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Between Two Worlds

Buffer States between the European Union and Russia

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Name: Casper Sonderen

Student number: 6476600

Master: International Relations in Historical Perspective, Utrecht University

Supervisor: Dr. Corina Mavrodin

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I hope you enjoy reading this thesis.

Casper Sonderen

Winterswijk, 15 December 2022

Abstract

The presented study looks at pivots in the foreign policy of buffer states. Some countries have lost that status after opting relatively quickly for an international sphere of influence. By looking at the cases of Belarus and Ukraine, this research has helped to provide insights into what has influenced pivots in the foreign policy of former buffer states. The results of these case studies show that pivots are significantly influenced by international normative power. Sanctions and territorial annexations push states away from the initiator, while incentives through political and economic benefits show positive effects.

Policy documents and statements by international actors indicate that in the Belarus case, president Lukashenka and normative power both played a major role in choosing Russia as the main international partner. Opting for that side allowed the president to realise his aspirations to consolidate power, which was impossible to combine with the norms and values of the European Union. Simultaneously, the EU halted all diplomatic negotiations with Belarus. It provided too few economic or political reasons for Lukashenka to abandon his quest for more domestic power. On the other hand, Russia was not so bothered by this. It saw opportunities and in turn did offer political and economic deals. As for the Ukraine case, the results of policy documents and a discourse analysis show that Russia was not keen on Ukraine's aspirations to integrate with Europe. Russia decided to take advantage of the emerging political instability and polarisation in Ukraine, and annexed Crimea. This annexation, combined with harsh Russian diplomacy drove Ukraine towards the European Union, which this time stood ready with treaties and agreements. Again, the results show that normative power with a negative approach pushes countries away, and positive incentives instead attract countries.

This research contributes to a deeper understanding about the actions of buffer states and, in particular, the loss of that status. It shows the role and use of international normative power and how that strategy may or may not achieve its goals, particularly for the cases of Belarus and Ukraine.

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Introduction

The 2022 Peace Prize is awarded to human rights advocate Ales Bialiatski from Belarus, the Russian human rights organisation Memorial and the Ukrainian human rights organisation Center for Civil Liberties.¹

With those words, Berit Reiss-Andersen, Chair of the Norwegian Nobel Committee announced the winner of the Nobel Peace Prize on October 7, 2022. The individual and the two organisations received the award because they have been promoting the right to criticise power and protecting fundamental human rights for many years. Belarus, Russia and Ukraine united in one prize, awarded for protecting norms and values the West always stands for. It was a moment where four actors came together that have received a lot of attention since the outbreak of the Russo-Ukrainian war. That this attention rose to great heights in 2022 does not mean that nothing was at play until then. The war in Ukraine is the eruption of a diplomatic struggle that had been ensuing for decades. The outbreak of the war has clearly shown the focus of the two countries on European international politics: Belarus supports Russia, and Ukraine seeks help from the European Union.

Contacts between Belarus and the EU, and Russia and Ukraine started on good terms but deteriorated later. Both countries managed to balance well between the two spheres of influence. As for Belarus, the European Council recognized Belarus as a state in December 1991, after which a period of hopeful cooperation began.² Subsequently, after Lukashenka's elections in 1994, two agreements were signed in order to encourage mutual cooperation and European integration between the European Union and Belarus. However, before they were ratified, the process of ratification was stopped by the European Council in 1997. In fact, ever since Alexander Lukashenka tried to consolidate his power, ties between the EU and Belarus worsened. His authoritarian or dictatorial regime contradicted everything the European Union stands for. Certain events constantly caused disputes between the EU and Belarus. Corrupt elections and the maintenance of the death penalty, for instance, are factors that keep the

¹ Nobel Prize, "Announcement of the 2022 Nobel Peace Prize by Berit Reiss-Andersen" (October 7, 2022). Available on: <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/2022/prize-announcement/>, accessed on November 28, 2022.

² Giselle Bosse, "A Partnership with a Dictatorship: Explaining the Paradigm Shift in European Union Policy towards Belarus*" *Journal of Common Market Studies* 50 (2012): 3, 372.

relationship on edge already for decades.³ Moreover, societal values and human rights were threatened which often lead to diplomatic discussions. Unlike the EU, Russia was not so bothered by Lukashenka's policies and ambitions. They concluded treaties and agreements, which means Belarus is now mainly in Russia's sphere of influence.

Ukraine witnessed the same kind of pivot, but in this case from East to West. The Euromaidan protests in 2013 and 2014 were initiated by dissatisfied pro-European Ukrainian citizens after President Yanukovich failed to sign the Association Agreement with the EU.⁴ The protests marked the starting point of a political and diplomatic chain reaction which resulted in a turning point in Ukrainian foreign relations. From then on, Ukraine increasingly looked towards the European Union and gradually less towards Russia. This eventually culminated in the annexation of Crimea. Out of need for international partners, agreements like the Association Agreement and the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area were signed.⁵ Ukraine is now mainly part of the European sphere of influence. The diplomatic developments of both cases show that buffer states like Belarus and Ukraine therefore had their own pivots in choosing between the Eastern or Western sphere of influence.

Historiography and concepts

The status of states between Europe and Russia is a topic that many academics have written about. The topic touches on several concepts and debates that academics have ventured into. Most literature on the subject is descriptive in nature, and serves as an excellent starting point for many studies on these countries. They mainly describe the political situations from the perspective of the states themselves, such as Mykhailo Minakov et al. on Ukraine and Andrew Wilson on Belarus.⁶ In fact, they almost give the impression of the two countries making autonomous choices, with little focus on influences from international politics. Nevertheless, they name international developments in a factual and often chronological manner. Such

³ Elena Korosteleva, "Was there a Quiet Revolution? Belarus After the 2006 Presidential Election" *Journal of Communist Studies and Translation Politics* 25 (2009): 2, 340.

⁴ Olga Zelinska, "Ukrainian Euromaidan Protest: Dynamics, causes and aftermath" *Sociology Compass* 11 (2017): 9, 1.

⁵ Guillaume van der Loo, *The EU-Ukraine Association Agreement and Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area: A New Legal Instrument for EU Integration without Membership*, (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 1. BBC News, "EU signs pacts with Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova", last modified June 27, 2014, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-28052645>, accessed on April 3, 2022.

⁶ Mykhailo Minakov, Georgiy Kasianov and Matthew Rojansky, *From "the Ukraine" to Ukraine: A Contemporary History, 1991-2021* (Hannover: ibidem-Verlag, 2021). Andrew Wilson, *Belarus: The Last European Dictatorship* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011).

literature therefore paints a good picture of how Belarus and Ukraine made the choice for one of the two spheres of influence.

As the examples in the intro showed, power blocs sometimes try to strengthen themselves by winning over new countries. That is where the first important concept of this study emerges, namely “normative power”. Normative power is a vague concept of which the definition is not much debated. Although some parts of it are older, the concept itself was introduced by Ian Manners in 2002. Manners has given it the most famous explanation, stating that powers have the ability to form “conceptions of what is normal”.⁷ Cooperation with those powers then requires the partial or total assumption of the "conception of normal". This allows the power to exercise power over the internal and external politics of other states. The EU, for example, can exercise power over nations that want to become member states or allies of the organisation. Several norms and standards are presented to candidates in order to let them assimilate to the structures and values of the EU.⁸ States then become more EU-like, which provides the EU with even more power. When applied to this study, it refers to the EU and Russia ‘pulling’ on Ukraine and Belarus with incentives and policies.

Looking at Belarus and Ukraine, it is often claimed that they are buffer states. This was obtained from the IR school of Neorealism. The intellectual movement, introduced by Kenneth Waltz, revised the Realist theory and emphasised the importance of alliances in the international system. It stresses the significance of the so-called bipolar system, in which there are two great powers to which multiple states commit themselves with.⁹ In between these great powers and alliances, there are status quo countries, or buffer states. This concept plays an important role in this research, as the study argues that Belarus and Ukraine possessed that status. The term is widely used in various disciplines. Geographers probably use the most basic definition, as they describe them as “small political units located between large nations”.¹⁰ Pitman Potter was the first who tried to define buffer states as a concept in the profession of IR. In the 1930s he described it as “a weak state, small in size, probably without foreign policy of its own, which lies between two or more powerful states and thus serves to inhibit international aggression.”¹¹ For years, the focus in defining the concept was on “being a small state among larger states”.

⁷ Ian Manners, “Normative Power Europe: A Contradiction in Terms?” *Journal of Common Marketing Studies* 40 (2002): 2, 235-258.

⁸ Ian Manners, “Normative Power Europe”, 242-244.

⁹ Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Boston: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1979), 173.

¹⁰ Nicholas Spykman, “Frontiers, Security and International Organization” *Geographical Review* 32 (1942): 3, 440.

¹¹ Pitman Potter, “Buffer State” *Encyclopedia of Social Sciences* (New York: Macmillan Publishers, 1930), 45.

