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The 23rd EU-Ukraine Summit at a time of changes

Milàn CZERNY

On August 24th, Ukraine celebrated the 30th anniversary of its independence. This offered a window of opportunity for the country's president, Volodymyr Zelensky, to mobilise the population domestically around patriotic rhetoric and, internationally, to engage in diplomatic initiatives. However, on both fronts, the Ukrainian leader faces important challenges: mounting Covid-19 cases, intensification of Russian pressure, and Western states' refusal to meet Kyiv's expectations. The EU-Ukrainian summit planned on October 12th 2021 represents the occasion for both sides to reflect on these difficulties and for the EU to clarify its position *vis-à-vis* its eastern neighbour.

THE IMPACT OF THE PANDEMIC

The [latest EU-Ukraine](#) summit in October 2020 was the first EU summit to take place in person in Brussels since the start of the pandemic. At the time, the EU put emphasis on the need for cooperation against Covid-19 and pledged economic assistance to Ukraine as cases were mounting in Kyiv. Yet, following a third Covid-19 wave, restrictions were virtually non-existent this summer in Ukraine, and Kyiv turned into the "pandemic's party capital". It attracted European tourists fleeing stricter regulations as well as Gulf state visitors, forbidden to travel to their usual destinations in western European capitals. Among Ukrainian society, many were convinced that the virus was behind them.

Unsurprisingly, since the start of September, cases have been rapidly rising in Ukraine. On top of the lack of restrictions, the percentage of fully vaccinated in the country amounted to solely 12% at the end of September, one of the lowest rates in Europe. At the start of the pandemic, Kyiv struggled to secure doses, relying largely on donations from European

countries, the COVAX initiatives and Covishield (the Indian version of the AstraZeneca vaccine). The pace of inoculation has been slow because of a longstanding distrust of vaccines, political infighting around vaccinations and misinformation. According to the United Nations Development Programme, Ukraine suffers from an "infodemic" with false narratives and conspiracy theories spreading on social media. The US State Department and the Ukrainian security service (SBU) have blamed Russian "official state media, proxy news sites, and social media personas" for spreading such disinformation. However, Russia is not the sole actor to blame, some prominent Ukrainian politicians, such as former president Petro Poroshenko and former Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko have raised doubts concerning the quality of vaccines purchased by the current Ukrainian government, encouraging further suspicion amongst the population. Hence, the 4th wave of Covid-19 might be particularly serious in Ukraine at a time when European countries are learning to co-exist with the virus thanks to high rates of vaccination.

In this difficult epidemiologic context, the Ukrainian government is resorting to coercive measures. To boost inoculation rates, the government is planning to make vaccinations compulsory for certain state jobs. Additionally, starting on September 23, the government decided to move all regions into a "yellow zone" consisting in limitations on mass events and occupancy rates at gyms, cinemas and other venues unless all visitors are vaccinated to contain the spread of the virus.

However, it is questionable whether Zelensky can enforce these measures throughout the country. One year ago, local mayors were already strongly pushing back against lockdown measures adopted

by Zelensky's government. Additionally, the economic cost of previous restrictions limits Zelensky's margin of manoeuvre. The Ukrainian economy contracted by 4.4% in 2020.[1] Low-income workers in the informal sectors found themselves without revenues and small and medium-size enterprises have been badly hit despite the European Union's and World Bank's support.

DOMESTIC POLITICS

The rise in Covid-19 infections comes at a time of potential significant turmoil in Ukrainian domestic politics. The current president Volodymir Zelensky faces stark opposition from various members of the political elite. The popular mayor of Kyiv and former world heavyweight boxing champion, Vitaly Klitschko, is often mentioned as a potential future rival presidential candidate. He has stepped up his criticism of Zelensky's handling of the vaccination program and has notably tried to buy vaccines by using Kyiv's municipality budget to launch an independent campaign. The 4th coronavirus wave might thus provide a further boost to Klitschko's ambitions and challenge Zelensky's standing.

