

The European Union: Eastern Partnership vs. Eurasian Union

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For more than a decade, the European Union has been wrestling with the issue of its Eastern Neighborhood. It was at pains at how to define this neighborhood, what importance to assign to it, and what, if anything, to offer to its countries. Suffering from “enlargement fatigue” after the big-bang enlargement of 2004-7, and a deep financial crisis in the following years, the EU’s appetite for large projects in its East has been limited, to say the least. Many influential member states accorded priority to the Mediterranean—as illustrated by the pompous launch of the Union of the Mediterranean in July 2008, just before the onset of the financial crisis. By contrast, a Polish-Swedish proposal for the Eastern Partnership presented in May 2008 appeared stillborn.

Yet in spite of the depth of the financial crisis, the EU mobilized in the fall of 2008 to create this institutionalized partnership program, which was launched at a Prague summit in May 2009. This fact encapsulates the Eastern Partnership’s intrinsic dilemma: most European leaders never intended it to be a direct challenge to Moscow, but this was its unavoidable result. The one event that led the Eastern Partnership to be created was Russia’s invasion of Georgia; most diplomats involved in its launch agree that in its absence, it certainly would not have been created at that time. Its main supporters certainly understood the strategic implications of the project; but most EU leaders appear to have gone along with it reluctantly, and largely in order to do “something” in the Eastern Neighborhood. This was particularly the case as the hard line against Moscow’s invasion disintegrated within weeks of the European Council’s September 1, 2008 summit, which put much of EU-Russia relations on hold.

¹ An earlier version of this chapter appeared as “Underestimating Yourself: the EU and the Political Realities of the Eastern Neighbourhood”, *European View*, vol. 13, p. 115-123.

The creation of the Eastern Partnership was nevertheless an important factor accelerating Vladimir Putin's forceful promotion of the Eurasia Union project. Indeed, it preceded it: the Eurasian Customs Union did not enter into force until 2010, and Putin did not seriously launch the Eurasia Union project until 2011. Thus, the EU's initiative was not a response to Russia, but a trigger for it. As will be seen, the Eastern Partnership is a typical EU "soft power" instrument, and based entirely on the voluntary transformation of societies and governing structures toward a common European model. Whereas Russia immediately interpreted the project as an attempt of the EU to create a "sphere of influence," this was never the case. That is most readily illustrated by the Armenian case: the EU certainly is not trying to bully anyone into an Association Agreement, seeing how Armenia simply walked away. And yet, Moscow was unable to match this soft power—being forced first into bullying and then once again into armed conflict to halt the westward march of its western neighbors.

What, then, is to be made of the EU's relationship to the Eurasian Union? The Ukraine crisis has generated substantial criticism and commentary, which has gone so far as to blame the crisis on the EU's alleged mishandling of the Eastern Neighborhood. That assessment misses the point that the Eurasia Union project was, in part, a response to the Eastern Partnership. Further, the criticism is overblown and unfair, as the crisis was created entirely by Russia's hostile behavior toward former Soviet states and its leadership's pursuit of Eurasian empire. Yet there is a serious argument to be made that the EU has been less than fully equipped to handle the political realities of the Eastern neighborhood.

Lessons of Foresight: Did Europe Underestimate Itself?

The Eastern Partnership has been subjected considerable ridicule; but given the circumstances of its creation, it has been a very successful instrument—and in some ways, it is this success that forced the Russian leadership to take unprecedented measures to halt it, measures that carry dire consequences for Russia's place in the world. This outcome appears to have taken European leaders by surprise. It should not have.

Indeed, it is a legitimate question why European leaders failed to foresee that Vladimir Putin's Russian government would be ready to use military force to prevent Ukraine from going down a road of European integration. Both

Ukraine's importance to Russia, and its willingness to use force in its neighborhood, have been widely documented. Indeed, going back to the fateful NATO Summit in Bucharest in 2008, Vladimir Putin told then U.S. President George W. Bush that "Ukraine is not even a state," and that "part of its territories are Eastern Europe, but the greater part is a gift from us."² He then added that if Ukraine joined NATO, "the very existence of the state could find itself under threat."³

