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THE IMPLICATIONS OF THE CIVIL SOCIETY IN THE EASTERN PARTNERSHIP

Loredana JITARU*

Abstract

The Eastern Partnership (EaP) launched in 2009 as the Eastern dimension of the European Neighbourhood Policy introduced the civil society as a new strategic actor in the EU's relations with Eastern Partnership countries. The civil society's role is to participate in policy making, to suggest new initiatives and to promote shared values of partnership, such as: democracy, promoting better governance, state law, sustainable development, respect for human rights and for the fundamental freedoms. The paper is divided into two parts. In the first part, we analyse the role of the civil society in the EaP and we ask whether the increasing role of the civil society in the EaP will lead to the success of this project. In the second part, we analyse the perceptions and the attitudes of civil society towards European integration.

Keywords: Eastern Partnership; European integration; civil society; EaP countries

JEL Classification: F15; F5; F53

Introduction

Eastern Partnership is an enhancement of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), initiated to give new impulse to the EU's relations with its Eastern neighbours. This project was generated by the EU expansion in 2004 and 2007 on the eastern border. Thus, given that the former Soviet states are now direct neighbours of the EU and they had different objectives on foreign policy, the EU could not overlook this. The main goal of the Eastern Partnership is to create the necessary conditions to accelerate political association and further economic integration between the European Union and the interested partner countries. The significant strengthening of EU policy regarding the partner countries will be achieved through the development of a specific Eastern dimension of the European Neighbourhood Policy. Given this aim, the Eastern Partnership will seek to support political and socio-economic reforms of the partner countries, facilitating the approach towards the European Union and encouraging the shared commitment for the stability, security and prosperity of the European Union, the partner countries and of the entire European continent (Council of European Union, 2009).

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The main objectives of the EaP are achieved using bilateral instruments, such as the Association Agreement (AA), Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas (DCFTA) and the abolition of visa regime.

To benefit from these tools, eastern partners must make progress on their domestic situation. It is known that „civil society plays an important role in the accomplishment of the reforms" (Lada, 2011). In this context, the main issue of the research is the analysis of the civil society's role in the EaP countries and the analysis of their attitudes towards the European integration.

Although the civil society is an essential component for change and democratization and the review of the European Neighbourhood Policy presented it as a pillar of the EU's Eastern Partnership, its role in the development of national, regional and EaP policies is limited and fragmented. In this context, we try to answer the following questions:

- 1) What are the mechanisms that can be used by EU to increase the role of civil society in the EaP?
- 2) What are the main challenges for the civil society in developing and implementing reforms?
- 3) To what extent are the reforms made by EaP societies in line with EU expectations?
- 4) What is the perception of the Civil Society from EaP countries towards European integration?

To answer these questions, we will try to highlight the importance of the civil society in the EaP and to have a clear perspective over the cooperation relationships between EU and eastern partners.

In the following, we present the methodology used to perform the work and in the following sections we will analyse the role of civil society in the EaP and the Eastern Partners attitudes towards European integration.

1. Methodology

This research is a fundamental one, and it is performed in a setting that combines the theoretical elements with the practical ones. Also, this work is descriptive, analytical, emphasizing the importance attached to the civil society by EU and the six partners within EaP, the obstacles faced by the civil society in the elaboration, implementation and monitoring of the reforms.

The research methods used in this work are qualitative. In the first part, we use the analysis of documents that will help us examine and understand in depth the role of civil society in the EaP and to make an overview of the EaP. In the last part of the research, we try to draw a comparative analysis between the six EaP countries on their attitudes and perceptions towards the EU. Also, in the last part we use tables as a tool for the systematization of data and the interpretation of results.

The research techniques used in this paper include the content analysis and the comparative analysis.

This paper is based on multiple sources of data, which come from a literature review based on books, reports of the European Parliament, European Council, European Commission, the Civil Society Forum of the EaP, specialized articles and other documents.

In the analysis of documents, we have considered the following issues: the role of the civil society in the EaP, social, political and economic changes, which took place in the eastern neighbourhood, the perception of Eastern Partnership countries about European integration.

