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Ukraine and Triangular Diplomacy:

Kyiv's Legitimacy Dilemmas in the midst of the Crisis

Valentina Feklyunina and Valentyna Romanova

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Sam Nunn School of International Affairs
Georgia Institute of Technology
Atlanta, GA, 30332

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Ukraine and Triangular Diplomacy:

Kyiv's Legitimacy Dilemmas in the midst of the Crisis[1]

Valentina Feklyunina and Valentyna Romanova

Abstract

This paper analyzes Ukraine's attempts to influence the triangular diplomacy pursued by the European Union and United States. The framework of triangular diplomacy supports a particularly nuanced understanding of how Ukraine sought to navigate the perils of an asymmetrical conflict. Unable to influence Russia's behaviour directly, Ukraine sought to influence it by appealing to Brussels and Washington for symbolic, diplomatic and material support. At the same time, the paper shows that the Ukrainian authorities and political elites recognised a substantial difference in the willingness and ability of the EU and US to exert pressure on Russia. Wary of the EU's lack of internal cohesion and aware of the importance of its economic links with Russia, Kyiv sought, mostly unsuccessfully, to advocate a more active diplomatic role for Washington. Importantly, Ukraine consistently called for a greater solidarity between Brussels' and Washington's policies towards Russia. While Kyiv largely succeeded in communicating its narrative of the crisis, it struggled to convert this discursive success into a diplomatic one. The perceived inadequacy of the resulting US and EU support for Ukraine and pressure on Russia has weakened pro-EU support within Ukraine.

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Introduction

Russia's annexation of Crimea in March 2014, the rise of Russia-backed separatism in eastern Ukraine and the subsequent formation of the self-declared People's Republics in the Ukrainian provinces of Donetsk and Luhansk *oblasts* (Donbas) present a profound challenge to Ukraine's sovereignty two decades after it gained independence from Moscow. Kyiv's efforts to restore control over the breakaway territories encountered large-scale resistance by Russia-backed separatists, and the ensuing military confrontation have inflicted a heavy humanitarian and economic cost. Following years of mismanagement and corruption under the previous governments, Ukraine desperately needed reforms. It was this combination of the political and socio-economic sides of the crisis that made it particularly challenging for the Ukrainian authorities. President Poroshenko (2015g) described it as 'a fight on two fronts' – 'one, is the struggle to preserve [Ukraine's] freedom, independence and territorial integrity; the other, is the fight to survive economically, root out corruption and carry out comprehensive, and, even very painful reforms…'

For many in Ukraine, the only way to survive on both 'fronts' was through increased cooperation with the EU and the US. However, as the crisis unfolded and the support from the EU and the US fell short of elite and popular expectations, the pro-European and pro-Western euphoria of Euromaidan gave way to increasingly sceptical attitudes. The Ukrainian authorities repeatedly emphasised that the full implementation of the Minsk Agreements, which were negotiated among Ukraine, Russia, France and Germany in September 2014 and February 2015, was the only solution to the crisis (Poroshenko, 2015d). Yet, while publicly maintaining this line, Kyiv sought to demonstrate to its negotiation partners that the Minsk Agreements could not be realistically

fulfilled due to continuing Russia's interference. Moreover, Ukrainian elites and public were increasingly sceptical of Kyiv's ability to protect Ukraine's interests at the negotiation table.

This paper analyses Ukraine's attempts to influence the triangular diplomacy pursued by the EU and US. The framework of triangular diplomacy allows us to gain a particularly nuanced understanding of how Ukraine sought to navigate the perils of an asymmetrical conflict. Unable to influence Russia's behaviour directly, Ukraine sought to influence it by appealing to Brussels and Washington for symbolic, diplomatic and material support. At the same time, the paper shows that the Ukrainian authorities and political elites recognised a substantial difference in the willingness and ability of the EU and US to exert pressure on Russia. Wary of the EU's lack of internal cohesion and aware of the importance of its economic links with Russia, Kyiv sought, mostly unsuccessfully, to advocate a more active diplomatic role for Washington. Importantly, Ukraine consistently called for a greater solidarity between Brussels' and Washington's policies towards Russia.

The paper begins by examining how Ukrainian decision-makers and political elites viewed the responsibilities of the EU and the US as the crisis emerged, and what they expected from the West as an appropriate response. The following section looks at Ukraine's attempts to influence the EU's and US' policies, including its efforts to convince western decision-makers to put heavier pressure on Russia, and to secure from them more substantial economic, military and symbolic support. The final section of the paper examines the implications of Brussel's and Washington's responses for Ukrainian politics, and, ultimately, for Ukraine's ability to maintain the declared pro-European choice.

The West's responsibilities

As seen from Ukraine, the triangular diplomacy pursued by Brussels and Washington was indicative of the extent to which Europeans and Americans were willing to recognise Ukrainians as a European nation. Although the crisis was linked to a wide range of inter-connected political, geopolitical and socio-economic factors, it was the question of Ukrainian identity and nationhood that emerged particularly prominently both in the run-up to Euromaidan and in the aftermath of Russia's annexation of Crimea (Sakwa, 2015).

In the academic literature, Ukraine has often been described as a 'cleft' (Huntington, 1993) or an 'in-between' country (White et al, 2010). Over centuries, what we now know as Ukraine saw several attempts to establish an independent state. Yet, surrounded by bigger neighbours, parts of Ukraine repeatedly changed hands between regional powers. As a result, as Molchanov (2002: 15-16) convincingly demonstrates in his study of Russian-Ukrainian relations, the Ukrainian political culture 'could not but be fragmented into several regionally, linguistically, and religiously defined parts'. Experts in Ukrainian identity politics and foreign policy have often differentiated between either two or three distinct socially constructed identities or identity complexes representing very different interpretations of Ukraine's past, present and desirable future. Stephen Shulman (2004), for example, differentiates between what he labels as 'Ethnic Ukrainian' and 'Eastern Slavic' understandings of Ukraine. While the first identity complex is based on Ukraine's radical difference from Russia and identification with Europe, the second identity framework is based on cultural affinity with 'brotherly' Russia. White and Feklyunina (2014) have identified a third identity framework that presents Ukraine as not radically different from Russia and yet increasingly distinct from it.

