

THE EU'S INTERNAL FRICTIONS AND THEIR CONSEQUENCES ON THE EASTERN NEIGHBOURS

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Abstract *In the last couple of years, the EU's foreign policy was mainly directed towards two regions: the Balkans and the Eastern neighborhood. However, the means and the ends of the EU's approach were in a sharp contrast. While the Balkan countries witnessed a more straightforward and coherent path towards the EU, the Eastern neighborhood had a different experience. Aiming to avoid future cleavages, the EU developed in 2004 the European Neighborhood Policy. But following Romania and Bulgaria's accession in the EU, there was still the need for a more comprehensive approach toward the Eastern neighbourhood. Therefore, at the Polish and Swedish overture, the EU inaugurated the Eastern Partnership program which comprises of six ex-Soviet countries. However, the Vilnius Summit was not as effective as it was expected. Instead, it has failed to address the major issues on the agenda. Considering these aspects, this paper asserts that the EU's gaps in its approach toward the Eastern neighbourhood were mainly determined by systemic incentives and constraints as polarity and ordering principle. After laying out the core arguments, the paper will further develop possible future dynamics concerning the fate of the EU Eastern neighbourhood in the aftermath of the Vilnius Summit.*

Keywords: EU; Neo-medievalism; Eastern Partnership; Russia; Structure; System

INTRODUCTION

Foreign policy is one of the most important challenges for the European Union (EU). Throughout the years, the EU's member states succeeded in achieving some internal consensus on the integration process. However, in the foreign policy area the road proved not to be a smooth sailing; it was rather paved with roadblocks and inconsistencies. Even if there were some attempts to coalesce a unitary perspective, at the conceptual level, the EU's foreign policy is still in an embryonic stage.

Starting from these assumptions, this paper aims to offer a cogent perspective on the EU's policy towards the Eastern European¹ and South Caucasus²

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¹ Ukraine, Republic of Moldova and Belarus

² Armenia, Georgia and Azerbaijan. From now on, this paper will refer to the six mentioned countries as the Eastern neighbourhood.

states and its flaws. The starting hypothesis of the paper is that the EU's gaps in its approach towards the Eastern neighbourhood were mainly caused by systemic incentives and constraints as polarity and the ordering principle (Waltz, 1979/2006, pp. 130-143).

Therefore, in the first part of the paper, there will be exposed a parallel conception on the EU's approach towards the Western Balkans and the Eastern neighbourhood in order to highlight the crucial importance of the internal mechanisms and political will for the EU's foreign policy. In the second part, there will be discussed three structural arguments that are supporting the paper's hypothesis: Russia's relations with EU's Great power States (polarity), the futility of the Eastern Partnership endorsement (lack of polarity) and the neo-medieval characteristics of the EU (ordering principle). In the last part, the paper will further develop possible future dynamics concerning the fate of the Eastern neighbourhood in the aftermath of the Vilnius Summit.

1. THE EU: ANTHITETIC FOREIGN POLICY

1.1. The approach towards the Balkan states

EU's stance towards the Balkans can be conceived through two different periods of time: from 1990 to 2003 and from 2003 until the present. The first period consists of a rather lethargic approach, without a clear sense of leadership and firmness. This passive stance can be revealed through the wars between Serbia and Croatia, the Bosnian War and even the Kosovo War. In this sensible and tragic instances, the EU lacked cohesion and coherence. Its impact was marginal, and the United States played the most important role, especially in the Bosnian War and in the Kosovo War. The third 'Springtime of the Peoples' was not to be a peaceful and joyful moment for the Balkans, but a moment of upheavals and ethnic cleansing and the EU was not able to have a certain stance toward the events that were happening in its 'backyard'. The EU rather contained the Balkans through a 'cordon sanitaire' which was best revealed through the Balldur initiative³ (Bianchini, 2013, p. 256) (Dolghi and Oliva, 2011, p. 107).

