

# A CONVERSATION WITH GERALD KNAUS: EUROPEAN VALUES AND CONTINENTAL GEOPOLITICS\*

*Discussing EU policy and leverage in its Eastern neighborhood, Knaus argues that the EU should support the democratization of all of its eastern neighbors. For the people of these countries to be able to choose their future, the EU should oppose Russian interference and blackmail in its neighbors. The continental fault-line today is between societies that aspire to defend and respect the values of liberal democracy, and those who do not. Theories of civilization have nothing to do with this, he underlines. Knaus recalls that defending their “civilization” was a rhetorical device used by autocrats and nationalists of all ethnic groups and religions in the Balkans to justify ethnic cleansing, repressing minorities, and suppressing basic rights of their own citizens.*



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**T**he spread of European governance models and democracy eastwards seemed much smoother until the recent “wave”. How would you describe where the fault-lines are drawn now, and why? Is there a Huntingtonian reason? Are these societies less “European” by nature?

Huntington wrote, against the background of wars in the former Yugoslavia, about conflicts and the battle lines of the future. He explained these wars by reference to civilizational fault-lines. In fact, ideas like his are misleading, ahistorical, and dangerous. It is no surprise that in the Balkans they were most popular with autocrats and nationalists of all ethnic groups and religions to justify crimes—ethnic cleansing, repressing minorities, and suppressing basic rights of their own citizens—in the name of defending their “civilization”. This was obvious in the Balkans in the 1990s, where I worked at the time.

The curious thing: Huntington was popular with allegedly “Catholic” autocrats, like Franjo Tudjman in Croatia, and allegedly “Orthodox” autocrats, like Slobodan Milosevic in Serbia. In reality, not only were both Tudjman and Milosevic former communists, but both also used the same rhetoric to justify crimes, claiming to defend “Europe”: Milosevic against “Turks” and Albanian Muslims, and Tudjman against Serbs and Bosnian Muslims. It is an old rhetorical device. In his declaration of war against the United States, Adolf Hitler declared in December 1941 that the war led by National Socialist Germany was a war in defense of “Europe”. At the same time, Hitler’s Germany reintroduced unimaginable torture, mass killings, and the slavery of millions of people on a continental scale. Not long ago, before the Second World War, the notion that “Europe” stood for a civilization based on the rule of law, the Enlightenment, and democracy would have seemed strange. From Italy to Spain, from Germany to Russia, from Portugal to Poland to Yugoslavia, dictators were in control.

This means that when we talk today about “European values”, what we really mean is the aspiration, following the catastrophe of failed autocracy and war in the first half of the 20th century, that this continent should finally become a continent of liberal democracies. It was a vision to escape from the past, and move towards a very different future. Take the European Convention on Human Rights from 1949: it is, or should be, as much at home in Warsaw, Bucharest, Madrid, or Ankara as in Berlin or Vienna. And the continental fault-line today is between societies which aspire to defend and respect these values and those who do not. Theories of civilization have nothing to do with this.

**However, hasn't the relative power of the EU waned in recent years? So, aren't these values in retreat today?**

We see two opposing trends. On the one hand, the last 25 years have seen the most astonishing peaceful geopolitical revolution in the history of this continent: The enlargement of the EU from 12 to 15 and then to 28 countries. Taking in the former communist states of Central Europe and the Eastern

Balkans has been an astonishing development. Take Poland, take the Baltic states: these have never been more secure, more democratic in their history. You can also compare the Balkans today with the Balkans in the 1990s. Military budgets are down, conflict between states has ended. Today Serbia and Kosovo sit at the negotiating table. Or take Moldova, the poorest state of the continent, where a governing coalition which called itself the Alliance for European Integration promised to take the country to the EU.

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On the other hand, we see pushback. This dramatic –and fast– change has come at a price. There are many people in the older EU member states who feel that this change has been too quick. Today enlargement is an unpopular policy in Paris or The Hague. As a result, the EU today is no longer promising as clearly as it did after 1999 that it is ready to embrace future democracies on its doorsteps. In the Balkans, in Turkey, this has slowed down the enlargement process to a snail's pace. It is undermining the EU's influence.

Let me add that even before, the process of EU enlargement was never smooth or obvious. The key determinant was always the determination of the countries that wanted to join.

In the early 1990s, Germany was opposed to the Baltic states joining. There was long opposition to Bulgaria and Romania, and later Croatia. But in the Baltic states and later in Bulgaria, national elites decided to make joining the EU a top priority, and pushed for it against all odds. And in countries where leaders did not support EU accession, like Slovakia in the late 1990s, it was civil society and the opposition who campaigned and defeated the government on a platform

of EU accession. The driving force, by far the most important single factor, was always the determination of countries who wanted to join. Where this will existed, they managed. Where this was absent, they have not. I believe that this is still the case today.