The dominant account of the crisis, heavily promoted by Russian commentators and often adopted by Western analysts, emphasises the identity split as one of the key causes of the conflict (Lukyanov, 2015; Sakwa, 2015). A number of Ukrainian scholars, on the other hand, have argued that the question of identities was instumentalised by Russian policy-makers and propagandists who sought to portray the conflict as a civil war rather than as foreign intervention (Hrytsak, 2015). Kyiv's interpretation of the crisis, as it was articulated by the Ukrainian authorities and reinforced by the mainstream media, emphasised Russia's role as the sole source of the hostilities in eastern Ukraine (Poroshenko, 2015b; Turchinov in Koshkina, 2015). As the conflict unfolded, there emerged expectations that Russia's involvement would be a crucial factor in unifying Ukraine against the threat posed by Moscow. They were summarised by President Poroshenko (2014) in his extraordinary message to the Ukrainian Parliament in November 2014 when he declared that the 'mainly artificial divisions of Ukraine on geographic, ethnic, linguistic and religious grounds have finally been overcome'. He concluded that 'Ukraine has never been as united as it is now'. Poroshenko's assessment was shared by some Ukrainian scholars who saw the conflict as playing a unifying role for those who 'have opted ultimately for the Ukrainian cause driven primarily by civic rather than ethnic, cultural, or linguistic considerations' (Riabchuk, 2015, p. 152).

On the surface, Ukraine appeared to have made a definitive pro-European choice both in terms of its domestic politics and its foreign policy orientation. Following the overthrow of Yanukovych's regime in February 2014, the May 2014 presidential elections brought to power an openly pro-European president. In a crucial contrast to previous elections, which had consistently demonstrated significant regional divisions between eastern and western Ukraine, President Poroshenko gained electoral support throughout the country with the exception of Crimea and separatist-controlled parts of Donbas, which did not participate in the elections (see Kudelia,

2015). The parliamentary elections held in October 2014 seemed to confirm the victory of pro-European forces, with five pro-European parties (The Petro Poroshenko Bloc, People's Front, Self-Reliance, Fatherland and Radical Party) forming a 'European Ukraine coalition'.

At the policy level, Ukraine's European choice was manifest in the signing of the political provisions of the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement in March 2014 and of the remaining part of the Agreement in June 2014 (EEAS, 2015). The European choice was also evident in the coalition agreement concluded by the pro-European parties in the Parliament – a document that set out a plan of reforms in accordance with the Association Agreement and pledged to abolish Ukraine's non-aligned status and pursue Euro-Atlantic integration (Verkhovna Rada, 2014). Both the new National Security Strategy and the new Military Doctrine prioritised the goals of obtaining EU membership and preparing conditions for membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) (Strategiya natsionalnoi bezpeki Ukraini, 2015; Voenna doktrina, 2015). There was also a noticeable rise in public support for EU membership. In the years immediately before the crisis (2011-2014) public support for the European integration stayed in the range of 32-42%, reaching 41% in February 2014. By September 2014, as the crisis escalated, this number climbed to an impressive 59% of respondents, although this number did not include Crimea or separatist-controlled parts of Donbas (IRI, 2015).

On closer examination, however, the apparent victory of the pro-European identity and associated policy choices was far less convincing. Although Poroshenko's electoral support was more evenly spread across Ukraine than in any previous nationwide elections, the eastern (Kharkivska *oblast*) and southern (Zaporizhka, Khersonska, Mykolaivska, and Odeska *oblasts*) regions that traditionally supported pro-Russian candidates, witnessed the lowest voter turnout

since 1991 (Kudelia, 2015). As suggested by Sergiy Kudelia (2015), the low turnout could be 'a form of protest especially if residents viewed the new authorities as illegitimate'.

Moreover, once elected, President Poroshenko was increasingly constrained in his engagement with the EU, the US and Russia due to the continuing radicalisation of Ukraine's political arena. The pro-European coalition in Verkhovna Rada brought together political parties with very different understandings of Europe, of the West more broadly and of Russia. The implementation of the Minsk Agreements proved particularly divisive, with the coalition members displaying bitter disagreements about the desired Western response and Ukraine's commitments (see Berezyuk in Peshko, 2015). Thus, Russia's annexation of Crimea and the subsequent conflict in Donbas did contribute to a significant rise in pro-European attitudes. However, as the crisis and the parallel diplomatic process unfolded, the sustainability, the extent and especially the essence of Ukraine's pro-European choice came increasingly into question.

