

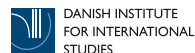


Think Global – Act European

# The Contribution of 14 European Think Tanks to the Spanish, Belgian and Hungarian Trio Presidency of the European Union

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## ENLARGEMENT AND THE NEIGHBOURHOOD

# The EU's Role Towards Russia and the Eastern Neighbourhood: Between Consultation, Cooperation and Confrontation

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The EU's relations with Russia are shaped by the tensions between Central and Eastern European security interests and Western Europe's energy needs. After a brief honeymoon at the start of Putin's first term in 2000, and unsuccessful attempts to revive the spirit of cooperation after 11<sup>th</sup> September 2001, relations with Russia have consistently been one of the most divisive issues within the EU. Whereas France, Germany and Italy tend to take a relaxed position in relations with Russia (not least due to their dependency on Russian energy supplies) some of the Central and Eastern European states (though Poland under Tusk is keen not be perceived as anti-Russian within the EU) and states such as Sweden see Russian politics in the Caucasus as an immediate threat to their own security and therefore join Britain (as the foreign policy ally of the United States) in calling for the EU to take a harder line on Russia.

These differing preferences are also reflected in the different approaches to the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), where major political projects such as the Mediterranean Union initiated by Paris stand unconnectedly side by side with the Polish / Swedish Eastern Partnership (EaP) for deepening cooperation with the EU's Eastern neighbours. It also remains unclear how the Eastern Partnership will fit in with the Northern Dimension (EU, Russia, Norway and Iceland) and the Black Sea Synergy. Nor has the EU yet developed successful instruments for preventing conflict in the Eastern neighbourhood. Finally the EaP does not contain any forward-thinking proposals as to how the EU's proposed multilateral cooperation with Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine could constructively complement the existing EU-Russia relationship. Following the events in Georgia in 2008 and the positioning of the EU as the only mediator in the conflict, EU member states now find themselves forced to rethink their policies in the Southern Caucasus, and how to handle Russia. Three alternative paradigms offer themselves to the EU.

## Consensus-building within Europe and consultation with Russia

Russia's latest demonstration of military strength and power aspirations in neighbouring territories has clearly widened the gap between the EU member states that call for a more confrontational course towards Russia and those that prefer to pursue cooperation.

The EU wants to remain present in the Caucasus through the vehicles of the United Nations and the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). Beyond that, it has sent a Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) mission to monitor the ceasefire agreement. The EU will continue supporting Georgia with humanitarian aid and reconstruction assistance. As well as a donors' conference and talks about a free trade zone, it is also planned to lift visa restrictions on Georgian citizens entering the EU.

It is quite possible that Russia aims to become a new hegemonic power and restore former spheres of influence, which is bound to give rise to new disagreements between EU member states. In November 2008, the EU decided to return to the negotiating table with Russia in order to agree a new Partnership Treaty. But Lithuania refused to endorse the move, describing it as 'a mistake'. Consultations with Russia by individual member states and the EU as a whole are necessary to make sure the distance between the two sides does not become so large that it ends up being difficult to bridge (a tendency that is also encouraged by the American course). The conflicts that need tackling within the EU and with Russia are obvious. Apart from the crisis in the Caucasus, they include cooperation on global issues, the US military presence in Poland and the Czech Republic (which Obama's 2009 decision to drop missile stations has not entirely defused), and common energy policy in the neighbourhood (and in the EU, given the penetration of the EU market by Russian energy companies).

Certain EU member states are interested in maintaining or even expanding existing relations with Russia. Alongside dependency on Russian energy imports and other economic interests, they are motivated by the conviction that many crucial global problems cannot be solved without Russia, certainly not those in Russia's own neighbourhood. The European Commission emphasised in its communication of December 2006 on strengthening the ENP that a state of lasting peace in the neighbourhood can only be achieved with Russia's participation. But in line with its self-image as a 'global actor' Russia rejected integration in the ENP, instead agreeing a 'strategic partnership' with the EU designed to shape four 'common spaces': a Common Economic Space; a Common Space of Freedom, Security and Justice; a Common Space of External Security and a Common Space of Research and Education, including Cultural Aspects. However, progress in the development of these four common spaces has recently been stalled; Russia is not even a World Trade Organisation (WTO) member.

Despite the crisis in the Southern Caucasus and differences within the EU on how to deal with Russia, certain core states of the EU might seek to intensify dialogue in order to prevent Russia slipping into isolation. Germany, France, the Benelux countries and Italy could continue the

negotiations over the Treaty on Strategic Partnership. One central project in this partnership could be the planned development of a Common Space of External Security. A cooperative course towards Russia would initially find the approval of just a few EU member states, but it only really makes sense if it enjoys the fundamental support of all the EU member states. The ‘new Europeans’ are not yet convinced that urgent international problems are unsolvable without Russia’s participation.

