



institute
of world
policy

www.iwp.org.ua
20/8 Instytutska Vul., Kyiv 01021, Ukraine
380 44 253 55 57 / 253 53 58

Policy Brief

№1

Institute of World Policy, 2015

The Approaches on the Russian-Ukrainian Conflict The attitudes of France, Italy and Spain*

Leonid Litra, Kyiv**

Executive summary

Russia's aggression following the Euromaidan and its results brought about difficult times for Ukraine in terms of its territorial integrity and economy, but also a broad consensus — confirmed by parliamentary election results — that Ukraine's future development path is that of European integration. However, in contrast to broader Ukrainian society, some EU countries have adopted an ambiguous attitude towards the events and results of the “revolution of dignity” that has happened in Ukraine. The misunderstanding — if not ignorance — of certain Ukrainian realities, combined with other existent disputes among the key actors in European politics, has created an ambiguous approach on the Ukrainian revolution and therefore tacit agreement with the “legitimacy” of Russia's intervention. The countries with an ambivalent attitude on the Russian-Ukrainian conflict have conventionally been called “Russia's understanders”; among others, France, Italy and Spain are countries suspected of indulgence toward Russia's behaviour in Ukraine. The position of Madrid, Paris and Rome is very important for a coherent EU policy towards Russia, and therefore it is of paramount importance to understand the extent to which these suspicions can be confirmed and how to change these attitudes.

Introduction

When looking from Kyiv to south-western Europe, based solely on official statements, one would cautiously name France, Italy and Spain as true friends of Ukraine. The reasons to question this friendship, however, emanate from various sources and events that have happened over the last year. In the case of Italy, doubts appeared with the allegations that Rome is opposed to

* This paper was produced as part of the Ilko Kucheriv Democracy Fellowship Programme, a project of the Policy Association for an Open Society (PASOS). The project is made possible with support from the National Endowment for Democracy.

** The author would like to thank Carmen Claudín for coordination, interview and review of the text and Nathalie Tocci, Andrey Makarychev, Tatiana Kastoueva-Jean, Nicu Popescu, Marco di Liddio, Eleonora Trivigno and Olena Nazarenko for interviews.

In order to understand the causes of some attitudes coming out of Madrid, Paris and Rome, one must invert the roles and look from a different angle, which broadly suggests the existence of four important dimensions — historical legacies, legitimate interests, anti-Americanism and finances — that influence the above countries' narratives on Ukraine.

sanctions against Russia over Ukraine¹. With regards to France, the Mistral deal seems to be the issue generating a lot of anger in Kyiv and beyond². Meanwhile on the part of Spain, an initial unwillingness to punish Russia³ and the fighting of several Spanish citizens on the side of the Russian-backed rebels⁴ have come to Ukraine's attention. But in order to understand the causes of some attitudes coming out of Madrid, Paris and Rome, one must invert the roles and look from a different angle, which broadly suggests the existence of four important dimensions — historical legacies, legitimate interests, anti-Americanism and finances — that influence the above countries' narratives on Ukraine.

The origins of a friendly policy towards Russia

Historical legacies

Historical ties have traditionally played an important role in developing the relationship between Europe and Moscow. Unlike Ukraine, which used to be incorporated into the Soviet Union, Russia, as the center of the Soviet empire, was for decades the only interlocutor in the region. Even after the collapse of the Soviet Union, very few considered the other former Soviet republics to be actual independent states, despite several of those countries previously having had their own statehood, not to mention Kievan Rus — the proto-state of Ukraine — having existed long before Russia itself.

The traditional relations between the Italian Savoia royal family and the Romanov imperial family cemented a good cooperative relationship between the two countries, which was later continued by the special relationship between the USSR and the Italian Communist Party, at that time the biggest communist party in Europe. For Spain, which doesn't have a historical precedent of conflict with Russia, the living memory of Russia's support for the legitimate government against the Franco regime provides an argument for friendly relations with Moscow. Compared to Rome and Madrid, Paris has an especially rich history of relations with Moscow, including a long history of alliances over the last several centuries. In the recent past, the friendship between Vladimir Putin and Silvio Berlusconi, as well as Nicolas Sarkozy and King Juan Carlos' sympathy towards him, have also influenced those governments to perceive the Kremlin in a quite different manner than Russia's neighbours.

