

POPULAR ASSESSMENTS OF UKRAINE'S RELATIONS WITH RUSSIA AND THE EUROPEAN UNION UNDER YANUKOVYCH

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Abstract: Ukraine finds itself in a constant tug of war between the European Union and Russia. This article looks at how the Ukrainian population views its main foreign partners. It finds that opinions are divided along regional and generational lines. Historical factors and the role of the media are key in explaining the content of Ukrainian opinion. Overall, the public would support President Viktor Yanukovich's declared intention to maintain good relations with both sides, though his tilt toward Russia seems to have increased the popularity of closer relations with the EU. Young people (including those in the east) favor ties with Europe, and this preference may ultimately affect Ukrainian foreign relations.

Since the end of the 1950's, scholars have frequently analyzed the role of images, representations and perceived relationships in international relations.¹ In the 1970's, some researchers showed renewed interest in public opinion and its impact on foreign policy,² but few have studied this

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¹ K. E. Boulding was one of the first scholars to study the role of national images in international relations. See Kenneth E. Boulding. 1959. "National Images and International Systems," in *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 3: 2 (June): 120-131. See also Robert Jervis. 1989. *The logic of Images in International Relations*. New York: Columbia University Press., 2nd ed. (1st ed. 1970).

² See Ole R. Holsti. 1992. "Public Opinion and Foreign Policy: Challenges to the Almond-Lippmann Consensus." *International Studies Quarterly* 36: 4 (December): 439-466.

matter in the case of the former Soviet Union. Research works have been hampered notably by the fact that the Soviet populations were largely isolated from the rest of the world. Heavy censorship limited their access to information on international issues and to foreign sources of information. Soviet citizens were unable to travel abroad, and travel within the Soviet Union was highly restricted. Contact between Soviet citizens and citizens of the countries of the Soviet bloc and countries of Western Europe and North America was therefore limited. On the whole, the Soviet citizens' representations of the world were significantly influenced by official Soviet propaganda. In this regard, the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991 represents a major turning point: the opening of borders, greater access to information, opportunities to travel abroad, and increased contact with foreigners (tourists, company managers, NGO representatives, journalists, etc.) are among the decisive factors that have contributed to change populations' relationship to the Other and perceptions of the world. 1991 marked the end of isolation and the progressive emergence of a public opinion on international affairs. Public attitudes on this topic are complex, sometimes volatile, and therefore difficult to measure. Nevertheless, it is worth trying to analyze it in the case of the post-Soviet countries.

Obviously, this article cannot be an exhaustive study of the issue, rather it has a more limited goal: it will focus on the case of Ukraine and on Ukrainian society's attitudes to the European Union and Russia since Viktor Yanukovich's election as president in 2010. Drawing on the results of opinion and sociological surveys carried out in Ukraine between 2009 and 2012 by several Ukrainian or foreign institutes or research centers,³ this article will provide a brief overview of the recent evolution of popular perceptions of Ukraine's relations with Russia and the European Union and of Ukraine's policy toward these two international partners. The first section of this article will show that the population remains deeply divided on foreign policy priorities and particularly on the optimal model of regional integration for Ukraine's future – the European Union or the Customs Union with Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan. The second section

³ This study is based on opinion surveys carried out between 2009 and 2012 by the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology; the O. Razumkov Ukrainian Centre for Economic and Political Studies (Kyiv); the Democratic Initiatives Foundation (Kyiv); the Research & Branding Group (Kyiv); the Sociological group "Rating" (Kyiv); the Public Opinion and Market research company Baltic Surveys/Gallup on behalf of the International Republican Institute (Washington, United States), and the Pew Research Center (Washington, United States). Among the above mentioned Ukrainian institutes, some are considered to be close to the current opposition forces (such as the Razumkov Center) while others are close to the ruling authorities (such as Research & Branding Group). However, and with regard to some issues (such as, for example, the image of Russia in Ukraine), the results of their respective opinion surveys show similar tendencies. This study is also based on interviews conducted in Ukraine by the author with Ukrainian researchers, experts, journalists and foreign diplomats in September-October 2012.

will analyze two of the key factors that may help to better understand why the population does not seem ready to make a clear choice between these two models of integration. It will show the effects that the burden of history and the role of the mass media have on the Ukrainian society's perceptions of the world and on the image of Ukraine's main international partners.

Ukrainian Society's Attitudes toward Russia and the European Union

After his election in February 2010, Viktor Yanukovich announced his intention to establish stable and strong relations with both Western and Russian partners of Ukraine. He advocated a "multivectoral" foreign policy which aimed to achieve balance between firm establishment in Europe with EU integration as a "strategic aim," and good neighborly relations with Russia.⁴

On March 1, 2010, just a few weeks after the election, Yanukovich travelled to Brussels on his first official trip abroad. Deemed by many as being pro-Russian and labeled "Moscow's man" since the Orange Revolution in 2004, the new president hoped to reassure his European partners, recalling that integration into the European Union was still Ukraine's main priority.

Despite this, his initial steps in terms of foreign policy revealed a different reality from the official discourse. During the first months of his tenure, dialogue and cooperation with Moscow were privileged and quickly grew in intensity. On April 21, 2010, Yanukovich signed the Kharkiv Agreement with his Russian counterpart Dmitri Medvedev, whereby Kyiv clinched a 30 percent reduction in the price of gas for the next ten years in exchange for a 25-year extension, until 2042, of Russia's rental of the Sevastopol naval base. This compromise led to a reduction in the diplomatic tension that had emerged on several occasions during the Viktor Yushchenko presidency with regard to the presence of the Russian Black Sea fleet in Crimea⁵. The conclusion of the Kharkiv Agreement also opened the way to increased cooperation in many areas: economic, cultural, religious, etc.⁶ The Russo-Ukrainian rapprochement which followed was facilitated by the fact that Kyiv aligned its position towards

⁴ See the transcript of the speech by V. Yanukovich in the report of the 12th session of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe on April 27, 2010, available on the PACE site: <http://assembly.coe.int/>

⁵ Cf. Emmanuelle Armandon. 2011. "La Crimée dans les relations ukraino-russes: une controverse du passé?" [Crimea in Relations between Ukraine and Russia: Controversy from the Past?], *Questions internationales*, no. 50 (July-August): 97-104.

