Ukraine: The revolution of minds?

The events in Ukraine over the course of the last 3 months have provoked a wide political, diplomatic and intellectual debate. As the events have evolved, many media outlets and foreign observers have already forgotten how everything started and the reasons for the mass street protests. From peaceful protests in support of signing an Association Agreement with the European Union (EU), to a brutal crackdown which resulted in the loss of over a 100 lives; from the blocking of Ukrainian goods at the Ukrainian-Russian border to a blocking of the Ukrainian military bases in Crimea, the transformation has been rapid and wide-ranging.

In a classical sense, we usually differentiate between an ‘evolution’ as a gradual process of change, and a ‘revolution’ as fundamental change, a complete change from one constitutional order to another. While the Euromaidan protesters and their supporters requested or called for gradual change, a revolution has taken place in the minds of Ukrainians, who have started to understand what it means to be a citizen – an independent, responsible, not post-Soviet but Ukrainian citizen (in the non-ethnic sense). Many in Ukraine suggest that Ukraine should construct a monument in honor of Vladimir Putin, whose actions have contributed to Ukrainian unity, with Tatars confirming their desire to live within the Ukrainian state, Lviv starting to speak Russian and Donetsk – Ukrainian.

The threat of US sanctions against Russia, as well as the Russian rhetoric against the West harks back to the Cold War era, but the reality is that while the European Union and its citizens have already transformed their mental maps and tried to deal with the challenge of Eastern Europe from a normative perspective by putting the emphasis on values, cooperation, solidarity and the like; the Russian
Federation never stopped thinking in Cold War terms. The rhetoric and mindset of ‘spheres of interests and influence’, ‘the aggression of NATO enlargement’, and ‘Western interference in the internal affairs of the post-soviet states’ never disappeared from the discourse of its politicians and media.

For the United States (US), the policy ‘reset’ with Russia was meant to replace the Cold War rhetoric. The US also gave the EU a droit de regard in East European affairs while concentrating more on the Middle East and Pacific. The US now feels compelled to play a more active role.

Apart from the United States, France, Germany and the United Kingdom which are all attempting to play the role of mediator; Romania, Turkey and Poland are the countries that are most concerned by the current situation. In 2010, Romania had already expressed concern with the prolongation of the lease agreement for the Russian Black Sea Fleet beyond 2017. Poland, an old ally of Ukraine, has been active in supporting Ukraine since the beginning of the crisis. It requested that the North Atlantic Council meet under article 4 of NATO’s founding Washington Treaty as ‘the developments in and around Ukraine are seen to constitute a threat to neighboring Allied countries and having direct and serious implications for the security and stability of the Euro-Atlantic area’.1

Another neighbor of Ukraine – Turkey – also has its eyes and ears on current developments. Being home to a large Tatar diaspora, in addition to the usual support of this Muslim population of Turkish origin in Crimea, Ankara faces a particular dilemma. As a NATO member state, and a candidate for EU membership, Turkey cannot diverge from the stated position of its allies and partners. At the same time, Moscow and Ankara are used to having a good working relationship and common vision regarding developments in the Black Sea Region, especially in terms of security and energy concerns. For example, both countries have been instrumental in no allowing NATO’s Active Endeavor to extend to the Black Sea. Thus, the question is whether Turkey is ready to jeopardise its relations with Russia if, for example, there is a request will it allow NATO ships to pass the Bosphorus Straits. Turkey which has invested in relations with Russia since the 1990s is in a bind as the significant bilateral economic relations cannot prevail over support for the Crimean Tatars, who are eager to stay within a united and democratic Ukraine.