In the dominant view, shared by many in Ukraine, the West was directly involved in the emergence of the crisis, and, thus, had a direct responsibility to protect Ukraine. This understanding was based on two major assumptions – a view that Ukraine's sovereignty was guaranteed by the 1994 Budapest Memorandum, and a claim that the crisis erupted as a direct result of Ukraine's civilizational choice in favour of European values. The 'Memorandum on Security Assurances in Connection with Ukraine's Accession to the Non-Proliferation Treaty' – a document that was signed by representatives of Russia, the US, the UK and Ukraine in December 1994 – did indeed contain a reference to the signatories' 'commitment (…) to respect the independence and sovereignty and the existing borders of Ukraine' (UN, 1994). However, some Ukrainian policy-makers had questioned its significance long before the crisis. According to a commentator of the Ukrainian weekly *Dzerkalo tizhnya*, 'already at the time of signing the

Budapest Memorandum experts and diplomats said it would not be able to guarantee the security of the state' (Kravchenko, 2009; also Klimkin in *Ukrainska Pravda*, 2014). Unlike an international treaty, the memorandum was not ratified by any legislative bodies. Nor did it go beyond reiterating the commitments that had already been stipulated by the UN Charter or the CSCE Final Act. However, for wider Ukrainian society the Budapest Memorandum did appear as a document that made it obligatory for the US and the UK (as well as for China and France who expressed similar commitments later) to defend Ukraine's sovereignty (Lossovskii, 2015). As the West struggled to find an appropriate response to Russia's annexation of Crimea, even more pro-Western members of the Ukrainian political elite expressed their bitter disappointment. As former President Yuschenko, the celebrated champion of the 2004 Orange Revolution, lamented in *Dzerkalo tizhnya*, that the signatories of the Budapest Memorandum confirmed 'their commitment to prevent the threat or use of weapons against our territorial integrity, sovereignty and political independence of Ukraine…' Yuschenko then went on to pose a rhetorical question: 'Doesn't this mean that France, China, the US and Britain were obliged to help us when the crisis began?' (*Dzerkalo tizhnya*, 18 June 2015).

An even more powerful vision of Western involvement was linked to the idea of Ukraine's civilizational choice in favour of Europe. The interpretation of Ukraine's economic and especially political cooperation with the EU as a symbolic confirmation of Ukraine's European identity had been prominent among a large part of the Ukrainian society long before the crisis (White and Feklyunina, 2014). This view was also shared by a number of Ukrainian scholars who argued that the Orange Revolution had clearly marked Ukraine's pro-European civilizational choice as early as 2004 (see Molodizhna Alternativa, 2005). Following President Yanukovych's retreat from signing the Association Agreement with the EU in November 2014 and the onset of Euromaidan,

this interpretation became particularly salient. This idea was articulated by President Poroshenko (2015b), for example, who explicitly described Euromaidan as Ukraine's choice in favour of 'European values – democracy, the rule of law, respect for human rights and dignity, – which [Ukrainians] shared mentally and belonged to historically'. Crucially, this interpretation was linked to the idea of Europe's moral duty to help Ukraine: Europe would confirm its own European-ness only by protecting a European nation that came under attack. Poroshenko's speech at the European Strategy Annual Meeting in Yalta in September 2015 included an emotional appeal to EU officials and public: 'Let me remind you that the EU flag was sprinkled with Ukrainian blood' (Poroshenko, 2015b).

While the idea that the EU and the US should do more to help Ukraine remained central in both the official rhetoric and in the discourse articulated by pro-European elite, we can see a noticeable change in expectations of how (and if) the crisis could be potentially resolved. At the level of the official rhetoric, Poroshenko (2015e) continued to emphasise Kyiv's total commitment to the Minsk Agreements. He also reiterated that the conflict should be resolved rather than frozen. Yet, as noted by Ukrainian commentators, the Ukrainian authorities did not see a full-scale implementation of the Minsk Agreements, particularly Ukraine's ability to restore its control over the Russian-Ukrainian border, as realistic (Rakhmanin, 2015). The issue of elections in the separatist-controlled Donetsk and Luhansk proved particularly sensitive. The Ukrainian authorities feared that these elections, if held before full disarmament in the troublesome region, would legitimize the existing separatist regimes and their *de facto* independence from Kyiv (see Yaremenko in Radio Svoboda, 2015; Rakhmanin, 2015). Instead of seeing the elections as part of the solution, they saw them as part of the problem. Thus, Kyiv found itself in an increasingly challenging diplomatic position. While being apprehensive about the Minsk Agreements, it could

not openly oppose their implementation because of the fears of a renewed military confrontation or loss of support from its Western partners. This tricky position made it particularly important for the Ukrainian authorities to insist on continuing diplomatic pressure on Russia, mainly via international sanctions.

As the crisis unfolded, Ukraine's political elite was increasingly split in their views of how the conflict could be realistically resolved. Some, such as ex-head of Donetsk regional administration Serhiy Taruta, called for a more assertive approach to restoring control over Donbas (in Vidernikova, 2015). Yet, others began to question whether returning the occupied territories 'at any cost' was possible at all, at least in the short-to-medium term. As suggested by Presidential Advisor and Ukraine's representative on the Working Group of the Trilateral Contact Group Volodimir Gorbulin (2015a), neither 'the reintegration of Donbas in Ukraine on Russia's terms' nor reconciling with the loss of the eastern territories were viable options. While recognising that freezing the conflict was not desirable, Gorbulin (2015b) admitted that Kyiv may be forced to agree to this scenario 'under the pressure of internal and external circumstances'. In his view, such a scenario would involve keeping Donetsk and Luhansk within Ukraine while granting them some special powers. It would also potentially include the resumption of economic links between Donbas and the rest of Ukraine, which would put the economic burden of the post-conflict reconstruction solely on Kyiv. At the same time, Donbas would see a 'puppet regime controlled by Russia'. As a result, Ukraine would be severely constrained both in its domestic development and foreign policy. For Gorbulin (2015b), while freezing the conflict in Donbas was detrimental to Ukraine's interests, it was beneficial for both Russia and the EU. Thus, if forced to agree to this scenario, Ukraine would need to ensure that its international partners would agree to compensate it for the risks associated with freezing the conflict. Among such demands Gorbulin (2015b)

mentioned not only some specifics of Kyiv's relations with Donbas, but also significant economic compensation and definitive recognition of Ukraine's future as a member of the EU and of NATO.

