

The EU's Eastern Partnership: promotion of fundamental European values or a geopolitical rivalry?

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Abstract

This paper examines the EU's Eastern Partnership (EaP) initiative within the framework of idealistic and geopolitical dimensions and argues that the EaP has not become as much successful as enlargement policy; accordingly it is inevitable for the EU to review this strategy. It is suggested that the main problem which caused the failure of the EaP is an ambiguity of the project and consequently the EU's inability to find right balance between its geopolitical interests towards the region and its core values. In other words, it is still uncertain whether the EaP is a framework for democratic institution-building in the post-Soviet region or it is an attempt to weaken Russia's traditional influence in six partner countries. The EU's indecisive behavior in contingency like Ukrainian crisis which erupted after and largely as a consequence of the EaP 2013 Vilnius Summit as well as a general state of bilateral and multilateral relations with partner countries clearly demonstrates that the EU's strategic approach have varied between economic interests (especially in terms of EU-Russia relations and energy security issues) and its commitment to a core target of the initiative in terms of value-based transformation. The EU in terms of EaP has been demonstrating inconstancy and switching from a liberal rhetoric to a realpolitik approach and vice versa. Such a situation reveals some important geopolitical challenges which hinder the EU's ability to become neither a "normative" nor a "geopolitical" power in the post-Soviet region.

Keywords: European Union, Eastern Partnership, convergence, democratization, value-based transformation, geopolitical competition, conditionality, post-Soviet countries, Russia

Introduction

After several rounds of enlargement when the European Union's capacity to integrate more countries has structurally and financially weakened its neighborhood policy started focusing on new initiatives of mutual cooperation and partnership with contiguous

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countries based on fundamental European values rather than enlargement policy with clear membership perspective.

The Eastern Partnership (EaP) as one of the offshoots of the European Neighborhood Policy has become the EU's main policy initiative in Eastern Europe and South Caucasus. Forged by Poland and Sweden, the project was launched in May 2009 as a specific approach to Eastern neighbors and comprises six post-Soviet countries: Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, Azerbaijan, Armenia and Georgia. Aiming to ensure further rapprochement with the EU it envisages the promotion of stability, effective governance and economic development, facilitation of the visa regime and ensuring energy security. The initiative is a framework for fundamental transformation in the region based on common European values such as democracy, rule of law, respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms and good governance. The initiation of EaP project to a certain extent meant recognition of these six post-Soviet countries as an integral part of modern Europe which implies the possibility of their acceptance to the EU in the perspective. However the EaP does not include a membership prospect for these partner countries and merely focuses on forging closer ties with six countries and mutual convergence with the EU.

Five years after its launch, the EU's project to bring former Soviet states closer to the European order is in uncertainty as Moscow strives to maintain influence leverages over the region. Though a certain level of a political dialogue has been reached between the EU and six partner countries in the reality most of the targeted reforms in partner countries are inadequate particularly in terms of democratization. On the other hand, Russia's increasingly fierce and ambitious tactics towards the region aimed to preserve its influence in this post-Soviet area has become an evident challenge for EU's aspiration to Europeanize the region. In this sense the EaP November 2013 Vilnius Summit has become a turning point for the initiative and since then it has been facing substantial challenges. Ukrainian crisis and ongoing deterioration of the EU-Russia relations has created a dangerous situation of insecurity in the region. All these developments which are largely the consequences of the EU's eastern strategy have influenced its EaP initiative and forced experts to reflect on its prospects as a framework for relations with South Caucasus and Eastern Europe. In this sense, the EaP is considered as the EU's another foreign policy failure. Therefore there is a necessity for the EU to review and revamp this policy. Before considering challenges and difficulties for the EU's eastern strategy we will briefly examine the content of the EaP and its short historical development in terms of concrete achievements.

Eastern Partnership: from Prague to Vilnius

Recognizing the limits and ineffectiveness of the European Neighborhood Policy's (ENP) single framework of cooperation for completely different countries situated in completely different regions the EU in May 2009 Prague Summit launched The Eastern Partnership as an eastern dimension of the ENP which was designed for substantial improvement of the level of EU's engagement with the six countries in the Eastern Europe and South Caucasus. Largely this process was also accelerated by the January 2008 Russian-Ukrainian gas dispute and sped up by the August 2008 Russian-Georgian war, which were a harbinger of the potential instability approaching the neighboring region.