Though between 1990 and 2003, the EU was not resolute and lacked any robust action towards the Balkans from 2003 Brussels took a different track. EU's new posture towards the Balkans is best shown through the Thessaloniki declaration that was issued at the EU-Western Balkans Summit from June 2003. At the Summit participated all the Heads of States and Governments of the EU states and the representatives of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Serbia and Montenegro. In the second point of

³ 'The Balladur's idea was to agree upon a pact preserving the stability of borders, rejecting territorial claims and respecting minority rights to be signed by all interested or potential candidate countries of the EU. Few months later, the EU members states finalized the Balladur plan and approved in Copenhagen the three famous criteria for submitting applications for membership: as known, the first one of these criteria was particularly devoted to the rule of law, democracy and minority protection.' (Bianchini, 2013, p. 257).

the declaration, the EU's representatives made a clear proposal towards the Balkans. For the first time the EU expressed its unequivocal support to the European perspective of the Western Balkan countries. The future of the Balkans is within the EU' (Thessaloniki Declaration, 2003, 2nd paragraph). Even if the initiative was perceived as utopian and it had many roadblocks in practice, it had the ability to pacify the region and offer a sense of direction. Briefly said, the declaration offered a teleological perspective that fulfilled the needs of the parties involved: the EU wanted peace and stability while the states of the Balkans wanted peace and prosperity (Sabriu, 2013, p. 71).

Even if at the beginning of the 90's, the EU was not effective in its approach towards the Balkans, in 2003, once the Thessaloniki Declaration was issued, it had succeeded in pacifying the region and also to gain a broader leverage on the relations within the Balkans. It is true that there were not radical changes short after the Summit from 2003, but the bottom line is that a firm approach like the one from Thessaloniki in 2003 had the power to eradicate the main issues of the Balkans that were war, ethnic belligerence and deep society polarization. The EU also persuaded the Balkan countries that its post-Westphalian political-economic model is better than a state-centric and ethnic exclusivist model. Thus, even if, the June 2003 Thessaloniki European Council recognized the Western Balkans states as potential candidate states, it did not do the same for the Former Soviet Republics (Verdun and Chira, 2011, p. 450).

1.2. The approach toward the Eastern neighbourhood

Following the last rounds of enlargement, the EU found itself in a new environment with different neighbours. The EU gradually started to realize the need to articulate its interests in the region by establishing a coherent policy framework toward its Eastern neighbourhood, in order to avoid 'drawing new dividing lines in Europe and to promote stability and prosperity within and beyond the new borders of the Union' (Wider Europe - Neighbourhood: A New Framework for Relations with our Eastern and Southern Neighbours, 2003, p. 4). Thus, based on the values of democracy, rule of law and respect of human rights, the EU developed in 2004 the European Neighbourhood Policy which comprises 16 countries: Algeria, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Egypt, Georgia, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Republic of Moldova, Morocco, Palestine, Syria, Tunisia, Ukraine (What is the European Neighbourhood Policy?, *n.d.*). The European Neighbourhood Policy was created with the aim of promoting good governance and social development in the Eastern neighbourhood, without offering to the participating countries the possibility of accession. In other words, the European Neighbourhood Policy is not about enlargement, but rather about partial economic integration, closer political links, assistance with economic and social reforms and support to meet the EU standards (What is the European Neighbourhood Policy?, *n.d.*).

In 2008, the EU's first initiative was complemented by the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EUROMED), formerly known as the Barcelona

Process and by the Black Sea Synergy. One year later, at the Polish and Swedish overture, the EU inaugurated the Eastern Partnership program which comprises of six ex-Soviet countries.

The Eastern Partnership initiative is 'a genuine and long-term partnership the EU is seeking to build with the neighbour states for their mutual development, stability and security, making the countries involved fully realize the benefits of being part of a larger Europe' (Ionescu, 2013, p. 370). The European Neighbourhood Policy and the Eastern Partnership are complementary and inclusive projects, created with the aim of giving to the partner countries and their people choices and opportunities for the future. The Eastern Partnership is a policy based on a differentiated approach with each partner, thus providing flexibility because it is dedicated to support each individual country to progress in its own way and at its own speed (Tsantoulis, 2009).

The year 2013 was a crucial one for the EU's Eastern Partnership program. Commentators and EU politicians underlined that the November Eastern Partnership Summit in Vilnius should bring tangible results for the program. In other words, the Vilnius Summit was a very important opportunity to assess the stage of the Eastern Partnership program. But the reality showed the EU's Eastern Partnership initiative has experienced a serious setback at the Vilnius Summit. Among the six Eastern Partnership countries, only Republic of Moldova and Georgia initialled Association Agreements with the EU, including the DCFTA. The negative responses of Ukraine and Armenia to the EU's offer of Association Agreements and the lack of interest of Azerbaijan in adopting a DCFTA attracted a number of critics. Moreover, there were analysts who described the Eastern Partnership as being a failure and went on by asserting that 'it is high time to start a real partnership' (Wiśniewski, 2013).

