

Katarzyna Górak-Sosnowska  
Tomasz Stępniewski

## The geopolitics of the ENP: from Tahrir to Minsk\*

**Abstract:** Today the European Union (EU) is challenged by the developments beyond its eastern and southern borders, incl. a series of conflicts that have been erupting in different spots of the Middle East and North Africa since the end of 2010, i.e. the so called Arab Spring and the Russia-Ukraine war that started in 2014. The EU's relations with both regions used to be framed by the European Neighbourhood Policy. The objective of this paper is to examine the implications of the geopolitical changes that have taken place in the EU's imminent neighbourhood over the past few years for that complex policy framework.

**Keywords:** European Neighbourhood Policy, Arab Spring, EuroMaidan, Russia-Ukraine war, security

### Introduction

Today the European Union (EU) is challenged by the developments beyond its Eastern and Southern borders, incl. a series of conflicts that have been erupting in different spots of the Middle East and North Africa since the end of 2010, the so called Arab Spring<sup>1</sup>

\* This research project has benefited from funding under the Polish "National Science Centre" (NCN) grant titled "European Neighbourhood Policy: (multi-level) governance, the reform process and the prospect of enhanced cooperation in the region", OPUS/HS5, No. 2013/09/B/HS5/04534.

<sup>1</sup> While not all countries of the Middle East and North Africa belong to the Southern dimension of the ENP it is essential to elaborate on all of them in order to present the political and social changes in the region in a complex and comprehensive way. The phenomenon of the Arab Spring produced a bulk of academic literature on this issue including: C. Henry, J.-H. Jang (eds.), *The Arab Spring: Will it Lead to Democratic Transitions?*, Palgrave Macmillan 2013; H. Dabashi, *The Arab Spring: The End of Postcolonialism*, Zed Books, 2012.

and the Russia-Ukraine war that started in 2014.<sup>2</sup> The objective of this paper is to examine the implications of the geopolitical changes that have taken place in the EU's imminent neighbourhood over the past few years for the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP). To this end, the argument is structured as follows. First, the broader context of the Arab Spring is outlined so that in the next step the geopolitical changes that it triggered can be discussed in more detail. In the following move, the developments in Ukraine are discussed critically in view of the geopolitical changes that they have provoked. Conclusions follow.

## 1. The Arab Spring

Since late 2010 the media's attention has been directed at the Arab Middle East and North Africa. It was a Tunisian street vendor who inspired a nation-wide protest. Soon the Tunisian president, Zayn al-Abidin Ibn Ali, was toppled. Only two weeks later the Egyptians did the same, i.e. they began to gather on the biggest square in Cairo, called Liberation (Tahrir in Arabic) and demanded that the Egyptian president, Hosni Mubarak step down. Thousands of people, mostly young, occupying that square and chanting political slogans gave rise to hopes that things would change in Egypt. That hope was shared both by them and the West. The developments on the Tahrir Square were seen as the beginning of the end of the Arab exceptionalism as once defined by Samuel Huntington.<sup>3</sup>

- 2 More on this issue, see: R. Menon, E. Rumer, *Conflict in Ukraine: The Unwinding of the Post-Cold War Order*, MIT Press, Cambridge 2015; A. Tsygankov, *Vladimir Putin's Last Stand: The Sources of Russia's Ukraine policy*, "Post-Soviet Affairs", vol. 31, 2015, no. 4, p. 279-303; M. Kalb, *Imperial Gamble: Putin, Ukraine, and the New Cold War*, Brookings Institution Press, Washington, D.C. 2015; G. Pridham, *EU/Ukraine Relations and the Crisis with Russia, 2013-14: A Turning Point*, "The International Spectator: Italian Journal of International Affairs", vol. 49, 2014, no. 4, p. 53-61; M. Klatt, T. Stepniewski, *Normative Influence. The European Union, Eastern Europe and Russia*, The Catholic University of Lublin Publishing House, Lublin-Melbourne 2012, p. 115-136; А. Гиль, Т. Стемпневски (ред.), *Перед выбором. Будущее Украины в условиях системной дестабилизации*, Институт Центрально-Восточной Европы, Люблин-Львов-Киев 2013.
- 3 Huntington examines the waves of democratisation which gradually had covered the whole world except for the Middle East and North Africa. He argues that they are prone to Oriental despotism rather than liberal democracy. See: S. Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late 20<sup>th</sup> Century*, University of Oklahoma Press, Oklahoma 1993.

