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## How Attendant is the Theory of Inter- Civilisational Clashes within the EU` Eastern Neighbourhood?

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## How Attendant is the Theory of Inter-Civilisational Clashes within the EU` Eastern Neighbourhood?

Eugen LUNGU<sup>1</sup>

### *Abstract*

*Utilized as an ideological tool by state leaders, within the latest couple of decades, for the establishment of important action strategies, within the international arena, disavowed by important representatives of the academia, Samuel Huntington`s thesis about the clash between civilizations remains one noteworthy theoretical milestone in the realm of the security and geopolitical analyses. The Ukrainian conflict, through its confessional and ethnical structure of the diverging sides, has reopened, for the International Relations analysts, the debate regarding the accuracy of the thesis of the renowned political scientist. The article aims to analyze the degree in which the Ukrainian people, and other Eastern Neighbourhood people as well, through its cultural, religious and ethnic traits, is confronted with, or can be confronted with, in the forthcoming future with an inter-civilizational conflict, from the standpoint of Huntington`s theory.*

**Keywords:** *the thesis of the clash between civilizations, EU`s Eastern Neighbourhood, the Ukrainian conflict, inter-civilizational conflict, Eastern Partnership, geopolitical fault line.*

### 1. Introduction

Elaborated within the last decade of the XXth century, the well-known theory of Samuel Huntington, referring to the existence and to the persistence of a conflict between the civilizations of the contemporary

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world, is one of the most impressive theoretical constructs of the last quarter of a century, with a significant impact in the international sphere.

The principles and the theoretical pronouncements of the American political scientist, based upon elements of social, political, cultural, religious, etc. substance, lead to the conclusions, according to the author, that, after the oddment of the Cold War, the phenomena of planetary belligerence, as well as the intra- and inter-state conflicts, can be explained, within the accounts of a permanent conflict between planetary civilizations. Esteemed as a pseudo-theory by its opponents, who consider that the term of civilization has been approached, as well as utilized, in a rather simplistic manner, without a scientific founding, Huntington's theory continues to prevail as a theoretical domain of interest for the researchers in International Relations, but also for other researchers in the field of Socio-Humanistic sciences. For what reasons?

First of all, because, apart from the criticisms that the theory has been subjected to, from the inceptive years of its appearance, a series of theoretical principles, of pronouncements, and also a series of formulations with a predictive value, concerning the possibility of the unveiling of some conflicts in the so-called 'sensitive' geopolitical space, have proven, meanwhile, information that can be reasoned with, in the analysis of current International Relations.

Although the thesis of clashing civilizations has a quarter of a century old age, this theoretical construction continues to be relevant, both in academic research and in the field of international relations. Considering that the huntingtonian thesis is viable, respectively that planetary civilizations are currently in conflict stage a number of Islamist fundamentalist organizations motivate their appeal to extreme violence by referring to Huntington's thesis. This could be an additional argument, along with other elements of international relations, for the purpose of an in-depth analysis of Huntington's theory.

In this paper, we aim to analyze to which degree the principles formulated by Huntington can contribute to the explanations of some conflicts, which have taken place, within the former communist states of Eastern Europe, by revolving, most especially, about the civil war in Ukraine, started three years ago. Apart from the critiques ignited by Huntington's theory, regarding its scientific limitations, we do not believe, that this theory can be avoided or completely cancelled from analytical optical positions, by those who study the field of International Relations.

## **2. Theoretical Huntingtonian and non- Huntingtonian landmarks regarding the concept of civilization**

The conflicts of the post-Cold War era have taken place in various areas of the planet, where they have represented a challenge for the political scientists and for the theoreticians of the field of International Relations, from the perspective of elaborating solid and coherent theories, which can explain scientifically, in the new global context, the phenomena of extreme inter- and intra-statal violence.