The goal of a cooperative policy towards Russia must be to prevent new arms races in Europe and jointly tackle global and regional problems (whether they be hard security risks like Iranian nuclear weapons or soft risks like organised crime). The precondition for the success of such a policy would be a willingness on Russia’s part to take the EU’s interests into account in its activities in the EU’s Eastern neighbourhood. Has Russia under Medvedev changed to the extent that cooperation with the EU in this area could be boosted?

## The Eastern Partnership: good start or false start?

The Eastern Partnership (EaP) was not conceived as a response to the war in Georgia in August 2008 (as the original Polish-Swedish non-paper was drawn up months before), but it was certainly given additional momentum at the special EU summit after the war in September 2008.

However, several underlying issues have not been solved. Is the EaP a training ground or clearing house for eventual EU membership or an alternative to it? Is engaging with the six former Soviet states (Belarus, Ukraine and Moldova, Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan) an alternative to an EU-Russia relationship which is increasingly dysfunctional, or a means of rebuilding it? Or is the EaP nothing to do with Russia, and solely a matter between the six states and the EU? How can the EaP deal with the conditionality principal, especially as Belarus, which was never a member of the Eastern Neighbourhood Policy, has leap-frogged straight into the EaP?

One group of EU member states – the Reinvigorators – thinks the Eastern Partnership got off to a poor start. Normally this group would include the Baltic States, many but not all in ‘new Europe’, Sweden, sometimes Denmark and the UK. They would like to see the EaP play a stronger role in building up a belt of friendly states that would serve as a buffer zone against an unfriendly and revisionist Russia and maintain and even advance the case for a membership perspective for its leading states – Moldova and Ukraine, and sometimes Georgia. But the Prague Summit that launched the Eastern Partnership in May 2009 was a disappointing affair. Only two member states failed to send a President or Prime Minister to the Union of the Mediterranean Summit in July 2008; but ten were absent from Prague, including big hitters like Brown, Sarkozy, Berlusconi and Zapatero. The Austrians only sent their representative to the EU, the Italians their welfare minister. Even Sweden, one of the co-sponsors of the EaP project, failed to send Foreign Minister Bildt. In the Summit *communiqué*, the neighbourhood

states were downgraded from ‘European countries’ – a phrase which it was feared would encourage hopes of accession – to ‘partner countries’. And Germany and France succeeded in watering down the language on visa liberalisation, a key issue for neighbourhood states.

The Swedish Presidency added some extra momentum, including a key foreign ministers’ meeting of the EaP six in December 2009 and the start of visa facilitation negotiations with EaP states; but there were also problems in incorporating the civil society dimension in the EaP’s project ‘platforms’. Supporters of the EaP worry it will lose momentum under the Spanish and Belgium Presidencies in 2010.

Another group of member states – the Stand-Patters – think the EaP was actually launched with relative speed, with less than a year from conception to the first summit. Harsh economic realities after the global economic crisis mean that its budget of €600 million over four years is actually quite generous. The existing framework is deemed sufficient, as the six states are a long way from meeting the Copenhagen criteria and anyway should achieve its targets by their own efforts.

This second group has arguably grown in the last two years, as a result of several factors. Traditional friends of the East like the Baltic States have their own problems with the global economic crisis. So-called ‘Ukraine fatigue’ has spread with the country’s endless internal bickering and the gas crisis with Russia in January 2009, even affecting states like Slovakia. Poland under Donald Tusk has pursued a more pragmatic foreign policy, less focused on ‘special causes’. ‘Neighbourhood fatigue’ is also a reality for those who see a region of constant crisis, ranging from political deadlock in Ukraine to war in Georgia to Moldova’s constant elections, with corrupt and incompetent governments.

A third group of states – Russia Worriers – such as Spain, Italy, and traditionally Germany, though the FDP is pushing for a more balanced eastern policy, worries about Russia’s hostile initial reaction to the EaP. They would like to use the ‘third party’ provision in the EaP to include Russia in some key areas, or reassure Russia by offering it some parallel synergies. This group also suffers from ‘neighbourhood fatigue’, but is often prepared to go further in instrumentalising the EU’s relations with the EaP six in the name of ‘broader’ policy goals, such as disarmament or Russian cooperation on Iran.

## **Policy recommendations**

### **Avoiding confrontation with Moscow**

Some of the countries of Central and Eastern Europe that joined the EU in 2004 are pushing for a policy of confrontation towards Russia. For instance, Poland delayed the EU’s negotiation of a new Partnership and Cooperation Agreement with Russia. The Polish-Russian

conflict escalated when Russia restricted energy supplies to Europe and banned imports of Polish meat. More recently – two weeks after the fighting broke out in Georgia – Poland signed a treaty (which had been under negotiation for two months) allowing the United States to station missile defence systems on its territory. However, both US and Polish policy has become less confrontational since 2008.

When the conflict in Georgia escalated in August 2008, the states of Central and Eastern Europe, supported by Britain and Sweden, called for the negotiations over a new Partnership and Cooperation Agreement with Russia to be suspended and for visa restrictions to be reimposed. Other sanctions were also proposed, such as refusing membership of the World Trade Organisation (WTO), excluding Russia from the G8, freezing Russian bank accounts or boycotting the 2014 Winter Olympics in Russia. Since the spring 2008 NATO Summit, some of the new members like Poland have been calling for quick NATO membership for Georgia and Ukraine.

