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DOES THE EASTERN PARTNERSHIP STILL NEED A “SUCCESS STORY”?

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Abstract. *The article undertakes a comparative analysis of the evolution of the six former soviet republics within the framework of the Eastern Partnership, highlighting the differences between the levels of Europeanization of these countries. The research demonstrates that after two years of existence, the Eastern Partnership still needs to convince the high-level European leaders about its relevance for the EU foreign policy and to become more attractive for the post soviet republics. As the economic crisis and the Arab Spring shifted EU's attention from its Eastern neighbours and the rollback of democracy that took place in some Eastern partners, and the lack of positive progress in others increased EU leaders' reluctance towards former soviet republics, the Eastern Partnership needs a new impetus. A “successful story” could be a powerful example both for the Eastern neighbours and the EU skeptical leaders. Republic of Moldova is the most active country within the Eastern Partnership surpassing Georgia and Ukraine as the best pupil. However before becoming a successful story, Chisinau has to implement more essential reforms and to curb the widespread corruption. Which is not an easy task without the EU's support.*

The methods used for this research are documentary and discourse analysis.

Keywords: *Europeanization, Warsaw summit, EU's Eastern neighbours, membership perspectives*

After being postponed and relocated, the second summit of the Eastern Partnership took place in Warsaw (Poland), on September 29-30. With only few European leaders (Angela Merkel, Germany's chancellor, being the only high-level EU leader attending the event, even Sweden, one of the co-initiators of the Eastern Partnership, failed to send Foreign Minister Carl Bildt), and with a symbolic empty chair instead of the representative of Belarus, the summit felt

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the full effects of the economic crisis and the Arab Spring (during the summit France's president Nicolas Sarkozy chose to attend the opening of a railway in Morocco). The joint declaration assessed that "much has been achieved already" in the Eastern neighbourhood: political and economic reforms were implemented, the relations between the EU and its Eastern European partners have deepened significantly, the negotiations on Association Agreements and dialogue on visa-free regime progressed. Though, while the European Commission President Jose Manuel Barroso was describing the Eastern Partnership summit as very successful, the majority of the European media were in general restrained when enumerating the achievements of the meeting (Siarkiewicz Pawel, 2011), and the declaration of the UK deputy prime minister, Nick Clegg, that the EU should offer the possibility of closer integration, and even full membership to any Eastern Partnership country that meets the criteria, made much noise. Why are not EU countries ready to offer more to the Eastern partners?

On one side, many EU countries have very extensive and intensive bilateral relationships with Russia, which are often officially designated as 'strategic' or 'special' partnerships and framed by bilateral treaties and agreements. Within this context, these countries would not want to upset Moscow, which perceives the six former soviet republics as its sphere of influence. Chief among these EU members with special relation with Russia are four of the large European states, Germany, Italy, France and Spain (David, Gower and Haukkala, 2011). As Andreas Umland, Associate Professor of German and European Studies at the Department of Political Sciences of the National University of "Kyiv-Mohyla Academy", pointed in the interview for "EUinside", "Germany, France or Italy have spent too much time on courting Russia, and has given insufficient attention to developments in the Eastern Partnership countries" (Adelina Marini, 2011).

On the other side, the six former soviet republics have not made much progress on Europeanization neither. The Eastern Partnership is based on a community of values and principles of liberty, democracy, respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, and the rule of law, the rollback of democracy that has taken place in some Eastern Partnership countries over the last year, and the lack of positive progress in others though (Shumylo-Tapiola Olga, 2011), gave some European leaders more justification for their reluctance towards European Eastern neighbours. Furthermore, the refusal of the EU's Eastern partners to sign the declaration on Belarus at the end of the second Eastern Partnership summit, was described by some analysts as a simple expression of "deep concern over deteriorating human rights, democracy and rule of law" and another prove of "wasting" money in the region (Pawlak, and Kurowska, 2011), even though, the motivation was different (diplomats say Georgia feared revenge in the form of Belarus' recognition of its breakaway

provinces and Ukraine feared trade problems with its neighbour (Rettman Andrew, 2011a).