Ukraine at the negotiating table

While we cannot ascertain the extent to which such views were shared by Ukraine's President or other key decision-makers, Kyiv's diplomacy did prioritise the points mentioned above. Its key goal, as articulated by President Poroshenko (2015c) in his annual address to the Parliament in June 2015, was to 'prevent the abolition of sanctions against the aggressor until the settlement of the situation in Donbas and the return of Crimea'. In addition to maintaining the diplomatic pressure on Russia, Kyiv consistently sought military support from the EU and the US. In 2014-15 both Ukraine's President Petro Poroshenko and the then Prime Minister Arsenyi Yatsenyuk repeatedly asked for 'defensive military support', which, in Yatsenyuk's words, would 'deter Russian-led terrorists' (*Financial Times*, 20 March 2015; Poroshenko, 2015e). As the conflict became more entrenched, most members of Ukrainian elite, with the notable exception of the radical right, agreed that there could be 'no or practically no military solution' to the crisis (Gorbulin, 2015a). Yet, military support was still seen as crucial to Ukraine's survival, especially due to Moscow's increased investment in the military (Gorbulin, 2015a). Although both the EU and the US recognised the need to support Ukraine, the question of what such support should entail proved divisive. In the US, for example, while the Congress consistently called for supporting Ukraine with defensive lethal weapons, the Obama administration chose other means of military support, including provision of non-lethal aid and training (Medynskyi, 2016). As explained by US permanent representative to the UN Samantha Power, 'if we (*…) give lethal weapons to Ukraine, we will ma*ke Ukrainians suffer even more' *(*Ukraine Today, 2016). *It is perhaps not*

surprising that divisions over military support both in the US and in the EU made it impossible to develop a coordinated approach. As a result, as emphasised by a British analyst, the military support proved 'unsystematic, uncoordinated and unevenly matched to Ukraine's needs' (Sherr, 2015).

Another focal point of Kyiv's diplomacy was an attempt to secure as much economic and financial support as possible. While the Ukrainian authorities acknowledged the importance of the support they received from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and G7 industrialised countries, they sought to persuade the EU and the US that Ukraine's needs were significantly greater (see Yaresko in Golos Ameriki, 2015). According to the then Prime Minister Yatsenyuk (in Cadei, 2015), Ukraine needed additional support from the EU and the US not only in securing bigger loans, but also in 'mak[ing] private international investors more collaborative in debt restructuring'. On the surface, Kyiv's appeals for help produced impressive results. According to the European Commission (2016), since the beginning of the conflict Brussels 'mobilised a total of EUR 3.4 billion in macro-financial assistance through three consecutive programmes of low-interest loans'. Over the same period, Washington provided a further 1.3 billion US dollars in foreign assistance, as well as 2 billion US dollars in loan guarantees, with another billion loan guarantee agreed in June 2016 (White House, 2016). Although exceptionally important for Kyiv's ability to prevent an economic collapse, this support was insufficient to restart the economic growth. More importantly, as will be discussed later in the paper, Kyiv failed to maintain support from the IMF which was much more significant in absolute terms (see Ministry of Finance of Ukraine, n.d.).

Finally, Kyiv sought symbolic support from the EU and the US that could, on the one hand, strengthen Ukraine's position at the negotiating table, and, on the other hand, maintain its domestic

legitimacy. As Ukraine's economic performance continued to deteriorate and the promised reforms struggled to accelerate, the bolstering of the government's domestic legitimacy was seen by the Ukrainian authorities as increasingly important. According to the findings of a series of public opinion surveys conducted by the Razumkov Centre, the share of Ukrainians who believed that the situation in Ukraine was developing in a wrong direction increased dramatically – from 57.7% of respondents in December 2014 to 73.4% in February 2016 (Razumkov Centre, 2016). At the same time, an overwhelming majority (70.1%) of respondents in a survey conducted by the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology in May-June 2016 reported a negative assessment of President Poroshenko's actions (KIIS, 2016). These developments made any symbolic international support particularly important for the Ukrainian authorities. Ultimately, the desired symbolic support was a promise of Ukraine's eventual membership in the EU and NATO. Yet, as Brussels was increasingly preoccupied with the economic problems in the Eurozone and later with the migration crisis and heightened security concerns in the wake of terrorist attacks in Paris and Brussels, Kyiv noticeably scaled back its demands. Poroshenko's vision of the key objectives of Ukraine's diplomacy in 2015, for example, included 'obtain[ing] the visa-free regime with the EU in 2016' – a more realistic goal than a commitment to EU membership (Poroshenko, 2015c).

In order to achieve these objectives, Ukraine focused on three inter-connected tasks in relation to both the EU and the US. Firstly, in order to mobilise elite and public support in the EU and the US for diplomatic pressure on Russia, the Ukrainian authorities invested significant efforts into conveying their interpretation of the conflict and of Russia's role. The newly established Ministry of Information Policy was to coordinate these efforts. Yet, compared to Russia, which had a sophisticated media infrastructure capable of disseminating its messages to a large number of foreign audiences (Yablokov, 2015; Feklyunina, 2016), Ukraine's abilities were limited.

However, Ukraine had the advantage of being widely seen as the victim, which contributed to a greater credibility of its narrative. Secondly, fearing an eventual 'Ukraine-fatigue,' the Ukrainian authorities sought to keep the attention of both western diplomats and international media on the crisis. Their efforts ranged from numerous reports of an expected full-scale invasion by the Russian army (Turchinov in Koshkina, 2015) to a call for a reform of the UN Security Council that would lead to Russia losing its veto power (Poroshenko, 2015f).

