



Wilfried
Martens Centre
for European Studies

Democratisation in EU Foreign Policy

The Cases of Belarus, Turkey and Ukraine

**Lucie Tungul, Petr Hlaváček,
Tereza Soušková and Marek Ženíšek**





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Credits

The Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies is the political foundation and think tank of the European People's Party (EPP), dedicated to the promotion of Christian Democrat, conservative and like-minded political values.

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Table of contents

About the Martens Centre	04
About the authors	06
Introduction	10
Ukraine: a country struggling with transition	13
Governance reform: facing economic difficulties, oligarchs and corruption	13
Civil society, human rights and identity	17
Ukrainian foreign policy: between Russia and the West	19
Turkey: the perpetual <i>enfant terrible</i>	21
Government and opposition: a winner-takes-all system	22
The Human Rights Action Plan in a 'society of fear'	25
Turkish foreign policy: between anxiety and despair	26
Belarus: a state banished from the European mind	29
Uncertain statehood and a post-Soviet quest for national identity	29
The West or the East: a Belarusian dilemma	32
The disguised Belarusian Western identity	34
The rise of civil society	36
What can the EU and its member states do?	37
Belarus, Turkey, Ukraine: the common points for a roadmap	38
Conclusion	43
Bibliography	48

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About the Martens Centre



The Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies, established in 2007, is the political foundation and think tank of the European People's Party (EPP). The Martens Centre embodies a pan-European mindset, promoting Christian Democrat, conservative and like-minded political values. It serves as a framework for national political foundations linked to member parties of the EPP. It currently has 31 member foundations and 2 permanent guest foundations in 25 EU and non-EU countries. The Martens Centre takes part in the preparation of EPP programmes and policy documents. It organises seminars and training on EU policies and on the process of European integration.

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Executive summary



Since the end of the Cold War, the EU has become a major force in the democratisation process in Eastern Europe. It has focused primarily on the appeal of its soft power, promoting liberal economic policies and democratisation. Since the completion of the ‘easy task’ of the East–Central European democratic transition with the EU enlargement waves of 2004 and 2007, the EU has only had partial success in performing the major task of stabilising its neighbourhood and preparing it for possible accession in the future. Three countries on the eastern border of the EU have caused significant political and economic challenges to the EU’s accession policy (Turkey) and to the European Neighbourhood Policy (Belarus and Ukraine). All three have revealed the weaknesses of intra-EU decision-making processes (especially the lack of flexibility and the unwillingness to apply ‘hard’ power politics) and the disunity of the EU member states’ voices, which reflects their very divergent national interests. Still, the policies adopted by the EU with regard to these countries also represent an opportunity for the Union.

The paper focuses on the key attributes that the EU needs to consider when drafting its policies, both bilateral and multilateral, towards these countries. We especially focus on those features which might be overlooked or neglected due to the urgency of the pressing current issues. We argue that a well-prepared EU policy vis-à-vis these countries should (a) be in the EU’s interests, (b) align with the EU’s actual capabilities and (c) stem from a profound knowledge of the situation in the countries concerned.

The structure of the paper therefore first examines the situations in Ukraine, Turkey and Belarus. This is followed by a comparison of the three countries, and country-specific and general recommendations for short- and medium-term EU policy. Individual member states could assume more active roles in promoting specific policy recommendations. The EU should be specific, clear and consistent about what is acceptable and what is not, and form rules-based relationships that take a step-by-step approach which is adhered to. This approach should also bring together the differing interests of the EU member states and the EU institutions.

Introduction



Since the end of the Cold War, the EU has become a major force in the democratisation process in Eastern Europe. It has focused primarily on the appeal of its soft power, promoting liberal economic policies and democratisation (the process of consolidating democracy). Defined as the ‘stabilization, routinization, institutionalization and legitimization of patterns of democratic behaviour’,¹ democratisation is perceived as a ‘determining factor for development and long-term stability’.² It entails the establishment of democratic institutions and the rule of law, but also ‘adherence to democratic values and norms’.³ In exchange for gradual liberalisation and democratisation, the EU offers incentives such as economic cooperation, visa liberalisation and, in some cases, the promise of future accession to the EU.

Since the ‘easy task’ of the East–Central European democratic transition was completed with the 2004 and 2007 EU enlargement waves, the EU’s presence in the region and influence over its future development has been diluted by both internal and external factors. These include the declining appeal of the reform Zeitgeist in Eastern European countries, the internal weakness of the EU’s Common Foreign and Security Policy,⁴ and the rising confidence of Russia. The EU has only partially succeeded in performing the major task of stabilising its neighbourhood and preparing it for possible accession in the future.

Three countries on the eastern border of the EU have caused significant political and economic challenges to the EU’s accession policy (Turkey) and the European Neighbourhood Policy (Belarus and Ukraine). All three have revealed the weaknesses of intra-EU decision-making processes (especially the lack of flexibility and the unwillingness to apply ‘hard’ power politics) and the disunity of the EU member states’ voices, which reflects their very divergent national interests.⁵ Still, the policies adopted by the EU with regard to these countries also represent an opportunity for the EU.

¹ Gunther et al., cited in G. Pridham, ‘Assessing Democratic Consolidation in Central & Eastern Europe: The European Dimension’, *Acta Polit* 41 (2006), 378.

² M. Lerch, ‘Promoting Democracy and Observing Elections’, European Parliament (June 2021).

³ L. Tunkrova, ‘The Challenge of Euroscepticism in the Accession Countries: The Good, the Bad and the Shaky EU’, in L. Tunkrova and P. Saradin (eds.), *The Politics of EU Accession: Turkish Challenges and Central European Experiences* (London: Routledge), 36.

⁴ See, e.g. D. Roháč, ‘The Mirage of the Geopolitical Commission’, in L. Tungul (ed.), *Emerging Paradigms in the Shifting Foreign and Domestic Environments* (Prague: TOPAZ, 2021).

⁵ Cf. Roháč, ‘The Mirage of the Geopolitical Commission’.



The aim of this research paper is to analyse the current major challenges in these three countries in order to contribute to a realistic debate on the direction of EU policy towards them over the next decade; to identify European interests in this area; and to offer specific policy, economic or social recommendations. The selected countries are analysed through three dimensions: (1) governance, (2) civil society and human rights, and (3) foreign policy. Our primary assumption is that the attention and support domestic actors receive from the EU amplifies their impact on the country's democratisation process and future policies. Thus, assistance from external actors such as the EU might help the agendas of pro-reform groups, but it is vital to understand who those groups are and whom they represent.

The paper focuses on the key policy attributes that the EU needs to consider when drafting its policies, both bilateral and multilateral, towards these countries. We especially focus on those features which might be overlooked or neglected due to the urgency of the pressing current issues.

We argue that a well-prepared EU policy vis-à-vis these countries should (a) be in the EU's interests, (b) align with the Union's actual capabilities and (c) stem from a profound knowledge of the situations in the countries concerned. The structure of the paper therefore first examines the situations in Ukraine, Turkey and Belarus. This is followed by a comparison of the three countries, and country-specific and general recommendations for short- and medium-term EU policy.



Ukraine: a country struggling with transition

Ukraine is one of the poorest countries in Europe despite its relatively stable macroeconomic indicators—the assistance it receives from international financial institutions is substantial.⁶ Its main long-term structural problems are related to deindustrialisation,⁷ heavy dependency on the Russian market, the effects of the 2014 Crimean crisis and mass labour migration.

The turning point for the current Ukrainian society was the 2014 revolution known as Euromaidan. The revolution enabled further integration with the EU but also led to the Russian occupation of the Crimean Peninsula. It put Ukraine on the path of transition from an autocratic regime to a democracy. Ukraine has made significant progress in promoting the rule of law and fighting corruption, but many structural obstacles remain.

Governance reform: facing economic difficulties, oligarchs and corruption

The Ukrainian economy used to be heavily dependent on the Russian markets. This economic dependency on Russia made Ukraine vulnerable to Russian political influence and undermined its European identity. After the Euromaidan revolution, Ukraine shifted most of its attention to the European markets and, in the course of five years, the EU (and China) overtook Russia as its main trade partner. Despite this, the country is plagued by severe economic underperformance.

The poor economic situation in the country has contributed to a dramatic decrease in the Ukrainian population. In 1991, 52 million people lived in Ukraine, a figure which had fallen to 45.6 million by 2013.⁸

⁶ J. Mlejnek, 'Ukraine Thirty Years After Independence: The Struggle Continues the Mirage of the Geopolitical Commission', in L. Tungul (ed.), *Emerging Paradigms in the Shifting Foreign and Domestic Environments* (Prague: TOPAZ, 2021), 37.

⁷ M. Abysova et al., 'Aviation Industry Management: Objective and Subjective Risks', *E3S Web of Conferences*, 258/02001(2021), 9.

⁸ State Statistics Office of Ukraine, quoted in Mlejnek, 'Ukraine Thirty Years after Independence', 37.



The lack of employment opportunities and proximity of the Western Ukrainian regions to the EU have led to massive emigration, especially to Poland, Czechia and Slovakia.⁹ Those who are unable to leave these regions are dependent on the remittances sent by the migrant workers.¹⁰ Remittances totalled 7.8% of Ukraine's GDP in 2019.¹¹

The desired cooperation between Ukrainian and Western companies is hampered by the oligarchic structure of the Ukrainian economy and the related high level of corruption. Widespread corruption and weak institutions represent the most pressing problems in Ukraine's transition process. Corruption is considered the main cause of the country's underperformance, costing the budget an estimated \$37 billion annually (almost a quarter of its GDP).¹² The shadow economy accounted for as much as 47.2% of GDP in 2018.¹³ The economy needs substantial investment, but the non-transparent and corrupt business environment erodes the tax base and hinders both domestic and foreign direct investment.¹⁴

The very slow pace of reforms and in some cases even reversals of the reform process raise the question of whether Ukraine is genuinely dedicated to reform. One example of such a reversal can be seen from the situation with the state-owned oil and gas company Naftohaz. As the single largest revenue item on the Ukrainian state budget,¹⁵ it used to be a source of large-scale corruption and rent-seeking schemes.¹⁶ The goal of eradicating government interventions and promoting transparent corporate governance in Naftohaz emerged immediately after the revolution. A respected representative of the reform process in Ukraine, Andriy Kobolyev, was appointed as the chief executive officer of Naftohaz but was later dismissed when the government used a legal loophole to directly interfere with the company's management, bypassing OECD corporate governance practice regulations.¹⁷

⁹ See, e.g. *International Labour Organization*, 'Face to Face With Migration in Ukraine', 18 December 2021; J. Pieńkowski, *The Impact of Labour Migration on the Ukrainian Economy*, European Economy Discussion Paper no. 123 (Luxembourg, April 2020).

