

Brailean, Tiberiu

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# THE GEOPOLITICS OF HELPLESSNESS

Tiberiu Brailean\*

**Abstract:** *The events in Ukraine are in the thick of actuality, at the crossroads of East and West. From a buffer zone it has become an acute space of exhibition of Russia's interests, on one side, and of the European Union's, on the other side. As the EU does not have a unique army or a strong political leadership, the presence - as major actors - of NATO and the United States of America is necessary. Huge geostrategic, military, economic, politic, cultural, social and even religious interests are involved. As a neighbour state, member of the EU and NATO, Romania is directly concerned by the present deployments. We wonder if its foreign politics is an appropriate one. Moreover, great stakes aim at the statehood and independence of the Republic of Moldova, but also at the status of the Romanians living in the Cernowits region. Thus, we try to analyse what will happen in Ukraine and with the actors involved, in general. There are several possible scenarios, among which: the success of the elections and the stabilization of Ukraine in integrum; the federation, with the preservation of the frontiers or with the amputation of these ones; Russia's conquest of the country, taking into account EU's demonstrated incapacities; a war that can dangerously escalate; the maintenance of a grey situation, where the two camps explore each other, sanction each other, but not too drastically, elections and referendums are organized, weapons are pacing around, threats are teething, but nothing important is decided, not even a new cold war. The title hints to everyon's weaknesses (is Ukraine a selfsustainable state?), but especially to EU's, the geopolitical objectives of which are in complete disagreement with its means. That is why, in a short term, Russia can win. But in a medium and long term...*

**Keywords:** Actors (Ukraine, the European Union, Russia, NATO, Romania, the Republic of Moldova, Poland, Turkey, etc.); geopolitics; geo-economics; sustainability challenges; interests; objectives; resources; scenarios for the future.

**JEL Classification:** F51.

## INTRODUCTION

The events in Ukraine should stir our most acute interest. There are approximately 200.000 Romanians who live there, besides those residing in Moldova, who are surrounded by almost-Ukrainians with their good and bad sides. In Eurasia, Ukraine has turned into the main foyer, its centre, disputed – well – between Russia and the European Union. Although weakened and highly dependent upon the NATO, the latter is still driven by an economic and cultural attraction force, discovered by a growing number of Easterners through the increasing freedom of movement, especially since they were promised that after Vilnius they were the next to enter this club (housing for centuries a wealthy civilisation), although any level-headed person could understand there is a long way off.

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\* Professor, Faculty of Economics and Business Administration, Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iasi, Romania; e-mail: tbrailean@yahoo.com.

## 1. GREENFIELD POLICY

After Russia's opposition and the shift in power underwent by the oligarchic leadership in Ukraine, after feelers, promises and conflicts, blood has started to flow on the streets of Kiev, and civil war was on the brink. People have heroically resisted to a barbarian power financed – through blackmail – by Russia and without the West provide them with a clear perspective, or a road map. In short, European diplomacy displays a tragic image, with the notable exception of Poland. This Lady Ashton was more fit to lead a group of children to kindergarten, rather than to take part in the European democracy. I have seen it contemptibly attacked by the Russian television, which turned the EU into a scapegoat for what happened in Kiev and, instead of slamming the jerk, mumbled a Sibylline answer and left the room. Western governments are generally moving very slowly: we have no serious agreement regarding what will happen in Ukraine.

Through historical and geographical proximity, those who understand best the state of affairs and act accordingly are the Polish and the Swedish. We should be doing the same thing but, unfortunately, except for the position expressed by President Băsescu, we have seen some Corlăţean straying in Brussels, and willing to sign any resolution, together with a whole bunch of appeasement statements. We have seen this public infant(ile) Victor Ponta, with his lady, in the official stand in Sochi, the only head of government in the UE, if I counted right – which honoured the Russians and, even more, took pictures with the main culprit – Yanukovych – and posted the picture on the internet. Otherwise, what's left for the press to debate upon; politics and Romanian diplomacy, just like the services, seem anaemic, exactly where they were asked for more activism: in the events taking place in the country with which we share the longest borders (650 km). I hope Romanian diplomacy will take notes from Sikorski. Compared to poor Corlăţean, Lady Ashton is Stephen the Great.

