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# THE “NEW EASTERN EUROPE”: BETWEEN THE DEEPENING CRISIS OF THE EUROPEAN UNION AND THE GROWING TENSIONS WITH RUSSIA

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## ABSTRACT

*The concept of “Eastern Europe” was always ideologically, politically, strategically or even culturally defined, while pure geography was down on the list of criteria. We therefore consider Eastern Europe a geopolitical idea on a dynamic mental map rather than a geographic reality. In the past three decades, Eastern Europe had at least three meanings, from the former “socialist bloc”, then “East Central European post-communist countries”, to the present member states of the “EU’s Eastern Neighbourhood” or Eastern Partnership (EaP). None of the countries of the pre-1989 Eastern Europe is still in this category, all being “transferred” to Central Europe, while the “new Eastern Europe” currently consists of six post-Soviet republics, from Belarus in the north to Azerbaijan in the south. This paper analyses the geopolitical context of the new Eastern Europe after the launch of the EaP, focusing on Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova, caught between the crisis of the EU, their own vulnerabilities and a more threatening Russian Federation.*

## KEYWORDS

- Eastern Europe
- European Union
- structural crisis
- Ukraine
- Republic of Moldova
- Russia
- Eastern Partnership
- Eastern Neighbourhood

## 1. Introduction

The definitions, meanings and contents of “Eastern Europe” varied substantially after World War II. Located basically between Germany and Russia, the region had undergone - under different denominations - huge political, ideological, socio-economic and cultural transformations over the past seven decades. The Eastern Europe of today is neither the one of the 1950s, nor the one of the 1990s. Even its map and frontiers have dramatically changed. Three states vanished (East Germany, Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia) while many others appeared. Moreover, the national and ethnic diversity and also the differences between the countries included in this region (in terms of politics, economy, history, culture and religion) are significant, despite the temptation of the westerners to treat them in one single category (Rothschild: 1989).

The concept of Eastern Europe has always been assigned with a certain strategic, ideological and geopolitical dimension. The geographical truth is sometimes distorted. For instance, before 1989, Prague was part of the Eastern Europe, while Vienna was part of the West, although Prague is situated to the west of Vienna. Nowadays Armenia and Azerbaijan are officially part of the “EU’s Eastern Neighbourhood”, having no direct borders with the European Union, while Russia is not considered in this category, in spite of its long borders with a number of EU northern countries.

At least three versions of Eastern Europe were largely accepted only in the past three decades. From eight countries forming the “socialist bloc”<sup>[1]</sup> until 1989, under the domination of the Soviet Union, the region’s label switched to a transitional post-communist “East Central Europe”<sup>[2]</sup> consisting of more than twenty states in the 1990s, then to the present six post-Soviet republics included in the so-called “European Union’s Eastern Neighbourhood”<sup>[3]</sup>, according to the initiative called the Eastern Partnership (EaP), launched in 2009. Further, while in the 1980s the former US President Ronald Reagan used to call Eastern Europe as ‘the evil empire’ (Crawford: 1996, p.1), in 2003 the former US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld petted the same countries of now “Central Europe” with the controversial notion of ‘New Europe’, in contrast with France and Germany representing, in his view, the ‘Old Europe’.

The strategic frontier of the West has therefore considerably moved to the East after the end of the Cold War, from the Berlin Wall to the far away South Caucasus, notwithstanding the opposition of Russia. The continuous advance of the West towards Russia’s borders, under the umbrella of NATO and EU’s enlargements or partnerships, was officially considered in the national doctrine of security a “threat to Russia’s security” (Centre for Strategic and International Studies/Oliker: 2016). From the opposite perspective, as the French historian Alain Besançon remarks, “the West was always fascinated by Russia. It was attracted by Russia but it also stood in fear of Russia. The West tried to include Russia in its world as well as to exclude it; both attempts failed” (Besançon: 2013, p.7).

This paper<sup>[4]</sup> analyses political developments in the region after the 2009 launch of the Eastern Partnership, in the light of a traditional geostrategic competition between Russia and the West, reflected in dividing identities, internal cleavages and conflictual societies within two of the most pro-European states of the EU’s Eastern Neighbourhood, namely Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova.

The pro-West foreign policy of Kyiv and Chişinău cannot hide the considerable weaknesses and vulnerabilities of the two countries, reflected in high levels of corruption and low administrative and economic performances. The situation in the biggest EaP

1 East Germany, Poland, Romania, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Bulgaria, Yugoslavia and Albania.

2 Poland, Romania, Czech Republic, Slovak Republic, Hungary, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Bulgaria, Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia, Albania, Belarus, Ukraine, Republic of Moldova, Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan and the controversial entity of Kosovo.