¹ Italy accused of blocking tougher sanctions on Russia, July 13, 2014, <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/ad743cae-0a8a-11e4-be06-00144feabdc0.html#axzz3Kf3nt8XN>

² France defends sale of Mistral assault ships to Russia, June 6, 2014, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-27729578>

³ Divisions in Europe on sanctions mean Russia need not change Ukraine aims, April 28, 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/apr/28/divisions-europe-sanctions-russia-ukraine-vladimir-putin>

⁴ Spanish civil war nostalgics join fight alongside Ukrainian rebels, August 8, 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/08/08/us-ukraine-crisis-spaniards-idUSKBN0G81VX20140808>

THE APPROACHES ON THE RUSSIAN-UKRAINIAN CONFLICT

THE ATTITUDES OF FRANCE, ITALY AND SPAIN

Beyond that, geography has played an important role in establishing the current state of relations, due to the lack of competition in projecting interests over different regions and especially over Eastern Europe. Thus, the historical legacy of Russia's relations with Italy, Spain and France is one compelling explanation for the inability of these countries to look at the new independent states as something more than a sometimes annoying and historically accidental appendix of Russia.

Legitimate interests

Russia's overwhelming control of the former Soviet republics over the last two centuries fed the perception of its owning “legitimate interests” in those regions, and succeeded in convincing many Western European capitals of the same. France has traditionally had geopolitical priorities based in southern Europe, the countries of the Maghreb, Africa and the Middle East, towards which its main diplomatic power and strategic planning is concentrated.

Spain — after a period of isolation during the Francoist period — always focused on Latin America and Northern Africa, while Italy has had a more modest foreign policy with interests concentrated in the Mediterranean and Middle East. In addition, none of these three European countries has perceived a direct or significant threat to its interests, national security or territorial integrity from Russia. Therefore, the lack of interests and connections with the former Soviet territories on the part of Paris, Madrid and Rome has led to a paucity or even absence of knowledge on the region. This is true even in the case of France, in spite of its long tradition of Russian scholarship.

None of these three European countries has perceived a direct or significant threat to its interests, national security or territorial integrity from Russia.

Moreover, events in former Soviet countries — with the exception of the Baltic States and Madrid's relative intimacy with Kazakhstan — are typically analysed through the Russian prism. Consequently, in Paris, Madrid and Rome there is a general endorsement of Russia's perception of the former Soviet space as its rightful sphere of influence. The illegal annexation of Crimea, which allegedly also falls under this “legitimate interest”, was broadly accepted in these countries through the Kremlin's argument that Russians have always been living there, overriding the fact that Crimean inhabitants were citizens of Ukraine and largely ignoring that, in Ukraine, to be a Russian speaker does not equate to being pro-Moscow. It is not that the political establishment in these three EU countries supported annexation, especially considering the negative reaction from Madrid for domestic reasons (as in the case of Kosovo), nor is it a question of open support. Rather, it is about approval by default. This perception of “legitimate interests” has been strengthened by the argument of an alleged informal agreement between the West and Mikhail Gorbachev on the non-enlargement of NATO in Eastern Europe; thus, with NATO's expansion to the Russian border, this “promise” was broken.

