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How can Europe promote a more peaceful Neighbourhood?

Introduction

How can Europe promote a more peaceful Neighbourhood? This paper will consider the Ukrainian crisis as the most prominent bench test for the future of EU external action and will provide a critical reflection on European foreign policy and its role in promoting a peaceful Neighbourhood.

Recent events in Ukraine, from the beginning of the negotiations for the Association Agreement (AA) to the uprising following the disappointing outcome of the Vilnius Summit, have shed light on the lack of unity and strategy in developing European Neighbourhood Policy, especially in its Eastern Partnership section (which includes Moldova, Georgia, Ukraine and Azerbaijan). Now that the crisis has escalated, the EU should find a way to address it, both in order to ensure peace and stability on its borders and to prevent similar crises to occur again. The EU should focus on three main points: 1) a redefinition of the Eastern Partnership, recognizing the peculiarities of each EaP state and outlining more effective strategies for partnership; 2) a more realistic approach in EU-Russia relations and trying to negotiate with Moscow via international frameworks in order to limit its leeway; 3) a more convincing European defence in order to increase the international credibility of the EU as a security provider in its Neighbourhood.

1. Redefining the Eastern Partnership (EaP)

The Neighbourhood is the last test for the European foreign policy: if Europe does not show its capability to influence the future and the development of its near abroad, it cannot claim to be something more than a regional power among others - F. Parentier

As far as peace and security of its Eastern Neighbourhood are concerned, the EU should revise its major framework of foreign policy referring to this area: the Eastern Partnership (EaP). The EaP is the EU initiative governing relationships with the post-Soviet states of Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine, intended to provide a venue for discussions of trade, economic strategy, visa liberalisations, and other issues. Initiated by a Polish proposal prepared in co-operation with Sweden, presented at the EU's General Affairs and External Relations Council in Brussels in 2008, the Eastern Partnership was inaugurated in Prague on 7 May 2009 through a

*joint declaration of the Prague EaP Summit*¹. Its main goal: creating the conditions necessary to accelerate political association and economic integration between the EU and the interested partner countries. The core idea is that the EU should work to build up a peaceful and stable Neighbourhood by providing support to the partners states for socio-economical and judiciary reforms fitting the *acquis communautaire* with reference to democracy, good governance and free market. The key instrument of the EaP on the bilateral level (EU- partner state) is the Association Agreement, which creates a framework of cooperation based on four elements: a) The Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA), b) a platform for dialogue over security affairs, c) justice and domestic affairs, d) economic cooperation.²

The AAs concluded between the EU and Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine are considered as the main achievements of the EaP. However, at least so far, they do not seem to have contributed to the stabilization of the European eastern neighbourhood. In order to understand which steps the EU should take to promote a more peaceful Neighbourhood, it is necessary to analyse the major flaws in the EaP:

1) *Gap between the EaP demands and rewards*

In many cases the EaP requirements for partner states are very demanding. In particular the economic and political reforms, always encounter some resistance from the leadership and the elites. The path dependence from the Soviet Past in respect of economic and institutional structure and the undemocratic nature of the leadership, in countries like Belarus and Azerbaijan, represent serious obstacles to overcome. It is important to offer concrete proposals and clear perspectives on the EaP goals and rewards so that these countries could know the advantages of cooperating with the EU. So far, the EU has carefully avoided any prospect of joining the EU with full membership, making its “carrot” not sweet enough to boost regime transition towards democracy, and incapable of counterbalancing Russian “stick”. Offering EU membership would have at least two main advantages: a) it would entail many benefits for civil society (above all visa liberalization) so that this latter will likely put some pressure on the government by demanding democratic reforms; b) it would force the leadership to adopt a clearer approach to reform and to take a definitive stand. In fact, it usually happens that EaP countries’ leaders do not take any position and prefer to adopt a wait-and-see approach and alternate cooperation with the EU and Russia depending on which part

¹ *Joint Declaration of the Prague Eastern Partnership Summit*, 2009

<http://www.enpi-info.eu/library/content/joint-declaration-prague-eastern-partnership-summit>

² Wiśnevski P. D., *The Eastern Partnership – It Is High Time To Start A Real “Partnership”*, Carnegie Moscow Centre, November 2013.

offers the best advantage. The gap between EaP demands and rewards usually contributes to prejudices and differences between the European family and the partner states: the latter would feel very inadequate and interpret the EU demands as a direct interference in their domestic affairs, making them more keen to prefer Moscow's approach, which opposes regime change.