In the months that followed, almost all Arab countries experienced at least a couple of days of developments resembling those of Tunisia and Egypt. A few instances of self-inflammation, like in Tunisia, by people who hoped to provoke their countrymen to stand up against the authoritarian rule, were recorded as well. Overall, January 2011 witnessed demonstrations in Egypt, Yemen, Algeria, Saudi Arabia, the Palestinian Authority, Lebanon, Morocco and Oman. In the majority of cases, however, the public protests did not last long. The following months brought the Bahrainis and the Libyans onto the streets. Their determination to protest and demand change was stronger than in the aforementioned cases. That is, in the case of Bahrain, the King decided to call for help and it was the military units of the Gulf Cooperation Countries which had eventually dispersed the protesters. In Libya the demonstrations turned to a civil war, in which the rebels – supported by NATO airstrikes – succeeded in overthrowing Mu'ammār Al-Kaddāfi. Last but not least, by mid-March 2011, the Syrians sought to take their fate in their hands. Also in this case a civil war erupted which has brought over 200,000 deaths until now.

It was the particular socio-political context which brought the Arab Spring to life. Social conditions provided the backbone for protests, while political realities enabled or hampered the pace and scope of these ad-hoc grassroots/social movements. One of the most important social conditions was the so called youth bulge. In the majority of the Arab countries the proportion of young people (aged 18-24) in the entire population is very high. Frequently, up to two-thirds or even three-fourths of the population are below 35 of age. Combined with high unemployment rates that are particularly acute among young people, the youth bulge can be enough to get people mobilised. Frequently, they have the education, but no job; they dream about their own family, but cannot afford a separate household and have to live with their parents. They are the generation in waiting.<sup>4</sup> That socio-political context translated into the strength of the protests.

Depending on the country-specific circumstances, the protests were more or less successful in view of the change that they induced

4 N. Dhillon, T. Yousef (eds.), *Generation in Waiting. The Unfulfilled Promise of Young People in the Middle East*, Brookings Institution Press, 2009.

in the functioning of respective socio-political systems. It is possible to differentiate between countries where changes have been introduced and countries where no significant changes have taken place.<sup>5</sup> Significant changes have taken place in Egypt and Tunisia, in which cases it is possible to talk of a form of transformation. Libya and Syria represent the daunting examples of the protests which have gone wrong. In the remaining countries of the region, the changes that have been introduced are rather nuanced. The following paragraphs elaborate these issues.

## 2. The implications of the Arab Spring

The word 'transformation' employed in the context of the developments in Egypt and Tunisia highlights the fact that in both cases the president was overthrown. That gave rise to a domestically managed political process of change. Whereas Tunisia serves as a case-study of successful transformation, Egypt – following the overthrowing (or rather *coup d'état*) of the first democratically elected president Muhammad Mursi and de-legalisation of the Muslim Brotherhood – turned into a case-study of a failed transformation. In Libya and Syria violence was used against the protesters and the high level of authoritarian rule made peaceful demonstrations impossible. The demonstrations mutated into civil wars driven by the existing social, religious and ethnic divisions. As the initially domestic civil strives slipped out of control of the local parties, they have acquired an international dimension.

The cases of Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates could be best referred to in terms of '*desinterestment*'. Hardly any protests were held in those countries. Belonging to the richest nations in the world in terms of GDP per capita and enjoying a great number of social benefits, the citizens did not feel inclined to complain. Jordan, Lebanon and Morocco are the instances of countries that fol-

5 These scenarios were developed within a research project titled: "Cultural context of the socio-political changes in the Arab world after 2010" that has benefited from funding under the Polish "National Science Centre" (NCN) grant no. UMO-2011/03/D/HS2/00876 headed by K. Górak-Sosnowska.

lowed the strategy of adaptation. That is, occasional demonstrations resulted in reforms and stepping down of some ministers. The demonstrations did not aim at overthrowing the regime. Their objective was to raise some social and political points.