¹⁰ Interview conducted by one of the authors with a worker from an organisation researching migration in Ukraine in April 2019.

¹¹ Pieńkowski, *The Impact of Labour Migration on the Ukrainian Economy*, 14.

¹² W. Buijter, 'Ukraine's Choice: Corruption or Growth', *Atlantic Council*, 19 June 2021.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ For more information about the company, see <https://www.naftogaz.com/www/3/nakweb.nsf>.

¹⁶ R. Vilpišauskas et al., 'Susceptibility of Ukrainian and Belarusian Domestic Actors to External Actors' Approaches: Puzzling Patterns of Transition', *East European Politics* 37/1 (2021), 78–80.

¹⁷ T. Prince, 'Ukraine's "Internal Threat" on Blinken's Plate After Naftogaz CEO Fired', *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 4 May 2021.



Another thorny issue is the judicial system, which is crucial to the reform process. The government is struggling to enhance the integrity of judges, free the system of corruption, and erase the political and business pressure on judges and legal professionals. It has established new institutions, such as a new Supreme Court and an Anti-Corruption Court,¹⁸ but the corruption within the judicial system torpedoes the effectiveness of the National Anti-Corruption Bureau in detecting bribery among top state officials.¹⁹ President Zelensky has attempted to move the reform process forward: he suspended the Constitutional Court's Chief Justice, Oleksandr Tupytsky, and several constitutional judges have been prosecuted for bribery.²⁰ His efforts face strong resistance, delaying the reform process.

The Ukrainian government has recently declared war on the oligarchs,²¹ who continue to hold substantial power in some parts of Ukraine. The government's main aim is to interfere with their channels of political and media influence and their money-laundering schemes.²² This comes in part as a reaction to US complaints, and is motivated by a wish to bring in foreign investors and establish more cordial relations between Kyiv and Washington since Joe Biden's accession to the presidency.²³

A particularly troubling outcome of the enduring oligarchic interference with democratic governance is the media situation in the country. In the past, the media outlets were all owned by oligarchs, who disseminated their political agendas via these channels; this led to only a limited plurality of opinions being expressed in the media. The rise of a truly independent media after 2014 enhanced pluralism, diversity and competitiveness.²⁴ Smaller media stakeholders have been striving to maintain high-quality journalism standards and to improve Ukraine's media production and consumption. This development has been most

¹⁸ O. Halushka and H. Chyzyk, 'Is Ukraine's New Judicial Reform a Step Forward?', *Atlantic Council*, 24 October 2019.

¹⁹ D. Peleschuk, 'Ukraine's Anti-Corruption Effort Struggles, but Soldiers On', *Eurasianet*, 15 April 2021.

²⁰ *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 'Ukraine's Supreme Court Strikes Down President's Attempt to Block Judge's Appointment', 14 July 2021.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Recently, the case of Viktor Medvedchuk, a pro-Russian politician and oligarch whose business in Ukraine covers a vast number of sectors, has attracted a lot of attention. He was charged with treason and personal sanctions were imposed on him. The government shut down three TV channels broadcasting in Russian that nominally belonged to another pro-Kremlin figure, Taras Kozak, but were believed in fact to belong to Medvedchuk. The TV channels were charged with disseminating Russian propaganda in Ukraine. See *NV.ua*, "Шанс розірвати павутиння впливу РФ". Чому Медведчуку і Козаку висунули підозри в зраді - що важливо знати про гучний "мінітрилер", 12 May 2021.

²⁴ *Freedom House*, 'Freedom in the World 2021: Ukraine', 2021.



visible in the online media, which are very diverse and popular among the younger generation.²⁵ Despite these positive developments, oligarchs continue to control the major media outlets, including the most influential TV channels.²⁶ The reform of the state-owned TV channel Pershyi has improved news broadcasting, but it cannot compete with their popularity.²⁷

International pressure and conditionality have been instrumental in fighting the resistance to the reform process. The EU, the US and the International Monetary Fund have tied financial assistance to anti-corruption and transparent governance reforms. One of the biggest incentives was meeting the conditions for EU visa liberalisation. To this end, Ukraine established an open-source government e-procurement system, ProZorro, and instated mandatory income and asset declarations for state officials. The National Anti-Corruption Bureau was founded in 2015.

Yet, the reform process has generally proceeded slowly. Ukrainians have pinned a lot of hope on the current president of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelensky, and his party, Servant of the People (Слуга народу). They promised sweeping pro-democratic reforms that would be implemented by technocrats and young professionals with no ties to the former autocratic regime.²⁸ However, the government lacks a clear strategy and a goal-oriented approach, and continues in a rather populist direction. It has failed to address the long-term political, economic and social problems rooted in the past. It has also lacked adequate leadership and management skills during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Low-quality governance coupled with outdated economic structures, the high energy intensity of Ukrainian industry and a lack of public interest will also hamper the proposed cooperation with the EU on implementing the Green Deal.²⁹ Ukraine faces problems with financing the Green Deal's policies; oligarchs are interfering with the plan and using their influence to promote the involvement of state and international

²⁵ *Institut Masovoi Informatsii*, 'Compliance with Professional Standards in Online Media', 4 April 2021.

²⁶ A. Korbut, *Strengthening Public Interest in Ukraine's Media Sector*, Chatham House (London, 2021), 8–16. Rinat Akhmetov, Viktor Pinchuk, Viktor Medvedchuk, Dmytro Firtash and Ihor Kolomoysky dominate the media sector. The latter two are under investigation by the US authorities for money-laundering. See T. Prince, 'U.S. Slaps Sanctions on Ukrainian Oligarch Kolomoyskiy Over Corruption Accusations', *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 5 March 2021. Former President Petro Poroshenko's media and TV channels are also influential.

²⁷ Korbut, *Strengthening Public Interest in Ukraine's Media Sector*, 13.

²⁸ C. Miller, 'Servant of The People – Or Master? Big Parliamentary Win Hands Ukraine's New President a More Dominant Role', *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 22 July 2019.

²⁹ K. Alekankina and Y. Tkachenko, 'Green Deal in the EU and Ukraine: What Challenges Arise', *Vox Ukraine*, 30 July 2021.



funding only. Yet, the plan will not materialise without substantial financial engagement from domestic businesses.³⁰ Despite the obstacles, the Ukrainian green transition also offers many possible opportunities: its energy mix has significant shares of nuclear and green energy, and Ukraine is relatively energy self-sufficient;³¹ there is a large potential for organic food³² production; and it has recently passed a law on green procurement.

The first EU–Ukraine dialogue on the green transition was held in May 2021 and a strategic partnership on raw materials was launched in July 2021. One aspect of the cooperation aims to increase Ukraine’s competitiveness in the global markets and the resilience of the domestic economy. The slow modernisation of the Ukrainian economy since the 1990s and its deindustrialisation might present an unexpected opportunity in the future as the reforms currently being undertaken will follow the lines of a green transition but also those of digitalisation and the emergence of new markets. For the Ukrainian economy to thrive, it needs a transparent regulatory environment, stable government and a strong legal framework, which the EU–Ukraine cooperation aims to promote, even in sector-specific areas such as those covered by the Green Deal.

Civil society, human rights and identity

Civic activists have brought more diversity and transparency into policymaking, even though their contribution has brought only limited changes to the nature of Ukrainian politics, which is still dependent on charismatic leaders with a populist programme and sponsored by oligarchs or rich benefactors.³²

Ukrainian civil society has been growing in the new, post-2014 liberal environment. Domestic sources of civil society support are limited; most support comes from international donors such as the EU and the US.³³ Competition for funding has increased in recent years, and the dependency of civil society organisations on donated money is a serious impediment.³⁴

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ukraine is the world’s seventh-largest producer of nuclear energy, which provides over half of the country’s electricity (IEA, ‘Ukraine Energy Profile’, April 2020).

³² *Freedom House*, ‘Freedom in the World 2021: Ukraine’.

³³ European Commission, ‘European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations – Ukraine’, 2020.

³⁴ N. Shapovalova and O. Burlyuk (eds.), *Civil Society in Post-Euromaidan Ukraine: From Revolution to Consolidation* (Stuttgart: Ibidem Press, 2018), 12–13.



Ukrainian civil society activists and journalists are also facing growing violence from far-right and conservative groups. Over 170 cases of physical aggression against journalists were recorded in 2020.³⁵ The response of law enforcement agencies is insufficient and reluctant, and is similar to that offered in response to the violations of the human rights of ethnic minorities such as the Roma, and the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered (LGBT+) community.³⁶

The growing confidence of Ukrainian society has been connected to discussions on national identity and efforts to move away from the strong Russian influence. Symbols play a big role in Ukrainian society. One of the key symbols in Ukraine is language, as illustrated by the distinction between Ukrainian and Russian.³⁷ The issue of language gained utmost importance after the 2014 revolution. Some Ukrainian speakers considered the Russian language a tool of Russia's political influence in Ukraine, undermining Ukraine's identity and being a legacy of the Soviet Union. Therefore, they advocated the use of Ukrainian, the de facto official language of Ukraine since the 1990s.³⁸

In 2019 a new language law was passed that stipulated that every Ukrainian citizen was obliged to know and use Ukrainian in interactions with civil and public services. The use of Ukrainian in the education system was also strengthened. Most media outlets, TV programmes, printed books and so on must be in Ukrainian; the Ukrainian language must dominate cultural events, cinema and theatre. The law clearly aimed to discourage the use of Russian, but did not significantly restrict the use of the EU's official languages.³⁹

Ukrainian-speakers and some prominent public and cultural figures welcomed the law,⁴⁰ but Russian-speaking organisations and some members of the opposition found it to discriminate against those who

³⁵ *Institut Masovoi Informatsii*, '229 Випадків Порушень Свободи Слова Імі Зафіксував В Україні У 2020 Році', 31 December 2020.

³⁶ B. Globa, 'LGBTQ Rights in Ukraine and the False Dawn of Zelenskyy', *Atlantic Council*, 9 November 2020.

³⁷ The language distinction has geographical roots: generally, Ukrainian was dominant in Western and Central Ukraine and Russian in Eastern and Southern Ukraine. The border was not firmly defined though. Both languages were used in many parts of Central Ukraine, including in Kyiv. Some Ukrainians considered Ukrainian their mother tongue, for others it was Russian, and many were fluent in both. Before Euromaidan, Ukrainian was widely considered to be the 'lower' language of the rural regions, in contrast to Russian, which was perceived to be the 'higher' language of cities and public life. In a 2019 public survey, 63% stated that their mother tongue was Ukrainian, 35% chose Russian. Russian was the second language for 63%, Ukrainian for 36% (*Kantar*, 'Дослідження: мовна ситуація в Україні', 2019).

³⁸ B. Bowring, 'The Russian Language in Ukraine', in L. Ryazanova-Clarke (ed.), *The Russian Language Outside the Nation* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 60–4.