2) *no differentiation between the EaP countries*

Although the EaP countries share a common Soviet past, they must not be considered as a single political reality while European policies cannot apply homogeneously in all of them. In the EaP integration process there are three front-runners, which have signed the AA: Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia. The first is experiencing a civil war; the second is fast advancing in the field of visa liberalization and domestic reforms, the third gradually moves forward. Armenia has entered the Custom Union; Azerbaijan is considered by the EU as an important partner for natural gas supplies, so it usually happens that the human rights and democracy issues end up in the second position; due to its closeness to the EU borders Belarus, is asked to fulfil harsher conditions compared to Azerbaijan. This apparent double standard exposes the EU criticism.³

3) *Little funds and little investment in civil society*

In light of migration crisis and the instability of the Libya and Syria, the EU is far more concerned on its Southern Neighbourhood than on its Eastern one. This is reflected in the foreign policy budget repartition: the EaP benefits for 3,2 billion euros, which is only one third of the budget allocated to the Southern Neighbourhood⁴. In addition, the EaP funds are limited by the EU financial means and economic situation, which has never fully recovered from the 2008 US subprime-mortgage crisis and is currently undergoing a tough phase because of Greece's crisis. It is quite clear that the EU is not presently capable of providing the same amount of investment it did in Czech Republic or in Poland when they joined the EU in 2004. Closely linked to the lack of adequate funds, is the lack of involvement of civil society, which is quite telling considering the fact that most of the EaP fields of action (freedom of the media, democracy, human rights, good governance) affect directly civil society, but also need its involvement to be implemented. The establishing of forums for discussion such as the Euronest Parliamentary Assembly, the Civil Society Forum (CSF), the Business Forum, and the Assembly of Local and Regional Authorities has not produced any significant result so far. These platforms are often more focused on EaP states

³ Tocci N., *The Neighbourhood Policy is Dead. What's Next for European Foreign Policy Along its Arc of Instability?* IAI Working Papers 1416 November 2014.

⁴ European External Action, Eastern Partnership, http://eeas.europa.eu/eastern/faq/index_en.htm

conflicts and disputes than on EU-EaP cooperation⁵. Civil society benefits from very limited EaP funds and this affects also its involvement in reporting the effectiveness of the EaP initiatives is almost absent, mainly because of government interference in the activities of the NGOs (which, especially in Belarus and Azerbaijan) are considered as a threat for the regime.

4) lack of unanimity and main goals of the EaP

This is the crucial problem of the European External Action in general and of the EaP in particular. The 28 member states rarely share the same views on foreign policy due to their domestic demands and geographic position. On the one hand we can find Italy and France, which are more concerned about the Southern Neighbourhood because they are in the centre of the migration flux, while Germany is more interested in keeping good relations with Moscow because of the huge amount of trade (Germany is the second trading partner of Russia⁶). On the other hand, regarding the EaP, it is worth making reference to its main sponsors: Poland, Czech Republic, Baltic States, for which Russian expansionism represented for centuries their most prominent geopolitical threat. Since its very beginning the EaP has acquired an anti-Russian attitude. However, Russia remains a stakeholder to consider while dealing with the post-Soviet space. On this issue, it is worth recalling Stephan Füle's (former Commissioner for the EU Neighbourhood Policy) declaration of September 2013, in which he judged the DCFTA incompatible with the Russian project Eurasian Union⁷, and the attempts of creating gas pipeline bypassing Russia, the so-called Nabucco, which now seem to be over. All these elements have contributed to a sense of threat from Moscow's perspective, which interprets the post-Soviet space as its own sphere of influence: it is easy to imagine that a regime change in that area would threaten Russian leadership and maybe generate spill over effects in other countries willing to get rid of Moscow's pressure. Events in Ukraine have openly shown not only how much Russia does fear the EU enlargement together with the NATO, but also to what extent Russia is ready to defend its own interests. Therefore, it is necessary to acknowledge that, if political stability was among the objectives of the EaP, it seems yet very far away. Russia's armed response to the event highlighted its potential to further destabilize the area, as has already happened in Armenia, which has been finally forced to adhere to the Custom Union. At this stage it is extremely urgent to rethink the approach towards the Russian Federation and find new strategies for the common Neighbourhood.

