



Tomasz Stępniewski

The European Union and Eastern Partnership: Crises and Strategic Assessment*

Abstract: The EU's Eastern Partnership is frequently perceived as an inefficient policy. One may even risk saying it has become obsolete. Is it true that the EaP has not lived up to its expectations? Are we dealing with insecurity with regards to the EaP's future and objectives? Will Russia's actions towards EaP's countries contribute to the policy's objectives becoming unachievable? Will the EU, facing crises (especially the migration crisis) and the prospect of Brexit itself, be able to consider the position EaP's countries are in? Will Poland, supported by V4 states, be able to convince EU countries to become actively invested in the affairs in the East?

Seven years after the introduction of the EaP, its achievements, objectives and possibilities need to be revisited. Such a need has become even more pressing due to the EaP summit planned to take place in 2017 (to be held in Brussels or Tallinn – the location has not been fixed yet). A change of both the approach and narration as far as the EaP and countries it encompasses is necessary.

Keywords: EU's Eastern Partnership, European Union, Ukraine, EU's neighbourhood.

Introduction

The EU's Eastern Partnership (EaP)¹ is frequently perceived as an inefficient policy. One may even risk saying it has become obsolete. Is it true that the EaP has not lived up to its expectations? Are we dealing with insecurity with regards to the EaP's future and objectives?

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1 The Eastern Partnership was initiated by Poland and Sweden in 2008. The project was launched by the European Union at the Prague Summit on 7th May 2009. The EaP is a European project addressing six countries in the EU's eastern neighbourhood: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine.

Will Russia's actions towards EaP's countries contribute to the policy's objectives becoming unachievable? Will the EU, facing crises (especially the migration crisis) and the prospect of Brexit itself, be able to consider the position EaP's countries are in? Will Poland, supported by V4 states, be able to convince EU countries to become actively invested in the affairs in the East?

1. The EU and EaP countries – overview of the current situation

According to a representative of EEAS (European External Action Service), the EaP is a mature project². Despite the fact it has been losing momentum, and peculiar period of time the project has been running in, one cannot forget that the Vilnius and Riga summits' resolutions are being successfully implemented³. Multilateral platforms are still in operation, meetings on various levels are held. The problem may be that the meetings are inconspicuous. Nevertheless, they do take place, and exert smaller or greater impact upon the situation of EaP's states.

Undeniably, the greatest issue the EaP is faced with is the perception of the project in geopolitical categories. Considering EaP's states in the context of a choice to be made: either the EU or Russia (when listening to EU decision-makers, it seems that these are the only available options), may be the greatest sore of the project. When Poland and Sweden initiated the EaP, they did not foresee the signatory countries would face such a choice. The issue is extremely challenging and entails several difficulties (in case of Ukraine, these are existential in character). Unsurprisingly, the policy leading up to the EU membership is the most effective. The lack of such a prospect deprives the EU of a leverage as far as these countries are concerned⁴. However, that fact that, currently, EaP countries are not ready for European integration (as far as virtually all membership criteria are concerned)

2 Interview 1, European External Action Service (EEAS), Headquarters Brussels; Russia Division, 15 September 2016.

3 Interview 2, Permanent Representation of the Republic of Poland to the European Union, Brussels, 13 September 2016.

4 Interview 3, European External Action Service (EEAS), Headquarters Brussels; Eastern Partnership, regional cooperation and OSCE, 15 September 2016.

is noteworthy. At this point, it is worth mentioning that according to the latest corruption perceptions indexes, in 2005 Ukraine ranked 107 worldwide. However, in 2015, its ranking decreased to 142nd position. Moreover, not all countries associated in the EaP express willingness for EU integration. Even though Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine desire to be integrated and implement AA/DCFTA, Armenia, Azerbaijan and Belarus do not do so. On the other hand, Armenia has been participating in DCFTA negotiations aiming for the agreement to be signed (in a form which would not collide with Armenia's involvement since 2014 in the Eurasian Economic Union led by Russia). Should the negotiations be successful, the floor for further talks with Azerbaijan and Belarus would be opened⁵. Moreover, the public in EaP countries is also divided as far as the EU integration is concerned.