However, when the Cold War flared up, the definition stretched. In 1986, John Chay described buffer states as:

[...] countries geographically and/ or politically situated between two or more large powers whose function is to maintain peace between the larger powers.¹²

Chay's definition focuses mainly on the international function, and indirectly suggests that they have the status involuntary. An important notion Chay makes is that buffer states must be neutral and independent in order to play a “buffer role” in international rivalry.¹³ This implies that the chance of conflict increases when they lose their neutrality. Greater powers, in this definition, can for instance be powers such as the Western and Communist blocs in the Cold War. When applied to this study, “greater powers” refers to the European Union and Russia. The definition of the concept evolved as the years passed. Later, in 2017, Graham et al. expanded the definition:

Buffer zones separate more powerful states without being aligned with or controlled by them. [...] States that have endured as buffers generally have internal cohesion and have reached a national consensus that avoiding formal alliances serves the national interest, defined minimally as territorial integrity and self-determination.¹⁴

Graham et al. thus allocate more decision-making power to the buffers themselves. Chay's definition focuses more on the international function, while Graham et al. looks more at internal characteristics, so they seem to complement each other in the literature.

In addition to providing a definition, Graham et al. contributed to the literature by applying that definition to the case of Ukraine. This means there is already literature on Ukraine as a buffer state.¹⁵ However, not on Belarus. Moreover, this literature mainly sticks to proving that Ukraine has been one since 1991. Only recently have scholars started to look at this more critically. Krisciūnė and Jensen asked questions on the assumption that Ukraine and Belarus are buffer states.¹⁶ They tried to explore whether Belarus could possibly be choosing for the

¹² John Chay, *Buffer States in World Politics* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1986), i.

¹³ *Ibidem*, 194.

¹⁴ Thomas Graham, Rajan Menon and Jack Snyder, “Ukraine Between Russia and the West : Buffer or Flashpoint?” *World Policy Journal* 34 (2017): 1, 108-109.

¹⁵ Thomas Graham, Rajan Menon and Jack Snyder “Ukraine Between Russia and the West: Buffer or Flashpoint?” *World Policy Journal* 34 (2017): 1, 107-118.

¹⁶ Zivilė Krisciūnė and Donald N. Jensen, “Will Belarus Choose the West?” *Centre for European Policy Analysis* (2019), 9.

West recently. However, they do not go much further than just putting the question on the table, and do not take a clear stance on whether Belarus still is. Literature thus mainly shows that the conversation among academics on the status of Ukraine and Belarus is still in full swing. Academics are slowly beginning to doubt whether the two states are largely neutral at all, but are not giving that question the attention it needs. The current status of Belarus as a partner of Russia and Ukraine as a partner of Europe, along with the literature on buffer states, leaves us with a question that has not yet been answered by academics: *What influences pivots in the foreign policy of former buffer states?*

Contribution to the literature

To get a better understanding about the previous question, this study looks at the cases of Belarus between 1991 and 1998, and Ukraine between 2012 and 2015. It goes beyond the question marks of Krisciūnė and Jensen, and takes a substantiated position on whether these countries are still buffer states or not, by arguing that they no longer are. This puts this research in opposition to academics who still identify the two countries as such. Therefore, it adds an analytical chapter to the literature on the international political status of Belarus and Ukraine.

In addition, this is innovative research. The pivots in the foreign policy of Belarus and Ukraine that suddenly took place are striking events that have not yet received full attention as stand-alone concepts. In fact, pivots in foreign policy are still a relatively undiscovered niche in the literature. Looking at the Ukraine and Belarus cases helps us gain more insights into what pivots are, how they arise and how they develop. Furthermore, this creates a clearer picture of what roles international and national actors and factors play in tipping points, in particular in the cases of the two analysed countries. Therefore, this research is a contribution to the literature on Ukraine, Belarus and pivots in foreign relations.

Methodology and structure

Several methods are employed to provide a reliable answer to the main question. Both qualitative and quantitative information will be used. The qualitative information consists of two types of sources: primary sources such as agreements or diplomatic conversations between nations and international organisations, and secondary sources, such as literature. Examples of primary sources are the Trade and Co-operation Agreement (TCA), the founding papers of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation or the European Union-Ukraine Association Agreement. These types of sources are mainly found on digital archives. It is important to note

that the English versions of these conversations and treaties are the subject of research. They have been translated in some cases from Russian or Ukrainian into English, so this research depends on the interpretations of the translator. Although these translators try to be neutral, sometimes the translator's interpretation will seep into the final English product. In addition, this study uses news articles. They reflect on public opinion on policies and can portray events effectively. Secondary sources – often consisting of academic literature – introduce or clarify concepts or contextualise primary sources when needed. The quantitative information of this study is of a smaller volume and serves mainly to confirm the qualitative information. An example is the support for the Euromaidan protests, expressed in percentages. This information is very factual and therefore less subject to interpretation or translation.

The first chapter, on Belarus, deals mainly with policy documents and secondary literature. These already give a good picture of what played a role in its pivot. Chapter two, on the other hand, analyses more statements by leaders and statements by political actors. This benefits the study because frequent political changes around Ukraine's international policy have provoked many international reactions. Looking at those reactions gives a good insight into why key actors made certain choices that affected Ukraine's pivot. Because of this way of working, parts of chapter two have characteristics of a discourse analysis.

In order to get a better understanding of pivots, this research examines the case studies of Belarus between 1994 and 1998 and Ukraine between 2012 and 2015 separately and looks at the contribution of incentives and policies of Russia and the EU. By analysing the primary sources and contextualising them by secondary sources, the reasons behind their choices become clearer. The fact that both Belarus and Ukraine were former Soviet republics and became independent at the same time makes them ideally suited for a comparison, and therefore also for saying something universal about how pivots work. That both countries gained independence under almost identical international conditions and that they were both influenced by the same powers adds to the reliability of the comparison.

This study seeks to answer the main question by first answering two sub-questions. Those sub-questions are covered in two separate chapters. Chapter one explains what European and Russian incentives and policies between 1994 and 1998 caused Belarus to choose Russia as its main economic and political partner. This chapter mainly discusses the political history of Belarus with the EU and Russia. Chapter two focuses on the other side of this study and finds out What European and Russian incentives or policies between 2012 and 2015 caused Ukraine to choose the European Union as its main economic and political partner. It mainly focusses on the political history of Ukraine with the EU and Russia. This research ends with the final

conclusion which contains the answer to the main question. In addition, the conclusion contains the aforementioned comparison between the two cases with similarities and differences, and it provides suggestions for further research on buffer states and pivots.

Europe, Belarus, and Russia between 1994 and 1998: a post-Cold War battle on European grounds

Since Belarus gained independence after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the country has not had many heads of state. Already in 1994 Aleksandr Lukashenka seized power, after which he continued to hold the position of president until today.¹⁷ Despite having the same president, the foreign policy of Belarus is somewhat more unstable. The country has not contributed to political stability within Europe since its creation after the Cold War. A turning point in Belarus' foreign policy occurred in the years between 1994 and 1998. During this time Belarus turned from economic and political rapprochement with the European Union to a rapprochement with Russia. Therefore, this chapter seeks to find out what incentives and policies of the EU and Russia contributed to Belarus' choice to mainly side with Russia. It argues that – after Lukashenka's ascension to power – the EU more or less closed the door on Belarus, after which a rapprochement with the EU was difficult. By not providing any incentives and by expecting unfeasible policies, the EU pushed Belarus away. Russia, however, did provide incentives and feasible policies, both included in treaties, which caused Belarus to suddenly change its course on international cooperation.

The European-Belarusian rapprochement, 1991-1995

On August 25, 1991, Belarus' declaration of independence came into force.¹⁸ From then on, Belarus was politically independent from the Soviet Union and therefore able to determine its own foreign policy, which did not start from scratch. Before the Belarussian independence, there was already some degree of Soviet rapprochement towards Europe as a result of the glasnost and perestroika policies of Gorbachev. During those USSR days, partnerships between the European Economic Community (EEC) and the USSR were negotiated by the national government of the Soviet Union. However, these partnerships were also signed, ratified and implemented by the individual Soviet republics. This means that the individual republics within the USSR also had formal ties with the EEC. Therefore, after the Belarussian declaration of independence, the formal partnership between the EEC and Belarus remained based on the only valid European-Soviet trade agreement left: the Trade and Co-operation Agreement (TCA). It was signed by the EEC, the national government of the Soviet Union and its individual

¹⁷ Andrew Wilson, *Belarus: The Last European Dictatorship* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 140-167.

¹⁸ Andrew Wilson, *Belarus: The Last European Dictatorship*, 151.

republics in March 1990.¹⁹ In particular, the TCA diversified and liberalised trade between the EEC and the Soviet Union and its republics. By listing these developments we can see that the USSR and thus Belarus actually sought rapprochement with the European community even before its independence.