2. The role of civil society

Launched in 2009, the Eastern Partnership - which includes Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Ukraine, Georgia and the Republic of Moldova - is a political framework where bilateral cooperation dimensions intertwine with the multilateral ones. Eastern Partnership takes into account the acceleration of the political association and further economic integration between the EU and its eastern neighbours. The novelty of the EaP to ENP is its multilateral size and a new institutional structure for the strengthening of the relations between the EU and the partner countries. The recent emphasis on the strengthening of democracy and on the application of the principles of differentiation and conditionality enables EU to adapt better the level of support to the level of engagement of each partner country in order to make progress in implementing reforms (CESE, 2012). The emphasis is on „a democratic political system because it not only allows but also encourages civil society to participate actively in public life” (Raik, 2006). “It is assumed that, over time, the basic reforms will encourage the political and regulatory convergence around democratic principles and practices. But the change cannot be simply exported, it must come from within” (Charniakovich, 2013). This objective can be achieved through a strong civil society. It was introduced in 2009 by the Eastern Partnership as a new actor in EU relations with eastern neighbours, being a prerequisite for the changes in Eastern Partnership countries. To support this statement, Ales Bialiatski pointed out during the EaP Civil Society Conference from Riga 2015: „civil society is the *locomotive* that attracts EaP countries to EU and its values, and acts as an advocate for the population”. In addition, the European Parliament Resolution concerning the review of the European Neighbourhood Policy emphasized the „importance of supporting the civil society and the role of the civil society in examining expenditures for EU assistance in EaP countries” (European Parliament, 2015).

To understand the importance of civil society in the democratization of the former Soviet countries and the EaP, it is necessary to mention that civil society refers to „interest groups, social partners, networks, ad hoc groups, sports clubs, cultural associations, associations for many other types of leisure activities etc" (Raik, 2015). Thus, we see that civil society includes a number of actors far from the political activities, who can also generate – through their work – trust and solidarity among people, the two indispensable ingredients for a democratic country.

Given that civil society is on the one hand, the locomotive that attracts EaP countries to EU values and standards, and on the other hand, it is the central pillar of the EaP, the EU has as a goal the democratization of eastern neighbours. This objective starts from the fact that civil society makes its presence felt only in a democratic political system, which guarantees freedom of expression, opinion, association etc.

„In very general terms, civil society is needed in the democratization of the partner countries for two purposes: first, to stimulate the process of democratization of the partner countries to move forward and secondly, to prevent this process from slipping behind" (Raik, 2006). The civil society plays an important role in improving transparency and responsibility, both by explaining EU policies in favour of a wider audience and by monitoring the reform efforts of governments. Civil society's actors in Eastern Europe and South Caucasus see EU as an actor who plays four roles: (1) reference model, (2) mediator and enforcement authority for dialogue between local authorities and interested non-governmental parties, (3) the manufacturer for local organizations, (4) promoter of external reform. (Charniakovich, 2013). Another role fulfilled by the Civil Society of the Eastern Partnership countries is the overseer, which calls for greater transparency and accountability. In addition, civil society is seen as a way to defend and promote the values and interests of the various non-state actors. Civil society represents „both a channel for citizens to get to the state and to influence public life and a state channel to communicate its decisions and policies to the people" (Raik 2006). In this sense, a good example is the fact that NGOs provided civil society in EaP countries with relevant information about the EU, thus helping them form their own opinion about the EU and European integration. Also, by means of civil society, small and non-presentational groups for the political elites are heard, thus helping minorities defend themselves from the power and influence of the state.

In addition, the civil society of the six countries in the Eastern Partnership believes that „increasing support for reform requires the abolition of the visa regime, because this liberalization can be considered a multiplier of the reform" (Charniakovich, 2013), and this is one of the main ways of providing the civil society in EaP countries with „a tangible benefit of EU integration" (Kirov, 2015). Sergey Ostaf also supports this statement: „visa liberalization has been the backbone

for the Moldovan politicians to make the process of democratization more attractive". So far, only Moldova enjoys the abolition of the visa regime and Georgia will enjoy a visa-free regime this year.

