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From Zero-Sum to Win-Win? The Russian Challenge to the EU's Eastern Neighbourhood Policies

Abstract

EU-Russia relations are often seen as increasingly problematic. Usually it is the common neighbourhood residing between the two that is seen as the focal point of tensions. Russia has greeted the EU's activism in the East with growing suspicion. This European Policy Analysis looks at Russian reactions to the Union's evolving neighbourhood policies in the East. It concludes that Russian misgivings notwithstanding, the EU is an indispensable actor in the East. It is also a legitimate one and its presence is both warranted by the recent rounds of enlargement and welcomed by the regional actors. The EU has both the interest and the invitation to be actively engaged in the region. This engagement is something the EU must continue to pursue vigorously also in the future. Therefore the EU should be adamant concerning its intent and inherent right to be actively engaged in the common neighbourhood while assuring Russia that such activities are not aimed at nor threaten anybody: the times when Great Powers scrambled for spheres of influence are over for good and the EU's increased role in the neighbourhood is here to stay.

1. Introduction

EU-Russia relations are often seen as increasingly problematic. Problems are usually perceived to be mounting on three fronts in particular: the very contractual foundation of their relationship, as exemplified by the problems the two have had in negotiating a new post-Partnership and Cooperation Agreement; the role of energy, as exemplified by the disagreements over the fate of the Energy Charter Treaty (ETC) and the different interpretations concerning the origins and consequences of recurring gas crises between Russia and Ukraine; and the so-called common neighbourhood between the European Union and Russia. Of the three, it is the common neighbourhood that is increasingly seen as the focal point of tensions between the parties (Popescu & Wilson 2009b). For many the case in point was the war in Georgia in August 2008 that for a while managed to disrupt also wider EU-Russia relations.

This European Policy Analysis looks at Russian reactions to the Union's evolving neighbourhood policies in the East. Indeed, the starting point of this paper is that the Union has only gradually come to grips with the need for a full-fledged

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eastern policy. The obvious starting point is the two rounds of eastern EU enlargement in 2004 and 2007. These enlargements not only increased the point of contact between the EU and Russia but also resulted in the emergence of a whole new eastern neighbourhood for the Union, including Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova but also the countries of the Southern Caucasus (Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia) and Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan) as well. The focus in this European Policy Analysis is on the so-called Eastern Europe and Southern Caucasus – the areas adjacent to the EU and the ones which to date have been the most contentious parts of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) in the context of EU-Russia relations.

To be sure, the Union's approaches for the region are still largely work-in-progress but the learning curve has been steep. In a spate of a few years the EU has been able to adopt a host of doctrines ranging from the European Neighbourhood Policy and the Eastern Partnership (EaP). In addition, the question of energy security has risen in prominence, resulting in calls for a more coherent EU level external energy policy as well as becoming a cross-cutting theme in the EU's regional and bilateral approaches.

Russia has greeted the EU's activism with growing suspicion, opting out from the ENP and greeting the inception of the EaP with concern. Yet Russia is by no means an outsider in the region but an active and well-established player with a host of legitimate interests to attend to. That said, the current situation of suspicion and (mild) hostility to the growing EU presence in the East is far from satisfactory. Indeed, the biggest challenge the EU is facing in its eastern portfolio is to overcome the current Russian mood of zero-sum interpretations by persuading Moscow to accept the win-win logic of integration in the region.

In the following, the paper will do three things: *First*, to understand the present state of affairs an excursion into the underpinnings of the EU's policies in the East and their reception in Russia is required. *Second*, the role of Russia as well as the neighbours themselves in the Eastern Partnership is examined. *Finally*, the paper ends with some concluding thoughts that seek to flesh out a future agenda for the Union in the region.

2. The Russian reactions to the ENP

The main theme in EU-Russia relations in recent years has been Russia's growing insistence on a more equal role with the European Union that would be on par with Moscow's regained sense of power (these developments will be discussed at length in Haukkala 2010). Increasingly, Russia has come to view the EU and its policies, even if well-meaning, as overly intrusive and unwanted encroachments on Russia's own sovereignty. This mode of thinking has gained prominence in Russia especially during Vladimir Putin's two terms as president which witnessed a certain consolidation of a more pragmatic nationalistic position promoted by Putin and his circle (Mankoff 2009). For all intents and purposes, this tradition has been continued during his successor, Dmitry Medvedev as well (Lo 2009).

