EU – Russian Relations and the Eastern Enlargement: integration or isolation

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Abstract

Initially, in the first half of the 1990s, Russia's plans to include the countries of the former Eastern bloc within the EU were not seen as a threat to its interests. Furthermore, in the context of NATO's enlargement, some Russians regarded them as an advantageous alternative. Russia is aware that the EU enlargement with the Central and Eastern European states resulted in a present increase in the number of EU members supporting close trans-Atlantic relations. Moscow's fears of further EU enlargement were softened due to a dispute that continues to grow within the Union, regarding the rationale and limits of further enlargement, primarily for the Balkan states, Turkey, and the CIS states. Moscow expects that the reluctance of European societies towards further enlargement will inhibit this process.

The external relations dimension of the European Union's enlargement to central and Eastern Europe has received surprisingly little attention despite the fact that in the long-term the issues it raises may be far more important than those currently dominating the debate. Nowhere is this more likely to be correct than about Russia, for which the EU's enlargement poses a risk of increasing isolation from the rest of Europe. The danger of creating a new dividing line across Europe is widely recognised, and the challenge, therefore, is to find ways of ensuring that Russia can be fully integrated with Europe while almost certainly remaining outside the EU Itself. This article focuses on relations between the EU and Russia and addresses three fundamental questions: how Russia has responded to the prospect of the EU's eastern enlargement; the specific issues arising from expansion, and the kind of long-term relationship that could develop between Russia and an enlarged EU.

Key words European Union, Russia, Eastern Europe, Enlargement**,** Integration.

Introduction

Russia and the EU agreed to form a common economic space and coordinate financial regulations without the establishment of supranational structures back in 2003. In line with this idea, we proposed setting up a harmonised community of economies stretching from Lisbon to Vladivostok, a free-trade zone and even employing more sophisticated integration patterns. We also introduced the pursuit of coordinated policies in industry, technology, the energy sector, education, science, and also to eventually scrap visas. These proposals have not been left hanging in midair; our European colleagues are discussing them in detail. Soon the Customs Union, and later the Eurasian Union will join the dialogue with the EU.

As a result, apart from bringing direct economic benefits, accession to the Eurasian Union will also help countries integrate into Europe sooner and from a stronger position. A better understanding of the potential positive outcomes of this geopolitical and geo-economic dynamic is not only analytically relevant but could also help European countries and Russia to elaborate more effective strategies to develop a more cooperative relationship both among themselves and with other countries of

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the region (Putin, 2011).

For over 20 years, the idea of building a Greater Europe has been a significant landmark along the way to cooperation in the Euro-Atlantic area. However, its concrete implementation faces at least three fundamental problems. The first concerns security issues. How best to resolve the 'security dilemma' between Russia and NATO, as well as between Russia and the Euro-Atlantic community as a whole? How to build a common security space? The answers to these questions require solving a whole bunch of problems, including the enlargement of NATO, ways to settle local conflicts, control over nuclear and conventional weapons, the missile defence issue, and many others. The second one is economic. It pertains to the measures to be taken to align the economic potential of the EU, Russia, and post-Soviet states. These are key to achieving a mutually interdependent economy in Greater Europe as well as to creating a common humanitarian space with the participation of Russia and other post-Soviet states. The third relates to the post-Soviet space itself and deals with the reconciliation of Russia's strategic interests in the post-Soviet space with the EU and NATO enlargement plans, as well as the sovereign choices of certain post-communist countries.

The EU's approach to the eastern neighbourhood has evolved to become an inclusive regional policy based on the EU. With the articulation of its 'proximity policy' in 2002, the EU registered its specific interest in the eastern region but had no particular strategy or vision to support its intentions. Hence, the initial inclusion of Russia (subsequently rejected by the latter), and almost incidental of the Southern Caucasus. For more discussion, see Korosteleva 2012; Delcour 2011. The European Neighbour Policy made it a wider European focus with an overarching responsibility for the region underpinned by an 'enlargement-light' strategy (Commission 2004).

However, with the launch of the Eastern Partnership Initiative (EaP) in 2009, the policy gradually acquired a more pronounced (and contested) region building narrative (Commission 2009). At its core was the promotion of low-key technocratic strategies of engagement to codify an EU-centred agenda into a series of roadmaps and Association requirements, with some profound implications for the wider region. EU region-building policies de facto assume the primacy of economic inter-regional cooperation, without a prospect of EU membership for the willing partners. Having encountered much criticism from its institutions and the region itself, by 2012 the ENP/ EaP became reduced to further 'a set of instruments to promote further the eastern region, supported by a complex financial tool machinery of financial tools and inclusive of all levels of society. The instruments, in particular, evolved to reflect the numerous aspects of the economic and legal acquis of the EU, as transcribed in individualised roadmaps (Commission 2012) and more recently, the European Union Association Agreements, now signed with Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia. The anticipated impact of these agreements, as claimed, was to develop the 'capacity of the third countries to set strategies and prioritize convergence of their regional policies with those of the EU' (European Commission 2014: 7). As a region-building project, the policy by definition entails inclusion and exclusion (Delcour, 2011), favouring conformity and isolating resistance, which also extends.