3 Belarus, Ukraine, Republic of Moldova, Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan.

4 In a preliminary and shorter version, parts of these considerations were presented at the international conference “Disintegration and Integration in East Central Europe - 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition: Borders, Identities, Communities” at the Institute of Cultural Diplomacy in Berlin, 14-15 April 2016, with the title: *The European Union’s Eastern Neighbourhood: Identities and Conflicts. A Comparison between Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova*. The present version is substantially revised, updated and extended.

country seems dramatic: “Industrial production has collapsed as fighting shut down mines and factories in the country’s east. GDP fell by nearly 18% year-on-year in the first quarter of 2015, worse than even the pessimistic projections. In April, inflation topped 60% due mostly to utility price hikes. [...] Now the country is dependent on the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and other international donors to keep it afloat” (The Economist: 2015). Political and administrative corruption, intensively criticized by the European Commission in its annual reports, makes the whole picture even more painful for ordinary people. Transparency International offers a glimpse of the aggravating deficiencies of the rule of law: “With a rank of 103 out of 168 countries, the Republic of Moldova dropped two points to score 33 out of 100, indicating a widespread problem with perceptions of public sector corruption and continuing a decline from 2010” (Transparency International: 2015). The growing dissatisfaction of the citizens with regard to the lack of progress in both states suggests a critical moment in the relation between the two countries and the European Union. The pro-European momentum was lost.

In the confusing context of a semi-failure of the Eastern Partnership in the past seven years, the fact that the Netherlands voted in April 2016 referendum to reject the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement while the UK chose the Brexit “solution” in June 2016 is obviously worsening if not completely cancelling the European perspectives of Ukraine and Moldova. The interest of the European Union for the “new Eastern Europe” (former Soviet space) will probably be collapsing in the coming years, unless the structural crisis of the Union will be overcome. Public opinion, mass-media and mainstream political leaders, not to mention nationalist and populist parties, would like to see more if not exclusive focus on internal agenda and protectionist measures in the Western countries. Enlargement and openness were the attributes of a much more optimistic era of the 1990s and 2000s.

Under these negative circumstances, we can forecast two different political trajectories for Ukraine and Moldova. Most probably, the deep political and economic frustration in the region will trigger the ascension of far right and radical nationalist movements in Ukraine, combined with the risk of new inter-ethnic tensions, while the next general elections in the Republic of Moldova could bring in office a pro-Russian parliamentary majority and government, after the victory of a pro-Russian president in November 2016. As a consequence, even the pro-West foreign policy in Kyiv and Chişinău will suffer adjustments, with less enthusiasm for negotiations with Brussels in Ukraine, and with Moscow regaining political influence in Chişinău.

The fault line separating NATO and EU member states in Central Europe from the “buffer zone” represented by the “new Eastern Europe” will be most probably becoming clear and hopeless, for at least one more generation. The present context of the structural crisis of the European Union deepens the difficulties of the Eastern Partnership countries to advance on their way to Europeanization, modernization and democratization, amid the diminishing interest of the Western countries for the Eastern Neighbourhood.

## 2. The Eastern Partnership: too little, too late?

The Russian-Georgian war in August 2008 issued a critical alert for both the post-Soviet republics and the European Union. There was a need to urgently come up with a political solution for the whole region. Then Foreign Ministers of Poland (Radosław Sikorski) and Sweden (Carl Bildt) co-authored a political instrument named the Eastern Partnership (EaP). The initiative was launched at the EU Summit in Prague, in May 2009, as part of the larger European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP). That was a changing international context in which different authors observed a “growing securitization of EU relations with the Eastern neighbourhood through the Eastern Partnership” (Simão and Dias: 2016, pp.97-98).

At that time, EaP was seen in Brussels as the proper framework for developing political and economic relations between the European Union and the new partners, in order to prepare them for the Association Agreements (AAs) and the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreements (DCFTAs). Six countries were invited to join the program: Belarus, Ukraine, Republic of Moldova, Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan. In its official mission statement, the EaP was “based on commitments to the principles of international law and to fundamental values, including democracy, the rule of law and the respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, as well as to market economy, sustainable development and good governance... [while] 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 interested partner countries” (The Council of the European Union: 2009).

Elena Korosteleva remarks the decreased political commitment of the European Union for the new Eastern Europe: “The EC<sup>5</sup> officials take a more ‘technical’ executive approach to the ENP/EaP<sup>6</sup>. After the problems with the ENP’s low legitimization in the region, they seem to be less ambitious about the policy’s overall success [...] they present *no coherent understanding* of how it should be better managed or implemented in the region, and lay full responsibility for the policy’s implementation on the partner countries” (Korosteleva: 2012, p.8). The hesitations and ambiguity of the purposes and strategies of the European Union with regard to the new Eastern Europe will remain furthermore one of the main weaknesses of the Eastern Partnership.