While the resignation of influential minister of interior Arsen Avakov may strengthen Zelensky's control over the police force and Ukrainian Security Service (SBU), this minister's departure does not mean that he is out of the political picture. Avakov maintains influence within hard power structures, and he has close ties with members of the far-right Azov movements. Clashes erupted during the summer between members of this group and law enforcement following the interior minister's resignation. Avakov may also gain greater freedom by standing outside of the current government and thus emerge as a parallel centre of power. While he has become an unpopular figure, he has ties and access to resources that can be mobilised in favour of a candidate standing against Zelensky in future elections.

[1] Shevchenko Kyrylo,
"Speech by NBU Governor Kyrylo
Shevchenko at a Press Briefing
on Monetary Policy", 21 January
2021

[2] Shevchenko Kyrylo,
"Speech by NBU Governor Kyrylo
Shevchenko at a Press Briefing
on Monetary Policy", 21 January
2021.

Moreover, Zelensky has decided in recent months to intensify his campaign against the country's oligarchs. This is a much-needed step in the right direction but, doubts remain concerning Zelensky's approach to the issue. Measures have particularly targeted Viktor

Medvedchuk, leader of the pro-Russian party "For Life": his TV channels and assets have been sanctioned and Medvedchuk himself is currently under house arrest. To broaden the scope of his campaign and reject accusations of political repression, Zelensky has pushed forward a "anti-oligarch" bill. This law, voted on at the end of September, legally defines the term "oligarch" and imposes restrictions on those falling under the label (a ban on privatising state assets, holding public office and funding political parties). Less than 24 hours after the adoption of this law, an assassination attempt targeted Zelensky's friend and top adviser Serhiy Shefir, underscoring the risks of a political storm looming over Ukraine in subsequent months.

While the new law may seem like a brave step in the right direction, it has clear drawbacks. To begin with, it does not address oligarchs' control over media, their main tool of influence. Additionally, it targets individuals rather than the underlying political structure and clans allowing oligarchs to emerge and consolidate their power. Reflecting this limitation, only 14% of Ukrainians believe that the law will improve the political and economic situation in Ukraine according to a survey conducted by the Ukrainian research firm Gradus.[2] Finally, the law goes against principles of separation of power and rule of law enshrined in Ukraine's constitution. This raises the risks of furthering Zelensky's authoritarian tendencies; a worrying prospect in a country that has been ruled by autocrats in recent years. The criteria defining who constitutes an "oligarch" leave room for politicised decisions. Indeed, they provide additional tools for Zelensky to target political opponents such as Medvedchuk and Poroshenko. At the same time, it is unclear if Ihor Kolomoisky, Zelensky's backer, will fall under the new law. Hence, Zelensky's policies might fuel instability while addressing only selectively and in an incomplete manner the oligarchs' grip over Ukraine's political arena.

Furthermore, the recent revelations of the Pandora papers cast a cloud over Zelensky's anti-corruption image.[3] Slidstvo.info, a Ukrainian investigative project, gained access to leaked documents proving that the Ukrainian leader and his partners in comedy

production owned a network of offshore companies in Belize, the British Virgin Islands, and Cyprus as well as real estates in London. Money transfers from the oligarch Ihor Kolomoisky fed these accounts. These revelations undermine Zelensky's political identity as the leader ran in 2019 as a humble comedian on an anti-corruption platform. The timing of the leaks' release, a few weeks after the adoption of the anti-oligarch law, risk being particularly hurtful to Zelensky's standing domestically as well as internationally in the eyes of Western backers.

Consequently, Zelensky's critics have denounced that the president's reforms are meant to act merely serving as a façade to improve opinion polls. In recent months, Zelensky's trust ratings have increased, reaching 50%, mainly as a result of his seemingly hard-line policy against oligarchs and his beating of the patriotic drum in the context of Ukraine's 30th independence anniversary. [4] However, the effect of rallying around the flag like this might prove short lived. It is too early to assess the implications that the [Pandora Papers](#) might have on Zelensky's rating. However, his popularity remains dependent, in largely, on the evolution of the conflict with Russia. Moscow has a direct influence on Ukraine's domestic trajectory, and it has increased its pressure on Kyiv in recent months.