⁶ Cf. Anne de Tinguy, Emmanuelle Armandon. 2010. "Ukraine : la présidence Ianoukovitch, retour en arrière ou nouvelle étape du processus de transition?" [Ukraine : the Yanukovich Presidency, a Retrograde Step or a New stage in the Transition Process ?], *Questions internationales*, no. 45 (September-October): 90-99.

that desired by Moscow with regard to most of the disputes that had been the cause of serious crisis between the two countries. The question of Ukraine's accession to NATO, which had been the source of great hostility in Russia, was no longer on the agenda; the partnership with the Atlantic Alliance continued, but the new law "On the Foundations of Ukraine's Domestic and Foreign Policy," adopted by the Ukrainian parliament in July 2010, stipulated Ukraine's non-aligned status.⁷ The Russian language was granted greater scope in the spheres of public life (administration, media, education) and the law "On the Principles of the State Language Policy," adopted in August 2012, further expanded Russian's legal status. Yanukovich also brought the historiographical quarrels that had emerged over the grand famine of the 1930's to an end: unlike his predecessor, who considered the Holodomor a genocide perpetrated against the Ukrainian people, the new president declared that it was "a tragedy that affected all populations who lived at that time in the Soviet Union."⁸

But three years after Yanukovich's rise to power and despite all the efforts being made by the Ukrainian authorities to re-establish better relations with Moscow, the Russian-Ukrainian rapprochement, which reached its apogee with the 2010 Kharkiv Agreement, is now clearly showing its limits. Bilateral relations remain tense: Kyiv's repeated refusal to join the Customs union formed by Russia, Kazakhstan and Belarus (in spite of the pressure exercised by Moscow), the Ukrainian authorities' insistence on Moscow's re-assessment of gas tariffs, and the constant problems over the delimitation of borders, are all sources of diplomatic tensions between the two states.

According to the results of various opinion surveys carried out after Yanukovich's election, the Ukrainian population's view of the evolution of bilateral relations with Russia is mainly negative. Ukrainian citizens tend to critically assess both Ukraine's policy toward Russia and Russia's attitude toward Ukraine.

It should be underlined that these negative tendencies do not concern the image of Russia itself or the Russian people. As in the past, the population of Ukraine demonstrates a positive attitude to Russia. According to the results of surveys regularly carried out by the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, overall, between 2010 and 2012, the percentage of individuals with good and very good attitudes to Russia varied between 80 percent and 93 percent.⁹ Russia is generally perceived as a "brother and friendly

⁷ The text of the law is available on the website of the Verkhovna Rada: <http://zakon4.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/2411-17>

⁸ See the speech by V. Yanukovich to the PACE on April 27, 2010.

⁹ Kyiv International Institute of Sociology. 2010. "Dynamika stavlennâ naseleonnâ Ukraïny i Rossii odne do odnogo" [Mutual perceptions of the Ukrainian and Russian population], Press release, March 2: <http://kiis.com.ua/?lang=rus&cat=reports&id=92> [in Ukrainian]. 2,029

country,” “a strategic partner” of Ukraine.¹⁰ In general, Ukrainians' attitudes toward Russia and Russians do not differ much: most Ukrainians do not feel any distrust or hostility towards the Russian people and, on the contrary, seem close to them. This perception of Russia and the Russian people is not new and continues to be regionally differentiated: in the Southern and Eastern regions, the Ukrainian population tends to have a better attitude toward Russia than in the Western and Central regions.

However, as paradoxical as it might seem, it is since Yanukovich's election that Ukrainians' attitude toward current and future cooperation with Russia have changed from positive to negative. Ironically, Yanukovich was the candidate during the 2010 presidential election campaign whom the population generally perceived to be most capable of restoring good relations with Russia.

The first, most serious changes that have occurred since 2010 deal with Ukrainians' assessment of the recent development of relations with Russia. According to various surveys carried out by Ukraine's Razumkov Center, the share of the population that considers relations with Russia unstable has continuously increased: from 50.9 percent at the end of 2009 to 64.5 percent in February 2012.¹¹ Another survey carried out by the Research & Branding Group Institute shows that more and more Ukrainians tend to describe Ukrainian-Russian interstate relationships as tense and bad (41 percent in February 2012), which was not the case two years earlier (13 percent in December 2010). Conversely, the share of the population that considers that relations with Russia are good in general continues to drop: from 58 percent in December 2010 to 17 percent in February 2012.¹²

The second change that can be observed since Yanukovich's election concerns the Ukrainian population's assessments of future relations with Russia. Noteworthy is the evolution of Ukrainians' perceptions of the desired level of cooperation between Ukraine and Russia. Asked about the main priority of Ukrainian foreign policy, around 52 percent of the respondents mentioned “relations with Russia” in November 2009, while

Ukrainian citizens were polled in every region of Ukraine in February 2012.

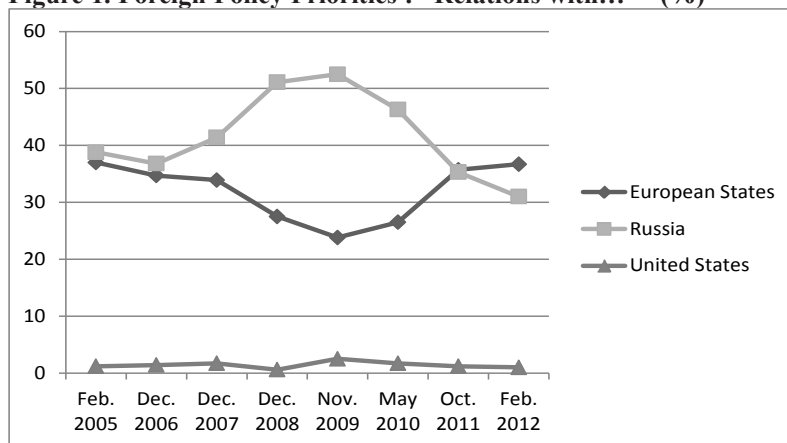
¹⁰ See the results of opinion surveys carried out in October-November 2011 and February 2012 by the Research & Branding Group: “Ukrainian-Russian relationships in expectation of refresh. Russia a week before the elections,” Press release, February 28, 2012: <http://www.rb.com.ua/eng/projects/uaru/8328/>. 2,079 Ukrainian citizens were polled in every region of Ukraine.