Only a limited number of demonstrations were organised in Algeria and Iraq, which may be explained by reference to their “trauma of the past”. It is plausible that both societies were not ready for another conflict, because they experienced severe traumas in a recent past, incl. the Algerian civil war of the 1990s and war in Iraq at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Bahrain and Yemen exemplify countries where the legacy of pre-existing divisions has prevailed over any attempt to introduce change in the system of power in respective countries. In both cases, the Arab Spring merged into the pre-existing social divisions, be they religious or tribal, and made the ongoing conflicts even more violent. Simultaneously, no social group had enough power to endorse any significant change.

The joy and hope that the Arab Spring ignited lasted only several months. In a relatively short period of time following the outburst of the first protests it became apparent that the protests and effort were in vain. Except for Tunisia that succeeded in introducing changes as a result of the protest-related social pressure, the remaining countries of the region did not record any significant changes. Even in Tunisia, the political process of change has not consolidated and the country remains fragile and vulnerable to external factors as indicated by the March 2015 attack on the Bardo National Museum in Tunis. In contrast to Tunisia, Egypt followed a different path. That is, following the developments that began on the Tahrir Square, the country found itself in the same, or even harsher political situation, as during the late-Mubarak era. The army is still in power and the opposition is delegalised. In autumn 2014 several hundreds of Muslim Brotherhood members were sentenced to death, including the top leadership. Syria and Libya have become the black spots on the map of the Middle East. In Syria no party was strong enough to win. In Libya, the opposition proved to be too weak to control the whole country. Both countries became a fertile ground for radical Islam. In spring 2014 “the Islamic State of Iraq and Al-Sham” (ISIS) expanded its activi-

ties from Iraq onto Syria.<sup>6</sup> A couple of months later a radical Islamic group Ansar Al-Sharia became one of the dominant forces in Libya. The dream of the Arab Spring faded away in Libya.

### **3. The EU's response to the Arab Spring**

At the end of 2010 it was impossible for the EU to foresee what would happen in the region of the Middle East and North Africa in the months to come. Therefore the EU's first reactions to the set of developments associated with the Arab Spring were rather incoherent and inconclusive. Several factors had contributed to that. On the one hand, the EU had to cope with the old authoritarian regimes. On the other hand, different EU countries had different approaches and interests in the region. One of the most striking examples was the NATO intervention in Libya led by France and the UK.

From a different angle, on December 16, 2011 an official statement was published by the European Commission where the EU's stance and way of responding to the developments in the Southern Mediterranean was outlined. The EU's response was consistent with three Ms, i.e. Money, Mobility, and Market.<sup>7</sup> These factors were considered the milestones for a better future in the Southern Mediterranean. Nevertheless, the implementation of the Ms was far from efficient. Two sets of reasons contributed to that. First, as the Arab Spring unfolded the EU had to deal with its own problems, especially with the Euro-zone crisis. As a result, only a limited leverage to increase financial involvement abroad existed undermining at least one of the Ms. Second, the EU's approach to the chaos beyond its southern frontiers lacked not only coherence and coordination, but also an overall strategy in the region. The question to be asked is "What if the EU had reacted strategically to the Arab Spring?"<sup>8</sup>

6 More e.g. at: J.-P. Filiu, *From Deep State to Islamic State. The Arab Counter-Revolution and Its Jihadi Legacy*, C. Hurst and Co. Publishers Ltd 2015.

7 *EU Response to the Arab Spring*, European Commission, [http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/neighbourhood/southern-neighbourhood/arab-spring/index\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/neighbourhood/southern-neighbourhood/arab-spring/index_en.htm).

8 J. Techau, *What if the EU had Reacted Strategically to the Arab Spring?*, "IP Journal", 27.02.2014, <http://carnegieeurope.eu/publications/?fa=54672>.

Certainly, the EU's response can be called a faltering one.<sup>9</sup> However, would a coherent reaction on the part of the EU contribute to the developments in the region in a positive manner? It would not be the first time that the West was involved in the Middle Eastern politics. The West involvement (especially by the US and the UK) had not always been welcomed.<sup>10</sup> In other words, any significant EU interference in the Arab Spring could have proved counterproductive. From a different angle, greater EU involvement in the Arab Spring might have been employed by other actors as an excuse to get involved in the developments in the region as a means to maintain or consolidate their vested interests. Clearly, as a result the whole Middle East and North Africa would have turned in a battlefield.