It is against this background that the Russian reactions to the ENP should be examined. On the one hand, there seems to have been a certain appreciation of the rationale for the adoption of the policy in Moscow. Especially the bureaucratic and political necessity for bringing together the various strands of the Union's proximity policies has gotten a nod of approval from the Russians. Some voices have noted how the ENP is in fact a rather shrewd strategy from the supranational European Union to adapt itself to the processes of globalization by also pooling its neighbours' resources into the service of the centre in Brussels. As such, the ENP has been seen as "a graphic example" of how the internal methods of European integration are transferred into the realm of international relations outside the EU itself. This has resulted in the abandonment of traditional geopolitics through the exploitation of "gradual, sometimes latent, yet always effective, economic and legislative mechanisms to transform the states from inside" (Kravchenko 2007, 46, 49).

On the other hand, there has been an outright rejection of the applicability of the concept in the case of Russia. It is seen as entailing a harmful intrusion into Russia's own sovereign prerogatives, including relations with its neighbours. In short, from a Russian perspective the ENP is seen as conceptually flawed. According to the then Deputy Foreign Minister Chizhov (2004):

> this [the ENP] is an attempt to reduce to the least common denominator groups of countries and individual states that are entirely different in their level of development and that, in addition to this, have different objectives with respect to the EU itself – objectives that are oftentimes incompatible with one another.

In essence, Russia felt insulted that it was grouped together with Moldova, Morocco and other countries in the southern Mediterranean as a mere "neighbour" of the Union (for a discussion, see Averre 2005). Instead of becoming part of the Union's neighbourhood, Russia has insisted that its relations

with the European Union must rest on a separate basis of equal and mutually beneficial strategic partnership. Chizhov's later words are worth quoting again in this context as they put the official Russian thinking on the issue in a nutshell:

> Russia is a large self-sufficient country with its own views on European and Euro-Atlantic integration. In contrast to some smaller Eastern European or South Caucasus countries striving for EU-membership Russia is neither a subject nor an object of the European Neighbourhood Policy. (Chizhov 2006, 90)

Instead of becoming a part of the ENP Russia has demanded and been granted a more privileged status as a "strategic partner" based on equality (for a discussion with many illustrative Russian quotations, see Averre 2007). The initiative for the development of a new and wider basis for the relations in the form of Four Common Spaces at the St. Petersburg EU–Russia Summit in May 2003 can be seen as a response to these Russian demands. This is not the place to discuss the negotiations leading to the roadmaps for the Four Common Spaces that were adopted at the EU–Russia Summit in Moscow two years later. Nor should scarce words in a short paper like this be used discussing the content of the documents as such. Instead, attention will be drawn to the role that the question of Russia's normative convergence towards the rules, norms, and standards of the European Union has played in the Russian debate. The question of normative convergence is, after all, at the heart of the Union's approach to its eastern neighbourhood, the ENP and the Four Common Spaces included (Haukkala 2010).

3. Normative convergence as a bone of contention

Since the beginning of the 1990s, the Union has sought to spread its norms and values into Russia as well. This aim was originally codified in the Article 55 of the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement between the EU and Russia which unambiguously stated that "Russia shall endeavour to ensure that its legislation will be gradually made compatible with that of the Community." Yet in actual fact the process of normative convergence has been slow in coming with Russia dragging its feet at every possible instance. In fact, one way to read the Union's proposals for the Four Common Spaces and the Common European Economic Space (CEES) that predated it is to see them as attempts at 'operationalising' the rather monolithic and abstract obligation for Russia to harmonise its trade-related laws and rules with those of the EU *acquis*. In essence, they can be seen as attempts at generating incremental forward momentum in a process that from the vantage point of the Union had so far been disappointing, to say the least.

It should be pointed out that the idea of normative convergence is highly sovereignty-challenging, akin to economic, even political integration. Such a highly intrusive process in fact goes against the very grain of prevailing Russian understandings about what is feasible and desirable in international relations. By contrast, the idea of seeking equality and recognition for Russia's sovereignty runs like a red thread through most of the recent official Russian interventions on international politics in general and its relations with the European Union in particular. All the major figures ranging from President Putin, both present and former ministers, parliamentarians, ordinary diplomats, and even judges in the Constitutional Court have conveyed the same basic message of Russia's equal rank and status in the contemporary world and the need to treat the indivisibility of state sovereignty as the main building block for the world order (Haukkala 2010).

