

READINGS

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*On March 19, 2013 Eastern Europe Studies Centre and Lithuanian-American Association held discussion with a guest speaker **Bruce Jackson**, Founding Director of the Project on Transitional Democracies*

“The Upcoming Eastern Partnership Summit in Vilnius: What are the Expectations and Prospects for the Success?”

SUMMARY

During the upcoming Lithuania’s EU Presidency the heads of the EU and EU Eastern Partnership (EaP) countries (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine) will gather in Vilnius for the EaP Summit. Among the topics to be discussed are free trade agreements, visa liberalization, and Association Agreements. Notwithstanding the importance of the EaP initiative many factors could threaten the success of the Vilnius Summit, including increasing instability in the EaP region, tensions between the West and Russia and the on-going EU financial crisis.

Owing to these problems, the guest speaker Bruce Jackson, Founding Director of Project on Transnational Democracies, touched upon the prospects and expectations of the upcoming EaP Summit.

B. Jackson started by noting, that the EaP initiative originates from unsuccessful attempts to integrate the Eastern Europe into the West. He reminded the NATO Summit in Bucharest in 2008 when despite active US support Germany rejected Georgia’s and Ukraine’s accession to the Alliance. In reaction, the EaP initiative was started by Poland and Sweden in 2009. However, the EaP initiative was not able to reach its goals and remains weak policy without seriously binding commitments.

While assessing the situation, B. Jackson welcomed changes in the western attitude towards the region of Eastern Europe. The Western Europe has finally acknowledged that Ukraine is not another Poland just with more problems. According to B. Jackson, the examples of Lithuanian, Latvian, Estonian or Polish EU integration should not be compared to the integration of such post-soviet countries as Armenia, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova or Ukraine. These countries were driven to very different cultural and political courses. For example, after the collapse of the Soviet Union Central European states have decreased their defence budgets while the Eastern European states have increased it. In addition, instead the expected parliamentary system to be dominant in the East, the presidential “tsar” system took place and hindered democratic processes - elections in both Ukraine

and Belarus are still considered as being fraud. Moreover, after 20 years only Ukraine managed to implement a two party system, which unfortunately still has its flaws.

To explain existing situation, B. Jackson used a historical analysis of English historian Norman Davies. According to the analysis, after destroying the Roman Empire barbarians did not create new political system but replicated the former Roman Empire model. B. Jackson identified identical process in the Eastern Europe where the former Soviet states continue Soviet political traditions instead of creating autonomous systems of their own. Having in mind that for barbarians it took around 500 years to create their state (France), the post-soviet states are far from being capable to create similar democratic systems to the West.

When talking about the upcoming Vilnius Summit, speaker emphasised that a key to any tangible political changes in the EaP countries lies within the economy. He quoted the US president Thomas Jefferson who once stated that political change could only happen one hundred years after an economic transformation. This implies that only financial measures can accelerate political reforms in the Eastern Europe. This is exactly what the EU attempts to achieve with the EaP initiative: Association Agreements, visa liberalization and soft power that would lead to democracy and political stability.

B. Jackson also criticized popular believe that an agreement with the EaP countries is difficult to reach just because of the lack of common values between the East and West. Instead he noted that the ratification of such treaty as the Association Agreement does not require shared principles and values. The mentioned Agreement is an economic not a politically binding treaty.

Nevertheless, the EaP Summit will face serious challenges. Many issues can arise due to problematic situations in Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Azerbaijan. According to B. Jackson, Ukraine is the most realistic but also troublesome candidate to sign the Association Agreement. He compared Ukraine to a suitcase without a handle. No one is able to pick the suitcase, but they also cannot take their eyes from it. Both Russia and the EU have made their proposals, now it is time for Ukraine to make a decision. Various political circumstances will shape the Ukrainian choice: worsening situation in Cyprus and Russia's intervention to help, international trial of "Gazprom" and unpredictable results of the federal election in Germany in 2013.

In addition, a proper attention should be given to the rest of the EaP countries. In order to keep the EaP countries on track, the EU must produce alternative proposals to challenge those coming from the Russian side. Therefore, the positive outcome of the Vilnius Summit is extremely important. If the EaP Summit will fail to deliver, the Eastern Europe will be left with only one option - to move closer towards Russia. According to B. Jackson, such aftermath would have an everlasting damage and would jeopardise the political and economic stability in the region.

In conclusion, the EaP Summit should be used to reengage the Eastern Partners and bring them closer to Europe. It will be a dirty work like digging the graveyard, said B. Jackson, but if succeeded, the next phase will include creating a long-term political and economic cooperation and implementing the principles of the soft power. At the end B. Jackson shared a belief that important decisions similar to those taken with the Rome and Washington treaties will be made in Vilnius and would give a new political course to the Eastern Europe countries.

During the Q&A session B. Jackson was asked about a potential scenario for the upcoming EaP Summit. He answered that decisions during the Summit will be highly affected by the situation in the EaP countries. He brought attention to the evolution of the political culture in Ukraine, upcoming presidential elections in Georgia and formation of governmental coalition in Moldova.

B. Jackson was also asked to evaluate the chances for Ukraine to sign the Association Agreement in Vilnius. He focused on EU-Ukraine progress reports, including a report by former Polish president Aleksander Kwasniewsky and former president of the European Parliament Pat Cox regarding the trial of Yulia Tymoshenko and former Interior Minister Yuriy Lutsenko. The final reports are expected this April-May and will have a profound role in deciding whether Ukraine is politically ready to sign the Association Agreement.

Subsequently, B. Jackson was asked whether the Western Europe pays enough attention to the EaP summit. He agreed that the West lacks interest in the Summit but did not see it as a problem. He argued that the Western attention is not crucial. The Association Agreement is not a politically binding treaty and could be pushed forward with the support of such EU countries as Poland, Sweden and Baltic states. Finally, if the EaP countries will complete with the EU regulations, the Western Europe will have no reason to block the Association Agreement.

B. Jackson has also commented the EU integration of the Western Balkans. He brought attention to the fact that both the EU and NATO were present in the Balkans from an early phase of state building and transition while it took awhile for them to come to the Eastern Europe. As a result Croatia is joining the EU this summer.

The discussion concluded with criticisms to the Obama administration. B. Jackson agreed that the current administration has been paying less attention to its European allies, especially to the Central Eastern Europe. The US has to change its attitude towards the European allies and rethink some of its foreign policy priorities.