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THE EASTERN PARTNERSHIP OF THE EU – THE CHALLENGES AND THE OPPORTUNITIES IN THE CONTEXT OF THE UKRAINE’S CRISIS

Gheorghe Ciascai*

Abstract: *The aim of this paper is to highlight the political limits and the strategic and geopolitical dilemmas of the European Union’s approach concerning the Eastern Neighbourhood. For this reason, the research will examine the main steps of the implementation of the Eastern Partnership and the main consequences and dilemmas of this implementation for the Eastern European Partners, especially for Ukraine. Also, the paper will investigate the impact of the Eastern Partnership for the Russian approach concerning the near western abroad and the European Union.*

Keywords: European Union; Eastern Neighbourhood; Eastern Partnership; security; geopolitics; crisis.

JEL Classification: F51; F53; F59.

INTRODUCTION

The five years anniversary gala for the launch of the Eastern Partnership has passed almost unnoticed. The conference dedicated to this anniversary, organized by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic in Prague on April 25, 2014, under the patronage of the President of the Czech Republic, brought together, with few exceptions, only the second-ranking diplomatic representatives and academic experts from the European Union, the partner countries and the Russian Federation (Conference "Eastern Partnership Five Years on: Time for a New Strategy", 2014). The Ukrainian crisis and the negotiations for its settlement have overshadowed the conference held in the capital of the Czech Republic, although the influence of the Eastern Partnership on developments in Ukraine was substantial. Moreover, into the message sent to participants at the conference, European Commission President, Mr. Barroso, remarked rightly that "Events in Ukraine today show that the relevance and necessity of the Eastern Partnership is clearer today than it has ever been." (Barroso, 2014).

Paradoxically, one of the most prudent instruments of the EU foreign policy - the Eastern Partnership – has catalyzed one of the most terrible crisis of the post-war period. Perhaps the most serious, because, for the first time after the Second World War, there held an annexation of a territory of a sovereign and independent state by another state in Europe. Amid the European

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priority given resolving internal effects of the economic crisis, the real weakness of the CFSP of the European Union, very little used in the Eastern Neighbourhood, the rifts and the diversity of European options of the six partner countries in Eastern Europe, and not least, the Russian strategy to restore this influence in its *near western abroad*, the Eastern Partnership recorded a questionable result.

In this context, the objective of this article is to highlight the political and strategic limits of EU approach concerning its Eastern Neighbourhood and geopolitical dilemmas of this approach. For this reason, the research will examine main steps of the implementation of the Eastern Partnership and the main consequences and dilemmas of this implementation for the Eastern European partners, especially for Ukraine. Also, the paper will investigate the impact of the Eastern Partnership for the Russian approach concerning the *near western abroad* and concerning the European Union.

1. THE EASTERN PARTNERSHIP BEFORE THE VILNIUS SUMMIT: - THE EXCESSIVE PRUDENCE AND THE AMBIGUITY

In the early 2000s, the European Union launched, almost simultaneously, two strategies that have marked the behaviour of the Union in respect of the regions in the immediate proximity, including the Eastern Neighbourhood. Thus, in December 2003, at the proposal of the HR for CFSP, Javier Solana, the European Council enacted the European Security Strategy (A Secure Europe in a Better World, 2003), while in March of the same year, the European Commission initiated a strategy on the European Neighbourhood, European Neighbourhood Policy / ENP (Wider Europe - neighbourhood: A Framework for Relations with our Eastern and Southern Europe, 2003).

If we look at the European Security Strategy, we will find that among the three main objectives of this strategy the building security in the European Neighbourhood, both in the southern and in the eastern regions, but without specifying the means of achieving this goal (A Secure Europe in a Better World, 2003). In turn, the European Commission's initiative concerning neighbourhood tried somehow to fill this deficiency, by providing a framework for cooperation with all neighbouring countries of the European Union from the south of the Mediterranean Sea, or from the Eastern Europe and the Southern Caucasus. In addition, by using the financing instrument and the bilateral action plans, the Commission's strategy on neighbourhood provided for all partner countries the useful means to support their policies of the economic reform and the modernization

of governance through cooperation and consultation with the EU, including the association with European Single Market (Ciascai, 2012).

Largely, this double European approach seemed to meet the needs and expectations of the neighbours situated on the southern shore of the Mediterranean, some of them already benefiting from EU Association Agreements and their positive effects. Instead, for the states located in the space between the expanding European Union and a Russian Federation willing and able to reaffirm the interests in near abroad, the EU's ambitions were too limited and ambiguous, especially on size CFSP (Popescu, 2005).

In this context, to come to greet aspirations about the European Neighbourhood Policy of some Eastern partners, who wanted a closer relationship with the European Union, including European integration, following the proposals and the tenacious actions of Poland and Sweden, EU launched in 2009 at the summit in Prague Eastern Partnership (Joint Declaration of Prague Eastern Partnership Summit, 2009).