A few months later, Russian forces invaded Georgia, the other country that had sought closer ties to NATO at the Bucharest summit. This invasion took European leaders by surprise, and prompted the rapid intervention of French president Nicolas Sarkozy to negotiate a flawed but important cease-fire. Initially, many European leaders were willing to give the Georgia at least a significant share of the blame. Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili was viewed by many European leaders—especially German Chancellor Angela Merkel—as an unpredictable hothead, and Saakashvili's decision to launch a defensive strike against Russian forces moving into Georgian territory led to a long debate on whether Georgia, rather than Russia, had started the war. Research carried out since then shows unequivocally that the invasion had been planned and provoked by Russia.⁴ Just as in the case of Bucharest, however, Russian intentions are best described by its own leaders. In 2011, then President Dmitry Medvedev told Russian troops that "If the war against Georgia had not happened ... several countries would join NATO."⁵ If that did not make matters clear enough, Vladimir Putin himself in 2012 stated that the invasion had been planned since 2006, and that Russia had trained South Ossetian militias for the conflict.⁶

² James Marson, "Putin to the West: Hands off Ukraine," *Time*, May 25, 2009, <http://content.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1900838,00.html>.

³ Alana Goodman, "Warning Signs Ignored," *Washington Free Beacon*, March 25, 2014, <http://freebeacon.com/national-security/warning-signs-ignored/>.

⁴ Ronald Asmus, *The Little War that Shook the World: Georgia, Russia, and the Future of the West*, Palgrave MacMillan, 2010; Svante E. Cornell and S. Frederick Starr, *The Guns of August 2008: Russia's War in Georgia*, Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 2009.

⁵ "Medvedev tells the truth about the war in South Ossetia," *Caucasus Regional News*, November 21, 2011, <http://dailygeonews.blogspot.se/2011/11/medvedev-tells-truth-about-war-in-south.html>.

⁶ Pavel Felgenhauer, "Putin Confirms the Invasion of Georgia was Preplanned," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, vol. 9 no. 152, August 9, 2012.

The potential implications for Ukraine were understood much earlier than that. A week after the Russian invasion of Georgia, U.S. Ambassador to NATO Kurt Volker sent a cable to Washington recalling Putin's statements in Bucharest and what they portended for Ukraine if the invasion of Georgia did not lead to significant consequences. In such a scenario, "this may only embolden Russia to increase its bullying behavior towards Ukraine and others in the neighborhood."⁷ In 2009, Ukrainian officials were already speaking of the increasingly harsh Russian rhetoric on Ukraine, including "aggressive conversations . . . concerning Ukraine and the dividing of its territory . . . at various levels of the Russian political, military and secret-service leadership."⁸

This, then, was known in Western capitals, as was the increasingly assertive Russian plan to build a Eurasian Union on the foundations of the Customs Union that includes Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan. The centrality of Ukraine to any such plans was equally well understood. If these facts were all known, why did Western leaders fail to foresee the evolution of events in Ukraine?

This is all the more relevant since the events in Ukraine were preceded by the capitulation of Armenia. In August 2013, Putin, along with six ministers and a portion of Russia's Caspian Fleet, visited Baku. The next month, clearly capitalizing on Armenian fears of a change in Russian policy on the unresolved Armenian-Azerbaijani territorial conflict, Putin forced Armenian President Serzh Sargsyan to make a 180-degree turn, giving up his plans to initial an Association Agreement with the EU and pledging instead to join the Eurasian Union. (This is covered in detail in Armen Grigoryan's contribution to this volume.) Clearly, the European integration drive threatened to reverse Moscow's tacit endorsement of Armenia's military conquest of Azerbaijani territories. As one analyst put it, "the implication is that the Russians threatened to end military aid to Armenia and sell more weapons to Azerbaijan," as well as threatening Sargsyan's own position in power.⁹ Sargsyan would have taken such threats very seriously given that Moscow had helped to overthrow Kyrgyz President

⁷ Goodman, "Warning Signs Ignored."

⁸ Marson, "Putin to the West: Hands off Ukraine."

⁹ Emil Danielyan, "Armenian U-turn on EU not as 'objective' as thought," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, December 30, 2013. <http://www.rferl.org/content/caucasus-report-armenia-customs-union/25216605.html>.

Kurmanbek Bakiyev in 2010 when the latter reneged on a pledge to expel the U.S. from the Manas air base outside Bishkek.¹⁰

One simple answer to Western surprise lies in the unforeseen developments in Ukraine. Even before November 2013, cynical observers did not believe Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych was sincere about his stated intention to sign an Association Agreement at the Vilnius Summit of the Eastern Partnership. Many believed he was simply seeking better terms from Moscow by courting the EU. Few expected that Yanukovych's decision *not* to sign the Agreement would lead to massive demonstrations in Kyiv, lasting for weeks in sub-zero temperatures. More likely, European leaders were fully prepared to allow Ukraine—like Armenia before it—to submit to Russian control, and only the determination of the Ukrainian people to live in a normal, European country halted that scenario. Indeed, had the second Ukrainian revolution not occurred, Moscow would have had neither a reason for nor an opportunity to make its land grab in Crimea, nor to launch an engineered revolt in the Donbass. And had Yanukovych signed the agreement in Vilnius, Russia would certainly have retaliated, but it is less certain that its response would have included military action.