Thirdly, Kyiv engaged in a war of interpretations with Moscow with an aim of minimising the potential negative consequences of the Minsk Agreements. On the one hand, Kyiv sought to persuade the EU and the US that the political points of the Minsk Agreements, such as elections in Donbas, could be implemented only after the security-related points had been successfully addressed. On the other hand, Kyiv sought to demonstrate that it was Russia rather than Ukraine who impeded the implementation of the Minsk Agreements (see Crimean News Agency, 2016). Needless to say, Moscow played the same game.

Ukraine's narrative of the crisis, similarly to Russia's, appeared selective in a number of ways. Emphasising Ukraine's victimhood, it portrayed the hostilities in Donbas as an exclusively international conflict. Contrary to Russia's claim that eastern Ukraine was engulfed in a civil war, Kyiv downplayed any local roots of the conflict. With its focus on Russia, Ukraine's narrative glossed over genuine grievances in eastern Ukraine that produced increasing alienation of Donbas in relation to Kyiv during the events of Euromaidan (Sakwa, 2015). Poroshenko (2015b), for example, repeatedly stated that '[w]e don't have any civil war, we don't have any inside conflict (…) We have an aggression against Ukraine and occupation of the independent Ukrainian state'. This interpretation implied that Kyiv could not negotiate with representatives of the self-declared Donetsk and Luhansk Republics because they were viewed as an extension of the Russian state

and their demands were seen as having no connection to genuine local grievances. To underscore the illegitimacy of the Donetsk and Luhansk regimes, the Ukrainian authorities labelled Kyiv's military attempt to restore control over Donbas, which commenced in April 2014 and still continues at the time of writing, as an 'anti-terrorist operation'. The then Acting President of Ukraine Oleksandr Turchinov explicitly referred to the 'terrorist threat' to Ukraine's territorial integrity in his decree 405/2014 (Prezident Ukraini, 2014). In addition, Kyiv sought, albeit unsuccessfully, international recognition of the Donbas republics as terrorist organisations.

Having interpreted Russia's intervention as the sole source of the conflict, Ukraine's narrative also focused exclusively on the human rights violations and alleged war crimes committed by Russia-backed separatists (and by extension by Russia). The tragedy of the MH17 flight from Amsterdam that was shot in the sky over eastern Ukraine in July 2014 killing 298 people galvanised this narrative. Having immediately attributed the downing of the plane to actions of pro-Russian rebels, the Ukrainian authorities succeeded in mobilising elite support across the EU for a significantly tougher stance towards Russia. The tragic death of the passengers, many of whom were EU citizens, appeared to confirm Kyiv's narrative that the conflict was not only about Ukraine, but about Europe's security more broadly. The acceptance of this narrative by the EU and the US required more radical measures and was reflected in the introduction of the third wave of sanctions against Russia. According to the statement of the European Council (2014), '… when the violence created spirals out of control and leads to the killing of almost 300 innocent civilians in their flight from the Netherlands to Malaysia, the situation requires urgent and determined response'.

Crucially, Ukraine's narrative did not include any instances of human rights violations committed by the Ukrainian side. This omission was particularly noticeable if one compared the

narrative with an account of the conflict presented by international observers. A 'Report on the Human Rights Situation in Ukraine' published by the office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR, 2015) in September 2015, for example, noted instances of human rights violations by both sides. The report explicitly referred to both 'the armed groups and the Ukrainian military' and stated that '[t]hey routinely did not comply with the international humanitarian law principles of distinction, proportionality and precautions, with numerous incidents of indiscriminate shelling of residential areas causing civilian casualties observed' (OHCHR, 2015, p. 7).

Another key element of Kyiv's narrative was its depiction of Moscow as a major threat to democratic values across the world. According to the then Prime Minister Yatsenyuk, Russia presented 'a threat not just to Ukraine, [but] a threat to the free world, to democracy, [and] to freedoms and liberties…' (*The Financial Times*, 25 May 2015). To continue with this logic, opposing Russia would be crucial for saving the European civilisation – an argument that Kyiv pushed particularly hard in its attempts to influence the EU. President Poroshenko (2015b) underscored this point by describing an 'independent democratic Ukraine anchored into the system of European values' as 'a cornerstone to security and stability in Europe and in the whole world'. According to this narrative, the consequences of Ukraine's defeat would be disastrous for the EU. In Poroshenko's (2015b) words, '[o]nce this cornerstone is undermined, the European and global security foundations will be shattered'. Kyiv's appeal to the democratic values of the EU and the US was an effective approach. It made it difficult for both actors to ignore the normative dimension of the conflict and to continue business with Russia as usual, which was reflected in the repeated renewals of their sanctions against Russia. In the EU's case, however, the renewal of sanctions proved increasingly contested in the EU, with a growing divide among member states in their

willingness to support the sanctions regime. Hungary's Prime Minister Orban was particularly vocal in his criticism of the EU's response to the crisis, as he argued that 'the sanctions policy pursued by the West (..) cause[d] more harm to us than to Russia' (BBC, 2014).

As the crisis unfolded, however, the credibility of Kyiv's narrative was weakened by recurrent reports about the rise of Ukrainian far right nationalism (especially the so called Right Sector), about the slow progress of political, economic and judicial reforms and, particularly, about continuing corruption. Although some studies suggested that the role of the radical right was greatly exaggerated and that 'much of the negative publicity around Right Sector came from crude black PR from Russian media' (Wilson, 2014: 71; Shekhovtsov and Umland, 2014), these allegations could not but undermine Ukraine's democratic credentials. The allegations of continuing corruption proved particularly damaging, as they put at risk Kyiv's relationship with its lenders. Following the IMF's decision to postpone its third tranche of loans in October 2015 'due to the political infighting' in Ukraine (Reuters, 2016), Kyiv struggled to convince the Fund of its willingness to tackle the deep-seated problems in Ukraine's governance. The IMF's Managing Director Christine Lagarde, for example, publicly admitted that she was 'concerned about Ukraine's slow progress in improving governance and fighting corruption, and reducing the influence of vested interests in policymaking' (IMF, 2016).

