Beyond Vilnius: keeping the Eastern Partnership on track

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The countdown to the November Vilnius Eastern Partnership Summit is well underway. Coming almost a decade after the EU launched its European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) and four years since the creation of the Eastern Partnership (EaP), the summit represents an important milestone, but its success is by no means certain.

The optimal outcome is to sign the Association Agreement and Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA) with Ukraine as well as initial agreements with Georgia and Moldova. However, the real challenge will come thereafter. Ukraine will need to start the process of implementation, which will be costly and difficult, while Moldova and Georgia – which are not due to sign until the autumn of 2014 – will face an uncomfortable ten months as Russia endeavours to coerce them into joining the Russian-led Customs Union (CU) instead. Meanwhile, the EU will be absorbed with internal cuisine: the on-going Eurozone crisis, European Parliament elections in May 2014, and the entry into office of a new EU leadership. Therefore, the commitment of the partners to continue on a difficult journey, which as yet has no final destination, and the EU’s ability to sufficiently support them both politically and economically, will be tested.

Russian Coercion

During the Baltic states’ period of pre-accession to the EU and NATO, relations with Russia were described as a ‘litmus test’ of Moscow’s willingness to leave behind imperialist ambitions towards its ‘near abroad’. Russia failed the test.

Russia views its Western neighbourhood as a strategic imperative and sees the EaP as a tool for containment, accusing the EU of trying to undermine the relations of the peoples living in Russia and Ukraine and other post-Soviet countries in order to include them in its exclusive zone of interest. Beyond Russia’s fixation with maintaining a privileged sphere of influence, Moscow probably also fears the democratic transformation of this region, which may bring increased demands for change at home. To counter the EU, Moscow has tried to mirror EU policies through the creation of its own integration projects, using soft power and coercion. Unfortunately, Russia’s efforts to prevent the sovereign choices of its neighbours have only served to increase resentment and distrust while also forcing the EU into a geopolitical battle with Moscow, which it does not want.

Russia’s methodology is not new. It was (and still is) used on the Baltic States and then Georgia. It focuses on trade, security, energy, and labour migration. The aim is to either have EaP states ditch their EU agreements or significantly increase the costs of pursuing them. Armenia’s recent decision to join the CU instead of initialising its EU agreement was Russia’s first success story. Yerevan’s reliance on Russia for security and energy left Armenia with little choice.

If the agreement with Ukraine is not signed, it would not only have a serious impact on EU-Ukraine relations but also a significant knock-on effect on Moldova and Georgia. A geopolitical lynchpin, Russian President Vladimir Putin declared Ukraine and Russia as одни народ – one nation. For Putin, ‘losing’ Ukraine would be particularly humiliating; therefore, it is not surprising that Russia has accelerated pressure on Kyiv. Yet Russia’s threats have backfired as they have served to regenerate Ukraine’s EU-demanded reform effort.

Moldova is faced with a wine embargo, increased scrutiny of fruit and vegetable exports, threats to cut off gas and end Moldovan labour migration, which amounts to some 4-500,000. Its Communist Party backs the CU, offering Moscow further influence internally. While blocking all workers would have a devastating effect, it seems unlikely given that finding replacements may prove difficult. However, Russia could expel a few workers very publicly in order to panic Moldovan society. Moldova is 100% dependent on Russian gas, and while Ukraine may be able to supply Moldova with some gas, and efforts to speed up the construction of a gas interconnector with Romania are underway, Moldova remains exposed. With a history of political crises, and elections at the end of 2014, Moldova is in a perilous position.

Russia began using sticks on Georgia in 2006 in an effort to stop Tbilisi’s Euro-Atlantic aspirations. While these sticks hurt, they failed to bring about a change of policy. The occupied territories of South Ossetia and Abkhazia remain Georgia’s weakest point, with Russia continuing to
consolidate its presence and engage in provocative actions including “borderisation” activities. There is a possibility that Moscow may switch to carrots, making an offer related to the occupied territories aimed at creating a rift in Georgian society. Yet such is the deep distrust towards the present Russian authorities, and Georgia’s nationalistic sentiment, that no matter how tasty the carrot may look on the outside, it would be surprising if Georgia were to take a bite.

The current Lithuanian Presidency of the EU has also come under pressure from Russia including prolonged border controls of vehicles with Lithuanian registration plates, while in the last few days Russia announced it would begin to limit the import of certain groups of Lithuanian dairy products as of 7 October.

With such threatening behaviour it is not unreasonable that these countries conclude that Russia’s main interest is eroding their independence. While these states want and need good relations with Moscow, these actions make it almost impossible to draw a line between legitimate and illegitimate Russian interests.

The EU Response

While Russia sees its Western neighbourhood strategically, the EU has suffered from a lack of strategic vision, rather viewing it as a technical process. The EU had an excellent opportunity to play a key role in the transformation of this region, yet it has squandered its political capital. While the EU declares the policy a priority, many Member States have an ambivalent position. Hence the EU is frequently labelled ineffective, which reflects both EU divisions over its ultimate objective for this region as well as the EU’s failure to have a consolidated Russia strategy. Russia counts on EU internal upheaval and division resulting in insufficient support for its neighbours, which could lead to the erosion of political forces supporting European integration in the EaP states.

While the European Commission was recently tasked to search for ways to support its EaP partners, given Russia’s track record, such a strategy should already have been prepared. While nobody is expecting the EU to put a European perspective on the table, there is clearly an urgent need for greater support and solidarity.

A serious effort should be made to speed up the technical process. This would, at the very least, allow for an earlier signing of the agreements with Moldova and Georgia, which would have a positive impact psychologically. Public diplomacy also needs to be strengthened. Russia has actively lobbied its CU, while the EU has been almost totally absent. Yet European integration remains popular simply because people have witnessed the positive transformation process in neighbouring countries. However, to maintain this support during tough times, society needs to taste some short-term tangibles. Therefore, visa liberalisation should speed up. If the Commission delivers a favourable verdict on the second stage of Moldova’s visa liberalisation Action Plan later this year, Member States should proceed rapidly and not engage in unnecessary hold-ups. This would help the pro-European forces stay in power while also sending a strong signal to other EaP states.

While the EU has now opened its market for Moldovan wine, further unilateral – although provisional – DCFTA provisions should be made to help counteract Russia’s tougher trade regime. This would be possible, even before the DCFTAs are signed, via Council agreement. The EU should be more generous, and open more of its market where EaP states have some advantages as well as also facilitating market penetration with special support programmes. Meanwhile, Russian sanctions should be dealt with through the WTO. Further steps should also be taken to speed up energy integration in line with the EU’s goal of building better integrated energy markets with its neighbours. Unfortunately, steps in this direction have not been as quick as they could have been.

Financial support also needs to increase. EaP states are being asked to carry out painful reforms almost identical to those demanded of candidate countries, but without access to the same EU funds. This is not sustainable.

The Vilnius Summit should be used as an opportunity to consolidate EU support for its partners. If the EU is committed to meeting its neighbourhood policies objective (security, stability and prosperity) it will require a greater level of commitment. This will be a win-win not only for the EU and the EaP states, but it will also help empower Russian society as it witnesses democratic change in its neighbourhood.

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