Protestors periodically shoot fireworks at Berkut. The entire square lights up and people cheer. Kiev, 01/23/2014.
The current political crisis in Ukraine, which, in the past few days, has resulted in an open and bloody confrontation, and has claimed the lives of dozens of people, would be one of the many crisis caused by anti-government protests against a kleptocratic government—so usual in non-democratic countries or in those which have not yet consolidated their democratisation process—if Ukraine were not located in one of the most important territories in the world from a strategic point of view.

1) It shares borders with Russia on the east; Belarus on the north; and Poland, Moldova, Hungary, Slovakia and Romania on the west. It is a country between Russia and the European Union, but it does not have the same significance for both of them. For the EU as a whole, Ukraine is a neighbouring country, included in the scope of the European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument (ENPI), the financial tool of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP). Apart from being a mechanism for financial support, the ENP aspires to make the EU look like an international actor which is able and willing to provide security and opportunities both in its own backyard and beyond. Therefore, all the events which take place in Ukraine have direct relevance on the EU’s interests.

For Russia, Ukraine is crucial in a historical way (the first Slavic State was created in the Kievan Rus’ in the 9th century), in a psychological way (they call it “Little Russia”) and, above all, in a political, economic and strategic way. Zbigniew Brezinski claimed that Russia would never be a European empire without Ukraine, which constitutes its historical aspiration. By losing its political influence in Ukraine, Russia would no longer control the trade route of its products and hydrocarbons to the west (the EU is Russia’s largest economic partner, to where it exports 40% of its hydrocarbons. In 2012, trade between Russia and the EU was equivalent to 400 trillion dollars). More importantly, Ukraine is a key country for Russia’s national security. Occupying Ukraine is necessary to conquer the Volgograd area, as well as to advance towards Moscow (like the Germans did throughout the Second World War), and it would cut off
communication between the Caucasus and the rest of Russia. For Europe, Ukraine would only be of strategic importance in the event of one of its States willing to attack Russia. The Russians know there is no such intention, but also that their defence plans must not depend on the plans of others, what others want or what they are able to do at some point.

2) Ukraine’s southern border adjoins the Black Sea, which links Europe with Central Asia, the Caucasus, and with the Marmara, Aegean and Mediterranean Seas; as well as with the Middle East (Syria, Iraq and Iran) through Turkey (where the NATO bases of the area are located, together with Romania and Bulgaria). It is one of the most insecure areas in the world regarding Islamic terrorism and drug smuggling. The security of the area is highly dependent on cooperation between countries which have access to the Black Sea (Ukraine, Romania, Bulgaria, Turkey, Georgia and Russia). The more understanding there is between them, the better.

3) For Russia, the Black Sea plays a key role in exporting its gas to Europe, as well as in terms of defence. Russia has three naval bases on the coasts of the Black Sea: one of its own, Novorossiysk, and two other in Ukraine, Sebastopol and Odessa (at least until 2042, according to their agreement with Ukraine in return of gas supply).

4) For Russia, the Black Sea plays a key role in its relations with other historical rival, Turkey, as well as in its influence in the Middle East, Central Asia and the Caucasus. Both Turkey and Russia try to maintain their influence areas in the Balkans and the Middle East.
The Sea of Azov is located between Ukraine and Russia, and it is crucial for the Russian connection with the Caspian Sea (through which Russia exports gas from Kazakhstan) and the Caucasus.

Regarding these key factors of Ukraine’s strategic importance, we need to distinguish between the political crisis between Ukraine’s government and its opposition, and the influence of said crisis in the relations between: 1) Ukraine and Russia; 2) Ukraine and the EU; 3) Ukraine and the USA; 4) the EU/USA and Russia. Two key issues arise from all those bipolarities, which will mark the future of the international relations: how far is Russia prepared to go to defend their national interest? (this question includes the doubts regarding the expansion of NATO to the east) and, how will the current crisis affect the relations between Germany and Russia, which have always marked the destiny of Europe?

The political crisis in Ukraine

Just like all Eastern European countries, Ukraine was founded in the ruins of the empires which disappeared after the First World War (1918); and, like most of them, it is a puzzle made of different ethnic groups and religions.

