

The Ukraine crisis has highlighted the flaws in the EU's technocratic approach to foreign policy

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The crisis in Ukraine has exposed a number of shortcomings in EU foreign policy. Björn Fägersten writes on three key reforms which would strengthen the EU's role in foreign affairs. He argues that the EU should develop shared long-term foreign policy goals, rather than relying on reactive measures to the actions of other states such as Russia. Second, the EU should break with technocratic approaches to foreign affairs and ensure that its policy-making becomes more politicised, driven by clear values and principles. Finally, he advocates an approach which recognises the importance of internal EU policy areas, such as energy and research, to foreign policy outcomes.



What sort of foreign policy is the European Union capable of? The question bears relevance in relation to the Ukraine crisis as well as in the run-up to the European Parliament elections on 22-25 May. It also has obvious implications for the EU's attempts to counter Russia's power politics.

The EU's technocratic and almost de-politicised approach to negotiations with Ukraine and other former Soviet states, which stands in stark contrast to Russia's highly political and emotional line, has been likened to entering a knife fight armed with a baguette. The idea of deconstructing sensitive political issues through protracted bureaucratic negotiations works well if there is time, political will, and if other parties do not have as their ambition to sabotage the negotiations. In the absence of these circumstances, it is a precarious way of managing foreign relations.

The split between member states has been clear all along – for a long time Sweden and Poland were relatively lonely drivers of negotiation talks with the EU's Eastern Partnership. Since Russia annexed Crimea, and the crisis began in eastern Ukraine, difficulties in agreeing on the level of EU reaction and how to distribute the cost of sanctions have again emerged.



Catherine Ashton, EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs, at Ukraine crisis talks in Geneva, April 2014, Credit: European External Action Service – EEAS (CC-BY-SA-3.0)

Finally, the EU's tools have been blunt in the current situation. Put together, European states possess significant military resources, but as a collective within the EU framework, access to heavy weaponry is scarce. EU soft power based on its attractive appeal is obvious – this is partly what is leading former Soviet states away from Russia – but against Vladimir Putin, or Syria's Bashar al-Assad, it lacks impetus.

In the short term, then, the EU and its technocratic, disunited and sometimes blunt foreign policy has crumbled in confrontation with Putin's hardboiled power politics. Nevertheless, it is worth pointing out that the EU was created with the aim of avoiding this brand of power politics as a way of solving conflicts of interest in Europe. The fact that the Union does not excel in this area should therefore not be surprising.

More surprising is the view of the EU's role in foreign relations held by its critics. Many observers seem to look at foreign policy as an optional extra that can be changed or dropped from one day to the next. British Eurosceptics

would like to completely abandon the attempts at a common foreign policy in order to focus solely on limited internal market cooperation. EU enthusiasts in Germany on the other hand want to federalise foreign policy and equip the Union with all the attributes of a nation state including an army, united decision making and a real foreign minister.

The fact that EU foreign policy is inherently linked to what goes on inside the Union is generally overlooked. First of all, the EU's internal vision of peace, wellbeing and values depend on its foreign policy. Peace in Europe requires active work in neighbouring regions and Europeans' welfare is today as closely linked to foreign markets and global decisions as to the functions of the EU's internal market.

Second of all, our foreign policy is inevitably reliant on actions and decisions within the Union. If we do not safeguard our values within Europe, they will lose their power of attraction to the outside. If we fail to regulate our internal market in a way that attracts trade with countries in, for example, northern Africa, we will lose development potential that no aid project can compensate for. If we cannot build an effective energy market and adjust our societies we will inevitably end up dependent on energy exporters with a complete lack of respect for human rights.

This mutual dependency between the EU's internal and external roles means that sceptics as well as enthusiasts should be queried on their visions for the entirety of European cooperation and its linkages. A more concerted European policy could redress some of the shortcomings illustrated by the Ukraine crisis. Three changes would be of special importance: to secure long-term interests, politicise EU foreign policy, and to establish an approach that incorporates more than simply diplomacy.

Long-term interests

A foreign policy without a clear inherent logic and link to the Union's internal happenings risks becoming reactive and event-driven, with decisions always depending on the next move of other actors – Russia in this case. Instead the EU should focus on the member states' long-term common interests and formulate a clear strategy for this policy.

Europe's nation states do not need a Union to secure their short-term interests – few politicians ignore these – but they would benefit hugely from being reminded of their long-term interests from time to time. Long-term interests also tend to be shared European interests, and this could remedy the fragmentation of member states, the Achilles heel of European foreign policy during the last decade.

A politicised foreign policy

The concept of solving problems in a technocratic and de-politicised manner worked in Europe up until the point when cooperation was extended to include more contentious areas such as political and monetary cooperation. As a means of conducting foreign policy it has clear limitations.

Just as internal work in the EU is more politicised today through, for example, more influence by directly elected parliamentarians and a more lively debate of ideas, foreign policy would benefit from being less technocratic. If political vision instead of bureaucratic project management guided foreign policy, it would be easier for both Europeans and societies outside of Europe to take a stand in relation to integration and deepened cooperation. In the case of Ukraine, for instance, the big European capitals need to stand up clearly in defence of the values that are meant to define the Union, and be prepared to pay a price for their stance.

More than diplomacy

Over the past few years a lot of focus has been given to how the EU's diplomatic tools, such as the European External Action Service and the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, could be developed. This is important, but it is not European diplomacy that will define the continent's global role in ten or twenty years' time. Instead, it is the European economy, values, societal structure and ability to integrate new Europeans and neighbours that will be of importance.

Foreign policy should therefore be formed in tune with migration, research exchanges, energy issues, and more, in order to genuinely play to the strengths of Europe. In relation to Russia, it is evident that it is within the internal European policy areas such as energy, the internal market, and migration that the EU has the best opportunities to create both positive and negative incentives in the long term.

With a more cohesive, long-term foreign policy the EU could more clearly represent an alternative to Russia's power politics. This would benefit neighbours and partners as well as European citizens, who all must choose how to relate to European cooperation.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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