After the results of the Vilnius Summit, many commentators expressed the opinion that the Eastern Partnership proved to be too technical, ignoring the proximity and influence of Russia, disregarding the differences between the six countries (although they share the same past as post-Soviet countries) and neglecting the characteristics of the Eastern neighbourhood as a whole (a highly diverse, volatile and unpredictable region, including political transitions, geopolitical competition, inter-state and intra-state wars and economic and political problems). At the same, the Vilnius Summit was an incentive for the EU to 'reset or rethink' its approach towards the Eastern neighbourhood, by finding first the answer to the question 'what went wrong?'

2. STRUCTURAL CAUSES: EXTERNAL EFFECTS

One of the endogenous structural factors which influence EU's approach and decisions toward the Eastern neighbourhood is the relations between the leading European states and Russia. The relations between European Great Powers like Germany or France with another Great Power which is Russia undermines the effectiveness and coherence of the EU. The EU has different approaches on Russia,

because of the member states' business interests and priorities. In this sense, Germany's relation with Russia has always been a subject of discussion.

'Change through rapprochement' (*Wandel durch Annäherung*) or 'change through interweavement' (*Wandel durch Verflechtung*) are concepts which played an important role in Germany's foreign policy. The classic principles of "Ostpolitik" applied by Germany led to the adoption of a co-operative policy with Russia. Today, the results of this kind of policy formed a symbiotic relationship between Germany and Russia or an interdependence between politics and business backed by economic interests. (Meister, 2014) For example, 'the annual trade volume between the two was a nearly balanced €76.5 billion in 2013 and according to Rainer Lindner, Director of the Ostausschuss der Deutschen Wirtschaft, 300,000 German jobs depend on business with Russia' (Härtel, 2014, p.5). Moreover, Germany is highly dependent on Russian oil and gas. 'Russia provides 38 percent of Germany's natural gas imports, 35 percent of all oil imports and 25 percent of coal imports, covering a quarter of the country's entire energy needs' (Deuse, 2014).

Another argument could be Europe's dependence on Russia's gas and Europe's role as Russia's largest gas market. Europe as a whole is a major importer of natural gas and Russia remains one of Europe's most important natural gas suppliers. Russia is currently the dominant supplier of natural gas to Europe, accounting for about one-quarter of the EU's natural gas supplies. But the dependency does not go only in one direction, because Europe is also the most important market for Russia's natural gas exports. (Ratner *et al.*, 2013) Energy becomes a useful political tool for Russia using Europe's dependency on its resources to influence decision making processes and to extract political concessions (Kaplan and Chausovsky, 2013). In this context, Heydar Aliyev's words – Oil is money, gas is politics – could be relevant.⁴

A second fact that reveals another flaw of the EU's approach toward its Eastern neighbourhood consists of the political will behind the Eastern Partnership. Even if the Eastern Partnership was a cornerstone of the EU's foreign policy, it lacked comprehensive and consistent endorsement from the leading EU member states. In structural terms, there was an absence of polarity, because the Eastern Partnership program was not endorsed by one or two Great Powers within the EU.

The Eastern Partnership program was an EU initiative backed by Sweden and Poland, not key members of the EU, as Germany or France were. Therefore, it was not the result of a unitary consensus among all the EU member states. After Romania and Bulgaria's accession in the EU, the process of European integration reached the Black Sea and led to the establishment of new neighbours. At the same time, the initial ENP was not functioning the way the European member states thought it would. The idea of incorporating Mediterranean countries and Eastern European/South Caucasus countries under the same 'umbrella' showed to be effective. The two groups of states were too different from social, political and economic point of views.

⁴ Heydar Aliyev was the third President of the Republic of Azerbaijan.

The ineffectiveness of the European Neighbourhood Policy revealed by the lack of progress concerning democratization or economic stabilization and supplemented by the gas crisis between Russia and Ukraine or the Russian-Georgian war from 2008, forced the EU member states to find ways to reform the European Neighbourhood Policy. This approach was not an easy one, due to the fact that each proposal needed to gain support from Germany or France, which advocated 'Russia first' principle in building relations with the Eastern neighbours (Adamczyk, 2010, p.196). In other words, the states from that part of the world were perceived by Germany and France particularly from the perspective of building relations with Russia, which remained EU's strategic goal.

Within the new environment and situation, Poland felt the opportunity to get involved in the shaping of the Eastern dimension of the EU. One of the aims was preventing the erecting of new barriers and divisions near the EU's Eastern border. At the same time, Poland tried to promote and support its Eastern neighbours. Thus, in May 2008, Poland, enjoying Sweden's support too, proposed the Eastern Partnership project to the EU member states. It would function within the framework of the European Neighbourhood Policy, but with the particularity of involving only six countries: three from Eastern European and three from South Caucasus.

