

EASTERN PARTNERSHIP IN THE CONTEXT OF UKRAINIAN CONFLICT: LESSONS TO BE LEARNED

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The crisis in Ukraine has become the first direct conflict between European Union and Russia or better to say between their differing regional strategies - Eastern Partnership and Eurasia Union concept. In my view, this conflict has been predetermined like everything is predetermined in a Greek tragedy. Ukraine was central for both strategies. The "either or approach" made the conflict inevitable. The reason of this confrontation is not so much Eastern Partnership per se, but rather Eastern Partnership is a creation of the EU-Russia differences in the CIS space that are rooted in the 90s.

The roots of the crisis

Three factors are essential for understanding the roots of the current crisis. First, the post-Communist space after the end of bipolarity was divided by the West between two security institutions. NATO became responsible for Central and Eastern Europe, which was included into enlargement strategies of NATO and EU, while OSCE became responsible for the post-Soviet area. This divide discredited the role of OSCE that was viewed as a second rate security institution for the second rate countries. Aside from this, nobody in the West wanted to sort out the mess in the CIS space but Russia could not afford to be just an idle onlooker. Its policy in the CIS in the 90s was very uneven if not heavy-handed but in the very least it more or less stabilized this space having lost around 1000 peacekeepers in the post-Soviet conflicts. And when the CIS area was more or less stabilized NATO and EU appeared with the regional strategies.

Second, the NATO and EU strategies had one common characteristic –they were meticulously bypassing Russia. EU like the whole of the West, once the problem with the Soviet nuclear legacy was solved, was obsessed with the prospect of a revival of a new Russian empire. Therefore it perceived the disintegration trends the CIS as a key condition of democratization of NIS and a guarantee that the USSR would never be brought back to life, in whatever form, in the post-Soviet space.

Third, the Kosovo precedent made the likely inevitable. In two decades since the Paris Charter Summit, every one of the ten principles of the CSCE's Helsinki Final Act (1975), has been violated. Two conflicts after the end of bipolarity– the Kosovo crisis of 1999 and the Caucasus crisis of 2008 are the most telling evidence to this reality. The Helsinki principles were not legally binding rules but nobody could even think about violating them since the stakes in the bipolar world were very high. In the post-bipolar time international actors started to apply these principles

selectively according to their foreign policy interests and preferences. Nowadays many secessionist movements in the world draw courage from the Kosovo, South Ossetia, r Abkhazia and Crimea cases.

ENP and Eastern Partnership

The Brussels strategy vis-à-vis the post-Soviet space initially was developed within the framework of the EU Neighbourhood Policy, a policy directed at the stabilisation of the Union's immediate neighbourhood. The main question was about Russia's participation. Some of the EU member-states were against Russia's inclusion in the ENP project. At the same time it was impossible to officially disregard Russia. The solution was found in the decision to invite Russia in such a manner that would be unacceptable for her.

The first draft of the ENP, namely Commission's Communication "Wider Europe - Neighbourhood" (like the so-called Solana Paper on the EU Security Strategy) was being criticised in Russia even by the proponents of the EU-Russia strategic partnership for the lack of clear priorities and diversification of the EU policy vis-a-vis the Union's immediate international environment, first and foremost Russia. The opponents of the EU-Russia rapprochement used this document to back their favourite thesis that "nobody wants Russia, and even the EU prefers to keep Russia at the arm's-length". Given Russia's post-Soviet complexes and its obsession with the status problem, Kremlin's response was predictable: "Thank you, but we shall be developing our relations with EU outside the ENP format". So, the EU got an argument not to include Russia into its regional strategies in the CIS.

The Eastern Partnership initiative of EU was launched before the Caucasus crisis as a reaction to the deficits of the EU Neighborhood Policy, as a manifestation of the EU dissatisfaction at the orange revolutions in the CIS and tacit recognition of the GUAM inefficiency. The aim is to strengthen regional cooperation with the GUAM states plus Armenia and Belarus in the areas of good governance and economic reforms. But its implementation was enhanced by the consequences of the Caucasus crisis as well as the gas crisis between Russia and Ukraine. The Prague summit declaration makes it quite clear that the Eastern Partnership is a new more pragmatic version of the ENP putting pragmatism above ideals. With all good intentions, Eastern Partnership from the very beginning had some inherent flaws.

First, had Russia been included in these negotiations from the very beginning, a critical position would never have developed. True, it has been stressed by Brussels that this initiative is not directed against Russia. But as long as Russia shares the continent with EU and NATO, which possess huge economic, technological and military power - "without Russia" will be always interpreted by Moscow as "against Russia". Russia has not yet found its proper place in the post-bipolar Europe and being

neither ally, nor opponent of the West, it will be searching for its own allies. The very idea to launch such an initiative without participation of the EU biggest Eastern partner raised Russia's suspicions against its real goals, namely the EU plans to create its own sphere of influence in the post-Soviet space and deprive Russia of the status of the priority partner for some of the CIS states included in EaP.

Second, in its approach to the EaP partners the EU proceeded from its experience in the CEE and Baltic region where European identity and vocation were inherent. In the CIS area the situation was different. The European option has not become irreversible for these states. Ukraine, the most European country of all EaP states has been torn apart between Russia and EU which means that only together Russia and EU can stabilize this country. Therefore, the EU should have worked to construct a regional economic context in which Ukraine can enjoy freer trade and improved economic relations with both the EU and Russia at the same time.

Third, like in the ENP, Brussels regarded all EaP members as one whole without clear priorities and differentiated approach to their eastern partners.

Fourth, The EU conducted no assessments to understand how the DCFTA's would impact different sectors within the partner countries. As a result, it could not offer a well thought selection of financial measures, implementation of reasonable timelines designed to smooth transition to the EU norms and standards.

Fifth, Brussels always preferred to talk to the political elites of its eastern partners but not to their ordinary people who were aware of all hardships that they would be faced with, but knew very little about finalite and benefits of the EaP implementation.

Conclusion: what should be done?

Whether the EU likes it or not, perception is everything in international politics. Russia's perception of the Eastern Partnership unavoidably rearranges the playing field. No doubt, the EU does not want Russia's domination in the CIS space but Russia does not want either any foreign dominance in its immediate neighborhood. "A battle for Ukraine" is a risky endeavor. Neither EU, nor Russia can stabilize Ukraine without each other. The primary goal is to stop bloodshed, to create conditions for Constitutional reforms and parliamentary and presidential elections in Ukraine.

If this goal is achieved, it would be worthwhile for EU to reformat EaP agenda and take a fresh and more adequate look at its eastern partners, including Russia. There should be no more illusions that the EU needs only to explain Russia better that the Eastern Partnership does not present any

threat to her. A new functional approach to cooperation in the CIS space is badly needed (in line with the 2009 proposal of the then president Medvedev to enhance European energy security by offering a syndicated loan to Ukraine). A functional approach consists precisely in making the agenda for cooperation as concrete as possible, concentrating resources on the main issues and conducting intensive negotiations with clearly set goals and deadlines.

And finally, under the best scenario in the Russia-West relations, it would be expedient to come back to the unfinished job of the end of bipolarity. Usually all world wars ended with peace conferences – be it Peace of Westphalia, Vienna Congress, Versailles, or Yalta - that established a new world order and new rules of behavior in international relations. Nothing of this kind was done after the end of the Cold war. The approaching 40th anniversary of the Helsinki Final Act offers a unique opportunity to reflect on the OSCE role and Helsinki's relevance in the post-bipolar Europe.