⁵ Wiśnevski P. D., *The Eastern Partnership — It Is High Time To Start A Real "Partnership"*, Carnegie Moscow Centre, November 2013.

⁶ Observatory of Economic Complexity, <https://atlas.media.mit.edu/en/profile/country/rus/>

⁷ Füle S., *Statement on the pressure exercised by Russia on countries of the Eastern Partnership*, September 2013 http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_SPEECH-13-687_en.htm

2. Rethinking EU-Russia relations

Russian imperial tradition played a significant role in determining Russian relations with the newly independent states soon after the collapse of the USSR; reciprocally, the relations with those states have deeply influenced Russian foreign and domestic policy, which has been developed in terms of national interests and security. Due to the strategic and psychological importance of this space, the EU's strategy towards the Eastern Neighbourhood cannot be detached from its approach towards Russia.

This approach should find a balance between cooperation and calculation of geopolitical risk. Firstly and undeniably, the Russian Federation is a very important partner for the EU in fields such as trade exchange and energy supplies (despite the shale gas revolution in the US, the EU is still dependent on the Russian giant Gazprom⁸), but also for what concerns international security. As we saw with Syria and Iran, Russia can be a valuable interlocutor, although extremely opportunistic, especially in these times of high international instability. Secondly, Russia enjoys more than one advantage on the post-Soviet ground: 1) soft power and the very close political ties between the Kremlin and some of the leaders (Lukashenko and Ilham Aliyev in particular) 2) coercive energy power, of which there are at least three examples. Ukraine imports 58% of its from Russia. Armenia imports all consumed gas and oil from Russia⁹ because it has no petroleum or natural gas reserves on its soil and it has been embargoed both by Turkey and Azerbaijan because of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Gazprom and Azerbaijani State Oil and gas company are very close partner in the energy market,¹⁰ 3) geographical proximity and rapid military reaction force (as already demonstrated in Georgia and Ukraine).

Bearing this in mind, it is quite clear that the importance of Ukraine for the Russian Federation would have prevented this latter from accepting Ukraine's turning eastward as a matter of fact and from producing a harsh reaction. The EU approach should have surely foreseen some complications from Russian side but above all it has undervalued the effect of the sanctions imposed on Moscow following its annexation of Crimea. In fact, these latter did not apparently meet their main purpose of delegitimizing Vladimir Putin's leadership, quite the contrary. The Russian president has been capable to use Western pressure as a tool to regain the support of many people,

⁸ Gas in focus *Observatoire du Gaz*, <http://www.gasinfocus.com/en/indicator/imports-of-natural-gas-into-the-european-union/>

⁹ Markus U., Oil and gas: the business and politics of energy

¹⁰ *Russia, Azerbaijan To Sign Deal On Boosting Gas Supplies*, <http://www.eurodialogue.eu/Russia-Azerbaijan-to-sign-deal-on-boosting-gas-supplies>

who did actually show themselves “Ready for work and defence”¹¹ despite how negatively sanctions affected the Russian economy.

Therefore, it seems that time has come to set up a different approach aimed both at keeping Russia as a European partner and at raising awareness in the EaP countries’ governments and civil society. Going back to business as usual is not an option for either the EU or Moscow at the moment. The only way to get out of the Ukrainian gambit and in general to build up a peaceful Neighbourhood would be to force Russia to think in economic terms, in the framework of international organization, in which the presence of other partners can limit Russian action. For instance, one way could be forcing Russia to face the contradictions of the Eurasian Union, which is a very weak project whose members (Belarus, Russia, Kazakshtan and Armenia) are not equal one to the other but have sometimes demonstrated to be reluctant vassals of the Kremlin. According to Ivan Krastev¹² the EU should approach Russia through a “dance with the bear” and he quotes the American politician Robert Strauss experienced in East-West policies “when you dance with the bear you don’t quit when you are tired; you quit when the bear is tired.” In Krastev’s opinion, engaging cooperation with the Eurasian Union would turn into the EU’s best chance to re-engage with Russia: in this way, the EU would not condemn but on the contrary would recognize Russia’s right to pursue its own integration process as well as its borders, but it will not give up on the cooperation front. In fact, although Russian leadership is undeniable, it is also true that negotiating with the Eurasian Union would limit Russian leeway and call on other states to participate to the dialogue, finally feeling perceived not as contested ground but as true actors of the international relations. In addition, this “collaborative” approach would soften the tones of Putin’s rhetoric over the Russian world and the post-cold war order, which is depicted as very unfair for Russia¹³, thus alleviating the pressure over the Russians abroad (which is an issue concerning not only the Baltic states but also Kazakhstan and Belarus).

