

Eastern Partnership: Still a missing link in EU strategy?

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Poland's six-month chairmanship of the EU came to an end in December 2011. Politically, it was a very volatile period, with the Greek and Libyan crises that significantly altered the European foreign policy agenda and complicated Poland's initial intention to refresh the EU Eastern policy.

At the start of its term, there was a niche for Polish activity in the post-Soviet area, taking into account the 'Eastern fatigue' in Europe and the scaling down of the United States' commitment to Eastern Europe and the Caucasus as a result of the Moscow-Washington 'reset'. When Alexander Rahr, one of the key German experts in post-Soviet affairs, claimed in August 2011 that Poland in its capacity as the EU presiding country should become more actively engaged in Eastern Europe and the Caucasus, he most likely expressed the dominant expectations among Germany's political class. The logic of this 'Go East!' discourse was quite obvious: due to emergency situations in North Africa and Greece, Germany would not be able in the immediate future to streamline the EU's Ostpolitik and would be happy to pass on this task to Poland, taking into account Warsaw's co-authorship of the Eastern Partnership programme (EaP). Besides, Berlin is always hesitant to deeply engage with Russia's neighbours to avoid irritating Moscow and further alienating it from Europe.

Yet the reactions to these expectations from the very beginning were quite cautious. Some German analysts (for example, Stefan Meister from DGAP¹) argued for a stronger emphasis on the German-Polish co-management of the Eastern policy, using existing institutional tools such as the Weimar triangle. Warsaw made clear that too elevated expectations of its role might be misplaced, especially in the Caucasus where Poland did not want to engage with the frozen conflicts, leaving the initiative to Germany and France. Thus, Nicolas Sarkozy's visit to Baku and Erevan immediately after the Warsaw EaP summit in the beginning of October 2011 demonstrated France's own intentions in this conflict-ridden region.

¹ Stefan Meister, "A new start for Russian-EU Security Policy: The Weimar Triangle, Russia and the EU's Eastern Neighbourhood", Genshagener Papiere, No. 7, DGAP Analyse Kompakt, Berlin, July 2011.

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The EU's concerns

In fact, what the EaP produced during the Polish EU Presidency was the final declaration of the Warsaw summit, which acknowledged the European aspirations of the EaP countries and the principle of conditionality known as 'more for more'. The funding of the programme remains scarce. Yet the key structural problem with the content of the EaP is the proper balance between its political and technical sides. In the recent study by the Slovak Foreign Policy Association, the EaP was criticised for "unclear political leadership" and "missing political guidelines". This is indeed a crucial issue.

The EaP was from its very inception a political project aimed at supporting fragile democracies in Eastern Europe after the Russian-Georgian war in August 2008. This explains the rhetoric of the Warsaw summit that claimed that "the Eastern Partnership is based on a community of values and principles of liberty, democracy, respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, and the rule of law. All countries participating in the Eastern Partnership are committed to these values through the relevant international instruments".² There are two main problems with this evidently politicised approach. First, it looks so far a bit like wishful thinking: the concept of 'deep democracy' appears to be premature and hasty in times when even elementary democratic norms do not seem to be the evident guidelines for many ruling elites in EaP capitals. Second, the initial political design of the EaP is not substantiated by the political commitment on the part of Brussels to the core issue of the membership perspectives.

It is this lack of political commitment that Brussels is eager to compensate for by the technical offers to the EaP countries. Most of the EaP instruments (visa liberalisation, deep and comprehensive free trade) are technical by their nature, they are about implementing norms of the *acquis communautaire* in border management, phytosanitary control, etc. In this sense, the EaP may indeed be dubbed a modernisation project,³ focusing on tackling the issues of mismanagement, corruption, the shadow economy, lack of transparency and accountability, clan economy, etc. Within this logic, democracy can't be a pre-condition for membership in EaP, since none of its countries corresponds to the EU democracy standards. Against the backdrop of the prevailing managerial logic within the EaP, it becomes understandable why the EU is hesitant to intervene in a series of violence-prone over-politicised situations in those EaP countries facing the challenges of clashing identities, contested borders, complex interplay of inclusion and exclusion, etc. (Nagorno-Karabakh, Transdniestria, Abkhazia and South Ossetia).