This rapprochement increased after the EEC recognised Belarus as an independent state in December 1991.²⁰ The recognition allowed Belarus to cooperate with European countries that were previously ideological counterparts. It immediately started exploring its co-operational options in addition to Russia. Despite ideological differences, voices in the parliament called for Belarus to ‘return to Europe’, referring to the contacts between the Russian empire and Europe during the pre-communist period.²¹ This indicates that Belarus had the intention to seek cooperation with Europe from the moment Belarus was recognised. The sense of cooperation did not come from one side, it was mutual. Europe wanted to bring former communist countries under its economic and political sphere of influence, and Belarus fitted exactly into their target group. The rhetoric of ‘returning to Europe’ was put into practice.

To exploit the mutual wishes of cooperation, several agreements and institutions came into the picture. One of the institutions Belarus wanted to join was the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), which has activities that mainly focus on the development of agribusiness, infrastructure, transport, energy, industry, and technology.²² Belarus joined the institution on June 10th, 1992. In terms of Western economic institutions, they subsequently became members of the International Monetary Fund (July 1992) and the World Bank (1992). On military and security matters, it joined the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE, later OSCE) in January 1992, and it complied the START and CFE agreements, which were signed by the USSR.²³ But not only economic and military matters were discussed by the EEC/EU and Belarus. Political rapprochement was also needed. To liberalise and democratise the structures of Belarussian politics, negotiations on the Partnership and Co-operation Agreement (PCA) started in 1993. Even after Lukashenka’s elections in 1994, two agreements were signed in order to encourage mutual cooperation and

¹⁹ European Parliament, “AGREEMENT between the European Economic Community and the European Atomic Energy Community and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics on trade and commercial and economic cooperation”, December 18, 1989, [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:21990A0315\(01\)&qid=1497985775351&from=EN](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:21990A0315(01)&qid=1497985775351&from=EN), accessed on April 28, 2022.

²⁰ Giselle Bosse, “A Partnership with a Dictatorship”, 372.

²¹ Karen Dawisha and Frederick Starr, *National Identity and Ethnicity in Russia and the New States of Eurasia* (London: Taylor and Francis, 1994), 143.

²² European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, “Sectors and topics”, last modified on September 14, 2022, <https://www.ebrd.com/what-we-do/sectors-and-topics.html>, accessed on September 14, 2022.

²³ Andrew Wilson, *Belarus: The Last European Dictatorship*, 168.

European integration between the European Union and Belarus. One of them was the PCA, which was signed in 1995, and the other one was the Interim Trade Agreement.²⁴ So until 1994, in that sense, there seemed to be little in the way of a good diplomatic relationship between Belarus and the European Union. By signing agreements and treaties and by joining Western institutions, Belarus took all kinds of steps to adapt its economic, military, and political structures to Western models. All in line with 'returning to Europe'.

EU-Belarusian stalemate, 1994-1998

The year 1994 is key in the story of the EU-Belarusian relations. Lukashenka's democratic election as president of the Belarusian Republic would soon mean a change of direction in terms of domestic politics and foreign relations. The first signs emerged when Lukashenka delegated a four-question referendum in May 1995. The questions regarded: the equalisation of the Russian language to the Belarusian language (1); a new national emblem and flag for Belarus (2); more economic integration with Russia (3); and most important, constitutional changes that give the president more options to declare new elections (4).²⁵ Here, a small crack emerged in the European-Belarusian relationship. The West reacted resentfully to this move by Lukashenka. The OSCE Parliamentary Assembly stated that the referendum violated international standards and stated that the Belarusian government tried to influence the outcome.²⁶ At the same time, the OSCE still kept its reaction mild and diplomatic by putting it off to "lack of experience". After all, Lukashenka had made a good start with Europe in February 1995 by signing the PCA, so it was in Europe's interest to give Lukashenka a chance.

However, it turned out Lukashenka had other plans. It seems he noticed that the international reaction was weak and that he subsequently could take advantage of it. He used the created space to issue a new referendum in November 1996. Seven questions were put to the citizens of Belarus. Question two proposed amendments to the constitution that would give Lukashenka more power and allow him to stay in power longer.²⁷ Other questions in the referendum sought to curtail personal freedoms and a free market. For instance, one of them asks whether the public is positive or negative about the free buying or selling of land, and another asks about the public's opinion on the death penalty. If answered positively, these

²⁴ Giselle Bosse, "A Partnership with a Dictatorship", 372.

²⁵ Andrew Wilson, *Belarus: The Last European Dictatorship*, 174.

²⁶ Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, "Report on Parliamentary Elections in Belarus 14 and 28 May 1995", <https://www.oscepa.org/en/documents/election-observation/election-observation-statements/belarus/statements-4/2009-1995-parliamentary-first-a-second-round/file>, accessed on September 19, 2022.

²⁷ Andrew Wilson, *Belarus: The Last European Dictatorship*, 183.

questions would delegate more power to the state, and thus largely to Lukashenka.²⁸ The referendum turned out to be a great success for him, at least according to himself. The issues he had campaigned for were supported by the people, according to the government, and so Lukashenka could consolidate his power. Critical media, however, announced that the results were falsified.²⁹ This was of course ignored by Lukashenka, but not by the Western community. Once again, international democratic standards were exceeded, according to the European Union. In a statement, the European Commission indicated that:

The European Union remains seriously concerned at the situation in Belarus, and particularly the issue of the Constitutional referendum. The European Union is particularly concerned, in this regard, that the ruling of the Constitutional Court, concerning the consultative nature of the referendum, should be respected. President Lukashenko has indicated to Parliament that, notwithstanding the ruling of the Constitutional Court, he intends to consider its result binding. The European Union deeply regrets this development. The European Union reiterates its desire for a close and cooperative relationship with a Belarus which is committed to democratic principles and economic reform.³⁰

The statement showed that the European Union was strengthening its language, but above all it showed that the Union was concerned and still wanted to provide assistance. A total turnaround in the bilateral relationship would only come after the new policy of the referendum was worked out. In fact, the referendum of 1996 changed politics and fair opposition in Belarus. The situation changed into a reality that contained disappearances of opposition members, court verdicts, restrictions of the right to assemble, restrictions to the freedom of press and violence against demonstrators.³¹ It turned out Lukashenka took control over even more branches of power. Europe had to respond to his actions.

Europe's previous strategy to win Belarus to the West had been to present Belarus with economic and social prosperity if they adapted to Western structures. However, from now on, the European Union started working in the other direction. The Council of Ministers decided to impose a number of measures on Belarus. First of all, there was the PCA. It had already been signed in 1995 but had yet to be ratified by both Belarus and the European Union. As a measure, the EU decided to stop the ratification process immediately in 1997. Moreover, Belarus's

²⁸ Andrew Wilson, *Belarus: The Last European Dictatorship*, 183.

²⁹ Ibidem.

³⁰ European Commission, "Declaration by the European Union on Belarus", November 25, 1996, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/PESC_96_105, accessed on September 23, 2022.

³¹ Andrew Wilson, *Belarus: The Last European Dictatorship*, 183-190.

membership in the Council of Europe was tabled, and on top of that, bilateral relations at ministerial level were suspended.³² The EU went a step further after this and demanded that Lukashenka's 1996 referendum be declared invalid and that the parliament, including the opposition, that sat there before 1995 be reinstalled.³³ "Negative diplomacy" is the best way to describe the modus operandi of the EU of those years. With this form of diplomacy, the European Union threw Belarus off the negotiating table. Without massive adjustments to the Belarusian state model to Western standards, Europe did not want to engage with the Belarusian president. It is questionable whether this was futile. After all, what opportunities and reasons did Lukashenka have left to talk to Europe? He had set his sights on gaining power in Belarus and was not about to give it up easily under the threat of Europe. Following his rejection of the European demands, Europe stopped investing in Belarus. From then on, the only agreement the EU-Belarusian relationship was based on, was the old Soviet TCA from 1989.

Belarussian rapprochement towards Russia, 1994-1998

As for Lukashenka's interests, acquiring power and cooperating with the EU apparently could not go together. His cost-benefit analysis focused on acquiring power and seeking the appropriate international partners to go with it. The harsh European strategy provided extensive reasons for Lukashenka to turn its back on Europe and to cooperate more with Russia. Seeking cooperation with Russia was not a strange option from a cultural perspective. The Western political path that Belarus chose between 1991 and 1994 contrasted with the identity of the Belarusians. For years, the world was divided in three blocs: the Western or capitalist bloc, the communist bloc, and the non-aligned bloc. Belarus, as part of the Soviet Union, was at the centre of the communist bloc of the Cold War. In 1991, prior to its downfall, a poll was taken across the republics of the USSR. This poll showed that Belarusians were more likely to identify themselves as citizens of the USSR than any other Soviet republic.³⁴ As many as 69 percent preferred to call themselves citizens of the Soviet Union rather than citizens of their republic, Belarus. This percentage was even higher than the Russians in the Russian republic, where 63 percent called themselves citizens of the USSR. These numbers tell several things about Belarusians around 1991. On the one hand, they suggest that most of the Belarusians were proud of being Soviet or were at least not supportive of a downfall of the Soviet Union. They

³² Ramunas Davidonis, "The Challenge of Belarus, and European Responses" *Institute for Security Studies*, 11 (2001): 29, 23-24.