The new foreign policy instrument was an adaptation of European Neighbourhood Policy at the specific circumstances of the Eastern Neighbourhood and covered all states located between the European Union and the Russian Federation, including those visible backtracked on the democracy and the respect for human rights like Belarus. Basically, the Eastern Partnership provided to the countries concerned a common and multilateral platform for engagement between those states, the European Union and the Member States of EU, which was likely to deepen the process of rapprochement between the EU and its partners and finally to support the full association with the EU (Ciascai, 2012).

The initiative for the eastern partners started from the idea of a stronger political involvement of EU Member States and the EU. This stronger involvement was based on the institutional multilateral cooperation structures in four thematic platforms and on the strengthening of the bilateral framework with each state by opening negotiations on Association Agreements between the EU and partner countries (Ciascai, 2012). In addition, the Eastern Partnership has benefited from an increase of the financial resources available which amounted to 2.5 billion euros in the period 2010-2104 (Fulle, 2014). The assessments about the effects of EU financial aid for the eastern partners are more pessimistic, despite positive trends in Georgia and in Republic of Moldova (Kaca, E., Sobjak, A., Zasztowt, K., 2014).

The four thematic platforms of the Eastern Partnership were focused on priority areas of cooperation agreed between the EU and partner countries. These areas are: “democracy, good governance and stability; economic integration and convergence with EU sectoral policies; energy

security; and Contacts between people” (Joint Declaration of Prague Eastern Partnership Summit, 2009, p. 9). The way of working in these formulas is based on the active involvement of partner countries and EU Member States, on the multilateral dialogue and on the exchange of information between participants. European officials also hoped that this way will encourage a genuine rapprochement between the EU and the Eastern partners (Ciascai, 2012).

In addition, to allow the adequate monitoring and the evaluation of the process of cooperation with each partner, the Eastern Partnership set a timetable for execution of actions planned and a rigorous roadmap. An evaluation in technical terms of the meetings held in the four platforms and the progress of bilateral negotiations in association agreements with some partner countries such as Ukraine, Armenia, Georgia and Moldova in the first four years after launching of the Eastern Partnership indicated on mid-2014, a few months before the summit in Vilnius, an important commitment of the EU *vis-a-vis* of the Eastern partners. But a more demanding political and strategic examination the EU approaches in the framework of the Eastern Partnership indicated rather a constant concern of the EU to spare the susceptibilities of the Russian Federation. This concern was manifested in the constant avoidance of the topic of potential EU membership for the Eastern partners, despite the legitimacy of such aspirations in accordance with the EU Treaty, and the acceptance of the certain "*red lines*" suggested tacit or explicit by Moscow regarding the management of the security issues into Eastern Neighbourhood. The absence of the security subject from the Eastern Partnership agenda and the shy use of the EU security tools like CFSP in the Eastern Neighbourhood, despite the many outbreaks of conflict in this area, confirmed the prudence of the EU commitment to this region (Ciascai, 2013).

This excessive caution of the EU towards a region which is vital to protect its interests, otherwise known in the European Security Strategy, can lead to the precarious outcome in Vilnius. The stop of the Armenian negotiations on the EU Association Agreement for joining the Eurasian Union proposed by the Russian Federation on September 2013 and Yanukovich refuse to sign the Association Agreement as a result of Russian pressure seemed to prefigure a real mess of the Eastern Partnership (Popescu and Dreyer, 2014). Finally, the EU – Georgia and the EU – Republic of Moldova Association Agreements has been initialled in Vilnius and the Eastern Partnership survived.

2. THE VILNIUS SUMMIT OUTCOMES: - THE CATALYST OF UKRAINE CRISIS?

The last moment resignation of the Ukrainian leaders to sign the Association Agreement and Deep Free Trade Entertainment at EU summit in Vilnius on 28 November 2013 revealed two distinct political phenomena. On the one hand, at the EU level, the refuse of Ukraine reveals the inability of the European negotiators to persuade the most important Eastern partner to associate with the Union. In addition, at the Eastern Neighbourhood level, the summit in Vilnius confirmed the assessments on differentiation of the Eastern partner states into two groups, the EU-oriented states, Georgia and Republic of Moldova, and the non EU-oriented states, Armenia and Azerbaijan, and the singular status of Ukrainian, namely its inability to make a clear choice on the relationship with the EU (Kaca, E., Sobjak, A., Zasztowt, K., 2014).

It is possible that the insistence of the European leaders to condition the signing of the Association Agreement with Ukraine on the fulfilment of substantially political exigencies (see, the request for release from the prison of the former Prime Minister Yulia Timoshenko) and the absence of a clear post-association perspective for Ukraine be weakened the attractiveness of the European Union. But certainly, the oscillation, the hesitation and the duplicity of the Ukraine administration led by Viktor Yanukovich, even before the summit in Vilnius, generated a strong international discrediting Ukraine and an aggravation of the constant internal rifts in the Ukrainian society.