Despite the inconsistencies and omissions in Kyiv's narrative, Ukraine succeeded in generating an impressive level of diplomatic and elite support in the EU and in the US. Yet, it struggled to keep the conflict in Donbas in the focus of international attention. It is not a coincidence that Ukraine's ambassador to the US Valerii Chaly prioritised the task of keeping attention of US governmental bodies on Ukraine as absolutely essential for Ukrainian foreign policy (Ukrinform, 2015). However, as Russia's overt invasion, anxiously anticipated by the

Ukrainian authorities, did not happen and the ceasefire that was negotiated in February 2015 continued to hold, albeit imperfectly, Donbas slipped down the list of Brussels' and Washington's priorities. Faced with the continuing civil war in Syria, the advance of the Islamic State and the unprecedented refugee crisis in Europe, the Ukrainian authorities struggled to put its conflict back on the international agenda. As former President Yushchenko lamented in the Ukrainian weekly *Dzerkalo tizhnya*, 'the world is getting tired of Ukraine's question. We are not even the second or third on the agenda; Ukraine is being cast away as an annoying fly' (*Dzerkalo tizhnya*, 20 May 2015).

Kyiv's inability to keep the conflict in Donbas at the top of the international agenda made it more difficult for the Ukrainian authorities to pursue their third goal of contesting unfavourable interpretations of the Minsk Agreements. The framework of triangular diplomacy is particularly helpful in explaining Ukraine's dilemmas in relation to the Minsk process. Although seeing both the EU and the US as crucial in resolving the crisis, as we shall explore below, Kyiv hoped that Washington would be more willing to apply heavier pressure on Russia. This, in turn, would allow Ukraine to secure a more advantageous deal. Moreover, many in Ukraine considered Washington's formal participation in the diplomatic process as a necessary condition for the implementation of any agreements. Both Ukraine's first President Leonid Kravchuk and former Minister of the European Integration Oleh Rybachuk, for example, argued that the Minsk Agreements would never work without the US's signature (UkrMedia, 2015). Washington's absence at the negotiation table meant that Kyiv had to change its strategy.

Unable to oppose the implementation of the agreements as such, Kyiv sought to demonstrate that their implementation was impeded by Russia-backed separatists (and by extension by Moscow) rather than by Ukraine. As mentioned earlier, Kyiv was particularly

concerned with a potential negative effect of allowing the uncontrolled provinces of Donetsk and Luhansk *oblasts* to hold local elections before their full disarmament. Since the issue of elections was an important part of the Minsk Agreements, Kyiv could not oppose the elections in principle, but it aimed to demonstrate that Donetsk and Luhansk *oblasts* (and Russia) had not created the necessary conditions for legitimate elections. The then Prime Minister Yatsenyuk, for example, argued that it was impossible to hold free and fair elections which would comply with the Ukrainian laws and meet the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) standards 'under the barrel of the Russian gun' (*The Financial Times*, 25 May 2015).

Donetsk and Luhansk's decisions to hold their own elections in October and November 2015 seemed to support Ukraine's argument that separatist leaders (and Russia) did not fulfil their part of the Minsk Agreement. Predictably, the thorny issue of elections dominated the negotiations at the Paris summit of the 'Normandy Four' in October 2015 where the leaders of Germany, France, Ukraine and Russia agreed that the elections should be postponed until 2016. On the surface, this could be interpreted as Kyiv's victory. Postponing the elections meant that Ukraine should have sufficient time to pass a special law on elections in Donbas, which would allow the elections to comply with the Ukrainian legislation. Yet, Ukrainian elites, including many members of the Ukrainian parliament and especially those at the far-right end of Ukraine's political spectrum, viewed it as yet another compromise that demonstrated Kyiv's inability to defend Ukraine's interests. They feared that Donetsk and Luhansk's compliance with the Ukrainian laws would be superficial at best, and that elections would simply transform the conflict from an international problem into Ukraine's domestic problem (Rakhmanin, 2015). At the same time, the way in which the issue of elections was resolved at the negotiations in Paris contributed to an impression, held by many in Ukraine, that both the EU and the US were willing to sacrifice

Ukraine's interests (see Sidorenko 2015). Although the latter was absent from the negotiation table, many in Ukraine viewed Washington as unwilling to exercise the leadership they expected.

Looking at the EU and the US: Whose interests?

Western response to the crisis, as it was perceived in Ukraine, had a major impact on the way in which the Ukrainian authorities, elites and public interpreted the EU's and US's actorness in international politics. President Poroshenko (2015b) summarised the opinion of many in Ukraine when he referred to the crisis as 'a test for the Europeans – a test for solidarity, a test for unity, a test for freedom and democracy, adherence to common values and principles'. Did the 'Europeans' and the West more broadly, in the view of the Ukrainians, pass this test? The Ukrainian authorities, constrained by the need to maintain Brussels' and Washington's support at all cost, were rather cautious in their assessment. Yet, even Ukraine's President admitted that the Western response was not as quick or resolute as Kyiv had hoped. Poroshenko (2015b) complained that the '[i]llegal annexation by Russia of the Crimea without immediate strong response from the international community encouraged Kremlin to go further'. On another occasion, he spoke about 'an attempt to appease the aggressor' (Poroshenko, 2015a).