The questionable coherence of the region and, first and foremost, the poor connections with the European Union represented from the first years of the EaP a matter of concern. It was not a surprise that all of these countries had better connections with Russia than with the West. Political mistrust between the new partners (e.g. between Armenia and Azerbaijan, sometimes between Moldova and Ukraine etc.) made even more severe the multitude of identity disputes and frozen conflicts, economic weaknesses, high levels of corruption, a precarious infrastructure or the lack of cross-border transport routes. The geographical, historic and cultural difficulties of articulating the Eastern Neighbourhood as a functional, compatible and predictable European region became considerable challenges very soon.

5 The European Commission.

6 The European Neighbourhood Policy/The Eastern Partnership.

The limits of the EaP were reflected in the confusion that flooded the political debates. At different levels, many politicians, experts and journalists were questioning the ambiguity of the program. To give just one example, the Polish EU MP Konrad Szymanski was rhetorically asking in 2010: “Does this replace the status of member? Is this one more step toward the status of member or is it quite the contrary, a step toward the weakening of the political relations between Europe and its neighbour states?” (Szymanski cited by Iordache: 2015, p.50)

One of the most debated and criticized aspects regarding EaP was from the beginning the absence of an explicit “European perspective” offered to the Eastern partners, although this finality was not ruled out. The lack of a “road-map” to full membership, even a long term one (as in the case of Serbia, for instance) clearly suggested a different attitude of the European Union towards the post-Soviet region. Whether the Western Balkans (Serbia, Montenegro or Macedonia) and even Turkey got the explicit European perspective that is the status of candidates to accession, the Eastern Neighbourhood remained in a hazy “grey zone”.

The so-called “European fatigue” after the massive EU enlargements in 2004-2007, in addition with the economic crisis after 2008 and the growing hostility of Russia in the region, represented the three main reasons why the European leaders did not offer any European perspective to the Eastern countries. On the other hand, having no clear political message from the European Union but only vague promises, these nations started to feel themselves trapped in a buffer zone. The pro-European momentum was lost after 2014. Useless to mention that the Dutch “No” in the April 2016 national referendum for the ratification of the Association Agreement with Ukraine prompted a significant political crisis in approaching the future EU-Ukraine relations and collaboration, questioning in fact the success or failure of the entire Eastern Partnership. Two main types of explanations came up for discussion after the Dutch referendum: the European one synthesized in *Politico*, blaming the poor performances and the ineffective leadership of Ukraine (Stern: 2016), unable to tackle corruption and assume real reforms, and the American one through the voice of Anne Applebaum in *The Washington Post*, blaming Russian influence over right-wing nationalist parties in Western Europe (Applebaum: 2016). Even before the appearance of these signs of Euroscepticism in the region, there were authors who critically questioned how would the Eastern Partnership be effective without the “accession carrot” and with a Eurocentric approach that does not treat the Eastern states as equal partners? (Korosteleva: 2012, p.13).

Carl Bildt, who was considered in 2009 one of the initiators of the Eastern Partnership, seems disappointed: “It was not predestined that Russia should end up in confrontation with the EU. [...] The war in Georgia in 2008 seemed at the time like a mere ‘dip’ in relations between Europe and Russia, but in fact it presaged the decisive split that we see today. [...] The Kremlin began to actively try to stop the efforts of EU’s Eastern Partners to come closer to Europe” (Bildt: 2015).

There is no doubt that Bildt blames Russia with reason for the semi-failure of the EaP, but there are also things that went wrong in these countries as well as in the EU’s engagement. This evaluation, coming from the authorized voice of a very experienced European diplomat and political leader, is just a glimpse of a much

larger mutual disappointment that has emerged between the EaP countries and the European Union, in which both parties expected better results, deeper reforms and faster advance of Europeanization in the region.

Before dealing with Ukraine and Moldova, it is worth mentioning that the Eastern partners share a core of characteristics and vulnerabilities. These common features shape to some extent the historic, politic, economic, social and cultural profile of the present Eastern Europe and give us an idea of what challenges the region is facing, what the long-lasting weaknesses are and what could be improved: (1) All of the six republics belonged to the Soviet Union until 1991 and, historically speaking, had longer or shorter periods of inclusion in the Russian Empire; (2) They have no or minimum historical experience as modern sovereign states (with the exception of a very short period between 1918-1920, some of them even shorter); (3) They face variable economic dependency on Russian market and resources; (4) They are confronted with high levels of corruption; (5) They suffer from a lack of transparency and efficiency in public administration; (6) They rely on weak, Soviet-styled infrastructure; (7) They present identity issues, which are very sensitive and quite often mix with geopolitics; (8) They contain Russian ethnic communities (smaller or larger); (9) They display deep societal cleavages (political, inter-ethnic, religious, linguistic etc.); (10) They are disabled by „frozen conflicts”.

