THE SOCIO-CULTURAL DIMENSION OF THE EUROPEAN UNION'S EASTERN PARTNERSHIP: CONTINGENCIES AND PROSPECTS*

WYMIAR SPOŁECZNO-KULTUROWY PARTNERSTWA
WSCHODNIEGO UNII EUROPEJSKIEJ:
UWARUNKOWANIA I PERSPEKTYWY

*Tomasz Stępniewski***

— ABSTRACT —

The aim of the paper is an attempt at evaluating the Eastern Partnership from the point of view of the socio-cultural dimension in a broad sense. Do cultural and civilisational factors influence relations between the EU and Eastern European and South Caucasus countries? Is the EU capable of further enlargement? The Eastern Partnership is experiencing significant turmoil (Russia-Ukraine war, unstable South Caucasus) which begs the question of the future of the policy. Moreover, the paper tackles the issue of the EU's internal factors and their influence upon relations with Eastern countries.

— ABSTRAKT —

Celem niniejszego artykułu jest próba spojrzenia na projekt Partnerstwa Wschodniego Unii Europejskiej z punktu widzenia wymiaru społeczno-kulturowego. Czy Unia Europejska jest w stanie nadal się rozszerzać? Czy uwarunkowania kulturowo-cywilizacyjne mają wpływ na kształt stosunków Unii Europejskiej z państwami Europy Wschodniej i Kaukazu Południowego? Partnerstwo Wschodnie poddawane jest silnym wstrząsom (wojna Rosji z Ukrainą, niestabilny Kaukaz Południowy), które rodzą pytania o przyszłość tej polityki. W artykule zostanie również podjęta próba odniesienia się do uwarunkowań wewnętrznych UE i ich wpływu na jej stosunki z państwami wschodnimi.

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** The John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin, Institute of Political Science and International Affairs.

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Słowa kluczowe: Unia Europejska, Europa Wschodnia, Europa Środkowa, Europa Środkowo-Wschodnia, społeczno-kulturowy wymiar Partnerstwa Wschodniego, wschodni sąsiedzi, Partnerstwo Wschodnie

INTRODUCTION

The European Union remains the largest and most influential integrational project in modern international relations. This fact is determined by its *differentia specifica*: at present it is comprised of 28 countries; it is an integrational project with historical traditions of actions, an inspiration and a role model for those undertaking similar projects in other regions of the world; it is the most institutionally developed project as regards politics and economy; it maintains its central position when European integration is concerned due to the fact that almost all countries gravitate towards it and develop various forms of cooperation with the Community (some Eastern European countries are among the gravitating states) (for more see Gstöhl, Lannon, 2015, p. 1–7; Korosteleva, Natorski, Simão, 2013, p. 257–375). Apart from the above, the EU remains a vital subject (an actor) of international relations. The dynamic character of these relations is a consequence of the Community's actions and its influence upon external partners. An interesting example of such influence can be seen in the EU's relationship with the Eastern European countries.

The EU's structure features countries which can be regarded as the so-called Eastern Partnership's animators (Poland, Sweden). Such countries are lively interested in cooperating with the Eastern initiative. It is these animators who are, *de facto*, responsible for maintaining the EU's political support for the initiative, raising financial resources to fund it successfully and convincing the eastern neighbours to implement political and economic reforms. The devotion of both Central Europe and the Baltic EU member states towards cooperation with the Eastern European countries cannot be underrated. The European Partnership constitutes a response of Eastern European states towards the so-called enlargement fatigue (Marcu, 2009, p. 409–432). A separate group of countries consists of those whose relations with Eastern Europe reflect the current relationship between the EU and the Russian Federation and are developed with Russia glooming in the distance (the so-called *Russia-first policy*) (Cf. Kapuśniak 2008).

EUROPE'S GEOGRAPHICAL AND CULTURAL BORDERS – GENERAL COMMENTS

Europe's Geographical Borders. As far as geographical features are concerned – especially physiographic characteristics – Europe's borders are well-defined and characterised by significant partition, well-developed coastline, terrain full of contrasts and climate heavily influenced by seas (Czarnocki, 1991, p. 17). There is a consensus as far as the northern, western and a larger part of southern borders are concerned due to the fact that these borders are natural and defined by seas and oceans. Problems arise when the eastern and a part of southern border are discussed. It is agreed that these borders overlap with the current borders of the EU.