This kind of approach was assessed by experts as being characteristic for Poland's foreign policy, which tried to put a special attention on the unequal treatment of Southern and Eastern EU neighbours. Poland and Sweden claimed that 'if the EU is going to strengthen its co-operation and support within the southern dimension, there will be a strong need to balance these steps by emphasizing also the eastern dimension' (Łapczyński, 2009).

A third perspective encompasses a rather theoretic approach toward the causes of inconclusiveness of the EU towards the Former Soviet Republics. This perspective underlines the presence of a neo-medieval order that impedes a coherent and robust approach of the EU towards the Former Soviet Republics from its vicinity. Neo-medievalism is defined as a system of overlapping authority and multiple loyalties, held together by a duality of competing universalistic claims (Friedrichs 2001, 475). Therefore, this argument refers to the ordering principle of the structure.

The neo-medievalist Europe consists of two main antithetic and conflicting dynamics. The first dynamic consists of an integrationist one where the borders are permeable and multiple cultural identities coexist, whereas the second is fuelled by nationalistic sentiments and follows a state-centric logic. Whereas the first dynamic is broadly determined by the European institutions (European Commission, European Parliament) and the young civil society, the second dynamic is underlined by a Westphalian logic that underlines a state-centric perspective where the state formally has absolute sovereignty over its territory and its borders are stable and hard and one single (national) culture predominates (Zielonka 2007, p. 10). Therefore, this paradoxical mix reveals an entity (EU) that finds itself in a struggle for a stable identity. However, the EU is an actor that has not a definitive

identity; it is still a young actor that finds itself in many conflicting situations when it is confronted with its external neighbours (Ungureanu 2012, p.16).

This is the case of the EU's relations with the Former Soviet Republics. Basically it cannot have a coherent approach because of competing universalistic claims of the nation-state on one part and the supranational entity on the other part. These frictions determine not just a lack of coherence but also a clash of interests that sometimes they might be convergent and other times they might also be divergent. Therefore, as long as this conflicting dynamic will preserve, EU's approach towards the Former Soviet Republics will not reflect unity and coordination but rather cleavages. However it is important to note that in specific situations like the Russian aggression, the European states might overlook the cleavages between them and offer a unitary position. A common threat or possible threat is an ingredient for a more cohesive posture.

3. FUTURE DYNAMICS

Russia's annexation of Crimea is an unprecedented step in Russia's post-Soviet foreign policy. Until Crimea, Russia had never formally annexed a territory belonging to another sovereign country recognized at an international level. Thus, Moscow's willingness to violate international law in the face of clear warnings (Mankoff, 2014) is a sign of Russia's revisionism. This is why further discussions on the possible future dynamics concerning the fate of the EU Eastern neighborhood in the aftermath of the Vilnius Summit should start from the new paradigm in which Russia is seen as a challenger of the West.

Russia will continue to regard the post-Soviet neighbours as making up a Russian sphere of influence, where Moscow has what Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev, in 2008, termed 'privileged interests' (BBC, 2008). As the president of Russia, Vladimir Putin once said the demise of the Soviet Union is 'the greatest geopolitical catastrophe' of the 20th century (BBC, 2005). Therefore this sense of nostalgia offers a broader perspective on Putin's aims towards Russia's vicinity which consists in preserving a strong and undisturbed control on it. Moreover, his purpose offers a hierarchic image of the relations of Russia with its neighbours and the sovereignty of the last is rather a concept that has negotiated meaning, not a stable one. This special relationship between Russia and its neighbourhood impedes a firm approach of the EU towards the Former Soviet Republics.

Another possible change could reside in Germany's stance toward Russia. Moscow's recent actions in Ukraine, including the annexation of Crimea and the destabilization of eastern Ukraine, could cause rifts between Russia and Germany, despite continued economic and energy dependence. Anyway, the shift would not mean a complete reversal of Germany's co-operative approach (Meister, 2014, p. 8).