They also have a number of specific features, which make them closer either to the EU (e.g. Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia) or to Russia (e.g. Belarus, Armenia and Azerbaijan). These peculiarities are mainly based on historic, geopolitical and cultural traditions, still influencing national politics and, obviously, their foreign policy.

### **3. Ukraine and Moldova, struggling between pro-European options and deepening frustrations**

Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova tried hard to get a pro-European perspective in the past years. Both countries had dramatic turning points in their politics, which made them switch from pro-Russia or strategic neutrality to an explicitly pro-EU foreign policy and partnership with NATO. The last major alternation in power happened in 2009 in the Republic of Moldova, and in 2014 in Ukraine, after a failed “Orange Revolution” government in Kyiv between 2005 and 2010.

Ukraine is the largest country of the Eastern Partnership, while Moldova is the second-smallest state in the region. However they have a number of common characteristics, leading the West to consider them in the same subgroup of the EU’s Eastern Neighbourhood, sometimes together with Georgia.

Some of the similarities between the two states can be identified around the following observations: (1) Ukraine and Moldova are among the most pro-European countries in the EU’s Eastern Neighbourhood; (2) Both countries signed the Association Agreements (AAs) and the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTAs) at the EU Summit in June 2014, although the ratification went wrong in the case of Ukraine; (3) Ukraine and Moldova currently face very difficult economic situations, which have seriously deteriorated in the past years; (4) In relation to both states, Russia disposes of political and economic leverage to limit or counterbalance the pro-EU and

pro-NATO strategic options; (5) Each of the two countries has a separatist region, with a pro-Russian majority (Donbass in Ukraine, respectively Trans-Dniester in the Republic of Moldova) representing a vulnerability for their statehood; (6) Identity issues play an important role in Ukrainian and Moldovan politics and societies, still having an essential influence dating from the Soviet era; (7) The frozen conflicts in Ukraine and Moldova can reignite at any time; (8) The political and financial support of the West was below the level of expectations of the pro-European voters in the two countries, while the reforms and performances in Ukraine and Moldova were below the level of expectations of the European institutions; (9) A mutual disillusion appeared in the relations between the EU and the two countries.

In Kyiv and Chişinău we currently find self-proclaimed “pro-European” governments. However this formal option did not prove to be a guarantee for effective European policies and good practices in the two states, both countries being criticized by the European Commission for not fighting enough against corruption as well as for the lack of structural reforms in economy, administration and justice. Both Ukraine and Moldova experienced falls of pro-European governments and European criticism regarding slow and timid reforms and also high levels of corruption. The resignation of the “EuroMaidan Revolution”-emanated prime-minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk, in April 2016, shortly after the Dutch referendum and amid intense contestation within the government coalition, shook Ukraine and opened the door to political instability in the most important country of the Eastern Neighbourhood (Kramer: 2016).

In order to respect the historical truth, we have to admit that Ukraine has always been in very tight connections with Russia. In fact, the medieval state entity of *Kievan Rus'* (882-1240), located on a larger territory around the capital city of modern Ukraine, is considered the cradle of the Rus' civilization and also the origin of the current Russian, Ukrainian and Belarussian nations. Whether in the post-Soviet Belarus the political desire to distance from the Russian influence was mitigated by the authoritarian regime led by Alexander Lukashenko (inaugurated in 1994 and still in power), in Ukraine the alternation in power of pro-Russian and pro-European governments generated a real and never-ending drama of this country in relation with the former dominant Empire from the East. However the Ukrainians, though not denying East Slavic roots and close cultural and historical relations with Russia, strongly affirmed their own national identity. As other nations from the former USSR, affected by the lack of sovereign nation states, the Ukrainians developed after 1991 an intense nationalism reflected in domestic politics and foreign policy, in education and culture, as well as in relation with ethnic minorities living on the territory of their country.

The „ethnic map” of Ukraine shows quite clearly the cleavage between the pro-European regions located in the West and Centre and pro-Russian regions in the East and South. The map reveals not only current tension zones such as Crimea, Donetsk and Luhansk but also potential conflicts, in regions with up to 40% pro-Russian minorities such as Mariupol or Odessa (The Economist: 2015).