Declared objectives of the EaP were to advance the political association and economic integration of the EU with six partner countries. It sought to deepen cooperation and approximation of these countries to the EU standards through fostering their political and structural reforms and suggesting them financial incentives. A final goal of the initiative is to bring to a creation of a free-trade area which would provide partner countries with an access to the European markets. The principle of conditionality was stated as a basis for any progress in relations with partner countries. In other words, the perspectives of mutual cooperation should depend on the level of economic and political reforms enacted in partner countries which means for more progress in actual reforms in certain partner country, the more financial incentives the EU can provide.

The EaP does not envisage a membership perspective for the partner countries; instead it focuses on a target to reinforce cooperation with and among the partner states through bilateral and multilateral cooperation. These two tracks of cooperation in turn are the main features differentiating the EaP initiative from the ENP. On bilateral dimension the EU offers new contractual relations, an advanced and progressive integration into EU economy, easier travel to the EU, enhanced energy and transport cooperation and financial support for economic and social development.² At first glance it seems that this dimension does not bring much new to the already existing bilateral relations. However the most important feature of the partnership is that the EU offers to sign the Association Agreement (AA) which provides enhanced political association, increased political dialogue, deeper cooperation on justice and security issues. The AA is a bilateral document and a legal framework for cooperation between the EU and a partner state the structure and content of which depend on the partner state's

² "The Eastern Partnership. The European Union and Eastern Europe", available at http://eeas.europa.eu/eastern/docs/eap_vilnius_ppt_201113_en.pdf

commitment to reforms and democratization. The AA also includes the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA). Comparing with previously existing Partnership and Cooperation Agreements within ENP the DCFTA is considered as the most crucial novelty of this strategy. It aims to improve access to goods and services, reduce tariffs, quotas, barriers to trade, ensure stable legal environment, align practices and norms with partner countries.³ It requires adopting the EU's legislation in different spheres. Another important aspect of the new bilateral relations in the frame of the EaP is a creation of grounds for cooperation not only with the official authorities but also with the people of partner countries which is actualizing through a liberalization of the visa regime.

The second way to achieve the EaP's objectives is a multilateral track which provides a framework for the EU and partner countries to address common issues as a group since it envisages a forum to share experience and information, discussion of topics of common interest and cooperation on joint projects. For this purpose the EaP includes four multilateral thematic platforms and several flagship initiatives. Thematic platforms represent four main areas of cooperation: democracy, good governance and stability; economic integration and convergence with EU policies; energy security and contacts between people.⁴ The functioning of these platforms includes participation of official representatives of government ministries and agencies, parliaments, civil society institutions, international organisations, international financial institutions, and the private sector partners. The underlying logic of multilateral cooperation is an idea that working together on certain challenges partner countries might influence each other in their approximation to the EU. Therefore, countries like Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia which explicitly declare their interest in forging closer ties with Europe and have determined this as a foreign policy priority will play a model role for countries that remain more reluctant towards the EU and less willing to meet European standards on issues like rule of law, human right, liberalization and democratization.

Through the multilateral track which brings partner countries closer for exchange and cooperation the EaP offers new channels for dialog and diversified cooperation of civil societies, parliamentarians and representatives of local governments from the partner and EU countries. Newly established EaP structures such as Civil Society Forum, Euronest Parliamentary Assembly and Conference of Regional and Local Authorities for the Eastern Partnership are serving for this target. The most positive aspect of such

³ "The Eastern Partnership. The European Union and Eastern Europe", available at http://eeas.europa.eu/eastern/docs/eap_vilnius_ppt_201113_en.pdf

⁴ Ibid.

platforms is that they can make EaP not merely authority-based program but open it for citizens, students, businessmen and non-governmental organizations.⁵ However the effectiveness of such platforms in achieving convergence with Europe is limited by the internal differences between partner countries; despite their common historical soviet past these six countries of Eastern Europe and South Caucasus situated in two different regions, have different foreign policy aspirations and territorial conflicts.⁶ All these factors limit their ability to constitute a single political, economic and geographical unity.

Though through the initiative the EU has expanded tracks for deeper engagement with the region in its early stage of development the initiative was mostly perceived as a limited instrument for cooperation. Nevertheless, it is understandable that such an ambitious and wide-ranging policy could not illustrate tangible results in achieving the objectives of the Partnership in such a short period. It should be emphasized that the process of making crucial decisions concerning the EaP issues from the very beginning was also slowed down by the existence of different points of view among the EU member states over the perspectives and necessity of such a policy.