³³ Ramunas Davidonis, "The Challenge of Belarus, and European Responses", 24.

³⁴ Andrew Wilson, *Belarus: The Last European Dictatorship*, 142.

mainly identified themselves with the Soviet state. This means that most Belarusians felt like they belonged to their communist bloc. On the other hand, it implicates that a preference for the communist Soviet Union means a disfavour for the capitalist West. However, the collapse of the Soviet Union unfolded, and the Soviet republics continued as new independent states. Yet the aforementioned polls among the people of Belarus show that there has always been a strong cultural connection with other former Soviet republics.

Russia had set its sights on Belarus ever since the Belarusian diplomatic stalemate with the EU. The developments of "negative diplomacy" between the European Union and Belarus had not escaped Russia's notice either. Especially from 1994 onwards, it started the integration of Belarus into its sphere of influence. For this, it launched processes to sign a number of formal documents with Belarus. A lot of treaties were signed. First of all, and maybe the most important one, former Soviet republics founded an international organization called "Commonwealth of Independent States" (CIS). Belarus agreed on the protocols already in 1991 but ratified the Charter on the 18th of January 1994, after which it became a "full member".³⁵ Article 2 of the Charter was very clear about the purposes of the CIS:

The purposes of the Commonwealth shall be: accomplishment of cooperation in political, economic, ecologic, humanitarian and other spheres, the all-round balanced economic and social development of member states within the framework of common economic space, the interstate cooperation and integration, ensurance of the rights and basic freedoms of individuals in accordance with the universally recognized principles and norms of international law and documents of CSCE, cooperation among member states to ensure world peace and security [...]³⁶

As Article 2 shows, members of the Commonwealth were ought to cooperate on nearly every aspect of policymaking and interstate integration. The CIS seemed to be a counterpart to the European Union in a formal sense, that is, according to the Charter. With this, the EU seems to have miscalculated in terms of its own political and ideological dominance. The EU acted as if it was working towards a liberal-democratic unipolar world from 1991 onwards, but in fact the old Soviet states never completely abandoned each other and each other's political and economic structures. In terms of joining a major international organisation, Lukashenka was

³⁵ United Nations, "Charter of the Commonwealth of Independent States (with declaration and decisions). Adopted at Minsk on 22 January 1993", 22 January, 1993, <https://treaties.un.org/doc/Publication/UNTS/Volume%201819/volume-1819-I-31139-English.pdf>, accessed on October 2, 2022.

³⁶ United Nations, "Charter of the Commonwealth of Independent States", accessed on October 3, 2022.

thus faced with a choice of two options between 1994 and 1998. On one side was the economically and politically powerful European Union, which had been on the right side of history through the West's victory over the Soviet Union after the Cold War. In taking this side, Lukashenka had to abandon his ambitions for consolidating his own power and national policy structures had to be radically overhauled. Opting for the West would also take Belarus into new territory, thus into the unknown. On the other side was Russia with the Commonwealth of Independent States. When choosing for the CIS, national policy structures did not have to be radically overturned, and Belarus would return to working with familiar states. This made CIS a safer choice, especially considering that Belarusians mainly identified themselves as citizens of the Soviet Union. Moreover, the members of the CIS did not condemn Lukashenka's ambitions to seize more national power. In both the 1995 and 1996 referendums, there were no sanctions or demands from the CIS' camp.

Already around 1992, negotiations had begun on another new international alliance. Indeed, in addition to the economic, political, humanitarian and environmental cooperation provided for by the CIS, military cooperation between Russia and its neighbours was also being considered. The Collective Security Treaty (CST) was supposed to provide for this. In 1994 Belarus joined the CST. Two articles of the 1992 Treaty contain very relevant political phrases. Article 1 includes the following phrase: "The Member States shall not enter military alliances or take part in any groups of the states, as well as in the actions against other Member State."³⁷ Even more important is a section of Article 4 of the Treaty, which goes as follows:

If one of the Member States undergoes aggression (armed attack menacing to safety, stability, territorial integrity and sovereignty), it will be considered by the Member States as aggression (armed attack menacing to safety, stability, territorial integrity and sovereignty) to all the Member States of this Treaty.

In case of aggression commission (armed attack menacing to safety, stability, territorial integrity and sovereignty) to any of the Member States, all the other Member States at request of this Member State shall immediately provide the latter with the necessary help, including military one, as well as provide support by the means at their disposal in accordance with the right to collective defence pursuant to article 51 of the UN Charter.

³⁷ Collective Security Treaty Organization, "Collective Security Treaty, dated May 15, 1992", May 15, 1992, https://en.odkb-csto.org/documents/documents/dogovor_o_kollektivnoy_bezopasnosti/#loaded, accessed on October 6, 2022.

[...] ³⁸

Article 1 directly meant that, as long as states are members of the CST, they are not allowed to join other military alliances as, for example, the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO). They also are not allowed to fight each other in a military conflict. Article 4 is very reminiscent of Article 5 of the NATO treaty. The essence is that when one member state is attacked, it is considered an attack on all member states. All member states will then act in some way to help the attacked member state. Hypothetically, this could mean that if a CST member state gets into a military conflict with a Western country, immediately all other CST member states would have to step in. With NATO at the other end, the creation of the CST immediately generates a kind of antagonism or mistrust between NATO and the CST, otherwise they would have joined together in one alliance. Thus, by joining the CST, Belarus made a huge statement towards the West. It actually made clear that they trust CST member states more than NATO member states, and that, in short, they side with Russia.

In addition to multilateral ties, Russia and Belarus established bilateral ties with each other. An example of this is the creation of the Friendship, Good-Neighbourliness and Cooperation Treaty (FGNCT). The FGNCT was signed on February 21, 1995. The introduction starts with emphasising the historical ties between the peoples of the countries.³⁹ The treaty thus builds on the cultural bond demonstrated by the poll conducted among the people of the Belarusian republic just a few years earlier in the Soviet Union days. The next important phrase in the introduction is the following:

convinced of need to continue construction of the sovereign democratic states with socially oriented market economy and in every possible way to promote creation of the Common Economic Space,⁴⁰

[...]

Such sections are of significant symbolic value. They implicate a lot without explicitly saying it. With this section, Belarus and Russia stress that they still see the importance of socially oriented market economies and that their economic spaces should be integrated as much as

³⁸ Collective Security Treaty Organization, "Collective Security Treaty, dated May 15, 1992".

³⁹ CIS Legislation, "Contract between the Russian Federation and Republic of Belarus on friendship, neighborliness and cooperation" February 21, 1995, <https://cis-legislation.com/document.fwx?rgn=25444>, accessed on October 9, 2022.

⁴⁰ CIS Legislation, "Contract between the Russian Federation and Republic of Belarus on friendship, neighborliness and cooperation".

possible. Reading between the lines learns that, given more liberal European markets, this phrase largely turns Belarus' back on Europe. Furthermore, the FGNCT regulates parliamentary, territorial and economic relations. It is therefore a very broad document which strengthens Russian-Belarusian relations on many policy areas.

Conclusion

So, what incentives and policies of the European Union and Russia contributed to Belarus' choice to choose Russia as the main international political and economic partner? Comparing EU and Russian policies towards Belarus, this research comes to the following conclusion.

1994 is a crucial turning point in the story of the international relations between the EU, Belarus and Russia. Lukashenka's ascension to the presidency created a pivot in the orientation of the foreign policy of Belarus. He had ambitions to consolidate his power, in which he succeeded with the 1995 and 1996 referendums that amended the national constitution. This created bad blood with the European Union, which reacted immediately. The EU straight away halted negotiations on political and economic cooperation with Belarus, and put demands on the table that Lukashenka was highly unlikely to accept. For example, Europe demanded that Lukashenka should declare the 1996 referendum invalid, and that the old parliament should be reinstated. In doing so, it removed all incentives for Belarus to move towards Western state structures and to side with the liberal and democratic EU. Lukashenka's cost-benefit analysis yielded too little if he headed for Europe. Thereby, the European Union shut the door on Belarus. Europeans may say this was justified, because of violations of international law. Belarusians may think differently again. The fact is that the door was closed, and it would not open again any time soon. In short, Europe could not or would not respond to Lukashenka's interests, forcing him to seek other partners.

Russia dived into this possibility. It also knew that Belarus needed international partners, and Russia needed to start building on its international influence all over again. Gaining Belarus for the Russian sphere of influence would be a win-win situation for both. Russia tried to cash in on the opportunity, presenting Belarus with all sorts of treaties and agreements. When this is analysed, something remarkable emerges: namely, Russia seemed to mirror the European Union and other Western organisations in its ambitions to expand its sphere of influence. The Commonwealth of Independent States was a copy of the Western European Union and had the potential to become as integrated a system as its Western counterpart. Like the European Union, the CIS wanted to cooperate in political, economic, environmental, humanitarian and other policy fields. As with the EU, integrating these policy

fields internationally was one of its objectives. The Collective Security Treaty complemented this and provided military cooperation. Each other's territories would be defended by each, and military knowledge was to be shared. With the CST, Russia copied Western NATO. In fact, Article 4 of the CST was virtually a copy of Article 5 of NATO. Copying Western international organisations was a smart move by Russia. It ensured that Lukashenka, with Belarus, had an alternative to the West. Thus, despite his actions to consolidate his power, Lukashenka could still find international partners and alliances and still conclude treaties. All these supranational incentives were to be found with Russia. It let Lukashenka expand his power and it let him play along internationally. This was a double win for him.