Figure 1. Population of Ukraine by native language

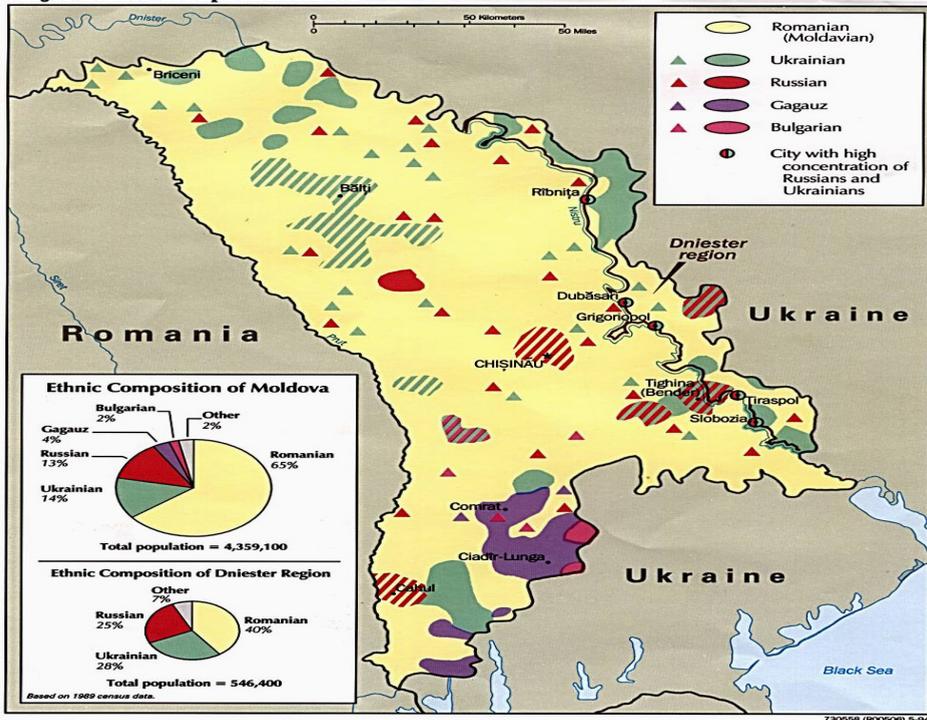


Source: <http://www.economist.com/blogs/graphicdetail/2015/06/ukraine-graphics>, accessed in November 2016

A few observations come up from this map and can be connected with other historic, political and economic aspects. First, the two main identities in the country are the Ukrainians and the Russians, on which the pro-West/pro-East political dispute is basically organised. Second, the major ethnic regions are large and compact, relatively well defined geographically, historically and culturally. Third, the pro-Russian Eastern and Southern regions are more industrialized, while the pro-European Western and Northern regions have smaller cities and large rural areas. Fourth, in the Western Ukraine there are also influential Polish, Romanian and Hungarian minorities, which bring even more European cultural heritage to this part of the country. Fifth, the illegal annexation of Crimea in March 2014 not only defied the international law but also left the Tatar community “prisoner” in a Russian controlled region, facing abuses and infringements of human rights, as shown in a 2015 Freedom House Report (Klymenko: 2015). The secession war in Donbass (Eastern Ukraine), fuelled by Russia, seems to get the international status of “frozen conflict”, cancelling even theoretical chances of Ukraine to join EU and NATO.

Beyond common problems induced by the specific of the region and the former membership to the Soviet Union, the Republic of Moldova has undoubtedly its own set of characteristics. According to Charles King, ethnic issues and identity controversies remain nevertheless essential in this small state’s politics (King: 2004, pp.61-70).

Figure 2. Major Ethnic Groups in the Republic of Moldova



Source: <http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/commonwealth/moldovaethnic.jpg>, accessed in April 2016<sup>7</sup>

Comparing with Ukraine, in Moldova we find the following specific aspects with regard to borders, identities and conflicts: (1) Moldova is the second-smallest Eastern Partnership state after Armenia, landlocked, being bordered only by Romania and Ukraine, with a population of 3.5 million inhabitants including Trans-Dniester; (2) No direct borders with Russia, but in the separatist region of Trans-Dniester there are still Russian troops deployed since the war of 1991-1992 (Moscow call them “peacekeeping forces”, while Chișinău name them “occupation troops”); (3) The main identity controversy is between the so-called “Moldovans” (a fake “national identity” invented during the Soviet regime) and Romanians. Both groups are Romanian-speaking and totalize 65% of the population of the republic (14% Ukrainians, 13% Russians, 4% Gagauz, 2% Bulgarian). The Academy of Sciences of the Republic of Moldova concluded in 1994 and reiterated in 2012 that “the right name of the official language of the Moldovan state is Romanian and there is no Moldovan language” (Academy of Sciences of the Republic of Moldova: 2012, p.3); (4) Charles King

