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The Eastern Dimension of EU External Relations

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Abstract

The eastern dimension of EU external relations has become more differentiated over time. While still embedded in the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP), it has been given new impetus with the introduction of the Eastern Partnership (EaP) in May 2009. However, the ENP has been plagued with a series of problems which are likely to carry over into the EaP, and the global economic crisis has created a very difficult environment for EaP implementation. Furthermore, Russia's sense of a growing competition between the EU and the Russian Federation in the EaP partner countries makes EU-Russian cooperation in the "common neighborhood" unlikely. Thus while there is some potential for progress in the civil society realm, the overall prospects for the EaP appear rather bleak.

The Emergence of the ENP

The "eastern enlargement" led to a new geopolitical situation for the European Union (EU). While it had shared a border with the Russian Federation since the accession of Finland in 1995, nonetheless with the entrance of 10 eastern and southeastern European countries by 2007, the center of the EU shifted further eastward. The expansion served as an impetus for the development of a policy toward the new EU neighbors. This policy was first reflected in a communication from the European Commission in March 2003 entitled "Wider Europe – Neighbourhood: A New Framework for Relations with our Eastern and Southern Neighbours". The European Neighborhood Policy, which has come to define relations with the countries to the east of the EU, was spelled out more precisely in a further Commission communication in May 2004, so that the elaboration of the policy coincided with the major wave of eastern enlargement encompassing ten countries, eight of them from eastern or southeastern Europe (Bulgaria and Romania joined later). While the impetus for developing the policy came from the changing geopolitical situation of the EU in the east, it was decided to have the ENP cover both the eastern and southern neighbors. This meant that ten states of the Maghreb and Mashreq regions involved in the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, or Barcelona Process, were now subsumed under the ENP. The logic behind this was twofold. First, it was believed important to create a policy which would have the backing and interest of all the member states. By including the southern ones, EU member states with little connection to eastern Europe could also be brought on board. Second, it was hoped that the ENP might rejuvenate the stagnating Barcelona Process. Thus it came about that the EU policy toward the neighbor-

hood countries acquired both an eastern and a southern dimension.

The Eastern Dimension of the ENP

The core of the ENP consists of bilateral action plans, which are agreed upon between the EU and each of the participating partner countries. In the east, such action plans were adopted in the cases of Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan. Belarus remained outside the ENP framework because it was judged by the EU not to meet the criteria for democratic governance to an extent sufficient to make cooperation within the ENP possible. The original idea for the ENP foresaw the inclusion of Russia in the policy, but the Russian Federation declined to participate on the grounds that its "strategic partnership" with the EU called for a separate framework for relations, one that would not simply group Russia together with the other eastern neighbors. The Russian refusal led to the creation of the "four common spaces", which, along with the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement from 1997, currently structure the relationship between the EU and Russia.

The action plans for the various countries have a similar format but have allowed for some differentiation in terms of the areas covered and the priorities set. Nonetheless, each action plan deals with a very comprehensive set of issues, covering almost all areas of EU relations with the state in question. Even the list of priorities often encompasses 12–15 areas of cooperation. The action plans are generally valid for three to five years, after which the intention was either to continue with that format or to take the relationship to a more advanced level, depending on the readiness of each individual partner. The ENP thus constitutes an ambitious and

long-term approach to relations with the neighboring countries.

As time has passed, several problems with this approach have come to the fore. First of all, the incentives built into the policy for the partner countries are frequently characterized as inadequate, both by political actors in the countries themselves and by outside observers. This lack of attractive incentives stems from two factors: the inadequacy of dialogue processes between the EU and the partner countries, and the high expectations raised by the EU eastern enlargement. Due to the asymmetric nature of the EU relations with the states of the eastern neighborhood, there was not a sufficiently intensive dialogue about the priorities of these countries within the ENP framework. This was particularly due to a lack of clarity on the part of actors in the partner countries about their own priorities. The high expectations raised by the enlargement translated into a strong focus on obtaining an EU membership prospect in some of the states involved (Ukraine especially, but also Moldova).

