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THE EU TOWARDS RUSSIA IN THE EASTERN NEIGHBOURHOOD – MISSING THE STRATEGIC VISION

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The conflict in and around Ukraine has sparked once more countless debates regarding the EU's best course of action regarding Russia, as well as regarding Moscow's actions and behaviour. It is clear that the events that shocked the world in 2014 caught the EU completely unprepared and have undoubtedly left the EU-Russia relations under unprecedented strain. The EU has lacked strategic vision in the Eastern Partnership region and underestimated both the Kremlin's endgame as well as the reasons behind Russia's involvement and actions in Crimea.

Introduction

Over the past decade, the European discourse about its Eastern Neighbourhood states has been centred on the concepts of Europeanisation, integration, and reforms, since it remains within the EU's most important interests to have stable and prosperous countries at its borders. Despite the union's efforts to assist these countries in developing their economic and political environments, the outcome of the ENP has been rather disappointing, especially in the spheres of democracy and the rule of law. Furthermore, the events in and around Ukraine have shaped what could be considered as the most serious crisis in the EU-Russia relations and has profoundly affected not only Ukraine, but also the welfare and security of the extended Europe.

Despite several inconsistencies, which have been widely analysed in literature (lack of incentives, limited resources, EU members' divergent interests, no

membership perspective for the EaP partners, etc.), the conflict and slow progress of Europeanisation in the region cannot only be blamed on Russia, but also on the EU's lack of commitment, long-term vision, and specific end-result for these countries. The 'go with the flow' approach did not yield any positive outcomes. As such, the EU's approach before 2014 determined that ruling elites of some EaP states were balancing their politics between Russia and the European Union, and were implementing a 'bridge' policy between the West and the East. However, such a strategy failed because these countries did not have the resources to balance for a long time, and big actors have been insisting on them picking a side in the end (particularly relevant for Ukraine, where the population was politically divided between a pro-Western and pro-Russian vision, a notion actively used and exaggerated by the parliamentary and presidential campaigns). Ukraine represents a tragic failure of the EU's actorness in the region, as it did not anticipate nor prepare for a crisis that could go to such a scale.

The Russian Factor in the Shared Neighbourhood

Without a doubt, the most sensitive and problematic area in the Eastern Neighbourhood regards the conflict resolution process. It is quite clear that the EU was not able to deal with conflict resolution at its Eastern borders, where there are several long-simmering and potentially destabilising conflicts, and where the union's engagement has been sporadic at best so far. This region has been a hot spot of frozen conflicts, which, as the Russian-Georgian war showed, could break out at any given time.

The EU underestimated and did not consider the importance of Ukraine for Russia – it has failed to see the emotional attachment and the importance it has for Russians' identity and collective mind-set. For Russians and for Putin, Ukraine is much more than a territory or pride; it represents an integral part of their identity, deeply rooted in 'russkiy mir' concept, stretching all the way back to Kievan Rus. As such, the EU has terribly underestimated the extent to which Russia would go to defend its interests in the region when it felt threatened with losing its grip on Ukraine.

For instance, in the televised annual show *Direct Line with Putin*, in 2014, the most frequently used word in the entire transcript is 'Ukraine'. Although the show was supposed to touch upon more internal affairs, from a wide spectre of spheres, Ukraine was mentioned overall 322 times throughout the three hours and 40 minutes of the TV show. However, it should be taken into account that this 'direct line' happened just after the illegal annexation of Crimea, so the level of attention to Ukraine was higher

than usual. At the same time, a content analysis detected some notions of doubt. The speech is dynamic (most used words are verbs). Such discourse shows an emotional attachment to the Ukraine issue, not only from the president's side, but also from the citizens who posed the questions revolving around Ukraine.

For a comprehensive analysis, Ukraine's and the EU's interests and personal choices should be taken into account on the same level as Russian ones described above; however, this paper is solely based on a brief critical analysis of the EU's shortcomings in understanding the deeper issues and structural causes of Russia's reactions, which could have helped in making Russia more predictable and in anticipating some of the events that followed.