³⁹ *Hromadske International*, 'Ukraine's New Language Law, Explained', 23 May 2019.

⁴⁰ В. Бега, 'Родным украинский язык считают 73% украинцев, однако общаются на нем лишь 53% — исследование', *Hromadske International*, 6 November 2020.



spoke Russian.⁴¹ Western organisations criticised it too, with the Council of Europe pointing out that the law could be a source of interethnic tensions in Ukraine,⁴² and Hungary objecting to it because of its impact on ethnic Hungarians living in the Zakarpattia region.⁴³ Naturally it has worsened relations with Russia, which is obviously one of the law's most vocal critics.⁴⁴ Rather than rectifying what some citizens believed to be a historic grievance, these steps failed to find a balance between strengthening the Ukrainian language and safeguarding minorities' linguistic rights.

Ukrainian foreign policy: between Russia and the West

The most pressing issue in Ukrainian foreign policy is the unresolved conflict with Russia. Russian diplomatic and military involvement in the Donbas region and the annexation of the Crimean peninsula are naturally the most important factors in Russo-Ukrainian relations. Many see these as the main obstacles to a substantial shift in Ukrainian politics in general.⁴⁵ President Zelensky has made resolution of the conflict the foremost objective of his presidency but there has, as yet, been no significant progress.⁴⁶

Despite some success regarding agreement on the withdrawal of troops and heavy artillery, the process of conflict resolution has become rather stagnant. Concerns increased in spring 2021, when Russia started to move troops and military hardware towards the Ukrainian border en masse without any prior notice.⁴⁷ What Russia called troop redeployment seemed to be a test for the new US administration of President Joe Biden, who has vocally supported Ukraine since the outbreak of war in 2014. Soon after his election, Biden announced his unwavering support for Ukraine, in contrast to the policy of the previous US president, Don-

⁴¹ *France24*, 'New Law Stokes Ukraine Language Tension', 1 April 2021.

⁴² M. Bilkova et al., *Opinion on The Law on Supporting the Functioning of the Ukrainian Language as the State Language*, Venice Commission Opinion no. 960/2019 (Strasbourg, 2019), 28.

⁴³ T. Wesolowsky, 'Singing Off-Key? Kyiv, Budapest Clash Over Rights of Ethnic Hungarians in Ukraine', *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 4 December 2020.

⁴⁴ TASS, 'Zelensky's Indigenous Peoples Bill Worsens Kiev's Neo-Nazi Stance — Zakharova', 8 June 2021.

⁴⁵ *International Republican Institute*, 'New National Survey of Ukraine Highlights Ukrainian Views on Economic and Geopolitical Issues', 6 March 2019.

⁴⁶ П. Калашник, 'Обіцяного два роки чекають. Чого дочекались українці за два роки президентства Зеленського', *Hromadske*, 21 April 2021.

⁴⁷ А. Баунов, М. Саморуков and В. Соловьев, 'Восьмой или четырнадцатый. Чем закончится украинское обострение', *Carnegie Moscow Centre*, Podcast, 14 April 2021.



ald Trump.⁴⁸ During an official visit to Ukraine, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Under Secretary Victoria Nuland promised their support (and possible military assistance) to Ukraine in its conflict with Russia.⁴⁹ The US has already provided Ukraine with financial, military and humanitarian aid worth \$5 billion.⁵⁰

Emboldened by this support, President Zelensky signed a decree banning Russian state-controlled media such as Russia Today, TASS, Gazeta.ru and Lenta.ru from operating on Ukrainian territory and restricting their use of telecommunication services.⁵¹ He has also expressed a strong aspiration to join NATO as soon as possible.⁵² Yet, Ukraine's prospects of NATO membership remain bleak. It would require profound reforms and is complicated by the unresolved conflict in Eastern Ukraine; the Kremlin has called Ukraine's potential NATO accession a 'red line'.⁵³

Russia's ambitions and the vague prospect of NATO membership have strengthened Ukraine's cooperation with Turkey. Their strategic partnership marked its tenth anniversary in 2021,⁵⁴ but the relationship dates back to the nineteenth century, when the Ottomans did not recognise the Russian annexation of Crimea and provided refuge to Crimean Tatars. Turkey supported Ukraine's independence and stood against Russia in 2014, and Ukraine showed support to Turkey after the failed coup in 2016. The two countries have made significant progress in bilateral relations, above all in military cooperation, which involves the aerospace, military and defence industries: more than 30 joint defence projects are currently being implemented.⁵⁵ Turkey supported Ukraine during Russia's military build-up on the Ukrainian border in spring 2021 and has used its good relations with Ukraine to strengthen its position vis-à-vis Russia and to improve its image in the West (including with Biden's administration). Ukraine and Turkey share a mutual interest in reviving their defence industries. As Russia becomes more assertive in the Black Sea region, Ukraine is finding Turkey to be a strategic ally and a 'key security partner'.⁵⁶

⁴⁸ *US Department of State*, 'The United States and Ukraine: Strategic Partners', 5 May 2021.

⁴⁹ *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 'U.S. Considering "Additional" Military Assistance to Ukraine, Blinken Tells RFE/RL', 6 May 2021.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 'Ukraine Places Sanctions on Dozens of Russian Officials, Entities', 24 April 2021.

⁵² *DW.com*, 'Ukraine Urges NATO to Set Up Membership Path', 8 April 2021.

⁵³ *Reuters*, 'Kremlin Says NATO Membership for Ukraine Would Be "Red Line"', 17 June 2021.

⁵⁴ *President of Ukraine*, 'Strategic Partnership Between Ukraine and Turkey Is Backed by Real Actions and Victories – Volodymyr Zelenskyy', 10 April 2021.

⁵⁵ *Ukrinform*, 'Ukraine, Turkey Implementing Over 30 Defense Projects – Ambassador', 9 January 2021.

⁵⁶ A. Aydinbas and J. Hasa, 'West Wishes: Turkey's Growing Relationship With Ukraine', *ECFR*, 12 May 2021.



The deepening cooperation with Turkey is also a response to the bleak prospect of joining the EU in the foreseeable future. Ukraine will not be ready to join any time soon due to the slow progress in the reform process. In addition, some EU member states, especially France and Germany, strongly oppose any further enlargement to the east.⁵⁷ At the same time, Ukrainians have concerns about Germany's and Russia's many shared interests.⁵⁸ For example, the Nord Stream 2 project and the recent French–German proposal to invite Russia to the summit of the EU leaders to launch a 'closer engagement with Russia'⁵⁹ have deepened the mistrust Kyiv harbours for Berlin. Despite some disappointment about the slow pace of progress and the opposition of some member states, EU accession remains highly desirable for Ukraine, which potentially gives the Union considerable influence over domestic reforms.

Turkey: the perpetual *enfant terrible*⁶⁰

President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, AKP) came to power in 2002 and have since managed to achieve almost full control of the economy, the media, the judiciary and the bureaucracy. In the early years of the AKP's rule, Turkey experienced a period of high GDP per capita growth, relatively low inflation and high net foreign direct investment inflows, but also increasing income inequality and omnipresent nepotism, which replaced petty corruption.⁶¹ Today's Turkey is based on a populist–authoritarian regime and crony–capitalist relations.⁶² The country is extremely polarised. Erdoğan's rule has exacerbated the undemocratic elements of the 1982 Constitution, which had already severely limited party competition, suppressed freedom of expression and curbed judicial independence.

⁵⁷ A. Rettman, 'Most Europeans Want Ukraine to Join the EU', *EUObserver*, 10 September 2014.

⁵⁸ J. Eyal, 'France, Germany and the "Russia Engagement" Game', *Royal United Services Institute*, 29 June 2021.

⁵⁹ S. Fleming et al., 'Berlin and Paris Propose Reset for EU Relations With Moscow', *Financial Times*, 23 June 2021.

⁶⁰ This chapter was supported by the GA CR Grant for Europeanization Discourse in the EU Candidate Countries (GA19-15958S).

⁶¹ A. Mert, 'The Trees in Gezi Park: Environmental Policy as the Focus of Democratic Protests', *Journal of Environmental Policy and Planning* 21/5 (2019), 4.

⁶² P. Kubicek, 'Faulty Assumptions About Democratization in Turkey', *Middle East Critique* 29/2 (2020), 8.



The economy is very vulnerable due to rising inflation and unemployment,⁶³ instability in the region, pandemic lockdowns and Erdoğan's very considerable influence over economic policy (he changed the head of the Turkish central bank three times between mid-2019 and spring 2021). Unable to resolve the economic crisis, he has used the presidential system to further polarise society following the logic of 'divide and rule', and plays cat and mouse with the EU, NATO and Russia.

Domestically, Erdoğan has managed to maintain the image of an anti-establishment force by redefining the 'corrupt elite' (formerly the Kemalist establishment) as the 'evil foreign coalition', a fluid category used to label foreign governments and international organisations. He claims this coalition works against the AKP, Erdoğan, Turkey and Muslims and is aligned with the domestic opposition. While anti-Western discourse and paranoia have been part of the Turkish political discourse for decades, it has become a 'major electoral strategy and keystone political discourse of the AKP government'⁶⁴ since 2013 and is also indicated by the increased aggression in Turkish foreign policy.

Government and opposition: a winner-takes-all system

Decision-making has become increasingly centralised under the AKP to ensure control over policymaking and budgets. The AKP's neoliberal economic policies in the early years of its rule were complemented by the expansion of services that hugely benefited the poor. However, the scarcity of the universal applicability principle and the weak welfare state on the national level have led to redistribution based on loyalty and affiliation with particular groups typical of Turkish society at large.⁶⁵ The system, known as 'rant', ensures loyalty from part of the AKP's electoral base—the patronage and clientelist system is often self-sustaining. The Turkish political system is based on a 'winner takes all' approach. Those who benefit from it are afraid that defeat of the AKP would result in the termination of these services and the contracts for the companies that provide them.

⁶³ The expected inflation rate for 2021 was 15.2% in June 2021. The poverty rate reached 12.2% in 2020 (10.25% in 2019). For more data, see *World Bank*, 'The World Bank in Turkey: Recent Economic Developments', 6 April 2021.

⁶⁴ E. Balta, C. R. Kaltvasser and Y. H. Yagci, 'Populist Attitudes and Conspiratorial Thinking', *Party Politics* 20/10 (2021), 4.

⁶⁵ I. David, 'Strategic Democratisation? A Guide to Understanding AKP in Power', *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* 24/4 (2016), 7.