In the case of Ukraine, the Dnieper River is the natural border between the east and the west. During the 17th and 18th centuries, Ukraine was divided in Poland, the Otoman Empire and the Russian Empire, and during the 19th century, it was divided in the Austro-Hungarian and the Russian empires. This natural border is also the religious border between Catholics and the Uniates (Slavs who accepted
the Catholic religion but maintained the Orthodox rite) and Orthodox Christians. Therefore, the Northwest of the country is culturally close to Europe, where most people speak Ukrainian and are Catholic (or, Orthodox people have their own Ukrainian Orthodox church) whereas the Southeast, were Russian is spoken, maintains historical ties with Russia and the Russian Orthodox Church. The central area of the country is a mixture which does not show a clear division between the “two Ukraines”.

Regarding population, over 46 million people live in Ukraine, 77.8% of which declare themselves Ukrainian and 17.3% Russian. The rest of the population are minority groups of Romanian, Tartars, Polish and Hungarians. 24% of Ukrainians consider their mother tongue to be Russian.

The key issue about Ukraine’s political identity is the fact that, apart from the short period between 1912 and 1992 (when it became part of the USSR), it was always part of other empires—hence its name “Ukraine”, which means “in the borderland”—. Two characteristics of its location have determined its identity: the bounds of the empires and those between the empires, which also meant the empires fighting for them.

Since 1991, when it became independent from the former USSR, Ukraine has gone through several political crises throughout the democratisation process. Said crisis, like the current one, proved that the Ukrainian sovereignty is more related to its borders than its politics: it has always been defined in terms of its relationship with the European Union or Russia. These are symbolic definitions: Europe represents more values than the European Union. It represents the aspiration for liberal democracy, with its Rule of Law, free market and individual rights. Russia represents the autocratic regime, but also the historical ties between the Slavs and the Orthodox religion. Over the last twenty years the ties with Russia have hindered any approach to Europe, and enhanced the connection between Russian and the Ukrainian oligarchs, which are largely maintained by both governments. However attractive European values may be, most Ukrainian fortunes have been made in Russia. In both
countries, oligarchs (the men of the former Communist nomenclature, former members of the secret service, their families and friends) hamper the internal democratisation of the country, as well as its political ties with the EU, because they are neither ready nor willing to admit democratic transparency.

Victor Yanukovich’s government refusing to sign an association agreement with the EU at the meeting of its Council in Vilna on 28 November sparked the current political crisis in Ukraine. In a short period of time, protests became the expression of the general discontent of the population with Yanukovich’s government, calling for his resignation as well as early elections. Both demonstrators and Western politicians hoped that protests would constitute a new Orange Revolution. However, there are big differences between them, and not only because the fact of demonstrators using violence on the streets rules out the possibility of defining it as a “velvet revolution”.

The Orange Revolution took place in 2004 when Victor Yanukovich won flawed elections, which had to be repeated due to peaceful protests of citizens. The winner of the new elections, Viktor Yushchenko, opted for a nationalist policy against Russia, approaching the EU and NATO. But, if we examine in detail the background of the leaders of the Orange Revolution, we will realise that Yushchenko had already been Prime Minister from 1999 to 2001 (with Kuchma as President), and Yulia Timoshenko was an oligarch of the energy industry who had been Viceprime Minister with Yushchenko. Actually, it was their dismissal, in January 2001, for being accused of many illegalities, which made them enemies of Kuchma and Yanukovich, and not ideological differences. However, the expectations of the population raised by Yushchenko’s government did not come true, which explains Yanukovich’s subsequent win in 2010 (in fair elections this time).
Yanukovich has tried to keep the balance between the EU and Russia, seeking the support of both regions. Such double game (known by the three parties) came to an end when Ukraine refused to sign the association agreement with the EU and subsequently approached Russia by signing several economic agreements which were much more advantageous than those offered by the EU. The EU and the IMF offered 610 million dollars and a market where Ukrainian products are not able to compete against European products due to their quality. The Treaty would economically benefit the EU (which aims to export its products due to the crisis) much more than Ukraine. Russia has offered 15 trillion dollars of financial support, as well as to cut gas prices by one third. However, since the resignation of Mikola Azarov’s government, the agreement with Russia is pending, and both the EU and the USA are trying to increase their financial support offer.