Europe's Cultural Borders. As far as culture, language and religion are concerned, Europe is heterogeneous in this respect. It is characterised by numerous divisions and differences originating from history and clashes of several cultures, including extra-European ones. European roots can be traced back to the Mediterranean antiquity – Greek and Roman. The second factor influencing the identity of European nations is Judeo-Christianity (Lobkowicz, 1998, p. 28; Graniszewski, 2007, p. 46–51; Gołembski, 2005, p. 61–67). When considering Europe's origin, one ought to remember that it arose from the ancient world which collapsed as a result of invasion of barbarians (Konopacki, 2007, p. 36–37). This led to the emergence of several civilisations: Islam – encompassing North Africa and the Near East, and two branches of Christianity: Eastern Christianity – Greek and Byzantine, and Roman Catholic Church – dominant in the west of Europe. It was the Roman and Latin branch that became Europe's fundament, especially western part of the continent (for more see Kłoczowski, 2002, p. 13–14). Moreover, Europe is frequently perceived through religion as Christian – *Christianitas*. However, the current academic discussion in the EU indicates that Europe's roots are more of the Enlightenment than Christian origin (a similar perspective can be seen in: Kłoczowski, 2002). The claim can be supported by the model of low culture promoted in Western Europe. The model is based on naïve vision of men¹, leading to social atomisation and promotion of egoistic individualism. Extreme liberalism, which emphasises following one's urges and instincts, is also a feature of the low culture. It is a kind of freedom

¹ "Naivety" of the vision lies in the promotion of the notion of men perceived as perfect individuals accepting their behaviour, setting their moral norms and, above all, the sense of life.

Map 1. The system of values in Europe presented in the global perspective

Source: Zielonka J. (2007). *Europa jako imperium. Nowe spojrzenie na Unię Europejską*. Warszawa, p. 113.

which creates an illusion that the development of a society where an individual has only rights and no obligations is possible.

Despite the above, the fact that Europe, as opposed to other regions in the world, features a great degree of independence and respect for human dignity, democracy, rule of law, freedom of thought, conscience and religion is undeniable². These characteristics are present in the countries of the region. Societies

² The worldwide drive towards ecumenism is worth-mentioning at this point. Along with the fall of the bipolar division of Europe, Protestant, Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches have undertaken several initiatives aiming at maintaining the integrity of our continent in the framework of Conference of European Churches and Council of the Bishops' Conferences of Europe (for more information see Karski, 2002, p. 36).

in these countries are based on pluralism, justice, solidarity, and lack of discrimination. The map below, which refers to Europe's values, especially those of Western and Central Europe, and presents them in the global context, can serve as a justification for the above claims. Despite the fact that we are dealing with freedom in several areas of life, numerous differences across the countries of the region are visible. The map below distinguishes Anglo-Saxon, Protestant, Catholic, and post-communist countries.

Taking the above features into account, it ought to be stated that the situation of Eastern European countries can be considered as severely complicated. On the one hand, part of the countries (Moldova, Ukraine) look to Europe, epitomised by the EU, as their geopolitical and civilisational objective. On the other hand, problems associated with this political and economic integration arise – these are issues of geopolitical, cultural, social, etc. character. The objective is of civilisational kind. Notably, when discussing the geopolitical, and civilisational objective in the broad sense, making a reference to Samuel Huntington's concept is worthwhile. Huntington claimed that we are dealing with cross-civilisational border which divides

Map 2. Division of Eastern European countries into the western and eastern world

Source: Huntington S.P. (2011). *Zderzenie cywilizacji i nowy kształt ładu światowego*. Trans. H. Jankowska. Warszawa, p. 263. Map's source: <http://www.rogersandall.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/08/Huntingtonson-map.jpg> [accessed 20.12.2015].

Ukraine and Belarus internally and “leaves the issue of geopolitical and civilisational affiliation open” (Nowak, 2013, p. 90; Stępniewski, 2011, chapter on Russia). The map below presents the division of Eastern Europe into two worlds – eastern and western. The border between them runs across these two countries.

THE INFLUENCE OF CULTURAL AND CIVILISATIONAL FACTORS UPON THE EU-EASTERN EUROPE RELATIONS

The character of the region, and at the same time, all Eastern European countries, is defined by their location on the civilisational borderland. These countries verge on the East and the West. On a smaller scale, the East-West antinomy denotes the opposition of Western Europe vs. Russia, and Roman vs. Byzantine cultural dichotomy. In short, it can be said that the West follows the idea of transcendence, whereas the East is attracted to immanence. The East, defined in the above way, encompasses the vast area of Asia (especially India and China), but also parts of Africa and South America. The West denotes primarily Western Europe and the USA (Olejarz, 2007, p. 43; Stępniewski, 2013).

The dividing line between the eastern and western religions in Europe frequently partitions the linguistically and ethnographically homogenous areas into distinct and often atomised and antagonistic ethnic, national and religious groups. This phenomenon conditions the emergence of different historical processes in these groups (Pawluczuk, 1994, p. 107). Regardless of the relations between the Eastern Christianity and the Asian East, numerous common characteristics are visible. These characteristics stand in opposition to the Latin West. The key antinomy of the issue lies in the fact that both transcendence and immanence are associated with different views of the world, human life and political ideas. Transcendence paves the way for the development of science, technology and economy independent from religion, morality and prevalent secularisation of the world. The following constitute consequences of transcendence: pragmatic morality, parliamentarianism, the imperative of the civil state. The human relations in the East, following the idea of immanence, are devoted to ethical and aesthetic matters. As far as politics is concerned, religious and moral valuation are prevalent. As regards emotional approach, the East-West relations are characterised by permanent ambivalence, i.e., fascination joint with the feeling of civilisational superiority. Samuel Huntington claims that in this civilisational dichotomy, some countries, e.g. Ukraine, can be perceived as

a hybrid due to the fact that their territory is partitioned into two civilisations developed primarily around different religions. The first of the civilisations can be called Latin or Western, the second Byzantine or Orthodox (or Turanian). According to Huntington, such status quo cannot prevail (Pawluczuk, 1994, p. 101–103; also Huntington, 2011).