The EaP as seen from Europe's 'near abroad'

In almost all six countries covered by the EaP, this programme faces implicit or explicit criticism, basically for the lack of incentives and prospects for membership. There are at least three issues that fuel sceptical attitudes from the EaP countries. The first is of a perceptual nature: while the EaP governments (except Belarus) view this initiative as a kind of common interface with the EU, for Brussels it is only an institutional platform for the EU's own policies towards the six neighbours.

The second issue stems from the first one: since the EaP is an EU tool designed for its own needs and convenience, it will inevitably be part of a broader system of the EU's external policies. On the one hand, both Brussels and Berlin have to implicitly adjust the tempo and

² <http://www.easternpartnership.org/community/debate/eap-after-summit>

³ Alexander Duleba and Vladimír Bilčík, "Taking Stock of the Eastern Partnership: Preliminary findings and discussion points", Research Centre of the Slovak Foreign Policy Association, supported by the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung and the International Visegrad Fund, October 2011.

the depth of the EaP to make it commensurate with the EU's relations with Russia, which include the negotiations on a visa-free regime, the Meseberg initiative,⁴ etc. On the other hand, Brussels has to accommodate the preferences of other EU member states that are not willing to pursue a 'Russia-first' policy. To be viewed in the framework of the EU-Russian relations seems to be unacceptable for countries located between these two powers and perceiving themselves as important elements of the pan-European order. Under these circumstances, manoeuvring between different poles becomes the core strategy of most EaP countries, of which Ukraine is perhaps the best example. Since both Moscow and Brussels have their own reasons (pragmatic and normative, correspondingly) to take critical stances towards the official Kiev, President Yanukovich hopes to reduce the criticism from the outside, using Moscow's aversion to the 'orange government' and Brussels' policy (mostly lobbied by Warsaw) to present Ukraine as the leading country in the EaP.

Thirdly, bilateral relations between the EU and each of the six 'eastern partners' evidently prevail over the common EaP agenda. The reasons for this are much deeper than simple failures in EU policies: the differentiation and fragmentation within the post-Soviet space are so profound that none of major world actors (including the EU, NATO or Russia) is in a position to contrive a common framework to incorporate most of them. This explains why the EU prefers to tackle the most urgent issues on a country-specific basis, rather than approaching its partners as a group.

The cases of Ukraine and Belarus are especially illustrative in this regard. There are voices in the EU that call for giving priority to those countries that show particular eagerness to closely interact with the EU, and Ukraine is certainly one of them. This country is critically important for the EU due to its ability to help relinquish exactly what Russia is eager to maintain – the old-style spheres of political influence. On 15 December 2011, Ukraine became the first EaP country to officially finalise a lengthy set of negotiations on a political association agreement with the EU, which to a significant extent was a counter-reaction to Russian economic and political pressure. Nevertheless Kiev was warned by Brussels that the agreement's ratification from the EU side is politically conditioned on the reversal of the Timoshenko verdict. This pressure, in our view, can bring results, since Kiev itself admits that, in the light of recent Russian-German energy projects that bypass Ukrainian territory, the country faces the prospect of marginalisation in Europe and a diminished ability to gain dividends from its geopolitical position between the EU and Russia.

A political rationale is also evident in the case of Belarus which demonstrates, in our view, the maximum that the EU may afford in sanctioning its neighbours. In the meantime, thanks to the coordinating role of Poland, Belarus was proposed a 'modernisation package', but only in exchange for political reforms and release of all political prisoners. This example is illustrative of the EU logic of politically engaging the country in a partnership through technical means.

Russia: A 'non-neighbour' but a partner

Russia, which earlier voluntarily refused to participate in the European Neighbourhood Policy and thus claimed its status 'above' the ordinary EU neighbours, does not seem to care much about the EaP and is eager to develop its own integrationist project. Only a few days

⁴ The June 2010 Meseberg Memorandum, signed by Chancellor Angela Merkel with President Dmitry Medvedev at Merkel's initiative, envisages creating an EU-Russia Political and Security Committee. This could potentially give Russia a voice in the EU's decision-making processes. To facilitate this, Berlin is asking Moscow to demonstrate its bona fides as a partner to the EU by facilitating a resolution of the Transnistria conflict.

after having announced his decision to run for president in the March 2012 election, Prime Minister Vladimir Putin published an article in "Izvestia" that looks like a concise enunciation of his foreign policy priorities for the next years in office. In it Putin calls the Customs Union a nucleus for post-Soviet reintegration, and makes clear that the Kremlin will heavily invest in this project, which in this case is doomed to present an institutional challenge to the EaP. The Russian initiatives on the Customs Union and Eurasian Union are more a resource for increasing the status of Russian leadership internally and externally than a well-thought out economic strategy. Such pompous moves reflect the character of the Kremlin regimes, which typically need great missions and success stories, even those existing only on paper.