During the EaP's last Summit in Vilnius in November 2013 it was expected to reach a breakthrough in relations with the partner countries. However it resulted with a great disappointment and was regarded as a failure of EU's eastern policy. The most important failure of the summit was the refusal of Ukrainian government to sign the Association Agreement with the EU though it was seen as a country which had made the most progress in satisfying the requirements for such a deal. Then president of Ukraine Viktor Yanukovich referred his decision to inconsistency of certain provisions of the trade agreement to country's national interests and insufficiency of funds allocated by the EU to compensate for potential losses of Ukrainian economy. However it was evident that this reversal was a consequence of Russia's pressure tactics such as unilateral trade sanctions towards Ukraine and interrupting gas supplies.⁷ The decision to put off signing the Association Agreement triggered weeks of large-scale pro-European protests in Ukraine followed by the government change. Since then the country have passed through a serious turmoil with a serious economic and political complications.

⁵ Pawel Dariusz Wisniewski, "The Eastern Partnership – It Is High Time to Start a Real Partnership", Carnegie Moscow Centre, November 2013, available at http://carnegieendowment.org/files/CP_Wisniewski_Eng_web.pdf

⁶ Kataryana Wolczuk, "Perceptions of, and Attitudes towards, the Eastern Partnership amongst the Partner Countries' Political Elites", Eastern Partnership Review, Vol. 5, December 2011, available at www.eceap.eu/ul/Review_No5.pdf

⁷ Jeanne Park, "The European Union's Eastern Partnership", Council on Foreign Relations, 14 March 2014, available at <http://www.cfr.org/europe/european-unions-eastern-partnership/p32577>

Despite a temporary postponement of signing the trade deal with Ukraine the EaP summit in Vilnius has ended up with some important positive steps in terms of the future perspectives of the initiative: Georgia and Moldova took a first real step towards the EU by initiation of the process of signing the AA and the DCFTA with the EU (which was consequently signed in June 2014 in the margins of EU summit); the signing of a visa facilitation agreement between the EU and Azerbaijan and a proposal of the European Commission on a visa-free regime with Moldova which is also valid since April 2014. In March 2014 the new Ukrainian pro-EU government at first signed the political part of the Association Agreement at the EU summit in Brussels and subsequently the economic part of the agreement was also signed in June 2014.

To conclude, it can be argued that after five years of its launch the EaP initiative has succeed in concentrating European leaders' attention on eastern neighbors and in expanding arsenal of tools available for bilateral and multilateral cooperation. However, its results are scarce when it comes to a real situation in the region. EaP failed to effectively stimulate the process of democratization in the region which most evidently proved by the situation in Belarus and Azerbaijan. Belarus while remaining a part of EaP initiative also constitutes Russia's Customes Union within the frame of Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) which does not include any democratization requirements. Azerbaijan together with Belarus continues balancing between the EU and Russia. These two countries have remained reluctant in terms of stepping on to the democratization path and instead have focused on issues like energy security, visa liberalization and investments. Armenia has also abandoned negotiations on the free trade area prior to Vilnius Summit and declared its preference to join the EEU. Ukraine after political turmoil has decisively determined its European path at the expense of becoming an epicenter for another territorial conflict and tension in the region. Thus, only Ukraine along with Georgia and Moldova has reached the conditional "finish line" by signing an Association Agreement with the EU. Therefore the EaP as a general framework for cooperation with single set of standard instruments that can be applied across the entire region has proved unworkable; hence, individual approach which suits the different ambitions of the partner countries and the interests of the EU is necessary.⁸

⁸ Stefan Lehnefriday, "Relaunching the European Neighborhood Policy", Carnegie Europe, 12 December, 2014, available at <http://carnegieeurope.eu/strategieurope/?fa=57492>

Eastern Partnership as an instrument for promotion European values

Undoubtedly the European Union is a community of values as it constitutes a model of global soft power which attractiveness emanates from its norms and values. Since its establishment the Union is founded on this system of values and their promotion and adoption during the enlargement process has been the most important requirement and precondition for countries striving to be integrated into the EU. This process of enlargement through democratization have started with the integration of Southern European countries and continued with democratic transformation and integration of former communist countries in Central and Eastern Europe. A long and challenged way of enlargement based on values and principle has weekend EU's structural strength and ability to integrate and "absorb" more members.⁹ In this sense since the last enlargement wave the EU has shifted from the enlargement strategy with a precise membership prospect to a new partnership policy in the framework of value-based mutual cooperation.