¹¹ In each of the polls conducted by the Razumkov Center, approximately 2,000 respondents were surveyed in all regions of Ukraine. See “Vidnosyny EC-Ukraina-Rosia: problemy i perspektyvy” [EU-Ukraine-Russia relations: problems and prospects], in *National Defence and Security*, n°4-5 (133-134), 2012.

¹² See Research & Branding Group: “Ukrainian-Russian relationships in expectation of refresh,” *op. cit.*

only 31 percent mentioned them in February 2012 (See Figure 1). The opinion of those polled about the authorities' policy toward Russia has also undergone serious change during the past two years. In Ukraine, as a whole, the share of the population that favors the deepening of relations with Russia has dropped from 78 percent in November 2009 to 50 percent in February 2012.

Figure 1. Foreign Policy Priorities : “Relations with...” (%)



Source: Razumkov Center

Several observations can be drawn about these critical perceptions of current and future relations with Russia. First, they can be interpreted as a reaction to the persistence of many unresolved issues in bilateral relations: conflict over the gas price, Russia's pressure on Ukraine to join Moscow's economic and political integration project, problems in delimiting maritime boundaries through the Sea of Azov and Kerch Strait, etc.

Second, public opinion seems to be more and more skeptical about the efficiency of Ukraine's policy toward Russia. In this regard, the 2010 Kharkiv agreement to exchange a gas price discount for a 25-year extension of the Russian Black Sea Fleet's Crimea base was not universally popular among the population. According to a survey carried out one year after the signing, the attitude of Ukrainian citizens toward these agreements was still mixed: 38 percent of those interviewed had, in general, a positive attitude toward the Kharkiv agreements, while 31 percent had the opposite opinion. In March 2011, 40 percent of Ukrainians considered the character of the agreements signed in Kharkiv mainly as concessions by Ukraine, while 30 percent of those interviewed considered them as mutually beneficial for both parties. Moreover the largest proportion of Ukrainians thought that it was Russia that gained (42 percent, compared to

33 percent in April 2010) from signing these agreements and not Ukraine (2 percent), while 35 percent claimed that both parties gained from the signed agreements (compared to 46 percent in April 2010).¹³ The idea that the concessions made by the Ukrainian authorities to Russia failed to yield the desired results tends to be widespread among the population.¹⁴ In other words, Ukrainian citizens have realized that these concessions did not change Russia's attitude toward Ukraine; Moscow still refuses to cut gas prices for Ukraine, and has increased pressure on Kyiv to make it join the Customs Union of Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan.

Third, these negative perceptions of current and future relations between Kyiv and Moscow confirm that the Ukrainian population's assessments of relations with Russia are much more complex than they might seem at first glance. The real sympathy that Ukrainian citizens express toward this country does not mean that they are ready to accept any kind of Russian behavior or policy toward Ukraine. If Russia is considered as a strategic partner or as a traditional ally, it does not mean that Ukrainian society supports all of Russia's positions or decisions. The population hardly accepts Russia's continued pressure on Ukraine to make further concessions if it wants additional gas price cuts. The population has a particularly negative attitude toward Russia's attempts to take control of the Ukrainian gas transportation system. In this regard, the results of a survey carried out in February-March 2012 are particularly noteworthy: when asked to answer the question "Do you think Ukraine should give away part or its entire gas transportation system to Russia if it would mean a reduction in the import price Ukraine pays for gas?" a vast majority of Ukrainians (74 percent) opposed this idea. For 84 percent of those polled in the Western regions, 74 percent - in the Center, 74 percent in the South, and 65 percent in the East, Ukraine should not give away its gas transportation system to Russia.¹⁵ Moscow's pressure intended to draw Ukraine into the Customs Union of Belarus, Kazakhstan and Russia did not produce massive support for the plan among the population. When asked in April 2012 about the optimal model of regional integration for Ukraine's future, only 36 percent mentioned the Customs Union with Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan (See Figure 2).

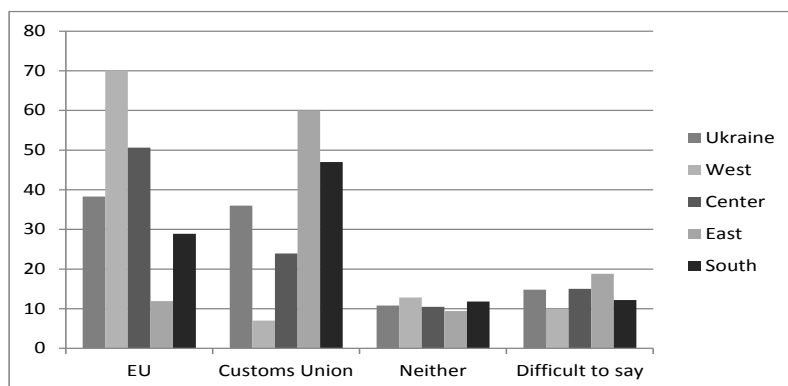
¹³ See Research & Branding Group, "Ukrainian-Russian Relationships, A Year After Signing the Agreements in Kharkov," Press release, April 14, 2011: <http://www.rb.com.ua/eng/projects/uaru/7507/>. 2,075 Ukrainian citizens were polled in every region of Ukraine.

¹⁴ Interview by the author with political analyst Mykola Ryabchuk (Kyiv, October 1, 2012) and Igor Tyshchenko, expert of Sociological group "Rating" (Kyiv, October 5, 2012).