Fundamentally Incompatible: the Eastern Partnership and Russian Spheres of Influence

An important question remains: did European leaders understand the political and ideological ramifications of the Eastern Partnership that they were gradually building? Many commentators have noted the contrast between the Euro-fatigue in European capitals and the young Ukrainians who were willing to risk death for the idea of Europe. Similarly, there appears to have been a widespread misreading of Russian perceptions of the EU. Indeed, the traditional understanding—in both Russia and Europe—had been that NATO enlargement was a red flag for Moscow, but that Russian leaders cared considerably less about the EU. To many Europeans, this perspective was a remnant of Moscow's territorial and Cold War attitude: NATO meant U.S. security guarantees, and there-

¹⁰ Stephen Blank, "Moscow's fingerprints in Kyrgyzstan's Storm," *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, April 14, 2010, <http://cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/12033>.

fore was seen as directly hostile to Russia; the EU was seen as being focused on “soft issues,” and therefore less problematic.

Once again, the statements of Russian leaders are telling. In March 2009, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov rhetorically asked “what is the Eastern Partnership, if not an attempt to extend the EU’s sphere of influence?”¹¹ This statement was prescient in indicating that Moscow no longer saw the EU as a soft politics actor, but increasingly as a force threatening Russia’s own ambitions in its neighborhood. This requires a more detailed discussion of the differences between Russian and European ambitions.

As most contributions to this volume make clear, the Russian ambition for integration in the post-Soviet space is diametrically different from that of the EU. Whether through its Collective Security Treaty Organization or the projected Eurasian Union, Moscow’s clear aim is to restrict the sovereignty of Soviet successor states, and ensure that their foreign as well as domestic policies are indexed on Moscow’s approval and consent. In other words, Russia aims to create a “sphere of privileged interests,” as President Medvedev declared following the invasion of Georgia—and which was the gist of the “Draft Treaty on European Security” that Medvedev proposed to NATO in the aftermath of the war.¹²

There is a fundamental incompatibility between the EU’s Eastern Partnership and the Russian plans for a Eurasian Union. The EU’s Eastern Partnership essentially offers the EU’s eastern neighbors support and assistance in the event that they choose to reform their political and economic systems on the basis of the EU’s *acquis communautaire*. These reforms are not easy and in some cases are likely to be unpopular, but carry the promise of building accountable and democratic state institutions, based on the rule of law—and inclusion in the EU’s common market. While the Eastern Partnership does not preclude eventual EU membership, it does not promise it either: it is entirely silent on the matter. And despite this absence of a membership perspective—which means states could implement reforms, but fail to gain a seat at the table determining the

¹¹ Valentina Pop, “EU Expanding Its ‘Sphere of Influence’, Russia Says,” *EUobserver*, March 21, 2009, <http://euobserver.com/foreign/27827>.

¹² Charles Clover, “Russia Announces ‘Spheres of Interest’,” *Financial Times*, August 31, 2008, <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/e9469744-7784-11dd-be24-0000779fd18c.html#axzz2yKnFWEOF>; Vladimir Socor, “Analysis of Medvedev’s Draft Security Architecture,” *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, vol. 6 no. 223, December 4, 2009.

rules of the game—it has acted as a powerful force of attraction for the states in the region—save Belarus and oil-rich Azerbaijan.

The vision of the Eastern Partnership has far-reaching implications. A state integrating with the EU and building stable institutions would have a government accountable to its people rather than to Moscow; entailing that where the interests of the people and Moscow do not coincide, the government would necessarily choose the interests of the people.

As a result, such a state could not be part of a Russian sphere of influence, which would require subjugation to Moscow. Indeed, for a country to be part of the Russian sphere of influence it cannot have strong, accountable and legitimate state institutions. Instead, it must be authoritarian, weak, corrupt, fragile and, if possible, have deep internal or external tensions that give Moscow the opportunity to manipulate social forces against one another, and the state the ability to maintain control. Political scientist Thomas Ambrosio makes this point clearly in his book *Authoritarian Backlash: Russian Resistance to Democratization in the Former Soviet Union*,¹³ in which he outlines what he considers Russia's strategy in the post-Soviet space: one focused, among other factors, on “bolstering” authoritarian rule in post-Soviet states, and “subverting” efforts at democratic state-building in those, such as Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova, going down such a path. This explains Moscow's policies of maintaining unresolved conflicts in Georgia and Moldova and between Armenia and Azerbaijan; and its clear intention to create such a stalemate in eastern Ukraine.¹⁴

Thus, the Russian sphere of influence is incompatible not only with the form of European integration envisaged by the Eastern Partnership, but at a more fundamental level with the type of countries that the EU's instruments would help to create. Where European leaders want a stable neighborhood, Russia seeks an unstable one; where Europe seeks to develop accountability, Russia undermines it. Thus, the competition between Russia and Europe is not only geopolitical; it is fundamentally ideological.

