

Geopolitics of Ukraine

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An interview with Philippe de Suremain, French Ambassador in Ukraine from 2002 to 2005.

Ukraine lies on the Eastern frontier of four EU member nations : Poland, Slovakia, Hungary and Romania. For historical reasons, Lithuania is also concerned. Except for the Orange Revolution in 2004 and the hosting of the Euro 2012 soccer competition [1], Ukraine has captured very little attention in France. Philippe de Suremain served as French Ambassador in Ukraine from 2002 to 2005, and regularly returns to the country. He begins by explaining that Ukraine is strategically important for more than one reason, and then puts the Orange Revolution and its consequences in perspective. Finally, he sheds light on the current situation and draws our attention to the fundamentals, going forward, including demography.

As part of its interdisciplinary approach to geopolitical analysis, Diploweb.com is delighted to bring you an extract from the new work by Pierre Verluise, *Géopolitique des frontières européennes. Elargir, jusqu'où ? (The Geopolitics of the European Union Borders, Where should expansion stop ?, Eska, 2014)*, illustrated by 20 color maps, published in France by Argos, 2013, and distributed by Puf. The selected extract is in fact the fifth chapter, published under the title : *Géopolitique de l'Ukraine. Extract Pierre Verluise, "The Geopolitics of the European Union Borders, Where should expansion stop ?" Eska, 2014.*

In June 2012, the Euro international soccer competition drew attention to Ukraine in controversial fashion. How did this turn of events arise ?

The Euro 2012 affair can almost be explained by a misunderstanding. The decision to partially stage the competition in Ukraine was taken in the wake of the Orange Revolution at the end of 2004. Poland, which had supported this political process, had been granted the right to host the tournament and decided to share the event with its Ukrainian neighbor. This "elegant gesture" was above all geopolitical, aimed at delineating and tightening the bonds between the two countries and including Ukraine in the preoccupations and organization of the EU network infrastructures. In a word, the aim was to use sport to defend Ukraine's explicit but not then finalized candidature for EU accession. This bold gambit ended up in a fiasco as the political developments in Kiev in recent years have not been those hoped for in Warsaw. Worse, the trial of Yulia Tymoshenko, one-time muse of the Orange Revolution, even triggered calls to boycott Euro 2012 during the run-up to the competition, thereby spoiling the June 2012 party, not only in Ukraine but also in Poland. The Tymoshenko affair is not only shameful but pathetically stupid. The behavior of President Victor Yanukovich has been suicidal ; it is common knowledge that the case for the prosecution is empty. Why get bogged down in a trial that has all the appearance of personal vengeance, except to prove one's authority and strength ? Governing is about more than intimidation.

Pierre Verluise, “The Geopolitics of the European Union Borders, Where should expansion stop ?” ESKA, 2014.

Pierre Verluise delivers a master stroke with this work that operates on two levels : as a manual of geopolitics and an essay on the Eastern and Southern borders of the European Union. Thorough and informative, it steps outside the box of back-slapping political correction.



Director of the geopolitical Web site Diploweb.com. [Pierre Verluise](#) closely monitors the development of the European Union and its borders. He is a lecturer in geopolitics at the Sorbonne. He founded the seminar on European geopolitics at the French “War College”. He is Distinguished Professor of Geopolitics at GEM.

This work offers clear, precise answers to the following questions :

- . How far does the European Union still plan to expand ?
- . What relations does the EU now entertain with the Eastern countries that were so recently perceived as enemies ?
- . How is the EU organizing its relations with the South ?

Zooming out a little, what is Ukraine’s place in Europe ?

Look at a map and you realize [Ukraine's geostrategic importance](#). In the heart of the continent, it is bigger than France and almost as heavily populated, with significant natural and human resources, and is of major importance for all Europeans, neighbors or otherwise.

As early as 1991 the Lithuanian statesman Algirdas Brazauskas said this to me : "We must monitor the development of Ukraine closely, because the balance of Europe depends on it". In France we would do well to wake up to a reality that is of course obvious to the Russians, to the Poles, who make it a foreign policy priority, and also to the Germans, who have for long been players in the region.