The era of the Cold War, being one of ideological clash, has been situated at the forefront of analytical stands, and it was clear that this is due to the fact that some conflicts, which have followed, having a different `physiognomy`, new elements for the generation of conflictual undertakings needed to be found and, thereby, analyzed.

Huntington`s theory, formulated for the first time in 1993, begins with the acknowledgement that cultural differences between people are preeminent in reference to the ideological, political and economic ones.

Huntington defines civilization as “a group of people, with the highest cultural traits, and with a widespread level of cultural identity, that the people have and that distinguishes them, from other species. The cultural identity is defined by objective shared elements, like: the language, the history, religion, the customs, the institutions and by the subjective self-identification of the people” [1].

The author of the inter-civilizational clash theory shows, by way of consequence, the fact that people`s identity is defined today through the point of view of language, tradition, religion, history, values, institutions and customs. Huntington asserts theoretically his speech, by identifying, on the global level, various civilizations: the Western civilization, the Orthodox civilization, Latin America, the Muslim civilization, the Sinic civilization, the Japanese civilization, the Hindi civilization and the civilization of Sub-Saharan Africa [1].

By claiming that the world order has become multipolar and multicivilizational, Huntington reaches the conclusion that the West, as a civilization has entered a phase of decline. Likewise, the American political scientist affirms that non-Western civilizations promote their own cultural values, in the context within which the cooperation between societies, which are resembling each other, through a series of common elements, is intensified.

At the same time, the author discusses the idea that the political and ideological lines of demarcation, from the period of the Cold War, in the new geopolitical context, after the fall of the Berlin Wall, have been replaced

by crevices between civilizations, as possibly conflict-prone and crisis-prone zones, with a probability of bloodshed.

Considering that, after the end of the confrontation between the East and the West, the most important line of cultural demarcation in Europe is the one between Western Christianity, on the one hand, and Orthodox Christianity and Islam, on the other hand, Huntington suggests that the possibility of conflict-generation along this crevice is likely to be produced. As such, the line of crevice that Huntington envisions, starts from the Finnish-Russian border, separating Russia and the Baltic countries, separating Orthodox Ukraine from the Western Catholic geopolitical portion of this country, separating Transylvania from the remainder of Romania, and, following the layout of the old dividing border, in the Balkans, between the Habsburg Empire and the Ottoman Empire [1].

In the scientific literature, as compared to Huntington's visions, the concept of civilization is defined differently. A series of authors, already established and new-comers alike, approach the concept of civilization, from another perspective, which in consonance with the well-known classification of the contemporary civilizations, made by the American political scientist. To be more explicit, Huntington's classification represents one of the central elements of the theory regarding the clash between the current world civilizations, one of the essential theoretical landmarks on which the theory is built upon representing the most criticized element of Huntington's purview.

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, civilization is "the action or process of civilizing or of being civilized, developed, or advanced state of human society" [2].

According to the Sociology Dictionary of 1993, the terminology of civilization is utilized, in different meanings, in connection to the thinking traditions and to the discipline which defines this concept. Whilst culture represents the sum of spiritual values, civilization represents the sum of technological-material values, of economic goods, and of the material infrastructure of social life [3].

A few years before the nascence of Huntington's theory, a short definition is rendered by Fernand Braudel – "both moral and material values" [4]. Approached from the point of view of tradition, more than four decades ago, Alfred Louis Kroeber defined civilization as a way of thinking, a set of beliefs, and a way of life [5]. After other two decades, from Kroeber's definition, the American sociologist, Immanuel Wallerstein has defined civilization, through the use of the concept of culture, considering that civilization is "a combination of word outlooks, customs, structures and cultures" [6]. Furthermore, the Russian sociologist and geopolitician,

Aleksandr Dughin, has a rather interesting definition regarding the concept of civilization, believing, like Huntington, that religion is a fundamental construct of any civilization: "A civilization designates the stage of the appearance of writing, of social-political institutions, of cities, of professions, of technical improvements, of social class stratification, and of the inauguration of important theological and religious systems"[7].

