

The Incomplete Policy

Three Ideas for the Future of Eastern Partnership

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- While the European Union (EU) wants to keep the Eastern Partnership (EaP) on hold, the need for strategic vision of its relations with Eastern European countries is more obvious than ever. The diverging concepts of integration and enlargement among the EU states weaken the conditionality instrument in the implementation of economic and political reforms in the East European Six countries.
- The intended aim of bolstering horizontal connections between the East European Six (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine) from the early concept of the Eastern Partnership failed to materialize, therefore important stabilizing potential within the region was not achieved.
- It is not possible to build stronger resilience in the East European countries, especially in the case of Belarus and Armenia, without discussing and calculating their vital security challenges, which are connected in many ways with the Russian Federation.
- The diverse development paths of the East European Six should be supported within the framework of "Rings of Europe" that differ according to their state of integration. Instead of taking sides, the Eastern European Six should initiate a stability-promoting dialogue with the EU and Russia, in which above all regional security and economic growth issues could be discussed.

1. Introduction

»It is a partnership for, not against.«
(Federica Mogherini, 25.10.2017)

The 2017 summit in Brussels is probably the most challenging summit of the Eastern Partnership (EaP) since the launch of the European Neighbourhood Policy initiative in 2004. Unlike the summit's precursors in Vilnius in 2013 and Riga in 2015, on this occasion we are not dealing with a crisis response, rather the meeting in Brussels will be about achieving a face-saving compromise on the future of the EaP and thus is likely to be a slow moving attempt at the preservation of this institutional framework. In the face of multiple challenges facing the EU and the EaP countries it is hardly possible to achieve more.

There seems to be a lack of understanding of the long-term goals of EaP after it became clear that the EaP is not about eventual EU-membership. Furthermore, there is no expansion enthusiasm in the EU at the present time as the Union deals with populism, migration and the consequences of Brexit.

The latest operationalization efforts of "clusterization", "tailored fit approach" and support for self-help in the form of "resilience" and concrete "key deliverables" are inadequate and cannot disguise the obvious lack of a strategic vision within the EU as to how to achieve a stable eastern neighbourhood. Therefore, the expectations ahead of the Eastern Partnership Summit in Brussels on 24 November are low. The absence of unity in the EU and general uncertainty about how to deal with Russia correspond badly with the fractionalization of the "in-between states". This creates a cacophony of far-reaching and partly very radical suggestions regarding the future direction of the EaP. For example, Ukraine wants more integration beyond the existing association agreement, more grants and less credit; Lithuania warms to the idea of a "Marshall plan" for Ukraine; and the Netherlands wants to make sure that the EaP remains closely aligned with core aspects of Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA).

From the beginning, one of the main problems was the exclusion of Russia from the design and the ongoing processes of negotiations of the EaP's policy with individual countries. From Russia's perspective, after NATO's expansion further east, the EU's outstretched hand to the "states in-between" looked like another threat (that could eventually lead to the prospect of a proposal for EU and, more importantly, NATO membership) to what Russia perceives as her sphere of vital interests. While Russia feared the EU membership option, it seemed that the EaP offered a possibility that would result in these countries' ascent in terms of economy and security policy. Another problem inherent in the design of the EaP was that at the outset the EU never planned on offering an option of EU membership, but the countries in-between hoped for just that. It would seem apparent that the EU did not clarify the position sufficiently well. Russia's reaction eventually culminated in real aggression in Georgia and against Ukraine. As a consequence of the annexation of Crimea and the ongoing war in Eastern Ukraine, much trust has been lost on all sides. Nevertheless, Russia's involvement, directly or indirectly, for example through institutionalized dialogue with the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), would offer a much more sustainable economic future for the countries in-between.

2. The Evolution of the Eastern Partnership Policy

Before ...

Due to the Russian intervention in Georgia in 2008 and the growing tension between the European Union states and Russia over influence in the Eastern European region, Sweden and Poland felt the urge for a faster, more specified and more encompassing association of the “East European Six” with the EU than was originally envisioned in the EU’s European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP). In the then political situation, the EU considered the Six a homogenous group endangered by Russian influence and in need of economic and political reform. Due to the urgency and an insufficient awareness, the countries’ specific interests and diversity were not properly taken into account and a “one-size-fits-all” concept was applied to the “region”. The Eastern European Six leapt at the chance to associate with the EU, seeing it as an opportunity to catch up in terms of their economic and technologic modernization. On the one side, Georgia and Moldova’s EU-friendly governments hoped for a deeper integration that went further than a free trade agreement. On the other side, Belarus and Azerbaijan acted cautiously and strived towards integration with Russia. Ukraine under President Yanukovich was cooperating with both Russia and the EU, as its trade patterns demonstrated, which were almost balanced in terms of both. The Russian government seemed initially unimpressed by the EaP policy, but – after realizing the economic and political implications for Russia’s neighbour states and the potential negative implications for Russia’s economy – interpreted it as a measure directed deliberately against its interests. In part as a reaction to the EaP, Russia pushed forward Eurasian integration, initially in the form of a Customs Union with Belarus and Kazakhstan (launched in 2010) and later in the form of the Eurasian Economic Union (launched in 2015). Considering Ukraine a vital part of the project, Russia tried to persuade the Ukrainian president Yanukovich to join.