If we consider the role of civil society in the EaP countries, this is different. For example, „the existence of a critical mass in society against authoritarianism and in favour of democratic changes, especially visible in Ukraine, but also present in Georgia and the Republic of Moldova, was the deciding factor for political change in these three countries. EU had often been a point of reference during the political protests" (Gromadzki, 2015) and EaP was and still is an „anchor for reform" (Kirova *et al.*, 2015). Belarus „wishes to participate in different policy areas without fulfilling any requirements on human rights and democracy, but the role that civil society will play in the EaP will be crucial" (Boonstra *et al.*, 2010). As for the role of the civil society in Belarus within EaP, it is very limited, almost non-existent, because very few people have contact with the outside world. Another important factor limiting the role of civil society in the EaP is that people are sceptical of NGOs (indeed, very few NGOs have been successful) and their mentality is passive, believing that these institutions do not defend the interests of ordinary people. „Civil society actors in Armenia and Azerbaijan are largely reluctant to cooperate, apart from a few exceptions, such as the European Partnership for the peaceful settlement of Nagorno-Karabakh, a project funded by the EU Instrument for Stability" (Charniakovich, 2013). According to some studies, the situation of the civil society in Armenia is better than in Belarus and Azerbaijan. Regarding Georgia, for the EU it is very difficult to support the civil society cooperation involving NGOs in the non-recognized entities in Nagorno-Karabakh, Abkhazia and South Ossetia because the access to these areas is limited. Involving civil society in these areas can help alleviate these tensions and can provide a path to reconciliation.

Civil society actors from EaP countries can be involved based on EURONEST and the Civil Society Forum (CSF). The latter is a platform that was conceived „as a space for open and free discussions on major areas of cooperation, namely: (1) democracy, good governance and stability; (2) economic integration and convergence with EU sectoral policies; (3) energy security and (4) contacts between people" (Andrespok *et al.*, 2013). These platforms meet at least twice a year at the level of senior officials and participation is voluntary and based on the interests of the members of the Eastern Partnership.

The creation of this forum was proposed by the European Commission in December 2008 in its Communication and it was gathered for the first time in November 2009, serving to promote contacts between civil societies and to facilitate their dialogue with the public authorities. The Civil Society Forum aims „to strengthen civil society in the EaP countries and to encourage cooperation between the civil society organizations in partner countries and the EU. It focuses on promoting

fundamental freedoms, participatory democracy and human rights and strives to foster pluralism in political discourse and policy making" (Kostanyan, 2014)

Bosse G. says: „the forum was important for the consolidation and a better coordination of the activities in the EaP Civil Society as a whole” (Bosse, 2014). In a survey conducted by Kaca, Kucharczyk and Lada (Kaca *et al.*, 2011) among the participants in the CSF, the following results were obtained: 76% of the respondents agree to the statement that CSF is an effective tool in bringing EaP countries closer to EU in terms of democratic and economic standards, and 80% agree that the forum has increased the contacts between their organization and other civil society organizations in their country.

Although the six EaP countries have recognized the civil society as an essential actor for change, promoting reforms and democratization, its role in developing national and regional policies is limited. This is explained by the fact that „authorities are mostly reluctant to accept policy recommendations from civil society organizations (CSOs), considering them unprofessional and politically biased" (Lada, 2011). However, civil society actors want to participate in the actual development of the reforms of their countries, not only to act as a *watchdog* on the implementation of the major projects. This will be possible by increasing the role of the civil society in the EaP. This requires more efficient national platforms based on the consolidation of the expert database, financial sustainability, autonomy and the enhancement of government contact. The EU should aim to support national reforming actors who want to implement real reforms in all EaP states. In addition, it should continue to provide a place for the civil society in planning and implementing the EaP policy agenda. This should include: providing feedback on initiatives that have not been considered so far and enabling tripartite dialogue between EU governments, EaP and civil society (Belarus, Azerbaijan and Armenia refuse by all means to involve the civil society in discussions between EU delegates and the government). The latter must be more actively involved in policy planning and eastern forms of dialogue that so far have been reserved for government officials (EaP CSF, 2015). “The inclusion of civil society members in the EaP summits” (EaP CSF, 2015), involving the NGOs in the development and implementation of EaP action plans are just a few examples of achieving tripartite dialogues.

Another way to increase the role of civil society in the EaP is by strengthening the regional cooperation, because it can have a stimulating role in changing the mentality of passive citizens in the partner countries. „Regional cooperation is considered to be extremely important in establishing new contacts, in exchanging *best practices*, in informing and solving the common regional issues. It is considered a form of *effective multilateralism*" (Rakutiene, 2014).

