organisation for Security and Co-Operation in Europe's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (OSCE/ODIHR) and rejecting the results of August 2020 (Borrell, 2020). As of now, however, no steps have been taken by the Belarusian establishment to align with the European Union's requests and is not likely to comply anytime soon.

The relations between the EU, Belarus and Russia are beyond complex. Belarus has had an ambivalent position between the two powers, using its strategic position to obtain leverage and political capital. It is not the most loyal of the Russian allies, but it is not a valid reason to believe that its current establishment could part on the side of Europe (Nice, 2012). Particularly now, seen that the Belarusian government's reluctance to respect some of the basic values of the EU and undergoing the sanctions imposed by the Council. This crisis shares some situational similarities with Ukraine, and if the EU shows the real intention to take any further step towards a peaceful resolution, it should take into account the main differences and the lessons learned from the Ukrainian crisis of 2014. The two situations are not entirely comparable. Ukraine was strategically pivotal for Russia, not only from an economic perspective but also in the security realm. Belarus



has not the same importance, it is a recalcitrant small state conscious of its rather relative importance, and acts upon it; a country where “rejection, resistance, oscillation and non-commitment have defined Lukashenko’s regime” (Korosteleva, 2016). It is mainly due to external factors that the Belarusian government changes its positions quickly trying to constantly seize economic or political opportunities. This is a behavioral pattern that helps analyze the current crisis and might support the forecasting exercise.

4. Possible outcomes: a cross-impact matrix analysis

The cross-impact matrix is a type of Structured Analysis Technique (SAT) which systematizes some key assumptions and relates these assumptions which are graphically shown on top and on the left of the matrix, by their level of consistency. By consistency, it means the impact that such assumptions have on the rest of the elements.

The analysis carried out here uses qualitative data gathered from existent academic research and bases its assumptions on the proven dynamics of the different actors in the comparable situation, the Ukrainian crisis of 2014. Although not all the elements are the same. In the cases of a lack of existing research, the author has extrapolated assumptions based on the current policies of the actors, and dynamics of the region.

The descriptors considered for the analysis are the following: the EU, the Belarusian security forces, the Belarusian civil society organizations (CSOs), Russia, and the Belarusian government. In this case, the descriptors correspond to the actors involved in the crisis. These descriptors (actors) have been put in a cross-impact matrix program (ScenarioWizard) built specifically to quantitatively produce consistent scenarios based on the qualitative assumptions made by the analyst. The tab below shows the different descriptors and their interactions in the cross-impact matrix. The numbers show the level of consistency (influence) that each descriptor could have on the variables. The analyst takes into account the amount of influence that one actor and its variables (which will be explained in the following paragraph) have in the other actors and variables. After filling in the boxes with numbers showing how the influence could be positive (positive numbers), negative (negative numbers) or none (zero). The algorithm calculates the level of consistencies giving the possible scenarios. Without numerical relations, in this case, the possible scenarios are 234, however, the analyst built the matrix obtaining two eventual scenarios.