The expectation of equal treatment has also started to filter into the official doctrines and documents in Russia. But it would be erroneous to argue that these are only recent developments in Russian thinking. For example, the Russian Medium-Term EU Strategy from 1999 already took equality between the partners as its starting point. More recently, material published from an on-going review of Russian foreign policy has framed the same issue in the most explicit terms:

> A new important factor in European politics is the understanding that Russia is an independent player with global interests: This leaves no grounds for illusions about the possibility of co-opting this country into the loose Western alliance on terms dictated to us. This last circumstance highlights the non-viability of the unilateral policy pursued by the **European Union** in dealing with Russia. There is a pressing need to come to terms with Moscow on the basis of equality, which will require respect and consideration for the Russian position in the EU decision-making process – that is to say, a drastic revision of the modalities of our relations. (Advisory Council to the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Russia 2007, 86, emphasis in the original)

Keeping this discussion in mind, it should not come as a surprise that Russia has increasingly started to question the very

feasibility and legitimacy of normative convergence with the Union. An analysis of Russian stances on the issue, to be discussed in more detail below, produced a rather uniform picture of rejecting the Union's attempts at projecting its values and norms on Russia. Behind this emphasis of equality and sovereignty seems to be an underlying understanding of world politics as an arena of uncompromising battle of interests and struggle for domination. The notion of ruthless global competition – economic, military and normative – seems to have strong resonance in the Russian elites. Furthermore, especially in the aftermath of the eastern enlargement to Central and Eastern European former Soviet satellites in 2004, there seems to be a growing understanding that in certain respects the European Union might prove to be a more serious challenger to the Russian position in the East than the traditional adversary NATO (Chizhov 2004, 80-81). Or, alternatively, leading Russian politicians also appear to bracket the EU and NATO together as organisations seeking to dictate policies, norms and values on Russia (Averre 2007, 183).

4. The reasons behind Russia's EU allergy

A curious flip side to this stance seems to be the constant worry in Russia that European integration is progressing without Russia and that it might result in new dividing lines detrimental to Russia's economic and social development. Often this worry is put in the way how the EU decisions, policies, norms and standards that affect Russia are prepared and taken without Russia's participation. For example, the former Ambassador to Russia's Permanent Representation to the European Union Vassily Likhachev (2004, 104) has noted how "cooperation between Russia and the EU can be effective only when it is governed by international law rather than the whims or rules of one of the negotiating sides." More often than not, Russian reasoning seems to be that such developments are highly detrimental and that Russia remains committed to mutually beneficial cooperation on an equitable basis without dividing lines. This offer is, however, often made conditional on the Union's willingness to offer Russia possibilities of affecting its internal decision-making processes.

These understandings and demands seem to be entirely incompatible with the Union's views that emphasise the mutually beneficial win–win logic of its aims and actions. In the words of the Head of the European Commission Delegation in Russia Richard Wright, the harmonisation of norms and standards is single-handedly beneficial for Russia:

> EU laws facilitate business effectiveness, and here unified approaches to standards would give Russia easy access to a potential single market. The advantages of harmonizing customs laws are obvious insofar as this removes trade barriers. … The application of EU rules and regulations would secure an effective functioning of any future free trade zone or unified economic area. Harmonization of regulations in the financial services sphere would help create a stable market in Russia, which would provide an incentive to attracting capital and stabilizing the capital flow. In conclusion, I would like to say that economic integration, accompanied by regulatory reform, would expedite Russia's economic growth. … I am sure that Russia and Russian business cannot afford not to adopt the same rules as are applied in all EU countries. (Wright 2002, 181-182)

Western economists by and large agree with this analysis. Yet the Russians themselves are far from convinced. In essence, the EU's attempts at liberalising and integrating the Russian economy and society are seen first and foremost as intrusions into the domestic affairs of the country with a view on discriminating Russian companies (Pleines 2005, 275). Some have gone as far as to argue that the main aim of the "European project" is merely to exploit the Russian potential in order to reinvigorate its own ailing economy (Skorov 2005, 81).

The prevalence of these sentiments in the Russian debate has resulted in a growing weariness towards the logic of integration propagated by the Union. This aversion takes several forms with similar traditional, sovereign undertones.