3. A more convincing European Defence

The current instabilities in the Southern and in the Eastern Neighbourhood and the new threats coming from terrorism and cyber crime demand a more effective response on European side. The Council of the EU promulgated its conclusions regarding these issues in June 2015 calling on the

¹¹ Kolesnikov A., *Why sanctions on Russia don’t work*, The Project Syndicate, March 2015-08-15 <http://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/russia-sanctions-backfire-by-andrei-kolesnikov-2015-03>

¹² Krastev I., *Dancing with the Bear. How the West should handle its relations with Russia*, in “West Russia Relations in light of the Ukraine Crisis” IAI Research Papers 2015

¹³ Vladimir Putin, Speech at Munich Conference on Security Policy 2007 http://archive.kremlin.ru/eng/speeches/2007/02/10/0138_type82912type82914type82917type84779_118123.shtml

High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, to elaborate a new security concept for the EU.¹⁴ What emerges from this document¹⁵ is a deeper concern over the migration crisis rather than on the future of European foreign policy and defence, which, looking at the recent events seems to be in urgent need of reshaping.

In the aftermath of the *Majdan* protests and the annexation of Crimea, the EU was not involved in observatory missions in Crimea or in Eastern Ukraine and the EEAS' Crisis Platform did not play any role in the investigation of the downing of the flight MH17. The Ukrainian crisis has shed light on the weaknesses of the European foreign policy and defence system, which could be gathered into two main groups 1) differences in threat perception and strategic culture preventing the formation of a common strategic orientation and the establishment of leadership in the defence and security sector. This jeopardises EU unity and makes Member States resort to unilateralism or bilateral agreements, but above all it enhances the EU's strategic and military dependence on NATO; 2) ineffective military apparatus due to duplication of capacities and systems (unable to interoperate with each other) and to a lack of trust and solidarity between member states in this field.

Nevertheless, it is necessary to take the Ukrainian crisis as an opportunity to learn by doing and secure the future in the long run. If the EU wants to be a credible actor on the international arena, it should work on becoming a "security provider" for its Neighbourhood. As far as the Eastern Neighbourhood is concerned, a more credible European Union on the defence side is more than needed for a number of reasons: 1) How can the EU get the trust of Belarus, Azerbaijan and so on if it was not even able to assist Ukraine in the toughest moments? The EU should be truly responsible to protect what it tries to build up 2) Warfare is becoming more and more hybrid (conventional and unconventional weapons, information war, cyber attacks)¹⁶ and demands more cooperation in different fields that could be better controlled by a strategic coordination among intelligence services of Member States 3) NATO engagement in counterbalancing Russia in Eastern Europe is very likely to continue on the path of escalation. The nature and the scale of the military exercises leave few doubts over who is the potential enemy: Russia is performing military exercises in the Baltic sea and airspace, as well as "snap exercises" in which 80,000 troops are engaged in long-range deployments; NATO employed 15,000 allied troops engaged in mock operation including response

¹⁴ The last European Security strategy was elaborated 12 years ago by Javier Solana in 2003.

¹⁵ European Council conclusions, 25-26 June 2015

<http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2015/06/26-euco-conclusions/>

¹⁶ Kofman M., Rojansky M., *A closer look at Russia's "hybrid war" I*; Kennan Cable, April 2015.

to a Crimean-style infiltration of irregular forces.¹⁷ However, the question is still on the table: how to build up a more effective European defence able to build up a more peaceful Neighbourhood?