<sup>7</sup> The resources of the Library of the University of Texas, <http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/commonwealth/moldovaethnic.jpg>, accessed in April 2016.

considers that in Moldova, because of the complexity of identity issues, “nationality is an absolute negotiable question” (King: 2002, p.5); (5) Although the Constitution of the Republic of Moldova (1994) stipulates that the state language is “Moldovan”, the Constitutional Court decided in 2013 that the state language is Romanian (because the Declaration of Independence in August 1991 was written in Romanian and it preceded the Constitution); (6) The Party of the Communists and the pro-Russian parties such as the Socialists support the idea of “Moldovenism” and oppose the recognition of the Romanian national identity already made by the Academy of Sciences from Chişinău, considering it a dangerous step towards reunification with Romania; (7) Unlike other EaP countries, Moldova had no “colour revolution” after 1991 except of the protests in April 2009 called by some authors a “Twitter Revolution” (Mungiu-Pippidi and Munteanu: 2009) but usually free and democratic electoral processes, with small-scale frauds in the limits of 2-4%, (Popescu: 2012, p.38); (8) After the alternation in power in 2009, the pro-European government alliance (PLDM, PDM, PL<sup>8</sup>) made some progress in reorienting the country to the West, but domestic reforms remained slow and weak; (9) Frequent disagreements between pro-European leaders led to political fragmentation and instability, a general weakness of successive governments and several crises; (10) Moldova had seven prime ministers in the past three years (2013-2016), including the *ad interim* premiers; (11) The huge scandal of corruption (the theft of 1 bn. dollars from Moldovan banks) had a negative impact after 2014 on the public support for pro-European parties; (12) Recent polls indicate a severe decreasing of the mainstream pro-European parties, the potential of new pro-European parties and a rise of the pro-Russian Socialists as the first opposition party, but also a slightly increasing of the pro-unionist option (pro-Romanian) to about 21-22%, especially among youth (Tiulea: 2015); (13) Because of its structural instability and multiple pressures that affect the Republic of Moldova both at internal and neighbouring level, Robert Kaplan concludes in 2016: “I am afraid that Moldova can soon become a subject of breaking news” (Kaplan: 2016, p.245).

#### 4. The geopolitical context of the “new Eastern Europe” is worsening

There were good times for European and Euro-Atlantic enlargements just before the global financial crisis of 2008. The Western countries were still in favour of the idea of openness and strategic extension to the East while the public opinion was enthusiastically pro-West in Ukraine and Moldova, as in the whole region. At the NATO Bucharest Summit, in April 2008, Ukraine was very close to get the invitation to join the Alliance, which would have probably changed the “buffer zone” status of this country forever.

After the recession hit the European economy and Russia won the short war against Georgia in August 2008, things have started to change. George Friedman gives points to the strategic significance of the Russian military intervention in the pro-West Georgia: “The war in Georgia was intended to undermine the American influence in the region of frontier [between Russia and the West] as well as to undermine the pro-

8 PLDM – The Liberal Democrat Party of Moldova, PDM – The Democratic Party of Moldova, PL – The Liberal Party.

American and pro-European local forces, and it was a success. Obviously, the United States did not want to intervene, while Europe was not able to do that. 'The Russian-Georgian war changed the dynamics of the region' (Friedman: 2016, p.231).

The pro-European momentum was lost in the following years, both in the West and in the East. The "enlargement fatigue" and nascent Euroscepticism in the European Union, combined with the economic decline, the political disappointment in Eastern Europe and the Russian growing opposition to the process of West's advance to the East, made the idea of a new wave of extension completely unrealistic. Amid this gloomy European sky, the European Partnership launched in 2009 was already a *compromise* between the high expectation of the Eastern countries and the diminishing appetite of the European Union to engage in the region.

Despite nostalgic remarks of some Russian military and political officials, including President Putin who considered "the collapse of the USSR as a major geopolitical disaster of the 20<sup>th</sup> century" (Putin: 2005), the Soviet Union or the Russian Empire will not reappear on the map. Nevertheless, the geostrategic ambitions of Russia to gain regional influence over Eastern Europe and to keep the West away from Russian frontiers will remain unchanged.

George Friedman explains the tensions between Russia and the West in Ukraine as a strategic fight to (re)settle the frontier between the European peninsula and the Eurasian continent, and also the interest of the US foreign policy for this region. The American geopolitical analyst considers that: "during the Cold War, the flashpoint was the red line from the centre of Germany. Now, that line has moved to the East, in Ukraine, where Russia and the West are confronting for supremacy and for the Ukrainian buffer-zone. Whether the West wins, the frontier will be along the Russian-Ukrainian border. Whether Russia triumphs, the frontier will be here [the Western border of Ukraine], were Russia confronts with the European peninsula for centuries. The result of the Ukrainian battle will decide where the US troops of the next generation will be based. The maps are rapidly changing here" (Friedman: 2016, p.217).