- First, often the Union's as well as other European organisations', such as the OSCE and Council of Europe, insistence on European norms and values is seen as a thinly veiled attempt at hegemony and the use of double standards in judging Russia and other non-EU/European others in world politics (Chizhov 2006, 93). In this respect, it is quite telling that in recent years even the pro-West and pro-reform liberal intelligentsia have started to view EU policies as a systemic challenge aimed at preventing Russia from gaining full access to most important trans-national structures and organisations (Averre 2005, 180).
- Second, the harmonisation of laws, even where permissible in principle, should only apply to certain relevant sectors, excluding the across the board harmonisation

promoted by the Union that could be seen as detrimental to Russian sovereignty and statehood (Khristenko 2004, 41, 46).

- Third, the question of normative convergence is couched in terms of democratic legitimacy. Some Russian commentators have argued that the expectation of normative convergence makes Russia vulnerable to a potentially "huge" democratic deficit as it is unilaterally forced to apply norms, rules and regulations without being given a chance to affect their essential content (Bordachev 2003, 52-53).
- Fourth, formation of a Common Economic Space with the Union is seen as potentially harmful and undermining Russia's other economic projects in the post-Soviet space. Therefore, Russians insist that the process with the EU must be compatible and complementary to these other projects as well (Chizhov 2006, 90, 92).
- Fifthly, European norms and standards are not only seen as a source of dilution of Russia's sovereignty, they are also increasingly seen as incompatible and even harmful for Russia's own economic trajectory. Russian economists point out that as the bulk of the Russian exports to the EU consists of energy and other raw material that are already traded toll free, the actual short-term benefits of economic integration would be meagre while the potential costs for domestic manufacturing could be prohibitively high (Pankov 2007).
- Finally, the EU's growing penetration of the eastern neighbourhood is followed with concern. It is to this concern that we turn next in the form of the Eastern Partnership.

5. The Eastern Partnership

The origins of the Eastern Partnership (EaP) can be located at the end of the 1990s when Poland started to make suggestions for a specific "eastern dimension" of the European Union that the forthcoming eastern enlargement would bring (the genesis of the EaP has been traced in Popielawska 2009). These calls never bore actual fruit with the other EU member states and the Commission preferring a more general ENP instead. It was only the French President Nicolas Sarkozy's decision to push for a separate Union for the Mediterranean in late 2007 that made viable the idea of a separate "eastern dimension" in the form of a Polish-Swedish proposal for an Eastern Partnership in spring 2008.

The EaP aims to draw the reform-minded neighbours in Eastern Europe and South Caucasus closer to the EU. The policy remains agnostic concerning the issue of possible EU membership: it does not make an offer, nor does it fully exclude that possibility. Instead, the EaP seeks to enhance the ENP Action Plans by providing a multilateral platform for the process. Importantly in this context the partners' implementation of their commitments is also based on the shared values of democracy, rule of law and respect of human rights, as well as the principles of market economy, sustainable development and good governance. In essence, the EaP is based on the same set of principles as the rest of the Union's Eastern policies that have become increasingly difficult for Russia to subscribe to.

Compared to the ENP, the main new innovation in the EaP is indeed the new multilateral component that encourages the convergence of the partner countries' legislation, norms and practises to those of the Union. The practical implementation of the multilateral track takes place through four thematic platforms: (i) democracy, good governance and stability; (ii) economic integration and convergence with EU policies; (iii) energy security; and (iv) people to people contacts. The multilateral track also provides for civil society participation through a separate *Forum* whose results will feed into the thematic platforms. Visibility and concrete substance to the EaP are brought through a number of regional flagship projects that are currently under development.

Political association and deeper economic integration are on offer for those partner countries which advance in agreed reforms. In practice this would mean the replacement of the current PCAs with more far-reaching Association Agreements as well as negotiations on deep and comprehensive free trade areas with those partners who already are members of the World Trade Organization. A related plan is to encourage free trade within the region itself.

Of concrete and most immediate interest to the citizens of the partner countries is the facilitation of mobility. The EaP expands on the already set goal of country-by-country advancement to visa facilitation and readmission agreements, with prospects for a visa dialogue with the possibility of eventual visa freedom at the end of this road. Integral to the success of this path is the ability of the partner countries' to deal with the challenges posed by illegal immigration and other border security related issues.

