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Russian Aggression and Ukrainian Accession: Lessons from History

By Nicholas Kaufmann

July 21, 2013

In the wake of the Cold War, the EU acted decisively and brought a group of fragile, newly-independent states into the European Community in a geopolitical gamble that paid off big. Now, as Ukraine finds itself between an increasingly menacing Russia and a lethargic Brussels, it is time to act once again.

Back in the day
When the Berlin wall fell under joyful cries in 1989 and the Iron Curtain that had for so long divided a continent was dramatically drawn back, the fate of the former-USSR countries was far from certain. Indeed, a frightening uncertainty gripped the East European states and many Western commentators were at best sceptical that countries having lived so long in the Soviet shadow could make the transition into liberal market-based democracies.

Indeed, none of the countries were ideal candidates for EU membership. Fears that the former Soviet states were too poor or too corrupt to join the Union haunted the Accession process at every step. Western leaders nevertheless saw a "historic opportunity", in the words of former European Commissioner for Enlargement Günter Verheugen, in the Accession of their Eastern neighbours and, in 2004 welcomed 10 new Member States into the Union in what would be its largest ever single expansion; a geopolitical gamble that has overwhelmingly paid off.

Far from being redrawn into the grasp of Mother Russia, the EU-10 have been able to carve themselves a new destiny and act as valuable allies to the Western world. Indeed, with much of Europe currently engulfed in economic crisis, it is the East that is driving the Union forward.

A new 'historic opportunity'
Now, nine years on, a similar challenge lies before us. This November, EU leaders will convene in the Lithuanian capital of Vilnius to discuss the future of another ex-USSR state, Ukraine, which has been seeking Association status with the EU, an important step towards membership, for the last four years.

Ukraine, a country roughly the size of France, directly borders an increasingly menacing Russia and daily faces mounting pressure from Putin to return under his fold. As a counterweight to the political heft the EU has been able to attain through cooperation, Russia has instated its own customs union along with Belarus and Kazakhstan, a union that former Secretary of State Hilary Clinton has referred to as a new Soviet Union.

So far, Ukraine's President Viktor Yanukovych has succeeded in keeping Ukraine free from Putin's grand designs despite increasing pressure from the Kremlin. Last January, Russia redoubled its attempts to bully Ukraine into signing the customs treaty by charging the country with exorbitant gas prices. Meanwhile, EU leaders have shown reluctance to include Ukraine in their Union because of concerns over the country's corruption levels and the imprisonment of former Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko.

While such factors are noteworthy, however, there is no reason that they should stand in the way of an Association Agreement. If the EU backs out now, there is no question that Ukraine will be pushed under Putin's thumb, in which case corruption will certainly increase. Closer links with the EU would at the very least place pressure on the Ukrainian government to implement judicial reforms and properly process allegations of human right violations. All in all, an Association Agreement would help the country along the rocky path towards democracy and away from the specter of Sovietism.