This most important goal the EU should focus on is reaching a *strategic convergence*:

- The mechanism provided by the **permanent structured cooperation PESCO**¹⁸, on the model of the “coalition of the willing” on the UN level, may allow small groups of countries sharing the same security goals to take the lead of European foreign policy and address the crises when a military intervention is needed.
- A more **regular high-level debate** on defence it is likely to increase mutual trust and accountability as well as turning into a more significant contribution within the framework of NATO. Better coordination and a common strategy focused on realistic targets inside the EU could lend the EU some weight in decision-making within NATO so that the EU would finally stand as a truly global actor.
- **Intelligence sharing and rationalization of defence spending**: in times of economic crisis defence spending underwent to serious cuts. However, what the EU should intervene on is avoiding duplications of capacities and the low level of interoperability and inefficiencies. Increasing cooperation between intelligence services as well as investing in new military technology would be a more effective tool to address nowadays hybrid warfare.

A study produced by the Centre for European Policy Studies ¹⁹(CEPS) highlights the urgent need of the EU to take action now instead of waiting for the crisis to escalate. Its main suggestion consists in seizing the opportunity of the Eastern and Southern instabilities and creating a European Defence Union basing on a new strategy for European Defence. Through a reform of institutions based on the PESCO mechanism, the report calls on the creation of an autonomous permanent military headquarter in Brussels, which would enable the EU to conduct an independent foreign policy and rapidly react to current and future crises. An autonomous European Defence would be useful because it would not have to wait for the Alliance to be activated, providing a more rapid response to the crises in the Eastern Neighbourhood; and because, being free from the historical weight of Cold War, it could create a buffer between Russia and NATO. For instance, a EU peacekeeping force in Eastern Ukraine would likely have worked as a deterrent

¹⁷ Oliphant R., *Russia and Nato 'actively preparing for war*, The Telegraph, August 2015.

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/russia/11797351/Russia-and-Nato-actively-preparing-for-war.html>

¹⁸ Art. 42-46 TEU

¹⁹ *More Union in European Defence, Report of a CESP taskforce*, http://www.fes-europe.eu/attachments/511_150225_CEPS%20TF%20European%20Defence.pdf

for the incursions of Russian soldiers just like US soldiers did in occupied Berlin: although very poor in numbers, the mere presence of US soldiers prevented Russia from attacking because of the very easy foreseeable implication of such a gesture. Nevertheless, a European Defence Union is not likely to be realised in the short run due not only to the long-lasting effects of the economic crisis and due to the number of issues which are dividing the EU leaders (migration and austerity measures above all).

Conclusions

The crisis in Ukraine offers the opportunity for reflection on the shortcomings of the EU foreign policy and how to secure a more peaceful Neighbourhood for Europe. To sum up, it is possible to say that the EU actually has two choices, which entail different approaches towards the EaP countries and Russia.

1) If the EU wants to continue on the path of the Eastern Partnership it is clear that it has to work on filling the gap between its demands and the rewards it offers to the partner states; moreover it should reshape its policies to meet the peculiarities of each EaP country, which cannot be treated as a single political entity and require the adoption of different reforms.

However, one important condition seems to be necessary if Brussels chooses to pursue the path of the EaP integration in order to stabilize its Neighbourhood. Severe threats to international peace and security require the EU to reach a strategic convergence aimed at ensuring a more efficient foreign policy: this will be empowered to provide security in the Neighbourhood through the establishment of a permanent structured military cooperation. This will entail a strategic coordination, a rationalization of defence spending and in case of crisis a rapid reaction peacekeeping force to offer an immediate response to the crises.

2) The other choice the EU has is to adopt a different approach towards Russia, by recognizing the strategic importance of the post-Soviet space for Moscow and trying to keep it as an important partner for international security and trade. In this regard, a valuable option for the EU would be to negotiate within the framework of the Eurasian Union both for the stabilization of the near abroad and for an eventual solution of the Ukraine crisis. This will positively influence the relations with Russia, because it would be an official recognition of Moscow's integration project, but on the other hand, the Kremlin will be forced to operate in the economic field, where it is unlikely to win. In this framework, the participation of the EaP countries would both limit Russian leeway and soften the sense of prejudice that sometimes comes out in the requests formulated by the EU through the EaP.

Although renouncing to the EaP is not considered an option at the moment, it is also true that there are not very positive outlooks for European security with regard to integration and strategic convergence. The time has come to work on the EaP flaws; otherwise it will only contribute to the de-stabilization of the Eastern Neighbourhood.