## **4. From pacification of peaceful demonstrations to a return of the *status-quo* in Belarus**

In December 2010 the presidential election in Belarus took place. Alexander Lukashenko won the election for the next time. When the results became official, the streets of Minsk filled with peaceful demonstrators contesting the outcome. The demonstration was violently pacified by the president elect. Before the protests began, Lukashenko's regime had given signals indicating the willingness to change the political situation in Belarus, e.g. the release of political prisoners, and improved relations with the EU. Therefore, no one anticipated the brutal repressions that followed the election. Also in the previous years, e.g. 2006, protests had been organised. However, the response to them was not as violent as in 2010.

The difference between the reactions to the elections in 2006 and 2010 was motivated by the context in which those elections occurred. First, as a consequence of the Arab Spring, the geopolitical situation in the EU southern neighbourhood changed. This weighed on Lu-

9 See e.g. E. Burke, *Running into the sand? The EU's Faltering Response to the Arab Revolutions*, Centre for European Reform, December 2013, [http://www.cer.org.uk/sites/default/files/publications/attachments/pdf/2013/esy\\_eb\\_arab\\_18dec13-8216.pdf](http://www.cer.org.uk/sites/default/files/publications/attachments/pdf/2013/esy_eb_arab_18dec13-8216.pdf).

10 See e.g. *Revisiting the Arab Street: Research from Within*, Center for Strategic Studies, University of Jordan, Amman-Jordan, February 2005.

kashenko's regime approach to the protesters. Second, protests against Lukashenko were instigated by a different generation of protesters than in the previous years. This time the demonstrators included the so called "Facebook generation", workers that previously had not participated in protests as well as many people between 50 and 60 years of age. Third, the political and economic situation in Belarus changed. The country had been facing strong economic pressure exerted by Russia, which translated into Lukashenko's rigid approach to developments on the domestic political scene. It should be also mentioned that over the period 2008-2010 the EU changed its policy towards Belarus. It offered economic incentives and invited Lukashenko to cooperate. Unfortunately, as a consequence of the brutal pacification of the December protests and the continuation of repressions against Belarusian opposition and free media, the benefits of the Belarus-EU cooperation were forfeited by Lukashenko. Despite protests and the pacification of opposition, the regime did not change. The relations with the EU deteriorated and the regime reverted to the practice of seeking to establish a balance in its relations with the EU and Russia.

## **5. From students' protests to the change of power in Ukraine**

The socio-political changes unfolding in the EU southern neighbourhood, did not have an immediate effect on the situation in Ukraine. The onset of the turbulent political changes in Ukraine was associated with the drive of a part of the population towards tightening Ukraine's cooperation with the EU. Moreover, the protests that broke out in Ukraine in November 2013 were instigated by students. The protesters did not agree with President Yanukovich's rejection of the Association Agreement (AA) with the EU. However, it was the brutal pacification of the opposition, approximately 100 deaths were recorded, and the permanent protest at Maidan that changed the balance of power on the political stage of Ukraine's and forced Yanukovich to flee the country on 21 February 2014.

Great expectations were attached to the 3<sup>rd</sup> Eastern Partnership (EaP) Summit held in Vilnius on 28-29 November 2013. This is because Ukraine was about to sign the AA which was negotiated with

the EU. During the Vilnius Summit the signing of the AA was expected. To the utmost surprise of the observers, the then President of Ukraine, Viktor Yanukovych, did not sign the AA. Georgia and Moldova, however, launched their respective AAs with the EU, including a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA). Later, similar AAs were signed by Ukraine (and Georgia) during the European Council in Brussels on 27 June 2014.

Following the establishment of the new government in Ukraine, with Arseniy Yatsenyuk as the Prime Minister, the AA between the EU and Ukraine was signed in two stages in 2014. Specifically, on 21 March 2014 the political part of the agreement was signed. The economic part of the agreement was signed on 27 June 2014. The ratification of the EU–Ukraine Association Agreement by the European Parliament took place on 16 September 2014. The ratification will be completed if the agreement is ratified by all 28 EU member states.