Moreover, a current mismatch between theory and practice can be noticed. In other words, what the EU has proposed the EaP is inconsistent with what it has achieved as regards the support for the civil society in the EaP countries. In theory, supporting the civil society and its involvement in the development and implementation of reforms and action plans were a priority in promoting the common values of the EaP. In practice, the society received limited support from the EU and its inclusion in the development and implementation of reforms and action plans has not been a priority for the EU. This discrepancy is due to several factors, which are included in this work.

It is important to note that the support for the civil society varies in different stages of democratization: pre-transition, transition and consolidation phase. In this context, we can say that Ukraine and Georgia are in the pre-transition phase, Moldova is in transition stage, while Belarus and Azerbaijan have an authoritarian political system.

Considering all the above, we can conclude that the civil society is the central pillar of the Eastern Partnership, the main factor in the reform process and an actor that can influence government policies and make changes both externally and internally (this currently only happens in Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia). In this context, particular importance should be granted to the civil society in the Eastern Partnership.

3. Perception of the Eastern Partnership Countries concerning the European integration

The Eastern Partnership was adopted as a result of EU expansion towards the eastern border and the Russian-Georgian conflict in 2008, which required that some partner states reviewed their attitude towards the European Union. The conflict in August 2008 had a greater impact on Georgia, thereby determining it to consider the EU an essential guarantor of regional security.

EaP provided the opportunity for each partner country to choose its own model of engagement with the European Union based on free and sovereign will. From an EU perspective, „the role of the Eastern Partnership is to promote the political and socio-economic internal reforms by facilitating the convergence towards EU. This objective does not correspond to the one of the political elites in the region. Rather, their perceptions and attitudes towards the Eastern Partnership and the European Union are conditioned by the countries' geopolitical considerations" (Wolczuk, 2011) and by the short-term interests of the political elites.

Even though the six partner countries have common Soviet past and endemic problems, such as widespread corruption, unclear links between politics and business, inefficient bureaucracy, they are not a homogeneous group. The differences between EaP countries have been evident since the launch of the Eastern Partnership and they are evident in the beginning of 2016. These sharp

differences that came from the domestic situations of these countries, led inevitably to the division of the EaP countries into two groups, namely „countries with autocratic governments and countries that are democratic to an important extent. The first group includes Azerbaijan and Belarus. The second group includes Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia. Armenia is situated between the first and the second group, but closer to the second group" (Gromadzki, 2015).

Another division of the Eastern Partners into two groups has been made based on the criteria of signing and implementation of the AA/DCFTA; Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine fall among those who signed, but Armenia, Azerbaijan and Belarus are in the group that did not sign the AA/DCFTA. This division was confirmed by the Final Declaration of the Summit in Riga, May 21-22, 2015, which states that the „implementation of the AA/DCFTA accompanied by the reforms will bring full harmonization with the legislation and the standards leading to gradual economic integration of the partners on the EU internal market, and thus creating an economic space of the EU" (Council of the European Union, 2015).

„Once a partner country has implemented the AA and DCFTA, it will be ready to engage in negotiations to join the EU because the *export acquis* mutually agreed for association is modelled based on the agreements of pre-accession, which imposed the alignment of the candidate countries' legal framework to the EU *acquis*" (Gromadzki, 2015). Therefore, the implementation of the DCFTA would transform Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia into *Shadow Member States*. These three countries should be perceived as more than just partners and EU should use tools similar to those used into the integration process in the relations with these countries. The Declaration also emphasizes that the partners involved in concrete reforms will benefit from the EU incentive-based approach - more for more.

In addition, the six signatory countries of the EaP failed to make substantial progress in the economic modernization and European integration. In addition, the partner countries are disappointed by the EU policy. From their point of view, what the European Union is offering does not match their needs. Nevertheless, „relations with the EU are seen as an opportunity to promote positive changes" (Charniakovich, 2013).