The above religious and ethnic elements influence the cultural and civilisational identity of Eastern Europe in the broad sense, and condition the Old Continent's cultural and civilisational security. Cultural identity ought to be understood as social identity of a community perceived as autonomy of the particular culture in relation to others (Michałowska, 1997, p. 132). In such perspective, the main element ensuring cultural and civilisational security is cultural identity, especially in situations when unitary states lose their significance in international relations in favour of transnational actors (e.g. the EU). Moreover, intensifying transnational processes considerably weaken the traditional understanding of independence and indirectly influence cultural identity. In such conditions, the essence of cultural and civilisational security lies in the maintenance of cultural and historical awareness. In the external aspect, it constitutes protection against foreign influence, which decreases the internal cohesion. In the internal aspect, offering independence (in a modified version) and harmonious development ought to be ensured (Michałowska, 1997).

In Europe, however, the issue of identity is not reserved to the individual nations taken out of their international surroundings. In case of Europe treated as a whole, national identity of individual states composes the collective, European cultural identity. This identity, however, is not a sum of the individual identities but rather constitutes a synergy. Due to the above, a dilemma arises – a conflict between the European identity (still enigmatic and undefined) and national and even local identity (Eastern European). For that reason, attaining a dynamic equilibrium between the three levels of identity seems particularly crucial, especially in the period of intensifying European integration. Such idea is a very general one and does not specify the character of the common Europe, does not define the European culture and does not offer a solution to the issue of the role and place of the Eastern European countries. This is due to the fact that it is difficult to speak about the European identity at all when fundamental cultural differences between national cultures still exist. Meanwhile, the question whether countries (societies) of Eastern Europe, which are expressing interest in becoming a part of the EU, and in the future may as well become member states, will be able to find their place in the Community, remains valid.

CONCLUSIONS

To sum up, it ought to be stated that the divergence of the Russian Federation's and the EU's interests in Eastern Europe is of lasting and multidimensional character. The issue is conditioned mainly by the following: activation of the EU's policy in Eastern Europe and the evolution of Russia's policy in the Commonwealth of Independent States; Russia's self-perception as a great power and Russia's perception of the EU as a geopolitical competitor; the EU's support for the post-soviet states in accordance with European standards; the Russian Federation's aspirations towards maintaining the *status quo ante* by enforcing its dominant influence in the region and controlling relations of the region with the EU.

While discussing the framework of the EU's eastern policy, Europe's borders, etc., the fact that Europe is not perceived by us in geographical terms but rather ethical ones ought to be remembered. Europe is not defined by its borders but by its values, ideals, behaviour, culture. Therefore, the socio-cultural dimension of the Eastern Partnership ought to be kept in mind. As a consequence, the project cannot be simplified and discussed merely in terms of geopolitical issues and Russia vs. the EU rivalry. It ought to be in Europe's (especially Poland's) best interest to offer the citizens of post-soviet states the opportunity to live according to European values and ideals.

The EU's (and broadly the West's) active involvement in the East will determine the effectiveness of the eastern policy, but also the shape of political systems in Eastern European countries, and above all, the distribution of power in this part of Europe. The lower the West's involvement in Ukraine's transformation and modernisation, the more dependent on Russia the country will become. Therefore, despite the Euromaidan and its aftermath (for more information see: Stępniewski, Gil, Szabaciuk, Visvizi, 2014), the direction the internal policy of these countries will gravitate towards (pro-European or pro-Eastern) is still debatable. Unfortunately, the decline of democratic reforms in the countries of Eastern Europe casts a dark shadow over the region and diminishes the interest of EU decision-makers in it. In addition, the EU's internal problems (economic and migration crises, nationalist parties gaining in significance, European solidarity being crippled, etc.) result in the issues associated with the Neighbourhood Policy being pushed towards the background. Vít Dostál rightly observes that a pressing need for a change in the European Neighbourhood Policy, especially its eastern dimension, has emerged. The change will become possible if the East-

ern Partnership is replaced by a mechanism enabling financial resources being transferred into new areas, and a greater emphasis is placed upon cooperation with organisations of civil society. However, according to the author, the Eastern Partnership ought to be considered as a policy and not an instrument (tool) (Dostál, 2015, p. 110–111).

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