6. Russian suspicion

When examined against the discussion above, the lack of Russian enthusiasm for the Eastern Partnership becomes understandable. In fact, Russia's first reactions to the Polish-Swedish proposal in May 2008 were swift and negative. Essentially, the gist of Russian complaints has been that the policy template was unnecessary to begin with and that it amounted to nothing less than an EU attempt at gaining a sphere of influence in the East. Also the preconditions on joining the policy put forth by Brussels, such as putting pressure on Minsk not to recognize the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia before the first Eastern Partnership Summit in May 2009, have been deemed as unacceptable meddling into the internal affairs of other countries (yet this has not stopped Moscow from applying severe pressure on Belarus to recognize the two statelets).

The Russian suspicion towards the policy is also linked to the connection between the EaP and the war in Georgia in August 2008. In Russian minds the EaP is seen as a reaction to the war, although chronologically the initiative of course predates the war. Yet it cannot be denied that the war did act as a catalyst for the policy. The extraordinary European Council in September 2008 made this link very clear when arguing that it was precisely due to the war that it was more than ever necessary for the EU to support regional cooperation as well as to step up relations with its individual neighbours in the East (European Council 2008, 7). As such, the Russian reading of the EaP has been that it is the EU's divide and rule tactic for the eastern neighbourhood, a policy spearheaded and advocated by a group of EU members with a negative agenda towards Russia and its role in the region.

This is not the place to discuss the reasons for the Russian reactions in more detail. Suffice it to say that the Russian rhetoric concerning the EaP has been well in line and made understandable by the earlier thinking concerning the ENP discussed above. Also, the emotional stance of certain statements is made understandable by the war in Georgia as well as the growing perceptions in certain Russian circles that Russia is in fact in the process of losing its position in the CIS area, not strengthening it (for a discussion, see Stewart 2009).

However, the EU has done its best to allay Russian concerns. For example, after the first Eastern Partnership Summit in Prague in May 2009 the EU High Representative Javier Solana insisted that the new project was not against anybody and whoever thought so was simply wrong (Rettman 2009a).

The European Commission on its web pages dedicated to the EaP has a specific FAQ-section that takes the bull by the horns:

What about the Russian Federation? Is this proposal anti-Russian?

This is not at all an anti-Russian initiative. We are responding to a desire expressed throughout the countries in our Eastern neighbourhood who want to substantially deepen and widen their relations with the EU. Russia remains a crucial partner for the EU, with whom we are currently negotiating a new comprehensive agreement. We always stress that the members of the EaP will need good working relations with all their neighbours, including the Russian Federation.

(Available at http://europa.eu/rapid/pressReleasesAction.do?reference=MEMO/09/217&format=HTML&aged=0&language=EN&guiLanguage=en, last accessed 13 October 2009)

But despite its best efforts the EU has been only half successful in its attempts, as exemplified by the words of President Dmitry Medvedev during the post-EU-Russia Summit Press Conference in Khabarovsk later in the month: "I'll put it succintly. We tried to convince ourselves [that the EU project is harmless] but in the end we couldn't... What worries us is that in some countries attempts are being made to exploit this structure as a partnership against Russia." (Rettman 2009b)

Yet Russia's stance on the Eastern Partnership is not wholly negative. As Susan Stewart (2009) has pointed out, Russia has in fact welcomed cooperation under the auspices of the EaP when it comes to concrete, mutually beneficial projects. This is also a stance adopted by the European Union, leaving the option open that in the future the search for synergies and mutually acceptable forms of cooperation may begin. It seems obvious that the best way forward is to concentrate on so-called low political topics, such as environmental protection or emergency relief and use them as platforms through which increased trust can be generated with a view to approaching more political and contentious issues over time. For the time being, however, it seems clear that Russian antipathies towards the programme are strong enough to make the prospects of a fully cooperative relationship between the EU and Russia in their shared neighbourhood rather distant.

Indeed, it is the neighbours themselves that are a crucial part of the equation and a factor that has often been overlooked in the analyses of EU-Russia relations in the neighbourhood context. The neighbours themselves are far from passive objects of the EU's neighbourhood policies. The same goes for the Russian approaches as well. As Popescu and Wilson (2009a) have argued, the neighbours themselves form a "sovereign neighbourhood" which, unlike the Central and Eastern European countries that have recently acceded into the European Union, are less interested in full integration and normative convergence with the Union. Instead, for the eastern neighbours the name of the game is beefing up their own statehood and sovereignty and this is a process where at times both the EU and Russia may prove useful.