... the crisis ...

In the wake of the Vilnius summit in 2013, Russia tried to prevent Ukraine from signing the Association Agreement (AA) by means of economic and political pressure, which in part triggered the Euromaidan protests in Kiev. Consequently, the Ukrainian protestors drove Yanukovich out of office and strove for new elections. Russia intensified the pressure by annexing the Crimean Peninsula and conducting an undercover intervention in the Donbas region. The East European Six came to the painful realization that Russia would take high-risk measures to prevent their integration with the EU and other western institutions. After the Vilnius summit, the MUG states (Moldova, Ukraine, Georgia), who signed the AA and DCFTA, concentrated on benchmarks such as visa liberalization and the extension of export quotas. However, the ABA states (Armenia, Belarus, Azerbaijan), in response to the unsettled security situation in Europe, tried to find a balance between the EU and Russia. The EU stood with the new Ukrainian government as an ally both during and after Euromaidan, however, the Ukraine crisis revealed the danger for security and stability in (Eastern) Europe arising from the antagonism between the respective integration efforts of the EU and Russia.

... and after

The Russian intervention in Ukraine painfully demonstrated two things. First, that Russia was now willing to use military force to defend its interests. And second, that the EU perhaps had gone too far in its actions and failed to consult with Russia on an equal basis. Instead, the EU presented Russia with a *fait accompli*. However, the EU could not (or thought it could not) backpedal, reluctant as it was to be seen to give in to Russia, which increasingly became viewed as a threat. Instead the only change that followed was the revision of policy following the EaP summit in Riga (2015), in which the lack of membership perspective was clearly stated, the individual speed of each country in the reform process was accepted, and above all, the need

for an individual approach was stressed. This message helped the Eastern European Six to engage with the EU in a pragmatic discourse on material, technological and economic advantages and focus on tangible “deliverables”. In 2016 the EU stated clearly that Ukraine will not become an EU member state soon. It became obvious that the demand for specification of the approach towards these countries was overdue: While the MUG states pushed for a closer engagement with the EU and, in the case of Ukraine and Georgia, achieved visa liberalisation, the ABA states, in particular Armenia and Belarus as members of the Eurasian Economic Union, cooperated more closely with Russia. The case of Armenia is exemplary: it first negotiated the AA with the EU but at the last minute, contrary to the EU’s expectations, decided not to sign and opted for joining the EEU instead.

Competition between the EU (through EaP) and Russia (through the EEU) is unsustainable for the East European states and can have negative repercussions for European security. In order to change the situation, the reformed Eastern Partnership policy needs to combine two goals: most importantly, to improve the economy and security of the Eastern European Six; and also to find a non-confrontative approach for accommodating Russia rather than excluding it or not taking its interests into account. Having good relations with neighbours both to the west and east is in the best interest of the East European Six.

The Case of Armenia

Armenia is a good example how an EaP country strives for a balanced partnership with both East and West. After Russian involvement in 2013, the Armenian President Sargsyan chose not to sign the AA. Instead, Armenia joined the EEU and EU-Armenian negotiations stagnated but did not come to a full stop. In January 2014, a Visa Facilitation and Readmission Agreement, as well as a Protocol to the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) between the EU and Armenia were realized. After further negotiations, Armenia is about to sign a Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA) with the EU during the EaP summit in November. Whereas Armenia relies on Russia as its main security provider, it orients towards Europe for its economic development, especially because economic improvement through the EEU seems to be limited. The Armenian case highlights the interest of – at least some – EaP states to have balanced relations with both the EU and Russia.

3. Recommendations

Trilateral Dialogue: First of all, the EU, Russia and the EaP-countries need to establish a trilateral dialogue on equal terms. Russia’s interests in the region are to be recognized and taken seriously, at the same time consideration must be given to the sovereignty of other countries. To solve the security deadlock (and the economic consequences) facing Eastern Europe since the fall of the Iron Curtain, the EU should involve Russia as a neighbour with its own interests in negotiations about a vision for this region’s future. There are pragmatic voices in the EU that recognise the advantages of such an approach that could persuade more sceptical EU members.

It is equally important to diminish the inherent inconsistencies in the EaP’s aims. The EU needs to stress once more that prospective EU-membership for the EaP’s states is not envisaged in the near future. Reforms in the six states should be enforced for the benefit of their citizens and not simply to meet the EU’s membership requirements – that would pose not only the danger of the unsustainability of reform, but also question the intrinsic desire for reform.

