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The European Parliament on the position of Eastern Partnership countries and Ukraine in the run-up to their conclusion of association agreements with the European Union

Scheduled for November 28-29, 2013, the Vilnius Summit of the Eastern Partnership has been hyped as an opportunity to conclude the association agreement between Ukraine and the European Union (EU). This step on the way towards Ukraine's integration with the European institutions will also advance the evolution of Central and Eastern Europe's geopolitical scene. However, the developments of recent weeks seen in Ukraine's relations with Russia show a great deal of determination on the part of this largest state in this region of Europe to slow down Kiev's political and economic integration with the West. This is not the first time that Russia objects strongly if not confrontationally to having its influence diminished, especially in the territories held by the former Soviet republics. In the case of Ukraine, such opposition has grown very fierce. The EU, which is positioned on the other side of the dispute, has responded staunchly. "The EU is not just an observer here but also a party. Russia's measures are not targeted at Ukraine alone but also at the European Union", noted Jacek Saryusz-Wolski, the Polish MEP and Vice-Chairman of the EuroNest Parliamentary Assembly of the Eastern Partnership and European Parliament's Rapporteur on the EU's Eastern Neighborhood, on August 19. Russia's infringement of the rules of the World Trade Organization are not a mere trade conflict but rather "a very serious political dispute grounded in geo-politics".

The exaggerated checks of goods on the Ukrainian-Russian border, the ban on imports of sweets from Ukraine and the embargo on Moldovan alcoholic beverages are just a few examples of what Russia portrays as responses to alleged complaints from its consumers. Yet, the circumstances which surround the Russian pressures cast doubt on any such clarifications. The fact of the matter is that bans on imports into Russia (of e.g. steel products from the Metinvest holding company controlled by Rinat Akhmetov) impact heavily on the Russian economy.

The August 28, 2013 debate on Ukraine in the Foreign Affairs Committee of the European Parliament included a hearing of representatives of the opposition: Vitali Klitschko of the Ukrainian Democratic Alliance for Reform and Arseniy Yatsenyuk of the Batkivshchyna Party. These opposition organizations, which favor an association agreement, have been exerting pressure on the Viktor Yanukovich administration to secure it. During the EP debate, MEPs stressed that Russia's actions violate WTO rules and are targeted primarily at Ukrainian citizens. The MEPs expressed support for the association agreement and misgivings about Ukraine's failure to fulfill the recommendations presented by the Foreign Affairs Council of the European Union (which were to abandon the selective justice system, reform the office of the state prosecutor and free the former Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko). Elmar Brok, Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee, emphasized the need for sovereignty in reaching this decision: "The future of Ukraine, its choice between a trade and political partnership with Russia or the EU, should be decided in Kiev, not Moscow or Brussels". The MEPs expressed strong opinions at the Committee's meeting. One of them, Jacek Saryusz-Wolski, interpreted Russia's steps as clear attempts to derail Ukraine's association agreement and contest the entire Eastern Partnership project. The Polish MEP suggested that the issue should be looked at holistically. Rather than being viewed as a trade matter, as seen initially by the European Commission, it should be recognized as an attempt to curb the EU and the Eastern Partnership project.

Russia's pressures on Ukraine and other Eastern Partnership countries were subsequently debated during the European Parliament's plenary session on September 9-12, 2013 in Strasbourg. The debate included proposals to submit a formal protest, a complaint to the WTO, resort to retorsions with the use of the EU's trade policy tools (such as an embargo on alcoholic beverages from Russia as a response to Russia's embargo on Moldovan wine) and lodge an EU complaint, which was already completed, regarding Gazprom's abuse of its dominant position and manipulation of the gas prices offered to European buyers. All but one draft resolution prepared by the political groups were replaced with a joint text. The exception was a motion tabled by the Confederal Group of the European United Left / Nordic Green Left, made up of 35 members most of whom stem from



the German Die Linke party as well as leftist and communist groupings. In its conclusions, the motion shifts the burden of responsibility to the EU and, in particular, the European External Action Service, criticizing its insufficient determination to engage in dialogue with Russia, and the failure, as seen by the document's authors, to make a proper link between promoting human and civil rights and pursuing economic and geopolitical interests.

