

The EU foreign policy-makers' forged public statements regarding the Eastern Partnership countries

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Abstract

The so called „captured states” are the countries with oligarchic control of political power. This term is used frequently to describe the Eastern Partnership countries – Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. That inevitably puts pressure on the resilience of these three countries, in addition to Russia’s aggressive campaigns, carried out with or without the use of conventional weaponry. We underline several aspects of the „hybrid war” waged by Russia against Eastern Partnership countries, which includes instruments of pressure in bilateral trade, media and security sectors (through the refusal to pull out the Russian troops from the illegally occupied regions). This paper looks at the EU’s messages that are being forged by different actors internally and by Russian propaganda externally. It provides a range of arguments supporting the idea that the Eastern Partnership countries receive forged messages and the consequences are quite big – mainly for the European prospective of these countries.

Keywords: disinformation, propaganda, sovereignty, risks, pluralistic environment

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1. Introduction

European integration has become a hard “dilemma issue” for the majority of the Eastern Partnership (EaP) countries since the Vilnius EaP

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Summit in November 2013. Some countries had to pay a high price to protect and ensure their right to follow European integration. The continuing crisis in Ukraine means that the EU's relationship with Russia has reached a critical juncture, and that the EU and its member States need fundamentally to reassess it. Eastern Partnership countries, being at the crossroads between East and West, have always been in a very "hot" geopolitical and strategic space, where the situation of peace and war are often changing. This region is on the "fire belt" since 1989, in immediate proximity to the EU - between NATO and the Russian Federation, both of which are in constant competition for the sphere of influence in the area. A prosperous, independent and successful neighborhood for EU is an undeniable fact.

The pro-European rhetoric was strongly connected with dynamic competition between the pro-EU and pro-Russia political parties. The major political goal of the pro-European political parties was to maintain control over the decision-making process in the country, thereby reducing the chances for the pro-Russia counter-parties to trigger the abandonment of the European agenda. On the other hand, the reform agenda, stemming from the provisions of the Association Agreement, signed in June 2014, has registered low performance in key sectors: justice, good governance and fight against corruption. These issues have formed the core of substantiated criticism, formulated more often than once by the EU and other development partners.

Since late 2013, the Eastern Partnership countries (EaP countries) reached a critical juncture. On the one side, EaP– Russian Federation relations are of vital economic, energy and cultural importance for EaP countries and on the other side, the security of these countries as a whole depends upon harmonious relations between EU and Russian Federation.

Measuring the success of the Eastern Partnership, the whole EaP region can be divided in two groups of countries: the more successful countries (Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine) and the less successful ones (Belarus, Armenia and Azerbaijan). Yet the situation in this region is more fractious than at any time since the end of the Cold War. This research is focused on the successful states (particularly on Republic of Moldova).

Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine do not constitute a single geographical region, but since 2014 they have something in common - the degree of

commitments assumed by the governments of these countries. In the respective year, all three countries signed Association Agreements (AA) with the European Union (EU) that came into effect in July 2016 for Georgia and Moldova and in September 2017 for Ukraine. Reform agendas for each of the three countries have never been so packed, or closely followed by the European institutions, in particular after full enactment of the agreements and the serious and diverse political crises that could be witnessed there.

This decision proved to be more difficult than it seems and authorities of these countries had initially imagined. This choice was far more painful for Ukraine: it suffered a violent government overthrow significant loss of territory and open Russia implication in the Donbas and Donetsk region. For Moldova and Georgia, the choice for European integration path is translated in bigger problems with Russian Federation and active resistance to their Europeanization.

2. Tools and instruments used for forging the EU's messages

The paper is based on the conducted research among the main EU statements concerning the very actual issues in the Eastern Partnership countries.

A deep analysis of the nowadays media content shows that the Russian Government is employing a wide range of tools and instruments, such as think tanks and foundations (e.g. Russkiy Mir), special national authorities with international impact (Rossotrudnichestvo), multilingual TV stations (e.g. RT), pseudo news agencies and multimedia services (e.g. Sputnik), cross-border social and religious groups, as the regime wants to present itself as the only defender of traditional Christian values, social media and internet trolls to challenge democratic values, divide Europe, gather domestic support and create the perception of failed states in the EU's eastern neighborhood. (European Parliament, 2016)

Also, there are various investigations that stresses Russia's relevant financial resources spent for disinformation and propaganda instruments engaged either directly or through Kremlin-controlled companies and organizations. We also underline that, on the one hand, the Kremlin is funding

political parties and other organizations within the EU with the intent of undermining political cohesion, and that, on the other hand, Kremlin propaganda directly targets specific journalists, politicians and individuals in the EU.