„Faced with deteriorating economic conditions, EaP countries are unable to bear the considerable costs of transformation and EU integration, especially since the real ultimate goal of integration has not been clearly established" (Sadowski, 2013). In this context, we wonder if the ultimate objective should be to achieve the main objective of the Eastern Partnership - political association and economic integration between the Union and partner-countries - or a possible EU membership. In this regard, A. Michta says in *The American Interest* that the European Union does not intend to offer significant accession prospects to the six Eastern partners. Without this major

incentive, the EaP will turn soon into another bureaucratic futile exercise. He also argues that there is no doubt that the EU's demands for serious reforms and the insistence of association normative criteria for partner countries is the right way to proceed. But conditionality only works when there is also a clear reward at the end of the road. When EaP degenerates into an unnecessarily bureaucratic exercise it will be discovered that Europe's shyness at the Summit in Riga and the refusal to provide EaP countries with a clear path to achieve EU membership were major geostrategic mistakes. (Michta, 2015)

Another factor that contributed to the disappointment of the Eastern Partners refers to the major changes that took place within the European Union, leading indirectly to a new context for its relations with Eastern Partnership countries. These major changes are related to the Euro crisis and the debate on the future of the Union and possible division into several concentric circles or speed integration. Due to the crisis in the Euro zone, partner countries no longer consider the EU economic model as optimal to achieve prosperity in their countries. This is because the EU is not the only option available for the six Eastern partners. An alternate option is given by the projects initiated by Russia, namely the Customs Union, which was turned in 2015 into the Eurasian Economic Union. The existence of this project increases the rivalry between the EU and Russia, forcing the common neighbouring countries to choose the integration model. Given that these countries have close political, economic and cultural well-knit connections with both actors, it is important for them to maintain the relations with both actors as optimal as they can.

Despite these obstacles, the attitude of civil society in the EaP countries to the EU is positive. According to a survey funded by the EU (EU Neighbourhood Library, 2014) that was conducted between 28 October 2014 -16 November 2014 in four countries, most respondents trusted the EU and they described the relations between their country and the EU as one of cooperation, namely: Georgia (58%), Ukraine (56%), Moldova (50%), Armenia (50%).

An improvement in the EU's image among civil society in EaP countries was recorded in the summer of 2014. Comparing the outcomes of the summer and autumn survey results, we see an increase in the number of respondents who see the EU positively, namely: Armenia (8%), Belarus (5%), Ukraine (5%), Moldova (3%). We can also notice a slight decrease in Azerbaijan (-1%).

Considering all the above, we see that the attitudes of the six EaP countries towards the European integration differs according to the country. For example, „the political elites of Azerbaijan and Belarus have clearly rejected the EU's efforts in establishing democracy and the reforms necessary to establish the state law, because such efforts represent a threat to their existence. They regard the democratization efforts as an unacceptable obstacle in the internal affairs” (Gromadzki, 2015). At the opposite pole, there are Georgia and Moldova, which have

embraced a clear pro-European attitude and they showed willingness to implement the EU reform agenda, although progress is slow and uneven across sectors.

In the following, we analyse the attitudes of the six EaP countries towards the European integration.

3.1 The Republic of Moldova

The Republic of Moldova sees EaP as a way to advance in the relations with the EU and it shows a strong interest in the *acquis*' convergence. Secrieru S. stated that „the public opinion is more aware of the process of European integration than the EaP; the latter is considered too technical by the average citizen” (Secrieru, 2015).

In 2014, Moldova signed AA including DCFTA with the EU along with two other EaP countries, namely Ukraine and Georgia. „Moldova is the only country whose relations with the EU have developed dynamically since the launch of the Eastern Partnership” (Boonstra *et al.*, 2010), despite the fact that Russia has made negative campaigns against the EU since the beginning of the EaP and actively promoted the Customs Union, which became EEU in 2015 among Moldovan citizens and political elites.

3.2 Ukraine

Ukraine's priority objective is to deepen their relations with the EU and, eventually to join the EU. But „as long as the EU refuses to discuss the hypothetical possibility of Ukraine's accession to the EU, Ukraine will be less interested in reforms and promoting the country transformation” (Moshes, 2006) and Ukraine „will head for the Putinism found in Russia” (Stepniewski, 2015). In addition, Shulga said that „for the bilateral Ukraine-EU relations, EaP offered no real added value” (Shulga, 2015), but instead it is perceived as a regressive step.

In 2013, Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich, under Russian pressure, decided not to sign the Association Agreement with the EU, but in the end the agreement was signed the following year. An important factor that determined the Ukrainian political elites and Ukrainian citizens to have a pro-European attitude was the Russian aggression in Crimea. At the same time, this attitude is due to the fact that Ukraine has no choice. According to the survey of 20 March 2014 (International Republican Institute, 2014), 54% of the respondents believed that Russia's action in Crimea aimed the invasion and the occupation of Ukraine's independence. In addition, it does not

want to be always under Russian pressure and it prefers to turn to the EU, seeing this cooperation as a means of counteracting the Russian influence over the country.

