The deal struck last Friday by the leaders of the so-called Independent Square protest and the President Viktor Yanukovich may prove a major progress in the Ukrainian crisis. The agreement has put an end to the violent clashes with the police that in the previous days had reportedly caused more than a hundred dead in Kiev and across the country, pushing back the prospect of a potentially devastating civil war. Moreover, the clauses to the deal – return to the parliamentary system in force until 2004 and adoption of a new constitution by November, appointment of a government of national unity within the next week, new elections to be held no later than in December and a proper investigation into the violence – are a promising first step towards a genuine political transition.

Whatever course the events are going to take, Ukraine’s political destiny is going to remain EU’s business. Since a failure to secure a peaceful transition in Ukraine would impinge on the very raison d’être of the EU, it is of the utmost importance that decision-makers and observers approach this connection without being hampered by defeatist attitudes.

Undoubtedly, recent political uprisings in Europe’s neighbours have led to mixed, if not openly disappointing, results despite the best intentions of the EU’s foreign policy. Political events in Egypt, with the sudden interruption of the relations built with the then-President Morsi by Ashton’s European External Action Service, are enough reason for being wary of the Neighbouring Policy’s effects. Nevertheless, every display of scepticism and analytical detachment would be misplaced before the pluck showed by the protesters in their fight against the government’s violent reaction to their requests. Realist platitudes would sound even more inappropriate considering that a significant part of the demonstrators have been putting their lives on the line for the sake of the European ideal – whatever this might actually mean to them. Of course, avoiding pessimism does not entail to deliberately overlook the still uncertain Ukraine’s political conditions. It is all too clear, for instance, that the protest front is fragmented, and that some of its members – like the far-right Svoboda party – can hardly fit in the all-encompassing “Euromaiden” grouping – meaningfully, the removal of Yanukovych seems to have been ensuring cohesion much more than the prospect of new elections. At the same time, though, sensible concerns like this cannot overshadow the fact that the protest was set in motion by the President’s rejection of the pending EU association agreement. This is at least
indicative of the ultimate effectiveness of the instruments through which Europe pursues its distinctive conditional foreign policy – that is, access to the European market in exchange for democratic reforms at home.

On the one hand, as long as the Union’s international role is solely assessed in terms of its capacity to act as a unitary actor, usual frustrations are confirmed – see the time necessary to issue sanctions against those who ordered to use violence against the population. On the other hand, though, the EU has also been pragmatically developing an approach that is “comprehensive” not only in terms of the diverse kinds of means it entails (diplomacy, trade policy), but also of its multi-level structure, which requires the co-operation of national diplomacies, intergovernmental co-ordination mechanisms and supranational means. In this sense, the combined action of the German, French and Polish foreign ministers’ intervention – key to achieve the agreement – and the economic sanctions can be regarded as an effective modus operandi. To what extent this is just a way to adjust to a sub-optimal condition, is not for this short article to determine. What may be noted, instead, is the EU’s capacity to implement “structural” policies that, despite appearing to be only relevant to a “domestic” level, can give rise to indirect but significant international effects. The EU’s attractive force, in other words, does not need to be regarded as a merely passive one – in contrast with the assertive power exerted, for instance, by Russia through the offer of unconditional bailout loans and low gas prices to nearly-bankrupt Ukraine. Leaving aside the admittedly trite “civil power” rhetoric, the EU is actually able to affect the structural conditions of its neighbours’ political, social and economic development. Since the establishment of the Single Market in the ‘90s, for instance, the EU’s regional policy has not only aimed at promoting cohesion and a more balanced development within the Union’s boundaries, but also advancing cross-border cooperation schemes through which EU-specific territorial logics spread out in the region. Since the 90’s and even more so after the Union’s eastward enlargement, Euroregions have been an inconspicuous but effective geopolitical instrument, able to defuse security threat, cope with emerging nationalistic tensions, create dense social and economic networks. The case of the Romanian-Ukrainian-Moldavian borderland has been a particularly successful one, and the geography of the protests within the country can be related to this effect, together with the well-known ethnic and socio-political factors involved.

Clearly, this “bottom-up” strategy has strong limitations, and cannot make up for Europe’s inability to act responsively when faced with acute crises or the so-called “sovereignist” emerging powers. In tackling with Russia over Ukraine’s geopolitical position, the EU is not called to to dramatically remould its priorities and modus operandi. Soft power can still be the way to go in normal times – but also to achieve urgent goals concerning the Ukrainian crisis, like addressing the threat of fragmentation and promoting national reconciliation via the establishment of functioning electoral processes and the fair prosecution of the perpetrators of violence. At the same time, though, when push comes to shove, the EU must be able to rely on the political resolution and the institutional means need to act in a genuine “strategic way”, and face actors like Russia on their same terms. In this sense, both intergovernmental coordination – see for instance the added value the Polish Foreign Minister Sikorski could provide on the analysis of the Ukrainian political situation – and the full development of the EEAS’s potential will have to be carefully combined and translated into clear-cut political actions. This is what is going to take to effectively counter Moscow’s financial and energy leverage, in Ukraine and in the whole region, and it is up to Europe’s political leaders to take the steps needed to give this decisive turn to Europe’s external dimension. In this sense, the Ukrainian challenge does pose a crucial test for the future of the EU, not only as a relevant international actor, but also as a model of advanced political integration.