Compared to the official stance, Ukrainian elites were significantly more critical. To use Poroshenko's metaphor of Ukraine fighting on two fronts, the West was seen as not doing enough to help Kyiv on both of them. Its financial assistance was perceived as inadequate relative to the extent of Ukraine's economic crisis. Former President Yushchenko, for example, argued that Ukraine needed 'tens of billions of US dollars' and that 'the world d[id] not seem to understand what [was] happening in the east of Europe' (*Dzerkalo tizhnya*, 20 May 2015). Western support on the other front was seen as equally limited. After the Paris summit of the 'Normandy Four' in

October 2015, the influential *Dzerkalo tizhnya* called for abandoning any illusions about the intensions of the West: 'the West is not concerned with bringing peace to Donbas' wrote its Deputy Editor-in-Chief Sergiy Rakhmanin (2015).

The growing scepticism was especially noticeable with respect to Brussels. Having interpreted the crisis as stemming from Ukraine's pro-European choice, many in Ukraine increasingly viewed the EU as failing to provide an adequate response. Firstly, as seen from Ukraine, the EU could succeed in influencing Russia's behaviour only if its member states agreed on their common stance in relation to Russia and Ukraine. President Poroshenko (2015g) underscored this need for solidarity when he argued that 'Ukraine needs Europe and the West to stay united, the same united as it was in Minsk'. This unity seemed possible in the immediate aftermath of the tragedy of the flight MH17. Yet, as seen from Kyiv, it could be significantly stronger. Secondly (and related to the first factor), in the view of Ukrainian elites, any attempt at solidarity was fundamentally difficult due to the varying vulnerability of EU member states to Russia's influence. Presidential Advisor and Ukraine's representative in the Working Group of the Trilateral Contact Group Vladimir Gorbulin (2015a), for example, pointed at several EU members as being particularly reluctant to contribute to the pressure on Moscow because of their economic links with Russia. He compared the infrastructure of Russia's influence across the EU to 'Stalin's Comintern [Communist International] of the 1930-40s' in its ability to exert influence on 'policies of individual member states and the EU as a whole' (Gorbulin, 2015a).

The increasing prominence of such views in Ukraine can be further illustrated by a project that was launched by the influential weekly *Dzerkalo tizhnya* in June 2015. With a telling title 'The Abduction of Europe', it included a series of extended articles on individual EU member states that investigated the extent of their economic, political and cultural links with Russia. The

introductory article urged the Ukrainian readers to develop an 'understanding of what was behind the attitudes of individual EU members towards the events in Ukraine and behind their assessment of Russia's actions against our country' (*Dzerkalo tizhnya*, 2015b). The article on Germany, for example, emphasised that Berlin's interests 'were not always similar to Ukraine's interests', which had important implications for Germany's position as part of the 'Normandy Four' negotiations (Kravchenko, 2015). With its pronounced dependence on Russia's energy supplies, Germany was seen as vulnerable to pro-Russian lobbying undertaken by energy companies and other German businesses that had a stake in the Russian market (see Stulberg, this volume). Contrary to the widely-spread expectations in Ukraine that Germany would not be able to adopt a sufficiently tough stance towards Moscow, Berlin's position proved crucial in imposing a sanctions regime. However, in the view of *Dzerkalo tizhnya*, Germany's key objective in the negotiation process was fundamentally different from that of Ukraine as Berlin 'aimed at freezing the conflict' in Donbas (Kravchenko, 2015).

Thirdly, as seen from Kyiv, the EU – both at the level of Brussels and individual members – was torn between 'a selfish desire to normalise relations with Russia' and a need to maintain its 'normative position' in response to Russia's annexation of Crimea and its involvement in Donbas (Gorbulin, 2015a). These seemingly inconsistent impulses, as interpreted by Ukrainian commentators, meant that the EU would be likely to settle for a minimalist interpretation of the Minsk agreements, such as 'an imitation of elections' in the uncontrolled provinces of Donetsk and Luhansk *oblasts* (Rakhmanin, 2015). To continue with this logic, this would allow EU members to save their face in normative terms while at the same time lifting their sanctions against Russia and returning to business as usual. It was precisely this rationale that, as seen from Kyiv, explained why the EU was putting increasingly more pressure on Ukraine to fulfil its part of the

Minsk Agreements even though the implementation of the agreements by the other side of the conflict remained unsatisfactory (Gorbulin, 2015a).

As a result, Ukrainian elites were increasingly sceptical of the EU's diplomatic role in the resolution of the crisis. In particular, they feared that Germany and France as key actors in the 'Normandy Four' format were unlikely to disregard their own interests related to cooperation with Russia. This understanding of the EU's position led some members of the Ukrainian elite to advocate an extension of the negotiation format to Washington, with a hope that the US would be more supportive of Kyiv's interests (see Yushchenko in *Dzerkalo tizhnya*, 20 May 2015). The significance of Washington's formal absence at the negotiation table was also noted by Russian commentators. According to a Russian expert with close ties to the Kremlin, 'without giving the Americans a formal status in the [negotiation] process, Poroshenko will not succeed in pushing the Europeans to confront Putin' (Chesnakov in Yusin, 2015). However, the actual position of the US was far from clear. As the hostilities in eastern Ukraine noticeably deescalated by the time of the 'Normandy Four' Summit in October 2015, it appeared that, even if included in the negotiation process, the US would not necessarily have sided with Kyiv. As suggested by a member of the Ukrainian delegation, Washington, similarly to Berlin, seemed interested in freezing the conflict (Rakhmanin, 2015).