One of the handicaps facing Ukraine is the provincialism that was foisted on the country by Tsarist and subsequently Soviet centralism, a paradox considering that this territory lay in the outer reaches of Empire, and was destined to become a vital crossroads on the Black Sea. Its complex history has bequeathed a great diversity that sets it apart from its neighbors and is central to its very identity. A sense of regional belonging precedes that of a national feeling that is nonetheless acknowledged by the majority, but in very personal ways. This is illustrated by surveys of public opinion. The result is an identity that defines itself by default : "Ukraine is not Russia", said former President Leonid Kuchma (1994-2004), despite apparently being a Moscow ally. Nor is it Poland, despite obvious mutual affinities. The relations that Ukraine continues to entertain with both countries still often remain fraught. A family affair that each depicts in their own fashion but that concerns us too.

Unlike the Baltic nations, whose return to independence (1990-1991) was welcomed in France with fervor and relief, that of Ukraine (1991) has very generally been judged by our elite as an accident that will have to be repaired, sooner or later. On the contrary, the Orange Revolution at the end of 2004, during a lull on the international news front, captured the full glare of attention and was met with enthusiasm. Was this not a success story for the European process ? The subsequent disappointment was all the greater. Yet we would be wrong to consider the incident closed. Despite appearances, we have not gone back to square one.

How should we read the Orange Revolution ?

Nobody saw the Orange Revolution coming. Neither the people who made it happen nor the pundits. It was a "happening" so spontaneous that it can only be explained, with hindsight, by exasperation. It was a response to ambient corruption and was brought to boiling point by rigged voting in the first and, above all, second rounds of the 2004 presidential election. Many Ukrainians, especially in Kiev, felt that their vote had been confiscated and hit the streets in mass to reaffirm their dignity and aspiration to democracy, freedom, and justice. The protest movement was not about work, money or inequality - Ukraine was at that time in the midst of economic growth - but was above all the reaction of a middle class disgusted by the cynicism of a parasitic and inefficient political class. It revealed the existence of a maturing civil society that had already made its presence felt more discreetly by voting tactically despite a loaded electoral system. However badly elected, the Parliament was and still is unavoidable and, representing so many oligarchic interests, the powers that be had to use it. Ukraine's leaders have failed to realize the changes in mindset brought about by high levels of temporary emigration, and external - notably Western - influences. This change has spread nationwide across a population that, we should remember, is well educated, attracted by consumerism and allergic to the idolization of leaders. Suddenly, after the street, the press and the television

discovered freedom of speech. The fifth channel belonged to oligarch Petro Poroshenko and immediately played a key role. Despite freezing temperatures and snow, the capital was suddenly submerged by mobilization on an unprecedented scale, in a passionate mood that is hard to conjure up today. Now Ukraine was discovering - in the eyes of the world - that it was, after all, a "normal", i.e. a European country. Unforgettably, the Maidan was decked out with the flags of the European Union.

[For Russia - and Vladimir Putin -](#) who had imprudently become entangled in the Ukrainian presidential election - the Ukrainian revolution was experienced as a failure, worse a humiliation, a remote-controlled attack on its interests, and as serious as 9/11 had been for the USA. Unquestionably, many Russians had not yet become accustomed to the loss of Ukraine - their Alsace-Lorraine - even less so that of Kiev, touted as "the mother of all Russian cities". Propaganda was prompt to revive dormant imperial nostalgia. Above all, the sudden emergence, so close to home, in a country with such high potential, of a political regime that could prove contagious, was perceived by the Kremlin as an existential threat.

However, the Orange Revolution soon disappointed

There is no getting away from it : the Orange Revolution has crumbled. The touchdown has not been converted and there is deep disillusionment. There are reasons for this.

The transition from communism in the wake of a political earthquake, underestimated in the West, has been easy nowhere, and is unquestionably a work in progress. Yet, in Central Europe, nation states were a reality, consolidated by institutions that have been reformed with the support of the European Union and prospects of accession that have been fulfilled.