It can be argued that the indirect result of the EaP Summit in Vilnius has been the war between Russia and Ukraine. If the Association Agreement between Ukraine and the EU had been successfully signed, political stability would have been maintained in Ukraine. Yanukovych's refusal to sign the AA led to a chaos in the country, loss of control over the developments on the political scene and exposed Ukraine's vulnerability to external threats. That vulnerability was exploited by Russia. The annexation of Crimea was followed by a hybrid war waged by Russia against Ukraine, incl. the destabilisation of the south-east of Ukraine and the establishment of marionette separatist republics in Donetsk and Lugansk.

## **6. Implications of the developments in Ukraine for the ENP**

From the onset of Russia's aggression on Ukraine, Russia's objective was to destabilise the situation in southern and eastern Ukraine in order to detach those areas from Ukraine by means of either turning them into "occupied territories" or establishing a quasi-state in the area, as for instance in the case of Transnistria. This occurring in the immediate vicinity of the V4 states, it would directly affect the security of the V4 countries as well. Properly coordinated, comprehensive

action needs to be taken by the EU and the OSCE involving measures of peacekeeping, monitoring, state-building as well as financial and humanitarian aid with the strategic aim to stabilise the situation in Ukraine. Without an active involvement of the West (including the V4 countries), Ukraine will not be able to handle the war with Russia.

For this reason, the assistance of the West should be of both medium-term and short-term nature. The medium-term goal is to support Ukraine in implementing fundamental reforms (reform of the legal system, justice reform, economy, public administration reform, fight against corruption and the oligarchic system, etc.). Achieving this requires that the Ukrainians be given training and expertise, the know-how, to help them in their effort to change the situation in their country. The immediate goal is military assistance – V4 should provide both lethal and non-lethal items (equipment, flak jackets, helmets, etc.) as the Ukrainian forces are really poor. It is essential to underline that there is no purely military solution to the conflict, but Ukraine's army needs to be shored up at this stage, regrouped and trained in strategy and tactics. Ukraine is not capable of regaining control over the territories occupied by the pro-Russian separatists without a military intervention from the West (as the West is not ready to provide massive military assistance). It is necessary to realise that Ukraine has no military option to solve the conflict. Immediate assistance from the EU and V4 countries should be aimed at helping Ukraine to survive this winter – by supplying it with emergency energy sources for this winter (supply of gas, oil products and coal etc.). However, granting a wide autonomy to the territories may raise hopes that they will be given back to Ukraine in the future. The best-case scenario, though unfortunately also the most unlikely one, is that Russia, exhausted by the economic sanctions, will abandon its aggressive policy towards Ukraine and this (in the long run) will provide an opportunity for Ukraine to regain control of the territories.

Reform is a prerequisite if Ukraine is to survive as a state. The new authorities have no choice other than to reform the country, otherwise Ukraine is going to remain a failed state. It is necessary that the West supports Ukraine both politically and economically. However, while political support needs to be unconditional in the light of the on-going Russian aggression, economic and financial support needs to strictly

follow the principle of “more for more”, e.g. further supportive measures need to be tied to the actual progress in the much-needed reforms. In order to ensure the uninterrupted flow of support, a very detailed system of conditionality needs to be defined, where even small steps forward can get immediately rewarded. The geopolitical confrontation puts the European Union at a disadvantage. Focusing on technical, sectoral agreements instead of forcing plans of political consequence which arouse hostility in relations with Russia would be a solution much more favourable to the interests of the EU (as well as the V4). Without radical reform, Ukraine will not be able to comply with the requirements set down by the EU.

## Conclusions

The functioning of ISIS on the territory of Iraq and Syria,<sup>11</sup> which are not covered by the framework of the ENP, poses a twofold challenge to the EU. On the one hand, there are citizens of the EU who want to join the ISIS militants. On the other hand, in the EU member states terrorist attacks are plotted by home grown Jihadists. The example of the “Charlie Hebdo” terrorist attack suggests how tragic the outcomes can be. The Eastern Partnership must be adapted to the new geopolitical situation in the whole Eastern Neighbourhood. Russia’s imperial policy challenges the EaP project as well as the EaP states, especially Ukraine which will not be able to cope with this situation unless assisted by the West.<sup>12</sup> If the EU wants to shape its Eastern Neighbourhood, it needs to focus on deepening its relations with the EaP states by offering them more specific incentives conducive to stabilisation in terms of politics, economy and security. Without the EU assistance, countries included in the EaP will become ever more dependent on Russia. This is because the economies of the EaP countries are weak and vulnerable to Russia’s impact. Moreover, po-

11 The EU suspended its bilateral cooperation programmes with the Syrian Government under the European Neighbourhood Policy in May 2011 (ed.).