Protests have reflected an evolution in both the opposition and the government strategies: firstly, demonstrations were peaceful and later they became violent attacks against policemen, as well as occupation of public buildings. From the beginning, the government used force alleging its duty to ensure its monopoly of violence. However, since protests have become more radical, the government adopted a conciliatory tone due to the pressure of Western leaders as well as its fear of a civil conflict which would fracture the country. Yanukovich has offered everything but his resignation and the calling of early elections: the resignation of the Prime Minister, Mikola Azarov, and his government; he has offered Arseniy Yatsenyuk, the leader of the opposition, to take his place and to create a coalition government (rejected by Yatsenyuk); the suspension of the so-called “dictatorial legislation” (a copy of Russian legislation emanating from Putin’s authoritarianism) which sparked off street violence; negotiations to replace the
2011 Constitution with that of 2004, which placed more limits to the presidential power and, lastly, to release people detained in protests in exchange for removing demonstrators from public spaces. Protesters have been evicted from the city council as well as from some of the main streets in Kiev in exchange for releasing of 234 detainees during protests. Although it seemed that the Ukrainian political crisis was on track toward a peaceful solution, the statements of both sides predicted nothing but the conflict becoming radical. Demonstrators expressed their intention of continuing protests until they obtained the resignation of Yanukovich, as well as that of getting ready “to defend themselves from the attacks and tortures” of the regime. Their statements showed that demonstrators are led by radicals, and that Yanukovich’s government is not willing to give in to more than the previous offers. The battle on the streets of Kiev, which has already claimed many lives, both from civilians and policemen, as well as thousands of wounded, is a tragic fact which might lead to a civil war. Ukraine’s army has 760000 forces (it is the largest in Europe after the Russian) and can be deployed at any moment. It is obvious that early elections (if Yanukovich accepted to call them) could not be held in a violent atmosphere and sponsored by the institutions of such a destabilised country.

The opposition is united by the anti-Russian nationalism, but includes an extreme fringe and lacks of a common leader (a big difference in comparison with the Orange Revolution). It comprises from centre-right Batkivshchyna (Homeland), led by Arseniy Yatsenyuk, a substitute for Yulia Timoshenko, who is now in prison; to UDAR (Strike), led by former boxer Vitali Klitschko and the ultra-nationalist and xenophobe Svoboda (Freedom) led by Oleg Tyahnybok, whose ideology has nothing to do with the European values. Pravy Sektor (Right Wing) is not a political party,
but a radical group of football fans which possibly started street violence among demonstrators.

**Ukraine and Russia**

From Russia’s point of view, Ukraine’s approach to the EU represents a challenge to its national security, which means that Russia is willing to go as far as it takes to defend its interests, even a military intervention (which it will try to avoid), as it proved in the war against Georgia (2008). At that time, much was said about the possible accession of Ukraine and Georgia to the NATO, until the 5-day war in August 2008 interrupted these plans. Said intervention, which started under the pretext of protecting the Russian population in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, was a clear message to the NATO, but also to Georgia and Ukraine. One of the first measures adopted by Yanukovich in 2010, was that of promoting a new law on “Fundamentals of Ukraine’s domestic and foreign policy” which established the neutral status of the country and suggested the suspension of its accession to the NATO as the objective of the law on “Fundamentals of National Security of Ukraine”.

Vladimir Putin’s government ascribed the success of the *Orange Revolution* to the help of the Western secret services—CIA and MI6—to the Ukrainian NGOs. True or not, it marked its domestic policy (by introducing a restrictive legislation for Russian NGOs and treason legislation) as well as its foreign policy regarding Ukraine. Since then, Putin intensified the economic blackmail as well as the intelligence work, and strengthened the ties between oligarchs in order to hamper Ukraine’s approach to Europe.

Vladimir Putin’s strategy regarding Ukraine is the same than that regarding other countries of the former Soviet Union: an indirect control. Russia does not intend to govern Ukraine—it has the failure of the USSR and its attempt to govern 15 different republics as an example—. But it wants a “negative” control: that
Ukraine does not do what Russia does not want it to do, especially if its attitude directly threatens Russia’s national security. It is obvious that Putin would rather have a related government in Ukraine, but he is willing to negotiate with any Ukrainian government on their interests: naval bases (military cooperation) and economic exports. The main purpose of the creation of a Eurasian Union is to fulfil said aspirations.