Early elections were established, but I believe the Ukrainians will continue to fight among themselves, because what they are looking for is impossible to find completely: their own identity. I do not think that – let us say – the Ukrainian political class represents the people. It is a huge cleavage between the latter's interests and daily life (47 millions scattered on some 600000 square kilometres) and those of the oligarchs and powerful politicians; but it is one gained through fraud. Then, in Ukraine, there are many weapons and a market that is likely to facilitate their rapid growth. Under these circumstances, can you imagine a peaceful future and successful elections? It is very hard for me to believe that. Everybody already has something to avenge there, evil was caused, and a violent and anarchical spirit is already reigning. Moreover, it seems that Russia will never accept

to lose Ukraine. For they would remain, geopolitically speaking, uncovered. Can you imagine, for instance, the “Great Bear” to lose Crimea, Sevastopol? Or even Kiev, considered the cradle of their civilisation – as early as the times of Czar Vladimir (the 19<sup>th</sup> century)?

## **2. BETWEEN TWO DECADENCES?**

Let us not forget that Ukraine is an artificial state, composed of approximately 80 ethnic groups, of which Romanians occupy the third place, after the Russians and they are hated by the majority anti-Russian supporters. It woke up occupying territories from Poland, Hungary, Slovakia, Russia and from us and Bessarabia. The economic landscape is presently groggy, but it has high agricultural and industrial potential. Russia alone made a concrete short-term offer – now obsolete – the Western procedures being rather heavy. It is equally highly dependent upon the Russian oil and gas, but also on the Russian market, their main export market. Their main economic activity is smuggling and tax evasion has reached unbelievable rates. The fiscal system is in collapse and the banking one is also vulnerable, rinsing black money. Their economic model resembles – like two drops of perspiration – with the Russian one. Heavy money should be invested in production and infrastructure, so as to modernize them. No foreign investor dares to come closer and we are getting more and more affected by this. The Germans alone, led by their Angela, could help them now.

The Western part of the country, the north of Bukovina is populated mostly by Catholics, who no longer submit to the centre. The old commercial route of Lviv, which used to pass through Iași, is thus restored. Ukrainian nationalism, especially in these provinces, is defined today by opposition to the Russians, with whom they have had a history of collision. It is true that there are also other South-Eastern parts, pro-Russian, but they also seem to be asking for something else. The administrative system is highly centralised, although the so-called Party of the Regions, formerly belonging to Yanukovich, won the elections precisely based on promises of decentralisation. They are pious; they fight and die with the cross in their hands, and with priests on their side...

Why has the European Union not anticipated Kiev’s rebellious potential, and why does it act with such delay, while the turn of events in Ukraine was visible as early as the organisation of the European Championship. This is when the Europeans stroke the winning shot, more important than Putin’s money. In the 2013 Report on the state of the nation, the Russian president stated that “Russia is the guarantor of traditional values (probably vodka) against the Western decadence. The world is getting more contradictory and agitated. Within this context, the historic responsibility of Russia is strengthening. Key- guarantor of global and regional stability, the Russian state is

constantly protecting its values. Russia is the final bastion of conservatism.” Both societies, Eastern and Western, are in decay, but Ukraine remains in the middle, as a pinnacle of decadence, a pivot, attracted by both decadences. Only 23 years of statehood do not suffice to provide very much stability.

### 3. THE ANACONDA PLAN

The present-day crisis strongly slowed down the first wave of globalization, which was a sort of quasi-colonial Westernisation. There have been profiteers, new power centres emerged, but also opponents, if we were to name only the more virile ones: the Islamists, China or Russia. The example of the pendulum teaches us that, the more its axis moves in a certain direction, the more it will do in the other direction. This is also another grid through which events in Ukraine could be read. However, on a larger scale, after the centre of world economy moved to the Pacific, the main Asian states constituted sovereign investment funds, with which they massively buy, following the most liberal principles, Western actives depreciated by the crisis. We can thus talk about a retiring tide, or about a second wave of globalization, which comes, this time, from the East and goes to the West. The two waves met precisely in Ukraine, the soft belly of Eurasia.