The draft resolution itself, which was adopted jointly by the Christian Democrats, Socialists, Liberals, Greens and Conservatives, calls on Russia to depart from its confrontational line and engage in cooperation for the benefit of all parties. The Members appeal to Eastern Partnership countries to continue preparing for the autumn summit in Vilnius and for having the concerned countries (i.e. Ukraine) sign their association agreements. Armenia's recent announcement of plans to join the Russia-led Customs Union was judged to have been made under threat from Russia. The EP resolution additionally points to the need to be more proactive within the Union in relations with countries covered by the Eastern Partnership program so that specific effective mechanisms support their sovereign and free aspirations and intentions. The resolution is also to reach the governments and parliaments of Eastern Partnership countries and the Russian Federation as well as the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. This relatively large document refers back to fundamental values which underpin Europe's political and economic governance the respect for which is a necessary condition for the future association with the EU of Ukraine, Armenia, Georgia and Moldova. The resolution openly blames Russia for attempts to undermine and contest the Eastern Partnership and, indirectly, also EU's external policy. It recalls the principles of sovereignty and freedom which govern decisions regarding entry into multilateral economic agreements and brings to mind the need to respect the rule of international law, as enshrined in, among others, the Helsinki Accords. It points to the fundamental difference involved in the fact that "as opposed to the association agreement, the joining of the Customs Union requires no reference to values or preconditions and, as such, provides no incentive to carry out domestic reforms". This final argument is most certainly crucial for understanding the significance of the decisions faced by Eastern Partnership countries. The way of integration on which they now have an opportunity to embark offers a remote prospect of complete integration with the European institutions as well as a way to fully escape from the influence of the Kremlin acting in its usurped role of a protector of the former Soviet world.

When considering the problem of Russia, Ukraine and the EU being on a collision course, one must assess the Eastern Partnership project whose implementation leaves a lot to be desired, not only in the countries it is designed to help but also on the part of the EU.



While there is continued need for bringing the citizens of Eastern Partnership countries to embrace the values and ways of democracy, the rule of law and the standards of human rights, it is equally important to meet the political, economic and legal criteria for association with the EU. Based on the experience of countries which have historically sought and achieved accession to the European Union, one may recommend that Eastern Partnership countries see integration as a matter of advancing their development and one with a wide range of repercussions, not only for the economy or administration, the closing of gaps between political declarations and practice or using the existing forms of cooperation to embrace EU experience and practices but also for the ways in which each state pursues neighborhood policies, which at the present time are not always fully peaceful and harmonious.

The report on the Eastern Partnership is to be debated on October 7 of this year by the Foreign Affairs Committee of the European Parliament, and be adopted during the October 22 plenary as the Parliament's official position. The report also offers recommendations for the Union itself. The way in which the governments of Eastern Partnership countries are asked to satisfy high demands while a great deal of openness is shown to its citizens inevitably brings back memories of the Polish experience of the 1980s. It will, of course, take years to drum up support for the fundamental values upheld by the EU and strengthen the civil aspirations and yearning for freedom, without which the institutions are unlikely to change sustainably. Similarly, the effectiveness of the Eastern Partnership depends on success in decentralizing its aid programs. Once put into practice by social organizations acting on both sides, such programs will help establish a variety of contacts and boost the commitment of the beneficiaries. Visa facilitations and, ultimately, the visa-free regime offered to Eastern Partnership countries (where it will be available sooner than in other countries, such as Russia) will be a clear sign of openness. What is most essential in view of EP's election calendar and the term of office of the European Commission is to conclude association agreements as soon as the candidate countries satisfy the necessary requirements.

The current position of Eastern Partnership countries on the eve of the Vilnius Summit has interesting implications for the changing roles and position of the European Parliament. Under the Treaty of Lisbon, nearly a decade after the EU enlargement which resulted in the accession of countries from the former Eastern bloc, the Parliament has become a tool for formulating opinions ever more decisively, not only within the Union. The example of a debate on pressures on Ukraine and other Eastern Partnership countries shows the extent of values which bring Europe together and underpin the institutional fabric while setting directions for external relations. The stern tone of the debate meant as a protest



against Russia's behavior, echoed also in the official resolution, has been motivated not as much by the will to protect the interests of the EU and its member states. Respect for sovereignty, freedom to choose political arrangements and economic systems as well as civic freedoms and participation are making their comeback onto the political stage of Europe not only as lofty slogans but also as values applied in setting goals for Europe and identifying ways to achieve them.

The experience of Poland and other countries which have chosen to advance their development by integrating with the EU can be helpful in solving the current dilemmas and taking action. It is difficult to anticipate direct analogies between the process which had led to the EU enlargement of 2004 and the changes on which Ukraine is about to embark. However, as demonstrated by the rising significance of the European Parliament, integration with Europe is a dynamic two-way process which not only improves political and trade relations on the European Continent but also modifies EU institutions.

The theses and opinions included in this text express the opinions of the authors only.

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