The access to resources and the resulting benefits of this system mean that the AKP has limited incentive to democratise on the local and national levels. It is crucial for the government and the presidency to keep the opposition divided and to limit its access to the public space. The government labels all of its critics enemies of Turkey, serving the interests of foreign powers and/or aiding terrorists (the Kurdistan Workers' Party (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê) and the Gülen movement, which the regime calls the Fethullahist Terrorist Organisation). It often uses the term 'gavur', meaning a fanatical infidel. The increase in hate speech used towards opposition politicians has resulted in increased violence towards their representatives.

The crackdown on the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (Halkların Demokratik Partisi, HDP) has been particularly strong, caused not only by the AKP's coalition with the anti-Kurdish Nationalist Movement Party (Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi), but also due to the fact that many Kurdish voters have left the AKP to join the HDP since 2015. An attack in June 2021 on the HDP office in the Izmir region left one party employee dead,⁶⁶ and in July the HDP building in Muğla was also attacked by a gunman. The AKP and the Nationalist Movement Party claim that the party supports terrorism and demand that it is banned due to its alleged ties to Kurdish militants.

Prominent members of the other opposition parties have been targeted as well. For instance, the mayor of Istanbul, Ekrem İmamoğlu, was indicted for insulting the members of the Supreme Election Board.⁶⁷ While the opposition parties share their opposition to Erdoğan and to the presidential system, they remain fragmented and weak. Even after two former prominent AKP members, Ahmet Davutoğlu and Ali Babacan, left the AKP and established their own parties, the Future Party (Gelecek Partisi) and the Democracy and Progress Party (Demokrasi ve Atılım Partisi) respectively, the AKP remains the strongest party in Turkey. The weakness of the opposition is partially a result of the regime's treatment of it, but the internal divisions, heavy personalisation of politics, inability to adopt intra-party democratic reforms, inter-party hostility and inability to appeal to new voters among the opposition parties are equally (if not more) responsible.

Other than suppressing the opposition, the presidency has been trying to promote economic growth by supporting consumption through cheap borrowing (despite high inflation rates) and undertaking symbolic

⁶⁶ *Duvar English*, 'Assailant Opens Fire on HDP Building in Turkey's Marmaris', 14 July 2021.

⁶⁷ In a speech delivered after the first round of local elections in Istanbul was cancelled in March 2019, he said that it placed Turkey in a bad light internationally and that the decision was foolish.



grandiose construction projects to legitimise its rule and generate political support. After the establishment of the Republic in 1923, the Kemalist national ideology supported the notion that Turkey should build a modern economy, which led to a focus on development and construction-led growth. This accelerated with the adoption of neoliberal economic policies in the 1980s and even more so after 2002, when the AKP came to power. Typical of this approach was the South-Eastern Anatolia Project to build a series of dams, one of which submerged the twelve-thousand-year-old town of Hasankeyf, and the construction of a third airport and a third bridge in Istanbul.

The latest plan is to build the 45 km long Istanbul Canal to connect the Black Sea with the Sea of Marmara on the western side of the city. Announced in 2010, construction started in June 2021 despite problems with funding (in 2019 the estimated costs were \$13 billion) ‘due to environmental concerns and the investment risks’.⁶⁸ When, in April 2021, a group of retired admirals published a letter criticising the project for undermining the Montreux Convention, which regulates traffic through the Bosphorus and Dardanelles Straits and the Sea of Marmara, they were detained for plotting against the state.⁶⁹

The regime and its supporters dismiss concerns about environmental damage and claim that the main motivation for disapproval is criticism of the AKP and the presidency.⁷⁰ The opposition have indeed used environmental protests to gain visibility and criticise the government. The framing of environmentalism in partisan terms has become more common with the polarisation of the parallel conservative, liberal and nationalist public spheres and the development of corresponding social ‘bubbles’. Yet, environmental concerns have been on the increase in Turkey, caused by the rising incidence and visibility of climate change effects, pollution, waste and mismanagement. A 2021 survey indicated that 71.6% of Turks believed that environmental protection should be prioritised over economic growth and employment.⁷¹ The severe effects of climate change include rising temperatures and changing precipitation, leading to floods and drought-related problems such as large sinkholes and receding lakes. The consequences threaten agriculture, forestry and fisheries but also tourism and the living standards in residential areas.⁷²

⁶⁸ C. Sezer and E. Tunca, ‘Turkey’s Banks Shy Away From Erdogan’s “Crazy” Canal – Sources’, *Reuters*, 27 April 2021.

⁶⁹ For an analysis of the situation, see A. Lund, ‘An Unconventional Canal: Will Turkey Rewrite the Rules of the Black Sea Access?’, *FOI*, 20 April 2021.

⁷⁰ See, e.g. S. I. Ozle and B. Obach, ‘Polarization and the Environmental Movement in Turkey’, *Journal of Civil Society* 14/4 (2018), 311–27.

⁷¹ *GMF*, ‘Turkish Perceptions of the European Union’, 29 April 2021.

⁷² The Turkish Environment and Urbanisation Ministry issued a report in 2021 which confirmed that extreme weather was on the rise in the country (935 extreme natural incidents occurred in 2019; it was also the fourth hottest year since 1974). The report stated that ‘the loss of the drinkable and usable water networks has reached up to some 37 percent’ (*Hurriyet Daily News*, ‘Turkey to Witness Extreme Climate Changes: Report’, 26 April 2021).



The Human Rights Action Plan in a ‘society of fear’

Responding to the growing criticism of human rights violations in Turkey and the desire to improve the economic situation by reviving the EU accession process, Erdoğan announced a ‘Human Rights Action Plan’ on 2 March 2021. Its 9 key targets, 63 objectives and 256 activities address improvements in the rule of law, judicial independence, protection of media freedom, freedom of expression, freedom of assembly and association, and freedom of religion and conscience; introduce zero tolerance of torture and ill-treatment; create a shorter list of offences for which detention is permitted⁷³ and so on. The plan, it was announced, should be implemented within two years and will serve as the basis for a new constitution.

Not only does the plan fail to provide specifics for concrete problems, but the developments that have followed contradict rather than support the declared objectives. On 20 March 2021, Erdoğan decided to quit the Istanbul Convention without parliamentary consent, and the subsequent protests were violently suppressed. In April 2021, two Turkish TikTok users were arrested when they made fun of the limited travel options provided by Turkish passports. Finally, in June 2021, the governor of the Istanbul suburb of Şişli banned an LGBT+ picnic from taking place and the presence of all ‘LGBTI elements’ in the park in which it was to happen.⁷⁴

Changes to the widely abused anti-terrorism laws and the promotion of media freedom⁷⁵ (which at present is extremely restricted), and freedom of expression and association will be crucial to the future of Turkish democratisation.⁷⁶ Using the argument that it needed to protect citizens’ privacy, in April 2021 Turkey’s

⁷³ Turkish judges often order detention for offences that are not on the list, such as ‘insulting the President’; by 2020, 63,000 individuals had been accused of this offence and 9,554 had been convicted. For more, see A. Uludağ, ‘What Would the Human Rights Action Plan Do?’, *Heinrich Boll Stiftung*, 14 April 2021.

⁷⁴ E. Kepenek and T. Pişkin, ‘Police Attack LGBTI+s’ Picnic: 1 Person Detained’, *Bianet*, 22 June 2021.

⁷⁵ The regime severely restricts the access of opposition media to financing and imposes heavy fines on them. See, e.g. K. Şener, ‘State Banks Sponsoring Pro-Gov’t Newspapers With Advertisements, Starving Critical Media of Revenues’, *Duvar English*, 25 June 2021. Many reporters have had their press cards cancelled, and entire websites have been blocked or taken down. For instance, the opposition website Sendika.org was blocked for four and a half years until a ruling by the Constitutional Court allowed it to reopen in 2020.

⁷⁶ Between 2015 and 2019, the freedom of assembly was violated 4,771 times in Turkey and 160 people died as a result. For more information, see *BIA News Desk*, ‘20 Thousand People Detained at Demonstrations in 4 Years’, 28 May 2021. Instead of bringing organised crime and terrorism laws into line with the European Convention on Human Rights, Turkey passed a law in 2020 that further restricted the freedom of association and civil society activities under the pretext of preventing the financing of terrorism.



General Directorate of Security issued a circular that banned all audio-visual recordings of citizens and police at protests. Consequently, journalists are not able to record police violence against demonstrators. Violence against journalists is also a serious concern.⁷⁷

The thirst for information and distrust of pro-government media in many sections of Turkish society are the most likely cause of the high interest in the videos of Sedat Peker, a mobster. Peker makes videos about the relationship between the Turkish state and mafia, implicating current and former government officials in international drug and arms smuggling, bribery, corruption and political assassinations. His videos on YouTube, which are usually over an hour long, were viewed more than 100 million times in 2021.⁷⁸

Turkish foreign policy: between anxiety and despair

The Turkish desire to achieve 'strategic autonomy' has so far failed to bring regional supremacy and respect, and instead has led to the emergence of anti-Turkish alliances, a loss of credibility in the West, a very complicated relationship with the US⁷⁹ and increased pressure from Russia. Turkish ambitions and Turkish nationalist rhetoric need to be distinguished from each other. Turkish foreign policy is targeted at the domestic audience and is part of the internal/external enemy discourse. Turkish voters across the political spectrum have a shared distrust of the West (and the East) and a nationalist foreign policy discourse helps the regime to sustain some level of popular support.⁸⁰

⁷⁷ According to *Al-Monitor*, in the year ending May 2021, 6 journalists had been beaten in police detention, 44 journalists had been physically attacked, 47 journalists had been held in jail on charges related to their work in the media, and 274 journalists had been prosecuted in 128 different cases that had to do with their work or social media posts (A. Zaman, 'Turkey Bans Filming at Protests to Hide Police Violence, Rights Groups Say', *Al-Monitor*, 3 May 2021).

⁷⁸ *BIA News Desk*, 'Sedat Peker Releases Short Video After Rumors of Death, Detention', 21 June 2021. For more on the links between Turkish politics and the mafia, see G. Jenkins, 'Peker, Politics and the Turkish Mafia: Plus Ça Change?', *The Turkey Analyst*, 3 June 2021.

⁷⁹ Joe Biden is seeking to improve the transatlantic relationship but his terms with Turkey are complicated to say the least—his administration has recognised the Armenian genocide and put Turkey on the list of countries that use child soldiers. The dim view taken by the US of the Turkish purchase of the S-400 from Russia is also unlikely to change under Biden. At the same time, Biden wants to cooperate with Turkey on issues such as Ukraine and Black Sea security, both of which strengthen NATO's position against Russia. In March 2021, Turkey announced that it would send back the Russian experts overseeing the S-400 missile system but would keep the system; at the same time Russia's Rosatom started to build the Akkuyu unit 3 nuclear reactor.

⁸⁰ See, e.g. S. Neset et al., 'Turkey as a Regional Security Actor in the Black Sea, the Mediterranean, and the Levant Region', *CMI Report* (June 2021).



