

# Humanitarian aid and political aims in Eastern Ukraine: Russian involvement and European response

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## Abstract

*Recent events in Ukraine revealed several humanitarian issues against the background of strong pressures from Russian Federation, in its attempt to block Ukraine's accession to the European Union (EU). This article examines how the UE, as a normative force, responds to the humanitarian crisis in Eastern Ukraine and to Russian moves to support the separatist forces, under the guise of humanitarian aid. The Russian convoys that reached the Donbas region have repeatedly breached international legislation in the humanitarian field, as documented by both Ukrainian authorities and international missions in the disputed regions. Moscow's "humanitarian" vision appears to be a part of a wider attempt to impose the Eurasian project in its near abroad, alongside information war and outright military support for anti-government forces.*

**Keywords:** European Union, Russia, humanitarian aid, Ukraine crisis, Donbas conflict

## 1. Introduction

The events that happened in Ukraine on the eve of the Vilnius Summit have revealed a clear competition between the European Union (EU) and the Russian Federation in the Eastern part of the continent. Although many researchers doubted a potential military offensive by the Russian Federation against the former satellite state, the establishment of a pro-European government coalition in Kiev in February 2014 led to the exhaustion of Russia's indirect means of pressure and prompted Kremlin to resort to military force.

The Vilnius Summit of November 2013 was the moment when a serious breakup of the Eastern Partnership group of states happened. Before the Summit, of the three states following the EU association path, Ukraine was the only one on whose territory no secessionist troops had been deployed. The Russian

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Federation has assumed the role of pseudo-peacekeeper in these military conflicts. Europe's pragmatism in its relationship with Russia, explained mainly by its energy vulnerability, left Georgia confront the ambitions of its northern neighbour in 2008, and in 2014 it was Ukraine's turn to fall into that trap.

In spite of all warnings from the West, in the case of Ukraine, Putin resorted to the same scenario applied in the military conflicts with Georgia and Moldova: supporting Russophile associations and organisations, infiltrating and supplying paramilitary separatist groups, and dispatching regiments of the Russian regular army with the status of peacekeepers. However, in the case of Crimea, the Kremlin went much further and officially annexed a part of the territory of its neighbour, pointing out that Russia took back its own land without causing any bloodshed.

In 2014, Ukraine has been one of the most important issues on EU's foreign relations agenda. Thus, the leaders of the member states have reiterated their support to the pro-European Government of Kiev by encouraging the necessary reforms and Ukraine's territorial integrity. In this connection, the European Commission has proposed a €11 billion aid plan to help Ukraine's macro-economic stabilisation and development.

On April 9, 2014, the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Catherine Ashton, stated that the Union supported Kiev's efforts to stabilise the situation in the Eastern regions of the country through so called „Anti-Terrorist Operation” (ATO). This statement was also backed by the president of the European Council, Herman Van Rompuy, who said the EU had to rethink its relationship with Russia after the past decade of partnership.

Therefore, the signing of the Association Agreements with Georgia, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine (the economic part) by the EU, on June 27, 2014, represented a significant event. On the situation in Ukraine, the European Council decided: to create a verification mechanism, monitored by the OSCE, for the ceasefire; to return to the Ukrainian authorities the control over the eastern borders; and to implement President Poroshenko's peace plan.

The domestic situation in Ukraine has been worsened by the economic and financial crisis. Given the military conflict in the East of the country, Ukraine was forced to create its army forces virtually from scratch. Under the chaos fostered by the Kremlin, the separatist forces supported by Russia's secret services and Special Forces started to take over several cities in the Donbas region; the amplification of the military confrontations has led to serious humanitarian problems. Thus, a population of approximately 4 million people living in the conflict area have gone through a total nightmare: bombings, lack of resources and proper living conditions, robberies and violence organised by pro-Russian volunteers, many of whom had a criminal record. Eventually, under the information warfare launched by Moscow, the humanitarian catastrophe in Eastern

Ukraine did not correspond to the official Russian propaganda, which blamed the “junta” and the “supporters of the fascist power” in Kiev for this situation.

