

## **The EU Hybrid Diplomacy Between Deep Concern for Ukraine and no 'Red-Line' for Russia**

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Five years ago, the European Union (EU) introduced different types of “restrictive measures”, reacting to the Russian annexation of Crimea of March 21<sup>st</sup> 2014. The destabilization of the Donbas in Eastern Ukraine started immediately after. Five years later, the European Council agreed on the latest extension of the economic sanctions, until 31<sup>st</sup> January 2020. The EU has periodically reviewed, strengthened where necessary and kept sanctions in place, while waiting for the implementation of the Minsk Agreements. At the same time, it also seems to be protagonist of a *hybrid diplomacy*, repeatedly stating “we are deeply concerned” for Ukraine while avoiding settling on a clear ‘red-line’ for Russia.

### **Ukraine still “walking” towards the EU**

In 2013, Euromaidan, or the “Revolution of Dignity”, began when the step Ukraine wanted to take away from the Soviet world and towards the EU was not granted. In 2019, the interest in becoming a EU member state is still as strong as before the start of the Ukrainian ‘reign of rot’. Confirming this view, the new Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelenskyy declared that he “intends to keep Ukraine on the path of European and Euro-Atlantic integration” while on his first European tour in June. Highlighting the importance of sanctions, he stated that they “are the only leverage to free the occupied territory”. During their meeting, German Chancellor Angela Merkel backed Zelenskyy’s remarks asserting that right now “the sanctions cannot be lifted.”

### **The EU in Ukraine: “We are deeply concerned”**

Focusing on the EU presence in Ukraine, there are various formats that help Ukraine in ensuring a stable and democratic future for its citizens, and are unwavering in their support for Ukraine’s independence, territorial integrity and sovereignty. According to the European External Action Service (EEAS) representatives, everything seems to be working and Ukraine has progressed more in the last five years than in the previous twenty-five when looking at European-backed reforms. With 250 running programs, the EU and Ukraine are managing to “move forward together”. The European Union Advisory Mission (EUAM) underlined the importance of keeping the lines of communication open with Russia, even if there will never be agreement on certain issues. At least, the West and Russia must agree to disagree, and then find areas where they can cooperate. Even if the EU delegations do not want to give up on Ukraine because that would mean giving up on the EU itself, the EU member states have specific interests that lead to tensions. There is a lot of ambiguity coming from their politicians and the only common line appears to be that “Russia’s actions in Ukraine are deeply concerning”.

### **Will a ‘Red-Line’ for Russia ever exist?**

The EU’s *hybrid diplomacy* is crystal clear. For example, the EU is Ukraine’s biggest

trading partner while simultaneously protecting its close ties with Russia as the biggest investor in the country. Among the EU members, the range of approaches to Russia is certainly diverse. Germany sits right in the middle between Ukraine and Russia with German companies' new investments in Russian gas companies, and its positive opinion about Nord Stream II. Fearing economic and geopolitical instability, the German government wants to take a moderate stance towards Moscow, while the Baltic States and Poland see a moral and security imperative to stand up to Putin's aggressive authoritarianism. Other states, such as Austria and Italy, may be underestimating the possible consequences of the ongoing conflict because they do not perceive Russia as a threat. Thus, the EU's economic sanctions have not yet had a significant impact and with 83,047 ceasefire violations in Eastern Ukraine in the first 3 months of 2019, the implementation of the Minsk Agreements seems even further away.

On June 25<sup>th</sup>, Russia was re-admitted to the Council of Europe. The question which arises is why Russia has been re-admitted when the reason for its suspension, Crimea's annexation, is still present. This decision may be a sign of Europe softening its attitude towards Russian aggression in Ukraine. The EU should not follow the Council of Europe's stance and start trading values for investments, since there is no difference between Russia as an aggressor and a corrupted EU. Most importantly, it seems that there is no 'red-line' that Russia's actions can cross to prompt a meaningful EU response.

The EU strategy in Ukraine has merits and shortcomings, but there is no doubt that it appears to be weak predominantly due to its closeness to Russia. Without changing this approach, the EU may only be able to act as a therapist but not as the surgeon that Ukraine needs to be finally separated from its dominant twin, Russia. If the EU wants to be effective in world politics, it should act united against states who violate international law.