Many Turkish foreign policy steps have actually been taken as a result of the fear of standing alone against the West, Russia or the East. Erdoğan relies on a personalised foreign policy, promoting his contacts with the leaders of countries, from Russia, the US and the EU to the Western Balkans, Africa⁸¹ and Central Asia. Turkey also focuses on military cooperation and the development of a national defence industry;⁸² the expansion of trade contacts, including development aid;⁸³ and cultural cooperation through its Maarif Foundation and Yunus Emre Institute.

More recently we have witnessed Turkey's attempts to improve its relations with Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Israel, as well as the EU and the US. This is indicative of both the long-term unsustainability of its confrontational foreign policy and of its economic problems. This mild thawing in the Eastern Mediterranean should not be overestimated. It has only involved first contacts and the results depend on Turkey's will to actually satisfy its partners' needs. A mere toning down of rhetoric will not bring tangible changes, as long-term settlement is obstructed by ideologies (Egypt, Israel, Syria and Saudi Arabia), antagonistic interests and historical symbolism (Cyprus, Greece and Russia), and a struggle over spheres of influence (France and the UAE).

The continued escalation of the Cyprus conflict would have a negative impact not only on the situation in Cyprus but also on that in Syria and Libya (major sources of migration to the EU). It would also further worsen Turkey's relations with the US and NATO.⁸⁴ At this point, deconflicting, defined as avoiding escalation that leads to the use of military means,⁸⁵ should be the EU's primary short-term goal and could serve as a basis for future discussions. The EU could support Turkish observer status within the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum on the explicit condition that Turkey respects the rights of all countries in the region and

⁸¹ Turkey has been very active in the Maghreb and Sahel countries, where Turkish investment has increased, particularly in the energy sector, and it has increasing military influence. For more information, see D. Ghanem, 'Ankara's Maghreb Moment', *Carnegie Middle East Centre*, 4 May 2021.

⁸² Turkish military expenditures increased by 39.83% between 2015 and 2019. Turkish drones in particular have the potential to 'become a precious strategic tool in its foreign and security policies and will be used as leverage to transcend the country's other limitations in defense sector' (Neset et al., 'Turkey as a Regional Security Actor', 43).

⁸³ For an analysis of Turkish development assistance, see Y. Tuyoglu, *Turkish Development Assistance as a Foreign Policy Tool and Its Discor-dant Locations*, SWP Working Paper no. 2 (April 2021).

⁸⁴ A. Aydtasbas et al., 'Deep Sea Rivals: Europe, Turkey, and New Eastern Mediterranean Conflict Lines', *ECFR*, May 2020.

⁸⁵ H.-J. Axt, 'Troubled Water in the Eastern Mediterranean. Turkey Challenges Greece and Cyprus Regarding Energy Resources', *Comparative Southeast European Studies* 69/1 (2021), 133–52.



ratifies the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea.

Turkey is willing to negotiate and compromise but given the concentration of power in Erdoğan's hands and the personalisation of Turkish foreign policy, much depends on him and there is limited predictability. His main goal is to sustain his rule, and Russia has used this motivation to strengthen its grasp on the region by supporting Turkish foreign policy decisions, which has undermined Turkey's relations with NATO and the EU. Geopolitical dependency on Russia should not be confused with partnership, and Ankara is eager to reduce its dependency. Equally Turkey counterbalances Russia in the Black Sea, and Russia is uneasy about the Istanbul Canal project. It would open up another access point to the Black Sea and Russia questions its effect on the Montreux Treaty.⁸⁶

Regarding Turkey's relations with the EU, the Union had an undeniably positive effect on Turkey's democratisation process in the early 2000s. The mistake of supporting AKP policies which are contrary to liberalisation and democratisation, including the Ergenekon and Balyoz trials, should be avoided in the future. The EU should vocally criticise undemocratic institutions, processes and practices; the AKP, Erdoğan and Islam should not be the primary targets of such criticism. One-sided support for the opposition would be counterproductive, however, as many of the voices that oppose Erdoğan also have undemocratic tones, as indicated by Meral Akşener's anti-Americanism; Ekrem İmamoğlu's anti-refugee rhetoric; the political agenda of the Gülen diaspora in Europe; the hesitation of the HDP to denounce the Kurdistan Workers' Party's violence against civilians; and the youth movement Student Collective's (Oğrenci Kolektifleri) rejection of representative democracy.

Rejecting accession as such would be counterproductive as well; it would also leave the progressive forces in Turkey feeling abandoned. The majority of the Turkish public favours EU accession.⁸⁷ Leaving the option open leaves space for cooperation in areas of crucial shared interests such as security, migration, energy and the environment. Cooperation should not, however, mean appeasement. Turkish domestic and foreign policies are closely interlinked. Turkey's aggression towards its rivals and allies alike nurtures security threats to Europe and must be met with an adequately strong reaction every time (without exception).

⁸⁶ For more on the topic, see Y. E. Açıkgönül, 'Erdoğan's Kanal Istanbul Complicates Security Dynamics and International Law', *Feniks Politik*, 27 April 2021.

⁸⁷ *GMF*, 'Turkish Perceptions of the European Union', 29 April 2021.



Belarus: a state banished from the European mind

The August 2020 manipulated presidential election in Belarus attracted a lot of public attention in Europe. Numerous politicians and journalists from EU member states were overwhelmed by the intensity and persistence of the demonstrations and protests organised by the Belarusian democratic movement. As Belarusians were swiftly and consistently forming into a sovereign political nation, everything suggested that a confident civil society had been born in opposition to Alexander Lukashenko's authoritarian regime.

The violent suppression of the mass protests ended the latest period of rapprochement with the West, which had started in 2014, and pushed the regime into isolation once again.⁸⁸ European interest in Belarus has gradually decreased as a democratic transformation has proven unrealistic for the near future. The pessimistic prospect of an even more brutal post-Soviet dictatorship and a 'unification' with the Russian Federation has set in. The picture is more complex than this though. The EU's approach to Belarus in the 2010s failed to bring about more democratisation and economic liberalisation. Its reaction to the 2021 protests was hampered by a lack of expertise on the country, and faulty assumptions and misunderstandings. To draft a more realistic future relationship, we need to put the current situation into a long-term perspective.

Uncertain statehood and a post-Soviet quest for national identity

The Belarusian Soviet Socialistic Republic was, together with the Soviet Union and Soviet Ukraine, a member of the UN, and the Belarusian Soviet elites could, therefore, pretend to represent a 'state'.⁸⁹ Its

⁸⁸ A. Kazharski, *Belarus and the EU After the 2020 Awakening: Limited Room for Maneuver?*, Latvian Transatlantic Organisation, Policy Paper (Riga, 2021).

⁸⁹ The Belarusian exile community built its statehood tradition on the Belarusian People's Republic (1918–19), which was crushed by the Red Army. The exile government was based in Prague, Czechoslovakia until 1945. It was negotiating a mandate handover with the post-Soviet Belarusian government in Minsk from 1991 to 1994, but the election of Lukashenko interrupted the negotiations. See the website of the exile government at <http://www.radabnr.org/en/>.



economy was industrialised, and the population was well-educated. Its starting position was better than that of many other post-Soviet republics.⁹⁰

When the Soviet–Russian imperium disintegrated between 1989 and 1991, the independence movement in Soviet Belarus was paradoxically trifling. In the March 1991 referendum on the existence and transformation of the Soviet Union, 84% of Belarusians voted for its preservation (turnout was 83%). Confronted with the instability of Moscow after the unsuccessful coup, Belarus followed the example of the other Soviet republics and declared independence on 25 August 1991. As the Soviet Union fell apart that year, Belarus became a sovereign state entity.

From 1991 to 1994, Belarusian politicians of all political beliefs tried to resolve the question of Belarusian national identity and find an answer to the question of whether Belarusian sovereignty was compatible with the country's close connection to Russia.⁹¹ Soviet nostalgia eventually won, embodied in the election of Alexander Lukashenko as the president of Belarus. Lukashenko's re-Sovietisation programme corresponded with the integration of Belarus into international structures under Russian influence.⁹² As well as becoming a founding member of the Commonwealth of Independent States in 1991, Lukashenko's Belarus signed a Treaty on the Union of Belarus and Russia in 1997.⁹³ Lukashenko started to talk about the 'unity of Slavic nations' (excluding Poles and Czechs).⁹⁴ The country became dependent on Russia, both in terms of natural resources and militarily. Due to the violation of civil rights, it fell into international isolation (with the US and the EU both imposing sanctions).⁹⁵ What followed has been a cycle of improving and worsening relations with the West, none of which has led to any significant change in Lukashenko's grasp on power. Staying in power is Lukashenko's dominant driving force.

⁹⁰ Kazharski, *Belarus and the EU after the 2020 Awakening*.

⁹¹ See, e.g. J. Zaprudnik, *Belarus: At a Crossroads in History* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1993); J. Zaprudnik, 'Belarus: In Search of National Identity Between 1986 and 2000', in E. A. Korosteleva, C. W. Lawson and R. Marsh (eds.), *Contemporary Belarus: Between Democracy and Dictatorship* (London: Routledge, 2003), 112–24.

⁹² E. A. Korosteleva, C. W. Lawson and R. J. Marsh (eds.), *Contemporary Belarus: Between Democracy and Dictatorship* (London: Routledge, 2003); S. White, E. Korosteleva and J. Lowenhardt (eds.), *Postcommunist Belarus* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005).

⁹³ V. Nikonov, 'The Place of Belarus on Russia's Foreign Policy Agenda', in S. W. Garnett and R. Legvold (eds.), *Belarus at the Crossroads* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1999), 105–29; C. Rontoyanni, 'The Union of Belarus and Russia: The Role of NATO and the EU', in G. Herd and J. Moroney (eds.), *Security Dynamics in the Former Soviet Bloc* (London: Routledge, 2003), 118–20.

⁹⁴ N. Leshchenko, 'The National Ideology and the Basis of the Lukashenka Regime in Belarus', *Europe-Asia Studies* 60/8 (2008), 1419–33.

⁹⁵ T. Wesolowsky, 'Russian Military Creep in Belarus Raises Security Alarms', *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 4 October 2020.



