



EU and Russia: an Eastern Partnership Muddling on?

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Summary: Moscow's attitude towards the EU fluctuates. There are deep-seated doubts that the EU is attempting to undermine Russia's geopolitical positions in its traditional sphere of interest. Alexander Sergunin examines Russian concerns.

EU-Russian relations have developed quite dynamically over the last fifteen years. Despite some ups and downs there has been obvious progress in various spheres of bilateral cooperation – energy, transportation, information technologies, telecommunications, environment protection, visa facilitation regime, education, research and culture. The EU has become Russia's largest trade partner and source of investment, while [Moscow is one of Europe's main energy suppliers](#) [1]. The two protagonists try to coordinate their global and regional strategies to make the world and their neighbourhood a safer place. For example, since 2000 Moscow has taken an active part in the EU's [Northern Dimension Initiative](#) [2]. This involved north-western regions of Russia in quite intensive sub-regional cooperation with neighbouring countries. A solid legal and institutional basis for bilateral cooperation has been established, although the 1994 Partnership & Cooperation Agreement (PCA) expired in 2007 and has so far only been extended on an annual basis. In May 2005, the so-called roadmaps towards four EU-Russia common spaces were adopted.

Although Russia has embraced a growing number of cooperative projects with the EU, there have also been some limitations restricting both Russia's engagement and the success of different projects. These include residual mistrust and prejudice, bureaucratic resistance in both Brussels and Moscow, authoritarian trends in Russia's domestic policies, uneasy relations between 'old' and 'new' EU members, conflicting interests in the post-Soviet space and (as mentioned) the lack of an updated and revised Partnership & Cooperation Agreement. Therefore, when thinking about the future of EU-Russia cooperation, it is important to note that in the current situation both challenges to, and opportunities for, such cooperation can be identified. And the Eastern Partnership (EaP) project is no exception.

In the 1990s Moscow was absolutely positive about EU regional and sub-regional initiatives and encouraged Russian border regions to participate in various trans- and cross-border collaborative projects. However, in 2002-2003 Poland (still a candidate country at the time) launched the Eastern Dimension initiative, aimed primarily at engaging Belarus, Ukraine and Moldova and, only in second place, the Russian region of Kaliningrad. At that point Moscow became more suspicious of Brussels' regionalist projects on its doorstep. Some Russian strategists tended to believe that such initiatives had the secret goal of undermining Russia's geopolitical positions in its traditional sphere of influence.

For this reason the EU [European Neighbourhood Policy](#) [3] (ENP) of 2004 was coldly received by Moscow, which refused to join the initiative, claiming special status in its relations with Brussels. For the same reason, Russia was quite suspicious of other EU regional/sub-regional projects such as the [Black Sea Synergy](#) [4] (April 2007), [Central Asian Strategy for a New Partnership](#) [5] (June 2007), [Arctic Strategy](#) [6] (November 2008) and [Baltic Sea Strategy](#) [7] (June 2009).



Eastern Partnership Member Countries

The EaP was launched at the [Prague summit](#) [8] (7 May 2009) and involved six post-Soviet states (Belarus, Moldova, Ukraine, Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia). According to the Prague declaration, “The main goal of the Eastern Partnership is to create the necessary conditions to accelerate political association and further economic integration between the European Union and interested partner countries... With this aim, the Eastern Partnership will seek to support political and socio-economic reforms of the partner countries, facilitating approximation towards the European Union”.

More specifically, the EaP has the following concrete aims:

The further development of bilateral relations between the EU and the partner countries with the aim of providing a basis for Association Agreements between the EU and those partner countries who are willing and able to comply with the resulting commitments. New Association Agreements in their turn should stipulate the establishment of comprehensive free trade areas, where the positive effects of trade and investment liberalization will be strengthened by regulatory approximation leading to convergence with EU laws and standards.

- The European Union will develop Comprehensive Institution-Building Programmes individually with each partner country in order to improve their administrative capacity, including through training and technical assistance.
- Increased mobility for the citizens of the partner countries through visa facilitation and readmission agreements and, at the same time, fighting illegal migration and improving the border management system.
- The EaP also aims to strengthen energy security through cooperation with in the areas of long-term stable and secure energy supply and transit, including through better regulation, energy efficiency and more use of renewable energy sources.

Moscow reacted to the EaP with both caution and scepticism, because the Russian leadership was not sure about its real goals: is the EU serious about making its new neighbourhood a stable and safe place or is it some kind of geopolitical drive to undermine Russia’s positions in the area? Moscow is particularly sensitive about the EaP programme because Russia has fundamental interests in the region that range from strategic and political ([confederation with Belarus](#) [9], military-technical cooperation with Belarus and Armenia, military conflict with Georgia, support of the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia) to economic (investments, trade, energy supply, etc.) issues.

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- Moscow is puzzled by the motivation of some of the partner countries. While Georgia and



Ukraine have clearly expressed their intention to join Western economic and security institutions (EU and NATO), Armenia and Belarus are strategic allies of Russia, who depend on economic and military assistance from Moscow. Moldova and Azerbaijan also have huge economic and strategic interests in cooperating with Russia. Moscow does not understand why these countries opted for a pro-EU orientation in a situation when Brussels is unable to offer them substantial financial aid or other tangible political or economic benefits. For example, soon after the Prague summit EU leaders sent a clear signal to the six partner countries that the EaP is not the way to EU membership or substantial liberalization of the visa regime (at least in the near future).