Through the Vilnius failure and the sudden reorientation to Moscow of Yanukovich administration, the recession that knocks the Ukrainian economy and the suspicions about the endemic corruption that reigned in Ukraine has been an accelerated radicalization of the Ukrainian political climate. The outbreak of anti-government protests in Kiev, immediately after the summit in Vilnius, revealed, first of all, the existence of a strong pro-European segment in the political establishment and in the Ukrainian society, and also the incapacity of the regime led by V. Yanukovich to meet the expectations of the public who took seriously the European values and the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement. Secondly, the extension, the radicalization and the proliferation of the protests into other regions of Ukraine ant their violent turn indicated the inability of the Kiev government to negotiate a political settlement with protesters and to stop the deepening of the fault lines in Ukrainian society and the weaknesses of the Ukrainian state .

Thus, due to political inability of the authorities led by Victor Yanukovich was revived and aggravated gradually the linguistic, political and economic cleavages between western and eastern regions that have marked the evolution of independent Ukraine from its separation from the Soviet

Union in late 1991 (Gerard , 2014). On this line, a significant phenomenon highlighted by some authors about the developments in the independent Ukraine is the recurrent reactivation of the separatism in the eastern and southern regions, with Russian support, during the periods when the political Eastern Ukrainian elites lost the control of the central administration in Kiev (Meister, 2014. The Yanukovich failure of the management of the political crisis catalysed by the result in Vilnius summit and the violence that accompanied the collapse of the regime revealed an unambiguous role of the Russian Federation in undermining the territorial integrity of Ukraine, since the end of February 2014 (Wolczuk, 2014).

3. WHAT NEXT: THE EASTERN NEIGHBORHOOD BETWEEN THE EUROPEANIZATION AND THE RUSSIAN *RECONQUISTA*?

After over two months of anti-government protests in Kiev and in other Ukrainian regions and after a tentative of bloody crackdown, the giving up to the presidential prerogatives by Viktor Yanukovich and the taking power in Kiev by the coalition of the pro-European parties not resolved the domestic Ukrainian crisis, aggravated by eastern and southern separatism (Paul, 2014), and caused an international crisis unprecedented since the end of World War II.

The crisis in Ukraine and the events that followed in the country after the Vilnius summit marks so far a rupture in the European and global geopolitics. The tacit or explicit *red lines* set by the Euro-Atlantic organizations and the Russian Federation in their area of interference from Eastern Europe (including Southern Caucasus) were brutally violated by the annexation of the Crimea by the Russian Federation.

Only in this context, amid the weakness and the obvious inability of post-Yanukovich Ukrainian authorities to effectively respond to the centrifugal tendencies of the south-eastern regions, stimulated and supported by the Russian Federation in full counteroffensive (Taran, 2014), the EU decision-makers and Member States have understand the magnitude of the cataclysm underway in Eastern Europe. However, the epithets on irrational and illegal behaviour of the Russian government, the recurrent comparative analyses between the Putin regime and the the international Nazi regime behaviour before World War II or the Western sanctions against the Russian Federation are insufficient to address the concerns of states situated in the Eastern Neighbourhood.

From this perspective, only the returning of the EU and member states leaders, along with North American allies in NATO, to a combined approach that include the hard and soft power

actions would be able to temper the coolness of the Russian Federation in this region of Europe. The deployment of additional forces and capabilities in the allied NATO countries, located on the border with the Russian Federation, the emergency financial assistance given to post-Ianukovich regime by FMI, the signing of the political party the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement on March 21 2014, the liberalization of the visa regime for Moldova's citizens since April 28 or the launch of a strategy of Moscow's international isolation are some concrete steps for stopping the *Reconquista* campaign triggered by the Russian Federation in the EU's Eastern Neighbourhood.

Other European projects regarding the initiation of an EU police mission in south-eastern regions of Ukraine, the setting up a European Energy Union to reduce EU dependence on Russian Federation and the acceleration of the procedure to signing the EU Association Agreements with Georgia and Moldova before June 2014 are the additional steps that EU would be able to complete in the near future on the above. In this context, it may be recovered the viable segments of the Eastern Partnership to strengthen the association process with Georgia, Republic of Moldova and Ukraine as well as to open the official perspective of their full European integration.

CONCLUSION

It is clear that the Eastern Partnership, as enacted by the EU and partners summit in Prague in May 2009, has been a *quasi* failure. Although European objectives such as fostering good governance in partner countries, the European norms and values dissemination or the partial association in some of the EU policies were rather cautious and less ambitious in terms of policy and strategy, they were perceived as threats to Moscow for the Russian influence in Eastern Europe and Southern Caucasus. The Europeans' lack of ambition, the failure and the weakness of the governments of the partner states and the ability and the determination of the Russian Federation to control the former Soviet republics contributed at the *quasi* failure of the Eastern Partnership.

Paradoxically, even if the Eastern Partnership objectives were largely missed, it has two undeniable merits. The first is to put an end to hypocrisy covering the EU's relations with the Russian Federation, including the tacit *red lines* agreed by some EU leaders and the Russians leaders on the Eastern Neighbourhood. The second merit of the Eastern Partnership is to be supported and strengthened the (pro) European elites and the societies that actually exist in some Eastern European states such as Georgia, Republic of Moldova and Ukraine. Considering this aspect, an Eastern Partnership adjusted and more ambitious could be revived by the EU to respond

effectively and consistently to expectations of these states in a radically changed geopolitical context.

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