The economy of Belarus is highly state-oriented and centralised. Its international isolation and dependency on Russia make it highly vulnerable to the Russian markets. In the past, the Belarusian economy benefited from large energy subsidies from Russia and the fast growth of the Russian economy. However, both of these came to an end, and Belarus then suffered through three economic crises: in 2009 due to the global economic downturn, in 2011 due to a balance of payments crisis and in 2014–15 due to a currency crisis. As a consequence, the country has accumulated a high level of public debt.⁹⁶ An often-overlooked problem is environmental degradation, especially air pollution. The joint projects with the EU directed at promoting a green economy through gender equity have met with very little local interest⁹⁷ but the regime is very interested in renewable resources.⁹⁸

The persistent main economic problems are low competitiveness and the fact that the country continues to play the role of a ‘Russian appendix’: the Belarusian economy is dominated by state-owned enterprises and state-owned banks.⁹⁹ It is the most loyal client of the Kremlin in the post-Soviet space. Belarus was, together with Russia and Kazakhstan, a founding member of the Eurasian Economic Union in 2015 (Armenia and Kyrgyzstan have since joined). China was expected to invest heavily in the country and proposed the building of the China–Belarus Great Stone Industrial Park in 2012, which would have served as a Chinese hub between the Eurasian Economic Union and the EU. As Chinese interest in Belarus declined and the proposed information technology miracle did not happen, Russian economic dominance was reinstated in the country.¹⁰⁰ Russia is not, however, capable of delivering the subsidised economic prosperity to Belarus that it used to, so it has opted to sponsor its authoritarian ruler instead.¹⁰¹

⁹⁶ A. Alachnovič, ‘Slow, but Meaningful Changes in the Belarusian Economy’, *Observerator finansovy*, 8 January 2019.

⁹⁷ *EU4Environment*, ‘Towards a Green Economy in Belarus. Work in Progress – 2019–20’, 2021.

⁹⁸ IRENA, *Renewables Readiness Assessment. The Republic of Belarus* (2021).

⁹⁹ S. Guriev, ‘The Political Economy of the Belarusian Crisis’, *Intereconomics* 55/5 (2020), 274–5.

¹⁰⁰ *CEPA*, ‘The Belarus–China “Iron Brotherhood” Begins to Rust’, 27 May 2021.

¹⁰¹ Kazharski, *Belarus and the EU after the 2020 Awakening*.



The West or the East: a Belarusian dilemma

The Kremlin supports the belief that Russians and Belarusians (as well as Ukrainians) constitute one nation and represent the so-called Russian world.¹⁰² This paternalistic and colonial approach to Belarusians, Ukrainians and the other Slavic nations of Europe is familiar to many Russians, who support the ideology of pan-Russian or pan-Slavic imperialism.¹⁰³ Russian President Vladimir Putin and Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Lavrov regularly refer to this concept. Neither the supporters of Lukashenko's autocratic regime nor Belarusian democratic activists like the sound of it, but the Belarusian national identity and statehood are seen, even by Belarusians, as uncertain and therefore unstable.

In contrast to Ukraine's Euromaidan (2013–14), EU flags were not seen during the 2020 demonstrations in Belarusian cities. The opposition leaders did not talk much of their country's European future. The Belarusian exile leader, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, even stated before the European Parliament's Committee on Foreign Affairs and Subcommittee on Human Rights on 21 September 2020 that the objective of the Belarusian democratic movement was not a 'geopolitical revolution'. She also said that the Belarusian democrats were neither pro-Russian nor anti-Russian, just as they were neither for nor against the EU.¹⁰⁴ The term 'Europe' was frequently used as some sort of juxtaposition ('Belarus and Europe'), and this was even more true of the term 'West'. On the other hand, no one explicitly advocated for the East either. Thus, we witnessed a Belarusian geopolitical volatility bordering on helplessness.

The Belarusian attitude towards the West is the result of the two-hundred-year-long indoctrination (the national Russification)¹⁰⁵ of a large part of the Belarusian population in the idea that the West is an enemy, or at best an entity that belongs to a foreign civilisation, despite being an 'object of desire' from an economic perspective. Belarusian national and civilisational identity is, thus, quite ambivalent. The question of 'West

¹⁰² *President of Russia*, 'Article by Vladimir Putin "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians"', 12 July 2021.

¹⁰³ D. Allan et al., 'Myths and Misconceptions in the Debate on Russia', *Chatham House*, 13 May 2021.

¹⁰⁴ European Parliament, 'Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya Calls on MEPs to Stand by the People of Belarus', Press Release, 21 September 2021.

¹⁰⁵ When the territory of contemporary Belarus became part of the Russian Empire after the triple Partitions of Poland (1772, 1793 and 1795) and was later incorporated into the Soviet Union, a systematic liquidation of Belarusian elites took place. Belarusian history was interpreted and presented solely from the Russian, or Eastern, perspective. T. Snyder, *The Reconstruction of Nations: Poland, Ukraine, Lithuania, Belarus, 1569–1999* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003). The Declaration of State Sovereignty in 1991 did not bring about much change as the population of Belarus was to a considerable extent Russified and had adopted a Soviet–Russian mentality. Belarusian writer and Nobel prize winner for literature Svetlana Alexievich has even argued that Belarus is the very place where the so-called *homo sovieticus*, an archetype that lacks a sense of place, morals and hope, still exists (*France 24*, 'Exclusive: Nobel Laureate Alexievich on Putin and Soviet Trauma', 9 October 2015).



or East?’ seems to many Belarusians to be inappropriate and potentially dangerous.¹⁰⁶ A ‘civilisational consensus’ has thus emerged between Lukashenko’s authoritarian regime and the opposition that states that Belarus belongs to neither the East nor the West, and that it will cooperate with both. Belarusian intellectuals argue that their country represents the genuine ‘heart of Europe’.¹⁰⁷ Even Lukashenko promotes this odd Belarusian exceptionalism, which is backed by both the supporters and the opponents of his regime.¹⁰⁸

The pragmatic emancipation of Belarus from Russian patronage started with the Russian occupation of Ukrainian Crimea in 2014. One of its expressions was the so-called Minsk Protocols (the peace deal between Ukraine, Russia and the separatists in Eastern Ukraine, negotiated during marathon peace talks in the capital of Belarus), which symbolised the independence of the Belarusian position from Russia and the West.

In 2018, on the occasion of the one-hundredth anniversary of the Belarusian People’s Republic, the symbol of modern Belarusian statehood, Lukashenko, stated that there was no ‘East–West choice’ for Belarus, as it chose the path of ‘independence, peace and partnership with other states’.¹⁰⁹ The aim of his multivector policy was to mediate between the West and Russia, and raise the geopolitical importance of Belarus, that is, preserve its authoritarian regime and Belarusian sovereignty.

Domestically, Lukashenko portrays himself as the one and only guarantor of Belarusian state sovereignty. He describes the opposition as protagonists of chaos, who would pave the way to Russian occupation. In July 2020, several Russian mercenaries from the so-called Wagner Group were ostentatiously detained in Belarus for allegedly plotting a coup.¹¹⁰ However, immediately after the August 2020 presidential election, a dramatic turn of events occurred. Lukashenko’s regime faced civic emancipation and resistance. Fighting for his and his regime’s survival, he rejoined Kremlin.

¹⁰⁶ R. Allison, S. While and M. Light, ‘Belarus Between East and West’, *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics* 21/4 (2005).

¹⁰⁷ Those who are politically more realistic, such as French–Belarusian journalist Andreï Vaïtovich, have described their country with sad sarcasm as the ‘North Korea in the heart of Europe’ (P. Paccard, ‘Andrei Vaitovich : la Biélorussie “est une Corée du Nord au cœur de l’Europe”’, *France24*, 7 June 2021.).

¹⁰⁸ A. G. Lukashenko, ‘Vneshnyaya politika Respubliki Belarus v novom mire’, Speech delivered at a meeting with heads of the foreign embassies of the Republic of Belarus, in *Vestnik Ministerstva zamezhnykh sprau Respubliki Belarus* 30/3 (2004), 45.

¹⁰⁹ B. Zogg, ‘Belarus Between East and West: The Art of the Deal’, *CSS Analyses in Security Policy* no. 231, 1.

¹¹⁰ *Guardian*, ‘Belarus Says Russian Mercenaries Arrested Ahead of Presidential Election’, 29 July 2020.



The disguised Belarusian Western identity

Belarus is not only a nation between the East and the West, but an essential part of its history and traditions makes it a Western nation as well. Through its confrontation with the Mongol–Tatar, Moscow–Russian and Ottoman–Turkish civilisational otherness, it not only has been an object of interest for the West, but for many centuries was also its co-creator. In fact, we can talk about the ‘disguised’ Western identity of Belarus. After all, Belarus has a shared history with Lithuania and Poland, the north-eastern border of Western civilisation. While for many Belarusians this is a paradoxical, uncomfortable and shattering historical fact to be spoken of only quietly, or not at all, a growing number, whether at home or in exile, perceive the Belarusian Western identity to be a source of national, civic and political emancipation.

The Belarusian national identity was formed during the second half of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It emerged in opposition to the Russian and Polish identities and partially—albeit not in a negative way—in response to the Lithuanian and Ukrainian identities.¹¹¹ It was built on identification with the Grand Duchy of Lithuania (thus the myth of a ‘state tradition’). The renewed references of the Belarusian democratic movement to the Grand Duchy, symbolised in the 2020 demonstrations by the ‘Pahonia’,¹¹² are a form of Belarusian declaration that it belongs to Europe.

A significant element of the identity discourse is language. Linguist and chairman of the opposition Belarusian People’s Front, Vincuk Viachorka, explained the symbolism of using the Belarusian or Russian languages in Belarus: ‘If someone speaks formal Belarusian language, it is considered not only a sign of politeness, but also of European orientation . . .’¹¹³ [And] Lukashenko speaks a strange “Pidgin-Russian”, that is, Russian with elements of Belarusian pronunciation and vocabulary,’ which is symbolically the exact opposite.¹¹⁴

¹¹¹ R. Radzik, ‘Konstanty Kalinowski – między polskością a białoruskością’, in A. Мальдзіс (ed.), *На шляхах да ўзаемаразумення. Беларусіка = Albaruthenica* (Minsk: Беларускі кнігазбор, 2000), 23–33; P. N. Wexler, *Purism and Language: A Study in Modern Ukrainian and Belorussian Nationalism (1840–1967)* (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1974).

¹¹² The Pahonia was the historical coat of arms used by the Grand Duchy of Lithuania to which Belarus once belonged. It was also the coat of arms of the Belarusian People’s Republic (1918–19) and of the Republic of Belarus from 1991 to 1995. Under Lukashenko’s re-Sovietisation programme, a modified former Soviet Belarusian coat of arms replaced the Pahonia in 1995. The Pahonia was used by the Belarusian diaspora after the Second World War and has become a symbol of opposition to Lukashenko since 1995.

¹¹³ A. Goujon, ‘Language, Nationalism, and Populism in Belarus,’ *Belarusian Review* 14/2 (2002), 6.

¹¹⁴ I. Skálová, ‘Homo sovieticus je oporou totalitního režimu: rozhovor s dr. Vincukem Viačorkou’, *Navýchod* 2/3 (2002), 21–2.



