

European interview

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Interview with Philippe de Suremain

1. What do you think the reason is behind the Ukrainian refusal to sign the association and free trade agreement with the European Union? Russian pressure, poor judgement on the part of Europe or a U-turn due to the changeable nature of a controversial personality – Viktor Yanukovich, who has always preferred Russia to the European Union?

Viktor Yanukovich's spectacular u-turn on the eve of the signature in Vilnius of the association and free-trade agreement stupefied the Ukrainians who thought everything had been settled, likewise the Europeans after a long round of negotiations which they thought complete, and even the Russians, if not the Kremlin, which had duly prepared its "delighted surprise".

The European Union is certainly not to blame for this failure. Undoubtedly and in different ways some Member States were too enthusiastic regarding Ukraine, these being the new members who formerly shared the same fate as their neighbour, others were somewhat confused by Kyiv's pro-European rhetoric which it was taking time to turn into reality. This failure occurred firstly because of the incredible pressure placed by Russia this summer on Ukraine, weakened by its debt and its trade and energy dependency; it truly was a preventive economic war (the dangers of which also finally got the better of Armenia). The question for the Kremlin is of size: Customs Union,

then Eurasian Union, Vladimir Putin's leading project, cannot succeed without Ukraine. Viktor Yanukovich clumsily tried to duck out, by making free concessions (extension of the rental of the naval base of Sebastopol), or by procrastinating. Unable to avoid the choice between East and West, the power struggle forced him into this situation. Whatever the affinity between Russians and Ukrainians, it is mistrust which increasingly prevails and this is not about to dissipate. Viktor Yanukovich's first goal is his re-election in 2015: his survival and that of his "family" depends on it – by "family" I mean the close circle on which he has built a vertical power structure and a rapid fortune, which has not just made him friends in the extremely Byzantine world of oligarchs. The man's ignorance and arrogance are the focus of derision. This presidential election is not a foregone conclusion, since he only just won the previous one with less votes in 2004. The electorate is mainly in favour of Europe. It is the European flag and not the orange one that is now being waved in Maidan Square – symbolic of the rejection of corruption, selective justice, the lack of reforms which the middle class, deprived of any prospects, is denouncing. Viktor Yanukovich is the victim of this "multi-faceted policy", which is void of vision and design, both from without and within. He emerges from this even more discredited than before, if that is possible. But the story is not finished: pushed into a corner Yanukovich and his entourage are fighting for their survival and have not had their final say.

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2. The Ukrainian president has said that he is prepared to resume negotiations with the Union for an association and free-trade agreement. What could the Union offer Ukraine in addition to access by 500 million consumers to its domestic market and its development aid?

The European Union would be tempted to stop at that. Resuming "suspended" negotiations, whilst these had been completed would mean accepting blackmail that has been going on too long. The agreement is on the table and as long as this is the case the door should remain open. This is all the more the case since the European Union is extremely attractive to the Ukrainians who perceive the model to follow so that they can finally achieve the rule of law to which they aspire. Mentalities change at a pace which is masked by the performance now being given by the authorities. We must not let Ukraine feel that it has been abandoned. Beyond the crisis of government which it is experiencing, its present economic and especially its financial difficulties, it represents significant potential from all points of view, which, sooner or later, will turn it into the major partner it should already be. There has to be a more coherent, a more concerted policy between all of the Union's Member States directed towards society from all sides. The European Union would gain that extra touch of soul that it is looking for: we must especially foster trade via a visa policy that is implemented with greater discernment and thereby foster the education of a new elite; we have to show pugnacity in an economic sector that is difficult to access but which is extremely rewarding for anyone who manages to break through. The quality of the labour force and the technical level of Ukraine's engineers is undeniable. The effort made by Poland when it was a candidate is the example to follow: there is more than just return on investment.

3. Is the European enlargement policy failing? Are the association and free-trade agreements, which do not offer full membership to our neighbours, enough to guarantee the "European bonding" of the Union's neighbourhood?

We could have done better: the neighbourhood policy has been improvised to a certain degree, firstly in terms of those left out of the enlargement to the east, and then in terms of the entire southern periphery of the European Union and beyond. Those involved have however understood that it was to their benefit to play the game. Then we moved onto the poorly financed Eastern Partnership, which did at least tighten the game up but in a more or less accepted cohabitation. It would have been better to start by offering a specific partnership, especially to Ukraine, which would have given these countries the feeling that they had been taken into consideration individually. Somehow we cannot ignore one European view; it would be more convincing to show that each would be judged according to their merits, since the task to be fulfilled would be so great that we might allow ourselves time. The precedent with Slovakia, which no one was expecting, deserves consideration.

4. The failure of negotiations with Europe has led to major demonstrations, and in answer brutal repression. You were Ambassador to France in Kyiv during the Orange Revolution and with your colleagues you played a vital role in maintaining its peaceful nature. How do you see the development of the situation within the next few days? Do you think that the demonstrations can provoke early elections before the planned date in 2015?