To put it briefly: Unlike the EU, Russia was able to act on Lukashenka's interests. An alliance with Russia was much more profitable for him than one with Europe, so a pivot in Belarus' foreign policy took place. Russia was successful in acting on the interests of this buffer state. However, Russia does not seem to have applied those tactics again to the other case in this study, Ukraine. Instead, that nation would become an ally of Europe and turn against Russia. The next chapter dives deeper into how that could happen.

Europe, Ukraine, and Russia between 2012 and 2015: a battle on European grounds during the ‘Pax Europaea’

Ukraine, as a state, had more time to shape its own foreign policy than Belarus. The latter started to really move towards the Russian sphere of influence already after three years of independence, whereas Ukraine waited more than twenty years longer until it moved concretely towards the EU as main partner. For a long time, it seemed to display strong characteristics of a relatively stable buffer state between the European Union and Russia. However, 2014 marked a turning point in the story of Ukraine’s foreign policy. It moved from being a buffer state, balancing between the West and Russia, to one that wanted to be part of the European world. This chapter seeks to find out what incentives and policies of the European Union and Russia contributed to Ukraine’s choice to mainly side with the EU. It argues that, with the annexation of Crimea in 2014, Russia closed the door on proper and good diplomatic bilateral relations. Ukraine was more or less forced out of self-interest to seek help from Russia's power-political counterpart, the European Union. Russia's expansionist ambitions and actions therefore played a key role in Ukraine's decision to primarily move towards Europe. This situation left the EU in control and allowed it to admit Ukraine to the negotiating tables of treaties relatively easily.

Background: Ukraine as a buffer state between two worlds until 2009

In contrast to Belarus, Ukraine has had different presidents since its independence. Ever since the adoption of The Act of Declaration of Independence of Ukraine on August 24, 1991 until 2014, four individuals have held the highest political office.⁴¹ Thanks to periodic presidential changes, the focus in foreign policy also changed continuously. These changes in office and the influence of both the European Union and Russia resulted in Ukraine becoming a buffer state. Academics describe the international status and internal affairs of buffer states as follows:

Buffer zones separate more powerful states without being aligned with or controlled by them. [...] States that have endured as buffers generally have internal cohesion and have reached a

⁴¹ Mykhailo Minakov, Georgiy Kasianov and Matthew Rojansky, *From “the Ukraine” to Ukraine: A Contemporary History, 1991-2021*, 14.
Karina Shyrokykh, “The Evolution of the Foreign Policy of Ukraine: External Actors and Domestic Factors” *Europe-Asia Studies* 70 (2018): 5, 832-833.

national consensus that avoiding formal alliances serves the national interest, defined minimally as territorial integrity and self-determination.⁴²

However, buffer states are not always entirely in control of making the choice to be a buffer state. There is an important condition for the creation and maintenance of such situations. In fact, they will only be or remain buffer states as long as the powerful states involved want to preserve the situation as it is, or as long as they are not capable of changing the situation at all. Buffer states have to balance their national and international policies carefully in order to be successful. As academics say:

[...] to be successful, buffer states must forge national unity, mobilize their citizenry, exploit the advantages conferred by geography, and conduct foreign policies that turn great power competition to their advantage.⁴³

Thus, buffer states cannot be passive objects in world politics. They can exploit opportunities by turning the international status to their advantage, while at the same time they have to avoid making formal alliances. So how did Ukraine deal with this?

After its independence, Leonid Kravchuk was Ukraine's first president. He held office from 1991 to 1994. His presidency would be characterised as one that focused on the West, but his first steps on the world stage focused on Russia.⁴⁴ Because Ukraine was a former Soviet republic, meetings and to establish the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) had begun between Ukraine and Russia in 1991. Ukraine agreed on becoming a special member on December 10, 1991 and thus decided to strengthen political, economic, ecological, and humanitarian ties with Russia and the other former Soviet states.⁴⁵ The membership officially took effect in 1994, same as for the other member states.

This Russian rapprochement was balanced by an European focus, which Ukraine's parliament expressed strongly in 1993. The Supreme Council of Ukraine approved a resolution which was called 'On the main directions of the foreign policy of Ukraine'.⁴⁶ It stated:

⁴² Thomas Graham, Rajan Menon and Jack Snyder, "Ukraine Between Russia and the West : Buffer or Flashpoint?", 108-109.

⁴³ Ibidem, 109.

⁴⁴ Karina Shyrokykh, "The Evolution of the Foreign Policy of Ukraine: External Actors and Domestic Factors", 832.

⁴⁵ Ibidem.

⁴⁶ Ibidem, 836.

[...] the foreign policy efforts of Ukraine should be all the time directed at the development of European regional cooperation in all affairs with a purpose of strengthening of its national independence and the effective provision of international interests [...]

[...] supporting the stability of the relationship with the European Union, Ukraine will conclude with them the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement, realisation of which will be the first step towards an associated membership status, and, later, towards the full-fledged membership in this organisation [...]⁴⁷

These phrases are clear in Ukraine's ambitions in its early years as an independent state: It needed to adjust its national institutional structures and conclude agreements and treaties so that it would integrate with the European West in all sorts of policy areas. Every step it took in this would then be a step closer to the ultimate goal: becoming a member of the European Union. In addition, this resolution argues that strengthening ties with Europe was crucial for consolidating its independence.

The context of the time gives clarity to this phrase. In the early 1990s, the extent to which Russia would accept Ukraine's independent status was still uncertain. In fact, territorial claims were still the order of the day.⁴⁸ Strong ties with Europe could be a possible solution. At the same time, this uncertainty about its independence was the exact reason why it was vital that Kyiv would not provoke Moscow for any reason. This made the European ambitions Kravchuk had difficult to realise in a big hurry. Ukraine tried to do it in a subtle way anyway. It tentatively began engaging in dialogue with the European Union after three years of independence. This resulted in the Partnership and Co-operation Agreement (PCA), which was signed by both parties in June 1994.⁴⁹ It entered into force on March 1, 1998. Besides, to keep the dialogue going, they organised EU-Ukraine Summits and a Co-operation council. The European Commission stated in 1998 that the then relationship with Ukraine was based on establishing broad economic, legislative and social cooperation.⁵⁰ The Commission had been helping Ukraine do that since 1991. Ukraine had the political motivation to do so, and it would benefit economically and socially. The EU then used its normative power and played into this under the condition that Ukraine would adapt to the Western model.

⁴⁷ Karina Shyrokykh, "The Evolution of the Foreign Policy of Ukraine: External Actors and Domestic Factors", 836-837.

⁴⁸ Ibidem, 837.

⁴⁹ European Commission, "PCA with Ukraine enters into force" February 27, 1998, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_98_198, accessed on October 16, 2022.

⁵⁰ European Commission, "PCA with Ukraine enters into force".

Despite these resolutions and seemingly concrete steps towards EU membership, it never came close. Talks were held and new resolutions and trade agreements were concluded, but Russia was constantly watching around the corner. Moreover, as mentioned earlier, the change in presidents was a significant factor. Pro-Russian presidents of Ukraine made the path towards Europe more difficult. Leonid Kuchma, Ukraine's second president, for instance, ran less fast towards Europe and gave more focus to Russia than his predecessor. This way, he balanced more between east and west. He himself described his policy as follows:

[...] being located at the European crossroad, in a complicated system of international axes, being at the same time pivotal for central, western, and southeast Europe, our country cannot afford not to have tight relations with these countries.⁵¹

In other words, he indicates that it is important to have a good relationship with both powers. During Kuchma's presidency, this manifested itself around a possible NATO membership. Around 1993 Ukraine indicated that in addition to EU membership, NATO membership was important for ensuring national security.⁵² However, during his inaugural speech in 1999, Kuchma stated that abstained from NATO membership. He argued that the key features of his foreign policy were stability, predictability, and neutrality. A possible NATO membership did not fit into that picture.

Events during this period showed no clear line in Ukraine's foreign policy. Ukraine had continuously expressed its desire to integrate with the European Union over all the years. But at the same time, because of its fear of losing independence to Russia, it had never fully implemented Western reforms.⁵³ Moreover, joining the EU required a lot of time. All the requirements that needed to be implemented had a lot of impact on a country and would take years. The changes of presidents, some of whom had more focus on the EU and the others on Russia, made EU requirements difficult to implement quickly. Therefore, concrete steps towards one of the two spheres of influence remained absent between 1991 and 2009. This created a situation in which Ukraine balanced between East and West.

