

Do we detect some neo-Finlandisation in the Eastern neighbourhood?

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The term Finlandisation has dropped out of current diplomatic usage, since Finland has long since quit this state of affairs and Russia is not the Soviet Union. But still the term has stuck in the terminology of international relations texts with a distinct meaning: generically, a small state that acquiesces in the hard security sphere of influence of an authoritarian and hegemonic neighbour, while belonging at the same time to the liberal democratic and economic regime of the West. For me the term sprung to life again when talking to a civil society leader from Belarus in Prague in the margins of the Eastern Partnership summit of 7 May. I asked him what he made of Belarus joining the Eastern Partnership, with Moscow's apparent non-objection. He replied: "We have the impression that Moscow has come to see a certain Finlandisation of Belarus as unavoidable and even useful." For Belarus, neo-Finlandisation means remaining in Moscow's orbit for strategic security affairs (strategic military installations, 50% ownership of the gas pipeline, no question of NATO aspirations), but becoming more open to its EU neighbours for personal contacts and eventual political liberalisation and for modernising its economy. All this has the ring of plausibility to it.

How does this syndrome look further to the East? And is it likely to be a sustainable and stable formula? For example, in Moldova (Transnistria) and Armenia, the Russian military is present alongside its energy networks, neither has NATO membership aspirations, while both countries seek at the same time to gradually Europeanise. Ukraine hosts the Russian Black Sea fleet, due to be evacuated in 2017, but Foreign Minister Lavrov says that Russia wants to extend its lease there. Overall the strategic landscape becomes clearer: none of the six Eastern partners has a credible membership prospect for either the EU or NATO on the political horizon, the Russian strategic presence is sustained or growing throughout the region, and all countries seek political and economic 'Europeanisation' in varying degrees.

Is this a recipe for the stability of the wider Europe, or a recipe for a remake of the notorious instability of the buffer zones of European history? The Eastern Partnership was discussed explicitly at the EU-Russia summit in Khabarovsk on 22 May. The EU side argued that the Eastern Partnership was positive all round and was against no-one, although it was evidently spurred on by the August war in Georgia. President Medvedev said: "They did try to convince me, but they did not completely succeed".

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Russki *realpolitik* and hard power sits alongside EU soft power and liberal democratic values. It is one thing for these two very different animals to be realistic, responsible and mutually interdependent neighbours bilaterally – a plausibly stable proposition. But what happens when their respective presences co-habit in this buffer zone, whose states seem condemned to manage constant ambiguities in their political stances and to face constantly contradictory pressures?

The Finnish Finlandisation was stable and mutually beneficial for some decades, and then dissolved itself quietly and completely. But can the Eastern neighbours manage their affairs as smoothly? Only a naïve optimist could assume this. There are not only the risks of miscalculation and misunderstanding attached to the ambiguities and contradictions of such regimes. We saw these risks actually mutate into a short but dreadful war in Georgia last August.

Today the risks inherent in the confusions and ambiguities of Ukraine's relations with the EU and Russia are still just risks. But the political symbolism on display in Prague and Khabarovsk this month was not reassuring. What is clear is that neither the EU nor Russia is going to quit their overlapping neighbourhood, the EU gently encouraging political and economic Europeanisation, Russia seeking to consolidate its strategic security interests.

Are the two sets of leadership capable of achieving some more sincere convergence on some common European space, house, home, order or architecture? They seem already to have used every conceivable image as labels for a box that remains largely empty. For example, the EU finds President Medvedev's pleas for a new security architecture to be lacking in conceptual coherence and operational content. Russia dismisses the European Energy Charter, etc.

What should they do? The Eastern Partnership offers some ad hoc participation maybe by third parties such as Russia and Turkey, but this is marginal tokenism. Something more substantial and balanced between all major parties is needed. Last month we published ideas for some major projects that could bring together the EU, Russia, the Eastern partners and Central Asia. Let us add now another idea. Why not initiate a triangular EU-Russian-Ukrainian political dialogue, with all three as equal partners? Let it begin with an open search for confidence-building measures between the parties, together with discussion of urgent topics such as gas supply security.