Crimea is perceived as a most complex issue, as the latest events are seen as a Second Front. Crimean history does not allow any state to claim ownership over it, as well as a specific ethnic group to give it rights over those of other ethnicities. Greek colonies, mixed with the Scythians gave way to the Roman Empire and in the 13th century to Tatars-Mongols, when Crimea became a part of the Golden Horde. It became a vassal state of the Ottoman Empire in the 15th century and towards the end of the 18th century it became a part of the Russian Empire, thereby becoming a Slavic land for the first time. In 1944 Tatars, Armenians and Bulgarians were forcefully deported from Crimea while in 1945 Crimea’s autonomous status was revoked. The
exiled populations were only allowed to return in 1987. In 1954, Crimea was handed over from the Russian Soviet Socialist Republic to its Ukrainian counterpart. This was always perceived by many Russians as an unnecessary ‘gift’ to Ukraine.

Crimea presents several flashpoints. The first is its ethnic or national composition, with Tatars supporting the Ukrainian government, as do most of its ethnic minorities. At the same time, ethnic Russians, together with former Russian navy personnel who have received Ukrainian passports have deep bonds with Russia. The second concern is economic. On the one hand, the Russian Black Sea fleet provides a boost to the local economy with employment opportunities for the indigenous population, as do the many Russian tourists that visit the peninsula yearly. On the other hand, Crimea is totally dependent on Ukraine for its energy, electricity and water supply. In fact, rumors abound that Russia would like to lure tourists away from Crimean resorts to post-Olympic Sochi. The third contentious issue is the Black Sea Fleet itself. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Sevastopol is Russia’s only warm water port and therefore important to maintain it. According to the Ukrainian Constitution and subsequent treaties, the lease of the Black Sea Fleet could not be extended beyond 2017. Thus, when President Yushchenko iterated after the Orange Revolution that Ukraine would not prolong its lease, the Russian side began preparations to move its fleet to one of three possible destinations – the Russian port of Novorossiysk, a port in Russia-controlled Abkhazia, or the Syrian port of Tartus. The ensuing developments have shown that Russia still prefers the Crimean option – both from a tactical and a political point of view.

While in the case of the Euromaidan protests, the European Union was more involved both in the negotiations and the possible use of leverages; in the Crimean events, there is evidence of a wake up by other relevant organizations. The UN Security Council meeting on 4 March served as an effective venue for the various interested parties to present their positions in public. The OSCE was invited to send an observer mission to Crimea (although it has repeatedly been denied access by self-proclaimed local militia). NATO held special sessions on the crisis and has been a point of reference by Ukrainian elites that view the restarting of membership talks as the only possible security guarantee.

Quite illustrative is the fact that, like in 2008, the closest Russian allies – Kazakhstan and Belarus – do not support the Russian policy, especially on backing separatist regions.

The rush towards a referendum in Crimea, which had been originally scheduled for 25 May, later changed to 30 March, and suddenly moved up to 16 March raises many questions. While Ukraine’s constitution does not allow for a local referendum in Crimea, the haste towards one can be interpreted as an attempt to ensure that the ‘occupation’ of Crimea will be for the long-term, as the Ukrainian side has not reacted as expected by falling prey to Russian provocations. Demonstrations and banners proclaiming that ‘I am Russian-speaking and I do not need your protection’
are good media and social network images in contrast to the unmarked armed men attempting to persuade the Ukrainian army to violate its oath.

Before the Crimean events many in Europe suggested that the Ukrainians in Euromaidan were fighting for values and norms that many in Europe have been taking for granted - human rights, dignity, economic development, and integrity. And when most assumed that the new interim Ukrainian government and Parliament would bring about a sense of normalcy to the political scene, the Crimean crisis evolved by shifting the paradigm from being values-driven to security- and risk-oriented. The stakes are not only the blocking of Ukrainian military bases or even the possibility of a new separatist region, but an attempt to undermine the fundamentals of the European security system given the proximity of the crisis to the borders of the EU and NATO. Any attempt to change the existing borders is a violation of the Helsinki Final Act. On the other hand, the position of the President of the Russian Federation that a revolution took place in Ukraine leading to the creation of a new state (despite the fact that the composition of the Parliament is unchanged) with which Russia has not signed any agreements thereby making the Budapest Memorandum null and void – demonstrates the absence of reliable mechanisms to guarantee the security of third countries and partners by Western institutions.

Endnotes