

Commentaries

The unbearable lightness of permanent integration: why does the EU need to answer its Ukrainian question?¹

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The process of European integration has long ceased to be a 'know-how' of political science. Nowadays, it is the discipline's daily routine, the prose of life and the sublimation of Milan Kundera's "unbearable lightness of being." There is a cost to bear, of course, but it is worth it. For example, the Estonian understanding of integration is that the country is never again to be in another version of the Soviet Union; the small Baltic/Nordic country is now heading to its centennial in 2018 being called *Eesti Vabariik* or, if translated literally from Estonian into English, the 'Estonian Free State.' Spain is integrating to keep Catalonia and the Basque Country – after all, both Futbol Club Barcelona and Bilboko Athletic Kluba are still playing in the Spanish La Liga, aren't they? Apart from the rather beneficial financial side of integration for the EU's strongest economy, Germany is very much favouring the idea to ensure that it is not to forget how and why the process commenced. There is also a very original 'Greek way' of integration, but let's be quiet about it for now.

Indeed, what was supposed to be the unified Europe is shaping up to be dramatically patchy. Some commentators in the United States (Marko Papić, for example) even started expressing concerns that the European continent is suffering from overpopulation – of nations not people. Former citizens of the disintegrated Yugoslavia could tell a lot of stories about relatively small localities becoming independent states overnight. If tiny Tuvalu and Nauru in our lovely South Pacific can be proudly called 'sovereign nations' (no doubt, they deserve it), why can't Montenegrins be treated the same way? There is a centuries-old popular saying in the less than 700,000 people Balkan state: "We and the Russians – 200 million." Forget that numbers do not usually go smoothly with statistics when it comes to sounding slogans... Forget that, for Russians, Montenegro is very far down the list of priorities in foreign policy – a popular place to have a holiday though...

"Overpopulation – of nations, but not people"... Is it the case? What is going on in Europe? There is an interesting as well as radical scholarly response from Oxford, England – Jan Zielonka's view on Europe as a modern variation of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Fairly liberal, very multicultural and rich, the monarchy of Austria-Hungary was in existence for quite a while. Besides the two titular nations, it managed to integrate and quasi-integrate a

¹ This commentary is based on Vlad Vernygora, 'The EU's Ukrainian question: the unbearable lightness of permanent integration' in *The Lithuania Tribune*, 29 July 2012.

large number of other peoples, some of whom had absolutely no ability and/or desire to become integrated. The Austro-Hungarian Empire had friends and enemies, but it had no internal security system. That's why it was traded in the war, and the vast political entity, together with another three empires that had direct relevance to the European continent disappeared.

The EU has a decent security system, thus the peaceful sky within an imaginary quadrilateral 'Azores-Rovaniemi-Vilnius-Limassol' is not yet possible to be exchanged in the devastating military conflict. Therefore, everything in Europe continues to be framed by the vignette of permanent integration. Sometimes it seems that if Leon Trotsky had been alive, he would have tried to adapt his crazy idea of permanent revolution to the new integration-driven realities. Presumably, he would have received much of pan-European support – from Members of the European Parliament, for instance. A true Trotsky clone in his capacity as President of the European Council is perhaps something extraordinary to think of in 2013, but George Orwell would have loved the concept for his dystopian fiction. Or does it sound like a 'bread and butter' for a Sir Thomas More of the XXI century – the 'U' would have been standing for 'Utopia' in the 'EU'? The revolution (read – integration) that has no end...

Why this prelude? Sooner or later, the Greek financial 'hiccup' will be history: Greece is even scheduled to preside over the Council of the EU in the first half of 2014. The contemporary 'Golden Fleece' (billions of euros) is getting found, albeit this time not by Jason, not in Georgia and not for free. For the EU it is time to go further eastwards, partially playing the integration game in the Polish or/and Lithuanian way. To the east is Ukraine. It is hard to ignore the fact that even Jean Monnet in his Memoirs – mistakenly or intentionally – treated the former USSR as a monolithic geopolitical formation, often simplistically identifying the humongous communist polity with Russia and Russians only. Perhaps, it was a matter of diplomatic convenience to 'forget' about the other titular republics of the Soviet Union, and, of course, the difficult time it was. Now European bureaucrats (elites, low-profile office-holders and 'grey cardinals' of European politics) are becoming increasingly interested in re-doing the intermediate school-level geography lessons to explore the continent's political map and locate the Ukrainian state. Actually, the State itself is not in good shape at the moment.