The fact that the European Union faces the most critical moment in its history affects the mid and long term perspectives of Eastern Europe. It is not only the regional economy that suffers and returns to traditional dependency on Russian markets and cheaper resources, but it is also about politics going chaotic and turbulent. People remaining in the post-Soviet European republics feel betrayed, confused and off the beam. Many young families from Moldova and Ukraine migrated to the West, looking for opportunities for a better life. They were once the most fervent supporters and voters of the pro-European parties. Millions of Ukrainians and citizens of the Republic of Moldova, now living in the EU or North America and being disappointed by political perspectives of the two post-Soviet republics, will probably be skipping the next elections in their native countries, leaving national political decision to older and more conservative generations. There are also many workers from these countries in Russia, attracted by better job opportunities and higher salaries. In the Moldovan presidential election of November 2016, only 1.6 million voters expressed their option, meaning a modest turnout of 53% of the total electoral corps (e-Democracy.md: 2016). The pro-Russian socialist Igor Dodon eventually had about 67,000 more votes

than the pro-West candidate Maia Sandu but he lost elections outside the territory of the Republic of Moldova. The Moldovan diaspora, usually consisting of young and middle-aged citizens, voted for the pro-European option. From a total of about 1,500,000 citizens living abroad, in the West (including Romania) and in Russia, the overall winner was by far Maia Sandu. However, only 135,000 Moldovan citizens voted abroad. Sandu also won in the capital city of Chişinău, relaunching the old thesis of the „two Moldovas”, animated by divergent pro-West and pro-Russia fundamental options, which clashes at polls every four years since 1991.

With regard to Moldova, it is usually assumed that the small post-Soviet republic, landlocked between Romania and Ukraine, has an important geopolitical position in Eastern Europe. Part of the historical province of Moldavia, “Bessarabia” was for the first time annexed by the Russian Empire in 1812. The remaining principality of Moldavia decided in 1859 to unite with Wallachia and formed the Romanian state. In 1918, Moldova - located between the Prut and the Dniester rivers<sup>[9]</sup> (called Bessarabia after the Russian occupation) - decided democratically to join the Kingdom of Romania. A “Secret Supplementary Protocol” of the Hitler-Stalin Pact of August 1939, in which “the Soviet side emphasizes the interest of the USSR in Bessarabia while the German side declares its complete political disinterest for these areas” (the Soviet-German Non-Aggression Pact: 1939) allowed the Soviet Union to re-annex Bessarabia in June 1940.

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, both Ukraine and Moldova, now sovereign states, included the principle of neutrality in their post-communist constitutions. The idea of political neutrality between the West and Russia was considered at that time the best guarantee for maintaining independence, territorial integrity and security. A second thought does not necessarily lead nowadays to the same conclusion. However any constitutional revision in the sense of removing the principle of neutrality would probably stir a huge controversy, both on the internal and external levels. Russia threatened repeatedly with serious measures if Kyiv or Chişinău would decide to join Western strategic structures, especially the North Atlantic Alliance.

## 5. Conclusion: How stable are Chişinău and Kyiv’s pro-European options?

With some peculiarities and different nuances, Ukraine and Moldova (and, to some extent, Georgia) proved to be the most pro-EU countries in the Eastern Neighbourhood. Nevertheless all of these states have very few to no chances of becoming EU full member states in the following years. As it was remarked in a recent volume dedicated to the EU’s Eastern Neighbourhood, the Eastern Partnership was intended from the beginning to offer this region „integration without accession” (Naumescu: 2015, p.4). The economic integration and political collaboration between the EaP countries and the EU have never explicitly forecasted the perspective of political accession of the former Soviet republics to the European Union. In the fall of 2014, the new EU Commission President Jean Claude Juncker declared that he will lead the first Commission after 1989 without any enlargement on the agenda during the next five year term.

But even economic integration seems now very difficult to be achieved in

9 At that time Moldova was not including Trans-Dniester.

Ukraine and Moldova, not to mention the accession to the European Union. After 2014, with the deepening of the crisis of the European Union, the political interest of the West for the Eastern neighbourhood diminished. The EU member states became more focused on their own difficulties. For instance, the Riga EaP Summit in 2015 was just a shadow of the vibrant Vilnius EaP Summit of November 2013. Both sides are disappointed.