Results and discussion

Russian Approach

"Russia, which had originally refused to be part of the EU's ENP, and presently has set to pursue a region-building strategy of its own". From the start, Russia has intended hegemonic region-building policies towards the eastern neighbourhood, while carefully observing EU actions in the region. Following the dissolution of the USSR and the subsequent interstate integration tendencies, especially in economic

and humanitarian fields, in 2007 Russia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan, at the latter's initiative, inaugurated the Eurasian Customs Union (ECU), an (alternative) Russian-led regional-building project in post-Soviet space (Eurasian Economic Commission 2013). The construction of the ECU and the forthcoming Economic Union (EEU) allegedly emulates the EU's supranational structures (Karlyuk 2012) and has progressed considerably moved apace from signing the initial treaty on the ECU Commission and Common Territory (2007) to establishing the ECU in 2011 and the new Eurasian Economic Commission in 2011, and a single economic space (SES) in 2012.

The launch of the EEU is anticipated in 2015, with further expansion of its membership to prospectively include Armenia, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkey, and Iran. Noting this fast-flowing regional integration, Vladimir Putin commented. The key features of this alternative regional integration project include market harmonisation and interest-driven multilateral partnerships often led by Russia, with the consent of other signatories. Since its launch, this regional project has not received adequate international recognition. At the same time, as Dragneva and Wolczuk contend, 'unlike previous integration regimes, the ECU and SES provision has developed alongside Russia's accession to the WTO in 2012,… in future agreements to comply with the WTO regime, even in the case of non-WTO members, and for WTO law to prevail over any conflicting ECU provision' (2014). However, this overlapping 'grand rhetoric' of the EU and Russia fails when it comes to its implementation, resembling more a tug-of-war than a partnership for regional modernisation. While the EU demands convergence with its acquis, which is claimed to be incompatible with the ECU standards; Russia conversely, although envisaging a prospective application of the WTO rules to the ECU/ EEU, operates more through compulsion and dependency arguments bearing the mark of the Soviet times.

Finally, both the EU and Russia recognize each other's presence and interests in the region, often stipulated in their respective official discourses. At the same time, in this acknowledgement of interests, they fail to understand, let alone to facilitate the need for interface and trialogue over and with the region. Instead, they continue their advancement of overlapping but disjoined projects in the region, which is 2013, owing to their highly politicised focus on economic integration, led to the eruption of conflict in Ukraine. The EU and Russia's intentions with Ukraine came rather late in 2014, as a consequence of war and the negotiated ceasefire in Ukraine, whereby the DCFTA by the latter was agreed to be delayed by six months, according to Russia's demands (Council, 2014). Furthermore, the Commission has also proposed to establish official contacts with the Eurasian Union to start negotiations on harmonisation of respective FTAs between the EU and the ECU (Focus, 2014).

The EU's and Russia's Inner Weaknesses

The main weakness of the EU lies in itself and more so within the member states, which have not been able to implement a genuine Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) and an EU energy policy. Thus, much of the problem has come from its side since it has allowed Russia to take reading very favourable to its interests. The Kremlin, since Putin's arrival at power, has rightly understood that interdependence in the energy field tilts the balance in its favor and that it can count on the division of EU member states not only to weaken the EU as a global political power, but also for offering Russia the possibility of legitimately reach the most convenient bilateral agreements. Moreover, no issue has generated more divisions and controversy among and within the member states than Russia. For years – and in some cases up to now – the political and economic elites of some EU member states did not really shake off the inherited idea that Russia had special rights over Ukraine as elsewhere in the former Soviet area.

What are the Chances of Co-Existence?

The EU engaging Russia through cooperation with the Eurasian Union could be one good option, provided that the latter delivers and that internal conflicts among partners do not disrupt their integration process. The chances of this to work out would be much stronger if Russia's

main concern were based on economic development interests. But now, after Ukraine, this has to be proven and in the very first place to its partners who have made evident that they are susceptible about their sovereignty, regardless of their similarities as political regimes (Krastev & Leonard, 2014).

The project of the European Union has been seriously weakened not only by the loss of Ukraine but also by the fears that Russian military intervention has raised in the other two key members, Belarus and Kazakhstan. According to the idea launched by Putin in October 2011, the project was inspired by other regional integration processes such as the European Union, the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), or the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and aspired to be "an essential part of Greater Europe united by shared values of freedom, democracy and market laws (Putin, 2011).