¹⁵ Public Opinion and Market research company Baltic Surveys/Gallup on behalf of the International Republican Institute, *Public Opinion Survey Residents of Ukraine*, February 17 - March 7, 2012. <http://www.iri.org/news-events-press-center/news/new-iri-poll-shows-majority-ukrainians-think-country-headed-wrong-dire>. 1,201 Ukrainian citizens were polled in every region of Ukraine.

As the results of opinion surveys show, the accession to the Customs Union is a project which is much more popular in the Eastern and Southern regions than in other parts of the country. The inhabitants of the West and the Center favor the project that Yanukovich has declared as his main foreign policy goal: Ukraine's accession to the European Union.

Figure 2 “Which regional integration path should Ukraine follow?” (%)



Source: Razumkov Center – April 2012¹⁶

Indeed, since his election in 2010, Yanukovich has repeatedly declared that EU integration is a key priority for Ukraine. On several occasions, he has reasserted Ukraine's European aspirations. “We have a European future,” he declared in April 2010.¹⁷ The goal of joining the European Union is stipulated in the Law “On the Foundations of Ukraine's Domestic and Foreign Policy” adopted in July 2010 and the president repeated this some months later: “Ukraine continues to work towards integrating into the European Union.”¹⁸ During a visit to the Council of Europe in Strasbourg on 21st June 2011, Yanukovich repeated this commitment: “Integration into Europe is still an absolute priority in terms of Ukraine's

¹⁶ See “Vidnosyny EC-Ukraïna-Rosïa: problemy i perspektyvy” [EU-Ukraine-Russia relations: problems and prospects], *op. cit.*. See also Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, “Otnošeníâ naseleniâ k integraciionnym proektam” [Population assessments of integration projects], Press release, 20 March 2012; Public Opinion and Market research company Baltic Surveys/Gallup on behalf of the International Republican Institute, Public Opinion Survey Residents of Ukraine, May 11 – June 2, 2012: <http://www.iri.org/news-events-press-center/news/new-iri-poll-shows-ukrainians-most-concerned-unemployment-corruption>

¹⁷ See the transcript of the speech by V. Yanukovich in the report of the 12th session of the PACE on April 27, 2010.

¹⁸ See his interview with the French newspaper *Le Figaro*, October 6, 2010.

domestic and foreign policy.”¹⁹

However, the Ukrainian president has undertaken a policy which does not match official discourse. Initiatives taken by the authorities in terms of domestic policy hardly correspond with the European Union's renewed efforts to establish the universal values of human rights, democracy and the rule of law in the countries on its periphery. On October 1, 2010 the Supreme Court decided to annul the constitutional reform that was adopted in December 2004 at the time of the Orange Revolution whereby parliament's powers were strengthened to the detriment of those of the president. In the eyes of Yanukovich's entourage, this return to a presidential regime is a guarantee of political stability. In the eyes of the opposition, it means, above all, a setback for democracy and even an authoritarian trend on the part of the regime. These fears are fed by regular infringements on the freedom of the press, discrimination against some ethnic minorities (Roma and Crimean Tatars notably), high levels of corruption and even shortfalls in the local elections at the end of October 2010.²⁰ To this authoritarian drift, which is contrary to the fundamental values on which the partnership between Kyiv and Brussels is supposed to be founded, should be added the fate assigned to members of the opposition. Since the new president came to power, the Ukrainian prosecutor's office has launched a great number of legal suits against some of them (about fifteen in all) for abuse of power, corruption or the embezzlement of public funds. These proceedings are targeted not only against the former prime minister and main opposition leader, Yulia Tymoshenko, but also against several former government leaders such as, amongst others, the former interior, economy, and environment ministers as well as the former deputy justice minister. More recently, the October 2012 parliamentary election proved once again the Ukrainian leadership's failure to show sufficient commitment to European democratic values. The biased media coverage, the efforts made by the authorities to eliminate the opposition political forces and to sanction their leaders, and the revision of the electoral law in order to improve the ruling party's chances in the elections have led many international observers to criticize the overall election process, saying it marked “a step backwards” compared to previous elections.²¹ That is the

¹⁹ See the transcript of the speech by V. Yanukovich on June 21, 2011, to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe: <http://www.coe.int/lportal/web/coe-portal/speech-yanukovich>. See also “Viktor Ianoukovitch : ‘L’Ukraine se perfectionne, se modernise. C’est une partie de l’Europe’” [interview], in *Le Monde*, June 24, 2011.

²⁰ See Jean-François Julliard, Elsa Vidal, *La liberté de la presse en Ukraine : la tentative du contrôle*, mission report on the freedom of the press in Ukraine, Paris, Reporters sans frontières, August 2010. Also see the progress report on the implementation of the European Neighborhood Policy in Ukraine, published on May 25, 2011, on the Commission's site: http://ec.europa.eu/world/enp/pdf/progress2011/sec_11_646_en.pdf

²¹ See OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission to Ukraine, *Statement of Preliminary*

reason why, although the negotiations on an Association Agreement aimed at fostering closer political ties and economic integration between the European Union and Ukraine have been finalized, there is no prospect of an agreement being signed and ratified unless Ukraine makes progress on democracy and the rule of law.

According to the results of various public opinion polls, the cooling of relations between Kyiv and Brussels during Yanukovich's first three years in office has had no major impact on the Ukrainian population's perceptions of the European Union and most people continue to hold positive views of the EU. In the minds of citizens, the characteristics that best represent the EU include economic prosperity (72 percent), human rights (62 percent), democracy (55 percent), and peace and security (51 percent).²² Although the current Euro crisis could also have had a negative impact on perceptions of the EU,²³ a positive attitude to the European Union continues to prevail in Ukraine. When asked in spring 2011 about their attitudes toward the European Union, most Ukrainians expressed favorable opinions (72 percent).²⁴

However, the fact that most Ukrainian citizens feel positive about the European Union does not imply either that Ukrainian society is satisfied with the current state of relations between Ukraine and the EU or that a large majority of the population supports the idea of Ukraine's accession to the EU. According to the results of various surveys, most Ukrainians tend to describe EU-Ukraine relationship as unstable (56 percent in April 2012), while only a minority considers it as good (9.5 percent in April 2012). It should also be noted that the level of support for European integration has not seen serious fluctuations over the past three years. Around 47-50 percent of the population would vote in favor of EU accession if a referendum were held on this topic. As Figure 2 shows, when asked in April 2012 to choose between two models of regional integration for Ukraine's future, only 38 percent of the respondents support the EU membership. Moreover, as in the past and as during Yushchenko's presidency, regional disparities

Findings and Conclusions, Kyiv, October 29, 2012. Available on OSCE's website: <http://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/96675>

²² See Opinion Polling and Research in the ENPI Countries and Territories, *Country report on the opinion poll 1, Ukraine*, March 17, 2010.