This has not been the case in Ukraine, despite the appeal of the European Union that underpinned the Orange Revolution. Europe's response has been inadequate. Above all, Ukraine has lacked an institutional framework : its Constitution has been produced by a series of compromises that each reads in their own way, with no clear allocation of responsibilities, a faulty legal system, and an administration that is a throwback to the Soviet era, equally inefficient at national and regional levels. To address a situation that is nothing unusual in Eastern Europe, there was a need for fast and far-reaching reforms driven by new faces. This is what none of the Presidents, governments or the Parliament have been able to deliver with the required determination, continuity and vista. Even though the population was probably broadly ready to take it on board.

Words are all very well but the pro-European rhetoric has done little to close the gap between a cynical ruling class, dominated by pork barreling, and a disoriented public opinion, deprived by years of purges of leaders, programs, and structured political parties. Political life is still incubating. Nobody with the moral authority of a Lech Walesa (Poland) or a Vaclav Havel (Czech Republic) has stepped up to the plate.

A suicidal rivalry opposed the two winners of the Orange Revolution that, in fact, carried them rather than having been initiated by them. This rivalry has led Ukraine into an impasse. President Viktor Yushchenko held all the trump cards but inexplicably failed to play them, wastefully passing over a historic opportunity. Maybe the poisoning attack that he survived prior to being elected had more serious effects than was believed. Yulia Tymoshenko's

pugnacity and considerable strength of character were not enough for her to gain the upper hand, and she was probably isolated. Ultimately it was the Orange Revolution's loser, Viktor Yanukovich who won the next presidential election in 2010, indisputably and uncontested, but by default, with fewer votes than he had gathered when he was defeated in 2004. Since then, his popularity has been on the slide and he will have his work cut out to reverse the trend. The scandal of the Tymoshenko affair and the unreal court cases of spring 2012 destroyed his credibility both domestically and abroad. However he has done some groundwork. He is wary of Russia, but fascinated too, and has already altered the institutions to work in his favor, in an attempt to emulate Vladimir Putin's "vertical power". He did this via a quasi coup d'état that was hard for Parliament to approve, and has been supported by shadowy networks that have been more active than ever. He has also taken care to create a financial base independent from the clans who had hitherto supported him. His gambits are bold, not only in view of the state of public opinion, whose endurance is not boundless, but also because of the hypersensitivity of the business world that is no longer getting its payback.

The Orange Revolution was part of a complex movement that has been dubbed the "colorful revolutions" on the edges of Russia and Europe. What are the results so far ?

The colorful revolutions are not all the same color and you would have to be color-blind not to see this. The Orange Revolution was the work of a middle class buoyed by economic growth and aspiring to the rule of law. In Georgia, the lead appears to have come from the lower reaches of the social pyramid. In Central Asia, the conditions were completely different and, though the demands were comparable, the underpinning motivational factors ranged from hope to despair.

That Russia should be concerned by the instability of its frontiers and the desire to safeguard its regional influence is understandable, but to claim that it should have an acknowledged "vital interest" zone on its doorstep to ensure its security is surely illusory if this claim is based on hard power. The question is less about the future of Russia than about that of its regime.

Turning back to Ukraine : what about its oligarchs ?

Because the world of the oligarchs is opaque, this does not make it tightly knit. Often with a background as industrial entrepreneurs, the oligarchs have become magnates, talented but often with few scruples about how they do things, some with a dubious past, their interests diverge. So far, those in power have only managed to influence the clans by playing them off against each other at the expense of the general good, thus contributing to the pluralism by default that is so characteristic of Ukraine.

Will President Yanukovich manage to keep control over them ? Nothing could be less certain. His success in building up his own financial network has been achieved at the expense of a number of others who are asking questions about what will come next. Public opinion is not fooled by his very open "family spirit", while the garish luxury of a residence that would not look out of place at *Disneyland* has tongues wagging.