The narrative of the NATO non-enlargement promise and the appeal to the 1990 Paris Charter are regularly recalled by the Russian leadership — and often echoed in the EU — in order to portray the West's inability to honour its promises and justify Russia's more assertive policy in the region, as if a legal document or agreement had been signed and infringed. But the

declassified American, German and Soviet records do not provide evidence of Putin's narrative⁵, and Gorbachev has confirmed that no promise was broken because no promise was given⁶. This is not to mention the fact that Russia never asked itself why Eastern European countries were willing to join NATO in the first place. In the end, one has to consider that the small states possess their own will, which does not converge with Russia's "legitimate interest". The most recent examples of the acceptance of the Russian "legitimate interest" doctrine in Ukraine were the non-bloc status that Ukraine adopted in 2010 and the lease of the Sevastopol port to the Russian Black Sea fleet. A neutral Ukraine for Russia means a Ukraine de facto aligned with Moscow, and Ukraine's non-bloc policy bought time for Russia to annex Crimea. The active phase of this process started on 20 February 2014, while Viktor Yanukovich was still in office, but preparations started in 2004.⁷

Anti-Americanism

Ukraine's discovery by the societies of Italy, Spain and France is recent; it started partially with the Orange Revolution and deepened with the Russian-Ukrainian war. The same process was initiated in regards to Georgia in 2008 on the occasion of the Russian-Georgian war, but it did not last because of the relatively short military operations, the size of the country and its location. Considering the limited knowledge about former Soviet countries in these three EU states, the subject of Ukraine doesn't arise as a serious issue of internal politics. Therefore is not able to influence the public debate as much as an issue related to Algeria would in France, or the issue of a Latin American country would in Spain. There is, however, a strong anti-American sentiment in these countries generated by different reasons. In Italy and France, the strong leftist tradition and newer far-right political parties such as the Northern League and the National Front create a significant anti-American opinion, while in Spain, for instance, the loss of Cuba to the US in the 19th century is still well remembered.

Aside from the anti-Americanism nurtured by messengers loyal to Russia in these countries, the strong anti-American feeling has at its basis a desire to *get rid of US unipolarity and influence and put an end to the disorder* caused by the US. The debate has substance, especially in light of US operations in Iraq; however, it has been artificially coupled with the issue of Ukraine. It is quite often that, due to Russia's anti-American narrative, opposition to the US becomes associated with supporting Russia's actions. The logic of accepting Russia's behaviour because it is opposed to the US, to the detriment of Ukraine, is difficult to understand. The belief that "the enemy of my enemy is my friend" is evident, but what it shows is the inability of some Western European elites to view Euromaidan as a genuinely independent response on the part of Ukrainian society. Moreover, along with anti-Americanism, the success of far-right and leftist parties can also be explained by Euro-scepticism, ultra-conservative attitudes (from far-right parties) and a lack of leadership by politicians against the strong and sharp leadership of Putin.

⁵ Steven Pifer, Did NATO Promise Not to Enlarge? Gorbachev Says "No", Brookings, 6 November 2014, <http://www.brookings.edu/blogs/up-front/posts/2014/11/06-nato-no-promise-enlarge-gorbachev-pifer>

⁶ Mikhail Gorbachev: I am against all walls, Russia Beyond the Headlines, 16 October 2014, http://rbth.co.uk/international/2014/10/16/mikhail_gorbachev_i_am_against_all_walls_40673.html

⁷ "Спікер" парламенту Севастополя Чалий зізнався у підготовці анексії Криму ще з 2004 року, 19 december 2014, <http://www.unian.ua/politics/1023718-spiker-parlamentu-sevastopolya-chaliy-ziznavsya-u-pidgotovtsi-aneksiji-krimu-sche-z-2004-roku.html>

THE APPROACHES ON THE RUSSIAN-UKRAINIAN CONFLICT

THE ATTITUDES OF FRANCE, ITALY AND SPAIN

European far-right parties' sympathy for Putin's conservative message (anti-gay, nationalism, etc.) and the leftist parties' fascination with the anti-American narrative and the centrality and superiority of their state is basically creating a supportive base of approval for Russia's policies, even if not directly connected with Ukraine.

