

# The EU Should Maximize Its Soft Power

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Manipulated by Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich and outplayed by President Vladimir Putin, the European Union has emerged with a bloodied nose from Ukraine. While Ukraine's leaders have not agreed so far to join the Russian-led Customs Union, indications are that they have signed away control of swathes of the country's strategic industries in return for a \$15 billion bailout package from Moscow and a short-term reduction in the price for Russian gas. Russian carrots and sticks have held the day and in practical terms, the prospect of Ukraine moving closer to Europe seems more remote than ever.

But the question of Ukraine's future orientation is still far from settled. Although the EU may have missed its moment, recent opinion polls indicate that more 60 percent of Ukrainians now support integration with Europe.

The "Euro maidan" protests have shown that there is an active part of society in Ukraine ready to voice its preference for living in a country with rule of law and accountability of leaders, where people have real opportunities to improve their lives. Many of the current protesters on Maidan Square in Kiev are owners of small businesses that cannot develop

because of institutionalized corruption. Russia's current development model holds no attraction for them.

Opposition leaders speak confidently of being able to take the protests east to regions traditionally supportive of close ties with Russia and consolidate support for Ukraine's gravitation toward European norms and values rather than the governance model based on "brotherly" relations with Russia. While it is difficult to tell to what extent this confidence is justified, Moscow's strong-arm tactics to prevent Kiev from signing the Association Agreement have undoubtedly alienated some of its key constituencies in the country. This is the behavior of a bullying neighbor rather than a strategic partner.

From an EU perspective, these are encouraging trends for the longer term. Unlike Russia, the EU is not a geopolitical actor and does not think like one. This makes the protests particularly striking since they have shown that the EU's soft power remains impressively strong in Ukraine as it also does in Georgia and Moldova. And this despite Europe's current economic woes and the introspection of its leaders.

Yet if EU countries want to see Ukraine begin to reform itself and avoid the risk of divisions within the country deepening and becoming unmanageable, they cannot rely on passive soft power alone to pull Ukraine in the right direction. They need to play a smarter game to maximize the EU's soft power advantage.

The key to achieve this is better communication with Ukrainian society. The EU has so far failed to give clear explanations about the nature and benefits of the Association Agreement, including the establishment of a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement, or DCFTA. A full-scale campaign is required to build understanding in society of what the EU is offering and to address disinformation about the effects of the DCFTA on economic relations with Russia.

Russia has been using hard and soft tools to undermine support among Ukraine's leaders and broader society for gravitation toward Europe. Last summer, Moscow arbitrarily imposed trade restrictions on different sets of Ukrainian exports from metals to chocolates, as a taster of the measures it could enforce if Ukraine implemented the DCFTA. At the same time, it conducted its own accompanying public relations effort to dissuade Ukraine's elites from building closer ties with the EU. The message was that the provisions of the DCFTA were unaffordable for Ukraine since the EU would not provide financial support, and that they would have a negative effect on Russia by displacing Ukrainian goods into the Russian market as a result of Ukraine's free trade agreement with Russia. This, in turn, would require a response from Russia to defend its economic interests.

The EU was conspicuously silent. Not a single EU leader challenged the Russian arguments by delivering the obvious messages: the DCFTA offers Ukraine excellent opportunities to expand its markets in the EU and attract investment that will modernize industry, raise productivity and help make the Ukrainian economy competitive over the long term. Russian capital does not offer the same opportunities. Mexico has a free-trade agreement with the EU and is a member of the North American Free Trade Agreement, or NAFTA, so there is no reason why Ukraine cannot have a free trade agreement with the EU and trade successfully at the same time with Russia..

The EU has powerful messages to differentiate its offering to Ukraine from Russia's: Integration is a voluntary process. The EU has an excellent track record of supporting institutional reforms that allow countries to function better and raise living standards. The DCFTA will stimulate growth and make Ukraine more competitive in international markets. Ukraine's citizens will benefit from better products and improved services.

Ukrainians know that in contrast, Russia is experiencing accelerating stagnation that is largely the result of incapacity to conduct structural reforms required for economic modernization.

Ultimately, of course, Ukrainians should choose how they want to be governed and how they want the country to develop. To make that choice, they need a debate based on reliable information.

It is time for the EU to seize the opportunity in Ukraine and make its soft power count.

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*The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.*

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