The Eastern Partnership media landscape and capacity of the EU Eastern neighbours to monitor and confront propaganda is very low. The enduring monopolization of the media market by state or powerful elites has deprived the society in the EaP countries of an effective variety of sources of information. At the same time, the region is involved in the disinformation war in which the Eastern Partnership is presented as an „anti-Russian project that leads to the loss of sovereignty of the partner countries”. (Štětina, 2017)

The cornerstone of deepening the relations between EU and EaP countries “should be based on respecting core European values and democratic principles” (Maksak, 2018). In the same time, the real fight against the forged messages has to become “a short- and long-term imperative”. (Cenuşa, 2017) For this to turn into reality, it should be depoliticized and transformed into an national goal in each of the countries from the Eastern Partnership.

3. The EU foreign policy makers forged public statements

Over the past years, the EU has been caught up in its own internal struggles facing fundamental challenges to its core principles and values. Russia stands only to benefit from such internal divisions. As usual, Moscow has three main instruments to exert significant political influence in the post-Soviet space (specifically in Eastern Partnership countries that are still dependent economically from Russian market) but also to expand it in the formerly communist Central Europe and further towards the West. Its main weapons to do so are:

- military intervention and conflict fuelling in ex-USSR states;
- “hybrid war” methods such as cyber-attacks, disinformation, trolls, covert financing of extremist parties and the like; and
- its energy leverages.

All three “instruments” are very dangerous for the Eastern Partnership area, but we consider the second as the most “efficient” for Russia since the political maturity in these states is quite low.

Despite significant achievements (in some countries), the rule of law, democratic values – specifically independent press is far from being according to EU best practices. The situation in these countries is critical – with clear signs of a “captured state” and eroding rule of law. Finally, the EU general message is that more efforts must be put for building effective institutions and in the same time tackling corruption.

These are a few messages that EU sent to the EaP countries but frequently these messages are forged by the local media, or by some political leaders. The actuality of the topic results from the necessity to investigate the impact that the forged messages have on the transformations in the society, particularly the support of the idea for the foreign policy vector.

Georgia: The final statement and recommendations of the EU-Georgia Parliamentary Association Committee (PAC, 2018) welcomed the increased accountability and transparency of the AA implementation process, the good functioning of the visa-free travel system and the integration of Georgia's energy market with that of the EU through regulatory convergence. The PAC mentioned about the significance of continuing public administration reform and referred on emergency of the implementation of public finance management reform. Also, the PAC sent an important message to Commission to further enhance its assistance in line with the political ambitions of the EU-Georgia partnership.

In the joint declaration of the EU-Georgia Civil Society Platform (CSP, 2018) is presented the overall progress achieved in implementing the EU-Georgia Association Agenda. In the same time, it underlined the progress registered in the strengthening of democracy process and the rule of law as well as the achievements in improving the business and investment climate and the SME sector in Georgia. There are still concerns on the repeated violation of human rights and discrimination in Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

The joint press release (Association Council, 2018) of the Association Council mentions the improvement in the EU-Georgia relations and in the implementation of the AA/DCFTA. It recommended increase women's

participation in politics and to effectively implement the Istanbul Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence, as well as the anti-discrimination law. Last but not least, it commended Georgia, to respect the fundamental freedoms during its local elections, to adopt the constitutional reform and reform the justice sector. Finally, it also welcomed the Commission's proposal of a new macro-financial assistance programme to Georgia of up to €45 million.

Ukraine: Concerning the messages sent to Ukraine by the Association Council, in the joint communiqué (Association Council, 2018) EU declared its concern over the deterioration in the security situation in eastern Ukraine and full support for Ukraine's independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity within its internationally recognised borders. The Association Council welcomed the country's progress in pursuing a comprehensive reform agenda, while also underlining the need to step up reform efforts. (Bentzen, 2017) The Association Council highlighted the importance of media freedom and a pluralistic media environment. It furthermore called for the continuation of reforms in the energy sector and welcomed the deepening of EU-Ukraine bilateral trade relations.

The final statement and recommendations of the EU-Ukraine Parliamentary Association Committee (PAC, 2019) stressed that the AA did not constitute the final goal in EU-Ukraine relations and welcomed Ukraine's European aspirations. (Bentzen, 2016) The PAC underlined the lack of progress in the implementation of the Minsk agreements in the context of tense security situation in the east of Ukraine. The main risk is that the situation is continuing to gradually deteriorate. After four years after the illegal annexation of Crimea and the city of Sevastopol by the Russian Federation, no concrete proposal for an international format of negotiations on de-occupation of the had been discussed by the international donors.

