



## **THE EASTERN PARTNERSHIP AND EUROPE'S TWO-WAY PERIPHERY**

It was a joint Polish-Swedish suggestion in June 2008 that a boost be given to the eastern aspect of the European Neighbours Policy (ENP) – the sequel to the grand 2004 enlargement, designed to bolster relations with the nearest countries of East Europe, the southern shore of the Mediterranean and the south Caucasus. Even while still negotiating to join the European Union, Poland proposed acting as Brussels' special interlocutor for bridge-building with countries in East Europe and Russia herself which were to remain on the fringe of the European integration process. Once she had secured her purpose, Poland was at pains to focus Europe's foreign and security policy on the precarious state of the countries sandwiched between the enlarged Union and a resurgent Russia. But what began as a conciliatory attitude on Poland's part has turned into Moscow-baiting, and in this the Poles are being egged on by other countries of our so-called "new Europe". The other promoter of the scheme, Sweden, is one of the EU members with least tolerance for Russia's hybrid brand of democracy.

Although the European Commission has stated that the Eastern Partnership (EP) is to develop in parallel with the strategic partnership with Moscow, the nature of those promoting it has made Russia suspect that the EP is a less-than-neutral stabilization policy. Again, the scheme coincided from the start with an announcement that Brussels would be supporting modernization of the gas-lines crossing Ukraine, and with the "south corridor" declaration whereby the EU, Georgia, Turkey, Azerbaijan and Egypt committed themselves to strengthening their ties in the energy sector. Moscow feels the EP may conceal a strategy to co-opt the former Soviet republics into the European integrated area and "roll back" Russia from her traditional sphere of influence.

The EP thus points to the existence of ongoing competition for control of the post-Soviet area where two rival security systems confront each other: the Euro-Atlantic and the Russian. Paradoxically, epistemological confusion over this cycle of international politics – ever since the Cold War ended the international system has been fluid and unstable – is both keeping the paradigms of bipolarity alive and revealing how inadequate and insubstantial they are.

Despite her uninhibited use of *hard power* (from economic sanctions to armed intervention in Georgia), Russia is basically a post-imperial power, while the EU's *Ostpolitik* is typical of a *civilian power*. In this "two-way periphery" area both are employing strategies that reflect their own interests and are based on an acceptable degree of rationality. The EU aim is to repeat the positive experience of "Europeanizing" and stabilizing central-east Europe, though if there are no prospects of membership its influence is distinctly hamstrung. By contrast, Russia sees the ex-Soviet area as embodying a sizable part of her Euro-Asian identity. The EP, which includes Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine and Belarus, forms one of two branches along which the ENP has unfolded. The other is the Union for the Mediterranean (UpM) promoted by the French President with backing from Spain, Italy and Greece. This limb of the neighbours policy is based on principles that formed in the early Nineties when the EU's progressive involvement with the East was balanced by launching a Euro-Mediterranean Partnership.

The two strategies comprise different categories of State: the countries of North Africa are "neighbours of Europe", while the East European countries are "European neighbours". At the moment UpM countries have no prospect of membership (Art. 49 of the Treaty on the EU establishes the criterion of "European-ness" – for the moment in the geographical sense – when new member countries are being mooted, whereas in the long term this might not be an impediment for EP countries. They enjoy the novel status of "plausible members".

Although in its genesis the EP got off to a weak start – we divide over involving Russia and Turkey or the political expediency of making overtures to Belarus president Alexander Lukashenka – it looks set to be more ambitious in its targets than the initial draft of the ENP. Cooperation over immigration by rapid introduction of a more elastic visa system ought in the end to get visas abolished altogether; there are also plans to create a free exchange area and a possibility of drawing up Association Agreements. The EP extends from bilateral to multilateral cooperation, hoping to encourage dialogue between partner countries and the EU over issues of common interest, on a 'best practice' basis.

Meetings have been scheduled among heads of State/government and foreign ministers and will address four topic platforms: democracy; good government and stability; economic integration and convergence with EU policy;

securing energy and contacts between peoples. Another feature of the EP is that a range of subjects may take part in its ventures, including government agencies and ministries, Parliaments, civil society, international organizations, finance institutions, banks and business. Enlisting the private sector via joint ownership will enable extra financial resources to be raised and an informal network of transnational actors mobilized. An opening is also to be left for collaboration with third-party States (especially Russia) which can take part, case by case, in concrete EP projects falling within the four ambits or platforms.

Target countries vary in their judgements of the EP according to how much they aspire Europe-wards (there is a weaker sense of European identity here than in central Europe and by now the enthusiasm of '89 has played itself out) or conversely how much the Russian ascendant is felt (in various forms). To Georgian president Mikhail Saakashvili the EP may be an opportunity to re-legitimize his authority after the war with Russia and mounting popular discontent. To Belarus the EP could help de-compress tensions with Brussels where there are signs of a softening in the approach to "the last dictatorship of Europe". Participation in the EP does not entail eligible countries having to plump clearly for one side or the other: many of them are still receptive to overtures from Russia which has more cultural affinity than the EU and a residual influence in the area. There are sizable minorities of Russians in EP countries and their identities have been bolstered by Moscow's passport policy and control over the national media. Equally important are the monies sent home by immigrants to Russia and the presence of Russian soldiers. Despite some increases, the price of Russian hydrocarbons has remained below market cost. Again, with the crisis the flow of Russian capital has stepped up in strategic sectors like energy and the infrastructure.

With the two zones of influence intersecting as they do, a competitive atmosphere has set in. Both seek greater institutionalization, though they differ in their basic values and in what they are able to offer. This has encouraged national leaders (most markedly in Ukraine) to draw tactically on support now from Brussels, now from Moscow, for domestic and often personal reasons. Such oscillation by national elites is hardly conducive to consolidating democracy. The "two-way periphery" is torn between what still seems too abstract an attraction to the EU and the more concrete promises being made by Russia. The EP is also completely silent on the issue of latent conflicts besetting the area; these can

only be solved by stepping up dialogue between Brussels and Moscow. Europe's policy towards Russia ought to take a leaf out of Washington's "reset button" initiative. The success of the EP will depend primarily on how far Brussels manages to dispel the "curtains" that still hang over the post-Soviet area.

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