Although, the EU got involved and has invested in resolving the Ukraine crisis, as well as other conflicts in the area, quite often it merely reacted to events, without having a clear strategy or political determination. If the EU had paid more attention to Russia's emotional stance on Ukraine, it could have built a proper strategy towards Russia and Ukraine. Unfortunately, so far, the EU has based its actions on improvisation and reactions to Russia. Therefore, how does the EU currently cope with these challenges?

The EU's Lack of Vision and Political Imagination in the Eastern Neighbourhood

The fact that the concept of 'Common Strategies' introduced by the Treaty of Amsterdam (1997) has practically disappeared from the EU's external agenda, it generally makes the EU even less effective in defining clear strategic visions for its

¹ A. Huff, *The Role of EU Defence Policy in the Eastern Neighbourhood*, Institute for Security Studies, EU, Occasional Papers, No. 19, 2011, p. 5, [<http://www.iss.europa.eu/publications/detail/article/the-role-of-eu-defence-policy-in-the-eastern-neighbourhood> accessed in February 2013].

external political relations². When it comes to its biggest and most important neighbour, Russia, the lack of strategic vision has been identified and emphasised long ago, ever since the Common Strategy towards Russia³ was launched in 1999. As such, over a decade ago Haukkala and Medvedev⁴ brought to light a detailed critique of the EU's lack of strategic vision in the EU's Common Strategy. Although many events and years that have passed since then, the critique still stands today. Per se, the conclusions of the strategy analysis outline three general setbacks:

- the fact that the European Union is indeed suffering from a strategic deficit vis-à-vis Russia, which the authors call “a strategy of non-strategy on Russia”,
- the fact that member states are more interested in protecting their own interests vis-à-vis Russia rather than in developing an operationally strong strategy document,
- as well as that rather than having a full-fledged and coherent strategy, which would allow for a flexible response to the evolving events in Russia, the European Union has instead been forced into reaction, improvisation, and a reliance on ad hoc arrangements.⁵

Following Haukkala and Medvedev's relevant and up-to-date critique, the report “Assessment of the Cooperation between the EU and Russia”⁶, published in 2006, also emphasised the dire need of a long-

term vision regarding relations with Russia. Moreover, the report identified the lack of long-term vision as “the main factor that prevents Moscow and Brussels from overcoming the ambiguity and the crisis of confidence in their mutual relations.”

Nearly two decades have passed since the Common Strategy was launched and the EU has still not elaborated a coherent document dedicated exclusively to shaping a long-term vision/strategy on Russia. The latest official form of the EU's ‘strategy’ on Russia consists of a one-page subchapter titled “European Security Order” that is incorporated into the EU's Global Strategy⁷ presented in 2016. Although this ‘chapter’ is quite detailed in terms of ‘principles’, it does not add up to any specific actions or means that the EU should take to further engage or mend things with Russia. The chosen formula for dealing with Russia is built upon ‘selective engagement’ [...] ‘if and when our interests overlap’, which suggests a short-sighted vision based on improvising rather than planning. The only long-term mention of the text is the declarative statement of strengthening cooperation with civil society through “deeper societal ties through facilitated travel for students, civil society and business”. However, it only mentioned the ‘what’ and not the ‘how’.

Similar to policy towards Russia, in terms of lacking a long-term vision, is the European Neighbourhood Policy (2004), which was

² *Assessment of the Cooperation between the EU and Russia*, Royal Institute for International Relations (IRRI-KIIB), 28 March 2006, [http://aei.pitt.edu/9092/1/Russia-EU.pdf].

³ *Common Strategy of the European Union on Russia: Conclusions of the Cologne European Council*, 04 June 1999.

⁴ H. Haukkala, S. Medvedev, *The EU Common Strategy on Russia: Learning the Grammar of the CFSP*, Ulkopoliittinen instituutti/The Finnish Institute of International Affairs: Helsinki 2001.

⁵ H. Haukkala, S. Medvedev, *The EU Common Strategy on Russia: Learning the Grammar of the CFSP*, Ulkopoliittinen instituutti/The Finnish Institute of International Affairs: Helsinki 2001, pp. 65-67.