¹³ Thomas Ambrosio, *Authoritarian Backlash: Russian Resistance to Democratization in the Former Soviet Union*, Burlington: Ashgate, 2009.

¹⁴ Svante E. Cornell, “No More Frozen Conflicts,” *The American Interest*, July 21, 2014, <http://www.the-american-interest.com/articles/2014/07/21/no-more-frozen-conflicts/>.

This fundamental ideological incompatibility between European and Russian aims is an element that European leaders have failed to internalize: that is, that the very notion, not of EU integration, but of the internalization of the EU *acquis* by the states in the eastern neighborhood constitutes a mortal threat to the imperial ambitions that lie at the heart of Putinism. Indeed, European leaders often not only state but appear to believe in the rhetoric that stable and democratic countries in the “shared neighborhood” with Russia would be in Russia’s interest.

Yet while that may objectively be the case, it is not in the interest of the Putin regime, or what it defines as Russian interests. Instead, the Putin regime views the stabilization and democratization of these countries as a threat not only to its foreign policy ambitions, but to its domestic system of governance. This is particularly the case for Ukraine and to a lesser extent Georgia, countries that occupy an importance place in the Russian identity and imagination. The Baltic States were considered “Western” and could be let go without any direct implications for Russia. But if Ukraine, in particular, were to develop into a modern, stable and democratic state on the European model, this would have enormous reverberations for Russia itself. If the closely related Ukrainians were living in such an environment, why would Russians accept the kleptocratic authoritarianism of the Putin regime? Thus, it is a matter of priority in Russian foreign policy to ensure that Ukraine—and Georgia—do not become democratic states, and that, instead, their “color revolutions” are portrayed as failures that have brought “fascists” to power and exacerbated the poor living conditions of their citizens.

Europe’s Problem: Dealing with Russia’s Asymmetric Challenge

European leaders also misread another element of the politics of the eastern neighborhood: the unresolved conflicts, often called the “frozen conflicts.” When Europeans think of Nagorno-Karabakh, Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Transnistria, they may accept that Russia is meddling in these conflicts, but mostly view them as fundamentally local conflicts that have to be resolved locally, involving the “parties” to the conflicts—and Russia has not traditionally been seen as a party to them. However, even if these conflicts indeed *began* as local conflicts, they rapidly transformed into primarily geopolitical conflicts, as

Russia's policy has been the decisive force in maintaining their lack of resolution through controlled instability. Furthermore, since at least 2004, Moscow has invested considerable resources into taking direct control of the separatist authorities in Transnistria, Abkhazia and South Ossetia. As for Nagorno-Karabakh, Moscow has, through its influence in Yerevan, mainly worked to achieve the same objective. The implication of this is that the conflicts are no longer solvable on the local level, and that Russia is not an arbiter but a direct party to them. Yet European powers still pay lip service to mechanisms of resolution that date to a different reality, that of the 1990s. The one exception is Georgia: following the 2008 war, the EU and the U.S. defined Russia as a party to the conflict, and thus to the Geneva discussions meant to manage it. Russia, of course, strenuously denies being a party to the conflict, which it argues is between Georgia on the one hand and Abkhazia and South Ossetia on the other.¹⁵

Yet the Eastern Partnership is virtually silent on the unresolved conflicts. This stems in part from a desire by the EU not to get embroiled in these conflicts; yet the consequence is that the EU is trying to contribute to the development of its eastern neighbors without addressing the single most important issue halting their development, which provides Moscow with ample instruments to undermine their development and Western integration. Indeed, one clear reason for the invasion of Georgia was that Moscow believed Western powers would never admit countries with disputed borders and unresolved conflicts on their territories into their organizations.¹⁶ Thus, Moscow thought that the invasion of Georgia had killed Georgia's NATO aspirations, and statements by some European leaders seemed to corroborate that view. In the same vein, it is likely that Moscow manufactured the crisis in Crimea with exactly the same purpose, but this time to stop Ukrainian EU membership.