However it is evident that the partnership initiatives as a democracy promotion policy have not worked as much effectively as democratization through enlargement. Democratic and political conditionality in enlargement process was supported by such a strong incentive as a clear membership perspective. Whilst in the framework of partnership initiative the EU offers a vague concept of convergence with partner countries in return to their adoption of European values and atandards. In other words on the one hand the EU is trying to approximate the region to Europe through exporting its values and building new political and structural links with the partner countries, on the other hand it have fallen short of offering strong incentives for adoption necessary reforms in terms of democratization and liberalization. Additionally, a value-based transformation has been perceived by the semi-democratic and authoritarian political elites in partner countries as a substantial threat to their power thus they preferred to focus solely on interests such as security, economy and trade and tend to preserve the current political status quo.¹⁰

The EU's efforts to spread its normative order in these countries tn terms of EaP is supported by such a limited incentive as deep and comprehensive free trade agreement

⁹ Ali Resul Usul, "Avrupa Birliği'nin demokrasi/siyasi şartlılığında çekme-itme dengesi ve bu dengenin bozulması", Uluslararası İlişkiler, Vol. 5, Spring 2008, p. 111.

¹⁰ İryna Solonenko, Natalia Shapovalova, "Is the EU's Eastern Partnership promoting Eurosepeanisation?"; FRIDE Policy Brief, Vol. 97, September 2011, available at http://www.fride.org/download/PB_97_EaP.pdf; Jana Kobzova, "Can the Eastern Partnership Work?", 21 November 2012, available at http://thinkingeurope.eu/sites/default/files/publication-files/kobzova_0.pdf

which in the end offers free access to the EU single market. The reluctance of the EU to incorporate these countries into the EU institutions slowed down their democratization especially in case of European-oriented partner countries.¹¹ Thus, the EaP is a limited mechanism for promotion value-based European order in the targeted post-Soviet region.

One of the major flaws of the EaP initiative is a discrepancy between the financial challenges for the EU in the region and its growing ambitions to play a key role in shaping the political processes in these countries. Therefore, because of the insufficient funding the EaP initiative as an instrument for boosting actual reforms in different areas including democratization is limited. The European Commission allocated €600 million for the period 2010-2013 to be shared between all partner countries, including €350 million of fresh funds.¹² The other part comes from the existing funds for the six partner countries within the framework of the European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument which had been already scheduled to be spent on these countries even if the EaP had not been launched.¹³ Relatively modest engagement of the EU in this region can also be illustrated by the comparison with the assistance to the candidate countries within the framework of enlargement period. For example, in 1991-2003 only Poland received altogether €5710 million of EU funds, which was more than the entire TACIS (Technical Assistance to the Commonwealth of Independent States) program during the same period.¹⁴ Therefore the overall estimation of EaP financing instruments shows its insufficiency for realization of actual transformation in the region and due to the period of recovering from recent financial crisis in Europe the possibility to sufficiently increase funds for the EaP in the near perspective is unlikely. Financing mechanisms also reveal an inconsistency to the principle "more for more" which is supposed to be the substantial ground for any progress in cooperation with the partner governments. The contradiction in this sense is that most of the above mention funds have already been allocated among the partner countries at the very beginning on the

¹¹ Thomas de Waal, "Expanding the EU's Ostpolitik", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, October 2011, available at <http://carnegieendowment.org/2011/10/24/expanding-eu-s-ostpolitik/8mk5> ; Janine Reinhard, "EU democracy promotion through conditionality in its neighbourhood: the temptation of membership perspective or flexible integration?", *Caucasian Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 4 (3), Summer 2010.

¹² Vademecum on Financing in the Frame of the Eastern Partnership, http://eeas.europa.eu/eastern/docs/eap_vademecum_en.pdf

¹³ Pawel Dariusz Wisniewski, "The Eastern Partnership – It Is High Time to Start a Real Partnership", Carnegie Moscow Centre, November 2013, available at http://carnegieendowment.org/files/CP_Wisniewski_Eng_web.pdf

¹⁴ Kristi Raik, "A bleak version of enlargement: The EU's democracy promotion policy in the eastern neighbourhood", *The Estonian Foreign Policy Yearbook*, available at <http://www.isn.ethz.ch/Digital-Library/Publications/Detail/?ots591=0c54e3b3-1e9c-be1e-2c24-a6a8c7060233&lng=en&id=56464>

initiative. This contradiction also reveals a lack of compatibility between what is designed by Brussels and the real functioning of the initiative. Therefore, the efficiency of declared conditionality policy has been hugely reduced.