THE CURRENT STATE OF THE CONFLICT WITH RUSSIA

The conflict between Russia and Ukraine has grown throughout 2021. While escalation remains unlikely, Russia has ratcheted pressure on its neighbour to communicate 'red lines' to Western states.

In April, large movements of troops by the Russian army were witnessed and together with that of hardware near the Ukrainian border thereby bringing the conflict back to the attention of the international community. According to different estimations, between 120,000 and 80,000 Russian troops were mobilised. . This constitutes approximately 10-15% of Russia's total manpower and up to one-third of its battalion tactical groups. The United States Department of Defence's spokesperson John Kirby indicated that it

represented the largest deployment of Russian forces alongside its shared border with Ukraine since 2014 and the start of the war. While Russian minister of Defence Sergey Shoygu announced on April 22nd that its troops would pull back, the withdrawal has been only partial. Additionally, in the Donbas, the fighting has been virtually constant in recent months. In mid-September, four Ukrainian soldiers were killed in less than three days in the east of the country, raising the total number of Ukrainian troops killed to 54 since the start of 2021 compared to a total of 50 last year. A skirmish also erupted in the Black Sea at the start of the summer: The British Royal Navy contested Russian claims over territorial waters off Crimea by sailing near the peninsula, leading Moscow to deploy warplanes and coastguard vessels and claim that it fired warning shots at the British Destroyer.

The rhetoric surrounding these events has done little to quell tensions. Dmitry Kozak, a senior Russian official, argued that the start of military action by Kyiv "would be the beginning of the end of Ukraine" and pledged to defend Russian citizens in Eastern Ukraine "if there is a Srebrenica". Furthermore, the president of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin published a [lengthy essay](#), "On the historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians", interpreted as an attempt to legitimise Russian claims over Ukraine. He argued in this essay that Russians and Ukrainians constitute "a single people", emphasised that modern-day Ukraine is set upon historically Russian lands, and that Ukrainian sovereignty remains dependent upon its neighbour. Zelensky responded to this article with sarcasm that if Ukraine and Russia are one, "there would a yellow-blue flag over the State Duma". The Ukrainian president also increased his rhetoric against Russian actions — more recently before the UN General Assembly where he accused Moscow of "international crime" — and warned that an all-out war with Moscow was a possibility.

Nevertheless, despite repeated warnings concerning the imminence of a renewed Russian offensive against Ukraine in recent months, such a prospect remains currently unlikely for several reasons. First of all, while the Kremlin's military interventions in Ukraine as well as in Syria have relied on an element of surprise,

[3] OCCRP, "Pandora Papers. Reveal Offshore Holdings of Ukrainian President and his Inner Circle", 3 October 2021

[4] Ukrinfo, "Zelensky gets 45% approval rating from Ukrainians", 27 July 2021

Moscow's military deployment in April was widely open to public view. Russian but also Western media could approach military facilities. It is difficult to imagine that Russia would have left the door open for all to see if it was planning for a full-blown military offensive. Secondly, compared to 2014, a Russian operation would be more costly (the Ukrainian army is better prepared and equipped, the West can adopt additional sanctions) and there is no objective that can counter-balance such costs. The takeover of the Northern Crimean Canal to solve Crimea water shortage is often spoken of as a potential target for Russia. However, alternative options to deal with the water issue are far less risky and expensive[5]. Hence, since the start of the war, Moscow has tried to retain the territory it has gained and reach a settlement in its favour rather than take over additional pieces of land. Thirdly, the Russian population seems unwilling to see its country engage in a new costly foreign policy campaign. In 2014, the annexation of Crimea provided a massive popularity boost to the head of the Kremlin. Today, according to the independent polling centre Levada, inflation and poverty are at the centre of the Russians' concerns. In August of this year, up to 66% of the population indicated that it deemed high standards of living more important than being a major power for Russia – the highest figure since the early 2000s. Hence, taking these factors into account and notwithstanding the risk of undesired escalation, the multiplication of alarming reports about future Russian military actions might be counterproductive. Such warnings contribute to instability and mask the true meanings behind Russia's increased pressure on Kyiv.