Therefore, instead of making a once and for all decision concerning their main vector in foreign and especially integration policies, these countries can be expected to vacillate between the East and the West (see also Stewart 2009). Yet this is a mode of operation that is very difficult for the EU to handle. The EU is in the business of long-term systemic transformation and is not a very agile strategic actor in keeping up with the ever-changing constellations and policies of the neighbours themselves. In fact, the EU's essential inability to play this game is already reflected in the various fatigues the EU is experiencing over its neighbours: Since the second gas crisis in January 2009, the faltering Orange Revolution in Ukraine has resulted in a growing weariness on the part of many EU member states to embrace the country. The same has taken place with Moldova and Georgia in recent years, although the new government in Chisinau might yet again change the dynamics somewhat. Most recently, there are already signs that President Alexander Lukashenko may be starting to back track on rapprochement with the EU – a move that could put the EU-Belarusian relations on hold once again in the nearest future.

7. The EU pattern

In short, we see a pattern emerging on the part of the Union. On the one hand the offer of convergence and integration stands – and this is very important – but the Union's own commitment to deliver on its promises varies over time and case by case. To be sure, the EU's stance is largely the function of the ability and willingness, or lack thereof, of the neighbours themselves to implement their commitments. Yet the fact that the EU is faced with a host of difficult neighbours in the East does not absolve the EU from an imperative to seek to transform its own periphery. The EU does not need to have an altruistic bone in its body politic to do this: this is in its own self interest.

In short, the eastern neighbourhood is too important for the Union to be left at the mercy of the fragile reform processes of the neighbours themselves. Instead, the EU must foster a strong long-term vision for the region and devise policies that seek to engage the countries regardless of the problems they themselves might face in making the European choice. This is of course easier said than done but at least the basic parameters are already in place in the forms of the ENP and the EaP: The 'vision thing' is in place even if the full political will and actual resources are not (at least of yet).

At the same time one should bear in mind that there are no grounds to claim that Russia is vastly more successful in the region, either. In this respect, Popescu and Wilson (2009b) may be seen as overly alarmist in their assessments concerning the EU and Russian soft and hard power in the region. The CIS area is far from being under Russia's domination, as exemplified by Russia's persistent problems in getting the other members to recognize the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

Also, there are increasing signs that in the Western CIS the EU is still the preferred destination for integration and in Central Asia it seems as if it is increasingly China, and not Russia, that is the pole around which the countries will seek to position themselves. Indeed, the general trends in the CIS region after the Georgian war would seem to testify of Russia's relative weakness and not its strength (for a discussion, see Tardieu 2009). A recent indication of Russian problems in the shared neighbourhood was the CIS Summit in Chisinau in early October which witnessed the absence of several key heads of states (Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and – most notably – Kazakhstan) as well as generally portraying the CIS as an increasingly inefficient and lacklustre organization (Centre for Eastern Studies 2009, 7)

Therefore, amidst Russia's current bluster it is important to keep in mind the following: The EU might not be enjoying a streak of stunning successes in its eastern neighbourhood but nor does Russia seem to be in full control of the situation. In fact, the current state of affairs should give the EU the opening and the time to get its own policies in line as well as to find some kind of a mutually acceptable modus vivendi with Russia in the East.

8. The way forward for the EU

Russian misgivings notwithstanding, the EU is an indispensable actor in the East. It is also a legitimate one. Its presence is both warranted by the recent rounds of enlargement and welcomed by the regional actors. The EU has both the interest and the invitation to be actively engaged in the region. This engagement is something the EU must continue to pursue vigorously.

Yet it is evident that the EU's impact in the East has been far from optimal. A part of the blame goes to the EU itself: it has not been as determined and as strategic as it should have been. That said, a major hindrance on the path towards an effective eastern policy for the EU has been the growing suspicion on the part of Russia. It is not necessarily the case that Russia would have actively resisted the EU's presence in the region (although signs of that have been present as well) but the very fact of Moscow's displeasure with the new concepts has been enough to rob a sizeable amount of wind from the Union's own sails due to the sensitivities within the EU over antagonising Russia over the common neighbourhood.

Although it goes without saying that the EU must listen attentively to the Russian concerns, this must not mean a carte blanche for Russia to stake a claim to the neighbourhood between the EU and itself. Instead, the EU requires a more joined up approach to its neighbourhood. To be sure, it already has more than a token policy in place: it has the voiced ambition to promote stability, prosperity and reforms on its doorstep; from accession to the ENP and the EaP the EU largely also has the instruments in place. The missing link is the political will and commitment to make maximum use of them.