²³ For Yulia Tyshchenko (Ukrainian Center for Independent Political Research), the current euro crisis does not have a negative impact on Ukrainians' views of the European Union because compared to the economic difficulties that the average Ukrainian population has to face in its everyday life (in terms of unemployment, low wages, etc.), the European crisis does not seem so acute in the eyes of Ukrainian citizens. Interview by the author in Kyiv on October 1, 2012.

²⁴ See the results of opinion surveys carried out in Ukraine in March – April 2011 (1,000 Ukrainian citizens were polled) in the Pew Research Center's Global Attitudes Project, *Twenty Years Later - Confidence in Democracy and Capitalism Wanes in Former Soviet Union*, December 5, 2011.

persist on the issue. For many years, the idea of Ukraine's accession to the European Union has been supported by a majority of respondents in the Western and Central regions, while the inhabitants of the East and the South have a more uncertain opinion on this topic. The same trends can be observed regarding the desired level of cooperation between Ukraine and the European states: the proportion of the population that prioritizes relations with European countries is higher in the West and in the Center than in the South and the East (See Table 1).

Despite the fact that the level of support for Ukraine's accession to the EU has not increased since Yanukovich's election, two important changes took place in recent years. The first one deals with the factors that hinder the integration of Ukraine into the EU. If a majority of Ukrainians still claim that Ukraine's European integration is mainly hindered by economic problems (such as the country's low level of economic development, the slow pace of reforms, and the rampant corruption), more and more Ukrainians underline the importance of other obstacles, such as democracy, human rights and political problems.²⁵ Moreover, if Ukrainian citizens are aware that Ukraine must fulfill certain conditions in order to sign the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement, only 23.3 percent of them think that Ukraine is capable of implementing reforms in order to fulfill these conditions.²⁶ In this regard, a large majority of the population is critical of the current Ukrainian leadership's European integration policy: most of the respondents polled in April 2012 considered it neither efficient (71.4 percent) nor consistent and coherent (66.3 percent).²⁷

The second change that has been observed since the beginning of Yanukovich's presidency deals with the desired level of cooperation between Ukraine and the European states. Since the end of 2009, the share of the population that regards relations with European countries as the main priority of Ukrainian foreign policy has constantly increased: from around 23 percent in 2009 to around 36 percent in 2012. This new trend can be observed in all regions of Ukraine (to a greater or lesser extent, depending on the region). In 2011 and 2012, for the first time in many

²⁵ Democratic Initiatives Foundation, "Ukrainians opt for EU membership, in particular the youth," Press release, April 14, 2012, <http://dif.org.ua/en/publications/press-relizy/dfefwgr.htm>; "Vidnosyny EC-Ukraïna-Rosïa: problemy i perspektyvy" [EU-Ukraine-Russia relations: problems and prospects], *op. cit.*

²⁶ See the results of a national public opinion poll on the foreign policy orientation of Ukrainian citizens conducted by the Ilko Kucheriv Democratic Initiatives Foundation jointly with the Razumkov Center on December 21-24, 2012 (2,009 Ukrainian citizens were polled): "European Union or Customs Union: Which Vector Do the People Choose?", Press release, 10 January 2013, <http://dif.org.ua/en/publications/press-relizy/es-iti-gromadjani.htm> [in Ukrainian].

²⁷ See "Vidnosyny EC-Ukraïna-Rosïa: problemy i perspektyvy" [EU-Ukraine-Russia relations: problems and prospects], *op. cit.*

years, in Ukraine as a whole, the share of the population that ranks relations with European countries as the main priority is higher (38.2 percent in 2011, 36.7 percent in 2012) than the proportion of Ukrainians that consider that relations with Russia should be the main foreign policy priority (35.3 percent, 31 percent).

Table 1. “What should be the priority direction for Ukraine’s foreign policy?”²⁸ Answer : Relations with EU countries (%)

Ukraine							
2009		2010		2011		2012	
23.8		26.5		35.7		36.7	
West				Center			
2009	2010	2011	2012	2009	2010	2011	2012
51.8	53.1	72.6	68.7	25.3	33.4	46.4	46.3
East				South			
2009	2010	2011	2012	2009	2010	2011	2012
10.2	8.2	11.4	15.2	14.9	18.2	27.5	22

Source: Razumkov Center (November 2009, May 2010, February 2011, February 2012).

Several observations can be drawn about these recent shifts in Ukrainians’ perceptions of current and future relations with the European Union and Russia. These tendencies confirm that the level of public support for the foreign policy orientation of the Ukrainian leadership is linked with the authorities’ ability to achieve the goals they set. The incapacity of the current government to develop equal and mutually-beneficial relations with Russia can be considered one of the factors that explains the recent drop in support for a pro-Russian foreign policy orientation. Similarly, the inability of the Ukrainian leadership to implement political, economic and judiciary reforms necessary to meet European standards and requirements may help to better understand why public enthusiasm for the idea of Ukraine’s accession to the EU has not grown in recent years.

The analysis of popular foreign policy preferences also shows that citizen attitudes still heavily depend on the region of residence. Even if the share of the population that supports relations with European countries as the main priority of Ukrainian foreign policy has increased in the Eastern

²⁸ *Ibid.*

and Southern regions of the country since 2009, most of the inhabitants of these regions continue to consider deepening cooperation with Russia as the key priority. The level of support for European integration is traditionally higher in the West and in the Center. Although these regional differences are not new, their persistence proves that the foreign policy of the current Ukrainian leadership is far from unifying society.