The joint declaration of the EU-Ukraine Civil Society Platform (CSP, 2017) expressed a positive position vis-a-vis the new action plan on implementing the association agreement and a full complete fulfilment of the action plan on implementing the national human rights strategy and expressed its concern about the serious ongoing violations of human rights in Crimea (particularly concerning Crimean Tatars) and occupied territories in the east

of Ukraine. It is very important to have consistent implementation of reforms and an online monitoring system of the AA.

Republic of Moldova: The joint statement of the EU-Moldova Association Council (Association Council, 2018) stated that we need to translate the adopted legislation and policies into concrete actions (particularly structural reforms for growth, job creation and poverty reduction). The Association Council stated on the strict conditionality of EU assistance, subject to the presence of 'concrete and satisfactory progress in all areas of reform, including justice and anti-corruption', and also requested Moldova to further investigate the 2014 bank fraud.

The final statement and recommendations of the EU-Moldova Parliamentary Association Committee (PAC, 2019) underlined the importance of a well-functioning and impartial judiciary and of ensuring that the upcoming parliamentary elections comply with the international best practices. The Committee referred on the increasing volume of trade as a result of the implementation of the DCFTA, commended the role played by civil society in fostering participation in the political debate, welcomed the reforms of the central public administration and called for reforms in the energy sector.

The joint declaration of the EU-Moldova Civil Society Platform (CSP, 2016) remarked the adoption of the revised EU-Moldova Association Agenda but in the same time identified a 'rather poor' implementation rate of the AA/DCFTA Action Plan and the Priority Reform Action Roadmap. The CSP called on the EU 'to continue monitoring and to impose strict conditionality on the Moldovan authorities'. The CSP also took note of the signature, in November 2017, of a Memorandum of Understanding, a Loan Facility Agreement and a Grant Agreement on micro-financial assistance worth €100 million for the 2017-2018 periods.

The case study on the forged messages will be done on Republic of Moldova. One of the main messages that have been forged is the expectation from the EU-Moldova Association Agreement on the impact of DCFTA. The message sent by EU policy-makers was: *“Starting with 1 September 2014, the customs duties to most of the Moldovan exports to the EU were cancelled, which should boost exports to the EU”*.

In the current world market conditions, based on market relations the fact that the bilateral trade with the EU did not “explode” during the first weeks after signing AA is not surprising.

Table 1: Exports to the EU countries

	September- December 2014	2015	8 months 2016	11 months 2016
Exports				
% reported to the corresponding previous period	-0.4	-2.3	-1.3	+7.2
+/- million USD	-2	-28	-11	+81

Source: Elaborated by the author based on data of the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS), 2019

Another message of the EU policy-makers was that immediately, AA will boost trade relations of the Republic of Moldova, particularly imports. In Moldova, this message was forged and it sounded that Moldova will be invaded by the products from the EU, particularly agri-food products: “*At the same time, there is a tendency of increasing imports from the European countries of a range of agri-food products - which our country is able to produce in large quantities and at high quality*”. In the same time, Moldova will become re-export platform, since Moldova has free trade agreements with CIS countries.

Concerning the positive impact of the AA over Moldova’s economy, the message of the EU policy-makers was that AA will improve the export position of Moldova on the EU markets!

Disinformation is not always about lies but rather manipulation through one-sided presentation of facts. In Moldova this message was sent and received as the EU markets opening have been accompanied by a catastrophic deterioration of the conditions of Moldovan exports to the Russian market. After Republic of Moldova signed the AA with European Union, in July 2014, the Russian Federation started to introduce restrictions on delivery of Moldovan products. Any decision on the country’s trade policy relates directly and exclusively to its economic interests. Logically, some questions

appear... Why to consult Russian Federation and why the “economic and commercial interests” of the Russian Federation should be taken into consideration?

In the last period, the topic on the change of the electoral system marked the main news. The OSCE/ODIHR and the Venice Commission expressed their opinion on electoral reform and said that it has to meet the large consensus in the society. Also, they insisted that now is not the right moment. The politicians in Moldova presented this message as follows: “in all our history, there was no broad consensus on any subject. If we seek consensus in all decisions for state development, then we should not have done anything.”