⁶ *Assessment of the Cooperation between the EU and Russia*, Royal Institute for International Relations (IRRI-KIIB), 28 March 2006, [http://aei.pitt.edu/9092/1/Russia-EU.pdf].

⁷ *Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe – The European Security Order*, EU Global Strategy, 2016, [https://eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/top_stories/pdf/eugs_review_web.pdf].



The long-term dimension is missing both from strategy (having a long-term objective – to transform the region, but missing the ‘how’) and in assessing the consequences of Russia’s actions

basically built on the EU’s enlargement policy. Initially, Russia was invited to take part in this policy and when it refused, it was harshly criticised by decision-makers and analysts alike. Its attitude was associated with pride and imperialism, rather than technical details of how to deal with such different countries through the same instruments. For instance, was it realistic to have Moldova and Russia under the same framework of cooperation? The ENP offered the same package and means to countries that had completely different structures and needs. That is why it did not work so well. Such policies should be custom-made according to the partner’s needs in order to be effective. In our opinion, you cannot deal in the same way, with the same means with Russia (the EU’s main gas supplier) as you do with Moldova (a country 100% dependent on energy supplies, with high-level poverty and emigration). Not only does the size of the two countries differ, but so do their agendas, capabilities, and resources.

In general, there is no common recipe for success in dealing with external partners, as none of the EU’s current cooperation frameworks (EU-US, ‘New Neighbourhood’, ‘Swiss’ or ‘Norwegian’ model, etc.) can be fully applied to the case of Russia. Each of these frameworks is built upon a unique historical, economic, political, and cultural

platform and cannot simply be transferred and applied elsewhere⁸.

EU economic sanctions had less political effect against Russia than expected and have failed, so far, to influence the Kremlin’s agenda. Although there is an ongoing debate regarding the efficiency of the sanctions, no matter the outcome, in our opinion, they are not a long-term solution. In assessing the real outcome of the EU’s actions, long-term consequences must be taken into account. As such, in judging the sanctions, the EU should not only look at short-term goals of harming Russia’s economy. There are side effects in the long run that might be opposite to the West’s overall interests – Russia’s isolationism and the ‘fortress’ concept will be a dangerous slope that will most likely not lead to Russia’s transformation. An isolated Russia can become a more aggressive Russia and a more nationalistic Russia.

Conclusions

There is no clear strategy on how to deal with or engage Russia and the Shared Neighbourhood. Very often the EU’s actions are merely a response to Russia’s actions in the region. The long-term dimension is missing both from strategy (having a long-term objective – to transform the region, but missing the ‘how’) and in assessing the consequences of Russia’s actions (for instance, in the case of sanctions, the EU judges their efficiency in terms of harming the Russian economy, which is an immediate effect, without considering the challenges that entail an isolated, ‘fortress’ Russia).

In our opinion, the EU has taken more than it could handle, both internally (considering economies that were not prepared, such as Romania, Bulgaria, Greece, etc.) and

⁸ *Assessment of the Cooperation between the EU and Russia, Royal Institute for International Relations (IRRI-KIIB), 28 March 2006, [http://aei.pitt.edu/9092/1/Russia-EU.pdf].*

externally (it misled neighbours and promised them prosperity and protection when in reality it could not deliver them). There are other means to appease Russia and hold it accountable for its actions that might work better than sanctions – for example, excluding it from several international organisations.

The EU will not be able to overcome this deadlock and bring coherence to its approach towards Russia unless it goes beyond the current state of affairs “to develop a clearer vision of the political order that it seeks to uphold on the contested fringes of its own post-modern space”⁹. Instead of focusing on changing Russia on our terms as a main objective, we should set intermediate goals

of making Russia want to transform on its own, which, of course, is a very complex and long-term process. One of the ways to do it is by targeting the civil society and supporting liberals inside Russia.

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⁹ I. Krastev, M. Leonard, *The New European Disorder, European Council for Foreign Relations*, 2014, p. 6, [http://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/the_new_european_disorder322].

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