**And how do “geopolitical power struggles” relate to “value-based clashes” in the current fault-lines of Europe’s eastern neighborhood?**

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We have autocratic regimes, in Minsk, in Moscow, which are not much different from previous dictatorial regimes, such as in Portugal or Spain. They fear their own people, and so they arrest dissidents, suppress civil society, and hold farcical elections. At the same time, such regimes are aware of their weak legitimacy. This is why they pretend to be democratic, pretend to hold free and fair

elections, buy influence in the Council of Europe. And they cooperate among each other. The laws on NGOs or laws to suppress demonstrations in Russia, Azerbaijan, or Belarus are copies of one another.

Today the big question is: what will happen in Ukraine? There are some in Kiev who want Ukraine to be run along similar lines as Russia: a strong president, no checks and balances, a closed economy. And there are others in the country who oppose this, including some business people who realize the value of being next to the European Union – the biggest integrated market in the world. There is a clear choice: either the “managed democracy” model of Putin, which exports only raw material and the money of its elites, or real parliamentary democracy that every Ukrainian can see when visiting Poland.

It is in the EU’s interest to support democracy in Ukraine. Then, in free elections, Ukrainians can make their own choices. What the EU should oppose, however, is Russian interference and blackmail in its neighborhoods. Since Russia’s elite has much of what it values in the EU –its money, its houses, its families– the EU has enormous leverage (if it should chose to use it) to stop open interference. But the real choice between the Polish and the Russian model has to be made by the people in Ukraine in free and fair elections.

## How about Moldova and Georgia – how are their chances to “break out” looking?

In February 2013, Polish Foreign Minister Radoslaw Sikorski praised Moldova on his visit to Chisinau as “the greatest hope of the Eastern Partnership.” Recently, German Chancellor Angela Merkel said that

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“the Republic of Moldova has perhaps demonstrated the greatest political will of all Eastern partners to adopt and implement reforms.” Very soon, Moldovans will be able to travel visa-free to the EU. And so this landlocked country with a population of only 3.5 million has become the surprising frontrunner in the Eastern neighborhood.<sup>1</sup> But Moldova is still poor, and in the end it is only through economic integration and investment that this will become a real success story. In 2012 Moldova’s per capita GDP was some 1,590 euros, making it the poorest country in Europe. The contrast with Romania is remarkable. Today people on the West of the river Prut –the border between Romania and Moldova– live significantly better than on the East.

The policy question for the EU is whether it finally offers Moldova a true perspective of future integration later in 2014, which goes beyond the current association on the table. I very much hope it will. As for Georgia, I think everything the EU offered to Moldova needs to also be on the table for Georgia. The importance of a stable parliamentary democracy in Georgia for the South Caucasus cannot be overestimated.

**And the “rest”: Belarus, Armenia, and Azerbaijan? Is there a risk that European conditions regarding human rights push these countries into the lap of countries like Russia and Turkey, which do not impose conditionality but offer more immediate security, economic benefits?**

Which security benefits does Russia offer to Belarus? Neither Poland nor Lithuania nor Germany is a threat to Belarus. What we see happening instead is that the Russian regime supports another autocracy in Minsk. It is in the EU’s interest for Belarus to be a democracy above all else. There is nothing wrong if the people of Belarus

<sup>1</sup> “The Surprising Front-Runner: Moldova Before and After the Vilnius Summit,” *ESI Discussion paper*, 2 December 2013, [http://www.esiweb.org/pdf/esi\\_document\\_id\\_146.pdf](http://www.esiweb.org/pdf/esi_document_id_146.pdf)

chose, freely and in fair elections, to remain neutral and nonaligned, like Switzerland. However, the EU should, in its own interest in lasting stability, support the democratization of all of its eastern neighbors. It should make travel for young people from Belarus to the EU as easy as possible. It should target the elites in these autocracies with visa bans. It should support independent media, just as this has been done by Radio Free Europe during the Cold War. Trying to appease the regime in Belarus will not wean it away from its alliance with Moscow; democratization would.

Russia also exploits the conflict in the South Caucasus between Armenia and Azerbaijan to its own benefit. This is a tragedy for both societies. It suggests that Russia has every interest in this frozen conflict to remain frozen, whatever the consequences for the people on the ground. But this should not stop other European democracies from defending the values to which both Armenia and Azerbaijan committed themselves when they joined the Council of Europe in 2001. Let us not be *naïve*: to insist on human rights will not have an immediate effect. But let us also remember how insistence on basic human rights standards during the Cold War in Europe was used by dissidents in communist regimes to confront their regimes, and how this dissident thinking contributed to the changes in 1989. But why would pressure that Baku release its dissidents or allow free elections, if it wants to remain a member of the Council of Europe, drive the country into the arms of Russia? This is what we see today: autocrats exchanging experiences of how to suppress their own people. That has never brought stability anywhere.

It is one of the tragedies of European politics today that the Council of Europe, once created as the guardian of democratic values, has recently been captured by autocracies in the East. And it is very disappointing to see Turkey regularly side with the autocracies in Eastern Europe when it comes to issues of human rights in the Council of Europe.