Finally, the main messages of the EU Parliament’s Resolution on Moldova:

- Expresses its deep concern at the decision to invalidate the results of the elections
- Recalls that *credible, transparent, fair and inclusive elections* are the cornerstone of any democratic system
- Demands that the Commission *suspend budgetary support and the macro-financial assistance* for Moldova
- Calls on the Moldovan authorities to address the recommendations of the *OSCE/ODIHR and the Venice Commission on electoral reform*
- Reiterates its concerns over *the concentration of economic and political power* in the hands of a narrow group of people, the deterioration of the rule of law, of democratic standards, and of respect for human rights
- Regrets the fact that following the *2014 banking fraud*, during which a total of around USD 1 billion was stolen from the Moldovan financial system, the authorities made very little progress in conducting a thorough and impartial investigation into the matter
- Calls on the Moldovan authorities *to respect international principles and best practices* and guarantee an enabling environment for civil society.

In this context, the governing coalition in Moldova mentioned that they “do not consider Moldova as a captured state! OSCE/ODIHR and the Venice Commission came with simply recommendations for the reform of the

electoral system! All the reforms *will be easier* to accomplish if we'll be closer to EU.”

4. Struggle against the forged messages

First of all, the regional and international context is favourable for an effective fight against the Russian propaganda. The European institutions and leaders, recognized in public the toxic nature of the misinformation promoted by Russia. One of the most efficient weapons to be used against the propaganda that comes from East is the limitation of the Russian media products' access. The media pluralism will significantly strengthen a pro-European profile of the country.

Beginning with 2014, the Ukrainian authorities had banned over 70 TV channels of Russia. (The Law nr. 1317 from 2015). The black mass media list applied in Ukraine includes not only feature and news programs, but also recreational or scientific ones. The source of these interdictions was and remains Russia's interference that caused the disintegration (separatism in Donbas region) and even the occupation of Ukrainian territories (annexation of Crimea). The European officials have always underlined, the importance of taking proportional measures to ensure national security, taking into account the freedom of the media and media pluralism. (EU-Ukraine Association Council (2017))

The EU's attitude to the attempts to place particular impediments in the path of Russian media outlets was as visible in the case of Moldova. Among the series of recent measures that apply to Russia is the rapid amendment of the Broadcasting Code (Amendments to the Audio-visual Code, 2017), apparently based on the necessity of protecting the Moldovan information space from foreign propaganda. The new provisions do not refer directly to the Russian media and are aimed at media content (news, military, political, feature programs) produced in countries that didn't ratify the European Convention on Transfrontier Television. This group of countries includes Russia and other CIS states (four countries) and even EU countries (seven), as well as Georgia.

The amendment of the legislation on the mass media is a powerful blow for the pro-Russian forces that practically free, through Russian media coverage, formed the necessary opinions among the pro-Russian electorate.

This does not yet mean that the misinformation propagated by Russia will not enter the public sphere of these countries at all. This circulates efficiently through other sources than the traditional ones, namely through social networking sites where it can be detected and counteracted with difficulty. But it is essential for the EU to continue to actively promote through its external actions respect for fundamental rights and freedoms. Through supporting freedom of expression, freedom of assembly, the right to access information and the independence of the media in the neighbouring countries EU institutions are counteracting the propaganda, strengthen media plurality and the objectivity, impartiality and independence of the media.

For having a sustainable result, it is important to continue the with the development of capacity-building programmes for media actors, fostering information-exchange partnerships and networks, such as content-sharing platforms, media-related research, mobility and training opportunities for journalists and placements with EU-based media to facilitate exchanges of best practices.

5. Conclusion

Four years after the signing of the Association Agreement, in the wake of growing disinformation against EU values in recent years, the EU has worked to put in place a stronger and more strategic approach to communication. It has strengthened the EU's communication in partner countries through clear, tailor-made messaging and raising awareness of the positive impact of EU policies and actions to people across the region. We consider that under the new Eastern Partnership framework, there has to be a renewed focus on outreach to youth. Strategic communication is crucial for building resilience and is a core duty for policy-makers at the service of citizens. There is also needed to be taken into consideration providing training opportunities and capacity building to the partner countries, including on countering hybrid threats, where appropriate.

It is important to underline the role of empowering citizens to critically analyse media content in order to identify propaganda. In this sense, we consider that EU should pay more attention the importance of strengthening knowledge on all levels of the educational system in order to encourage people to active citizenship and for developing their awareness as media consumers;

Therefore, it is clear that the EU, as a whole, and the Member States, individually, can only fight propaganda by third parties by rebutting disinformation campaigns and making use of positive messaging and information and should develop a truly effective strategy which would be differentiated and adapted to the nature of the actors disseminating propaganda.

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