The name of this Eastern European state is also indicative of Belarusian self-reflection and recognition of its civilisational roots. For a long time, English speakers used the terms 'Byelorussia' or 'Belorussia', derived from the Russian transcription. However, Belarus is not Russia, and these toponyms are not as innocent as they seem. They are based on the imperialistic Russian and Soviet-Russian perspectives and automatically suggest that Belarus belongs to Russia. English speakers thus began to use the term 'Republic of Belarus' instead, which the Belarusian Ministry of Foreign Affairs had previously recommended to both the UN and the Council of Europe.¹¹⁵

Hence, the Republic of Belarus is trying to remind the world, and especially the West, of what was banished from Western minds when we stopped differentiating between 'Rus' and 'Russia'. While the name 'Belo-Russia' represents the Moscow–St Petersburg imperial perspective, 'Belarus' highlights the freedom and independence of this Eastern European country that gradually came to be dominated by the Russian Empire (the so-called gathering of Russian countries). If we are to take Belarusian national, civic and political emancipation seriously, it is necessary to abandon Russian colonial terminology which is condescending towards Belarusians and other Eastern European nations. In other words, Belarus should be granted its own name.

Another paradox of modern Belarusian history is that the unification of the Belarusian regions into a quasi-state entity was completed through the Soviet Union. After the collapse of the Russian Empire (1917), the People's Republic of Belarus only lasted from 1918 to 1919. As a result of the Polish–Soviet War, which ended with the Peace of Riga (1921), the ethnically Belarusian areas were divided between Poland and Soviet Russia, later the Soviet Union. When the Soviets occupied eastern Poland and integrated the Belarusian regions into Soviet Belarus (under the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact of 1939), both the elites and the general public perceived it as 'historical justice'. This myth of the just unification of Belarus still lives amongst Belarusians and incites Soviet nostalgia.

The perception of Belarus as a 'privileged victim' of the Second World War is an important narrative that is deeply rooted in Belarusian society and used by Lukashenko's regime. It describes Belarus as the epicentre of the genocidal conflict between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. The fear of war, incited by

¹¹⁵ G. Shevelov, 'The Name Rus', in V. Kubijovyč (ed.), *Ukraine: A Concise Encyclopaedia*, vol. 1 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press), 3–5.



hybrid ‘pacifist–militarist’ Soviet rhetoric and elaborated upon by Lukashenko every year during the Victory Day celebrations (9 May), traumatises Belarusians. They fear political conflict as a trigger of war. Moreover, they recall the ‘Ukrainian scenario’ in which Russia annexed the Crimea and war broke out in the Donbas. Many also believe the Russian propaganda about ‘Ukrainian fascism’. The current Belarusian regime labels all its critics and opponents as ‘Fascists’, which coincides with the Kremlin’s propaganda (and the term Kremlin previously used in the Ukrainian crisis).¹¹⁶ As long as the debate on the twentieth-century history of Eastern Europe is not free in Belarus, the Soviet/Russian misinterpretation of Belarus’s existence between the East and the West will continue.

The rise of civil society

While the birth of Belorussian civil society dates back to the nineteenth century, it experienced a critical rebirth in the 1980s during Gorbachev’s perestroika process. Belarus had the most complicated starting position of all post-Soviet republics, because its population was heavily Russified and civic emancipation required the nation to search for its own identity. Most organisations thus focused on saving the local language and culture, and the political dimension (including a strong focus on the environment) emerged much later. Yet, the regime was very suspicious of any independent civil society initiative and often labelled it treasonous; exposure of malpractice led to systematic state persecution.¹¹⁷

Activists’ confidence slowly grew due to the support of foreign institutions. One example was cooperation with an international association called Civic Belarus.¹¹⁸ It provided mini-grants and know-how focused on specific problems such as environmental pollution, care for disabled children and the preservation of neglected historical buildings, often in peripheral regions of the country. It sponsored educational workshops, lectures and weekend camps for students, at which alternative perspectives on Belorussian and

¹¹⁶ Kazharski, ‘Belarus and the EU After the 2020 Awakening’.

¹¹⁷ *EEB*, ‘What Future for Environmental Protection in Belarus?’, 14 October 2020.

¹¹⁸ Civic Belarus was established in Prague in 2004 by former Czech President Václav Havel and his Chancellor Karel Schwarzenberg. It is financed by Czech state funds, international foundations and the Czech public. It is part of the Visa-Free Europe coalition, which supports the liberalisation of the EU’s visa regime with Eastern Partnership countries. It cooperates with a Polish organisation, Belarus in Focus, which tries to bring Belarusian topics to the European public and to overcome the international isolation of Belarus. For more information, see www.civicbelarus.eu/en/.



(post-)Soviet history were presented, and freedom of speech and critical thinking were promoted. It also sponsored visits by Belorussian activists and regional journalists to Czechia, where they were confronted with the successes and failures of another society that has had to reflect on its own post-Communist (and post-Soviet) traumas.¹¹⁹

Civic Belarus also co-established and co-funded the radio station Euroradio. Unfortunately, the station was shut down in July 2021 and the regime has blocked access to its website from Belarus. The station focused on news reporting but also fact-checking, political analysis and culture (including pop culture and the underground music scene). Its aim was to provide Belarusians with a venue to help them fight state propaganda and the fake news spread by the Russian media.

The mobilisation of civil society in 2020 was remarkable, but the current situation significantly limits the possibility of direct involvement in the country. Even cultural activities meet with Lukashenko's distrust and face heavy state control and sanctions. The regime's persecution of civic activists who have foreign contacts hinders long-term activities, which are limited to assisting specific individuals who are either being persecuted in Belarus or are living in exile.¹²⁰ The relations between the state and civil society have passed the point of no return, as Lukashenko has lost political legitimacy both at home and abroad.¹²¹ The authoritarian regime he created has no future.

What can the EU and its member states do?

EU–Belarus relations are currently defined by restrictive measures and limited diplomatic contacts; the country's participation in the Eastern Partnership programme is essentially dead. Providing direct support to Belarusian civil society is now impossible. The regime is boycotting any foreign support from the EU and the US—as in Russia, Western non-governmental organisations are called 'foreign spies'. Travel between

¹¹⁹ It is not possible to provide more specific information about the projects and their recipients as the regime defines any civil society organisation that is in contact with foreign actors as a 'foreign agent' and the individuals concerned are criminalised.

¹²⁰ In 2020 Civic Belarus joined the Czech humanitarian programme Medevac, which helped evacuate the injured protestors from Belarus to Czechia for medical treatment. This has helped increase cooperation with the Belarusian community in Czechia.

¹²¹ Kazharski, 'Belarus and the EU after the 2020 Awakening'.



the EU and Belarus is also stagnating, and academic, artistic and cultural contacts are limited.¹²² Even the EU's former contacts with the Belarusian state universities or the National Academy of Sciences of Belarus in Minsk have become impossible. This heightened repression will lead to a loss of human capital as many will decide to leave the country.

The turbulent events in Belarus in 2020–21 represent a major turning point. Belarus has embarked on a path of escalating human rights violations whilst also tightening its bonds with Russia. At the same time, Lukashenko has unknowingly programmed and accelerated his own end, albeit still a distant one. When Lukashenko's presidency ends (whether he remains in office until his death or until the regime collapses), the Belarusian dilemma will return in full force: national sovereignty and cooperation with the EU, or a protectorate of the Russian Federation? The EU and its member states must be well prepared when the moment arises.

Belarus, Turkey, Ukraine: the common points for a roadmap

Examining the long-term trends and challenges of the countries' domestic political situations and foreign policy, we can observe that despite their many differences, several critical common features exist, which need to be taken into account in any future EU policy vis-à-vis these countries. These pertain especially to identity politics (group identities affecting political processes¹²³) and populism, limited media freedom and human rights violations, the weak rule of law and lack of good governance, the rise of civil society despite a sluggish reform process and efforts to fight rising pressure from Russia.

These countries are struggling with the definition of their identities in the post–Cold War era. Language, ethnicity and religion together form the basis of identity politics, and in these countries this is resulting in

¹²² Up-to-date information is available at <http://franak.org/>, <https://belsat.eu/en> and <https://www.rferl.org/Belarus>.

¹²³ See, e.g. A. Garza, 'Identity Politics: Friend or Foe?', *Othering & Belonging Institute*, 2019.



the fragmentation and polarisation of society. This situation is then being cleverly utilised and promoted by their populist, or even undemocratic, leaders. Erdoğan and Lukashenko both play on people's emotions and fears, arguing that they are the only defenders of stability—chaos, violence and enemies would prevail without them. Their violent repression of mass protests indicates that they will not give up their power voluntarily; unlike Lukashenko, whose regime's reactions to the 2020–21 events passed the point of no return, Erdogan has preserved some degree of legitimacy despite the opposition taking control of all the major cities in the 2019 local elections.

Ukraine's main problems relate to the slow speed of the needed reforms, particularly in the areas of justice, corruption and weak institutions. In some parts, considerable power remains in the hands of local oligarchs. It is dealing with the effects of war, which have severely limited the reform process as well as the availability of the necessary resources. The Ukrainian leaders are pursuing a rather populist political direction and lack a clear vision for future reforms. While some believe that Ukraine is still in the process of transition from the former autocratic regime, it seems that the West currently has a stronger ability to impose conditionality here than in disappointed Turkey, the 'abandoned child' of the EU accession process, not to mention Belarus.

Civil society in all three countries is weak vis-à-vis the governments. The pro-democratic political forces remain fragmented in both Turkey and Ukraine. Ukrainian civil society has experienced a major expansion since 2014, yet the representatives of various civil society organisations increasingly face threats of violence. In Turkey, there is systematic pressure to silence civil society. The intensity and persistence of the Belarusian democratic movement in organising demonstrations and protests after the 2020 rigged election surprised many EU politicians and journalists. The repression that followed, however, indicated that the authorities in Belarus have started to exhibit totalitarian tendencies.

All three countries are also affected by multivector politics (the diversification of foreign policy ties) between the East and the West. In Russian imperial optics, both Belarusians and Ukrainians are ethnic groups of the Great Russian nation. Both Belarus and Ukraine will have to come to terms with their post-Soviet legacies and Russia's post-imperialist tendencies.

The cat-and-mouse games Turkey and Belarus have played with the EU, NATO and Russia have resulted in increasing dependency on Russia's goodwill and geopolitical interests. It was allegedly Turkey that



prompted NATO to soften its response to Belarus's forced landing of a Ryanair plane and the detention and abduction of a journalist. Russia thus uses the vulnerability of Lukashenko and Erdoğan and their focus on their own power to expand its regional power.

The rising pressure from Russia is affecting Turkey's relations with the EU and its wider foreign policy goals (this is mostly, but not exclusively, visible in Iraq and Syria). Turkey is trying to strengthen its regional power status but its desire to achieve 'strategic autonomy' has so far failed. The AKP's aggressive foreign policy has, instead, led to the emergence of an anti-Turkish alliance and the loss of Turkey's credibility in the West.