The absence of an effective mechanisms and institutions of mutual cooperation between the EU and partner countries reveals another crucial shortcoming of the EaP. Although within the frame of multilateral track have been created new platforms for cooperation which are designed to ensue the participation of civil society institutions, parliamentarians and local government representatives in the process of convergence, still the main decisions over the future directions of the initiative are made at the government level summits held within a certain intervals since newly established multilateral cooperation mechanisms have not yet reached a capacity to give a new direction to the EaP.¹⁵

Although the EU is ambitiously aiming to create a political consolidation in the post-Soviet region and quite straightforwardly trying to implement its democracy promotion policy yet it does not take into account the internal peculiarities of partner countries and divergency of their perceptions. The value-based transformation of the region can be successful if there are favorable and appropriate domestic conditions necessary for democratization in each partner country. The success or failure of such a process largely depends on some crucial internal factors such as the aspirations of ruling political powers and the level of development of civil societies in partner countries.

Most of the former Soviet republics after obtaining independence have established hybrid systems which can be placed between democracy and authoritarianism. Internationally they are classified as semi-free countries with combination of some features of democratic competition and authoritarian leadership.¹⁶ Although some of these countries have demonstrated progress in terms of ensuring relatively transparent elections and establishing some fundamental elements of civil society and despite political authorities' declared commitment to European values these political systems remain weak and unstable and many elements of Soviet system such as widespread corruption, absence of respect of rule of law, human rights violation have not been yet completely eliminated.

¹⁵ Ivan Andreyev, "Vostochnoye Partnyerstvo ES: dva goda u granits Rossii", Russian International Affairs Council, October 25, 2011, available at http://russiancouncil.ru/inner/?id_4=46#top

¹⁶ Kristi Raik, "Promoting democracy in the eastern neighbourhood. The limits and potential of the ENP", Journal of Constitutional Law in Eastern and Central Europe, Vol. 17, No 1, 2010, available at http://www.eu-consent.net/library/deliverables/d82_raik.pdf

Convergence with the EU requires a democratic and normative transformation in many areas which may in the long term strengthen the political opposition and civil society institutions and at the same time weaken the power of current authoritarian powers. Therefore, especially Azerbaijan and Belarus both govern with little respect of the rule of law have preferred to join the EU projects without significant structural changing of the existing systems.¹⁷ At this point it should be emphasized that despite similarities between two authoritarian countries the EU's approach towards them remains completely different. The EU's constant criticism of violation of human rights, corruption, and the absence of reforms and progress often is much more harsh and explicit towards Belarus than Azerbaijan.

The EaP initiative is mainly based on top-down relations. This means that the EU have been conducted its value-based transformation policy based on conditionality mainly directly through cooperation with high level government institutions, accordingly, the financial support for this purpose has also been allocated through the top governmental institutions. The role and the level of engagement of civil society organization in this process mainly remained secondary. This approach have been considered as a legitimization of authoritarian governments which also contradicts the EU's aspiration to spread its fundamental values and democratize the region through the EaP.

Geopolitical challenges for the convergence of EaP countries with Europe

While in terms of idealist approach the EU's main foreign policy aspirations including its partnership initiative requires to be a normative power exporting its values, in the context of realist perspective there is a necessity to ensure its geopolitical and geo-economic interests and security. Hence, the question is how successful the EU has been in achieving right balance between its aspirations to spread fundamental values and ensure its interest towards the post-Soviet region. In other words, it is still uncertain whether the EaP is a framework for democratic institution-building in the post-Soviet region or it is an attempt to weaken Russia's traditional influence in six partner countries. EU's indecisive behavior in a contingency like Ukrainian crisis which erupted after and largely as a consequence of EaP 2013 Vilnius Summit as well as a general state of bilateral and multilateral relations with partner countries clearly demonstrate that the EU's strategic approach have varied between economic interests (especially in terms of EU-Russia relations and energy security issues) and its commitment to the

¹⁷ Anar Valiyev, "Azerbaijan after the Vilnius Summit: What next?", Caucasus Analytical Digest, No 58, December 2013, available at <http://www.css.ethz.ch/publications/pdfs/CAD-58.pdf>

core target of the initiative in terms of value-based convergence. In other words the EU in terms of EaP has been demonstrating inconstancy and switching from a liberal rhetoric to a realpolitik approach and vice versa. Such a situation reveals some important geopolitical challenges which hinder EU's ability to become neither a "normative" nor a "geopolitical" power in the post-Soviet region.