The European Union and NATO wanted to apply the “Anaconda Plan” to Russia, a plan aimed at encircling the victim as closely as possible and suffocating it. The problem is that, given the weakening of Europe and the renaissance of Russia, it is no longer clear who the victim is. The story with Ukraine and Russia reminds us of the anecdote with the mouse who knocks at the door of the elephant. The elephant’s wife answers. “I’d like to speak to the elephant, please”, “Who asks for him?” “It’s Rodolpho from the disco-club!”. I remembered this anecdote when the current Ukrainian prime-minister publicly announced, after the annexation of Crimea, the entrance into “the military phase of the conflict”, which consisted into an order of retreat given to the Ukrainian army. Rodolpho from the disco-club...

Europe cannot understand the Slavic spirit, and the Americans even less so. In 1996, five years after the implosion of the USSR, during Boris Yeltsin’s time, I happened to be in Russia and I used to observe on people’s faces, but even more on the faces of soldiers and militiamen, a sort of dismay and confusion. Even they could not understand how they had got in that situation, after they had been told, all their life, that they were the best and the strongest. They were now selling their hats and their caps, with the emblems of the Soviet Union, for 10 dollars a piece. They called me “the American”, probably because of my hat and coat. However, in spite of all these things and

more others, I felt them to be a vital people, I felt that their history is not an accident and that they might revive. The Russians can be hungry, but they will not give up the imperial idea. They are Christian Orthodox, “blessed”, they have outstanding elite in all fields and icy-blue eyes, who come alive when they hear the words “Mother Russia”. They are, first of all, hungry of space, but they do no longer have the necessary population in order to control it. Moscow considers itself to be “the third Rome”, on its flag St. George is killing the dragon, while the Kremlin, with its mixture of churches and administrative buildings represents, just as its emblem, an image of the joining of the laic and the religious freedom. The dominant colours are copper-yellow, white and red for the exterior; white, yellow and green in the interior. The Cathedral of Vasily the Blessed in the square is unique, of a remarkable syncretism.

The Ukrainians are Malo-Russians, who had come a little earlier, in the 11<sup>th</sup> century they were already christened by the prince Vladimir and his mother, after the success of the byzantine delegation. They are milder, although nationalists, and they have betrayed all the conquerors of Russia until now: Gustav the Second, Napoleon, Hitler, etc. They are slippery, love feasting, their main occupations are agriculture and smuggling, although they have also inherited some industry. They have an oligarchic system, politicians being just puppets. In 1991 they received a patch of territory they hadn't even dreamt about. Although they still depend on the Russians, they started to be seduced by the charm of the Western world. There are around 80 ethnicities in Ukraine, and they become even more nationalists in order to control them. We can cite, for example, the region of Cernauti (Chernivtsi), where Romanians are no more than 20%, although it seemed to me that those Ruthenians are slightly uneasy, knowing this is not their territory. Ukraine is not a settled country, but a patched one, and we, the Romanians, did not have much to win due to this vicinity (see the mouths of the Danube and Snake Island).

Apart from its geostrategic position, I cannot see what the Europeans found in Ukraine. I fail to see what tremendous Ukrainian products could be asked for in the European space. I do consider that Ukraine brings more problems than it solves. The offer of Moscow – we need to acknowledge it – was much more concrete. I cannot see what Europe offers to Ukraine. One billion euro credit must be a joke. Of course, the IMF will come... But if we talk about joining the NATO, things are a little different. The Russians also menace now with the Iranian file, where they had a remarkable contribution, but I do not think that the Iran will come back on the road to negotiations. The whole situation fits China very well, and China is silent and continues to grow.

I can only see the Russians in Transnistria if the balkanisation and the federalisation of Ukraine are wanted, but the probability is nevertheless small, although, just as in the case of the

Republic of Moldova, the options of democratic vote are opposed and sensibly equal. However, in Ukraine there are tens of thousands of Russians, not to mention the Poles, the Galicians and territories that never belonged to them, and that they received... again, from the Russians. What does the Occident defend? The border lines drawn by Stalin? The deterioration of the strategic relation between Germany and Russia, which ensured the calm of the region, certainly constitutes a great loss. Then, the Visegrad group countries made a military alliance within NATO (they may not have confidence?). There is, then, the reopening of the Pandora box of regionalisms on the whole European continent. It seems that this time Anaconda went too far and it squeezed too much, while the elephant was showing off in Sochi. Without Rodolpho...

