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THE WEIMAR TRIANGLE AND THE UKRAINIAN CRISIS

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The article analyzes the activity of Weimar Triangle (Germany, France, Poland) during Ukrainian crisis (2013—2014) as an efficient, but still largely underestimated negotiation force of the European Union. The evolution of role of Weimar Triangle in post-bipolar era is indicated, as well as the role of this specific structure during Ukrainian crisis.

Key words: Ukrainian crisis, Weimar Triangle, diplomacy, The Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), Eastern Partnership (EP), European neighbourhood policy (ENP), Poland, Germany, France, European Union.

The Ukrainian crisis has offered the Weimar Triangle an opportunity to appear as an efficient negotiation force for the European Union. It is why it is necessary to present this specific structure of the post-bipolar era, since its importance as well as its possibilities have long been underestimated not only by most European countries but also by the three countries which are part of it. For instance the first time a French daily newspaper mentioned the Triangle was in 1998, i.e. seven years after it has been created, on the occasion of the first summit of the Triangle at the level of the heads of state and government!

It is why it seems necessary to start this paper with the origins of the Triangle up to 2010 when it could have started a new round in its life, but actually did not! Then came the Ukrainian crisis which has offered the Triangle a possible renewal of its mission and a real hope for an efficient European diplomacy. True, the new Commission has also to take into account the necessity for the EU to have a real diplomacy and, even more, an identified foreign policy.

Let's come back some 25 years earlier when the bipolar system collapsed and when the European leaders wondered how to reorganize the reunified continent. Of course, the

question then was not to integrate the former Eastern European countries in the main institutional European structures such as EU or NATO. It is why those countries first had to think how to organize themselves into new and specific structures. The point then was to act so that those countries do not stay left alone in the very middle of the old continent and the creation the very beginning of the 1990' of several new structures was a necessity for what was called the period of transition.

The first initiative came from Italy on November, 10th 1989, the very day after the Berlin Wall fell. Gianni de Michelis, the foreign minister, proposed the extension of the AlpAdria initiative — which then included Italy, Yugoslavia, Hungary and Austria — to Czechoslovakia then to Poland. According to the words of the Italian minister, the aim of this extension, was “to avoid the reconstitution of a new Carolingian Empire in Europe”.

A second initiative occurred in February 1991 when the three central European countries — Hungary, Poland, Czechoslovakia, decided to create the Visegrad Triangle — recalling an Alliance signed in 1335 between the kings of the three countries. This Triangle became the Visegrad group or V4 after the velvet divorce of Czechoslovakia. Its aim was to coordinate the policies of the three then four countries in order to join as soon as possible EU and NATO [1].

At last, it can be mentioned the Council of the Baltic states created in March 1992 and whose aim was to help the newly independent Baltic states to integrate western structures and was often perceived as a reconstitution of the medieval Hansa.

As it can be noticed, all those initiatives about the future of a reunified Europe recalled very ancient times and those who talked about a new “springtime of the peoples” (*Völkerfrühling*) have been left beyond by those who preferred the Middle ages: 800 with Charles the Great, the great Schism of 1054, the XII century of the German Hansa or the 1335 treaty. But this was also a sign of modernity. In this context the Weimar Triangle has been initiated but its historical reference was much more recent: the French-German reconciliation of the 1950's.

THE GROWTH OF THE WEIMAR TRIANGLE

In August of 1991, Hans Dietrich Genscher and Roland Dumas the German and the French foreign ministers have invited Krzysztof Skubiszewski, their Polish counterpart, in Weimar to talk about the future of Poland in Europe. The three ministers then decided to meet every year in a structure which became the Weimar Triangle. The official aim of the Triangle was to help Poland, as the biggest of the former Eastern European country, in its transition to market economy and democracy as well as to western institutions. But the Triangle had another aim: use the exemplarity of the French-German reconciliation as a pedagogy for a Polish-German reconciliation, since in 1989 Poland found itself surrounded with its two hereditary enemies: a weakened Soviet Union and a unified Germany that frightened at least the eldest generations all over Europe and of course in Poland [2].

The history of the Triangle can be divided into several periods: 1991—1997, 1997—2005, 2010—2014. The period between 2005—2010 has been intentionally forgotten because nearly nothing happened then and of course it will be said why.