First of all there are obvious differences in an understanding of what should be the essence and perspectives of EaP initiative among the EU states themselves. Therefore the perception of the necessity of eastern engagement is fluctuating as well. This applies mainly to the question of how deep the EU should go in its affairs with Eastern Europe and South Caucasus which reveals a discrepancy between foreign policy priorities for "new" and "old" Europe. On the one hand, the countries of Central Europe mainly those that joined the European Union in 2004 support deeper engagement in the region including the political sphere. They do not rule out the possibility of future expansion and granting of membership perspective to some of the partner countries. On the other hand, for the southern and western EU countries enhancement of the EU's political engagement in this region does not play a significant role.¹⁸ Therefore, some of them resist the deepening of political integration and especially rapid liberalization of the visa regime and rather prefer focusing on southern neighbors. As a result, the EaP initiative lacks an agreement among the EU members concerning the depth of the partnership and a clear long-term vision of what should be the endpoint of this approach towards eastern neighbors.¹⁹

The second and most important geopolitical factor which limits the EU's ability to become a significant power and increase its influence in the region is closely intertwined ties between partner countries and Russia and its strategic leverages for maintaining a dominant power in the region. Although on the official level it was declared that the EaP initiative is not against Russian presence in the region and that it will be developed within a strategic partnership with Russia, in the reality the EU fell short in taking into account Russia's historical interests and influence over the region and have built its partnership separately rather than in accordance with the EU-Russia cooperation. Russia as a powerful regional actor naturally felt uncomfortable with the NATO expansion closer to its borders as well as with the EU's project to build a free trade area with six countries. For Russian president Vladimir Putin the EaP initiative was nothing

¹⁸ Marcin Lapczynski, "The European Union's Eastern Partnership: Chances and Perspectives", *Caucasian Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 3 (2), Spring 2009, p. 149.

¹⁹ Pawel Dariusz Wisniewski, "The Eastern Partnership – It Is High Time to Start a Real Partnership", Carnegie Moscow Centre, November 2013, available at http://carnegieendowment.org/files/CP_Wisniewski_Eng_web.pdf

more than an alternative to further expansion of NATO to the east. Consequently this was treated by Moscow as a direct threat to Russian economic interests and security. For Russia it is a challenge for a geopolitical competition and meddling into its traditional sphere of dominance where Russia is trying to promote its own alternative integration project by using all possible leverages. And the crisis in Ukraine has become the latest reminder of how Russia perceives the EaP project.

Since current structure of the association agreement does not include possibility to join other integration projects partner countries (as in case of Ukraine) have been drawn into a situation of making choice between two sides; either the EU's EaP initiative or the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union which is set to enter into force from January 2015. In contrast to the EU's target to build a value and norm-based partnership based on a political conditionality Russia due to closely intertwined common historical and cultural ties with this region perceives it as its "own backyard" and by offering a simulated version of economic integration project in fact does not offer alternative model of modernization or democratization. This situation seemed more attractive for non-democratic and authoritarian regimes in some EaP countries.

Russia tactically uses two major leverages to pressure and distract partner countries from the EU path; trade and energy related issues and existing territorial conflicts in the region which were triggered by the very same Russian involvement are two major strategic and influential determinants of Russian engagement with the region. As a result of such a strategy Armenia has opted against proceeding trade related issues within the EaP and Ukraine's similar decision has brought the country to a division. Russia fiercely violated Ukraine's territorial integrity annexing Crimean peninsula in March 2014 and further created separatist regime in the eastern parts of the country.

The same leverage has been used in Georgia. Russia invaded Georgia's breakaway territories Abkhazia and South Ossetia in August 2008 as a retaliation to its gradually increasing engagement with the EU and the West. Moreover the same strategy is still pursuing by Russia in Georgia's separatist region of Abkhazia where on November 24, 2014 was signed a Treaty on Alliance and Strategic Partnership, which was considered in Tbilisi as a movement towards the annexation of the region by Russia. While Russia does not admit such an intention through this agreement it gains a significant control over Abkhazia's military and police forces, its borders and customs services which means that Russia's border infrastructure will move to Abkhazia's boundary with the

rest of Georgia.²⁰ The strategic partnership also envisages a possibility of inclusion of Abkhazia into the Russia-led integration process in the post-Soviet area within the framework of Eurasian Economic Union.