The country's political leaders speak incoherently. They almost legally appoint criminal 'watchers' to 'look after' regions of their own nation. They openly mock the Ukrainian language. They sincerely do not understand that the Estonian President's refusal to meet with the Ukrainian Minister of Foreign Affairs is a diplomatic signal of a different political world. Ukraine is on a par with Syria and the Central African Republic in the 2012 Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index. On a grimly ironic note, Ukraine's rating in the Index is slightly better than that of Eritrea and Guinea-Bissau though – what an achievement! People from the so-called 'Family,' a powerful politico-economic clan, control almost everything in the country. More significantly, the behind-the-scenes organisers of journalist Gongadze's killing – folks on Ukrainian streets will tell you those names without any hesitation – are still at large. Finally, the Ukrainian political summit is mercilessly 'compressing' the opposition. As some Nordic nations believe, there cannot be too much irony, it is also worthwhile noting that, apart from fierce criticism and perhaps even impeachment, Viktor Yanukovich deserves an imaginary medal of Ukrainian Merit for a great and easily accomplished 'feat' that, in different circumstances, could have united the nation. He ensured that Viktor Yushchenko, the country's most characterless and 'milk-and-water' politician, will have no chance to continue playing a more or less serious role in Ukrainian politics.

Nevertheless, Ukraine's geopolitical advantages for the EU are not only territorial— after EURO-2012, it became widely known in Europe that the Ukrainian state is in fact slightly larger than Germany and Britain (or, for that matter, Spain and Portugal) combined. There is something else that might help the former EU-15 (there is still a bit of a division between the EU-15 and the other Member States of the supranational entity, haven't you noticed?) to treat the Association Agreement with Ukraine as seriously as it could possibly be treated. Firstly, the formalisation of Ukraine's linkage with the EU will help the whole European continent to avoid something to which the Ukrainian nation is getting pushed openly, aggressively and ruthlessly – the country's division on the western part (with no access to the Black Sea) and the south-eastern formation. At the moment, Russia is answering its 'Ukrainian' question explicitly and much faster than the EU is. Quite often it feels like the continent's best head-hunters have already initiated their search for a new Gavrilo Princip. Or maybe the EU is in agreement with Leonid Kravchuk who once stated that “[i]n the case of the collapse of Ukraine, no one would notice its disappearance from the political map.” Russia will not mind then.

Secondly, the go-ahead to the Association Agreement with Ukraine should give the EU a unique opportunity to implement its own 'Marshall Plan' for Ukraine that could greatly enhance the long-term prospects of the euro and strengthen investment activities across the EU-28. Thirdly, the Baltic States and Poland, historical experts on Ukraine, will be able to boldly define their regional and sub-regional priorities. Fourthly, the Eastern Partnership Programme will eventually get a visible functional dimension – at present, its set of goals is generally perceived (not without irony) as promotion of the privilege and, to some extent, luck of a neighbouring country to be formally recognised by the EU as a neighbouring country. Fifthly and finally, the phenomenon of 'Polish plumber' in the EU will be replaced by the phenomenon of 'Ukrainian plumber.'

In sum, Ukraine is no longer a Soviet territory. In addition, the 'South Ossetian' scenario of the distribution of Russian passports in the Crimea and the Ukrainian East was not allowed to be 'performed' on the country's political stage either. Moreover, Viktor Yanukovich is a politician of his own economic clan, not a pro-Russian jack-in-the-box. During his time as the Head of Donetsk Oblast Administration (1997-2002), he was quoted by a reputable Ukrainian media source as proudly stating that Russian business had no significant presence in his region. Additionally, the Ukrainian civil society appeared to be visible only seven years ago, and it has already come to school age. Will it go to a Soviet-type school, or a European 'gymnasium'? Fortunately or unfortunately, the answer to this question, due to difficult circumstances, depends on the EU.

By leaving Ukraine outside of the European political vicinity, the EU will be providing 'an Archduke Franz Ferdinand' with his one-way ticket. Who will be the new Archduke and where the new Sarajevo will be, would no longer be so important, but Ukraine's disappearance from the political map would certainly be noticed by everybody. Thus if we have a desire to formalise an immediate agenda for scholars and practitioners in the field of European Studies the process should start by ensuring that the EU's geo-political stance on Ukraine is understood.