*Volens nolens*, the dramatic events of Ukraine call into question the efficiency of EU’s foreign policy in the Eastern neighbourhood and, particularly the humanitarian aid provided by the EU as a world leader. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to conduct an analysis of the EU policy and the implementation of the universal humanitarian aid principles during the military conflict supported by Russia, which proposed its own alternative for the settlement of the humanitarian crisis in Eastern Ukraine.

## **2. The European Union’s humanitarian aid to Ukraine after Euromaidan**

The EU member states failed to reach a unanimous position regarding the settlement of the armed conflict in Ukraine and the humanitarian problems raised by the war. However, there are several common points predominating among EU’s political elite, regarding the settlement of the humanitarian crisis in Eastern Ukraine. First of all, it is necessary to conclude a trustworthy ceasefire under the aegis of a special mission led by OSCE, which would ensure that all the parties in the military conflict abstain from using weapons, and would forbid military support from other states. In this sense, EU’s sanctions against Russia are aimed to temper the imperial ambitions of the latter and to resume the negotiations with Kiev, in the context of Ukraine’s political association and economic integration with the EU. To ensure an interethnic dialogue and internal stabilisation with the involvement of all regions, the Ukrainian government should develop and implement a special political reform program (which, upon Kremlin’s request, implies the federalisation of Ukraine, while in reality it means a separation into two spheres of influence).

Ukraine’s official position regarding the humanitarian problems engendered by the military conflict was reiterated by Ukraine’s President, Petro Poroshenko, who called for international aid for the Donbas population, with the participation of the EU, USA, and other partners. In his opinion, Russia could take part in helping the population in need, provided that it observed the international regulations and exclusively under the aegis of the International Committee of the Red Cross (Unian, 2014). Ukraine’s position on humanitarian aid was also supported by the leaders of UK, Germany and the US, who stated that Russia’s potential actions under the pretext of humanitarian aid, without Kiev’s agreement, are inadmissible. As a response to the common position of the West, Russia announced that it would enter Ukraine with its humanitarian convoy even without Ukraine’s permission.

On August 17, 2014, the foreign ministers of Germany, France, Russia, and Ukraine met near Berlin. The purpose of the meeting was to address issues such as: a ceasefire in Eastern Ukraine; establishing an efficient control at the border between Russia and Ukraine; and the provision of material aid to the

population affected by war. This is what made the meeting a small victory for Moscow, which was planning to send a so-called “humanitarian” fleet to support pro-Russian insurgents. These kinds of meetings reflect the tendency of the EU member states to press the government of Kiev to negotiate with the pro-Russian leaders and cease military operations against the separatists. Later events have revealed European leaders’ short-sightedness, as Kremlin and its proxies did not intend to abide by the ceasefire; moreover, they have used this time in order to advance onto the Ukrainian territory.

The Russian “humanitarian convoy” reached Donbas on August 22, 2014, thus violating the international rules. Kiev called this action a “direct invasion”, but promised it would not respond to this provocation by the Russian Federation, which could accuse Ukraine of an attack over a “humanitarian mission”. As a response, Russia’s representative to the UN, Vitaly Churkin, organised a briefing to explain why Moscow had decided to send the humanitarian convoy. In the afternoon of the same day, the issue of the Russian invasion was discussed in an emergency session of the UN Security Council. Later on, in an interview delivered by Churkin to the Voice of America, he argued that the United States did not have any “monopoly on humanism” ([sic] perhaps he meant “humanitarianism”). Thus, Russia disapproved the fact that the West interfered with the domestic affairs of other states, under the guise of humanitarian arguments (Shuster, 2014).

Although it has been initially agreed that the customs and border authorities of both countries would inspect the first group of the humanitarian convoy trucks sent by Moscow for the population in Eastern Ukraine, this proved impossible due to Russia’s unilateral actions, which defied international rules on sending out humanitarian aids.