Moscow has tangible tools to influence Kiev: the upkeep of its military presence in the Black Sea, the granting of the Russian nationality to Russians who live in Ukraine, trade blockades which affect Ukrainian agriculture and materials produced by the heavy industry, and gas supply disruptions (as was seen in 2006 and 2009).

**Ukraine and the European Union**

For the EU, Ukraine does not have the historical and psychological significance which it has for Russia, but it is important for Europe because it has an extraordinary significance for Russia. It never aspired to include Ukraine (the population of which is 46 million) as a member, let alone since the beginning of the economic crisis, although it will not shut the door on this possibility (more to encourage Ukrainians to deepen its democratisation process than to fulfil its own interests). Adding the Ukrainian economy to those of Southern Europe countries would be a suicide for the EU. Ukraine has been more of an Eastern Partnership country (Armenia, Azerbaijan; Belarus, Georgia, Moldova) the objective of which is to promote the development of democracy through economic and free-market relations with the EU.
The Ukrainian crisis has stressed the failure of the ENP and the need to define a new paradigm to guide the relations between the EU and the neighbourhood. This failure is due to the fact that the EU has not been able to compete with the strength of other regional actors—firstly Russia, and then the Eurasian Union—and that, even though there is supposed to be a common policy toward the neighbours in the east, in the case of Ukraine, there is no common position regarding its crisis. Suggestions regarding its solution are opposed: some countries suggest restricting the visa policy and economically blocking the businesses of oligarchs and politicians who are close to Yanukovich, whilst others suggest helping the opposition. Germany will have the final say, the attitude of which is ambiguous: it has shared interests of investments and energy dependence with Russia, and it would therefore be cautious and will not seek to provoke Russia. On the other hand, it is in favour of Ukraine having a bigger independence from Russia and approaching the EU. It remains to be seen how Germany’s decision of applying the “Spiderman Doctrine”—with great powers come greater responsibility—and playing a bigger role in international conflicts, announced at the Munich conference on security by several of its political leaders, will influence the Ukrainian crisis. Given the rejection of 60% of Germany’s population to this shift in foreign policy, the odds are that German leadership will be expressed in homeopathic doses. At the present, Germany is faced with a choice between an agreement with the Europeans or the Russians.

The EU has not clearly defined its political interest in Ukraine, apart from promoting democracy and Western values. This interest will be redefined as its relationship with Russia takes shape. The new paradigm for the relations between the EU and neighbouring countries should include not only countries which share a border with Europe, like it has been until now, but a broader geopolitical area where Russia must be present, because the crises in Syria and Iran, as well as that of Ukraine, have stressed the existing interconnection between Russia and the European Neighbourhood Policy.
Ukraine and the USA

The USA supported the Orange Revolution and supports the current Ukrainian opposition. Its strategic interests in the Black Sea are covered by many military agreements with Turkey, Georgia, Romania and Bulgaria, therefore, they are not essential regarding its relationship with Ukraine. Its reasons and attitude are marked (as well as its interests in promoting the development of liberal democracy in the world) by its declining relationship with Russia (the three last disagreements: Russia’s support to the regime of Assad in Syria; its rejection to a common tougher position toward Iran and its rejection to extradite Edward Snowden for him to be tried in the USA). The only strategic interest of the USA is counterbalancing the Russian policy in Ukraine. Its measures toward Ukraine are: supporting the opposition and restricting the visa policy and economically blocking the businesses of oligarchs of the Ukrainian political and economic elites.