Russia's military build-up can be better interpreted through the lens of strategic communication. According to Russian officials, Moscow increased its military presence in April to deter a Ukrainian offensive in Donbas. This argument is unconvincing to say the least. Ukraine still lacks the military means to shift to an offensive posture and it has not indicated any desire to do so. Rather, by amassing troops near Ukraine's borders, Moscow sought to communicate to the West and to Joe Biden's administration that Russia has clear "red lines". This was echoed in Vladimir Putin's address to the Federal assembly, pronounced the day before

Shoygu announced the withdrawal of Russian troops. As a candidate for the presidency, Joe Biden positioned himself as a strong supporter of Ukraine and indicated his desire to increase U.S defensive assistance to Kyiv. However, a change in the current *statu quo* constitutes one of Moscow's redline. Russia has thus communicated through hard-power deployment the potential cost that Ukraine might have to bear if Joe Biden increased American support for the U.S and embolden Zelensky.

The second of the Kremlin's "red lines" is related to Ukraine's NATO membership. Zelensky has pressed the new American administration to accept his country's request for a Membership Action Plan (MAP), the pathway to becoming part of the Alliance. However, the Kremlin deems this prospect unacceptable. At the end of September, Vladimir Putin reiterated in a discussion with Belarusian leader Alexander Lukashenko that "NATO's potential infrastructure expansion into the Ukrainian territory" would be regarded as "crossing Russia's red lines".[6] Through its military build-up and aggressive rhetoric, the Kremlin has communicated that it can and is ready to act in the event of closer ties between Ukraine and NATO. In sum, through its actions toward Ukraine, Russia has sought Western attention. While an escalation remains unlikely, Russia's strategy and manner of communication is a source of instability and dims peace prospects.

THE ROLE OF THE EUROPEAN UNION

In this context of a challenging domestic climate and a tense situation with Russia, Zelensky has sought to rally Western states' support through diplomatic efforts. However, the US and the EU have taken steps that have undermined the Ukrainian president's expectations. In turn, Zelensky has clearly voiced his dissatisfaction and has sought to pivot and develop ties with new partners, most notably Turkey. The EU-Ukraine summit planned on October 12th thus takes place at a turning point in the relations between the two sides.

In the wake of Russia's military build up in April, Zelensky has reasserted Ukraine's ambitious hopes of both EU and NATO membership. He has sought to obtain clear commitments in support of Ukraine from Western states.

[5] Rob Lee, "Russia's coercive diplomacy: why did the Kremlin mass its forces near Ukraine this Spring?", *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, 23 August, 2021.

[6] Reuters, "Kremlin says NATO expansion in Ukraine is a 'red line for Putin'", 27 September 2021.

On July 19th Ukraine launched jointly with Moldova and Georgia the “association trio’s initiative” in the hopes of bringing the three countries “closer to full membership in the European Union”. Such an initiative is in line with Zelensky’s view that the “ [Ukraine’s membership of the European Union](#) has stopped being hypothetical” and “should be solved by the end of the current decade”. Additionally, the Ukrainian president has insisted on Ukraine’s legitimacy to become a member of NATO. Zelensky seeks to portray Kyiv as not solely asking for Western charity but rather emphasise the positive contributions his “large country, Europe’s largest territorially, with a population that has survived several wars” can make to NATO and the EU. He has pressed the French and American leaders to give a clear yes’ or ‘no’ answer to Kyiv’s demand for a MAP by arguing that “if you want Russia to get stronger, don’t accept Ukraine”, without Ukraine “NATO will lose”[7]. The Ukrainian leadership also used the celebrations around Ukraine’s 30-independence anniversary to further call the West to deliver a clear message of Kyiv’s inclusion. On the eve of the anniversary, Zelensky launched the Crimean platform, an initiative meant to put the Russian annexation of the peninsula back on the international agenda, unite efforts to oppose the Russian take over and mobilise Western support. The celebrations were also an occasion for Zelensky to further stress Kyiv’s historical ties to Europe, Ukraine’s contribution in the Second World War and thus legitimise his claims to EU and NATO membership.