Belarus.option2.scw	A. EU	A. EU	A. EU	B. Gov	B. Gov	B. Gov	C. CSOs	C. CSOs	C. CSOs	D. SFor	D. SFor	D. SFor	E. Russia	E. Russia	E. Russia
	-A1 Dialogue	-A2 SupCSOs	-A3 San	-B1 Comp	-B1 Non Comp	-B3 Fall	-C1 Unrest	-C2 Riot	-C3 Retreat	-D1 Rep	-D2 With	-D3 Mutiny	-E1 PolSup	-E2 Milint	-E3 Inaction
A. EU:															
-A1 Dialogue				-1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	-1	0	2
-A2 Support CSOs				-1	2	1	2	1	-2	2	-1	1	2	0	1
-A3 Sanctions				1	2	1	2	2	-1	2	-1	0	2	1	0
B. Government:															
-B1 Compliance	2	2	-1				-1	-1	2	-1	1	0	-1	0	1
-B1 Non Compliance	1	3	3				2	1	-2	2	-2	0	2	0	-1
-B3 Fall	0	3	0				2	1	-1	2	1	2	1	2	-1
C. CSOs:															
-C1 Unrest	1	3	1	-1	2	2				2	-2	1	1	1	2
-C2 Riot	1	1	2	2	3	2				3	-1	1	2	1	-1
-C3 Retreat	2	2	2	-1	2	-3				0	-1	-1	0	0	0
D. Security Forces:															
-D1 Repression	0	2	3	-2	2	-1	1	2	2				0	0	1
-D2 Withdraw	2	2	-1	2	-1	1	-1	-1	0				0	0	0
-D3 Mutiny	1	2	0	0	0	2	1	1	-1				1	2	0
E. Russia:															
-E1 Political support	0	2	2	1	2	0	1	2	0	0	0	0			
-E2 Military intervention	1	2	2	-2	2	1	1	2	0	0	0	1			
-E3 Inaction	0	0	0	1	0	1	2	1	0	0	0	0			

The descriptors have been built with three variables each. These variables have been extracted by defining the potential actions that each actor (descriptor) could take. In the case of the EU, for example, the three variables are actions that the EU has taken on other occasions, and also specifically in this context, with both Ukraine and Belarus.

The EU:

- Dialogue, the decision of carrying out a political dialogue with the establishment
- Support of CSOs, via the cooperation and funding instruments, also providing know-how and guidance
- Sanctions, policy used so far

The Government:

- Compliance (to the EU's requests of fair and free elections)
- Non-compliance
- Fall (caused by other factors, as explained in the following descriptor)

The Civil Society Organizations:

- Unrest
- Riot (full scale conflictual relation with the security forces; the variable "fall of the government" in the previous descriptor could be caused by a potential conflict with the population, led by the civil society and opposition, which is included in the CSOs)
- Retreat

Security forces:



- Repression (in case of unrest and rioting)
- Withdrawal (if ordered by the government, in case of compliance)
- Mutiny (this option must be taken into account, seen how the state's economy might collapse in case of internal conflict).

Russia:

- Political support (to the Belarusian government)
- Military intervention (highly unlikely, as seen in the tab)
- Inaction.

Before showing the product, it is necessary to point out a few remarks. Firstly, the matrix used is usually the result of teamwork which comprises a red-teaming exercise, putting every single assumption in doubt, providing a more accurate qualitative analysis and therefore, potentially more consistent outcomes. Secondly, the matrix does not consider all the possible variables, due to a limitation of space and computing power. Finally, the result of the matrix is a mathematical combination of possibilities and the decision of which scenario might be the most likely is solely on the ability and knowledge of the analyst.

Seen the interaction of these possibilities, two are the final scenarios eventually considered. The key assumption here is the role that the EU will play in the crisis. As a cascade effect, all the other descriptors will follow: the local government, the CSOs, the security forces, and Russia, in that order. The analysis is built on the reactions of these other descriptors based on the actions of the EU. Theoretically, the exercise should be a system for decision support and guidance.

Scenario No. 1	Scenario No. 2
A. EU: -A2 Support CSOs	A. EU: -A3 Sanctions
B. Government: -B1 Non Compliance	
C. CSOs: -C1 Unrest	C. CSOs: -C2 Riot
D. Security Forces: -D1 Repression	
E. Russia: -E1 Political support	

According to the influence of the various variables in the previous tab, these are the two most likely scenarios. On the one hand, a stronger support of the EU of the CSOs, which would push the government further in a position of non-compliance with the requests. This might lead to



potential unrest, and further repression by the security forces, while receiving political support from the main ally, the Russian government. On the other hand, a continuous policy of sanctions on the side of the EU might, again, bring the Belarusian government to a position of non-compliance. However, in this second scenario, the CSOs are more likely to respond in a violent manner, bringing the security forces to respond in the same way: with repression. Again, Russia could show political support, against the EU's demands, tightening its ties with the Belarusian establishment, in a dynamic which is not new to the region (Dragneva & Wolczuk, 2016).