12 See also: З. Станкевич, Т. Стемпневски, А. Шабацюк (ред.), Безопасность постсоветского пространства: новые вызовы и угрозы, Издательство Люблинского Католического Университета Иоанна Павла II, Институт Центрально-Восточной Европы в Люблине, Люблин-Москва 2014.

litical corruption and authoritarianism of governments in the EaP countries favours Russia's interests. The most important fact is that "unfulfilled expectations will hasten, not prevent, the region's incipient de-Europeanization."<sup>13</sup>

## Bibliography

- Dabashi H., *The Arab Spring: The End of Postcolonialism*, Zed Books, 2012.
- Dhillon N., Yousef T. (eds.), *Generation in Waiting. The Unfulfilled Promise of Young People in the Middle East*, Brookings Institution Press, 2009.
- EU Response to the Arab Spring*, European Commission, [http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/neighbourhood/southern-neighbourhood/arab-spring/index\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/neighbourhood/southern-neighbourhood/arab-spring/index_en.htm).
- Filiu, J.-P., *From Deep State to Islamic State. The Arab Counter-Revolution and its Jihadi Legacy*, C. Hurst and Co. Publishers Ltd 2015.
- Henry C., Jang J.-H. (eds.), *The Arab Spring: Will it Lead to Democratic Transitions?*, Palgrave Macmillan 2013.
- Huntington S., *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late 20<sup>th</sup> Century*, University of Oklahoma Press, Oklahoma 1993.
- Kalb M., *Imperial Gamble: Putin, Ukraine, and the New Cold War*, Brookings Institution Press, Washington, D.C. 2015.
- Klatt M., Stepniewski T., *Normative Influence. The European Union, Eastern Europe and Russia*, The Catholic University of Lublin Publishing House, Lublin-Melbourne 2012, p. 115-136.
- Menon R., Rumer E., *Conflict in Ukraine: The Unwinding of the Post-Cold War Order*, MIT Press, Cambridge 2015.
- Pridham G., *EU/Ukraine Relations and the Crisis with Russia, 2013-14: A Turning Point*, "The International Spectator: Italian Journal of International Affairs", vol. 49, 2014, no. 4, p. 53-61.
- Techau J., *What if the EU had Reacted Strategically to the Arab Spring?*, "IP Journal", 27.02.2014, <http://carnegieeurope.eu/publications/?fa=54672>.
- Tsygankov A., *Vladimir Putin's Last Stand: The Sources of Russia's Ukraine Policy*, "Post-Soviet Affairs", vol. 31, 2015, no. 4, p. 279-303.
- Waal T. de, Youngs R., *Reform as Resilience: An Agenda for the Eastern Partnership*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, May 14, 2015, available online: <http://carnegieendowment.org>, accessed on June 17, 2015.

<sup>13</sup> T. de Waal, R. Youngs, *Reform as Resilience: An Agenda for the Eastern Partnership*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, May 14, 2015, available online: <http://carnegieendowment.org>, accessed on June 17, 2015.

Гиль, А., Стемпневски Т. (ред.), *Перед выбором. Будущее Украины в условиях системной дестабилизации*, Люблин-Львов-Киев (Gil A., Stępniewski T. (eds), *Facing a Dilemma. The Future of Ukraine under Systemic Destabilization*, Lublin-Lviv-Kiev 2013).

Станкевич З., Стемпневски Т., Шабациук А. (ред.), *Безопасность постсоветского пространства: новые вызовы и угрозы*, Люблин-Москва (Stankiewicz Z., Stępniewski T., Szabaciuk A. (eds.), *Security of the Post-Soviet Region: New Challenges and Threats*, Lublin-Moscow 2014).