On the whole, the recent evolution of popular perceptions of Ukraine's relations with Russia and the European Union can be interpreted as a demand for a *real* balanced foreign policy, along the lines that Yanukovich described during the 2010 presidential campaign and at the beginning of his mandate. In the popular perception, however, Yanukovich has not achieved this kind of balanced foreign policy during his first three years as president. This result confirms the fact that the Ukrainian population rejects the idea of a foreign policy focusing too much on one vector at the expense of the other. If more and more Ukrainians now favor deeper cooperation with the European countries, it is a reaction to a foreign policy concentrating too much on Russia.²⁹ In other words, many citizens seem convinced that Ukraine should have balanced relations with all of its partners: the deepening of relations with Russia is not incompatible with, and is not seen as an alternative to, the deepening of relations with the EU countries, and vice versa. This explains why the population has difficulty choosing between closer EU ties or tighter links with Moscow.

The role of history and the media help to explain why Ukrainian society does not seem ready to make a clear choice between European integration and the Russia-led Customs Union. The following section discusses these factors in greater detail.

History and Mass Media: Key Factors Shaping Ukrainian Public Opinion

In Ukraine as elsewhere, there are many factors which may influence public opinion on foreign policy or shape popular perceptions of one or more foreign countries. Economic parameters, international migration, diasporas, and religious and cultural issues are among explanatory elements which deserve attention. Far from pretending to be exhaustive, this article will focus on two key factors: it will show how historical issues

²⁹ The same phenomenon has been observed during Viktor Yushchenko's presidency. While his mandate has been marked by a pro-European foreign policy orientation and a sharp deterioration in relations between Ukraine and Russia, the level of support for priority relations with European countries significantly decreased between 2004 and 2009. Conversely, the share of the population that considered relations with Russia as the main priority of Ukrainian foreign policy continued to increase: from around 38 percent in 2005 to around 52 percent in 2009 (See Figure 1).

and the mass media may have an impact on the Ukrainian population's attitudes to the EU and Russia.

The Weight of History

The weight of history is one of the factors that exerts significant pressure on the population's perceptions of Ukraine's main international partners. It explains why representations of the world and popular foreign policy preferences are regionally differentiated. In this regard, it should be remembered that Ukraine never existed within its current borders as an independent state before 1991. The current territorial structure of the country was definitely established when Crimea was transferred to Ukraine in 1954. As they have formed an entity only since the middle of the 20th century, Ukrainian regions have histories, linguistic characteristics, and cultural references that differ from one another.

The Western regions, which were integrated into Soviet Ukraine during the Second World War, used to belong to Poland, Romania, Hungary or Czechoslovakia. They therefore have a political culture which is different from the rest of the country. In this context, it is not surprising that these regions feel closer to Europe and the West, that they favor enhanced cooperation with them, and support EU membership for Ukraine. These perceptions are also shaped by the fact that these regions share common borders with countries that recently joined the EU, countries with which they have long-standing relations. By comparison, their links with Russia are much more recent. Moreover, these regions were integrated into the Soviet Union in the context of the Second World War during a time of intense political repression. It is therefore not surprising that their attitudes toward Russia are marked with elements of distrust and hostility.

The Eastern and Southern parts of Ukraine shared a common historical past with Russia for several centuries. Since the signing of the 1654 Pereiaslav Agreement, most parts of the territories located on the left-bank of the Dnieper have been closely linked with the Russian Empire. The Southern regions of Ukraine, located on the Black sea coast, were incorporated into the Tsarist Empire at the end of 18th century. As for Crimea, the peninsula was annexed by Catherine the Great in 1783. As a result of this long history of close links, it is in these areas where the ethnic Russians are highly concentrated.³⁰ Therefore, the fact that 20 years after the break-up of the Soviet Union, these regions continue to feel closer to Russia and to the Russian people than to Europeans or European countries is not surprising. It may also explain why they tend to support deeper cooperation with Russia and the idea of Ukraine's participation in the Customs Union between Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan.

The impact of history is also apparent in an in-depth analysis of

³⁰ See All-Ukrainian Population Census data: <http://2001.ukrcensus.gov.ua/>

the results of sociological surveys. In this regard, the demographics, particularly age breakdowns, must be taken into account. Several surveys demonstrate that the youngest members of the population – that is the young people who had not been born during the Soviet period or who have only vague memories of it and who are therefore less influenced by the stereotypes of Soviet propaganda – have a somewhat different perception of Ukraine's international partners and priorities than the elder generation. Since the beginning of the 2000s, the majority of young people (18-29 year-olds) tends to support Ukraine joining the EU (60.1 percent in February 2012), while the population aged 50 and over is less convinced of this project.³¹ According to the results of another survey carried out in December 2011 by the Democratic Initiatives Foundation, “noteworthy is that the opinions of youth in the age category of 18-29 living in the Donbas region and Crimea, where a negative attitude towards Ukraine's membership in the EU prevails, do not differ from those of their colleagues that live in other parts of the country. Statistics show that 51 percent of the youth in the eastern part of the country are in favor of Ukraine's membership in the EU, while only 22 percent are against it.”³²

In the case of Russia, generational differences also prevail: older people have a somewhat better attitude toward Russia than the youth. In contrast to the population aged 50 and over, the young people are less inclined to consider that relations with Russia should be the main vector of Ukraine's foreign policy. When asked in December 2012 to choose between two models of regional integration for Ukraine's future, the youngest part of the population (18-29 year-olds) opted for European integration (51.9 percent) while the oldest group of respondents favored the idea of Ukraine joining the Customs Union with Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan (45.3 percent for those over 60 years old).

The Role of the Media

If historical factors help explain why the Ukrainian population remains divided on foreign policy priorities, other factors contribute to shaping the Ukrainian population's perceptions of the world and foreign policy preferences. Among them the sources of information used by the population deserve special attention.