Second, the EU often failed to take specific country contexts adequately into account. Although there was some potential for flexibility within the action plan format, this potential was not utilized as fully as it could have been because a serious engagement with the conditions on the ground in the individual countries was in large part lacking. This led to a situation in which the action plans could be only partially implemented, and in which implementation at times occurred mainly on paper without adequate translation into the country context. The reasons for these problems were manifold and range from poor coordination among institutions in the partner countries to insufficient awareness of the consequences of agreed-upon measures to interference due to domestic political wrangling in the eastern neighborhood. Third, and closely related to the problems described above, the visibility of EU initiatives in the partner states has remained low. This is due in part to the diffuse presence of the EU in many fields and the lack of “flagship initiatives” which could make the role and interests of the EU clearer to the population at large.

The Eastern Partnership

From the very beginning of the ENP there were some skeptical voices within the EU with regard to combining the eastern and southern dimensions in one policy. This skepticism has proved somewhat justified, since a differentiation has indeed taken place, both between the two dimensions and within each of them. In ad-

dition, a competition has developed between the two dimensions for attention and resources within the EU. While the French President Nicholas Sarkozy has promoted a “Union for the Mediterranean”, which is focused on the southern dimension of the ENP, Poland and Sweden have been instrumental in proposing an “Eastern Partnership” (EaP) to intensify EU relations with the countries belonging to the eastern dimension. The EaP was clearly a response to the Union for the Mediterranean and a signal that EU member states with strong interests in the east would not permit the southern dimension to “get ahead” of the eastern one. Despite the advantage of an earlier start, the Union for the Mediterranean has had difficulty progressing much beyond the initial declaratory phase. The EaP was officially launched by the Czech EU Council Presidency in Prague on 7 May. Like its southern counterpart, however, the initiative has experienced a relatively rocky start and is still very much at the developmental stage.

The EaP began as a Polish-Swedish initiative, which was raised to the EU level by the European Council in June 2008, and was elaborated in a communication from the European Commission in December 2008. The promotion of the EaP on the EU level was accelerated due to the Georgian-Russian war in August 2008, which was seen by many in the EU to signal the need for intensified relationships with the countries of the eastern neighborhood. The December 2008 communication was approved in its essence by the European Council in March 2009, although some accents were set slightly differently. In particular, the role of the “mobility and security pacts” foreseen by the Commission was downplayed, which meant that a key issue for the partner countries, visa policy, was significantly watered down. (This was later reflected in the declaration signed at the 7 May summit, in which even visa liberalization became a long-term goal.)

In the communication the European Commission stressed two aspects of the relations with the partner countries: the bilateral and the multilateral. The bilateral aspect focuses on “association agreements”, including the establishment of free trade areas, as a major goal of each individual relationship. The bilateral component is also concerned with energy security, visa and border control questions, and economic and social development. In sum, a deepening of the relationships developed under the ENP framework of bilateral action plans is envisaged. However, it is the multilateral aspect which is presented as the innovative portion of the EaP. The idea is to achieve a much higher

degree of networking and exchange among the partner countries than has previously been the case, in order for them (and the EU) to profit from each other's experience and to initiate cooperative projects. Four "thematic platforms" are foreseen for this purpose: democracy, good governance and stability; economic integration and convergence with EU policies; energy security; and people-to-people contacts. The dual focus on energy security at both the bilateral and multilateral levels is a clear indication of its high priority for the EU.

Despite the fact that the EaP has only just been launched, a number of problems have already emerged. Due to their differing levels of progress in developing relations with the EU, the degree to which the partner countries are prepared to make use of the EaP varies widely. Ukraine has progressed the farthest, and is currently involved in negotiations with the EU on an association agreement with a free trade component. This means that Ukraine has already advanced in its relationship with the EU to a point that makes the EaP appear only moderately relevant. Belarus is at the other end of the spectrum. Its cooperation with the EU is just starting, and the potential for developing the relationship is unclear due to the nature of the Lukashenka regime. Thus Belarus' participation in the EaP is likely to remain at a low level for the time being. Some states, such as Moldova and Georgia, as well as Ukraine, are currently preoccupied with internal political developments and have limited capacity available to invest in the EaP. Azerbaijan has little incentive to cooperate, as it already has sufficient interest and resources flowing in from both western countries and Russia due to its significance as an energy supplier.