Anyhow it would be, the Eastern Partnership has to restore the confidence among the EU leaders towards the eastern neighbours. Which is not an easy task. Take, for instance **Ukraine**, the largest European country after Russia. With its 46 million consumers the country represents the biggest market in Eastern Europe. Once regional leader in the Europeanization process, now, however, Kiev is giving Brussels big headaches. The country has squandered the chance of transformation promised by the 2004 Orange Revolution and is wracked by permanent political strife (De Vaal Thomas, 2011). Ukraine was the first of the six former soviet republics which started the negotiations for the Association Agreement with the EU, due to be completed by the end of this year. However, all the efforts are now in jeopardy because of former prime minister Yulia Tymoshenko conviction, labeled as politically motivated.

And the Tymoshenko trial is not the first launched against Yanukovich rivals since he came to power: former interior minister Yuriy Lutsenko, former defense minister Valeriy Ivashchenko, senior custom officials Anatoly Makarenko and Taras Shepitko, treasury officials Tetyana Slyuz and Tetyana Grytsun face similar charges.

Since the election of president Yanukovich, Ukraine has experienced a significant deterioration in its democratic framework (Tutu Desmond, Von Weizsäcker Richard and Havel Vaclav, 2011). The President has been increasingly consolidating his power and total control over the executive, the legislative and the judiciary. The constitution adopted in 2004 that shifted many powers from the president to the parliament was cancelled, and the previous 1996 version built around strong presidential authority was reinstalled. The Global Corruption Barometer 2010, published by Transparency International, shows that Ukraine scores among the worst in the former Soviet Union, and its judiciary system is the most corrupt in the world (Lavrov Vlad, 2010).

On the international arena, even though Yanukovich states that EU integration is Ukraine's priority, in the beginning of his mandate, Kiev concluded an array of agreements to meet Russia's expectations, commencing with the deal "fleet for gas". It is true that the current dispute over gas prices alienated Kiev from Moscow, however, there cannot be any guarantee that Yanukovich will not come to terms with Russia in energy relations, which possibly will include economic concessions in return for Russian political support. And the Belarusian experience suggests that such an exchange leads to loss of sovereignty and succumbing to Russian influence (Pavlenko Rostyslav, 2011).

There will be no wonder if Kiev is attracted by a possible Russian's Eurasian Union or the Custom Union with Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan, in case the Association Agreement with the EU is not signed by the end of 2011.

As long as Yanukovich was one of the few world leaders that supported Aleksandr Lukashenko before the 2010 presidential elections, congratulating him after the results were announced (Чирва Виктория, 2011), and did not eliminate the possibility that one day Ukraine could join the Custom Union during a meeting with Russian president Dmitri Medvedev, in November 2010, it is clear that Ukraine will not hesitate to take further advantage of its geostrategic position and play the neo-Titoist game of balancing in order to win resources, to strengthen local elites and provide an excuse for the lack of reform (Kobzova, Jana; Popescu, Nicu; Wilson, Andrew, 2011).

To avoid the alienation of Ukraine from the EU, the West should be seeking to bring more European standards to Ukraine, rather than withdrawing from the trade accord and leaving Kiev with little option but to head in Moscow's direction, (Riley Alan, 2011). The EU should not punish Ukraine because of its leaders, because such a decision will also have consequences for the EU and its entire Eastern Partnership. Isolating Ukraine serves no purpose other than to increase instability and uncertainty in this region (Paul Amanda, 2011). Therefore, the EU should not hesitate in signing the Association Agreement with Kiev and even offer membership perspectives in order to keep the country on the way of democratic reforms. Democracy is a long process and the West should have more patience with the Eastern neighbours. Furthermore, as Lithuanian foreign minister Audronius Azubalis stated, the EU should move forward on bringing Ukraine into the Western hemisphere because the decision about the Association Agreement could change European geopolitics for decades to come (Rettman Andrew, 2011a).

The “black sheep” of the Eastern Partnership, **Belarus**, officially did not even participate at the Warsaw summit. Since the December 2010 post-election crackdown Lukashenko is banned from traveling to the EU and was not invited to the forum, while the foreign minister refused to attend the summit. Only Belarusian opposition members were present at the event.

Since December 2010, the Belarus leader preferred an alliance with Russia to the European plan for transforming his country (Minsk ratified the agreement to join the free trade zone with Russia and Kazakhstan), however, the economic situation and Russia's attempts to subordinate part of Belarus' sovereignty (Russian prime minister Vladimir Putin stated that he would support the unification of Russia and Belarus and Moscow has pressured Alexander Lukashenko to sell his country's key industrial assets to Russians in exchange for a bailout) seem to have forced Lukashenko to reassess the relations with the West.