As to the EU’s humanitarian aid policy, it includes actions based on the fundamental principles of humanity, neutrality, fairness, independence, and uses three main tools: emergency aid, food aid, and aid designed for refugees and displaced people. In the conditions of the information war conducted by the Kremlin, these principles change their connotation, as they are often used for other than humanitarian purposes. The ways of coordinating the humanitarian actions on-site by the European Commission’s Humanitarian Aid and Civil Protection Department (ECHO) with the help of nongovernmental organisations and of the UN, are also different. Actually, the UN’s important role is missing in the case of the humanitarian aid from Russia, which is coordinated solely by the presidential administration in Kremlin.

The humanitarian aid provided by the EU to the population affected by the conflict was timely but not efficient enough in the conditions of the Ukrainian crisis. On August 12, 2014, the EU offered €2.5 million to the most affected victims of the war. For a population of about 4 million people, the resources invested by the EU in humanitarian aid have been virtually inefficient and

unable to address at least some of the problems of the population suffering as a result of the military conflict.

On November 13, Ukraine obtained €7.75 million from the EU for humanitarian purposes. In addition, €3.3 million were allocated to the affected population in Eastern Ukraine. These financial resources will be used to cover the basic needs, as well as for preparations for the cold season. Aside from this, €4.5 million were provided for the resettlement and integration of the relocated people, mainly to support schools and healthcare establishments.

Therefore, EU's humanitarian aid provided to the Government of Kiev since early 2014 has amounted to €32 million. Of these, 11.05 million were allocated for the affected population in Eastern Ukraine. Overall, the humanitarian aid provided by the European Commission and the EU member states to Ukraine accounted for €73 million. Since February 2014, EU experts have been working on the ground, monitoring the situation, and coordinating emergency assistance.

Another major issue is the blocking by the separatist forces of the distribution of humanitarian aid in the regions outside Kiev's control. Pro-Russian separatists have refused to take over the humanitarian contributions and this has led to reactions of dissatisfaction from the population in several towns. Having reached the line of poverty and hunger, people are ready to organise protests in order to make it possible for the pensions and humanitarian aids to be distributed (as the money is often expropriated by the groups of Cossacks from Russia).

Thus, the position of the European officials oscillates between the lack of desire to be involved in a major conflict of the 'cold war' era and the need to help Ukraine save its European project. In this sense, the recent statements of the EU High Representative for Foreign Policy, Federica Mogherini, about the ineffective sanctions against Russia (Reuters, 2014) as well as the declaration of the German Minister Steinmeier who spoke against the perspective of having Ukraine join NATO and the EU (Hoffmann, 2014), give clear signals that the EU could give priority to its trade interests with Russia.

It is necessary to make a short remark on the new stage of development of the Russian-European relations: many European officials do not understand the danger of the challenges coming from Russia, who is not EU's 'reliable' partner anymore – a myth that appeared years before the Ukrainian crisis. Therefore, it is necessary for the EU to have a sound common foreign policy, and especially a humanitarian aid policy that is adequate and efficient in conditions of war. It should also be capable to deal with the all-embracing corruption phenomenon inherited by the new Kiev power from the Yanukovich regime. Unfortunately, Russia continues the drama show using Kiev's post-Euromaidan political mistakes and economic complications.

### 3. The Russian convoys

The Kremlin's ultimate aim is to thwart the process of association of Georgia, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine to the EU, which would involve a transition to modern market economies and to democracy, affecting Russia's control over the CIS space.

Therefore, having lost its control over the Kiev Government in February 2014, Russia tries to block Ukraine's association to the EU, using the "best" tradition of Russian secret services and the military resources in order to outline the boundaries of the Project "Novorossia" up to the Dniestr and the Danube. The increasingly authoritarian regime at the Kremlin attempts to restore the former Soviet Empire, and the loss of Ukraine and of the control in the Northern Black Sea area would limit Moscow's influence in Eurasian space.

In the meantime, the Maidan's lessons are learned with difficulty and, as a result, Ukraine lost the hybrid war conducted by Russia, in May-June 2014 – a conflict for which Moscow rejects all blame, calling it an internal issue of Ukraine. An important method used by the Kremlin in the confrontation with the new government in Kiev was the sophisticated information war: in an interview, Putin eulogised the abilities of Joseph Goebbels, the Nazi minister of propaganda (Global Voices, 2014).