The pressing competition from the Russian business community operating in familiar territory carries a threat. Those who are counting on the western blueprint for management and technology, to the point of bringing in European or American experts, are worried. However,

the night of August 4 1789 [2] is not about to repeat itself.

How should we interpret Ukraine's European tropism ?

As we have seen, most Ukrainians have a favorable view of Europe and fail to understand why we are offering no prospects of accession to the EU. They take this as a snub. Successive authorities have played on this, remaining unspecific about the constraints that joining would entail, failing to undertake the required reforms, and leaving public opinion in a state of deep frustration. Why should the Ukrainians, who consider themselves more advanced than others, be refused what is being offered to the Western Balkan nations. Neighborhood and Eastern partnership policies have been perceived as surrogates while, at the same time, Russian pressure increases. However to deflect responsibility on to the Europeans on one hand and the Russians on the other, is not enough to define a strategy. Multi-vectoral diplomacy or a policy based on going where the wind blows are only a fig leaf. Crisis or no crisis, in the present conditions, the majority of Ukrainians see no alternative to Europe. None, that is, but despair.

Against this backdrop, how should we see relations between Poland and Ukraine ?

Poland and Ukraine go back ! Theirs is a long and painful history that has created deep affinities but also resentment, the legacy of a relatively recent past, namely the period before, during and after World War II. Reconciliation has since been actively pursued on both sides and Poland has been able to take on the role of Ukraine's most convincing advocate and role model. Undoubtedly, Poland's accession to the Schengen Area momentarily slowed down cross-border exchanges as Poland became part of the EU's frontier. However, by osmosis, the EU is increasingly present in Ukraine and its influence is spreading via Poland.

Lithuania also embodies a historical relationship with Ukraine, despite the distance that now separates the two countries. Vilnius is a blueprint for what Kiev aspires to be, a success story from which there are many lessons to be learned.

Since we are talking history, a word about past-present relations. What place does the great famine of 1932-1933 hold today in Ukrainian memories ?

The tragedy was denied, then blanked out by Soviet historiography, and the suppressed memories were handed down from generation to generation before resurfacing with independence. The Holodomor is now the subject of a debate as to its actual nature and who caused it. This carries a risk of political exploitation that does not help to shed light on the facts. Nobody today dares to pretend that it did not happen. The sore points in today's already overheated political climate are the scale and above all the causes. The decidedly very conservative "left", the Communist Party, threatened in its legitimacy, and the Regional Party, portray it as a mishandled climatic accident, or, in an even more uncritical light, as a drama that hit the whole of the USSR and especially Ukraine, southern Russia and Kazakhstan. The opposite viewpoint lays responsibility at the feet of the Soviets - headed by Joseph Stalin - accused of deliberately attempting to destroy Ukrainian identity.

It would probably have been wiser to let historians dig towards the truth rather than give

political leaders on all sides free rein to interpret the story to their own ends. Documents available today tend to give credit to the theory whereby Ukraine was indeed the butt of a specific operation to eradicate the peasant roots of Ukrainian society, the intellectual elite not having been spared either. Whether Stalin was reacting to the failure of collectivization or had from the outset planned to subjugate a region in which contestation was a leitmotif, the outcome is incontrovertible : a mass massacre, very probably genocide. Viktor Yushchenko saw it as a reference to – if not the symbol of – Ukrainian identity, and his supporters upped the ante. His opponents, however, no sooner reelected, wasted no time in repealing the previously voted bill defining the Holodomor as genocide. Was this to appease the Kremlin ? By reducing the issue to one of semantics is there not a risk of sidestepping the problem of collective responsibility and the ensuing compromises ? Should the blame be laid at the feet of Russia or the Soviet regime ? It is really totalitarianism that should be standing trial, and not everyone is prepared to accept this. As for the number of victims of the Great Famine, given the mass-migration that it provoked, it is hard to assess. Current estimates range from at least three million, which is terrifying enough, to an unlikely eight million. Whatever the case, the scale is huge. After the revolution, the civil war that raged through the region, the post-war repression, the German occupation which inflicted massive suffering on the civilian population, not to mention the bullets of the Holocaust, Ukraine endured a terrifying sequence of tragedies. If today's youth is to avoid sinking into resentment or indifference and build a future, they deserve an explanation of the past.