When considering EaP countries' internal situation, the most effective solution for the EU would be to place emphasis upon pragmatism, flexibility and search of opportunities for cooperation⁶. Clearly, the EU policy ought to be based upon "more for more" principle (one which is not enforced in the ENP anymore, but whose rationale still functions in the framework of the European Neighbourhood Policy)⁷. The EU ought to apply "less for less" principle towards EaP countries as well. Examples of such a pragmatic approach are seen in support for reforms in EaP states. The effectiveness of these reforms translates directly into the efficiency of these countries' transformation. Should the reforms fail, it will be difficult to speak about the relationship between the EU and EaP states becoming stronger. It ought to be clearly asserted that the EU cannot do EaP countries' homework for them. They must make an effort to reform, transform and be willing to do so themselves. As a consequence, the EU ought to invest much more substantial financial resources for reforms in these countries. However, corruption is clearly a problem e.g. Moldova has recently defrauded EU resources.

5 Interview 1, European External Action Service (EEAS), Headquarters Brussels; Russia Division, 15 September 2016.

6 Interview 2, Permanent Representation of the Republic of Poland to the European Union, Brussels, 13 September 2016.

7 M. Popowski, Deputy Director-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations (DG NEAR), European Commission, during a panel discussion on "Money in Politics: State-building, democracy and corruption in the Eastern Neighbourhood", European Endowment for Democracy and the Office of International IDEA, Brussels, 16 September 2016.

On 22nd September 2016, the World Bank published its forecast on the economic situation in Ukraine. According to the Bank's data "the economy grew by 0,8 percent in the first half of 2016, compared to a contraction of 16 percent in the first half of 2015, but significant recovery and growth have not yet taken hold except in select sectors"⁸. The Bank sees the reforms as too slow, and weak internal demand along with the conflict with Russia, undermine chances for Ukraine's economic revival. It is high time the EU takes action. Ukraine is unable to cope with the scale of problems and the war in Donbas with Russia on its own.

The liberalisation of visa requirements constitutes a further issue. Even though Moldova is incorporated in the no-visa traffic, Ukraine and Georgia are not. Although Ukraine has met all the EU requirements for the no-visa traffic, the final decision has not been made yet. Works on a safety mechanism are underway in the EU i.e. a suspension mechanism in case countries under the mechanism violate regulations of the visa-free travel in the EU. The mechanism is designed for the purpose of a prospective no-visa traffic with Turkey, which works against Ukraine. The combination of these issues postpones the implementation of the project in Ukraine and Georgia. Moreover, the fact that Ukraine does not control its whole territory (Crimea was annexed by Russia, the war in Donbas rages on) cannot be forgotten. This, according to some member states, questions the implementation of the no-visa traffic. Hopefully, Ukraine and Georgia, like Moldova, will sooner or later be granted the no-visa travel privilege in the EU. The European Parliament sent a positive signal with this respect in September. From the point of view of the EU policy's efficiency, it is critical that the public of these countries does not fall hostage to the political situation. Even though Ukraine's oligarchy and other authoritarian systems of EaP's countries are very much alive and kicking, the general public of these countries ought to be able to visit the EU freely. It is even more important due to the EU's people-to-people contacts policy enforced towards EaP's countries. Moreover, the EU ought to support civil society, young politicians and political leaders who seek changes, various media, and SMEs, etc. in these countries.

8 The World Bank, Ukraine Economic Update, September 22, 2016, <http://pubdocs.worldbank.org/en/705541474523591719/WB-Economic-Update-September-2016-en.pdf>.

A thesis that political systems in these states are likely to change in the near future may be posed. Therefore, the EU ought to support civil society and bottom-up initiatives. It was the general rebellion against Yanukovich's regime, named the Euromaidan (or the Revolution of Dignity) in Ukraine in February 2014, which led to the change in the country's political situation. This is the reason for Ukraine's, and to a lesser degree other EaP countries', civil potential being strong. EU decision makers ought to bear this fact in mind.

2. Russia and its fait accompli policy towards the EU's Eastern Neighbourhood

EaP's countries do not function in vacuum but depend on internal and external factors. Among the external ones, actions of both the EU and Russia seem vital. Therefore, from the point of view of EaP's states, considering Russia's objectives (realistic and not declared ones) with regards to these countries seems critical. This is done in order to identify Russia's tactical, but also strategic objectives towards EaP's, and post-Soviet, states in general. It can be said that since the very beginning of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, Russia intended to destabilise the situation in southern and eastern Ukraine in order to disconnect the areas from the country or to turn them into "occupied territories" or establish a quasi-state in the area (as in the case of Transnistria). Importantly, Russia widely uses propaganda in the conflict with Ukraine. The West should take measures in order to curb Russian propaganda in Ukraine. Ukraine is experiencing not only a news blackout, but also a misinformation campaign which is intended to destabilise the internal situation in the country. Russian propaganda is spread by Russian mass media, television being an important instrument of implementing Russian policy in Ukraine. Hence, the EU needs to find a way to support the independent (or, at least not pro-Russian) media channels – or even consider setting one up. An example is already in operation, with the BELSAT channel aimed at Belarus but operating from Poland⁹.