Russia claimed that it faced a true humanitarian crisis on its border with Ukraine, arguing that Ukraine committed severe crimes against its own people. In April 2014, Russian statements have already left the door open for a possible "humanitarian intervention", although Russia had repeatedly rejected this concept and presented it as a cover for Western strategic intentions (Allison, 2014, p. 1266).

"Humanitarian" guns were used to promote Russian interests. Under the influence of the Eurasian ideas promoted by Alexander Dugin's Eurasian Institute, Vladimir Putin has decided that Moscow has the mission to re-establish a society based on traditional values in Russia and in the "near abroad" countries. Thereby, since August 2014, under the pretext of humanitarian aid and among political attacks against the "fascist junta in Kiev", Russian troops and ammunition were brought into Ukraine.

The secessionist republics are conflict zones where political elites depend on the continuous presence of the Russian military and on Russian "humanitarian aid" for their economic security and survival (Dunn and Bobick, 2014, p. 410). Therefore, the Kremlin provoked Kiev to take radical measures against pro-Russian insurgents, and accused it, through its huge propaganda machinery, of wanting to exterminate the peaceful population and of provoking the humanitarian catastrophe in Donbas.

For this purpose, the dubious organisation under the slogan "Russians without borders" created by Kremlin and the Moscow oligarchs, set up the first humanitarian mission to the Donbas, consisting of 227 trucks. According to the

Russian authorities, on August 22, 2014, the convoy carried approximately 2.000 tons of humanitarian aid, collected in the Moscow region. There were 400 tons of cereals, 100 tons of sugar, 62 tons of food for children, 54 tons of medical devices and medicines, 12.000 sleeping bags and 69 portable electric generators. This was the first act of the Potemkiniade organised by Moscow in order to achieve its geopolitical interests in Ukraine.

According to Timothy Snyder, in Orwellian terms, Russia tries to build its Eurasian empire by destabilising the EU (Snyder, 2014). These efforts include the support of right-wing extremist parties from European states, while the Ukrainians are called nationalists and fascists – all this, when in Russia there are many extremist organisations tacitly supported by the Kremlin, which also recruits from their ranks many fighters for the “independence” of the Donbas.

The convoys helped the evacuation to Russia of dismantled equipment as well as of personnel employed in some strategic plants located in areas controlled by pro-Russian separatists – in particular, industrial capacities relevant for the Russian military industry, including nuclear weapon-producing industry. Certainly, these actions are meant to reduce the need for imports, in the current situation of sanctions and international isolation, especially in the military field. Under the pretext of the humanitarian catastrophe in Eastern Ukraine, the Kremlin argued that humanitarian convoys must consist of vehicles with enhanced transportation capabilities (“KAMAZ”) in order to help the “peaceful population” from the Donbas region.

Overall, between August 23 and October 4, 2014, the Russian Federation sent convoys with humanitarian aid consisting of: food, drinking water, blankets, portable electric devices, water filtering devices, medicines and fuel. Unfortunately, the information provided by Russian officials is not reliable, because neither the Ukrainian authorities nor international organisations such as OSCE or UN had access to their content (OSCE, 2014b).

On October 28, 2014, Russia sent a fourth convoy to the secessionist republics from eastern Ukraine, consisting of 50 trucks. The Kiev government has protested, as the Kremlin had not sent any request and notice for preparing the humanitarian mission, as stipulated by the international standards. In the case of the three previous convoys, at least the indicated formalities were respected, although the Russian government actually committed serious violations of the international rules and procedures necessary to conduct humanitarian missions: changing of routes, as well not allowing the inspection of the cargo by the Red Cross and the Ukrainian customs officials. The fourth Russian humanitarian convoy transported, according to Russian officials, only construction materials for civilians affected by the military conflict. The Ukrainian authorities had no possibility to inspect the transport, and declared that, after the war, Russia will respond for all illegalities committed in Ukraine at the international court in The Hague.

The latest evolutions can have a negative impact on the critical situation in eastern Ukraine, which risks to be transformed in a humanitarian catastrophe. The elections organised on November 2, 2014 in the Donetsk and Luhansk people's republics were in contradiction with the agreement signed in Minsk by the belligerent Parties. The elections were not recognised in the EU and in the USA, but Russia welcomed the expression of the right to vote by the population from the separatist regions.