⁵¹ Karina Shyrokykh, "The Evolution of the Foreign Policy of Ukraine: External Actors and Domestic Factors", 838.

⁵² *Ibidem*, 837.

⁵³ *Ibidem*, 840.

Political instability in Ukraine around 2013

Around the 2010's, the international situation had begun to become disbalanced. As indicated, Russia was never keen on Ukraine's integration into Europe. These irritations began to increase more sharply from 2009, as the European Union did not give up and continued to pull on Ukraine. After all Ukraine's statements that it wanted to integrate further with Europe, President Viktor Yushchenko added deeds to words by signing the Eastern Partnership (EaP) with the EU. On May 7, 2009, the first summit of the EaP took place in Prague.⁵⁴ The EaP is an EU foreign policy initiative which aims to adjust European neighbouring states to Western structures. It has four thematic groups which focus on (1) democracy, good governance, and stability, (2) economic integration and convergence with EU policies, (3) energy security and (4) contacts between people, like culture, media, and education. These policies are aimed at further implementing Western key values such as democracy, culture, and economy. In 2012, under the presidency of Viktor Yanukovych, Ukraine even went a step further by starting negotiations on the Association Agreement with the EU.⁵⁵ These Agreements are often seen as a first concrete step towards an EU membership. The European Commission describes it as follows:

An association agreement is a bilateral agreement between the EU and a third country. In the context of accession to the EU, it serves as the basis for implementation of the accession process.⁵⁶

Taking further steps towards Europe was undesirable for Russia, because it would reduce its influence on Ukraine. Moreover, this then only strengthened Europe's foothold on Russia's border. Russia saw this concrete step of Ukraine's rapprochement towards the EU as intrusiveness from Europe towards Russia. However, all did not go smoothly. The ratification process of the Association Agreement progressed with extreme difficulty, because Yanukovych showed that his words did not always match his actions. His ambition to implement Western norms, values and standards in Ukraine was not always accompanied by corresponding events. This first manifested itself in the case surrounding Yulia Tymoshenko, former president of Ukraine. Tymoshenko was sentenced to jail by a politically motivated trial, at least according

⁵⁴ Ukrainian Government, "Eastern Partnership" October 19, 2022, <https://www.kmu.gov.ua/en/yevropejska-integraciya/shidne-partnerstvo>, accessed on October 19, 2022.

⁵⁵ Michael Emerson, "The Ukraine Question" *European Neighbourhood Watch* 7 (2012): 80, 1.

⁵⁶ European Commission, "Association agreement" (n.d.), https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enlargement-policy/glossary/association-agreement_en, accessed on October 19, 2022.

to prominent EU leaders. The German Ambassador to Ukraine, Hans-Jurgen Heimsoeth stated that: "Everything is possible. But the conditions for this have been clearly stated. I would not count on its signing, if Mrs Tymoshenko remains in prison".⁵⁷ It did not stop here. Critical comments from the European side kept coming. In July 2012, EC president Barroso and Vice President Catherine Ashton said:

Regrettably, since 2010, we have been receiving recurring reports of deterioration of the freedom of the media and of assembly. [...] Signing and ratifying the Association Agreement and the DCFTA will not be possible unless Ukraine urgently addresses this stark deterioration of democracy and the rule of law. [...] Solutions need to be found, enabling Ms. Tymoshenko, Mr. Lutsenko and others to regain their freedom and fully participate in political life.⁵⁸

The regime of Prime Minister Viktor Yanukovich faced considerable criticism from Europe in 2012, as the above quote shows. His rule started off energetically with the Association Agreement negotiations, but soon after Ukraine took a wrong turn in Western eyes and started neglecting Western norms and values. Nevertheless, the door for Europe was not quite closed, and things were about to turn around again.

Europe demanded change. On December 10, 2012, the European Union Foreign Affairs Council met and came up with some statements. It recalled the importance of electoral, judiciary and constitutional reforms by Ukraine in order to finalise the agreement.⁵⁹ According to the Council, all this could be possible before the November 2013 EU-Ukraine Summit. Herman van Rompuy, president of the European Council, later argued that reforms in Ukraine should be in place by May that year at the latest, and that this was realistic and feasible.⁶⁰ Europe clearly mounted the pressure. By the end of 2013, events rapidly followed one another. Yanukovich felt the pressure and wanted to implement the necessary reforms as soon as possible because of the stakes of the agreement. In a speech to the parliament, he declared:

⁵⁷ Kyiv Post, "German ambassador: Association agreement unlikely to be signed unless Tymoshenko is free" February 23, 2012, <https://www.kyivpost.com/article/content/ukraine-politics/german-ambassador-association-agreement-unlikely-t-122991.html>, accessed on October 20, 2022.

⁵⁸ Kyiv Post, "EU leaders: Ratification of Association Agreement and DCFTA depends on settlement of Tymoshenko-Lutsenko issue" July 20, 2012, <https://www.kyivpost.com/article/content/ukraine-politics/eu-leaders-ratification-of-association-agreement-a-310272.html>, accessed on October 26, 2022.

⁵⁹ EU Foreign Affairs Council, "Council conclusions on Ukraine" December 10, 2012, https://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/EN/foraff/134136.pdf, accessed on October 26, 2022.

⁶⁰ Kyiv Post, "EU to Ukraine: Reforms necessary for trade pact" February 25, 2013, <https://www.kyivpost.com/article/content/eu-ukraine-relations/eu-to-ukraine-reforms-necessary-for-trade-pact-320910.html>, accessed on October 27, 2022.

Success at the Vilnius summit must be prepared. Documents, vital for our further advancement towards Europe, must be approved. This is work which the Ukrainian parliament must do in order for Ukraine to be able to sign agreements on association and free trade with the EU.⁶¹

Yanukovich was soon to be backed. On September 18, 2013, the Ukrainian cabinet unanimously approved the draft of an Association Agreement with the EU.⁶² The head of the EU delegation in Ukraine was positive and stated that this was an important step towards further integration.⁶³

During these turbulent times in Ukraine's choosing between the Western or Russian sphere of influence, Russia exerted continuous pressure on the politics and economy of the country. Moscow had warned that Russia would cancel Ukraine's special status with the CIS if it signed the Agreement.⁶⁴ In addition, Russia insisted that its partner countries should also take a stand against the developments and cool their relations with Ukraine. This anti-European movement came not only from Russia itself, but also from the Ukrainian parliament. After all, there was still a communist party. This party was already calling for a referendum among the people around September 2013 that would present them with the question as to whether Ukraine would not be better off by joining a Russian-led customs union.⁶⁵ A proposal that Russia tried to make more attractive by offering much cheaper gas. In a reaction, Yanukovich sought to reassure Russia that, despite a deal with the EU, Russia would still be a strategic partner of Ukraine.⁶⁶ The struggle for Ukrainian loyalty was at its highest during this period, and Yanukovich's balancing act is clear to see.

Meanwhile, developments around the signing of the Agreement were still in progress. The speaker of the Ukrainian parliament expressed with confidence that the necessary reforms would be approved by the MP's. He stated that the entire parliament, except the communist party, was united on that issue.⁶⁷ Most of the signals were in the right direction for Europe

⁶¹ Reuters, "Ukraine leader urges pro-Europe drive despite Kremlin pressure" December 3, 2013, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ukraine-russia-yanukovich-idUSBRE9820HG20130903>, accessed on November 3, 2022.

⁶² RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty, "Ukraine's Cabinet Backs EU Association Agreement" September 18, 2013, <https://www.rferl.org/a/ukraine-eu-membership-association-agreement-government-approve/25109791.html>, accessed on November 3, 2022.

⁶³ Ibidem.

⁶⁴ RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty, "Ukraine's Cabinet Backs EU Association Agreement".

⁶⁵ Ibidem.

⁶⁶ Ibidem.

⁶⁷ Interfax Europe, "EU-Ukraine Association Agreement to be signed, Ukraine to go to Europe – speaker" September 29, 2013, <https://web.archive.org/web/20130927070845/http://www.interfax.co.uk/ukraine-news/eu-ukraine-association-agreement-to-be-signed-ukraine-to-go-to-europe-speaker-2/>, accessed on November 4, 2022.

around this time. But one topic was conspicuously avoided, even by Yanukovych: the imprisonment of former president Tymoshenko.⁶⁸ Her release was a tough demand by Germany, among others, for signing the Association Agreement. In November 2013, her imprisonment was on the agenda of the Ukrainian parliament. However, a vote on November 21, on her release failed to win a majority. Since this case was considered important and a condition of the Agreement, this was a huge setback. However, it did not stop there. The parliament proved more sensitive to Russian diplomatic and economic pressure and subsequently disapproved of the rapid pro-European campaign. It declared that it would halt the deal around the Agreement and that Ukraine should renew ties with Russia.⁶⁹ The Ukrainian Parliament even proposed to talk with all parties at the same time to conclude a new trade agreement with the three of them together.⁷⁰ In fact, it appeared that prime minister Azarov had supported all this, perhaps under Russian pressure. Namely, the Kremlin had offered financial support in exchange for not signing the Agreement.⁷¹ These events contrasted sharply with Yanukovych's statement in which he expressed full confidence that parliament would do what was necessary to sign the Agreement. A political stalemate ensued, leaving the international community and the Ukrainian people in despair. The political instability in Ukraine was high, and the road was once again open to all directions: neutrality, the West, and the East.