Of course, other definitions can be mentioned, for their importance, concerning the concept of civilization, the scientific literature offering numerous examples, for this purpose, especially in the last few decades. Despite this fact, as we follow and dissect the last definitions, introduced above, religion is not in the foreground of the concept of civilization. Even if the classification of civilizations remains one of the criticized points of Huntington's theory, we cannot but wonder to what degree can religion be a focal point of a civilization, which can generate conflict-making, in manner we can find in Huntington's thesis.

### **3. Huntington's civilizational clash theory and a few landmarks regarding security in Eastern Europe**

The end of the Cold War, and, most especially the disappearance of the USSR, an event described by the president Vladimir Putin as "the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the last century", would be equivalent, in the short meantime, with the beginning of conflicts within different states, which have previously belonged to the communist sphere. Due to ethnical contradictions, that have taken place in the former totalitarian states, conflicts were fermenting to ignite, in countries situated in Eastern Europe, a few years from the fall of the Berlin Wall. If we take under advisement the Transnistrian conflict, the Georgian one, the one in Ossetia and Abkhazia, as well as the one in Eastern Ukraine, we can strongly claim that Eastern Europe is one of the regions, which has been profoundly met with the horrors of war, in the last quarter of a century.

How genuine can Huntington's theory be, related to the events unveiled in Eastern Europe, from the perspective of armed conflicts, after 1991? To credit Huntington's thesis, as far as the civilizational clash is concerned, means, implicitly, to generate viable explanations regarding the genesis of Eastern European conflicts, by utilizing intrinsic elements of the aforementioned theory.

In other words, we can explain the cause of some conflicts, by analyzing the civilizational differences, and by offering an important position to religion, in the same way Huntington does. After the 11<sup>th</sup> of September

2001 attacks, one could observe that more and more studies regarding the global or regional geopolitics have been paying an enhanced attention to the religious factor. Aleksandr Dughin, considered the most influential Russian intellectual under the Putin regime, is one of the contemporary thinkers, who considers religion a mainstay in the geopolitical analysis, appreciating that “in Ukraine, more than half of the population who is against NATO adherence, pertains to the Russian Orthodox Church, that is canonically subjected to Moscow’s Patriarch and tends to be closer to Russia. Civilizationally speaking, Ukraine’s Western territories are inclined towards Europe” [7].

It is obvious that Eastern European belligerence, from the last quarter of a century cannot be explained from a civilizational or religious standpoint, in the degree and manner pleaded by the American political scientist. This fact renders its actuality, as the geopolitical and security realities have demonstrated that conflict-engendering in this part of Europe has been of an inter-ethnic nature, the religious factor ranking secondarily. As in other geopolitical spaces, in Eastern Europe, also, one can identify an intra-state conflict, within the same “civilization”, and not conflictual fissures between different religious populations.

Making analytical allowance for the newest of the conflicts existent in Eastern Europe, the one in Ukraine, it is common knowledge, as we have dealt upon in the previous chapter, the fact that the separatist Eastern Ukraine, with a majority of the population of Orthodox religion, is in an armed conflict with the West of the state, with a majority of the population, of Greek-Catholic confession.

Even if Huntington considers Ukraine a „classic” case, from the point of view of his theory, the social reality in this state demonstrates that the Catholic and the Orthodox populations cannot be divided through a simple „border”. This kind of separation can be enacted only if we have at our disposal geopolitical criteria, and the ones regarding the socio-political realities of the state. Authors, like the Ukrainian historian Yaroslav Hrytsak, consider that the hungtintonian idea, based on which the Western part of Ukraine is a component of the Western civilization, and the Eastern part of Ukraine is a component of the Orthodox civilization, is highly flawed.