On the other side, the Belarus' leader bases his power on the “deal” with ordinary people: modest prosperity and stability instead of democratic rights. As its country is close to bankruptcy, the soaring of staple food prices staining the budgets of millions of Belarusians and fueling public discontent

with their longtime leader (Mijuk Goran), Lukashenko feels unsafe in his presidential palace. According to a poll conducted by the independent Lithuania-based Institute of Socioeconomic and Political Studies, just over 30% of voters currently support Alexander Lukashenko, and it is not just the young whose faith in the president is dwindling (Mijuk, Goran, 2011).

Therefore, Belarus' leader seems to be again willing to approach the EU. In August, this year, he started "pardoning" political prisoners and the next month, during talks with Bulgarian Foreign Minister, Lukashenko promised to release all protesters who were arrested during last year's presidential election. In the opinion of Alyaksandr Milinkievich, a Belarusian opposition leader, even Minsk's boycott of the Warsaw Summit of the Eastern Partnership should not be considered as a break with Brussels, as in reality (and unofficially), Aleksandr Lukashenko's attitude towards European demands has become ever more lenient. Milinkievich considers that the harsh speeches against EU diplomats have served only to divert attention from the regime's release of political prisoners – and thus, from the moment of weakness of Lukashenko's authoritarian rule" (Milinkievich, Alyaksandr, 2011).

The \$9 billion (in the form of loans) promised Belarus by the EU during Warsaw summit could be the first sign of resumption of relations between Brussels and Minsk even Lukashenko has not shown any interest yet, as the money comes only in exchange for free parliamentary elections and release and rehabilitation of all political prisoners.

Belarus leader might try to resume the game of balancing the country between the EU and Russia, however Brussels should not hesitate to support Belarus conditionally in order to help Minsk not to "sell" the country to the "bigger brother". On the other side, anything that can be done to lift visa restrictions and facilitate travel for students and professionals, in order to grasp the democratic values and on returning home to put pressure on the government in Minsk, could bear fruit in the future. The EU should increase the support of the civil society as "in eastern Europe, far more than in the Arab world, the EU is a guiding star for millions of people, who feel European but are frustrated by inadequate governments and persistent poverty" (De Waal Thomas, 2011).

As Belarus, **Azerbaijan** is headed by an autocratic regime too. President Aliyev's family has ruled the country with an iron grip since 1993. The current president came to power after fraudulent elections and has no restraint in persecuting the opposition. And after that the country is ruled by a dynastic regime, the 2009 constitutional referendum abolished term limits for the president and restricted the freedom of the press.

The hydrocarbon resources represent both the wealth and the "curse" of the country. In the absence of mature democratic institutions the revenues from oil exports are used for enrichment of a minority clique and for the

consolidation of president's power. Azerbaijan has made only limited progress on instituting market-based economic reforms. Pervasive public and private sector corruption and structural economic inefficiencies remain a drag on long-term growth, particularly in non-energy sectors (C.I.A., 2011).

Within the Eastern Partnership, the country seems to be only interested in regional security issues, the economic aspects and visa liberalization regime. Furthermore, the Azerbaijani officials have claimed that their country would never take part in the multinational dimension of the Eastern Partnership with Armenia, as long as the neighbouring country holds control over some Azerbaijani territories. However, the EU leaders do not seem willing to put pressure on Baku regime, just because the country is a wealth of energetic resources and represents an alternative to Russian gas. Which, obviously, justify the critics on the double standards of the EU policy towards its neighbours: "Aliyev came to Warsaw because his country has oil and gas that Europe needs" (Siarkiewicz, Pawel, 2011).

Yet, the EU should not be tempted to accept concessions in the relationship with Baku within the framework of the Eastern Partnership. In fact, Azerbaijan is interested as much in selling the oil and gas to EU, a stable and lucrative market, as the EU is interested in buying them. Therefore Brussels should not hesitate to make pressure on authorities to implement democratic reforms, to respect human rights and fundamental freedoms, and to strengthen the rule of law. And last, the rule of law, democracy and transparency is in the interests not only the EU, but of "oil companies, that would like to invest in the country and to see their investments to be protected by states" (Alieva Leila 2011). Furthermore, Azerbaijan might be self sufficient in financial terms, but is still in need of the European "know how" and technologies.