During the first period, up to 1997, the meetings of the Triangle took place at a ministerial level and concerned political, economic and cultural topics. In 1994, was added a military dimension to their cooperation devoted to the organization of seminars on defence topics, joint exercises and the creation of a joint army corps. The technical aspects of cooperation as well as its pedagogical one were rather efficient so that, in 1998, the three decided to organize their meetings at the level of the heads of State and government. The first of those summits took place in Poznan on the 21st of February in 1998 [3].

The reconciliation between Warsaw and Berlin was then considered as a fact — nevertheless as a still fragile fact — and the Three decided to enter a new step of cooperation, considering the perspective of a Polish membership to the EU.

THE DECAY

Of course, life is always more difficult than expected and two factors led to a temporary decay of the Triangle. The first one occurred in the occasion of the Iraqi crisis when, on the 30th of January, 2003, the Polish Prime minister together with the other two new NATO members and five older members published the so-called “Letter of the 8”, in which they unconditionally backed the US position in favour of a war against Iraq [4]. This was the occasion when Donald Rumsfeld, the US defence secretary opposed in a rather uneducated way “old and new Europe”.

This position has been criticized by many countries and especially by the French President, Jacques Chirac who said, with words that were not very diplomatic, that those candidates to EU membership (Hungary, Poland and Czech Republic) provoked a division inside the EU and “lost an opportunity to shut up” [5]. The meeting of the Weimar Triangle which was planned two weeks later has obviously been affected by this transatlantic crisis as well as the summit which took place next may in Wroclaw and coincided with the referendum organized in Poland about its EU membership. The February meeting and the May summit took place but of course nothing then happened!

The second factor of decay was caused by Polish home policy considerations. In October 2005, the Poles elected for President Lech Kaczynski, member of the PiS, a populist, nationalist and anti-European party, which obviously affected the relationships with France and Germany especially when, ten months later (July 2006) the twin brother of the President became Prime minister. The radical anti-German, anti-Russian and anti-European positions of the Polish Executive obviously froze any action of the Weimar Triangle. It lasted up to the accidental death of the Polish president in an air crash near Smolensk in April 2010. After its populist period — and Poland is not the only Central or Eastern European country to be concerned with such a regressive tendencies — the Poles elected for president Bronislaw Komorowski, a member of the liberal Civic platform (July 2010). But as the Chairman of the Parliament he immediately became the acting President, up to the July vote. Quickly the things went much better between Poland and its neighbours western as well as eastern.

THE RENEWAL

Two weeks after the accident (26—27th of April) the three foreign ministers met in Bonn. Apart from usual topics such as neighbourhood policy, CSDP... a new question

has been set forth during this meeting: how to normalize the relationships between Russia and Poland. The solution of this question could obviously have enhanced the role of the Triangle recalling to its initial pedagogic function. As a consequence of this new priority, the Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov has been invited to take part to the following meeting of the Triangle, in Paris on the 23rd of June. Then Moscow sent some encouraging signals concerning Katyn, the inquiry about the Smolensk air crash, obviously looking for reconciliation with Poland and its new government [6].

But for Paris and Berlin the question was also how to help Poland preparing its presidency of the Council of the EU, programmed for the second half of 2011. The point was also to help Poland in concluding the negotiations with Russia about the renewal of the Partnership and cooperation agreement between EU and Russia. This would have been a real symbolic victory for Poland as a new EU member. It did not take place, but the hopes were great.

During Paris meeting, the Three together with Sergei Lavrov have also discussed topics such as the situation in Afghanistan about which all nearly agreed, EU-Russia relations or more sensible topics such as the situation in Transnistria. And the meeting passed off in a rather warm atmosphere. Sergei Lavrov then hoped that the Triangle could become a square, because a "square is a good and balanced shape" [6]. Two weeks later, the German, Polish and Russian deputy foreign ministers met in Berlin. A question was then set forth: would this mean that the Weimar Triangle will continue as a triangle, where Russia takes the place of France? This could have been a possibility, since France from the very beginning has underestimated the operational possibilities of the Triangle.

The Warsaw summit in February 2011 [7] confirmed all those new tendencies that took place during the previous meetings especially in the field of the CSDP which included the creation of a joint battle group and the perspective of integrating Poland as the sixth framework nation of the Eurocorps. On the cultural field, Poland also joined the French-German TV channel Arte so that, according to Angela Merkel, it becomes a French-German-Polish program. But probably the most important during the Warsaw summit has been said by President Komorowski concerning the possibility for Russia to become an associate partner of the Triangle considering that "all that will make us understand that the cold war is behind us will be positive" adding that "If Hubert Vedrine considered the Triangle as one of the most clever amongst all the European initiatives as being oriented to the future, then we (Poland) shall have to prove our intelligence in using properly this formula" [8].