In this respect the forthcoming Treaty of Lisbon should be able to make a difference. It should allow for increased consistency in both messages and style of diplomacy on the EU side. Too often Russia has been faced with mixed messages or varying accents concerning the EU's eastern agenda. With the arrival of new President and the High Representative this problem should be at least ameliorated even if not perhaps entirely done away with. At the same time this should translate into less room of manoeuvre for Russia in playing the member states against each other and against the EU institutions.

Therefore, added coherence and consistency should be on offer in the EU's eastern portfolio in the nearest future. But this is only half of the story. To really start making a difference in the East the EU needs a four-pronged approach to its neighbourhood:

- First, the EU must make a genuine strategic commitment to its eastern neighbourhood. The talk has been talked but the true test lies in walking the actual walk of partnership in a difficult neighbourhood. Many more words could be used to justify this point but the issue really boils down to this: there is no way the EU can continue to be safe, prosperous and secure if the region just outside its borders is in turmoil. It is in the EU's own self-interest to make a long-term strategic comment to this neighbourhood regardless of the short-term travails that this might entail.
- Second, the EU needs to keep all options genuinely open towards its neighbourhood. The EU must be frank with itself: in the final analysis the EU's chances of effecting change in a legitimate manner in the East hinge on the question of accession. This is not to say that the prospect of full accession is a panacea that will do away with the problems that bedevil the neighbourhood. The reverse is in fact the case: none of the eastern neighbours is ready for full accession in the immediate future. At the same time, the very prospect of accession acts as a source of politico-psychological leverage that the EU should seek to exploit: by keeping the prospect of full accession genuinely open for countries such as Ukraine and Georgia the EU is in fact talking up the prospects of successful transformation in these countries with very little immediate cost or threat to the EU.
- Third, the EU needs to convey to Russia that its presence is indeed benign in the East. Here we enter the realm of psychology, however. It should be clear to anyone who has watched the EU's track record in the East that it is far from a malign power political empire builder. Yet this is the way Moscow chooses to cast the EU's new policies in the East. Therefore, the mental change required will have to take place on the Russian side. Thus far the change has not looked very likely. That said, the recent writing of President Dmitry Medvedev on the web pages of Gazeta.ru – *Go Russia!* – has given some grounds for optimism: there are voices in Russia that advocate the logic of integration in Russia and they operate at the very formal top of the power structures (Medvedev 2009). Therefore it is not entirely inconceivable that over time Russia might be persuaded to abandon the current zero-sum logic and embrace the win-win logic propagated by the Union instead. In the meantime, however, all the EU can do is to continue on its present course with Russia: extending the hand of partnership time and time again

despite the problems the two are currently facing. But this gesture must be accompanied with another signal as well: that of a resolute announcement of the EU's intent and inherent right to be actively engaged in the common neighbourhood and that such activities are not aimed at nor threaten anybody: the times when Great Powers scrambled for spheres of influence are over for good and the EU's increased role in the neighbourhood is here to stay.

- Fourth, the need for a robust EU policy in the East also has a transatlantic dimension: the EU needs to show to the US that it can carry its own weight in the neighbourhood. President Obama's United States is too preoccupied with other issues to be able to afford much attention to what essentially is the EU's own neighbourhood. By contrast, the US needs to be able to use its resources and political attention elsewhere, in international theatres of greater concern for Washington, such as the Middle East and Afghanistan. By taking care of its eastern neighbourhood on its own, the EU can in fact show the US that it can be of assistance in solving problems that are of mutual concern, that Brussels can shoulder major responsibilities and engage in a meaningful division of labour. This should go a long way towards answering to the challenge put forward by President Obama at the beginning of his term: that Washington is now willing to take its partners more seriously, provided that they can engage in meaningful co-operation with the United States.

All in all, the EU has plenty of sound strategic imperatives and reasons for a robust presence in the East. Also, and as has been argued, it already has an impressive array of different tools, instruments and concepts in place. What is now required is the essential political will on the part of the whole EU, its member states as well as its soon to be revamped institutions, to embrace this challenge and turn the current prospects and good intentions into a sound reality. None of the current challenges – the neighbours themselves, or Russia for that matter – should be seen as genuine obstacles for the EU. They are partners to be embraced and interlocutors to be persuaded – both feats at which the EU usually excels at.

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