3.3 Georgia

Since the EaP was launched shortly after the Russian-Georgian conflict, Georgia has seen EaP as an EU response to Russian aggression. In addition, „Georgia is satisfied with the Eastern Partnership bilateral incentives and the opportunities for multilateral cooperation. However, Georgia's security concerns are largely ignored in the Eastern Partnership" (Boonstra *et al.*, 2010).

The civil society's attitude towards the EU is positive. Moreover, a third of the respondents who participated in a survey conducted by CRRC Georgia (Eurasia Partnership Foundation, 2013) want their country to join the EU. According to this survey, 73% of respondents believe that once their country joins the EU, they will have a safer country, 63% of respondents believe that there will be better chances of restoring the territorial integrity and 65% of respondents believe that EU accession will bring prosperity. At the same time, however, they believe that EU membership could threaten the Georgian traditions.

In November 2013, AA was initiated and it was signed in 2014 with DCFTA, too, representing both a challenge and an opportunity for Georgia. The main challenge is the lack of awareness of the opportunities offered by the European market.

Furthermore, Georgia has achieved in March this year the concrete proof that European integration can bring tangible benefits. This evidence consisted of a formal proposal from the European Commission to the Member States and to the European Parliament to abolish the visa regime, foreseen for this year; Georgian citizens currently have a visa-free regime. At the same time, this clear proof could be an incentive both for Ukraine to carry on the reforms in order to qualify for the abolition of visa regime and for the other two Caucasian countries - Armenia and Azerbaijan - to increase interest in European integration.

3.4 Armenia

In 2013, Armenia waived the Association Agreement with the European Union in favour of joining the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU). Despite the fact that Armenia has chosen to join the EEU, „there is still a high degree of sincerity and political will both from Brussels and from Yerevan to save relations between the EU and Armenia" (Giragosian, 2015). In this context, for

Armenia, the Summit from Riga in 2015 was the starting point in rescuing the relations with the EU and in recovering a degree of confidence.

In addition, Armenia's interests regarding EU „increased since the launch of the Eastern Partnership in 2009. Unlike the other countries, the Armenian authorities, the opposition and the civil society are optimistic about the EaP potential to generate substantial benefits for its members” (Wolczuk, 2011). In this context, according to the survey in the fall of 2014, financed by the EU (EU Neighbourhood Library, 2014) 75% of the respondents believe that the EU is an important partner for their country, 62% believe that the EU brings peace and stability in the regions of Armenia, 59% consider that the level of EU involvement in Armenia is appropriate, and 65% say that the support provided by EU to their country enhanced national development.

„The conflict with Azerbaijan, in Nagorno-Karabakh, the closing of the Turkish border and the negative economic effects of the conflicts from Georgia have put Armenia in a particularly difficult situation geopolitically speaking” (Wolczuk, 2011). To overcome this difficult situation, Armenia is trying to save and develop its cooperation relations with the EU because that is seen as a way to overcome geopolitical isolation and vulnerability, or a way to diversify and to develop cooperation relationships worldwide and to improve the economic situation of the country.

3.5 Belarus

For Belarus, the priority objectives envisaged in the cooperation with the EU include „economic and trade cooperation, technology transfer and easier access to the European market” (Sadowski, 2013) and it does not envisage European integration. Moreover, Belarus is involved in the process of economic and political integration with Russia within the Eurasian Economic Union. To Belarus, EaP is a counter-balance in its relations with Russia and a source of attracting funds to strengthen the power of the actual leading regime. In this regard, President Alexander Lukashenko wants to maintain the best possible relations with Russia, but at the same time would like to have better relations with the EU to counteract the asymmetry in Belarus’ relations with Russia.

3.6 Azerbaijan

Like in the case of Belarus, the priority goals pursued in its relations with the EU are, on the one hand, economic cooperation, technology transfer and easier access to the European market, and on the other hand, to sell oil to EU markets.