Yet the reality on the ground looks much more difficult. Russia clearly lacks resources (both material and soft power) to play the role of the dominating party in the post-Soviet region. The ruling elite in the Kremlin is too technocratic and pragmatic for lavishly disbursing money to the neighbouring countries (as many of them certainly expect) without the promise of immediate payback; besides, the negative memories of the Soviet Union which sponsored its allies until the complete disintegration of the system are still alive. What is more, in spite of Putin's rhetoric, integrating the post-Soviet area does not look like the real essence of Russian economic policies: due to its heavy dependence on the export of energy, in practice it seeks to foster cooperative projects with the EU and China. Most experts have quite bluntly assessed the ceremonial opening of the Nord Stream pipeline by Dmitry Medvedev and Angela Merkel in November 2011 as conducive to a further weakening of Ukraine - which Moscow deems one of potential members of the Customs Union - in international energy markets.

A 'dead calm' or a respite?

It would be fair to describe the Eastern Partnership as an experimental EU project that, as demonstrated by other similar initiatives previously launched by the EU (Northern Dimension and the Barcelona Process), will most likely undergo serious institutional transmutation. What is more or less clear by now is the growing disparity within the group of six countries: Belarus is institutionally bracketed out from the project; the Timoshenko trial in Kyiv has alienated Ukraine from Europe; Moldova can't overcome its lengthy political deadlock provoked by deep divisions within the ruling elite; Georgia is desperately trying to maintain its higher profile as a pioneer in the good governance reforms; Azerbaijan is making efforts to promote itself as the most reliable partner in energy sphere, while Armenia has to pass the democracy test with the forthcoming elections in 2012.

Against this background, Warsaw faces new challenges. On the one hand, one of its key foreign policy priorities remains in the East, since Polish expertise in dealing with former Soviet countries is exactly what increases Poland's role and weight within the EU. Yet on the other hand, Warsaw could not neglect other events, including the effects of the 'Arab spring' for the entire West, as well as the deepening crisis in the eurozone. Under these circumstances, in its Eastern policy, Warsaw is eager to rely more strongly on the institutional resources of the Polish-German nexus, including the 'Weimar group' (Germany, France and Poland) and the German-Polish-Russian 'triangle' with its summit held in Kaliningrad in summer 2011.

Thus, by the end of 2011, all major actors were neither willing nor capable of making radical moves. The reasons for this relative passivity and inaction are different (Germany is trying to rescue the eurozone, Russia will be preoccupied until the next spring with a more complicated than anticipated presidential election, Ukraine is not rushing to raise its status in relations with the EU due to its fear of Russian economic sanctions, etc.), yet they result in a

combination of 'business as usual' and 'wait and see' approaches that appear to suit most of the actors. Yet within this status quo approach, there is some room for pro-active policies. Putin's projects for the Customs Union and Eurasian Union mean the intention to push Ukraine out of the status quo (which in practice boils down to free trade with both parties). Russia shows its readiness to alter the status quo in Transdniestria, but it seems that its political and diplomatic resources are insufficient for exerting effective influence on the local elites in Tiraspol, despite their almost total economic dependence from Moscow. This means that even if Russia is ready for political changes, it may not be able to implement them. As seen from the EU prospect, Russia's weakness may bring different policy effects: in the case of Transdniestria it can seriously damage the prospects of the Meseberg initiative and ultimately impede Russian-German relations, while in South Ossetia Moscow's failure to promote its candidate in the presidential election in fall 2011 makes the domestic situation in this breakaway territory more pluralistic and thus susceptible to EU influence(s).

And within Russia itself, with the mass-scale protest movement that erupted in the aftermath of the December 4 Duma election, the Kremlin appears to become politically much weaker and less credible than could have been imagined some months ago, which will undoubtedly add more vigour to the EU policies of democratising Russia. With more grassroots demand for good governance, transparency, accountability and democracy, the Kremlin's allying with either dictators or authoritarian leaders like Lukashenko, Karimov and others, will be increasingly challenged from within, which makes changes in Russia's neighbourhood policies a likely part of a new political agenda.