Furthermore, the financial basis of the EaP is meager (€600 million, with only €350 million new as opposed to rededicated funds), and even that sum remains a source of controversy within the EU. Especially in times of economic crisis, the amounts provided for by the EaP are unlikely to make a significant difference, except perhaps on the civil society level. Civil society activists have indeed expressed interest in the EaP, and in its multilateral aspect in particular. However, the extent to which political actors will be interested in multilateral contacts is questionable, as no strong regional mentality exists among these actors, and some of them (notably Armenians and Azerbaijanis) are involved in serious conflicts. Nor has it been made sufficiently clear how the multilateral aspect of the EaP is supposed to mesh with the existing Black Sea Synergy initiative, which was launched under the German EU Council

Presidency in 2007 and in which some EU member states (especially Greece, Bulgaria and Romania) are actively involved. In fact, the difficulty the Black Sea Synergy has had in getting off the ground indicates that the implementation of the multilateral component of the EaP will be far from easy.

Russia and the EU's Eastern Dimension

As mentioned above, Russia declined involvement in the ENP. However, while there has been a latent competition between the EU and Russia in the post-Soviet space, Russia has only seldom expressed overt dissatisfaction with the development of EU relations with the ENP partner countries. This has changed, at least at the rhetorical level, with the Eastern Partnership. The change is due in part to the inclusion of Belarus, which has traditionally been perceived as a strong ally of Russia in the region. In addition, the declaration on modernization of Ukraine's gas transit network, signed on 23 March by both European and Ukrainian actors, raised a warning flag for Russia with regard to its control over energy flows in the post-Soviet space. In short, the Eastern Partnership, despite being plagued by the problems described above, has led to an increasing awareness among Russian actors that Russia's influence on several of its neighbors is declining. This awareness is heightened by the impacts of the economic crisis, which has thrown into sharp relief some of the political and economic weaknesses of contemporary Russia.

Conclusions

The eastern dimension of EU policy has undergone a significant amount of development and elaboration since its beginnings in 2003. Although the ENP remains the overarching framework, with the EaP the specifically eastern component of EU policy has received a new impetus. However, initial difficulties with the EaP indicate that learning from the problems encountered in pursuit of the ENP has been insufficient. Inadequate learning processes, combined with the impacts of the economic crisis, which has highlighted not only the economic but also political fragility of many countries of the eastern neighborhood, combine to generate the prognosis that the Eastern Partnership will result in only incremental changes in the relationships between the partner countries and the European Union. The greatest potential for the EaP appears to lie in the civil society realm, which has been neglected during the implementation of the ENP. With regard to Russia, the current approach of the Russian

foreign policy elite makes it unlikely that a significant convergence of Russian and EU agendas in the “common neighborhood” will occur in the near future. Thus EU-Russian relations and development of EU policy toward the eastern partner countries will probably

continue on parallel tracks, with occasional (and likely problematic) intersections due more to Russian perceptions of competition with the EU in these countries than to any potential for cooperation.

About the author

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Analysis

The Northern Dimension: An Appropriate Platform for Cooperation with Russia?

By Oleg Alexandrov, Moscow

Abstract

This article lays out the history and current potential of the Northern Dimension initiative, a project initiated in the late 1990s to provide a common framework for the promotion of dialogue and concrete cooperation among Europe's Nordic and Baltic countries and Russia. The author seeks to assess whether the design of the four common spaces between the EU, Russia, Norway and Iceland, which was chosen in November 2006 as a new conceptual framework for the Northern Dimension, is a suitable policy to enhance cooperation among members of this initiative. The author also analyzes Russia's Arctic policy and evaluates its relevance for the Northern Dimension.

Debating the Northern Dimension

Since the renewed Northern Dimension (ND) policy was launched in November 2006, it has attracted attention as a useful platform for cooperation among all the key participants – EU member states, Russia, Norway and Iceland. Nevertheless, the new framework proposed for all parties has not put an end to a lively debate between the optimists and skeptics.