On one hand, the EU leaders see little progress in local government performances. Instead of Europeanization, the European Commission and Transparency International complain in their reports of high levels of corruption: “EU officials have been urging Ukraine since 2014 to clamp down on corruption and to carry out other reforms. But critics say not enough has changed, and President Petro Poroshenko has been accused of backing corrupt officials. [...] Perception of corruption is worse in Ukraine than in Russia, according to Transparency International” (BBC/Burridge: November 2016). Although recognizing that the reforms have been accelerated in 2016, the European Commission Progress Report on Ukraine still mentions that: “Tackling corruption and creating a reliable judicial system are also key to transforming the business climate and rebuilding prosperity” (European Commission: December 2016). The famous steal of one billion dollars from three Moldovan banks in 2014 or the taking into custody of the former pro-European Prime Minister Vlad Filat in 2015 are just two of the most “spectacular” moments of this dramatic decline.

On the other hand, people in the region feel the decline of the EU influence in their day-to-day life and the return of Russia as a major power. The poverty and corruption harm the quality of life in these countries and affect their European aspirations. The victory of the pro-Russian candidate Igor Dodon in Moldovan presidential election is an undeniable sign of this growing frustration. Nationalism and Euroscepticism loom in Ukrainian politics, too. Ukraine’s pivot towards the West has barely begun, yet Euroscepticism could already set in, observes Francisco de Borja Lasheras for *European Council on Foreign Relations*: “Ukraine’s Eurosceptic forces include a motley crew of pro-Russian Opposition Bloc members (who have reached out to like-minded forces within the EU), nationalists (such as EU-bashing Oleh Liashko of the Radical Party, or the far right Azov Battalion, now constituted into the National Corps Party), and recalcitrant elements in the ruling parties who torpedo reforms. Some of these forces toy with the notion of a ‘Third Way for Ukraine’ – neither Russia nor EU. Meanwhile, in the background, constant pro-Russian and anti-Maidan misinformation fans the idea that the Ukrainians were wrong in vouching for decadent Europe and will be let down.” (Borja Lasheras: 2016) Even though in the tumultuous winter of 2013/2014 the pro-EU popular support was over 75%, the polls at the end of 2016 shows that the accession to the European Union is still supported by only 58% of Ukrainians (Ukrinform: December 2016). Losing almost one third of the pro-EU supporters in three years should be a serious concern both for Kyiv and Brussels. The situation is even more disappointing in the Republic of Moldova, where recent polls say only 38% would vote for EU accession, while 52.8% would be in favour of an accession into the Customs Union including Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan (InfoEuropa.md: October 2016).

Despite enormous economic and social difficulties in the two countries, both

Ukrainian and Moldovan foreign policy (after the former President Viktor Ianukovici fled the country in February 2014, respectively after the removal of the Moldovan communists from power, in 2009) remained strongly pro-European. The pro-EU strategic option was maintained, especially in the Republic of Moldova, based on a very fragile pro-EU parliamentary majority. To keep it alive, the Central Electoral Commission in Chişinău had to exclude from the electoral race a pro-Russian party of about 8%, just a couple of days before the Election Day for the parliament, on the official reason of receiving funds from Russia (Matis: 2014). The last general election in Moldova in November 2014 as well as the recent presidential elections of October and November 2016 showed however that the support for the traditional pro-European parties has significantly receded in the past 4-5 years. To give just two examples of local crises, in the winter of 2015/2016 the Republic of Moldova was on the brink of a budget collapse, due to an unsustainable deficit, while Ukraine is confronted with the risk of a gas shortage every winter, due to its debts to the Russian provider.

In Ukraine, President Viktor Porosenko continues to enjoy quite large political support, although not at the level of 2014 presidential election. The former Prime Minister Arseni Yatseniuk, one of the leaders of EuroMaidan, stepped down in April 2016, amid severe political disagreements within the pro-European government coalition. The Party of Regions of the former President Ianukovici did not recover its initial political support and is still far from winning the next election. Nationalist and far right parties are emerging as possible new parliamentary parties, which will complicate the formation of the cabinet. In Eastern Ukraine, the summer of 2016 brought a sudden but short re-ignition of the separatist conflict “ended” with the Minsk II Ceasefire Agreement in February 2015, which makes the perspective of the frozen conflict a rather acceptable one for ordinary people living there.

The future is, however, *deeply uncertain* in this region of frontier. Any buffer zone in the world absorbs shocks coming from both sides of it, and crises can appear anytime. In the “New Eastern Europe”, to be more specific, malfunctions of both the European Union and Russia are reflected over Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova.

All of the options are still on the table. From continuity in modernization and European rapprochement to a dramatic pro-Russian switch, and from spectacular development to instability, unrest and internal conflicts, everything is possible. The political options in Kyiv and Chişinău are volatile and the local politics will remain mostly unpredictable. Changes are so fast here that one individual can expect several political oscillations between West and East, as well as between peace and war during a life time.

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