What is Ukraine's stance with respect to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization ?

At the onset of the Orange Revolution, President Yushchenko made NATO his priority, seeing it, like the Soviet satellites of yore, or today's Baltic States, as the necessary gateway to the European Union. Maybe we could have been more accommodating. The mistake on his part was, however, to maintain the confusion. Ukrainian public opinion, unlike that of its Central European neighbors, still has a negative image of NATO, perhaps a legacy of the Cold War, also because it sees it as an instrument of the USA. The latter is scarcely popular, and the operation in Iraq, like the pressure exerted by President George W. Bush on Ukraine to become involved, did nothing to improve this perception.

If NATO had renamed itself in 1991, Ukrainians would perhaps have seen it in a better light. Whatever the case, there are enough ongoing disputes with the Russians to avoid pouring oil on the fire, especially given that Paris and Berlin have a cool view of this chapter.

This does not prevent Ukraine from cooperating with NATO. However, the state of its army, with professionalization on hold for want of means, is at best a source of concern.

What are the prospects for President Yanukovich ?

The unlikely return to power of Victor Yanukovich was explained above all by the disarray of public opinion after the Orange Revolution and not by genuine support. A twofold risk is now palpable : firstly that the disillusionment entails a loss of interest in politics ; secondly, and worse for democracy, the rise of extremism – especially nationalism – in a country where tolerance has traditionally prevailed.

However the opposition is gathering its forces, getting organized and may have a chance of success in a fair electoral campaign.

We should not overlook the role played by the middle classes. They have interests to defend, especially the Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises. The spectacular rise of the Internet, new forms of mobilization, and the belated but very real development of awareness among young people are factors of change, in Ukraine as elsewhere. It is not certain that those in power in Kiev right now are gauging the extent of this. Preferring the Russian language at the expense of Ukrainian has unnecessarily rekindled a linguistic issue. This is a miscalculated risk that no leader had yet taken. Despite this, Russia will not give an inch. Concessions made to Russia in April 2010 by the Kharkov agreement with nothing in exchange - the naval base at Sebastopol is an example - have not gone down well in Ukraine. The prevailing sentiment in Ukraine is that the national interest has been sold down the river. We should underestimate neither the deep undercurrents at work in Ukrainian society nor an endurance that is made up of more than passivity. Clearly, corruption will solve nothing.

What about Gorbachev's project for a "common European home" ?

In a multipolar world that shows every sign of instability, the Europeans have no choice but to stand united : many Russians, who look to the west rather than the east, subscribe to this view. To depict the European Union as a threat is only to bolster a regime that is losing credibility among Russian public opinion. The aim of perpetuating the nostalgia for Russia's former power is to deflect attention away from the real challenges facing Russia for its long-term development ; the income from raw material and hydrocarbon exports will not be enough. The need for successful modernization tops the agenda, and Russia has all the assets, first and foremost intellectual. With so much empty space in Siberia, the rise of China gives food for thought. Moreover, Russian culture is a major component of European civilization. It makes no sense to hang on to a Westphalian vision of Europe based on an antiquated balance of power. For Russia to play on its potential to inflict damage as a means of getting its way is myopic. What greater hope could there be than for Russia to move closer to the EU and vice versa ? The proviso being that we share and implement common values, beyond superficial consumerism. Failing that, we shall all find ourselves off side. Let us not, however, lose sight of Russia's current demographic crisis - caused by ageing and depopulation - and Russia's endemic difficulty in enforcing the rule of law.

Is Ukraine still an issue for the USA ?

Ukraine was for long the third beneficiary of American aid, far behind Israel and Egypt, but various factors make it a key pawn on the European chessboard : a big Ukrainian diaspora in the USA, the complex relations between Washington and Moscow, and the country's resources. Ukraine's "strategic income" may have been devalued but it has not evaporated.