The EU should also increase its involvement in the settle of Nagorno-Karabakh frozen conflict, as because of this disputed territory, the hatred between Azerbaijan and Armenia has reached unacceptable limits, making the cooperation of the two neighbouring countries impossible even within the framework of the Eastern Partnership. Furthermore, Azerbaijan has increased the military budget and a report of the International Crisis Group warns about a risk of increasing ceasefire violations and the possibility that Azerbaijan may be tempted to seek a military solution for the settlement of this situation (International Crisis Group, 2007).

With tense relations with Azerbaijan and Turkey, there is no wonder why **Armenia's** foreign and security policies are Russian-oriented (Russia was Armenia's strongest ally during the Nagorno-Karabakh war). Armenia is a member of the Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organization and last year, Yerevan extended the term of the deployment of the Russian military base until 2044. Yet, while the authorities claim that this was done for ensuring the security of the country, many experts argue that the presence of the base is an

obstacle to Western investment and reforms of the Armenian public and political system that is too closely linked with the Russian leadership (Hayrumyan Naira, 2011).

Armenia sees the Eastern Partnership as an economic opportunity in terms of trade, investment and aid, as well as an opportunity to improve Armenia's position in the region. The government cautiously avoids talking of EU membership so as to safeguard its relationship with its strategic Russian partner. (Babayan and Shapovalova 2011: 2). With a president who came to power after contested elections, according to Freedom House, Armenia has not improved its democratic performance since the political crisis of 2008. The judicial system is still vulnerable, corruption is deeply ingrained in Armenian society and a small group of elites continues to dominate the political and economic spheres. (Iskandaryan Alexander, 2011: 68).

Thus, in the Caucasus, **Georgia** remains the only Eastern Partnership country with a real history of successful reform (Bezpiatchuk Zhanna, 2011). The radically improved tax collection, the reform of the police, the drastic reduction of corruption and the significant inflows of foreign investments made Georgia the most modernized post-soviet state, except for the Baltic republics. Therefore, Georgia has criticized the EU for not respecting the principle of 'more for more' and hopes for an explicit promise of future accession.

However, while Georgia implemented successfully economic reforms there is much work to do on the democratic front. Politics is monopolized, the opposition is virtually absent from the parliament, being often vilified and sometimes harassed. The media is less free than a few years ago, and there is the rumor that Saakashvili will continue as a prime minister after his term expires in 2013, under a modified constitution that would give the Prime Minister more power (Popescu Nicu, 2011).

Yet the EU could have more leverage to put pressure on Tbilisi government if the Eastern Partnership offered Georgia what the country desires the most: security guarantees and avenues for the restoration of its territorial integrity. And this should not be just a matter of reflection. One way or another, the targets of the Partnership and long-term interests in the Caucasus will not be carried out without making headway towards dealing with conflicts (Söderström Jenny, 2010).

Considering the political and economic situation of the above mentioned countries and the reserved attitude of many high-level European leaders, the conclusion that emerges is that the Eastern Partnership still needs a successful story to convince the skeptics and to boost the democratization of the neighbored authoritarian regimes. The West has long believed that if just one ex-Soviet state – outside the Baltic republics, can become a functioning market democracy, it will be a powerful example for the rest (Buckley Neil, 2011). And within this context, the sought impetus might become the **Republic of**

Moldova, the only one out of six countries in the partnership that has in reality made progress towards further integration with the EU (Shumylo-Tapiola Olga, 2011).

After becoming part of the Eastern Partnership, the tiny former soviet republic commenced the implementation of the reforms before being asked to do so by the EU (Ivan and Ghinea, 2010: 11). “Moldova does not have another decade to modernize. It only has a few years to make a radical and irreversible break with the past. That is why we are in a hurry to move as fast as possible in relations with the EU” Moldova’s Prime Minister Vlad Filat has wrote recently in an article for the EUobserver (Filat Vlad 2011). Moldova seems to be the most active country in its desire to take advantage of the opportunities being offered (Bezpiatchuk Zhanna 2011). And even it is still the poorest and not very well known country in Europe, Moldova’s EU vocation seems to be firm. Russia’s attempts to change the political course after the 2010 elections (one week after the anticipate parliamentary elections, on November 28, 2010, Sergey Naryshkin, head of the Administration of the President of Russia trevelled to Chisinau to support a left wing governmental coalition, loyal to Moscow, for the price of cheaper gas and wine imports from Moldova), failed and the country recreated the Alliance for the European Integration, thus staying on Brussels’ radar.