A pro-European popular uprising, 2013-2014

Yanukovych may have been trying to balance between the European Union and Russia. However, this situation began to look increasingly less like balancing and more like wavering policies in which there grew confusion for the Ukrainian people themselves. Besides confusion, dissatisfaction also prevailed among pro-European Ukrainian communities. Yanukovych had promised them European integration but delayed signing the Association Agreement. He locked up Yulia Tymoshenko after a politically motivated trial, could not resist Russian pressure, and he deteriorated democracy and the rule of law, according to European leaders. Trust in governance and national institutions was historically low: On a scale of 10, trust in parliament

⁶⁸ RFERL, "Ukraine's Cabinet Backs EU Association Agreement".

⁶⁹ Al Jazeera, "Ukraine drops EU plans and looks to Russia" November 21, 2013, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2013/11/21/ukraine-drops-eu-plans-and-looks-to-russia/>, accessed on November 4, 2022.

⁷⁰ Al Jazeera, "Ukraine drops EU plans and looks to Russia".

⁷¹ Karina Shyrokykh, "The Evolution of the Foreign Policy of Ukraine: External Actors and Domestic Factors", 843.

was 1.99, in the government 2.25 and in the judicial system 2.26.⁷² Ukrainians had hopes for a better future, but they were taken away after the events of November 21, 2013.

This set off a revolution. Even on the same night of voting, pro-European activists gathered at Independence Square in Kyiv.⁷³ Soon these protests were given the name "Euromaidan", which freely translated means "Europe Square". Students played an important role in this phase of the Euromaidan. It was their immediate future that was at stake. The students formed the basis of the movement eager for the government to refocus on European integration and managed to spread their movement quickly via social media. On November 26, the leaders of the Euromaidan met and drew up a number of demands to be met by the government: Azarov's cabinet had to resign, and the mandatory laws needed for European integration and the Agreement had to be passed.⁷⁴ From then on, the organisation professionalised. As the protests continued on a still relatively small scale, policemen tried to put down the uprising. The violence they used in doing so was perceived by the rest of the Ukrainian population as an abuse of force. This spark caused the situation to escalate from an uprising carried mainly by students to one that included all sections of the population. From that moment on, partly thanks to police violence, criticism focused on Yanukovych's regime. Some academics describe it as a "social explosion".⁷⁵ Images of the violence against protesters went viral, generating sympathy for the protests among others from the European Union. Result of all this: the Ukrainians turned against their government. Protests would intensify in the winter that followed. Police violence turned to shooting at its own citizens – killing 113 individuals – and the demonstrations culminated in a storming of the Presidential Palace.⁷⁶

The protesters wanted Yanukovych removed from his position as president. The people did not see from him any decisiveness that would make Ukraine a strong Western country. The protests were the perfect occasion to express this frustration. On February 21, 2014, Yanukovych had to flee the Presidential Palace and Kyiv. On February 22, he was removed from his post as president by the Ukrainian Parliament. A new government was installed, headed by Arseniy Yatsenyuk, and Oleksandr Turchynov was named interim president.⁷⁷ Both

⁷² Yuriy Shveda and Joung Ho Park, "Ukraine's revolution of dignity: The dynamics of Euromaidan" *Journal of Eurasian Studies* 7 (2016): 7, 85.

⁷³ Yuriy Shveda and Joung Ho Park, "Ukraine's revolution of dignity: The dynamics of Euromaidan", 87.

⁷⁴ Ibidem.

⁷⁵ Ibidem.

⁷⁶ Ibidem, 88.

⁷⁷ Interfax-Ukraine, "Maidan nominates Yatseniuk for prime minister" February 26, 2014,

<https://en.interfax.com.ua/news/general/193035.html>, November 8, 2022.

BBC News, "Ukraine: Speaker Oleksandr Turchynov named interim president" February 23, 2014, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-26312008>, November 8, 2022.

the new prime minister and president said they would resume talks with Europe, thus the Euromaidan had achieved their first successes.

However, it must be said that the Euromaidan protests were not supported by all Ukrainians. In December 2013, the Research & Branding Group conducted a poll amongst Ukrainian citizens which contained the question whether they support the Euromaidan or not. Around 50% of the population said they were opposed to Euromaidan, a significant proportion.⁷⁸ When analysing the supporters and opponents, it is evident that the socio-geographical aspect is very important. Support for the Euromaidan differed greatly between people in the east and the west of Ukraine. In western Ukraine, 84% of the population supported the protests, and 81% supported European integration, a large majority.⁷⁹ In the east and the south, things are completely different. There, 18% are in favour of European integration and 13% support the Euromaidan. Although the government had always been firm in its pro-European statements, the Ukrainian people were heavily divided. Nevertheless, Ukrainians were united on the outcome of the Euromaidan, with 83% of the population believing there would be negative consequences.⁸⁰ In terms of national security and domestic integrity, they would be right.

Ukraine's escape to Europe, 2014-2015

The international community came back into the picture from February 2014. Russia had noticed that the eastern and southern parts of Ukraine did not support the pro-European course. Putin called together the chiefs of his security services on February 22, discussing with them his plans to annex Crimea - southern Ukraine.⁸¹ He stated he wanted “Crimea to return to Russia”, referring to their shared past. Putin based his decision on a secret poll that showed 80% of Crimea's residents preferred to belong to Russia.⁸² Given the strong opposition towards European integration and the Euromaidan in eastern and southern Ukraine, those numbers were not implausible. Putin added deeds to his words by invading Crimea on February 27 with his special forces.⁸³ While the Russians occupied government buildings with soldiers, Crimea's

⁷⁸ Interfax-Ukraine, “Half of Ukrainians don’t support Kyiv Euromaidan, R&B poll” December 12, 2013, <https://en.interfax.com.ua/news/general/184540.html>, November 9, 2022.

⁷⁹ R&B Group, “Euromaydan – 2013” December 10, 2013, <https://web.archive.org/web/20131213064315/http://rb.com.ua/eng/projects/omnibus/8840/>, November 9, 2022.

⁸⁰ Interfax-Ukraine, “Half of Ukrainians don’t support Kyiv Euromaidan, R&B poll”.

⁸¹ BBC News, “Putin reveals secrets of Russia’s Crimea takeover plot” March 9, 2015, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-31796226>, November 10, 2022.

⁸² BBC News, “Putin reveals secrets of Russia’s Crimea takeover plot”.

⁸³ The New York Times, “Gunmen seize government buildings of Crimea” February 27, 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/28/world/europe/crimea-ukraine.html>, November 10, 2022.

Supreme Council took the decision to hold a referendum on its future, including the issue whether it should become part of Russia.⁸⁴ The referendum was, of course, not recognised by the Ukrainian government and its president.⁸⁵ According to Russian authorities, the results were overwhelming: as many as 95% of Crimea's residents wanted to secede from Ukraine and join Russia.⁸⁶ An allegedly legitimate basis for annexation had now been established. Russia formally annexed Crimea on March 21, 2014.⁸⁷ Since then, conversations between Ukraine, Russia and Europe were mainly about territorial integrity. The annexation had severely strained relations with Ukraine, and there was basically no room left for normal diplomacy. Ukraine even removed its ambassador from Moscow immediately after the official annexation.⁸⁸ But the fear was not yet gone. Russia had annexed Crimea partly on historical grounds, so given the historical ties it was not inconceivable for Ukraine that Russia would annex further parts of the country. If Ukraine wanted to retain its sovereignty, it had to look at international partners.

Europe had heavily condemned the annexation of Crimea and was ready to offer Ukraine support.⁸⁹ The annexation was an immediate opportunity for the European Union to bring the country into its sphere of influence. That Europe wanted to act on this opportunity quickly appeared very clear from an event that took place on the very day of the official annexation of Crimea: both parties signed the political part of the Association Agreement.⁹⁰ So, a process that had taken years was suddenly completed within a month. With this flexibility, EU member states showed their willingness to make real progress on admitting Ukraine to the EU. This ambition was highlighted in the opening statements of the Agreement:

NOTING the importance Ukraine attaches to its European identity;

TAKING INTO ACCOUNT the strong public support in Ukraine for the country's European choice;

⁸⁴ BBC News, "Crimea referendum: Voters 'back Russia union'" March 16, 2014, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-26606097>, November 10, 2022.

⁸⁵ Reuters, "Crimean authorities work under barrel of a gun – Ukraine leader" March 6, 2014, <https://www.reuters.com/article/ukraine-crisis-crimea-gun-idUSL6N0M32QY20140306>, November 10, 2022.