The negotiations on the Association Agreement between the EU and Azerbaijan began in 2010, but they stalled because the DCFTA establishment cannot be achieved, as Azerbaijan is not a member of the WTO (a precondition for DCFTA). Given that „Azerbaijan is a major exporter of oil and gas to EU member states and to avoid a stalemate, in 2013 the EU proposed to Azerbaijan a negotiation on a Strategic Modernisation Partnership. This partnership is seen by political elites as an alternative to AA” (Gromadzki, 2015).

Elites of Azerbaijan are „rather sceptical about the EU policy towards the post-Soviet area and the prospects for economic integration with the EU. In Azerbaijan, the support for the Eastern Partnership is difficult to ensure due to lack of EU support for the territorial integrity of the country” (Wolczuk, 2011). Moreover, the Eastern Partnership is seen as a means of asserting the country's role as a major player of energy on the regional and international level and as a means of getting EU support for its strategic energy infrastructure development.

Azerbaijan does not want European integration, but it demands to be treated as self-standing partner and not as a mere recipient of guidance and assistance from the EU. Nevertheless, the global decline in oil prices could lead to Azerbaijan's acceptance of the need for reforms and for stimulating progress in the accession to the WTO and the DCFTA.

In the last part of the work, we structured the data from the analysis above in a table that will facilitate the interpretation of results.

Table 1. Issues on the attitudes of EaP countries towards European integration

Countries	Armenia	Azerbaijan	Belarus	Georgia	Republic of Moldova	Ukraine
<i>Priority objectives envisaged in the cooperation with EU</i>	EU seen as a way: -to overcome isolation; -to develop relationships worldwide; - to improve economic situation.	-economic and trade cooperation; - technology transfer; -easier access to the European market; - to sell oil on the EU markets.	-economic and trade cooperation; -technology transfer; -easier access to the European market.	-deepening relations with EU	-deepening the cooperation relations and eventually joining the EU.	-deepening the cooperation relations and eventually joining the EU.
<i>Signing the AA/DCFTA with EU</i>	NO -2013 dropped to AA with the EU in favour of joining the EEU.	NO -negotiations started in 2010 stalled.	NO	YES -signed in 2014.	YES -signed in 2014.	YES On 21 March 2014 the AA signed the political and economic side to June 27, 2014 (DCFTA).
<i>Member of the European Energy Community</i>	NO	NO	NO	NO - it started the negotiations with the European Commission on February 20,	YES -signed the Protocol of Accession to the Energy Community in	YES -signed the Protocol of Accession to the Energy Community in

				2014.	2010.	2010.
	NO	NO	NO	YES	YES	NO.
<i>Abolition of visa regime</i>		-2013 Agreement signed with the EU on visa facilitation and readmission		- in the summer of 2016; -Georgian citizens currently enjoy visa-free regime.	in 2014	Visa facilitation issues persist.
	NO	NO	NO	YES	YES	YES
<i>The desire to join the EU</i>	EEU member	-partner asks to be treated as self-contained; -wants EU cooperation in areas of common interest.	EEU member			
EEU Member	YES	NO	YES	NO	NO	NO

Source: author's representation

Given the data above, we can say that the Republic of Moldova is the best *student* of the EaP – it has signed AA with DCFTA in 2014, it has eliminated the visa regime in 2014, it has been a member of the European Energy Community since 2010.

Both Georgia and Moldova are satisfied with the EU's reform agenda, as it meets the utmost expectations of the civil society and it is consistent with the government's official discourse. However, „the lack of prospect of membership remains the most painful problem for Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia in their relations with the EU” (Grzegorz, 2015). However, the three countries believe that the prospect of EU membership is not far. This assertion is supported also by Article 49 of the Lisbon Treaty ensuring that „any European state that respects the values referred to in paragraph 1 of Article 2 and is committed to promoting them may apply to become a member of the Union”.

While Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine want to join the EU, Belarus, Armenia and Azerbaijan do not want European integration, but only economic and trade cooperation so as to „take advantage of the EU human resources, competences and markets and to maintain a multi-vectorial external policy” (Kirova *et al.*, 2015).

Despite the obstacles faced by the civil society in the EaP, the lack of information of ordinary citizens in the partner countries about the EU and EaP, their limited understanding of the EU policies, the civil society wants to align to the values and norms of the European Union. In addition, the civil society in the EaP countries sees the EU as a means to strengthen the national security of their country, to achieve prosperity and reform.