Regarding the perspectives of Ukraine and Republic of Moldova's situations, it can be said that the EU will have a straightforward position towards them. As it is underlined in the paragraphs above, a common perceived threat might enhance a coherent and unitary response of the EU towards its vicinity,

especially Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova. This trend can be easily seen in the steps made in the last few weeks by the EU. First, on 21st of March, the EU has signed the political provisions of an association agreement with Ukraine in Brussels (RFE/RL, 2014) and second, the citizens of the Republic of Moldova will be transferred to the list of third countries whose nationals are exempt from visa requirement (Eureporter, 2014). This process will also be facilitated by the two countries and not just by the political will of the EU. As long as Ukraine and Republic of Moldova will feel threatened by Russia they will be eager to make significant compromises to converge with the European values. Therefore this mutual empowering dynamics will just further close the gaps between the EU and Ukraine and Republic of Moldova bringing them closer to the initiation of the integration process.

Concerning Armenia, as long as its security is guaranteed by Russia, it will endeavor to become a member of the Russian-led Customs Union as soon as possible. Armenia announced that it would join the Russian-led Customs Union, invoking security reasons related to the Karabakh conflict and the Turkish-Armenian relations. The Armenian political elites assess the decision as being natural within the given geopolitical context and, at the same time, consider that an ‘and-and principle’ consisting of the compatibility between the Association Agreements and the Customs Union should apply in its case. Since its announcement, Armenia is expediting the country’s accession to the Russian-led Customs Union. According to Minister of Economy Vagram Avanesyan, Armenia wants to sign the treaty of accession to the Customs Union of Belarus, Kazakhstan and Russia by the end of April (panarmenian.net, 2014).

In contrast with Armenia, Georgia decided to initiate the Association Agreement with the EU, including the DCFTA. (Joint Declaration of the Eastern Partnership Summit, Vilnius, 2013) The Georgian officials perceive this moment as consolidating and making irreversible the European integration process. Having the experience of a war with Russia in 2008, followed by Moscow’s recognition of Georgia’s separatist regions Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the Georgian elites are totally committed to accept the EU’s integration initiative. For Georgia, the signing of Association Agreement and DCFTA consolidates the country’s ambition to join Europe, a direction underlined under the mandate of the former President Saakashvili and continued by the new leadership from Tbilisi. Just after the Vilnius Summit, the Georgian officials said that by initialing the Association Agreement ‘the European integration process became irreversible’ for Georgia (civil.ge, 2014). Georgia has taken concrete steps to facilitate European integration and NATO membership. The parliamentary and presidential elections were freely and fairly held, there was a peaceful transition of power, the peaceful cohabitation process created a precedent given the fact that Georgia has never experienced this before. Georgian society and political class are determined to continue the pro-Western course chose for their country, even if it disturbs Russia.

Azerbaijan will maintain its European option and will keep requiring an agreement for establishing a special strategic partnership with the EU, in which the special formula of its relations with the EU that of a principal supplier of energy,

will be quantified. At the Vilnius Summit, Azerbaijan signed a visa facilitation agreement, thus making easier and cheaper for Azerbaijani citizens to acquire short-stay visas, allowing them to travel freely to and throughout the EU (Council of the EU, 2013). Even if Azerbaijan didn't initiate an Association Agreement with the EU, the visa agreement is important too, being a step further in the development of EU-Azerbaijan relations.

In addition, the Ukrainian crisis might lift Azerbaijan's oil and gas profile. In the Azerbaijani press, analysts expressed the opinion that Azerbaijan would emerge as a winner in the Ukraine-Russia crisis. Being confronted with the risk of a possible Russian decision of cutting natural gas supplies to Europe or raising the prices, Azerbaijan's natural gas production might take in the future a new strategic meaning for Europe. (news.az, 2014) Moreover, the Trans-Caspian pipeline is a subject debated in the press. Analysts draw attention to the fact that the Russia-Ukraine crisis might create an opportunity for Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan to become export partners. Because Turkmen Foreign Minister Rashid Meredov paid an unexpected visit at the beginning of April to Baku, experts are of the opinion that Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan might come to an agreement over the creation of the Trans-Caspian pipeline. If so, Europe's energy export picture will look differently in the sense that Europe will reduce its dependency on Russia's gas (Abbasov, 2014).

CONCLUSION

As can be seen in the paragraphs above, the EU's approach is not a coherent and uniform endeavor, but it is a process that has different dynamics and shapes influenced by a certain set of structural factors. In the first part, there were identified some major discrepancies between the EU's policy towards the Balkans and its Eastern neighbours. Moreover, in the second part, there were emphasized the major structural causes that stay at the basis of the flawed approach of the EU towards its Eastern neighbours. This paper demonstrated that the endogenous factors played a decisive role for the success or failure of the EU's behavior towards its vicinity. The last part was designed to offer some future perspectives on the Eastern neighbours based on the latest achievements and arguments discussed above.

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