In sum, while the EU promises "more for more" in terms of assistance for reforms, Russia offers another incentive: it essentially tells the countries of the eastern neighborhood that if they opt for European integration, Russia will not

¹⁵ Svante E. Cornell, "No Reset in the Post-Soviet space," *Journal of International Security Affairs*, no. 20, 2011, 19–32, http://www.silkroadstudies.org/new/docs/publications/2011-Cornell_JISA.pdf.

¹⁶ Damon Wilson, "Completing Europe: Georgia's path to NATO," *Atlantic Council Issue Brief*, February 27, 2014. (<http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/publications/issue-briefs/completing-europe-georgia-s-path-to-nato>.)

only wreck their economies, but physically tear their countries apart. This threat has been made in private but is also increasingly being made in public. To note only a very recent example, Putin ideologue Alexander Dugin reacted to Azerbaijan's pro-Kyiv vote in the UN General Assembly in April 2014 by noting that "an Azerbaijan hostile to Russia will instantly cease its existence." To clarify the point, Dugin explained that "the only guarantee of the territorial integrity of all the post-Soviet states is Russia itself . . . In a confrontation with Moscow, not one post-Soviet state will exist in its current borders."¹⁷ Simply put, European leaders have not been able to think up a response to this type of threat. In a sense, the EU and Russia are operating on different frequencies, in ways that prevent the EU from effectively mitigating Russia's actions.

Conclusion

If the EU is to succeed in its aims in the Eastern Partnership, it will need to find ways to rise to this challenge. The inherent problem is that hard security and deterrence is not the EU's mission; thus the response cannot be exclusively an EU one.

To begin with, therefore, the future of the EU's eastern neighborhood depends on effective institutional cooperation between the EU and NATO, and on the revitalization of the transatlantic link. Indeed, a hard power response to Russia will be needed, and only NATO can provide that, given U.S. backing.

Any response must begin with recognition that European aims in the eastern neighborhood cannot be achieved while the most serious challenges to the survival and development of partner states there are ignored or neglected. Instead, Europe and the U.S. must engage on the very core issues of sovereignty and security that the unresolved conflicts have created.

The response to Putin must be regional: it must be focused on shoring up the fledgling states along Russia's periphery, particularly those affected by unresolved conflicts. While providing security guarantees for these states might not be realistic at present, the EU and NATO could begin by making it clear that

¹⁷ Paul Goble, "Dugin says an Azerbaijan hostile to Russia will 'instantly cease to exist'," *Window on Eurasia*, April 6, 2014, <http://windowoneurasia2.blogspot.com/2014/04/window-on-eurasia-dugin-says-azerbaijan.html>.

the unresolved conflicts will not be held against these states if they fulfil criteria for membership. There is an obvious precedent for this: West Germany, of course, had a sizeable unresolved conflict that did not prejudice its membership of either organization, and similar arrangements were made for the overseas territories of several European states.¹⁸

The EU has levers at its disposal. It is a party in some form to the negotiations of all the unresolved conflicts—except Crimea, where such mechanisms have yet to be established. The 5+2 format over Transnistria, the Minsk Group over Nagorno-Karabakh and the Geneva discussions over Georgia's conflicts all provide avenues for clear and concerted European engagement. This will not magically lead to a resolution of the conflicts, but would indicate that Europe is now taking these issues seriously.

In cooperation with the U.S. and NATO, the EU also has the capability to engage more deeply in the security sector with Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine, as well as with Kazakhstan and other Central Asian states. Such steps would reassure these countries, and ensure that Moscow understands that there is no implicit acceptance of a Russian “sphere of privileged interests,” to use Medvedev's terminology.

Practical measures are also of key importance. In Georgia, the deployment of an EU Monitoring Mission following the 2008 war helped to counter Russian provocations and neutralized Russian efforts to manufacture local crises or throw unfounded accusations at Georgia. It has done little to address the unresolved conflicts, but it is a powerful tool in containing these conflicts and reassuring the Georgian leadership. Similar missions could be deployed in Moldova and could feature in Armenian–Azerbaijani negotiations. Moreover, the population of the unrecognized territories lives in an information vacuum, dominated by the propaganda of Russian official news. Countering that information monopoly and providing unbiased news coverage of regional and international developments for these populations is an important long-term goal.

In the final analysis, a key element in any effort to contain Putin's expansionism is to counteract his manipulation of unresolved conflicts. That means taking the victims of his policies seriously and helping to shore up their sovereign-

¹⁸ Wilson, “Completing Europe: Georgia's path to NATO.”

ty and security. Taking steps to address frozen conflicts would register at least as much as any freezing of assets—and by making Eastern Europe safer, it would also help to prevent the next Crimea crisis.