Finances

The money issue is very important for the EU countries, which are also suffering from the sanctions imposed on Russia. Although the losses are difficult to calculate, preliminary estimates are in the billions of euros, with the heaviest burden falling on Germany in absolute terms and on Lithuania in per capita terms. Therefore, the desire of some states in the EU to agree on terms for lifting the sanctions is understandable. France and Italy (and, to a lesser extent, Spain) are important economic partners for Russia and vice versa. In addition, special commercial arrangements are influencing the debate. The French agreement to sell two Mistral class ships to Russia is a profitable business deal, but at the same time has caused anxiety for Ukraine and some NATO allies, particularly the US. The French leadership has postponed the delivery of the first Mistral, and it is not clear whether this step could lead to the cancellation of the contract and subsequent sale to some other state such as Canada. However, for now, the prospects of cancellation seem unlikely.⁸ Avoiding the moral side of the argument, the motivation to honour the contract is mostly about money, but not necessarily Russian money. A still-unsigned contract with India to sell 126 Rafale fighter jets worth up to \$20 billion to the Indian Air Force, and potential participation in the modernisation of the Polish army (worth about \$45 billion), are serious issues to be considered as these could trigger unpredicted effects.⁹

Moreover, the European Union Code of Conduct on Arms Exports reads that “*Member States will not issue an export license if there is a clear risk that the intended recipient would use the proposed export aggressively against another country or to assert by force a territorial claim*”¹⁰. The Russian aggression in Ukraine is precisely the kind of risk described above. Of course, the argument that Mistral ships are transport ships is interesting, but it is very unlikely that Russia will use these for transporting people, as clearly confirmed by Admiral Vladimir Vysotsky, who said that “had Russia possessed such warships in 2008, it would have won its war against Georgia in 40 minutes instead of 26 hours”.¹¹ Another case that is not yet publicly confirmed is that, in recent months, Gazprom offered Italy a 10% discount on gas supplies and cancelled the principle of “take or pay”.¹²

Business with Russia has yet another dimension. The links between Russia and such political parties as the National Front in France, Forza Italia and the Northern League in Italy and the United Left and “Podemos” (“We can”) in Spain are also playing an important role, given the increasing influence of these parties in their home countries and their ability to lobby for Russian interests. The recent scandal

⁸ Jim Dorschner, A Mistral for Canada, 19 September 2014, <http://news.usni.org/2014/09/19/opinion-mistral-canada>

⁹ Dimitri Halby, Sale of Mistral ships to Putin May Cost France €11.3 Billion, 21 August 2014, <http://one-europe.info/by-selling-mistral-warships-to-putin-france-will-gain-12-billion-but-may-lose-up-to-113-billion>

¹⁰ European Union Code of Conduct on Arms Exports, <http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cmsUpload/08675r2en8.pdf>

¹¹ Mistral Blows, The Economist, 17 May 2014, <http://www.economist.com/news/europe/21602291-why-france-insists-going-ahead-selling-warships-russia-mistral-blows>

¹² Alyona Getmanchuk, Про що питають італійці? [What Italians ask?], <http://blogs.pravda.com.ua/authors/hetmanchuk/5497f9ae7c4c8/>

of the National Front borrowing \$11 million from the First Czech Russian bank¹³ and the allegations that Salvini's Northern League might have also borrowed Russian money are raising questions about these parties' aims. In addition, concerns are being raised about some of the media writing on the Russia-Ukraine war. Despite the fact that in France, Spain and Italy experts report relatively impartial information on Ukraine, quite often leading newspapers, especially in Italy, take information mainly from such Russian news agencies as TASS and RIA Novosti, which follow the Kremlin line. On top of this, the Western media's usual rule to provide at least two different opinions often results in offering a "second" one which has little in common with what is happening on the ground. Overall, suspicious media outlets and experts exist in limited amounts, but because they promote a very alternative view, they stand out against the background of the rest of the media.

Questions on Ukraine

Public opinion in Spain, Italy and France offers a credit of sympathy to Ukraine, in spite of better knowledge of Russia. The latest Transatlantic Trends Survey¹⁴ shows that France, Italy and Spain are in favour of providing economic and political support to Ukraine even if it causes conflict with Russia (France 58% Yes vs. 38% No; Italy 52% vs. 39% and Spain 48% vs. 43%). Regardless of this positive attitude on Ukraine, public opinion in the three EU countries posed two important questions about Ukraine's events: the procedure of ousting Yanukovych and the far-right parties/movements.