Russia and the EU/USA

Since Russia’s independence, in 1991, Russia’s foreign policy has been through four phases: throughout the nineties and up to the war in Iraq in 2003, Russia has tried to approach the West and to be part of its democratic institutions. In 2003, Russia abandoned the western orbit due to a disagreement with the USA about its foreign policy, especially about its counter terrorism strategy outside the ONU framework (the war in Iraq) and about them interfering in internal affairs of some countries aiming to cause a change in their governments. The culmination of this period was mar-

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The fourth phase—the current one—is focused on strengthening the economic relations with former Soviet countries through the Eurasian Union, without abandoning the traditional attitude of challenge toward the West (but its aspiration is no longer joining it). The Arctic and the Pacific are also on its agenda, as well as the complex relations with China, which are being defined as the “Great Game” of the area. The last change in Russia’s foreign policy is inspired by: 1) Vladimir Putin’s personal vision—regaining the status of big power which he believes to correspond to Russia—, 2) the fact that the economic crisis has damaged the image of the West, which is no longer an example to follow according to many Russians, and 3) the attitude of the EU and USA of not treating Russia as an “equal” among them. This phase is accompanied by the introduction of “Russian traditional values” in the political life, which is translated into a big influence of the Russian Orthodox Church and an increasingly anti-Western political discourse.

Since the Pussy Riot case (2011), for the first time since 1991, the Russian government has stated openly that it does not accept “the current European ultraliberalism”—reflected in gay propaganda, multiculturalism and secularism—, and that it is more identified with the European values of the 19th century: family values, the leading role of the Church and religion in political and social lives, and national so-
vereignty. Thus, Russia is no longer defensive about the criticisms received due to its lack of respect toward human rights, but it emphasises its own values and does not hesitate to criticise its former mentor and model.

The strongest tie between the EU and Russia is economic, and both regions will try to maintain their status quo. Russia perceives the EU’s interference in Ukraine’s internal affairs and Germany’s open support to the opposition as a challenge and evidence against its government and its national interests.

The former framework of the Cooperation Agreement between the EU and Russia, which was in force between 1994 and 2007, and which is annually renewed since 2008, does not longer correspond to the real relations between both parties, because it was created in a moment when Russia was believed to become increasingly European. Whilst Europe was plunged into its economic crisis, Russia was changing its overall foreign policy, and its attitude toward the EU in particular: it has adopted a more competitive position through “economic diplomacy” (boosting dependence on Russian hydrocarbons and investing in the economies of the post-Soviet space) the aim of which is hindering European attempts to expand its influence toward neighbouring countries. Whilst the EU keeps talking about energy, visas and human rights with Russia, Russians intend to be treated as “equals” by receiving the EU acceptance of its proposal of free trade between the Eurasian Union and the EU which would especially benefit countries between the EU and Russia.

In any case, Ukraine’s crisis has proved that the Cooperation Agreement framework has become obsolete and that the EU should search for a way to include Russia in its new ENP paradigm. Said search will be deeply marked by the political and
ideological (historical on the other hand) incompatibility between Europe and Russia. Whilst the first one is a 21st century power (using diplomacy and soft power as the main instruments of its foreign policy), Russia behaves like a 19th century power, sending ships to areas of conflict (Mediterranean Sea in the case of Syria) and using soft coercion, this is, economic and political blackmail.

The creation of the Eurasian Union reflects Russia’s fear arisen by the EU and NATO’s expansion to the east, but also shows a real and objective economic interest. As long as the adherence of its members is voluntary, like in the case of Kazakhstan and Belarus, there is no reason for concern. Russia is aware that it cannot incorporate Ukraine in the Eurasian Union without the will of its government and people. The new ENP paradigm will have to consider possible interconnections between the EU and Russia which may benefit both parties.

The battle for Ukraine is not won and it is most likely to be a long process which will reflect competitiveness between the EU and Russia on one hand and Ukraine’s attempts to find balance between both on the other.

The current Ukrainian crisis can be seen as the continuation of the open conflict between Russia and the West due to the war in Georgia. It reflects the problems provoked by the enlargement of the EU and NATO (Russians claim that Ronald Reagan and Helmut Kohl assured Mikhail Gorbachev that NATO would never expand toward the east. Germany and France have always been against it, as they expressed in the Bucharest NATO Summit in 2008).
Russia’s attitude, although it is a momentum for rebuilding its empire, is especially marked by its interest in national security, and will regard any approach from Ukraine to the EU or NATO as a provocation. Moreover, the Baltic countries, Poland, Bulgaria and Romania consider that Ukraine joining the NATO would be essential for their security regarding its archenemy, Russia.

Ukraine’s territory will still be, as it has always been, a scene of interconnection between different geostrategic, economic and political interests; because, we can define our values, but we cannot change geography.