

## **THE IMPACT OF THE UKRAINIAN DIVIDE ON EUROPE: THE MIRROR CRACKED**

*Nadia Alexandrova-Arbatova*

*Head, Department of European Studies, Institute of World Economy and International Relations (IMEMO), Russian Academy of Sciences*

The Ukrainian conflict, which can be viewed as a quintessence of the mutual disappointment of Russia and the West, has brought the Russia-West relations to the edge of confrontation for the first time since the end of the Cold war. However, deep divides have appeared not only in the Russia-West relations but in the European space at large affecting relations between the EU countries and within them as well as the CIS region. Figuratively speaking, the European mirror has cracked.

### **Divide in EU and NATO**

Years ago U.S. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld touched upon "the uncomfortable truth" in Europe dividing the continent into what he called "old Europe", namely France and Germany, and "new Europe" or real atlanticists from the CEE countries. According to Rumsfeld the latter were more supportive to the ideas of democracy and protection of human rights. In the light of the current migration crisis in Europe this statement looks at least debatable. But other consideration is more important here. The countries of Central and East Europe, not wishing to remain a buffer zone between Russia and the West, used all efforts and recourses to find security within the framework of NATO. However in case of escalation of the Ukrainian conflict exactly these countries risk to find themselves at a "front-line" with all predictable consequences.

Put simply, in the context of the Ukrainian conflict it is getting clear that there is no unity between the CEE states. The Visegrad group is split. Three countries - the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Hungary - have distanced themselves from Poland being more cautious with regard to the Ukrainian question and more skeptical about the EU anti-Russian sanctions. The reason of this position lies not so much in their pro-Russian sentiments but rather in their Euroscepticism. These countries proceed also from the interests of their national security, which is why they have more balanced approach than Washington or Brussels to political processes in Ukraine. Poland and three Baltic states, who are located closer to Russian borders, view their neighbour in an increasingly negative light. No doubt, the divide within new Europe is a new reality which cannot but complicate the EU and NATO agendas.

However under the best scenario in the Russia-West relations the CEE countries could become part of a broader space of cooperation in Eastern Europe which would include the CIS European states. It is exactly this part of Europe where it would be important to reinstate the institutes of

confidence building measures, prevention of unintended military incidents and low intensity military activity.

### **Cracks in Eastern Partnership**

The Ukrainian conflict has strongly affected the relationship between the architects of Eastern Partnership (EaP) and the partner-states. The last Eastern Partnership summit in Riga has become evidence to this reality. The summit was primarily of a symbolic nature. Its goal was to keep the project afloat and show to participating countries that Brussels has not lost interest in EaP. However, the Riga summit exposed the flaws inherent in the Eastern Partnership since its concept lacks an ultimate goal for those countries that have embarked on the path of painful reforms.

In many respects, the EU's position stems from its revised enlargement policy, in particular the introduction of a five-year moratorium on the acceptance of future members and recognition of the failure of the political elites of the three leading EaP countries to implement reform and tackle corruption. Put simply, Brussels is reluctant to add new problems to its agenda. And last but not least, the EU's caution is linked to an external factor. The past months since the Vilnius summit have shown that Russia possesses the resources to counteract strategies that it considers to be a threat to its national interests. Today, in contrast to the Vilnius summit, the EU and some partner countries have to act with one eye on the Kremlin.

The Riga summit vividly demonstrated the diversity of the countries in the Eastern Partnership, which offers a single ideology to a very broad sweep of peoples and countries. The leading elites of Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova are gravitating towards Euro-Atlantic community. At the same time the Ukrainian crisis has increased the polarization of the Moldovan society, heightening both pro and anti-Russian sentiments. Belarus, Russia's partner in the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), was not interested in the political reforms proposed under the Eastern Partnership, the objective being to lift sanctions and reap economic dividends.

Armenia, another CSTO member and EEU ally of Russia, on the contrary, committed itself only to the political part of the Association Agreement. Like Belarus, Azerbaijan snubbed political reform, as well as EU membership. In fact, Azerbaijan is much better suited to the format of the Euro-Mediterranean association agreements. Azerbaijan's main interest is in the energy component of the Agreement, in particular the Southern Gas Corridor project, in which Baku is heavily involved.