It may seem that Yanukovych was removed in violation of the law, but facts do not support this view. The parliament "passed a resolution that established that Yanukovych had removed himself from fulfilling his constitutional duties. The resolution stated that due to the fact that Yanukovych had unconstitutionally stopped fulfilling his presidential duties, the Rada was calling early presidential elections as is their right under Article 85/7"¹⁵. There is no regulation in Ukraine that would prohibit the parliament from adopting such a resolution. Furthermore, the fact that Yanukovych fled the country (to Russia) and the Kremlin started the operation of annexing Crimea before Yanukovych was legally removed raises more questions than the procedure passed in the Rada.

Far-right parties do exist in Ukraine; however, their influence is minor, which is not to say nonexistent. The Right Sector, which was heavily used by Russia to project its propaganda-type information abroad, gained only 1.8% in the parliamentary elections and did not get into the parliament (falling below the 5% threshold). Compared to the results of the National Front in France or other similar parties in the EU, the performance of the Right Sector is insignificant. Failure to enter the parliament is also the case of the Svoboda party, that had a more moderate message, and the Communist party, for the first time since the implosion of the Soviet Union.

¹³ French Far-Right Party Took Loan From Russian Bank, Radio Free Europe, 24 November 2014, <http://www.rferl.org/content/russia-france-national-front-loan-le-pen/26707339.html>

¹⁴ Transatlantic Trends 2014, German Marshal Fund of the United States, <http://trends.gmfus.org/transatlantic-trends/>

¹⁵ Maria Popova, Was Yanukovych removal constitutional?, PONARS, <http://www.ponarseurasia.org/article/was-yanukovych's-removal-constitutional>

Conclusions

The revolution of dignity in Ukraine, the subsequent illegal annexation of Crimea by the Kremlin and the Russia-Ukraine war have naturally created dividing lines throughout the world. The situation these days is that all countries, especially in the EU, need to take sides. Unfortunately, some countries began to understand the seriousness of the events in Ukraine only after such dramatic developments as the downing of the MH17 flight.

The challenge for the EU — for Spain, France and Italy, not to mention Germany — is to work on settling the conflict and rolling back Russian aggression. The task is not an easy one, given the financial dimension in times of crisis, but the current conflict touches the very base of EU principles. Therefore, the most important thing that Rome, Paris and Madrid could do to help Ukraine is to keep its policy within the framework agreed upon in Brussels. Second, they should have a joint assessment of and vision for what must happen for sanctions to be lifted. Is cease-fire enough, or is full implementation of the Minsk agreement, including the effective control of Ukrainian constitutional authorities on Ukraine's border with Russia, required? Third, Ukraine desperately needs help from the EU MS. It is not only about financial support, it is about assistance in implementing reforms and putting pressure on Ukrainian authorities to fight corruption and reform the justice sector. Fourth, the three countries should consider reputational sanctions for Russian players supporting the aggressive behaviour of Putin. An example could be the withdrawal of the Chevalier of the Legion d'Honneur order from Gennady Timchenko, who was awarded with it in 2013.

In its turn, Ukraine must boost its separate communications, both formal and informal, with Rome, Paris and Madrid in areas of common interest. Furthermore, Kyiv should intelligently challenge Paris, Rome and Madrid; for instance, by considering involving those three countries in the modernisation of its army through providing contracts to companies originating from those countries, as well as extension of participation in NATO trust funds.

Ukraine's fight is important for the other former Soviet countries, but also for stability at the border of the EU. The path of Ukraine should be viewed much more broadly, much like the French Revolution, which went through long and painful reforms and blurry times in order to modernise. The chance for success for Ukraine is there, and if accomplished, will represent a positive step for the entire Eastern Partnership and beyond, including Russia.