The domestic consequences of diplomatic disappointment

The widely-shared dissatisfaction with the outcomes of the US and EU's triangular diplomacy had a profound impact on Ukraine's domestic politics. Kyiv's adherence to the Minsk Agreements was fiercely criticised by those, especially in the far right, who interpreted them as unreasonable compromise. The then Prime Minister Yatsenyuk admitted that 'not everyone [was] happy with

the Minsk deal' and that the president and the government had 'already paid a huge political price' (*The Financial Times*, 20 March 2015, p. 3). Kyiv's steps to begin the implementation of the political part of the Minsk Agreements later in 2015 attracted criticism not only from the opposition, but even from within the ruling coalition. With the tensions in the society running high, the task of changing the Ukrainian constitution in order to meet the objectives specified in the Minsk Agreements, proved difficult.

The issue of decentralisation was especially divisive. Although Poroshenko's proposal envisaged only limited decentralisation that did not go as far as Moscow's preference for a federal Ukraine, it came under attack by opponents of decentralisation. On 31 August 2015, as the Ukrainian Parliament was voting for the proposed constitutional amendments, Kyiv saw another wave of violent street protests that resulted in several deaths. The pro-European coalition in Verkhovna Rada barely survived the voting as three of the five coalition parties (Self-Reliance, Fatherland and the Radical party) rejected the proposed amendments. Moreover, one of these parties – the Radical Party – left the coalition altogether (Lutsevych, 2015). The apparent division among the pro-European parties was further exacerbated after the Paris Summit in October 2015. Kyiv's commitment to pass a special law on local elections in Donbas, with the prospect of elections taking place in early 2016, received varying support by the coalition members. Finally, Self-Reliance and Fatherland left the parliamentary coalition in February 2016. It took the Petro Poroshenko Bloc and People's Front nearly two months to find the necessary support (votes of their former opponents) in the parliament to form a new government with the new Prime Minister Volodymyr Hroisman, who had chaired the parliament since November 2014. Thus, the fragility of elite consensus presented a serious problem for Ukraine's ability to maintain its pro-European course.

At the level of public opinion the pro-European choice was also rather fragile. On the one hand, Russia's annexation of Crimea and its interference in Donbas fuelled public support for Ukraine's accession to NATO. As President Poroshenko (2015c) emphasised in his annual message to the Parliament in June 2015, 'the number of people supporting the idea of joining NATO exceed[ed] the number of opponents for the first time in Ukraine'. Indeed, according to a survey conducted by the Kyiv-based Razumkov Centre in July 2015, as many as 41.9% of respondents expressed their intention to vote for NATO membership in a hypothetical referendum compared to 35.8% of those who would vote against. On the other hand, there still remained significant regional differences, with respondents in western Ukraine being significantly more likely to vote in favour (71.4% of respondents). The lowest level of support was in Kyiv-controlled parts of Donbas at 16.3%, while the separatist-controlled Donbas was not included in the survey (Razumkov, 2015c). More importantly, Ukrainians were increasingly sceptical of the Minsk Agreements and their potential to contribute to conflict resolution. Compared to March 2015, when 34% of respondents across Ukraine interpreted the results of the Minsk Agreements for the situation in Donbas as positive, by August 2015 this number dropped to as low as 11.9% (Razumkov Centre, 2015a). This dramatic decline in the positive assessment of the Minsk Agreements presented a serious problem for the Ukrainian authorities whose pro-European course in both domestic and foreign policies was closely linked to their participation in the Minsk process.

Conclusions

Following Russia's annexation of Crimea in March 2014, the Ukrainian authorities and political elites consistently viewed Brussels' and Washington's support as absolutely crucial for Kyiv's ability to resolve the crisis. The Military Doctrine of Ukraine, signed by President Poroshenko in

September 2015, described the external conditions as 'not conducive to the settlement of the armed conflict in Eastern Ukraine'. It also emphasized the importance of the support by the US and members of the EU and NATO ('Voenna doktrina, 2015). However, as the crisis and the associated diplomatic process unfolded, Kyiv saw Washington's and especially Brussels' contribution to the resolution of the crisis as insufficient. Although Ukraine's efforts to mobilise international support for maintaining pressure on Russia through sanctions brought some results, Ukrainians were increasingly apprehensive of Russia's influence on individual EU members, including on the key parties of the 'Normandy Four' Germany and France, due to the extent of their economic inter-dependence with Russia. As argued by Wilson (2014: 1), Ukrainians 'ended up convinced that they had sacrificed blood for 'European values', while EU states would not sacrifice treasure for the same cause'.

The triangular framework adopted in this paper helps us to appreciate the immense complexity of Kyiv's dilemma. Caught in conflict with a significantly stronger neighbour, Ukraine attempted to influence Russia's behaviour indirectly – by appealing to Brussels and Washington for their symbolic, diplomatic and material support. While Kyiv largely succeeded in communicating its narrative of the crisis (although this narrative was increasingly undermined by the continuing turmoil of Ukraine's domestic politics), it struggled to convert the discursive success into a diplomatic one. Seeing the EU and the US as playing a crucial role in the resolution of the conflict, Ukraine could not but remain publicly committed to the Minsk Agreements. However, Ukrainian elites and public were increasingly sceptical of the Agreements as they doubted that Russia-backed separatists would implement their part of the deal. As the elite and public support for Kyiv's commitment to the political part of the Minsk Agreements, particularly the issues of decentralisation and local elections in separatist-controlled Donetsk and Luhansk

eroded, the Ukrainian authorities found themselves in a very difficult diplomatic position. Their international legitimacy depended on Kyiv's continuing commitment to the Minsk process. Yet their domestic legitimacy was undermined by this commitment.

About the authors

Valentina Feklyunina is a Senior Lecturer in Politics at the School of Geography, Politics, and Sociology at Newcastle University.

Valentyna Romanova is a Senior Researcher, Institute for Strategic Studies "New Ukraine", Kyiv.

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