Therefore, establishing closer ties with certain post-Soviet countries particularly with Ukraine at the expense of unambiguously distracting them from Russian sphere of influence has triggered an atmosphere of tension in the region which is partly connected with the failure of the EU in taking into serious consideration Russia's geopolitical concerns over its EaP initiative. That is why the EU's reaction to Russian military intervention into Ukraine was not prompt and straightaway, instead European leaders at the beginning only expressed their deep concern over Russia's military activity in Ukraine. The EU's retaliation through imposing tough sanctions ensued only after months of escalating violence and loss of lives in eastern Ukraine. Undoubtedly, such restrictive measures against Russia were necessary in short term perspective. Moreover these tough measures along with the EU's endeavor for diversification of energy sources which led to the demise of Russia's South Stream pipeline have demonstrated the EU's strong commitment to defend its system based on fundamental values, market economy and principles of international law as well as its liability to protect Eastern European countries from Russian submission.²¹ However there are still questions about the endpoint of these sanctions; are they designed to achieve restoration of Ukrainian territorial integrity or a goal is weakening Russian economy? Sanctions as an instrument to pressure Russia to stop backing separatists in eastern Ukraine so far have not forced Russia to abandon its aggressive strategy in the region. Sanctions have in significant degree weakened Russian economy but in the expense of undermining Europe's own economy.²² Therefore sanctions are not the right way to deal with Russia for a longer term.

The way out of current crisis in the EU's eastern policy and in EU-Russia relations is a necessity to revamp or restructure EaP initiative and to seek new mechanisms of cooperation with partner countries which also includes Russia as an important regional power with its own vision concerning the post-Soviet area. In other words, the EU needs to create a mechanism of coexistence.²³ In this sense, the major challenge for

²⁰ Jaba Devdariani, "The EU-Russian Conflict Enters the Caucasus", Carnegie Europe, 5 December 2014, available at <http://carnegieeurope.eu/strategiceurope/?fa=57401>

²¹ Judy Dempsey, "Germany Is Europe's New Front Line", Carnegie Europe, 11 December 2014, available at <http://carnegieeurope.eu/strategiceurope/?fa=57464>

²² Ivan Krastev, Mark Leonard, "The New European Disorder", European Council on Foreign Relations, 20 November 2014, available at http://www.ecfr.eu/page/-/ECFR117_TheNewEuropeanDisorder_ESSAY.pdf

²³ Ibid.

the EU is focusing on cooperation between the EaP and the EEU as two different but “equivalent”²⁴ integration projects in the region.

Another major challenge facing the EaP from the very beginning was a lack of correspondence between what was offered by the EaP and expectations or perceptions of ruling authorities in partner countries. Some partner countries were tend to use rapprochement with the EU in their political and geopolitical advantage rather than an opportunity for value-based transformation which means a significant change of their system of governance and eventually a loss of power.²⁵ Therefore the main geopolitical motives of such an approach were a counterbalancing to Russian influence (for Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova) in the region, restoration of territorial integrity and security concerns (for Georgia), an attempt to attract more investments from European institutions and energy security concerns (for Belarus and Azerbaijan).

On this point it should be emphasized that the EU relations with oil-rich Azerbaijan indeed demonstrate a clear example of challenge to provide the right balance between the interests and values within the framework of the EaP. In case of this country it can be easily observed how the EU’s interests overshadow its aspirations to spread values in this region. The Azerbaijani elite is quite indifferent in its approach toward the EU-led project advocating the principle of equal partnership and expressing its main interest in economic issues, especially investments, energy security, education and visa liberalization. Azerbaijan also does not seek to actively participate in the multilateral dimension of the EaP due to the unresolved conflict with Armenia. Such a position also determined by the EU’s inconsistent approach towards Azerbaijan’s territorial integrity; while the EU’s position towards other EaP countries’ territorial disputes such as Georgia, Moldova and recently Ukraine after Russian annexation of Crimea is explicit in case of Karabakh conflict it remains ambiguous.²⁶ The effectiveness of conditionality policy towards this country also remains extremely low as Azerbaijan has no ambitions of European integration. However the deterioration of human rights situation and increasing authoritarian way of ruling in this country met with tolerance by the EU

²⁴ Neither the Customs Union nor the Eurasian Economic Union generally envisage a real integration in the region, both of them are a simulation of European integration experience since the main objective in initiating such a project is purely Moscow’s attempt to bind a number of post-Soviet countries by ensuring their loyalty. Nevertheless, this is a reality which cannot be ruled out by the EU leaders.

²⁵ Kataryana Wolczuk, “Perceptions of, and Attitudes towards, the Eastern Partnership amongst the Partner Countries` Political Elites”, Eastern Partnership Review, Vol. 5, December 2011, available at www.eceap.eu/ul/Review_No5.pdf; Pawel Dariusz Wisniewski, “The Eastern Partnership – It Is High Time to Start a Real Partnership”, Carnegie Moscow Centre, November 2013.