#### **4. "CONDITIONS FOR A NEW MAJOR CONFLICT"**

I was even more worried about Putin's allusions to a Europe which would "meet the conditions for another major conflict" and his intention to spend 500 billion Euros on arming during the following ten years. I am also bothered by the fact that all the present-day events are like a shadow theatre, on which the only important deciders in this matter are being projected: Putin and Merkel. One again, our history is written by others, and people die according to power relationships between the big ones or according to their interests. We could think we are before the signing of the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact. While the special emissaries of the European Union were negotiating long nights with Yanukovych and with representatives of the opposition, while protesters and the militia were fighting in the streets, Merkel and Putin were discussing gas prices. The Iron Lady of Europe is the only one – unfortunately – able to solve the Ukrainian problem, together with Putin. Angela goes on... Obama does play-back. However, after Sochi, Putin's reaction did not fail to come.

Ukraine, or maybe only its North-Western half, continues to represent the "vital half" that the Germans feel that they need, this time together with the Poles. The problem is how much the Russians are ready to lose here, after the Balkans, the Baltic countries and even Bessarabia. They did not give up in Chechnya, in Armenia, not to mention Georgia or Kyrgyzstan. In fact, there is no rest in the whole Caucasus. But all these are small countries, all of them reunited cannot be compared with the importance of Ukraine. Last year, Putin obtained some tremendously remarkable diplomatic victories, so he continues to be in a bellicose mood, he continues to provide arms in all strategic points, and lately he has been preparing for what will be The Battle for the Arctic. However, the Russians have lost more than 100 million people in 23 years, the medium life

expectancy for men is 55 years, the Chinese are putting pressure on them, the dependency on hydrocarbon exporting, so the fact that they have not diversified their economy can give them problems, in spite of all the blackmail they use. And you should know that even given the civic liberties that they offer, they are also confronted with street fights. While Europe, although more and more..., continues to preserve this cultural-civilizing force of attraction, which belongs to what some call *soft-power*.

Russia had *hard-power*, peak military technology in all fields, systems of information and knowledge structure, strategic resources; the state has financial resources, but social inequalities are very deep. There have already been episodes in history when the Ukrainians made alliances with the big powers which attacked Russia; Ukrainian nationalism has its own history, even if a fragmentary one. This is what happened during Peter the Great's time, when King Gustav II of Sweden attacked Russia, or during the First and the Second World Wars, when entire Ukrainian divisions were fighting on the side of the Germans. The Ukrainians betrayed every time, and even so, the revenge of the Russians was an extreme one. Only during Stalin's cooperativization around 7 million Ukrainians were killed, and 4 million were deported. And today, the Czar Boris, who in 1991 had the excellent idea to dissolve the Soviet Union, brought them luck. However, even he reunited his dearest republics, Ukraine and Byelorussia, together with the new Russia, in the ephemeral NIS (Newly Independent States).

At present, Putin probably has deep regrets that he was not quicker with his project of custom union or I don't know what. The worst scenario for what is to follow is that there happens a scission in Ukraine, and even more so, if it is a violent one. What happened in Transnistria, in Chechnya and in Georgia would not be anything compared to what could happen 200 km from Iasi. Of course, we can expect a gas war, which is likely to affect the whole Europe, we can expect murders, etc. Iulia Timoshenko's return is and is not a solution, as I cannot see those who fought in Maidan giving up, in order to free the way for her presidential elections. The world wants new people. Of course, she fought, but in the eyes of the common people, she is just another oligarch, and the measures she took while she was a prime-minister were not that perfect, if we were to think just of the relationships she had with the former president Yushchenko, for instance. Once, more, the Parliament become the centre of the power, the place where future street fights should be fought. But this would already resemble some kind of authentic democracy. Is Ukraine ready for such a thing? I'm sorry, but judging on mentalities, I'm afraid it is not. All these could be the convulsions of the birth of a new democracy on our continent, and the role of the EU could be an essential one



here. If politicians return to a Wilsonian politics, to a politics of self-determination, a Pandora's box will be opened in the whole world, with consequences difficult to foresee.