- In view of the ongoing tensions in Georgia, one of the tasks of the current Trio Presidency (Spain, Belgium, Hungary) is to sensitise the EU to Central and Eastern Europeans' fears about Russia, while at the same time preventing a policy of confrontation on the part of individual states from narrowing the options for the EU as a whole. A harder line would perhaps increase the political pressure on Moscow in the short-term. But in the longer term confrontation would be counter-productive for overall European security. Foreign and security policy interests in the EU-27 diverge and the Central and Eastern European states will not succeed in preventing 'old Europe' from coming to an arrangement with Russia, so in the medium-term there is a risk of a deep and lasting internal rift in the EU.
- The EU could try to establish a small group of EU member states representing the widest possible range of stances on Russia to act as consensus-creators. Following the great expansion of 2004, the obvious core of such a group would be the Weimar Triangle, supplemented by Britain and the two countries following France in the Council Presidency, Sweden and the Czech Republic. There is certainly a chance that Germany, France and Poland working with selected partners would be able to find a foreign policy consensus on Russia that was acceptable throughout the EU, especially given that Poland's Prime Minister Donald Tusk and Foreign Minister Radosław Sikorski see Europe as the channel of choice for Polish foreign policy.

## Getting the Eastern Partnership right

Whatever the internal differences, the EU debate on the Eastern neighbourhood needs to be reframed away from the case for and against enlargement. Instead the EU should concentrate on three key realities. First, it is not the only pole of attraction in the region – Russian soft and hard power is a factor that was largely absent for the accession states of the 1990s. Second, the Eastern states are weak states, not the *acquis*-absorbing states of the 1990s. Third, they are sovereignty-seeking states. Their leaders' priority is to use 'Titoist' balancing strategies to build up weak statehood, strengthen their personal position and excuse a lack of reform.

The EU should therefore tread carefully. It should support cooperation with Russia in the neighbourhood where possible: it should, for example, be prepared to discuss President Medvedev's proposals for talks on a 'new European security architecture,' first floated in June 2008. But member states must also accept that a significant degree of competition will remain in the neighbourhood between an activist Russia that aims to bring countries into its sphere of influence, and an EU that wants to spread democracy, stability and the rule of law – although this is mainly a competition between different *modus operandi*.

Rather than a one-size-fits-all policy of enlargement-lite, the EU therefore needs to develop a two-pronged political strategy to complement the bureaucratic processes of the ENP and EaP. First, EU member states and institutions need to boost their powers of attraction in the neighbourhood. Second, the EU needs to develop imaginative policies to help its neighbours prevent (where possible) and cope with (where necessary) political and economic crises.

There are many practical measures the EU could take in 2010, but in the limited space available here it will suffice to mention five examples.

- 'Political theatre' – all six EaP states are geographically or psychologically small. A little diplomatic attention – more visits by the President of the European Council, the new High Representative, and national foreign ministers – would go a long way.
- Visa liberalisation is the number-one issue for public opinion in the EaP states, but is currently stalled. The EaP states should learn from the experience of the Western Balkan states that put delivery (passport and border reform, etc.) before declaration. EaP '27+6' meetings of ministers of internal affairs and regular working groups on immigration and organised crime would help ease fears about organised crime and mass emigration amongst member state public opinion. Until visa liberalisation is achieved, member states could follow the example set in Chişinău in establishing joint visa centres and easing the bureaucracy of today's Schengen visa system (the problem is not only fees, but the number of different documents each state requires the applicant to bring). EU states could establish 'visa white lists' for groups of people (students, civil society activists / journalists, tourists) who would not have to pay the fees and present the same high number of documents every time they apply for a visa. If this can't be achieved within all Schengen countries, states willing to do so should establish their own national visa white lists for their national visa.
- Security solidarity – the EU has announced a mission to Crimea, but not yet decided how it will function. Such a mission should focus on helping diversify the economy of the region. It could also massage local egos by celebrating the rich Russian-language culture of the region, perhaps by making Yalta a City of European Culture. The guiding principle should not be sending Europeans to Crimea, but opening up Europe to the isolated peninsula. An EU contribution to the construction of infrastructure in EaP countries (roads, drainage systems, etc.) and support for inter-regional cooperation would also help – and these EU funds are quite easily accessible.

- The EU should think imaginatively about ways of countering Russia's strong position in local mass media. Under the EaP's civil society dimension, the EU should help create a regional network of free media funds and a 'new media school' to encourage bloggers and net-starters, promote web fora that strengthen networks and exchange ideas, and websites that translate western media. 'Internetisation' would be also helpful, especially in rural areas.
- EaP is a sensitive matter not only for Russia – Turkey should also be involved in multi-lateral projects, especially energy security and security (it has already become one of the leading partners in the Nagorno-Karabakh process).