As a result, on November 4, 2014, President Poroshenko, on the grounds that he cannot support the illegitimate actions in the secessionist regions, signed the document No. 875/2014, according to which the Government stopped all financial support to the territories which are not controlled by Kiev.

This document has come into force on November 15. It is clear that this decision aroused complaints from separatists, and also from president Putin, who declared that Kiev organised an economic blockade of Donbas (Financial Times, 2014). On the other hand, this decision of the Ukrainian government had the expected effects: the separatist leaders have precipitated to declare that they are ready for new negotiations in Minsk. More Ukrainian experts have announced possible problems regarding the survival the regions controlled by separatists, with a population of 3 million. There is evidence that hundreds of elderly people have died in recent months, being deprived of their means of livelihood. The Kiev government has no clear plan, nor resources to massively move the population to regions not affected by military conflict.

On November 13, the OSCE mission in Ukraine reported intense movements of trucks transporting coal and bodies ("cargo 200") from the Luhansk region to the Russian Federation. The report mentions that the Russian customs took care that the trucks be empty when they enter Ukraine. On November 16, 2014 the Russian ministry for Exceptional Situations finalised the "humanitarian" mission (the seventh) consisting of 74 trucks (about 350 tons), 20 of which were directed to Luhansk. It is evident that these charges were inspected only by the Russian party. According to witnesses, the Russian "humanitarian" convoy which arrived in the Luhansk region contained only ammunitions and no medicines, food or winter clothes. The Ukrainian officials declared that these defiant actions do not comply with the international and Ukrainian legislation regarding the transportation of material aid, and the representatives of Cross Red Committee have not been involved in the transportation of these charges.

On November 30, the eighth Russian humanitarian convoy entered Ukraine. The OSCE mission confirms that, out of the 106 vehicles that arrived in Donetsk, 18 trucks transported fuel (which cannot be called humanitarian aid). This convoy was only visually inspected by the Ukrainian customs, which were not allowed to draw up the necessary documents, a serious violation of the international norms.



The position of the EU Member States can be summarised in the declaration of the German Foreign Minister, Frank-Walter Steinmeier, who recognised that he didn't know how the conflict in the eastern Ukraine will perform (Business Week, 2014). Thus, the head of the German diplomacy commented on the fact that the OSCE reported the movement of 43 military vehicles, including heavy artillery.

The Russian officials affirm that under the management of the Exceptional Situations Ministry, the first seven convoys transported 9,500 tons of food, construction materials and medicines, and the eighth contained 1,200 tons of similar charges. In addition, Moscow accused Kiev for not complying with the Minsk armistice, according to which Ukraine was compelled to offer humanitarian corridors (relief) and thus Russia took the matter into her own hands. On the other hand, Russian NGOs involved in their own investigations on Russian military destinations in Eastern Ukraine and on Russian humanitarian transports, report that the "white" trucks transported the "Kremlin army" (Novyj Region, 2014).

The United States has officially affirmed that if, under the cover of "humanitarian" convoys, Russia transports ammunitions and fuel for the insurgents, a Russian invasion in Ukraine can be said to take place; for their part, the European states have no common position regarding the origin and the destination of Russian convoys. The EU is unhappy with the failure of both signatory parties, Ukraine and Russia, to observe the Minsk agreements. Thus, on November 11, the German Chancellor, Angela Merkel, requested insistently that the armistice be obeyed, and efforts concentrate on the winter conditions and on humanitarian aid for Ukraine.

According to Irina Severin, the "humanitarian operation" is Russia's Trojan horse that tipped the balance in favour of the secessionist republics, due to the fact that the humanitarian convoys brought regular Russian armed forces (Severin, 2014). Thus, Moscow departs from the humanitarian aid principles, using its own rhetoric of national-totalitarian regimes of the inter-war era. For sure, a part of the aid sent by the Russian Federation was distributed to the population that had suffered from the military conflict; however, these 'humanitarian convoys' are a characteristic display of an information warfare bitterly fought by Moscow against Ukraine and the West.