9 T. Stępniewski, *The EU's Eastern Partnership and the Way Forward After Riga*, "International Issues & Slovak Foreign Policy Affairs", vol. XXIV, no. 1-2, 2015, pp. 17-27.

Moreover, Dmitri Trenin observes that „Russia’s Ukraine policy is in the spotlight once again over the fragile ceasefire in Donbas and talk of resurrecting the so-called Normandy format negotiations between the leaders and foreign ministers of Ukraine, Russia, Germany, and France on resolving the conflict in eastern Ukraine. Moscow should realize that Kiev’s anti-Russian stance is here to stay, and reassess its long-term policy regarding its neighbour accordingly”¹⁰.

According to Russian politicians, swift democratic reforms in Ukraine pose a deadly threat for Russia’s interest and its political decision-makers. Clearly, Ukraine’s democratisation will only be possible with the assistance and close cooperation with western structures. Russia is well aware of this fact, and it is the reason for its strong opposition for the prospect of Ukraine becoming EU and NATO member. One may go as far as to claim that Russia’s strategic objective for Ukraine is to prevent its democratisation and integration with the West.

Sergey Karaganov, a recognised researcher who frequently comments on Russia’s international policies in western media, often stated that Russia will never become a global superpower unless it succeeds in being a regional one. As a consequence, according to several researchers, Ukraine is critical for Russia’s supremacy. Undeniably, Russia is capable of becoming a regional superpower, and to play a key role in international politics in the future. However, the war with Ukraine questions its ability to achieve such an objective.

Despite the above, the fact that in the past two decades Russia was significantly determined to reintegrate the post-Soviet space ought to be noted. From Russia’s perspective, ensuring its hegemony in the space and forcing the West out will enforce its imperial character in regional and global dimension, and will enable a series of lesser socio-economic interests to be achieved. Moreover, in order to protect its zone of influence, Russia did not hesitate to adopt a confrontational approach towards the West. In addition, the fact that the dependence of Ukraine and other EaP member states on Russia’s influence is considerable ought to be highlighted. In other words, Russia has numerous instruments to influence the situation in these countries. EU

10 D. Trenin, *Russia’s Next Move on Ukraine*, Carnegie Moscow Centre, 27.09.2016, <http://carnegie.ru/commentary/2016/09/27/russia-s-next-move-on-ukraine/j6oe>.

policy makers are fairly often unaware of how much the EaP countries depend on Russia¹¹.

Conclusions

Seven years after the introduction of the EaP, its achievements, objectives and possibilities need to be revisited. Such a need has become even more pressing due to the EaP summit planned to take place in 2017 (to be held in Brussels or Tallinn – the location has not been fixed yet). A change of both the approach and narration as far as the EaP and countries it encompasses is necessary. Symbolism is also a vital element of politics, and the EaP summit in 2017 along with the new approach towards the project constitute such a symbol. Moreover, the predicament of EaP's countries has been pushed to the background. As a consequence, the V4 ought to bring about the issue of EaP's states and Russo-Ukrainian conflict in Donbas. Ukraine crisis constitutes a challenge not only for Ukraine's security, but also for European and international security and order. Paul Ivan observes that the EU needs to highlight that it was Russia who annexed Crimea, Russia who is waging war against Ukraine, and Russia who violated international law¹². EU sanctions imposed on Russia constitute a proper response with regards to the *fait accompli* policy applied by the Federation. As a consequence, the EU ought to enforce Minsk II agreement and its implementation by Russia. The EU also needs to work out a mechanism to respond efficiently enough to emerging crises in its immediate vicinity. The situation in the eastern neighbourhood confirms that far-reaching changes are required. It will be difficult to reach a compromise on this issue if even the states under the EaP project failed to reach a consensus on whether or not the annexation of Crimea by Russia should be condemned.

11 Wider: T. Stępniewski, *The EU's Eastern Partnership and the Way Forward After Riga*, "International Issues & Slovak Foreign Policy Affairs", vol. XXIV, no. 1-2, 2015, pp. 17-27.

12 Interview with Paul Ivan from the European Policy Centre, Brussels, 12 September 2016.

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