This was four years ago and the sky was then rather fair. But clouds appeared in 2013 and the storm broke out this year. The Ukrainian crisis nevertheless offered new opportunities for the Triangle but it seems that they have been somewhat misused.

THE UKRAINIAN CRISIS

Understanding the Ukrainian crisis necessarily implies to start with the Polish Swedish initiative (May 2008) called Eastern Partnership (EP) which was supposed to reactivate the European neighbourhood policy (ENP). The initiative has been officialised by the EU in Prague in May 2009. In this context, Ukraine was supposed to sign an as-

sociation agreement with the EU during the EP summit in Vilnius in November 2013. But, under Russian pressures, former President Yanukovich decided to postpone his decision. Actually it is necessary to point out the fact that the EU led the negotiations with Ukraine in an inappropriate way, especially when ignoring Russia. This was a mistake especially if you remember that this was not the case when Brussels prepared its 2004 enlargement and led negotiations with the future new members together with a negotiation with Russia.

Even if Russia's behaviour is unacceptable, it must also be pointed out that the other side did not play a very clever role. This means that the EU shares its part of responsibility in this crisis as several observers in the West have noticed... but afterwards. This responsibility comes from deeper and intrinsic reasons, in that Brussels has always rejected any clear political representation of what the EU should be and in which Europe it will develop. Considering the way the EU has negotiated with its partners, the failure of the Vilnius summit could have easily been foreseen. True, but it was too late, some political leaders such as Elisabeth Guigou or Franz Walter Steinmeier admitted that they should have negotiated together with Ukraine and with Russia and that a compromise could have been found. At least it would have proven that they have tried it. Actually, Kiev was a prisoner between two antagonistic logics, each of it excluding the other, which is not a good way to negotiate. It seems as if Moscow and Brussels had then decided to build walls instead of building bridges.

When violence started in Kiev and after taking into account its mistakes, Brussels has adopted a very positive initiative. On the 21st of February 2014 the three ministers of the Weimar Triangle have been sent to Kiev to negotiate as representative of the EU. It was probably the most clever initiative Brussels has taken for long! The three ministers succeeded in having an agreement signed by the Ukrainian president, by representatives of the opposition and by the representative of the Russian government [9]. Even if the agreement has never come into force, it nevertheless demonstrated that a negotiation led by the three of the most representative countries of the EU could lead to effective results [10]. But instead of staying in Kiev the French minister flew to Beijing where he thought he had better things to do. Once more, France has underestimated the importance of the Triangle.

At the very moment when the new EU Commission comes into office, some changes may be expected. It is obviously a proper time for the EU to think of its future and hopefully to answer an old question that have been set forth for long: how to negotiate with Russia without weakness, but also with the determination of including it at its very place, i.e. in Europe. The Ukrainian crisis — and it is the role of crisis in international relations — has indeed helped reveal the efficiency of the Weimar Triangle. If the new Council and especially Mrs Mogherini, the new head of the EEAS, high representative of the Union for foreign affairs and security policy, plays its role and takes into account the achievements of the Weimar Triangle, things could change in the external action of the EU towards Russia and Ukraine. An ideal solution would be that the Triangle becomes a special “task force” of the EU in charge of the Russian, Ukrainian, Byelorussian and Moldavian files.

Several reasons legitimate why the Triangle should be in charge of the relations with Russia. First of all, it includes three of the most important EU countries including one of the new members. Second, among the three, Poland has obviously the best knowledge of what are Russia and Ukraine but it also has too passionate a vision of this relationship, which never makes a good policy. It is why France and Germany must be present because they have an historical legitimacy inside the EU and could help calming Poland. Third the Weimar Triangle has proved its efficiency in its contribution to reconcile former enemies and thus could lead not only to overcome the missed opportunity of 2010, but also could try to help for reconciliation between Russians and Ukrainians that have been artificially presented as enemies since February of 2014. The challenge will be important but it is worth it, since the very aim for Europe is to keep Russia as a part of the old continent. EU needs Russia as well as Russia needs EU. Considering the escalation not only in violence but also in the discourse that occurred in this crisis, the question now is to know whether it is too late?

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