Looking ahead, will Ukraine's demography weigh to some extent on its future ?

More than its neighbors and for the same reasons, Ukraine has been suffering from a declining demography that will be hard to redress, given its age pyramid, and a rate of mortality that exceeds its birth rate in an ageing population that is in the final stages of urbanization. Its population fell from 51.3 million in 1991 to just 46.16 million in 2008. The Ukrainian

population was estimated at 45.63 million on January 1 2012. Forecasts for 2050 are for 36 million Ukrainians, while the population of France at the same time could be close to 72 million, i.e. twice the figure.

The situation is aggravated by a high level of emigration. Some 6 million Ukrainians are thought to be living abroad, primarily in Russia, but also increasingly in Western Europe where the workforce is appreciated. The return of many Ukrainians and Tatars from the former USSR, notably Central Asia, after independence, only partially made up the numbers.

The effect of this – hopefully temporary – expatriation will be to speed up the adoption of a Western mindset, while injecting significant amounts of currency. The downsides will be a high social cost for dislocated families that have stayed at home and a worrying drain of the country's best talent.

Meanwhile, Ukraine must face a new challenge : an influx of illegal immigrants, either escaping war zones (Caucasia, Central Asia) or simply moving west from other continents. As a transit zone, it is ill-equipped to address the problem alone. Yet, going forward, it will have to use foreign labor if its promising long-term development prospects are to be fulfilled.

Can agriculture become an asset for Ukraine ?

Ukraine, Europe's bread basket before World War I, can become an agricultural superpower once it has overcome the challenges it has been facing since independence. Given the outstanding quality of its black soil, it will be capable of doubling its cereal yield within a relatively short timeframe, with agriculture being the number one component of its GDP.

After successive disasters – collectivization and the Great Famine followed by war – Ukraine had become the main supplier of basic foodstuffs to the USSR at the cost of modernization administered brutally but ultimately not without results. With the disorderly abandonment of collectivization that followed independence, it took Ukraine several years to return to its former level, even though this was mediocre. The agrarian revolution in which the country is now engaged is only in its infancy and, with no clear strategy, it is still hard to forecast the pace of change. It may indeed speed up.

Ukrainian agriculture presents sharp contrasts : some 5 million traditional smallholdings provide a by no means insignificant contribution of milk, fruit and vegetables, while 40,000 farm businesses, including holding companies, can stretch to 20,000 hectares of leased land – the oligarch Petro Porochenko is believed to control 250,000 hectares. These businesses are increasingly efficient but their legal basis is uncertain. These two worlds coexist without any notable friction, but an ineluctable rural exodus is gathering steam.

The uncertainties that weigh on the status of land are slowing change. A moratorium that has been renewed several times, freezing the sales of farming land, is causing heated debates between partisans of the status quo and leasing and those who would like to open the market to foreign investors, both camps taking turns to put forward good arguments without always revealing their true agendas : the stakes are indeed high.

The issue of cruelly insufficient funding in the agricultural sector is compounded by the lack of

road, rail and port infrastructures and storage capacities that paralyze agricultural development. This came to the fore in 2008 when the cereal harvest was outstanding (53 million MT). A considerable effort is required to bring production into line with European standards and ensure that products can be taken to market, without contestation, notably by Russia. The agribusiness industry is clearly progressing but still has some way to go.

This calls for a genuine strategy dictated not by short-term interest but by an encompassing vision. Ukraine has sacrificed market share to Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan in order to control prices on its domestic market.

By making the most of its considerable potential, Ukraine is in the process of becoming a major player just as the threat of food shortages becomes increasingly real.

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Translation : A. Fell

P.-S.

Philippe de Suremain, French Ambassador in Ukraine from 2002 to 2005. Pierre Verluise is Director of *Diploweb.com*.

Notes

[1] The Euro is the final stages of a high-profile four-yearly soccer competition entered by the national teams of all European countries.

[2] Translator's note : a landmark date in the French Revolution, the unanimous abolition of feudalism