Many Russian experts believe that the main EU interest in the EaP is the construction of alternative oil and gas pipelines bypassing Russia e.g. [Nabucco](#) [10] or [White Stream](#) [11]. Georgia and Ukraine are considered important transit countries, while Azerbaijan can serve both as a source of, and transit point for, energy supplies. Russian specialists, however, doubt that these plans are realistic and believe that any new energy transport schemes without Russia's participation are doomed to failure.

As already mentioned, some Russian specialists believe that the EaP 'hidden agenda' includes an EU plan to undermine Russia's geopolitical dominance in Eastern Europe and Caucasus. The EU views Russia as a revisionist power trying to regain its former control over the post-Soviet space. Brussels interpreted the Russian-Georgian military conflict of 2008 and the '[gas wars](#)' with [Ukraine](#) [12] as evidence of Russian imperialist intentions. In this sense the EaP is seen by some Russian experts as the EU's attempt to withdraw six post-Soviet states from Russia's sphere of influence and establish a sort of protectorate for these countries.

A number of Russian experts have expressed profound doubts over the EU's capability to effect serious changes in the existing regimes of the six partner countries, by transforming them into prosperous states sharing European values and ideals (one of the main official EaP objectives). The EU might find it difficult to achieve the desired result (it has problems in "digesting" even the so-called "new" members of the Union). The present generation of post-Soviet politicians is prepared only to pay lip service to democracy and liberalism rather than actually putting these values into practice.

Some Russian analysts suspect that Brussels intends to use the EaP to bring the [Kaliningrad question](#) [13] back on to the EU-Russia agenda on Brussels' own terms. They put this interpretation on a number of statements by Polish diplomats that some EaP-related programmes could cover the Kaliningrad Region.

There are serious disagreements between the EaP participants themselves, which may prevent implementation of the project. For instance, [the problem of Nagorny Karabakh](#) [14] is still an obstacle to cooperation between Azerbaijan and Armenia. Moldova has uneasy relations with Romania because of Romanian attempts to interfere in Moldovan internal affairs during the election campaign (spring 2009). In the context of relations between Romania and Ukraine, Bucharest periodically complains to Kiev about infringements of the rights of the Romanian minority in the Ukrainian border regions. All three countries have different approaches to conflict resolution in Transnistria.

The attitude of EU member states to the EaP project is also quite ambiguous. The analysts noted that the leaders of a number of influential EU countries such as UK, France, Italy and Spain did not attend the Prague summit on the EaP. Nor did the leaders of Austria, Portugal, Luxembourg, Malta and Cyprus. This is an obvious demonstration of the fact the EAP is not one of their major foreign policy priorities.

The EaP financial and economic base has yet to be put in place. The global financial and economic crisis and the necessity of rendering assistance to the "newcomers" mean that the EU is unable to allocate large sums of money to the EaP project. For the same reasons it cannot attract resources from international financial organizations, or private capital. The 600 million euros that are to be allocated by the EU to the project in 2010-2013 represent only a symbolic sum, not enough to deal with the problems in the partner countries. In addition, this sum is half what was promised earlier.

Many Russian experts believed that the above inconsistencies would sooner or later result in numerous duplications and parallels with similar EU regional initiatives, and in financial and organisational problems relating to the EaP project implementation. For this reason, there was no surprise at the position on the EaP adopted by the EU Swedish presidency in July 2009. It led to the effective cessation of EaP funding because of the EU's financial troubles (although Sweden - along with Poland - was one of the initiators of the EaP).

There is also a certain inconsistency between different EU regional/sub-regional initiatives in the



“new neighbourhood”. The Prague declaration especially emphasised that the EaP would not interfere with the implementation of existing bilateral and regional projects, but it is unclear how the EaP will be coordinated, for example, with the Northern Dimension Initiative and especially with the Black Sea Synergy. Both overlap with the EaP territorially, substantially and institutionally in many respects. For example, five of six EaP partner countries (except Belarus) are participants of the Black Sea cooperation. It is also characteristic that some European analysts (especially the French) express concerns regarding potential competition (for resources) between the EaP and the [«Mediterranean union»](#) [15] project supported by Paris.

To sum up: it appears that both the Russian expert community and practitioners lack a clear and objective vision of the EaP and its implications for Russia. Most Russian experts are either negative or sceptical about the EaP and its future. Quite often emotional and subjective assessments prevail or assessments that are not supported by solid empirical evidence. It seems that the lack of a sound Russian strategy towards the EaP is one of the sources of misunderstanding in EU-Russia bilateral cooperation, a misunderstanding that sometimes contributes to derailing the Brussels-Moscow dialogue. As a result of this, both EU and Russian policies often give the impression of muddling on rather than a sound and forward-looking strategy.

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Sideboxes'**Read On' Sidebox:**

[Eastern Partnership](#) [17], official EU website

[Eastern Partnership: The Opening Report](#) [18], edited by Beata Wojna and Mateusz Gniazdkowski, Polish Institute of International Affairs, Warsaw, 2009

[Russia and the Eastern Partnership after the War in Georgia](#) [19], by Jean-Philippe Tardieu, French Institute of International Relations, August 2009

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- [8] <http://www.dw-world.de/dw/article/0,,4232536,00.html>
- [9] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Union_State
- [10] <http://www.nabucco-pipeline.com/>
- [11] <http://www.gueu-whitestream.com/main.php?id=1&lang=eng>
- [12] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Russia-Ukraine_gas_disputes
- [13] http://www.wilsoncenter.org/index.cfm?event_id=12153&fuseaction=events.event_summary
- [14] <http://www.c-r.org/our-work/accord/nagorny-karabakh/origins-dynamics-misperceptions.php>
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