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Arkady Moshes
Programme Director
The Finnish Institute of International Affairs

The Eastern Partnership after the Riga Summit > Avoiding the path of least resistance

The EU should be warned against curtailing its ambitions in the Eastern Neighbourhood. Half-hearted policies will not lead to the systemic transformation of the region. Only a more robust, more demanding and more rewarding policy can bring about such change.

In the aftermath of the Eastern Partnership (EaP) summit in Riga, it is high time we asked whether the EU has the right instruments at its disposal to address the challenges it is facing in its eastern periphery.

To all intents and purposes, the honest answer to such a question should be No.

The EU initiative launched in May 2009 was supposed to make the region comprising six post-Soviet countries (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine) more secure, more prosperous, more compatible with the system of norms adopted within the EU, but also more internally co-operative.

Today's reality is far from this idealistic rhetoric.

A key partner state, Ukraine, is at war. Its territorial integrity has been violated and more than a million people have become refugees in their own country. The death toll is rising daily, and this tragic number includes several hundred EU citizens who lost their lives when Malaysian Airlines Flight MH-17 was shot down in Ukraine's airspace in July last year. Several other frozen conflicts in the region show no signs of progress towards resolution.

The necessary reforms in the partner countries take place painfully

slowly, if at all. Even the more advanced partners (Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine), which signed Association Agreements with the EU, reveal controversial developments. Georgia, for instance, is frequently criticized for "selective justice", whereas Moldova and Ukraine are causing concern due to the excessively high level of corruption, oligarchic influences and inefficient governance.

The region is also divided from within. Armenia and Belarus are both economically and militarily allied with Russia by way of the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), respectively. So it is hardly surprising that they refuse to express even a notional diplomatic solidarity with Ukraine and support for its territorial integrity, as the Riga summit final declaration has convincingly demonstrated. Azerbaijan, as it is sometimes said, chose not to choose, but is interested in a personally-tailored relationship rather than being just an odd member of the group.

And from here on, the situation is set to get even more challenging, not less. The key contextual factor here is the EU-Russia relationship. When the EaP was launched, the EU hoped that the Russian-Georgian conflict of 2008 would not be repeated

elsewhere and did everything in its power to return to "business as usual". Several European capitals, Berlin above all, fantasized about the "Partnership for Russia's modernization". Today, Russia and the EU are involved in direct geopolitical rivalry in the common neighbourhood. Brussels may disagree and repeat *ad nauseam* the old mantra that its policy is not aimed against Russia. But this will be to no avail as long as Moscow sees it as a zero-sum game and acts accordingly.

Meanwhile, today's Europe is arguably a weaker player than it was in 2009, not to mention in 2004, when it began implementing the European Neighbourhood Policy, of which the EaP is a constituent element. Continuing economic problems in many member states, the migration crisis and other security issues in the southern periphery, as well as the approaching debate concerning the possible exit of Britain not only absorb energy and attention, they also serve to deprioritize the eastern neighbourhood and undermine the resolve to stay the course.

Those countries that are not willing to accept any EU conditionality as a precondition for partnership will definitely see both the geopolitical game and the EU's perceived weakness as an opportunity. A classic

Finnish Institute of
International Affairs

Kruunuvuorenkatu 4

POB 400

00161 Helsinki

Telephone

+358 (0)9 432 7000

Fax

+358 (0)9 432 7799

www.fiia.fi

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example now is Belarus. Brussels is quickly normalizing its “pragmatic” interaction with Minsk despite the fact that the country still has political prisoners and its leadership is officially under sanctions. The only signal that this approach can send to Moscow is that if one can stay firm and non-compromising, sooner or later the EU will soften its stance.

Of course, the EaP alone cannot be blamed for this state of affairs. But an inadequate instrument may well be part of the problem. The EaP was designed and implemented as a technocratic gradualist policy which simply could not address the challenges in a strategic manner, and which lacked strategic resources.

A simple extension of this policy towards individual states, known in EU jargon as “differentiation”, will hardly change much. The risk is now twofold.

As regards the less willing partners, the EU now seems to be inclined, in order to ensure “co-ownership” and “progress”, to follow the agenda proposed by the partners and to forget about the overarching objectives.

As regards those who are more willing, Brussels cannot respond to their membership aspirations, which is fully understandable, but which will de-motivate the partners

nevertheless. In both cases, albeit at a different level, ambitions would be curtailed.

The way out of this impasse lies in making the EU policy more robust, more demanding and more rewarding, but above all in ensuring that it serves the interests of Europe and avoids compromises for the sake of compromises. In fact, the current level of EU involvement in Ukraine is already much higher than the EaP originally implied, and this should be applauded as an example to follow.

Only the systemic transformation of the Eastern Neighbourhood can make the region more secure and more prosperous. Half-hearted “partnerships” will not achieve that goal. But an ambitious strategic policy in the East of Europe might.