## 5. FIVE SCENARIOS FOR THE FUTURE

Others than those for the CNN. We obviously talk about a very close future.

1. Let us begin with the positive scenario, one in which Ukraine remains integral, that is, without Crimea, and a peace formula is reached, guaranteeing the other borders with Vienna. The only organization that could mediate such an agreement would be the OSCE, but I burst into laughter and tears at once, seeing that the separatist forces, the so-called "green men" took hostage 13 members of the OSCE. Can you believe how much visceral hatred these people have gathered? Although the noisiest cities: Donetsk, Kharkiv, Luhansk, Mariupol, Sloviansk, two thirds of the population does not want the annexation to Russia, according to a study carried out by the Institute for Social and Political Analysis in Donetsk.
2. Jumping to the other extreme, the Russians can occupy the entire Ukraine, or at least the South-East and Kiev (the Eastern Orthodox Jerusalem), through a lightning operation, speculating the hesitation in the Western governments, especially since it is hard to believe in the success of some generally recognised democratic elections, on May 25th this year. It would still be a very costly operation.
3. The federalisation of the country, with a general statute of autonomy of the regions, a new constitution, referendums, elections, after multilateral negotiations;
4. If negotiations fail, a civil war is possible, with the implicit or explicit support of the great powers, which would render their confrontation inevitable: a weakened East, after the futile wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, in addition to an ongoing economic crisis facing Russia, which is ready to continue its revenge for the humiliation in 1991. This will be a general war, not a world one. Of course, all this time, China is silently growing, which does not suit anyone.
5. This is why I believe that the most likely scenario is the one that fuels chaos, with menace, "accidents", return to the so-called negotiations, blackmail on gas, invented procedures, corruption and smuggling, promises and postponements, economic sanctions also result of evasion, etc. For now, this can be foreseen in the short term. In the medium and long term, things will change at Moscow's expense. Obama will attract Japan in the

Kuril, the Chinese will spread to Siberia, the Ukrainian economy will collapse, the Russian economy will increasingly lose ground, substituted by European hydrocarbon suppliers, the Iranian and Syrian files will be reopened, and chaos will spread, acquiring geostrategic virtues.

## CONCLUSIONS

An ex-politician from Switzerland used to say: “Collaborate with Russia, but do not get too close to it”. And he was right. What did Europeans want from Ukraine? I could not understand. What can they offer? All of Russia’s reactions are normal, from his point of view, and they had to be anticipated. Things should have been prevented from escalating so far. Does anyone fancy a new world war? I mean, keeping Turkey on the sidelines for almost two decades (do you realise how useful would Turkey be now, within the European Union?), bombing the Balkans – I could not understand why – with an accusing ferociousness, including in the night of the Resurrection, arranging Eastern partnerships up to the borders of the Great Bear, and launching invitations to Ukraine, which has no institutional stability nor a stately political tradition, being thus easy to handle. But where did the Europeans go, those who stirred up everything, when conflict sprang? Well, they have no means. Are we that naive? Did they believe the Americans would rush to bomb Moscow? They did not even go to Libya. Visegrad countries signed a distinct military treaty, Poland is forearming and, generally, entropy increases in Europe...

The problem is that the Ukrainians have started to understand how things work in Europe (see the interview Răzvan Munteanu had with two academics from Kiev, published in “Foreign Policy”, January – February 2014). It will be interesting to observe the evolution of the Ukrainian youth. They were born during a time of independence, they were inoculated a sort of nationalism, and they are now getting old as Ukrainians, without knowing that they live, as least partially, on the territories of Charles the Great, of the Slovaks, the Poles, the Hungarians, the Romanians, the Tartars, etc. The avatars of history do not interest them very much, not even those in the very special relationship with Russia, so they are at loss and risk not to understand recent history. I hope no sacrifices will be required for this.

The Brussels bureaucrats should build an army before planning such adventures; they should reinforce their political unity and declare the spiritual ideal which guides them. Meanwhile, they should solve the debt crisis, the competitiveness crisis, tax harmonisation, the Euro crisis, the crisis of the social model, the demographic crisis, reindustrialisation, remoralizing, etc. As for the

Americans, what are they doing with the deficiencies, what are they doing with Asia? And finally, between us, I wouldn't have thought Obama to be such a weak man...

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