There is a broad consensus in Ukraine that the country's future rests in the Euro-Atlantic circle as defined by EU and NATO accession. Russian diplomatic and military involvement in the conflict in the Donbas region of Ukraine and the annexation of the Crimean peninsula are naturally the most important determinants of Russo-Ukrainian relations, which affect EU–Russia relations, and thus also EU–Ukraine relations.

Ukraine's battle to leave Russia's power orbit is convenient for Turkey, which sees Ukraine as a useful counterweight and leverage against Russia. Both countries view NATO as a barrier to the Russian influence that directly (Ukraine) and indirectly (Turkey–Syria dynamic) threatens to undermine their territorial sovereignty and key national interests. They share geopolitical perspectives. Ukraine does not hide its disappointment that the West did not provide more substantial support in its conflict with Russia and is not more appreciative of Ukraine's role as the defender of Europe's eastern border against Russian influence. Similarly, Turkey does not disguise its frustration over Europe's 'ingratitude' for taking the biggest slice of the cake on migration out of Syria, which threatens to destabilise it internally.¹²⁴

The countries' relationships with the EU are a crucial feature of their engagement with the West, regardless of the obvious differences. The most problematic questions the EU must address in the region relate to Turkey as it is strategically the most important country for the EU. However, Belarus and Ukraine are important in terms of stability on the EU's eastern border and its close neighbourhood; they are vital to the EU's relations with Russia.

¹²⁴ See, e.g. Z. Yanaşmayan and A. Üstüblüç, 'Under the Shadow of Civilizationist Populist Discourses: Political Debates on Refugees in Turkey', *New Diversities* 21/2 (2019).



When situations arise in which any of the three countries tries to destabilise the EU, as we witnessed, for example, with the weaponisation of refugees in 2020 (Turkey–Greece border) and 2021 (Belarus–Lithuania–Poland border), the EU must respond swiftly and decisively, applying power politics. The EU should move beyond its image as a civilian power and start using coercive economic foreign policy tools¹²⁵ more often if the countries do not meet the agreed conditions or slip away from following EU norms and values.

Sanctions cannot be the sole long-term strategy. The EU is predominantly an economic giant; thus, it can motivate countries such as Ukraine through the use of credible economic incentives. In exchange for deeper economic cooperation in specific areas where it can provide access to know-how and technology, such as the green transition, it can demand institutional reforms that improve economic governance. The economic benefits offered would serve as an incentive to reform. The reforms hold the potential to spill over to other areas as well, strengthening transparency and the rule of law.¹²⁶ This would also limit the detrimental influence of Russia and China.

Providing economic incentives to regimes such as Lukashenko's Belarus will not achieve any progress towards democratisation. The regime's sole goal is its survival and any change can come only from within. Cooperation with Lukashenko only 'normalises' his position and is not feasible after his violent suppression of the demonstrations in 2020, the diversion of the plane in May 2021 and the weaponisation of migration in summer and autumn 2021. The only feasible approach that falls in line with the EU's values of democracy, human rights and the rule of law in such a context is pronounced isolation of the regime and the provision of maximum assistance to those facing or fleeing persecution.

Turkey stands somewhere between the two. The democratic forces are significantly limited; forsaking political conditionality in the EU–Turkey relationship leaves the progressive forces in Turkey feeling abandoned and feeds the undemocratic ones. The EU must tread lightly. The right mix of incentives and punishments could promote greater transparency in governance, limit corruption and strengthen civil society, paving the way for the country to engage in democratisation from within again. However, one-sided support for the opposition would be counterproductive as some of the voices that oppose Erdoğan carry illiberal tones.

¹²⁵ D. Roháč, 'The Mirage of the Geopolitical Commission', 19.

¹²⁶ D. Tsarouhas, *EU–Turkey Economic Relations and the Customs Union: A Rules-Based Approach*, Hellenic Foundation for European and Foreign Policy (7 May 2021).



The EU should use its expertise and thorough knowledge of the local context to prepare roadmaps for possible sudden regime changes. Undemocratic regimes are dangerous, unpredictable and have a tendency to create substantial security risks. The EU should not give up its values to promote short-term goals. Internal fragmentation and an inability to promptly resolve crises should not be compensated for by cooperation with disreputable leaders. It legitimises their rule, normalises their undemocratic practices and fortifies their survival.

Conclusion



Ukraine, Belarus and Turkey each hit the European news headlines in 2020 and brought headaches for the EU. In all three cases, the EU has repeatedly shown that it has neither the tools to respond effectively to acute crises nor a long-term strategy to support the country's democratisation other than the very remote promise of accession (which is not even conceivable in the case of Belarus). The dire consequences of the EU's inability to act were demonstrated in the 2014 Crimean crisis, the 2015–16 and 2020 migration crises, and in the 2020 rigged election in Belarus, to mention just a few examples.

Ultimately, democratisation and de-democratisation are primarily domestic processes, and to develop adequate reactions, we need to understand the forces and developments within these countries. We have seen that three aspects present obstacles to the reform process. First, democratisation is harder to achieve in countries with strong ethnic, social and political cleavages, where deep disagreements exist. Second, reform is hard to achieve in a system with one dominant party which has few incentives to promote democratisation, and has access to economic, political and state resources.¹²⁷ Third, a weak institutional setting becomes a particular problem when elites who have not internalised democratic principles come to power. What is important though is that local elites do not need to be democrats; they simply need to see democratisation as advantageous to them.

The EU has a limited range of tools, which—if used strategically—could have a significant impact on the reform processes. These include a carefully balanced mix of incentives and punishments following the 'logic of consequences'. EU conditionality is a very important complementary tool that can reinforce already existing and unfolding developments. The Union should use it wisely and be specific, clear and consistent about what is acceptable and what is not. EU conditionality should also bring together the differing interests of the member states and the EU institutions. Given the inflexibility of the EU decision-making process in foreign policy, which is unlikely to change in the near future, individual member states could assume a more active role in promoting specific policy recommendations. Consistency, transparency and credibility in relations with third countries are key to success. The policies towards Ukraine, Turkey and Belarus should not support particular groups but follow the norms and values the EU represents.

¹²⁷ David, 'Strategic Democratisation?', 8.



Recommendations

General

- Be specific, clear and consistent about what is acceptable and what is not; form rules-based relationships that take a step-by-step approach which is adhered to.
- Start using coercive economic foreign policy tools more often if the countries do not meet the agreed conditions.
- Consider each country as a unique case; avoid popular stereotypes and faulty assumptions based on quick and mistaken analogies. Pay attention to the complexities of their domestic environments and foreign engagements. Build up expertise to draw on when unexpected crises happen.
- Individual member states should assume a more active role in promoting specific policy recommendations.
- Promote green diplomacy towards Turkey and Ukraine as part of the European Green Deal. The condition of the environment and the effects of climate change hold the promise of deeper cooperation with the EU and overcoming politicisation of the issue.

Ukraine

- Make dialogue with Ukraine part of the Conference on the Future of Europe.
- The EU member states which have experience with transition from the Communist past and have traditional ties to Ukraine (Czechia, Poland and Slovakia) should share their experiences with the reform process. This could increase the trust-building process and balance disappointment regarding the uncertain future character of relations with the EU.
- The EU–Ukraine programmes and projects should
 - enhance competition and digitisation to promote transparency;



- boost participatory government;
- improve media transparency, freedom, diversity and independence—including financial and regulatory oversight—and support investigative journalism;
- support programmes aimed at judicial reform and improvement of the judicial system, especially the integrity of judges and the removal of political and business pressures on them;
- help small and micro businesses, especially in terms of building advocacy skills and forming regional coalitions to lift tax pressure, receiving more state support, simplifying procedures and drafting legislation;
- support policies to assist the return of migrant workers.

Turkey

- End appeasement with Ankara. Acknowledge that the current Turkey presents a security threat to the EU. Resist Erdoğan's personalised foreign policy tactics.
- Support democratisation by targeting undemocratic institutions, processes and practices. The AKP, Erdoğan and Islam should not be the primary targets. One-sided support for the opposition is counterproductive as many of the voices that oppose Erdoğan also carry illiberal tones.
- Condemn attacks on the rule of law. Support anti-disinformation campaigns.
- Reconsider the migration deal. While important, it should not be built on practices that conflict with European values and norms. It should focus on long-term solutions that will not put the EU in the position where it is relatively easily blackmailed by Turkey. While improving refugees' material conditions, it has produced negative externalities on the Turkish eastern border that need to be addressed—most new arrivals to Turkey are non-Syrian nationals who enter mostly from Iran.
- Insist that Turkey must recognise the Republic of Cyprus and actively support a viable reunification solution (in the framework set by the UN and the EU) in order to update the customs union and adopt the visa liberalisation programme.



- Support Turkish observer status within the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum on the strict condition that Turkey ratifies the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea and respects the rights of all countries in the region.

Belarus

- Prepare a roadmap to be followed if the regime in Belarus collapses. This could happen suddenly, which would require a strategy that the national capitals have already been consulted on.
- Reduce the number of Belarusian embassies in the EU member states to one. The single embassy could be in Prague, which has a sizeable Belarusian diaspora community.
- Apply a stricter 'empty seat' policy, that is, ignore the current regime's representatives in international organisations and in bilateral relations.
- Support independent television and radio broadcasting via satellite and on the Internet.
- Support the establishment of Belarusian cultural centres in cooperation with the Belarusian exile community, especially the 'exile embassies' associated with the leader of the Belarusian opposition, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya. The centres would keep Belarus in the European public space.
- Support the translation of Belarusian literature into other European languages, as well as the publication of books and magazines produced by Belarusians in exile.
- Central European Members of the European Parliament could initiate the establishment of the Skaryna Prize for the Development of a European Memory, which would express the European institutions' interest in freedom and independence. The award would refer to the Belarusian humanist intellectual Francysk Skaryna (d. 1551), whose life and work linked today's Belarus with Lithuania, Italy, Poland and Czechia, where he died.

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Three countries on the eastern border of the EU have caused significant political and economic challenges to the EU's accession policy (Turkey) and to the European Neighbourhood Policy (Belarus and Ukraine). All three have revealed some weaknesses of the intra-EU decision-making processes (especially the lack of flexibility and the unwillingness to apply 'hard' power politics) and the disunity of the EU member states' voices, which reflects their very divergent national interests. Still, the policies adopted by the EU with regard to these countries also represent an opportunity for the EU.

The paper focuses on the key attributes that the EU needs to consider when drafting its policies, both bilateral and multilateral, towards these countries. We argue that the EU should form rules-based relationships that take a step-by-step approach. Individual member states could assume more active roles in promoting specific policy recommendations. This approach could bring together the differing interests of the EU member states and the EU institutions.



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