The participating countries disagreed over the wording of the text of the final declaration with regard to Russia's annexation of Crimea. The split between Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia, on one side, and Belarus and Armenia, on the other, was nothing if not predictable. Azerbaijan

remained equidistant between the two camps. The invitation to Belarus and Armenia to join the Eastern Partnership looked like an attempt by the EU to neutralize the anti-Russian vector of the project. Without them, the Eastern Partnership would be limited to the GUAM countries, a group set up to counter Russian policy in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). Yet the involvement of Russia's allies highlighted the blatant artificiality of the EaP format.

The Riga summit showed that in order to avoid becoming a footnote, the Eastern Partnership needs rethinking and reformatting. As for Russia, it has reason to chortle at such a routine and incoherent EaP summit. But one person's failure does not necessarily mean another's success. The geopolitical rivalry between Russia and the West, wherever its roots lie, could lead to new conflicts. Yet it is conceivable that under the best scenario Russia could propose a new framework of cooperation for the EU in the post-Soviet space, based on specific functional projects across a range of fields and built upon a flexible geometry that encompasses all would-be participants.

### **Ukraine, Russia and EEU**

The Ukrainian conflict has strongly affected Russia having gone not only through politics and economy but families and friendships. It split the Russian society into two unequal parts. The majority of the population supports Kremlin's policy on Ukraine and Crimea's incorporation looks quite legitimate in the eyes of the ordinary Russians. They view Western sanctions on Russia as an attempt "to bring the country to its knees". Anti-Western rhetoric is gaining momentum in Russia fueling neo-Imperial motives in part of the Russian political elite, which looks scary for Moscow's allies in the CSTO and Eurasia Economic Union (EEU).

Crimea's incorporation and different interpretations of the concept of the Russian world by Russian politicians encouraged Minsk and Astana to take a more equidistant position on the Ukrainian conflict. Neither Belarus nor Kazakhstan have joined the Russian embargo on products from the EU countries, Norway, USA, Canada and Australia, imposed by Moscow as a response to Western sanctions against Russia. It should be noted also that even prior to the conflict in Ukraine, Belarus and Kazakhstan were cautious about the proposal of Russia to create a Eurasian Union as a new integrationist body modeled from EU with a single political, economic, military, customs, humanitarian and cultural space.

Political leaders of Belarus and Kazakhstan, being concerned about the problems of equality in the new Union, have repeatedly stressed that they are in favour of economic integration, but not the creation of supranational political structures, emphasizing that the participants of the EEU should remain independent sovereign States. As a result, the Eurasian project presented in the program article by Vladimir Putin "New integration project for Eurasia – a future that is born today" ("Izvestia",

03.10.11), was narrowed to the Eurasian Economic Union. The level of integration of the EEU (also joined by Armenia and Kyrgyzstan, mainly for political reasons) is higher than in the Customs Union but lower than in the Russian-proposed Eurasian Union.

The focus on Russia's Eurasian vocation came at a time of uncertainty concerning the country's prospects for modernization. In all likelihood, Putin felt that Russia should no longer solicit modernization guidance from the weakened EU. In its substance, the Eurasia concept of Russia is a product of its failure to be integrated with EU and the West at large on its own terms as well as serious mistakes made by the West on the Russian direction. In this context the Ukraine crisis has become the first direct conflict between differing regional strategies of Russia and the EU – Brussels' Eastern partnership and Moscow's Eurasia Union concept. Ukraine has been central to both strategies, and the either/or choice presented to Kiev ultimately made conflict inevitable. The conflict over Ukraine has exposed some very uncomfortable truths – the CIS has become an apple of discord in Russia-EU relations and smashed to pieces their "strategic partnership" based on four common spaces of co-operation because none of these spaces addressed the CIS issue.

Despite the fact that relations with the West has entered the most difficult period after the end of the Cold war 20 years ago, there is no doubt that the majority of the Russian population, passing through a period of nationalist euphoria, sooner or later will recognize its European civilizational identity in its widest sense. Many countries in Europe, namely Germany, went through similar experience, which only serves as further evidence of Russia's European roots. Another question is whether Europe as a unique civilization will survive under the current challenges of internal and external threats? Will the European politicians of today's generation grown up in comfortable conditions of post-bipolar peace, have enough wisdom, determination and resources to save Europe as a whole? The solution of the "Ukrainian question" in the broad sense of the word may be the first step towards bridging the numerous gaps in the European space.