Economic Connectivity: Building on the prospect of informal dialogue, communication between the three partners should be institutionalized and formalized. In this context the Eurasian Economic Union should be invited to EaP summits as an observer. The EaP countries need a reliable guarantee that cooperation with both partners and their respective economic unions is possible and desired. The trilateral platform would permit the frequent exchange of information, offer the possibility of further approaches and give common projects a space and time in which to be discussed. As a positive consequence, mutual trust will grow for finding further solutions to the region’s current and long-lasting conflicts. The in-between-states would – without the temptation of EU-membership – be able to uphold good relations with all regions,

which makes their bargaining position much more effective, rather than having a one-sided dependence on the EU and a complicated relationship, charged with tension, with Russia and the EEU as a whole.

As a long-term goal, even though hardly seen as possible nowadays, the EU and the EEU should enhance economic connectivity and establish a common free trade zone stretching “from Lisbon to Vladivostok” as envisioned by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). This would solve the precarious competition between the two trading blocs; membership in either bloc would be thus de-politicized if a single free trade zone were formed. This would bring benefits for all sides involved, especially the EaP countries. It would lay the foundation for a common security area in the spirit of the Charter of Paris.

The Four Rings of Europe: On a wider scale and in a long-term perspective, Europe needs to be completely rethought. Europe is defined by more elements than the EU and should not be viewed as comprising of only first-class countries (EU members) or second-class countries (non-EU members). Instead, we propose the concept of “The Four Rings of Europe”, which has been also discussed recently by the Economist: they are equally important for the well-being of the continent and should have a chance to shape its future, following their appropriate developmental paths.

All Four Rings, though differing in their depth of integration, share an overall understanding of being part of Europe and could benefit from a stable and secure environment through close economic ties. With effort and imagination, the legacy of the Cold War— the division of Europe—could finally be overcome. The Four Rings of Europe could consist of:

- Core EU member states;
- EU member states with less enthusiasm about further integration;
- European states such as Switzerland, Norway, and soon the United Kingdom;
- European states such as the East European Six, Serbia, and Russia.

3. Conclusion

We recognize that, to date, participation of Russia lacks supranational and intergovernmental political majorities and the Russian leadership sees itself in a multi-level confrontation with the West, confronted by endangered security interests in the wake of the Euromaidan. However, despite all the open and hidden divergence, the EU should understand that in the EaP’s objectives, above all, the consideration of the socio-economic modernization potential of the Eastern European Six should come first.

The diversity of development paths of these countries should be supported in the framework of the Rings of Europe that would differ according to their state of integration. Instead of taking sides, the six countries should engage with the EU and Russia in a trilateral dialogue to guarantee their safety and economic integration.

As has been shown, a trilateral dialogue and economic integration will clearly benefit all partners involved. The positive side effects, such as mutual trust, will help to dissolve the region’s conflicts. Different paces of integration and an individual strategy will not only permit the recognition of each country’s special interests but also their state of development. The dilemma of the in-betweenness will be solved: Armenia can already be used as a positive example of what is possible. This solution would also put a stop to the constant polarization of societies, as seen in Moldova in recent years. In the end, negotiations and dialogue are worth a try as they cost little but have the potential to change the unsatisfactory and unsustainable status quo. The idea of an Eastern Europe engaged through economic connectivity and organized through differing rings of integration, overcoming the Cold War dualism, is not new, but should be given a fresh chance.

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The FES office in Vienna

The goal of the Regional Office for Cooperation and Peace in Europe (ROCPE) of the FES in Vienna is to come to terms with the challenges of peace and security in Europe since the collapse of the Soviet Union a quarter of a century ago. These issues should be discussed primarily with the countries of Eastern Europe – Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine – and with Russia, as well as with the countries of the EU and with the US. The security order of Europe, based until recently on the Helsinki Final Act (1975) and the Paris Charter (1990), is under threat. This is, among others, a result of different perceptions of the development of international relations and threats over the last 25 years, resulting in divergent interests among the various states.

For these reasons, ROCPE supports the revival of a peace and security dialogue and the development of new concepts in the spirit of a solution-oriented policy. The aim is to bring scholars and politicians from Eastern Europe, Russia, the EU and the US together to develop a common approach to tackle these challenges, to reduce tensions and to aim towards conflict resolution. It is our belief that organizations such as the FES have the responsibility to come up with new ideas and to integrate them into the political process in Europe.

We support the following activities:

- Regional and international meetings for developing new concepts on cooperation and peace in Europe
- A regional network of young professionals in the field of cooperation and peace in Europe
- Cooperation with the OSCE in the three dimensions, the politico-military, the economic and the human