²⁶ Amanda Paul, “Azerbaijan and the Two EUs”, Euobserver Blogs, 6 July 2014, available at <http://blogs.euobserver.com/paul/2014/07/06/azerbaijan-and-the-two-eus/>

countries because of its crucial role in the European energy security issues. Immediately after the EaP Vilnius Summit the EU leaders signed a deal with Azerbaijan to build a Trans-Anatolian Natural Gas pipeline for importing gas from Azerbaijan into Europe.²⁷ And currently the EU and Azerbaijan are building a Strategic Modernization Partnership which is aimed to be concluded before the 2015 EaP Riga Summit. In other words, there is an engagement of the EU with an authoritarian country without any advance in terms of reforms, simply because it is currently fits the EU's economic interest. This approach indicates that the EU in case of resource-rich Azerbaijan seeks to maintain the existence of its EaP initiative as a framework for economic cooperation rather than an effective mechanism for democratic transformation of an anti-democratic regime.

Conclusion

In fact, the main problem of the European Union's Eastern Partnership policy is an ambiguity. In other words, it is not clear whether the EaP is a geopolitical instrument for competing with Russia in the region or it is a framework for supporting those six countries' democratization reforms. In the one hand the EU's approach towards the region is geopolitical in terms of attaching these countries to the EU through Association Agreements and Deep and Comprehensive Free trade Agreement, which in turn means their estrangement from Russia, on the other hand the EU through the EaP demonstrates its aspirations to spread core European values in the region. Though the second approach has been declared as a precondition for progress in terms of the first approach the real state of affairs proves that the conditionality was not effective (in some extent except Moldova and Georgia). In current crisis in order to ensure success in its Eastern Policy the EU should find more exact balance between geopolitical interests and values.

Current state of affairs in relations between the EU and partner countries and the EU-Russia also provides clear illustration of necessity to restructure the EaP. Obviously, the EaP cannot remain a one-size-fits-all policy; there is a need for a tailored approach to the partner countries. As Czech Minister of Foreign Affairs Lubomir Zaoralek at the Prague meeting on the 5th Anniversary of the Eastern Partnership on 24-25 April 2014 stated "the Eastern Partnership project of cooperation between the European Union and six post-Soviet republics should be transformed, and the EU should approach these

²⁷ Brenda Shaffer, "Gaz Politicis After Ukraine", Foreign Affairs, 17 December 2013, available at <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/140569/brenda-shaffer/gas-politics-after-ukraine>

countries on a more individual basis".²⁸ Thereby, what should be done for strengthening ties and enhancing cooperation between the EU and six post-Soviet countries? In this sense following three possible ways to make the EaP more effective are under review in most analyses.

Firstly, the EU should consider stronger financial incentives for those partner countries which demonstrate evident success in democratic reforms and institution-building. In order to achieve a real transformation of semi-democratic ruling systems in partner countries and help them to eliminate corruption and poverty the EU's decisiveness in offering new funding is a main determinant. Considering a membership perspective at least for countries advancing in reforms has been seen as a solution in most analyses. Though the EU's capacity to integrate new members is structurally and financially limited, granting such a promise could indeed accelerate partner countries' commitment to real democratic reforms. Nevertheless, in the current situation of confrontation between Europe and Russia over the region, a restructuring of the EaP towards a possible enlargement may trigger even more aggressive reaction of Russia and further aggravate the atmosphere of tension in the region.

Secondly, the EU should concentrate on working with civil society institutions rather than governments in partner countries. The EaP mainly is a bureaucratic and technocratic mechanism of cooperation between the EU and partner countries' governments. In this sense, enhancing the role of civil society organizations in partner countries is a key factor for reaching the EaP's democratization goals. The stronger civil societies in the partner countries the stronger might be their pressure on undemocratic governments to pursue democratic transformation.

Thirdly, Russia's traditional key role and interests in the region of Eastern Europe and South Caucasus makes necessary its inclusion to a multilateral cooperation. Therefore in order to reduce the sense of competition and not to further exacerbate the situation in the region the EU should take into account Russia's concerns over this geopolitical area and base its EaP initiative on the principle of conclusiveness rather than geopolitical competition. Instead of offering mutually exclusive trade deals to partner countries the EU should focus on creating new mechanisms of cooperation with Russia through its version of integration (EEU) in the region. It is also important to exceed the disagreement among the EU states over the necessity of focusing on the post-Soviet

²⁸ "Zaoralek wants EU to change stance on post-Soviet countries", Prague Post, 24 April 2014, available at <http://www.praguepost.com/eu-news/38624-zaoralek-wants-eu-to-change-stance-on-post-soviet-countries>

region and to articulate justification for existence and the essence of the EU's eastern policy.

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