**It seems fault-lines are appearing in this region over LGBT rights, with the Orthodox Church and Russia on one side and the EU and liberals on the other. Recently, EU conditionality has managed to forge progress in LGBT rights in Moldova, despite objection from the Orthodox Church. How did LGBT rights become a new frontier, and how does this relate to visa-free travel for countries east of the EU?**

In 2009, the European Parliament held a debate among young people from across the EU. When asked “What does Europe mean to you?,” “freedom to travel” was the most

popular response. During the past three decades the European continent has witnessed a revolution in border management and freedom of travel. The result has been dramatic. In 1985, European leaders signed the Schengen Agreement. This has led to the abolition of thousands of kilometers of land borders. In 1989, the Berlin Wall came down. In 1991, the EU lifted the visa requirement for Polish citizens travelling to Schengen countries. In 2001 and 2002, it abolished the requirement for Bulgarians and Romanians. In 2009, it was time for Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia, and in 2010 for citizens of Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina.

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This has been perhaps the most effective EU policy towards its neighborhood in recent years: to offer visa liberalization in return for clearly defined reforms. This has led to the EU designing visa liberalization roadmaps, and to lifting the visa requirement after these conditions are fulfilled.

The most recent success of Moldova is in many ways the most surprising. When the Alliance for European Integration came to power in Moldova in 2009, it chose visa liberalization with the EU as its top priority. In June 2010, the visa liberalization dialogue started. Moldova had to adopt laws and policies to ensure document security, manage its borders, and protect fundamental rights. It was soon clear that it performed exceptionally well. It started issuing only biometric passports and closely cooperated with FRONTEX – the EU’s border management agency.

To many people’s surprise, the biggest challenge Moldova faced on its path towards visa liberalization concerned gay rights. One of the requirements of the Visa Liberalization Action Plan was to pass antidiscrimination legislation protecting minorities, including sexual minorities. However, some public figures across the political spectrum responded to the EU requirement with statements describing gay and lesbians as abnormal. The Communist Party, for example, joined forces with the Orthodox Church, and in February 2012, Balti –Moldova’s second largest city– enacted a local ban on “aggressive propaganda of nontraditional sexual orientations.”

All this had earlier happened in Russia as well. In contrast, however, the Moldovan Parliament adopted an antidiscrimination law in May 2012. The law forbids all

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kinds of discrimination and explicitly refers to sexual orientation in relation to discrimination in the workplace. Further, in February 2013, the ban on “propaganda” was also struck down by a local appeals court as unconstitutional. This played a key role in convincing EU member states about the seriousness of the government in Moldova. It also holds important lessons for other countries that aspire to full visa-free travel, such as Georgia and Turkey.

**Turkey has a visa liberalization roadmap now. Does this mean Turkey will also need to acknowledge sexual minorities in its antidiscrimination legislation? Which EU institutions are in charge of monitoring this process? How can Turkish NGOs become more informed about what all this means for them and how they can take part?**

The European Stability Initiative (ESI) has long advocated in favor of visa liberalization for Turkish citizens.<sup>2</sup> Now, the visa roadmap has finally been handed over, last December. If the experiences of other countries are taken as a benchmark, this might lead to full liberalization within two to three years.

The reforms outlined in the visa liberalization roadmap are almost all in the interests of both Turkey and the EU. It should not be difficult for Turkey to meet them if there is political will. If Montenegro, Albania, and Moldova could do this, so can Turkey.<sup>3</sup>

At the same time, one of the most important challenges for Turkey will be to address the conditions concerning fundamental rights. The visa roadmap for Turkey states that “the right to liberty and security, the right to a fair trial and freedom of expression, of assembly and association in practice” needs to be ensured for visa liberalization to be granted.

2 “Cutting the Visa Knot- How Turks can Travel freely to Europe,” *ESI Report*, 21 May 2013, [http://www.esiweb.org/pdf/esi\\_document\\_id\\_139.pdf](http://www.esiweb.org/pdf/esi_document_id_139.pdf)

3 Documents and ESI analysis related to the visa liberalization processes of these countries and others can be found at: <http://www.esiweb.org/index.php?lang=en&id=483>

While nondiscrimination is not explicitly mentioned here, it has been central to every visa liberalization process in every other country, from the Balkans to Moldova and Georgia and Ukraine. It is also raised prominently in the EU's latest progress report, with half a page alone focused on discrimination of sexual minorities. The current legislation in Turkey is clearly not in line with the *acquis* either.

Here is the potential for a win-win situation. If Turkey meets the technical conditions of the roadmap –concerning document security and border management– and continues to help the EU to reduce illegal migration across its borders into the EU –as it has done successfully in the past year– then meeting the human rights conditions becomes the ace to win over even reluctant parliaments in the EU. If Turkey passes a nondiscrimination law, and passes the other human rights reforms outlined above, it will have a very strong case when it comes to getting the necessary votes in the European Council, which –and this is crucial– decides on this by qualified majority, so no single EU member state has a veto.

In this way, everyone gains. For this to happen, efforts and advocacy by human rights and civil society organizations become crucial, in Turkey and elsewhere in Europe. Learning from Moldova's experience here is actually a good starting point for Turkish NGOs as well.