But despite Kyiv’s repeated demands, no promises or timelines have been issued in Brussels and Washington concerning Ukraine’s inclusion in NATO or the EU. In recent months, President Biden has been largely focused on US troops’ withdrawal from Afghanistan; an event that spurred doubts in Kyiv concerning Washington’s commitment to its partners. Biden has yet to nominate a candidate for the role of US ambassador to Ukraine. When directly asked to respond to Kyiv’s demands for membership in the Alliance, Biden threw cold water on Zelensky’s hopes: “School’s out on that question, it remains to be seen”[8]. In Europe, France has remained largely silent in face of Zelensky’s calls for inclusion in the EU. Emmanuel Macron maintains hopes in sustaining a dialogue with Moscow and this is especially

true following the ‘submarine crisis’, understood in Paris as further proof that France needs to sustain an independent course from the US. Furthermore, both German Chancellor Merkel and President Macron did not attend the Crimean platform, to the Ukrainian leadership’s frustration.

More significantly, regardless of Zelensky’s repeated opposition, Germany and the U.S reached an agreement to permit the construction of Moscow’s Nord Stream 2. The new pipeline bypasses Ukraine and exposes the country to energy cut-offs. For the Ukrainian leadership, the pipelines thus represent a “dangerous geopolitical weapon”[9]. Both the US and Germany have tried to assuage Kyiv’s concerns. They pledged to act against Russia if it seeks to use the gas supply as a tool of political pressure on Kyiv and they have guaranteed to repay for gas transit fees Kyiv will lose by being bypassed through 2024. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that the finalisation of Nord Stream 2 increases the weight of the Russian firm Gazprom’s bargaining position over Kyiv and represents a symbolic victory for Moscow. The green-light given to the pipeline by the Biden administration signalled that Western states will not place Kyiv’s interests before their own. Zelensky found himself further humiliated when leaks published in the media alleged that the Biden administration asked Kyiv not to voice its anger at the pipeline’s construction as this could damage the Washington-Kyiv bilateral relationship.

In turn, Ukraine has become increasingly vocal about its disappointment with Western policies. Zelensky denounced the lack of military support for Kyiv and did not stay silent following Biden’s decision to give the go-ahead to the construction of [Nord Stream 2](#). According to the Ukrainian leader, the green light to the pipeline is a “grave political error”, “a loss for the United States and President Biden’s personal loss”. Ukraine’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs Dmytro Kuleba bluntly called the completion of the pipeline “a defeat of American diplomacy”. Frustrated, Kuleba noted that Ukraine “has learned from a number of bitter lessons that Western promises are likely [to remain] unfulfilled. We do not believe in promises”[10]. Additionally, Oleksiy Danilov, secretary of Ukraine’s National Security and Defence

[7] Ukrinform, “[Zelensky: Without Ukraine, NATO will be losing and EU – weakening Zelensky: Without Ukraine, NATO will be losing and EU – weakening](#)”, 10 September 2021.

[8] Christian Datoc, “[‘It remains to be seen’: Biden says ‘school’s out’ on Ukraine joining NATO](#)”, 15 June 2021.

[9] Deutsche Welle, “[Ukraine: Nord Stream 2 a ‘dangerous geopolitical weapon’](#)”, 22 August 2021.

[10] Vladimir Socor, “[Kyiv Airing Disappointment With Western Policies](#)”, 16 September 2021.

Council argued that Germany and France should feel responsible for the occupation of Crimea and 20% of Georgian territory since Russia was emboldened by the two European countries' reluctance to extend NATO's membership to Tbilisi and Kyiv. Such tough rhetoric may resonate domestically and participate in building up Zelensky's popularity, but it is unlikely to make Western states finally meet Ukraine's demands.

Consequently, in recent months, Zelensky has sought to develop ties with third actors - neither Russia nor Western Europe - to engage a more independent course. He has notably looked south and deepened ties with Turkey. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan welcomed Zelensky in Turkey during the April Russian military build-up and endorsed Kyiv's NATO aspirations by signing a 20-point declaration in support of Ukraine. While Turkey is careful not to anger Moscow by being too outspoken in support of Ukraine - for instance Erdogan did not attend the Crimean platform - the Turkish president still reminded world leaders during [his recent speech](#) at the UN General Assembly that Turkey "attaches importance to the protection of the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Ukraine, including the Crimea, whose annexation we do not recognize". This relationship is based on mutual interests. It represents a way for the Turkish leader to gain additional leverage in its competitive-cooperative relationship with Russia and to send a signal to the West that Turkey remains part of the Western world.