The first group, consisting mainly of senior ND officials, continues to insist that a Northern Dimension initiative based on the idea of four common spaces can play a role as one of the key regional instruments shaping relations between Moscow and Brussels. In contrast, ND-pessimists, like Prof. Christer Pursiainen, argue that this initiative cannot be regarded as an effective model of regionalism, because the interests of the partner-countries vary too widely.

In fact, the recent history of the Northern Dimension shows that it has clear political limits, thanks to its virtual character, the ups and downs in the relationship between the EU and Russia, and the lack of sufficient financial resources. Yet, the Northern Dimension as a regional project is still in demand and can become more effective in the future.

A Region in Transition

The Northern Dimension region possesses a number of unique characteristics. In its present shape, it encompasses different spaces, including the Baltic, Barents and Arctic. The recent enlargements of the EU and NATO and the accession of the Baltic States and Poland to these organizations have raised the interest of both Brussels and Washington regarding this part of Europe. A number of sub-regional organizations, like the Council of the Baltic Sea States (CBSS), the Barents Euro Arctic Council (BEAC), the Arctic Council (AC), the Nordic

Council of Ministers (NCM) and other regional and local institutions, emerged in the 1990s and made the picture of the whole region more colorful.

These institutions create a rather dense network of interaction under the common umbrella of the Northern Dimension. The most developed part of the ND space comprises the countries of Northern Europe – Sweden, Finland, Norway, Denmark and Iceland. The so-called “northern cooperation” between them for decades has guided the foreign and domestic policy of the respective countries. Almost all of them enjoy a high international reputation due to the socially-oriented model of their “welfare states”.

The Baltic region includes both traditional regional players like Russia, Sweden, Finland, Denmark and Germany and new independent states like Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia and Poland. Since Russia remains the closest neighbor to this group of countries and the mutual relationship among them is difficult, the political interaction within the framework of this region is less predictable. The Council of Baltic Sea States remains the only intergovernmental institution to promote political dialogue in the region, but politically it does not pretend to handle complicated bilateral tensions, especially between Russia and the Baltic states. At the same time, the processes of regionalization in the Baltic region dominate over efforts toward integration, and the countries of the region prefer to develop bilateral relations rather than multilateral contacts.

Since 1997 the idea of the Northern Dimension, proposed by the Finnish government, has united two different regions – Northern Europe and the Baltic Sea region – and has also involved Russia's northwest territories as fully-fledged participants in the project. The Finnish proposal was aimed at strengthening democracy in Russia and in the entire Northern Dimension area

as well as at developing relations with Russia as a key energy supplier to the European market. Other northern countries have supported the idea. The first and the second Action plans (2000–2003, 2004–2006) have contributed to further consolidation of the Northern Dimension area. The general idea of the Northern Dimension was to promote a positive interdependence between EU member states and the partners within this initiative, including Russia, and this task goes in line with the role assigned to the European Neighborhood policy.

The Importance of the Arctic Region

The third element of the ND space is made of the Arctic region. Actually, only a part of the huge Arctic space is institutionally covered by the Northern Dimension, but among the polar countries only the US and Canada do not play an active part within the ND initiative – both countries perform the role of observers. Similar to the Baltic region, the Arctic region is still “under construction”. The Arctic Council, which was established in 1996, remains the only intergovernmental organization in this region, but incentives for cooperation are undermined by narrow national economic interests, especially the race for energy.

Recent developments in this area were connected to Russia’s polar expedition, which took place in 2007 and provoked a strong international response, especially from the polar countries. Moscow sought to strengthen its political presence in the Arctic region in order to secure its economic interests and enlarge the border of its continental shelf. In spring 2008 Greenland hosted the first international conference of the polar states – US, Russia, Canada, Norway and Denmark. The participants agreed to consider the region a vulnerable ecological area, but did not find common ground on territorial issues. Since 2007 the majority of the polar countries (Canada, US and Russia) have announced plans to deploy limited military contingents in the Arctic region.

At present, the renewed Northern Dimension is equipped with the concept of “four common spaces”, which were previously put at the base of the EU-Russia relations: a common economic space, a space of freedom, security and justice, a space of external security, and a common space of science, education and culture. Do these common spaces really lead to a closer integration among all partner-countries? Do the Northern countries, the Baltic states and Russia feel comfortable within this framework? Do they really share the same interests and try to solve problems on friendly terms?