⁸⁶ BBC News, "Crimea referendum: Voters 'back Russia union'".

⁸⁷ Jure Vidmar, "The Annexation of Crimea and the Boundaries of the Will of the People" *German Law Journal* 16 (2015): 3, 366.

⁸⁸ Unian, "Ukraine's diplomat: Non-approval of Russia's ambassador doesn't mean full diplomatic break" May 8, 2016, <https://www.unian.info/politics/1455996-ukraines-diplomat-non-approval-of-russias-ambassador-doesnt-mean-full-diplomatic-break.html>, November 10, 2022.

⁸⁹ European Council, "European Council 20/21 March 2014 Conclusions – EUCO 7/1/14 REV 1" March 21, 2014, https://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_Data/docs/pressdata/en/ec/141749.pdf, November 10, 2022.

⁹⁰ Eur-Lex, "Association Agreement between the European Union and its Member States, of the one part, and Ukraine, of the other part" March 21, 2014, [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:22014A0529\(01\)&from=EN](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:22014A0529(01)&from=EN), November 10, 2022.

CONFIRMING that the European Union acknowledges the European aspirations of Ukraine and welcomes its European choice, including its commitment to building a deep and sustainable democracy and a market economy;⁹¹

In order not to immediately nullify all legislative and democratic conditions for signing the Agreement, European leaders waited until the upcoming presidential elections to conclude the major economic parts. After all, a pro-Russian president could deteriorate the relationship again. However, Petro Poroshenko, the new president, was pro-Western. This allowed the economic side of the Agreement to be signed as early as June 2014. Poroshenko indicated that: “Ukraine is underlining its sovereign choice in favour of membership of the EU [...]”.⁹² Poroshenko's presidency, the signing of the Association Agreement, and the statement the president made in the process, show Ukraine's final choice: Europe. Nothing in the post-annexation period suggests that Ukraine wanted to strengthen ties with Russia, or that it is trying to seek its neutrality. The ambition to be a buffer state was as good as gone. Ties with Russia had been cut and the gateway to Europe opened.

Conclusion

So, what incentives and policies of the European Union and Russia contributed to Ukraine's choice to choose the EU as the main international political and economic partner? Comparing EU and Russian policies towards Belarus, this study comes to the following conclusion.

The political instability in Ukraine leading up to the signing of the Association Agreement left both the European Union and Russia in despair. A long process preceded Ukraine's choice of the West. The basis of the foreign policy was to keep both Russia and the EU happy. Many presidents did not risk going too far in concluding treaties with either neighbour, so as not to offend anyone. Unlike the national government, Ukrainian citizens did know what they wanted. The population was highly polarised and had abandoned balancing between east and west. Western Ukrainians were keen to belong to Europe, while eastern and southern Ukrainians preferred to look towards Russia. President Yanukovich managed to push this polarisation to an all-time high through his unclear policies. His presidency marked a pivot in Ukraine's status as a buffer state. The EU, which had perhaps learned from Belarus, tried to

⁹¹ Eur-Lex, “Association Agreement between the European Union and its Member States, of the one part, and Ukraine, of the other part”.

⁹² BBC News, “EU signs pacts with Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova”.

use positive conditionality to win Ukraine to its sphere of influence. It proposed the Association Agreement, which had several conditions attached. Yanukovych indicated that he supported this kind of EU integration, but his statements did not always coincide with his actions. He failed to get the conditions through parliament, which provided a cause for rebellion for the pro-European population. Political instability, Yanukovych's pro-European statements and polarisation in Ukraine were seen by Russia as an opportunity. It took advantage of the situation and annexed Crimea, one of the most anti-EU regions. This assault on territorial sovereignty presented Ukraine with a clear choice. For years, its foreign policy had focused on protecting sovereignty and national security, and this was now seriously at stake. Ukraine sought international protection. Given Russia was the aggressor, Ukraine was left with only one option: Europe. The annexation virtually closed the door for Ukraine to join the Russian sphere of influence.

While Russia instilled fear in its neighbour, the EU tried to seize the momentum and bend the situation to its advantage. For years it was difficult to sign the Association Agreement, but after the annexation it could suddenly be done very quickly. That Europe wanted to cash in on this opportunity was abundantly clear. However, even before annexation, there was a substantial difference between EU and Russian policy. The EU, as mentioned, really tried to pull Ukraine in with incentives. In contrast, Russia had little to offer and even went so far as to threaten its sovereignty.

In terms of incentives and policy, we can say the following. Russia provided Ukraine with too few incentives. Europe had perhaps learned from Belarus and did comply with these two aspects. Russia deterred Ukraine, while Europe continually wanted to incorporate it by conducting peaceful diplomacy. In short, Ukraine had little to gain from Russia if it wanted to protect its own sovereignty and national security, and if it wanted to make economic and social progress. By cooperating with the European Union, it had much to gain: strong international allies, prosperity and support for its national sovereignty. Ukraine therefore chose the EU as its main political and economic partner.

Conclusion

This study wanted to find out what influences pivots in the foreign policy of former buffer states. To do so, it looked at the cases of Belarus and Ukraine, which have both experienced such turning points. In order to provide answers, this study has primarily used policy documents and statements by leaders of Belarus, Ukraine, Russia and the EU. After careful analysis of these sources, this study has arrived at a plausible answer to the main question.

Today, Belarus has Russia as its most important political and economic international partner. The results of this study show that the seeds for this were sown in 1994, when Lukashenka was elected president of the country. Soon after his election, it became clear that he had no intention of leaving anytime soon, and thus wanted to consolidate his power. The steps he took to this end, including amending the constitution through a referendum, were considered illegitimate by the EU. As this went against European standards of legal governance and Western norms and values, the EU scaled down diplomatic ties to a minimum. The EU put negotiations for better relations on hold and thus no longer undertook attempts to "westernise" the country. Russia, on the other hand, offered Belarus all kinds of alternatives. It virtually copied European institutions while allowing Lukashenka to retain power. Europe offered Lukashenka no prospects, while Russia presented him with a win-win situation. This did not make Belarus' choice of Russia as its main partner difficult.

Ukraine today belongs mainly with the European Union. This study shows that Ukraine was a good example of a buffer state until 2009. After that year, it was less able to balance East and West. Yanukovich's presidency has been important in this. The EaP and the Association Agreement, which would be important steps towards EU membership, were first discussed in 2009. With this approach, Europe provided economic and political opportunities to Ukraine. The country could modernise and its prosperity could increase, on condition that it started conforming its structures to European standards. However, Yanukovich found it difficult to keep all parties satisfied and left his people, the European Union and Russia in uncertainty about the Agreement. The polarisation among the population over which international course Ukraine should take caused internal unrest. Russia followed the developments and developed a drive for expansion for the pro-Russian Ukrainian territories. The subsequent annexation confirmed Ukraine's fears of threats to its territorial integrity and national security. To protect these two core values of its international policy, Ukraine did have to opt for the EU as main international partner, given Europe was ready to provide support.

When a comparison is made, the cost-benefit analysis stands out. This study shows that international actors such as Russia and the EU played a significant role in Belarus' and Ukraine's pivots. In each case, their choice is a combination of internal factors and external offers. Internally, because national leaders, political developments and salience among the population are important variables, and externally because international actors determine what conditions they set for an alliance. Internal actors, in the form of political power, define the costs and benefits. They decide what is good or bad for the country. It is then up to the international community to respond accordingly, and provide the right incentives. Furthermore, the results show that it is important to stay at the negotiating table with a party if powers ultimately want to win over other states in a diplomatic way. The complete cessation of diplomatic ties proves ineffective from these two cases, as states will then seek other allies. So, if international actors suddenly decide to stop incentives and start imposing sanctions, turning points can happen. Acting on benefits by using normative power well seems to have little impact, while triggering costs seems to create pivots.

This study stands on the shoulders of academics such as Kenneth Waltz, who introduced the concept of buffer states, and Zivilē Krisciūnē and Donald Jensen, who are beginning to question the proposition that Belarus and Ukraine are still buffer states. However, they do not delve deeper into the history of the two states and their current diplomatic ties. Unlike existing literature, this study went further by arguing that these states are no longer buffer states, and it traces the process of their respective pivots towards a clear position between East and West. Therefore, it shone a new light on the actions and drivers of international actors in influencing buffer states. For this reason, it added to the contemporary literature on buffer states and how international power blocs deal with them.

Yet, a number of issues remain unexplored. Results showed, for instance, that staying at the negotiating table is important for achieving international goals with other states. It remains unclear how universal this presumption is. For that would mean that cutting diplomatic and economic ties with Russia today would not be beneficial either. So, while this assumption is true for Belarus and Ukraine, it would be good if deeper research is done on the universality of this conclusion. It is also interesting to look further into the sustainability of buffer states in their form. The analysis concluded that Belarus and Ukraine both failed to maintain that status. This raises the question to what extent, and for how long other buffer states managed to do so, and whether 'being a buffer state' is a realistic long-term option at all.

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