Domestic political strategy, that is, maintaining the regime, is the decisive factor in Putin's decisions-not a rational choice, be it economic or security-driven. While the nature of power in the Kremlin remains unchanged, the European Union must seriously revise its strategy towards Russia. What if a conflict arises between Belarus and Russia? What Dmitri Trenin wrote more than ten years ago still fully applies: 'Russia's rapprochement with Europe is only in the second instance of a foreign policy exercise. Its success or failure will mainly depend on the pace and depth of Russia's economic, political, and societal transformation. Russia's 'entry into Europe' cannot be negotiated with Brussels. It has to be made first 'in Russia' itself (Trenin, 2002). According to the prevailing wisdom in the West, the Ukraine crisis can be blamed almost entirely on Russian aggression. But this account is wrong: The United States and its European allies share most of the responsibility for the crisis (Mearsheimer, 2004).

The European Expansion Eastward

Despite a steady increase in economic cooperation, Russia and the EU have shown so far divergent political views, in particular about the reorganisation of the Eastern European and Southern Caucasus countries of the post-Soviet space. Since the end of the USSR, the European Union, in concert with the United States and NATO, has, in fact, pursued a policy of political and military expansion eastward that Moscow has always considered threatening and unjustified in light of the absence of the ideological and strategic danger previously constituted by the Communist system. In fact, since the end of the USSR Western policy toward Russia has seen at the same time the establishment of forms of dialogue with the activation of a new containment strategy. A policy strongly influenced by the perception of the US strategic need to avoid "the re-emergence of a Eurasian empire that could obstruct the American geostrategic goal (Brzezinski, 1997).

A decisive moment in this process was the enlargement in 2004, the largest single expansion of the European Union, which involved four countries (Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Hungary) that had been members of the Warsaw Pac, as well as the three Baltic republics (Lithuania, Estonia, and Latvia). All these countries (with Romania and Bulgaria) were already members of NATO, a military alliance created to deal with the Soviet Union and that Moscow perceives as a threat to its national security. Besides, after the great enlargement of 2004, the EU had stepped up its expansion in the post-Soviet space through the project of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP). This project was born in 2004, with the strategic objective of uniting under a single set the post-Soviet country that have become 'new neighbours' of the EU (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine, Belarus). The European Commission has always said it wants to develop the ENP in parallel with the strategic partnership with Moscow, but failed to persuade Russia. Also, because the start of the ENP coincided with the so-called 'colour revolutions', which involved two of these countries, namely Georgia and Ukraine, and raised serious concerns in Russia (Beachain, 2010).

Moscow, in fact, accused the West of the

organisation of these regime changes, fearing to be involved. Therefore, Russia began to vigorously confront the whole process of expansion eastward of the EU, considered as substantially aggressive. Moscow seemed completely unable to understand that its political and economic model appears scarcely attractive for many countries of former USSR, namely Moldova, Georgia, and in a certain measure Ukraine. This is indeed the main obstacle for Russian projects of reconstruction of post-Soviet space. The following years saw then a progressive increase in political misunderstandings between Russia and the EU. Strengthening the ENP through the so-called Eastern Partnership (EaP) has helped to deepen this misunderstanding. The EaP stems from a joint Polish-Swedish proposal of June 2008 to improve relations with the neighboring countries of Eastern Europe, Southern Caucasus, and Southern Mediterranean. Given the traditional anti-Russian stance of Poland and Sweden, Russian suspicions that EaP aims at definitively removing from Moscow the countries of Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus cannot be considered groundless. The European Union, too, has been marching eastward. In May 2008, it unveiled its Eastern Partnership initiative, a program to foster prosperity in such countries as Ukraine and integrate them into the EU economy. Not surprisingly, the Russian leaders view the plan as hostile to their country's interests. This past February, before Viktor Yanukovych was forced to flee, the Russian Foreign Minister, Sergei Lavrov, accused the EU of trying to create a 'sphere of influence' in Eastern Europe. In the eyes of Russian leaders, EU expansion is a Trojan horse for NATO expansion. (J. Mearsheimer, 2004).

Conclusions

Despite the growing economic interdependence, the EU and Russia have not been able to find lasting forms of political understanding based on the real acceptance of differences in interests and values so far. The competition for the post-Soviet space represents the most severe threat to the further development of the partnership between Brussels and Moscow, which is of paramount importance to both. The severity of the Ukraine crisis imposes a profound rethinking of the relationship between the EU and Russia. The future of the post-Soviet countries of Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus should be defined with a much more shared involvement of all the interested actors.

In particular, the EU should take a profound reflection on its strategy toward the Eastern Partnership and consider more carefully the consequences of some delicate political decisions. In the post-Soviet countries, the weight of history and the determination of Russia to defend its interests must be seriously taken into account. On the other hand, despite the strategic relevance of acquisition of the Crimea and the high internal consensus, Russia should feel strongly motivated to get out of this situation of political isolation and progressive economic decline. Moscow needs to recover and expand its partnership with Europe and the West. The Eastern alternative is, in fact, dangerous for the Russians. Therefore, however hard it may seem, the European political project and the Russian one must be complementary, not opposed. For the good of the involved countries, but also for the recovery and consolidation of the Russian-European strategic relations.

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