The Northern Dimension Under Threat

At first sight, the idea of four common spaces looks very promising, because it unites all possible ways of cooperating, including a common security agenda, economic challenges, and ecological and humanitarian needs. Every partner is at liberty to propose its own vision of the “road maps”. But to the growing dissatisfaction of Moscow, the common economic space in the short-term does not represent a step-by-step approach. It will not provide a visa-free regime among the participating states, or create a free economic zone, or even establish a common energy market. The only working field of cooperation is transportation and infrastructure, while the majority of joint and cross-border projects still exist on paper only. What is even worse, the partners could not avoid an open confrontation on some important economic issues. For example, Sweden, Poland and the Baltic States strongly opposed the construction of the joint Russian-German Nord Stream pipeline. At present, energy issues divide the EU and Russia more than ever, and even growing energy interdependence does not create a stable base for a long-term relationship. In this situation, only cooperation in specific fields like transportation, fishing and tourism seems like a realistic scenario.

The future of the common space addressing external security likewise does not seem encouraging. Even if Moscow and Brussels take similar positions on questions like Afghanistan, Iraq and non-proliferation of nuclear weapons, their positions on other important issues of world politics clearly differ. The EU has strongly criticized Russia for recognizing South Ossetia and Abkhazia after the aggression of the Georgian government against these territories in August 2008. Among the most emotional critics of Russia were members of the Northern Dimension project – Sweden, Poland, and the Baltic States. The EU did not support the idea of President Medvedev on a new European security architecture. Taking into account the negative attitude of Moscow to NATO activities in general and in the Baltic region in particular, it would be difficult to imagine successful cooperation within this common space under the present political conditions. Moreover, the growing concern of northern countries over Russia’s activities in the Arctic region raises a problem of mutual confidence. In fact, the Arctic region could become a touchstone with respect to the future partnership within the Northern Dimension. The possible accession of Finland and Sweden to the North Atlantic alliance could also lead to the freezing of cooperation between Moscow and the Northern Dimension partners.

Cooperation Despite Political Tensions

The common space of freedom, security and justice (internal security), in contrast to the previous ones, looks better defined, and the participating countries have made visible progress on this track, despite the broader political tensions. The fight against organized crime, drug trafficking and illegal migration to a certain extent has united the EU, Russia and northern countries. Since 1997 Russia works in close cooperation with Europol, and in 2003 in Rome both sides signed a cooperation agreement, which allows an exchange of files on criminal cases, joint efforts against counterfeiting, and a variety of other issues. In 2007 Moscow ratified a readmission treaty, signed between the EU and Russia, and consequently strengthened control over illegal migration on its western borders. At the same time, however, the Finnish-Russian border, thanks to the construction of new check-points and the creation of the Karelia Euroregion in 2000, will be further transformed into a gateway that will unite border territories. Environmental and nuclear safety are also among the top priorities of the third common space. The Northern Dimension Environmental Partnership was established in 2003 and remains the only effectively working partnership within the Northern Dimension framework, with a total budget of 1.8 billion euro, which was spent on 15 individual projects, eight of which directly relating to Russia.

The last, but not least, common space of science, culture and education remains a potentially interesting instrument of cooperation between the universities in the Northern Dimension area. So far, it has resulted in a number of projects. Among them are the Eurofaculties that were opened in Tartu (Estonia), Riga (Latvia), Vilnius (Lithuania) and Kaliningrad (Russia). The latter experience has received a positive response from a CBSS assembly, and since 2008 the Pskov state university also participates in this program. Another interesting proposal concerns the establishment of a joint Russian-Finnish Northern Dimension Institute. But the long distance separating the EU, Russia, Norway and Iceland from this common space still has to be covered. Practically the same problem concerns all of the spaces.

Will the Northern Dimension Survive in a Time of Change?