In this regard, opinion surveys reveal that the Ukrainian population is not often in direct contact with foreigners or foreign countries. There are several reasons for this. Among them is the fact that a vast

³¹ See “Vidnosyny EC-Ukraina-Rosia: problemy i perspektyvy” [EU-Ukraine-Russia relations: problems and prospects], *op. cit.*

³² See Democratic Initiatives Foundation, “Ukrainians opt for EU membership, in particular the youth”, *op. cit.* See also Gorshenin Institute surveys: “Molodez Ukrainy” [Ukrainian Youth] (in Russian), April 2012; “Students – an Image of the Future”, April 2011. <http://institute.gorshenin.ua/>

majority of Ukrainians do not have the opportunity or the financial means to travel abroad. According to a survey carried out in December 2012 by the Democratic Initiatives Foundation jointly with the Razumkov Center, 77.1 percent of Ukrainians polled had never had the opportunity to visit countries of the European Union, Canada, or the United States.³³

Moreover, according to the Ukrainian national statistics committee, even if the number of foreign citizens that have visited Ukraine (for different purposes including leisure, business activities, etc.) has considerably increased over recent years (from around 9 million in 2001 to around 21 million in 2011), most of them do not come from West European or North American countries, but are residents of neighboring countries. In 2011, citizens of Belarus, Russia and Poland alone represented 62.5 percent of the total number of foreign citizens that visited Ukraine that year.³⁴

It should also be noted that, according to UNESCO data, only a minority of Ukrainian students study abroad. The outbound mobility ratio (i.e., the number of students from Ukraine studying abroad, expressed as a percentage of total tertiary enrollment in Ukraine) has never exceeded 1 percent since the beginning of the 2000s (a figure that represented approximately 36,000 students in 2010 and 2011). Moreover, UNESCO data reveal that Ukraine is not a country which hosts large numbers of international students. Their number has tended to increase (from around 12,000 in 2001 to 38,000 in 2011) but remains limited.³⁵

In a context in which Ukrainian citizens are not often in direct contact with foreigners or foreign countries, the mass media plays an important role in the population's view and knowledge about international issues or Ukraine's foreign partners. While the use of the Internet has increased in Ukraine in recent years,³⁶ it is not the population's main source of information: according to the results of various surveys, when asked to answer the question "How many times per week do you access the Internet?" most of the respondents (around 57-59 percent in 2012) affirm that they never use the Internet.³⁷ Therefore, the vast majority of Ukrainians is dependent on

³³ See the results of the national public opinion poll "European Union or Customs Union: Which Vector Do the People Choose?" *op. cit.*.

³⁴ Data available on the Ukrainian national statistics committee's website: <http://www.ukrstat.gov.ua/>

³⁵ Data available on UNESCO Institute for Statistics' website: <http://www.uis.unesco.org/>

³⁶ See Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, "Dynamika pronyknoventy v Ukraïni" [Dynamics of Internet Usage in Ukraine] Press release, April 20, 2012: <http://old.kiis.com.ua/ua/news/view-153.html> [in Ukrainian]. 2,029 Ukrainian citizens were polled in every region of Ukraine in February 2012.

³⁷ See Public Opinion and Market research company Baltic Surveys/Gallup on behalf of the International Republican Institute, *Public Opinion Survey Residents of Ukraine*, August 21 – September 6, 2012: <http://www.iri.org/news-events-press-center/news/iri-poll-majority-ukrainians-think-country-moving-wrong-direction> (2,000 Ukrainian citizens were polled in every region of Ukraine); Research & Branding Group, "the Attitude of Ukrainians to the

newspapers and, above all, on television. Obviously, it would be quite a long and difficult research project to analyze the way international events are reported by these media or to analyze their influence on Ukraine's foreign partners' image. But a few remarks can be made about the form or, more precisely, the language in which information is diffused by newspapers and TV channels. The three most read newspapers in Ukraine (*Fakty i komentarii*, *Segodna* and *Komsomolskaia Pravda v Ukraine*) are all published in Russian. The TV news program of the *Inter* channel, which is the most popular in Ukraine, is also in Russian.³⁸ This does not mean that information given in Russian automatically develops a Russian point of view on international events or that it automatically gives a positive image of Russia, but it contributes to keeping Ukrainian society in a Russian and Russophone environment. This may have an impact on the population's perceptions of Russia and may explain why many Ukrainians continue to feel close to Russia and the Russian people.

In this regard, the influence of the Russian mass media, especially television, which is broadcast over cable networks across most of Ukraine, should also be underlined. As Alexander Bogomolov and Oleksandr Lytvynenko show in their study of "Russian Soft Power in Ukraine," Russian serials, soap operas, and iconic Soviet films (especially those about the Great Patriotic War) account for much of Russian TV content and reinforce nostalgia and stereotypes.³⁹ The Russian media dominance contributes to the spread of ideas according to which the Ukrainian and Russian peoples have a common historic memory and cultural heritage, a shared and glorious past, and a common civilizational affiliation. In other words, it helps to diffuse the idea that a "Russian world" exists, that Ukraine belongs to it, and that both countries should therefore have a shared future. Add to this the existence of common economic interests and also family ties between residents of both countries and it explains why many Ukrainians support the idea that deepening relations with Russia should be Ukraine's foreign policy priority and back Ukraine's membership in the Russian-Belarusian-Kazakh Customs Union.

It should also be noted that, according to several researchers, the Ukrainian mass media generally tends to report events which take place

Internet. Rating of the most popular websites", Press release, March 14, 2012, <http://rb.com.ua/upload/medialibrary/PRInet2012engl.pdf> (2,079 Ukrainian citizens were polled in every region of Ukraine).