This author claims that the East and the West share similar cultural and civilizational traits, and that there is no line of division between the Eastern part and the Western part. With this end in view, the Catholics from Western Ukraine have borrowed elements of religious practice, which are specific to the Orthodox religion, dominant in the Eastern European space[8, p. 37-38]. For reasons like this, the conflict, which started to unveil in the year 2014, cannot be explained as a „fissure conflict”, generated by



religious differences, in the manner claimed by Huntington, but, certainly we can describe a clash of interests between state and supra-state actors, like the Russian Federation, EU and US. The interests of the Russian Federation, as far as Ukraine is concerned, do not have to be further demonstrated, if only we bear in mind the discussion by Robert Kaplan regarding Ukraine, a state considered by Moscow as „the core of the Kievan Russia”[9].

#### 4. Conclusions

Concerning Huntington's thesis, we can say that during the last decade of the 20th century, the theoretical approaches to international security, from the Huntington's perspective were frequently, but over time we can observe a low interest in the theoretical work of the American political scientist. In view of the security situation in Eastern Europe, following the annexation of the Crimea by the Russian Federation in 2014, but also the fact that Romania is in the vicinity of areas where armed conflicts can be expanded, we believe that the research of theories on the genesis of contemporary conflicts should be a permanent concern of the Romanian academic environment.

Beyond its scientific metes, Huntington's theory suggests, and we believe that it succeeds, to a really satisfactory extent, the necessity that, within the security analyses and within the area of current International Relations, the cultural and the religious factors should not be overlooked.

Considering that Eastern Europe has encoded a series of conflicts, in the last 20 years, which have juxtaposed different ethnic groups, and, also different populations. pertaining to opposite religions and confessions, we believe that the study of ethnical war-making should be open to influence, from the point of view of religious and cultural elements.

From this perspective, Eastern Europe, a geographical space, in which heterogenous religions, and, also culturally and religiously different populations coexist, represents a geopolitical area, in which, from our point of view, ethnic conflicts would not be forestalled, in the future. This type of conflicts, once ignited, can be amplified, through the influence of some factors, of cultural-religious substance, which separate even more the conflictual agents.

Even if we are congruent with some of the criticisms brought about by the theory of civilizational clash, the fact that Huntington's prediction, referring to the possibility of a conflict unveiling in Ukraine, almost a quarter of a century before it actually happened, proved to be actually correct, it



makes us think that a study of International Relations, within this approach, is not a foresight which should be neglected in the future.

What is doubtful regarding Huntington's vision? The fact that the civilizations, which are enumerated by Huntington, are in a perpetual state of conflict, and that, at the intersection of the "hungtingtonian civilizations", sooner or later, conflicts would be generated, is a rather distrustful hypothesis.

Why can't we accept this idea? Because in numerous zones of conflict, on the globe, the hungtingtonian lines of fissure do not produce, automatically, armed conflicts between the populations, which reside there. In this form and manner, we consider the fact that the civil war in Ukraine, even if it does not confront groups, which do belong to different religious confessions, it is based upon civilizational causes or hungtingtonian arguments. The causes of this conflict, that reached the attention of numerous specialists in Security Studies, are focused upon the Russian Federation's policy to maintain its influence in the "close neighborhood" and to its attempt to try to redesign, step by step, in another chassis, the old Soviet Empire.

As such, in the case of Ukraine, as well as in another situations of war-making across Eastern Europe, one cannot find conflicts generated by the hungtingtonian arguments, but rather by geopolitical, historical and security grounds. Even if we are at odds with Huntington's position, from the point of view of defining the concept of civilization, we must highlight the fact that the idea that culture influences more and more, presently, on the one hand, the processes of integration, and, on the other hand, the processes of state fragmentation, is very much resplendent in the geopolitical realities of Eastern Europe, of the last quarter of a century. Beholding the Russophone minorities existent in the states of the European East- Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia- as well as the more aggressive policy of Moscow in the former USSR states, the processes of fragmentation, as well the secessionist tendencies, with dangerous repercussions upon European security, would continue, as they had before.

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