The long-term perspectives of the Northern Dimension remain vague, because Russia and its Northern Dimension partners representing the EU cannot agree on future principles of cooperation, much less implementing them. In the European context, this regional initiative will inevitably face challenges from other regional dimensions – starting with the Eastern partnership. New countries (US and Canada) and new organizations (NATO) have announced their interests in the Northern Dimension territory. The Arctic issue will further guide the policies of interested polar states, and the growing competition for Arctic resources threatens to slow the process of consolidation in the Northern Dimension area or to stop it altogether. Thus, the interaction between different groups of actors under the Northern Dimension umbrella becomes even more complex and unpredictable than before.

In this situation the weak point of the EU as a major partner within this project is that it does not speak with one voice. So the fragmentation of the Northern Dimension space cannot be completely excluded. This trend will probably strengthen the position of northern countries (Sweden, Finland, Norway, Denmark and Iceland) vis-à-vis Moscow and Brussels. The Nordic Council (through the Stoltenberg report) in February 2009 announced plans to form Nordic Task forces with a mission of monitoring the situation in the Arctic region and performing crisis management, air surveillance and satellite cooperation. The military contingents from Sweden, Norway and Denmark will become the core element of these forces. Hence, the upcoming Swedish EU presidency will show whether the interests of these Nordic states are in line with those of Brussels, and to a what extent Russia is regarded as a partner within this initiative.

Yet despite all the problems, the Northern Dimension still represents a success story that has survived over ten years of political ups and downs. Cooperation has worked in a number of important areas. It is to be hoped that the results of these successful partnerships will one day spill over into the arena of high politics and contribute to strengthening mutual trust and stability.

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About the Russian Analytical Digest

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Research Centre for East European Studies at the University of Bremen

Founded in 1982, the Research Centre for East European Studies (Forschungsstelle Osteuropa) at the University of Bremen is dedicated to socialist and post-socialist cultural and societal developments in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe.

The Research Centre possesses a unique collection of alternative culture and independent writings from the former socialist countries in its archive. In addition to extensive individual research on dissidence and society in socialist countries, since January 2007 a group of international research institutes is participating in a collaborative project on the theme "The other Eastern Europe – the 1960s to the 1980s, dissidence in politics and society, alternatives in culture. Contributions to comparative contemporary history", which is funded by the Volkswagen Foundation.

In the area of post-socialist societies, extensive research projects have been conducted in recent years with emphasis on political decision-making processes, economic culture and the integration of post-socialist countries into EU governance. One of the core missions of the institute is the dissemination of academic knowledge to the interested public. This includes regular email services with nearly 20,000 subscribers in politics, economics and the media.

With a collection of publications on Eastern Europe unique in Germany, the Research Centre is also a contact point for researchers as well as the interested public. The Research Centre has approximately 300 periodicals from Russia alone, which are available in the institute's library. News reports as well as academic literature is systematically processed and analyzed in data bases.

The Center for Security Studies (CSS) at ETH Zurich

The Center for Security Studies (CSS) at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology (ETH Zurich) is a Swiss academic center of competence that specializes in research, teaching, and information services in the fields of international and Swiss security studies. The CSS also acts as a consultant to various political bodies and the general public.

The CSS is engaged in research projects with a number of Swiss and international partners. The Center's research focus is on new risks, European and transatlantic security, strategy and doctrine, state failure and state building, and Swiss foreign and security policy.

In its teaching capacity, the CSS contributes to the ETH Zurich-based Bachelor of Arts (BA) degree course for prospective professional military officers in the Swiss army and the ETH and University of Zurich-based MA program in Comparative and International Studies (MACIS), offers and develops specialized courses and study programs to all ETH Zurich and University of Zurich students, and has the lead in the Executive Masters degree program in Security Policy and Crisis Management (MAS ETH SPCM), which is offered by ETH Zurich. The program is tailored to the needs of experienced senior executives and managers from the private and public sectors, the policy community, and the armed forces.

The CSS runs the International Relations and Security Network (ISN), and in cooperation with partner institutes manages the Comprehensive Risk Analysis and Management Network (CRN), the Parallel History Project on NATO and the Warsaw Pact (PHP), the Swiss Foreign and Security Policy Network (SSN), and the Russian and Eurasian Security (RES) Network.

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