The brutality with which the demonstrations have been put down from the beginning has simply kindled the fire: their extent equals and even goes beyond the demonstrations of 2004, which were as spontaneous, but not just in Kyiv. We should pay just as much attention since it is their aspiration to Europe which is driving people along. As in 2004 the reasons are neither economic nor social but frustration and exasperation in the face of growing corruption, which call for the introduction of the rule of law. The demonstrators' spokespeople are mainly newcomers – and we hope they will come to agreement over a coherent programme in order to form a common front: they have to win the confidence of a civil society that is disappointed by the waste that followed the Orange Revolution. This is not

a coup d'état and everything rests on enabling democracy to organise elections which Viktor Yanukovych should not win. A great deal of wisdom will be required on the part of the opposition leaders in preparation for this. The Party of Regions represents various interests, the cohesion of which is not indestructible. It would be a shame for the situation to become radical and uncontrollable. But there is a tradition of tolerance amongst Ukrainians which tempers a certain leaning to disorder. The Cossack legacy has not been forgotten; Since independence, whatever the event, it has never ended in fighting. The danger lies rather more in a return to temporary apathy.

5. What do you think is pushing citizens to demonstrate in support of a European Ukraine? A political choice in support of freedom and democracy? An "anti-Russian" stance?

The Ukrainian aspiration to Europe is sincere but not unequivocal. The choice prevails of a regime which guarantees freedom, justice and the respect of individual dignity and that of the nation. The model is certainly not the one put forward by Russia. The standard of life achieved by Europeans, the effectiveness with which most of the new members have been able to reform their political and economic system – the Baltic States being the most convincing example – impresses even those in the east of Ukraine. "Why not us?"

The growing antagonism between Ukraine and Russia is not irreconcilable. Had Russia taken greater care of its relationship with Ukraine might have done better. Nostalgia for the Empire and of democratic centralization does not of course typify Ukrainians wherever they are. But a widely shared culture and extensive personal networks are not enough to reconcile Siamese twins, when one is trying to dominate the other. A shared past, diverging memories and incompatible values do not facilitate the settlement of this family business. According to historian Rybachuk: "*Russia prefers a friendly Ukraine less than one which is submissive.*" The European House built on a shared neighbourhood might have been a solution. But the Kremlin is against this offering a bipolar Europe based on an imaginary power struggle. Democratic Ukraine would be a formidable precedent. It is a choice of society to be discarded. The Orange Revolution would have been Vladimir Putin's 9/11. He is afraid that it will happen again.

6. You know all of the players in the Ukrainian drama. What do you think of the opposition leaders? Are they a credible alternative to the present team in office in Kyiv?

It would have been dramatic if Ukraine had lacked personalities able to transform the try, to translate this determination which has been so strongly expressed, in an increasingly assertive civil society, into a credible programme. Viktor Yushchenko and Yulia Tymoshenko were brought to power by an orange wave which they forgot they did not provide the impetus for. A victim of selective justice, the latter has remained a symbol, but it is not her name that is being chanted in the Maidan (now called the Euro-Maidan). What kind of continuity can the three main opposition leaders guarantee? They need to agree because what follows depends on it. The world boxing champion, Vitaly Klichko, enjoys a rare reputation for integrity and proof of his political skill, if not his experience, these are the qualities of those he has chosen to walk with. He has to avoid the pitfalls and he must not be hasty.

Arseniy Yatsenyuk is certainly a talented economist but lacks charisma and has made more than one mistake. Taking over from a character as strong as Yulia Tymoshenko, he is finding it hard to assert himself. As for the nationalist party, Svoboda, Oleg Tyanybok – needs to temper his passion and control his troops. It is this mixed group that has to be brought into order, patiently, with the target of the presidential election in 2015 in mind – it will be a chance not to be missed. Hence the motion of confidence that failed in parliament was premature. The opposition leaders must gain the confidence of public opinion to whom they have drawn close. However the former, recently freed Interior Minister Yuri Lutsenko is gaining in terms of authority. A new generation of often remarkable politicians is now emerging. But time is needed and urgency prevails. There is no foregone conclusion and everything is not played out in Kyiv in a country where regionalism is just as strong.

7. And what about relations between the EU and Russia in the light of these events? Can the traditional Russian fear of being surrounded and its repeated shows of geopolitical strength be overcome to establish a stable relationship with the European Union?

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In desperation Viktor Yanukovych has tried to impose Russia as a third party in his relationship with the European Union. A blunder which at least had the merit of revealing in Vilnius the evident repulsion Russia feels vis-à-vis the European Union: Vladimir Putin has made it his adversary whilst at the same time it is his leading economic partner and the osmosis between the Russian and European elites continues to grow. The Kremlin sees the international arena from the single angle of the power struggle which it uses skilfully and cynically; but the simple deployment of its means to inflict hardship will not be enough to return Russia to its status as superpower. An inevitable partner, it would recover decisive influence by acknowledging that it belongs to Europe rather than trying to achieve a unique destiny like the Slavophiles of the 19th century: we are no longer living in the time of Nicolas 1st. It is up to the Europeans to be more coherent regarding their vital and all the more difficult partner (Russia), since it

is not as confident as it appears to be. A strategic vision of Russia's development – which is in our interest – cannot exclude rapprochement with Europe of which it has to admit it is a part.



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Plenipotentiary Minister, Philippe de Suremain was Ambassador to France in Ukraine from 2002 to 2005, when the Orange Revolution took place. Member of the Robert Schuman Foundation's Scientific Committee, he is an acknowledged expert on Ukraine.

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