Analysing the above, we can conclude that the attitudes and perceptions of EaP countries towards the EU are positive, which should impel EU to support the civil society in partner countries

to a greater extent, and including the said civil society in the development and implementation of reforms and action plans should be a priority for the EU.

Conclusions

This paper analyses both the role of the civil society in the EaP and the EaP countries' attitudes towards the European integration. Civil society was a strategic actor in the relations between the EU and the six signatory countries since the launch of the EaP.

Civil society is the central pillar of the EaP and the essential component for change, for improving transparency and responsibilities, for promoting reforms and democratization. In addition, the civil society was the decisive factor in the progress made by Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia. In this context, an enhancement of the role of civil society in devising and implementing national and regional policies is recommended. This will be possible based on the political elite's acceptance of policy recommendations from the civil society organizations, on the consolidation of national platforms, on the inclusion of the civil society members in the EaP Summits, on the involvement of the civil society in the negotiations and the implementation of the Association Agreements and Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas, and on tripartite dialogue between the EU, EaP and civil society organizations.

Civil society has encountered a number of obstacles in its involvement in the EaP. Therefore, we can say that the main obstacle hindering the civil society to be active, independent and involved in the decision-making process is the lack of democracy. Of course, there are also other significant obstacles - such as those related to the history, tradition and culture- that the EU should consider if they want a more active involvement of the civil society. For the democratization of the partner countries, the EU should develop, on the one hand, strategies and effective policies that provide opportunities for citizens to be able to express themselves freely on the matter and to get involved in the decision making, and, on the other hand, adequate and flexible tools to support the projects initiated by the civil society in the EaP countries.

It should to be considered also that the civil society has many roles such as: (1) it has some influence on policy formulation; (2) it gives voice to the opinions of the ordinary citizens among political elites; (3) it controls the political elites in order to prevent the abuse of power by them; (4) it contributes in fighting corruption.

Unfortunately, the EaP objectives were not successfully met for several reasons, such as: (1) the EU has not developed an effective strategy to support civil society in the EaP countries; (2) both ENP and EaP objectives were not formulated clearly; (3) the lack of interest of the political system

of the six partners in creating opportunities for the civil society to get actively involved in the public life; (4) some EU member states (France, the Netherlands) are reluctant to EU enlargement and the democratization of the Eastern Partners; (5) bureaucracy - the financial regulations are too strict and difficult to be respected.

In terms of the partner countries' attitudes and perception concerning the EU, they depend on the political regime, on whether they signed the AA/DCFTA with the EU or not, on the current economic situation, on the Russian influence in their economy and on the short-term interests of the political elites.

If we consider the criterion - signing the AA/DCFTA - the six EaP countries fall into two distinct groups. The distinction is very clear. On the one hand, there are the three countries – Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia – that signed the AA including DCFTA and want European integration, on the other hand, the other three countries – Belarus, Armenia and Azerbaijan – that have not signed the AA/DCFTA. While two of these countries - Belarus and Armenia - are currently EEU members, Azerbaijan is interested neither in the European integration nor in the EEU membership. This division into two groups will last for a long time, because no other EaP country will sign an AA including DCFTA in the near future.

In addition, the EaP countries are disappointed by the EU policy because the real ultimate goal of integration in the EU has not been clearly established. To continue carrying out the reforms and bearing the considerable costs of transformation, these countries need a major incentive. It would consist in offering significant accession prospects by the EU. One such incentive presents a low risk to the EU, since many candidate countries remain candidates to membership for years or even decades. Given that the EU promotes, with increasing efficiency, the Europeanization of the eastern partners and it expands its system of values and governance to these countries, it will be increasingly harder to face the pressure of the request from the EaP countries - the Republic of Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia – of being offered real prospects of EU membership.

Despite the problems faced by the civil society in the EaP, it has a positive attitude towards the EU and it believes this is an important partner for EaP countries, contributing to peace and stability in the EaP region and bringing prosperity through support.

Considering the above, we conclude that the civil society is the central pillar of the EaP, a locomotive that draws the EaP countries to the EU norms and values, and therefore its power in the process of democratization of the EaP countries and its role in the EaP should not be neglected. In this regard, the EU should prioritize its support to the civil society not only theoretically but also practically through the development and implementation of effective strategies.

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