³⁸ A study carried out in 2012 shows that on the radio, 3.4 percent of songs are in Ukrainian while 60 percent are in Russian. Only 28 percent of all TV programs are in Ukrainian. See *Stanovyshce Ukraïns'koï movy v Ukraïni v 2012 roci – Analitychnyj oghlad* [The Ukrainian language situation in Ukraine in 2012 – Analytical overview], November 9, 2012, <http://dobrovol.org/article/271/>

³⁹ Alexander Bogomolov Oleksandr Lytvynenko, "A Ghost in the Mirror: Russian Soft Power in Ukraine," *Chatham House Briefing Paper*, REP RSP BP 2012/01, January 2012.

in Russia much more than those which happen in the rest of the world. According to some estimates, only about 7 percent of TV news concerns the European Union. On television talk-shows, members of government or the parliament from the ruling Party of Regions tend to speak more about relations with Russia than about current relations and negotiations with the European Union, according to Volodymyr Paniotto, Director of the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology.⁴⁰ It is therefore not surprising that people's awareness of the EU is low. This hypothesis is confirmed by opinion surveys that demonstrate that most Ukrainians do not know much about the EU, its members, institutions, policies or leaders. For example, in 2010, only 12 percent could identify the exact number of EU Member States and 17 percent knew that UNICEF is not an EU institution. Less than half (46 percent) of respondents were aware that the EU provides Ukraine with financial support for development programs. 20 percent of respondents do not believe that the EU provides such support and one third (34 percent) said they do not know whether such support exists.⁴¹

In this regard, the first two years of Yanukovich's presidency had no major impact on the population's awareness of the European Union and the current state of relations between Ukraine and the EU. In December 2011, overall, only 61 percent of the population knew that the Ukrainian leadership is holding talks on the EU Association Agreement, while the remaining 39 percent were totally unaware of this fact.⁴² This outcome can also be explained by the fact that, as the mass media in Ukraine are increasingly controlled and influenced by the political authorities (especially since Yanukovich's election),⁴³ EU topics have begun to appear less frequently in the Ukrainian media because of the worsening relations between Ukraine and the EU.⁴⁴ The few news items about the EU that are broadcast often deal with the current debt crisis. In other words, the information delivered by the mass media can be interpreted by the population in the following way: the European Union is too preoccupied with its internal problems and therefore does not have the will and resources to

⁴⁰ Interview by the author in Kyiv on October 2, 2012.

⁴¹ See Opinion Polling and Research in the ENPI Countries and Territories, *Country report on the opinion poll 1, Ukraine, op. cit.*

⁴² Democratic Initiatives Foundation, "Ukrainians opt for EU membership, in particular the youth," *op. cit.*

⁴³ On the eve of the October 2012 Parliamentary elections, pressure from the Ukrainian authorities on the mass media increased. Ukrainian journalists have protested to denounce a bill which calls for toughened punishment for defamation, including prison terms of up to five years. See *Kyiv Post*, September 28, 2012. Interview in Kyiv by the author with Sonya Koshkina (Editor in chief of the information web-site LB.ua) and Mykola Kniashchynsky (General Director of the independent TV channel *TVi*), on October 3, 2012.

⁴⁴ Interview with Viktor Sokolov, First Vice President of the Gorshenin Institute, by the author in Kyiv on October 5, 2012.

deepen cooperation with Ukraine.⁴⁵ This, in return, may explain why the level of support for Ukraine's accession to the EU has remained practically the same for the past three years.

Conclusion

Three years after Viktor Yanukovich's rise to power, Ukrainian authorities are now facing pressure from both its European and Russian partners. For them, Ukraine has to make a choice between signing an Association Agreement with the EU that includes a free trade area or joining the Moscow-led integration projects, such as the Russian-Belarusian-Kazakh Customs Union. During the EU-Ukraine Summit in February 2013, the European Union gave Ukraine three months to implement political, economic and judiciary reforms in order to make possible the signing of the Association Agreement. As President of the European Commission José Manuel Barroso repeated, "one country cannot at the same time be a member of a customs union and be in a free trade area with the European Union."⁴⁶ On several occasions Russian leaders have also stated that if Ukraine chooses European integration, it will face difficulties in finding openings within the Common Economic Space and the Customs Union.⁴⁷ As Russian Prime Minister and former President Dmitry Medvedev declared during a press conference in May 2011, "you cannot be everywhere at once after all, but have to choose between one place and the other. Everyone, including my Ukrainian friends and colleagues, must understand that you cannot sit on two chairs at once but need to make a choice."⁴⁸

Does the current Ukrainian leadership have the capabilities and the willingness to make a decisive step in one direction or another? As this analysis of the recent evolution of popular assessments of Ukraine's relations with Russia and the European Union shows, Ukrainian citizens remain deeply divided on the regional integration path which Ukraine should take. It is therefore doubtful that, in the short-term, the population will encourage the authorities to make a clear choice in terms of foreign policy. In a longer-term perspective, this situation could change. As mentioned above,

⁴⁵ See Igor Lyubashenko, "Perception of European Integration in Ukraine," in *Bulletin of the Polish Institute of International Affairs*, n° 42, April 25, 2012; István Szabo "Presentation of the EU-Ukraine Summit in the Ukrainian media," in *EU Frontiers*, Policy Paper of the Center for EU Enlargement Studies (Budapest), n° 6, February 2012.

⁴⁶ See "EU to Ukraine: Reforms necessary for trade pact," in *Kyiv Post*, February 25, 2013: <http://www.kyivpost.com/content/ukraine/eu-to-ukraine-reforms-necessary-for-trade-pact-320910.html>

⁴⁷ See, for example, the transcript of the joint press conference of Vladimir Putin and Viktor Yanukovich on March 4, 2013, on the Russian president's official website: <http://eng.kremlin.ru/transcripts/5080>

⁴⁸ See the transcript of President Medvedev's news conference on May 18, 2011 on the Russian president's official website: <http://eng.kremlin.ru/transcripts/2223>

in every part of the country the younger generation seems to be more inclined to support European integration and the generational differences already observed will probably increase in the future. The introduction of a visa-free regime between Ukraine and the EU could also facilitate tourist and business travel, contacts between people and, therefore, better public knowledge about the EU. Additionally, better media coverage regarding EU-related events and the European integration process could probably produce greater support for it among the population. In such a context, images and representations of the world in the Ukrainian society could change and affect foreign policy decision-making.