#### **4. Conclusions**

To conclude, we can say that the EU has not yet emerged on the international stage as an important actor, capable to impose its interests within its relation with Russia, which uses military force. The imposition of sanctions against Russian officials or Russian companies by the EU has not exerted a significant influence on the Kremlin's policy towards Ukraine and other Eastern European states. By supporting extremist parties in some of the EU member states, Moscow tries to weaken the Union as an entity on the international arena.

However, there are positive trends regarding EU coordination in the field of foreign policy: all members have condemned the intimidation practices and military actions conducted by Russia in Eastern Ukraine, as well as sending out ‘humanitarian’ convoys to the areas controlled by separatist forces. This was less likely to happen five or ten years ago (one can remember the shy reaction of the EU to the military offensive in Georgia in 2008).

Thus, the Putin regime has substantially contributed to adapting EU and NATO to the ‘old’ new challenges from the East. If Western multilateral aid does not involve cooperation and assistance in the military field, Ukraine could face a vast armed offensive from Moscow. Hence, one could expect an aggravation of the humanitarian catastrophe, caused by an ample Russian-Ukrainian military conflict. There is an opinion that Russia will tend towards the situation in which the separatist regions are financially supported by the Kiev government (Romanenko, 2014) because after the sanctions imposed by the West, Moscow does not have the resources to financially support Crimea and, especially, the Donbas region. In such a situation, the Ukrainian budget will incur all the costs of saving the population of the secessionist republics from a humanitarian catastrophe. However, for the time being, there are no reasons why the Ukrainian government would cancel the act of November 4 that cut out the financing for the separatist regions and, accordingly, the local commanders might pay the price for the aggravation of the humanitarian situation.

Such events will have unfavourable security implications for the region situated between the Baltic and the Black Sea. Other countries, such as the Republic of Moldova, could become targets of the Eurasian geopolitical projects. The actions of ‘Eurasian Integration’, an NGO led by the Russian MP Alexey Juravliov, follow this line. It sent aid to Transnistria, including medical equipment and furniture, in a convoy of 60 trucks, this time minutely inspected by the Ukrainians.

An ambiguous phenomenon is Russia’s immigration policy that offered to the refugees of eastern Ukraine temporary living place, food and eventually jobs. However, the refugees have often been relocated to Siberia, Yakutia, Chukotka, and other regions with extreme living conditions. Some of them expressed discontent with the conditions offered by the Russian government and, sometimes after conflicts with the local populations, returned home.

The Russian “humanitarian convoys” were sent without taking into account the official protests of Kiev and in violation of the international law. The Russian aid reached its destination the moment when the Ukrainian army and volunteer regiments started advancing towards the city of Luhansk and were practically surrounding their opponents. Afterwards, the Ukrainian armed forces were themselves surrounded near Ilovaisk, in September 2014.

The Kremlin’s policy towards the ex-Soviet countries undoubtedly raises fears and misunderstandings in the West. The European Union, for now, is not

capable to protect its interests in Ukraine. It is expected that the EU will continue to sanction Russia for its failure to observe the international norms and especially the Budapest Memorandum, as well as for Moscow's attempts to preserve its energy and informational hegemony in the post-Soviet space. Thus, the EU risks to forfeit its status of normative power in the world, which implies promoting human rights and democracy, as well as the political resolution of the frozen or active conflicts, caused by Russia in its near abroad.

The EU needs a common position based on reality, and must become the main supplier of material aid to areas damaged by the military conflict in the post-Soviet space. This would enhance the support for EU integration in traditionally pro-Russian regions, in which the population has started to resent the consequences of Moscow's active promotion of *Pax Russica* or *Pax Orthodoxa*.

In this connection, the EU should enhance the humanitarian aid for Ukraine, whose elites tend to unite against external aggression. It should cooperate with the Kiev government in order to establish an efficient control over the distribution of material aid, to provide decent living and working conditions to the displaced persons and the refugees, and to fight corruption at the local administrative level. Finally, a decision to increase the volume of humanitarian aid to those countries in the Eastern Neighbourhood which face the consequences of military conflicts would significantly improve the EU's status in the region.

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