The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Vilnius's Geopolitical Lesson

By Vira Ratsiborynska

December 15, 2013

These last months, the Eastern Partnership countries got worldwide attention. The reason for the increased interest in these countries is due to a set of political events and actions that recently took place in that region. Before the Eastern Partnership Summit in Vilnius started, some Eastern Partnership countries were facing a dilemma regarding the choice of their geopolitical future: a choice between the EU's model of integration and Russia's Eurasian course. The different geopolitical interests of Russia and the EU have become visible.

Starting from summer 2013, the Eastern Partnership countries have suffered from considerable Russian pressure. Russia implemented punitive trade measures by banning imports of some Moldovan and Ukrainian goods. At the same time, Ukraine was afflicted by a very tense situation related to the possible risk of a new gas confrontation with Russia.

The Eastern Partnership Summit has

become a historic
event
for rethinking
the model
of relations with
the European
Union.

During all this time, the European Union did not remain silent and reacted to this tension in the Eastern Partnership region. One of the reactions of the EU to the Russian pressure was the adoption of the European Parliament's Sept. 12 resolution asking Russia to refrain from exerting pressure in the region. The EU high officials repeatedly published statements where they reiterated that the pressure was unacceptable.

Before the Vilnius Summit, the EU had entertained the hope that it would be able to launch association agreements with Georgia and Moldova and sign the same agreement with Ukraine.

The Ukrainian decision to postpone signing the Association Agreement was completely unexpected for the EU. Thus, during the Vilnius Summit and the immediate aftermath, Ukraine quickly developed into a test of relations between the EU and Russia. Before the Vilnius Summit, when pressure was being exerted in the region, the EU underestimated the Russian influence in Ukraine. This could possibly be considered a big geopolitical mistake on the EU's part.

In Ukraine, the Russian factor always played a role in the country's relations with the EU. Since its independence in 1991, Ukraine has been in geopolitical limbo between the EU and Russia while always trying to keep a geopolitical balance between the two. This was the reason that Ukrainian officials had to take into special account the Russian factor when deciding to postpone the Association Agreement. From their geopolitical evaluation, the Ukrainians understood that choosing relations with one partner could potentially damage relations with the spurned one. Ukraine is only able to make this kind of choice if the country can be sure that the chosen side can guarantee that Ukraine will be able to continue having good relations with the other.

It is quite clear that the EU-Ukraine-Russia triangle was never really avoidable when making key decisions for the country. Furthermore, when pondering whether to align with the EU, Ukrainian officials had to take into consideration the possible risks that the Ukrainian economy could face during the transition period before the implementation of the Association Agreement. The risks of trade wars with and potential sanctions from Russia were ever present in their evaluations. This pragmatic assessment and the strong Russian influence in Ukraine came as surprises to the EU and created a shock due to the EU's unpreparedness to such a Ukrainian decision.

Taking stock of all that has transpired, the Eastern Partnership Summit has become a historic event for rethinking the Eastern Partnership model of relations with the EU. A succession of decisions and events in the Eastern Partnership region has created a need for both the EU and Russia to analyze what has happened and learn from the Vilnius Summit.

In order to make these lessons work, the two main players in the region — the EU and Russia — need to learn to act not with "soft" and "hard" tactics, but together. The period of the Cold War is over, but the geopolitical games over influence and control in the Eastern Partnership region still go on. Nevertheless the goals of the EU and Russia have to remain the same: a stable, politically secure and economically strong development of the Eastern European neighborhood. This task is difficult, but it can be managed.

The Eastern Partnership Summit in Vilnius was a necessary lesson for all parties and a historic moment of geopolitical rethinking. The post-Vilnius time will show how this rethinking will be used in practice.

Vira Ratsiborynska is a political analyst at the European Parliament. Justina Vitkauskaite Bernard is a member of the European Parliament.

The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

Original url: https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2013/12/15/vilniuss-geopolitical-lesson-a30506