Also, Erdogan seeks to build popularity domestically by publicising his support for Crimean Tatars and has demonstrated his concerns for the Turkish diaspora. He is also boosting Turkey's defence industry by selling the Bayraktar TB2 armed drones that are notably being used in Nagorno Karabakh and Idlib to Kyiv[11]. A joint training and maintenance centre for these drones will soon be established in Ukraine. In turn, Ukraine is providing Ankara with engines for helicopters and drones as well as sensitive defence technology that Turkey lacks. Both actors also aim to counter Russia in the Black Sea. Additionally, Kyiv has also welcomed China's out-reach in recent months: in July Kyiv signed an agreement to receive Chinese loans for the infrastructure sector, it has removed its signature from

a call condemning China's actions against the Uighurs and Zelensky praised the Communist Party on July 1st, the day of the 100th anniversary of its creation.[12]

In this context, the EU-Ukraine summit represents a useful occasion for both sides to clarify their positions.

The EU has left Ukraine in a "forever membership waiting room" to quote Zelensky and it must prevent Kyiv from growing increasingly frustrated. EU promises may no longer be constructive, and its bargaining power over Ukraine to push for reforms is running low. [EU's economic assistance](#) to Ukraine has been significant: more than €15 billion in grants and loans and over €205 million for investments since 2014, preferential access to the single market and €980 million to help tackle the Covid-19 pandemic. However, such support is insufficient in itself to push Kyiv to make further costly reforms. The fact that Ukraine has received more economic assistance than Central and East European countries prior their adhesion to the EU while implementing less than half of the reforms adopted by CEE states raises questions about the EU's approach[13]. The belief that the Union is unwilling to deepen ties with Ukraine regardless of reform progress has become set in the minds of policymakers in Kyiv. Brussels has run out of "carrots" to make them change their views and the completion of Nord Stream 2 further confirmed their belief.

While it is unlikely that the Summit will lead to any major changes in the relationship, one may hope that it can help mark the start of a new phase. It might help in moving beyond the Nord Stream 2 issue and somewhat lessen Ukraine's disappointment through dialogue. Increasing support to counter Covid,-19 notably in the informational space to promote vaccination, may also play a role in mending ties. The Summit will also be followed by [6th Eastern Partnership Summit in December 2021](#) where the Union will present and discuss its new proposals for cooperation with Eastern Partnership states. These include the strengthening of democratic institutions, increasing trade, growth and jobs, supporting green and digital transitions and promoting fair, gender-equal and inclusive societies. The extent to which these objectives will resonate with states such as Georgia, currently in a phase of

[11] Ukrinform, "Ukraine to buy four more Bayraktar TB2 strike drones from Turkey – Commander-in-Chief?", 13 September 2021

[12] Christian Mamo, "Cold shouldered by Brussels, Ukraine and Turkey find common cause", *Emerging Europe*, 14 July 2021

[13] Katarzyna Wolczuk and Darius Žeruolis, "Rebuilding Ukraine an Assessment of EU Assistance", *Chatham House*, August 2018

democratic backsliding, and autocratic Azerbaijan is doubtful. Nevertheless, this month's Summit is particularly important in this context. It could pave the way for greater understanding between the EU and Ukraine in the December meeting to find common ground on future objectives in the relationship and re-adjust both sides' expectations.

All in all, 30 years after its independence, Ukraine faces a difficult environment on multiple fronts. While the EU seeks to become a geopolitical actor, it is time to move

beyond the ambiguity that has characterised, to a large extent, its policy toward its eastern neighbour in the last decades.

Milàn Czerny

Second year MPhil student in Russian and East European Studies at the University of Oxford. His work has appeared notably in Le Monde, Haaretz, the Foundation for Strategic Research, NATO journal of Strategic Communications. He has collaborated extensively with the Groupe d'études géopolitiques

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