In 2010 Moldova was one of the top three fastest growing economies in Europe (Filat Vlad, 2011) and the last EU’s European Neighbourhood Policy report shows that of the six Eastern Partnership countries Moldova received the best marks surpassing Georgia and Ukraine as the best student in the class (Boonstra Jos, 2011: 2). Moldova has also made substantial progress towards launching talks on a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) and Prime Minister, Vlad Filat, stated that his country is not attracted by Vladimir Putin’s Eurasian Union and sees its place in the European Union.

However, Moldova still faces big challenges. Before being a successful story, Chisinau has to reform the police, the public administration, the judicial sector and to curb widespread corruption. Political uncertainty and a lack of resources could cause reforms to stagnate though. Moldova needs the EU support to continue the democratization process and to settle the frozen conflict in Transnistria. It is also in the EU’s interest that the country is stable and have efficient border control to prevent illegal migration and cross border crime. With Brussels’ support, both sides win: The Moldovan government will go to the population with good news on EU benefits and general economic development, and the EU will have the needed success story.

Even in the absense of a “success story”, the EU still can Europeanize its Eastern neighbours. According to critics, the Eastern Partnership lacks the force to deeply transform the societies in participating countries, because it remains ambiguous on the kind of relationship they would have with the Union

in the longer term (EurActiv 2011). The European leaders are still skeptical about offering membership perspectives to the Eastern neighbours, even the previous experience shows that the prospect of EU entry determines much more involvement for domestic reform, raises economic standards and increases a sense of responsibility on the international stage, “from the Mediterranean and Nordic region to Central Europe, enlargement has proved to be a most successful EU foreign policy tool” (The Financial Times, 2011). Therefore, Brussels should not be reluctant in taking in offering accession perspective to the Eastern Partnership countries. On one side, membership perspective does not automatically guarantee membership itself and on the other side, Turkey was not more democratic than the Eastern partners when signed such an association agreement with the EU in 1963. Furthermore, the inclusion of the EU membership perspective in the Association Agreements with Moldova, Ukraine or Georgia would support the European principle ‘more for more’ and would signify a great success for the Eastern partners, which will gain a new status in continental geopolitics.

Without a more active involvement in the Eastern neighbourhood, the EU risks “losing” former Soviet republics (Buckley, Neil, 2011). The dissatisfaction with the possible postponement of the Association Agreements or Visa Free Travel Agreements could determine some Eastern partners to give in to Russia pressure or to continue their neo-Titoist balancing game, undermining the EU strategy of conditional engagement (Kobzova, Jana; Popescu, Nicu; Wilson, Andrew, 2011). With little attention paid to Eastern Europe or the Caucasus, the Eastern Partnership countries are in danger of becoming the new Europe’s South, dominated by states that are economically tied to Europe, but led by entrenched autocrats who can brush off Western criticism on democracy and human rights (Wilson Andrew, 2011).

The European Union should not allow the Eastern partners to lose their interest in the Europeanization process and the Eastern partners must understand that the EU takes the Eastern Partnership’s goals seriously and that reaching them requires complete homework (Paet Urmas, 2011). That is why it is essential for the EU to offer partner countries programmes with immediate and tangible results in different areas. Visa facilitation and trade privileges could be good motivations for the former Soviet republics, and these could be the best EU tangible advantages given by political leaders to the citizens still longing for Soviet times.

On the other side, the EU should not have any restraint to support the former Soviet republics and treat them as independent entities not as pawns organically connected to Russia (Sikorski Radoslaw, 2009). The European leaders should clearly separate political and economic issues in the relation with Russia. They should not let themselves blackmailed by Moscow’s geopolitical interests in the former Soviet republics during negotiations of gas agreements or any other

economic treaties. UK, for instance, has managed to enjoy robust economic relations with Russia, despite frequent political problems. Which indicates that it is not necessary to be subservient to Moscow politically in order to do successful business in the country (David, Gower and Haukkala, 2011).

And not eventually, the Eastern Partnership members have to understand that with the “competition” from the South for EU attention and money it is in their best interest to follow a course of reform and democracy (Munk Jensen Peter 2011). The economic crisis has shown that not the EU nor Russia are going to accept their game of balancing for long time. The former soviet republics have to choose between the West and the East. And before choosing the Custom Union with Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan or the possible Eurasian Union, the Eastern Partnership countries should reassess the current situation in Belarus and remember that remaining in Russian sphere of influence cannot guarantee their sovereignty.

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