5. Conclusions

The soft power approach of the EU usually involves taking a top-down approach, closing gaps in the public sector of the country involved, signing commercial and political agreements and supporting new policies when necessary. However, this approach only works in the case of a friendly government which is keen to embrace the change. As it has been in the case of Ukraine, the pattern shown by the government helped to shape the people's expectation in a European future, causing a violent rupture in the society between pro-European and pro-Russian factions. Supporting governmental structures and binding oneself to economic and political treaties certainly plays an important role in the field of soft power. It should not be, though, the main aim of the European Union as an actor in the region.

It is important to remember that there is a part of the Belarusian civil society which is pushing for closer cooperation with the European institutions and has been pushing away the possibility of a closer integration with Russia (New Framework toward Normalisation of Relations between the European Union and Belarus, 2009). Supporting CSOs is one of the finest tools at the disposal of the EU, empowering the people to shape a democracy taking Europe as the main example, and creating a real long term solution not only for the country itself, but also for European security in its external borders. The ambivalence of the Belarusian establishment should remind how, at a governmental level, it still represents an important ally in the area where both the EU and Russia would rather avoid having real issues. However, this precise final consideration, should help open the eyes on the cruciality of sharpening soft power tools to secure the future of the region on the side of the EU.

6. Policy Recommendations

The criticalities pointed out in the first paragraph should have been addressed by the EU institutions in order to avoid the current standstill in Belarus. Especially seen that Belarus, as much as Ukraine, shares its borders on one side with Russia, and the other with European Union member states. Moreover, the current situation with Turkey, another bordering state, is rapidly deteriorating (McKernan, 2020). However, the lack of hard power means at the EU's disposal do represent a



challenge that only a stronger diplomacy could solve. Therefore, some strategic assets could be put into place to strengthen the European Union's soft power in the neighbouring countries. Once seen the different elements of the crisis, and acknowledged the potential scenarios in play, it is worth pointing out a few policy recommendations:

- Maintaining a strong European internal cohesion via information tools, and defending Europe from external soft power influence should become a priority, as such power is not only a prerogative of the EU (especially in the case of Poland, strategic actor in the crisis). For example, it should be developed a clearer strategy in the use of social media, to bring Europeans together via stronger communication initiatives and by securitising the topic of the fake news in the political and security agenda. Europol, in coordination with the EU Commission Communication Directorate General, could both lead an action to address the matter.
- Enhance the investment and delivery of funds on education and human development in the region, boosting programs such as the Erasmus+ and possible critical infrastructure to better liaise the people of the region. Bringing closer together people from Belarus to Poland and Lithuania, liaising them with infrastructural investment and education, could result in less attrition between people, and develop better relationships.
- Develop better communication tools aimed at the population to create an impactful campaign on European values and the European way of life, as element to protect and export. As the new EU Commission took over claiming a stronger geopolitical role, then should put into place a more effective communication strategy in the EU neighborhood to define strongly the European way of life concept.
- Giving full financial and political support to the local CSOs, organizing roundtables and setting up a functional Theory of Change allowing the government to prepare for a fair transition, also in the field of justice. Supporting the transitional justice would help bringing a peaceful change in the Belarusian crisis. On the other hand, supporting local CSOs would represent the creation of a new political establishment in Belarus which is based on the values of democracy and freedom.
- Explore a full spectrum of actions to be taken following a bottom up approach, and develop capabilities for covert operations in contexts outside of the EU borders. An effective and impactful intelligence does not only mean gathering and analysing information, but also the capability to carry out official operations under EU mandate. Developing such capabilities should become crucial for the security of European citizens and the EU itself.



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