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Response from Russia to Ukraine halting its efforts towards association with the EU

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On 21 November, already before the Ukrainian government announced the decision that it will halt its preparations to sign the Association Agreement with the EU (AA), President Vladimir Putin announced that Russia was not in opposition to Ukraine's integration with the EU, and declared the will to initiate a trialogue on mutual relations between Russia, Ukraine and the EU. He pointed out the next day that the stance Brussels would take on trilateral talks would be the measure of its real intentions. He branded reactions from the EU to Ukraine's decision as blackmail and an example of pressure being put on Ukraine. Putin's spokesman, Dmitry Peskov announced on 21 November that Moscow had been satisfied to hear Kyiv's declaration of will to improve Ukrainian-Russian economic co-operation, emphasising at the same time that the decision regarding the AA was an internal policy issue for Ukraine. Furthermore, Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Rogozin ordered a working group in charge of industrial co-operation with Ukraine, especially in the defence sector, to be established. On 26 November, Rogozin and Ukrainian Deputy Prime Minister Yuri Boyko met in Sochi. They discussed the possibility of co-operation between industry from Ukraine and Russia. At the same time, the Russian sanitary inspectorate, Rospotrebnadzor, announced that products of the Ukrainian confectionery manufacturer, Roshen, on which an embargo had been imposed for several months, could gradually return to the Russian market.

Commentary

- The fact that the initial reactions from Russia preceded the official announcement of the Ukrainian government's decision indicates that Moscow had been, at the least, privy to how the situation would develop. Russian reactions appear to be have been consciously toned down, since Russia does not wish, by expressing excessive engagement and the taking on of a triumphalist tone, to emphasise now that Ukraine has taken this decision under Russian pressure. It is more flattering for Russia's image to claim that Ukraine has changed its mind because the EU's offer was insufficiently attractive and because it attaches great significance to relations with Russia. Any mention of the significance Russian pressure had could also adversely affect Russia's relations with the other countries in the post-Soviet area, which are fearful of Moscow's dominance.

- The idea to launch talks in the EU-Ukraine-Russia format, which Russia has pushed for and which has been accepted by Ukraine, is Moscow's attempt to gain control over Ukraine's co-operation with the European Union and also tools to restrict such co-operation in the future. If this proposal were accepted, Russia's special status in the region would be recognised, and a precedence would be set that Moscow would refer to in the future, insisting that it should have a say in negotiations between post-Soviet countries and the EU.
- Blocking Ukraine's Association Agreement with the EU was merely an ad hoc goal in Russia's policy. One of Russia's long-term goals is to make Ukraine durably bound to it through integration with the Customs Union structures. This is why Ukraine, following its recent decision regarding Vilnius, may expect certain concessions, such as an intensification of economic co-operation and probably a preferential loan or an adjournment of the repayment of its gas debt. However, the most important benefit it will gain in relations with Russia is the lack of economic sanctions, which would have been imposed had Ukraine signed the AA. Any major benefits, such as a significant reduction in gas prices, will be linked to the process of Ukraine's accession to the Customs Union.