

Stewart, Susan

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Russia and the Eastern Partnership

Loud Criticism, Quiet Interest in Cooperation

Susan Stewart

On 7 May the Eastern Partnership initiative will be launched at a summit held in Prague under the auspices of the Czech EU Council Presidency. In addition to the twenty-seven EU heads of state and government, political leaders from Belarus, Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan have also been invited to attend. The initiative represents a continuation of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) as well as an intensification of its eastern dimension. A newcomer to the forum is Belarus, which the EU had not previously included in the ENP on account of its poor democratic record. The EU is still unclear about how extensive Russian involvement in the Eastern Partnership should be. The Russian government has commented harshly on the new EU initiative, yet Moscow seems willing in principle to participate in specific projects of the Eastern Partnership. How can these contradictory Russian attitudes be explained? And what repercussions are they likely to have for relations between the EU and Russia?

The Eastern Partnership began as a Polish initiative but soon became a joint Polish-Swedish project. The idea was to get the EU to focus more attention on eastern Europe and thus help to intensify the EU's relations with its "eastern neighbours". The project received a strong additional impetus after the outbreak of war between Georgia and Russia in August 2008 and Russia's subsequent formal recognition of South Ossetia and Abkhazia as independent states. Both events strengthened the EU's resolve to provide more effective support than hitherto for its eastern partners in the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP). Furthermore, the final document of the extraordi-

nary European Council held on 1 September 2008 linked the EU's condemnation of Russia's behaviour during the Caucasus crisis to its intention to move ahead with the Eastern Partnership, thus creating the impression that the initiative was directed against Russia.

In December 2008 the European Commission presented an ambitious concept for the Eastern Partnership, which had already been upgraded by the European Council to a multilateral EU project in June 2008. The Commission proposed the conclusion of bilateral association agreements that would cover the development of comprehensive free-trade zones as a principal aim and also

address visa and border control issues and energy security. The Commission further proposed the establishment of four multi-lateral “thematic platforms”: on democracy and stability, economic integration, energy issues and people-to-people contacts.

The Commission’s communication stated that the Eastern Partnership would be pursued “in parallel with the EU’s strategic partnership with Russia”. According to the Commission, Russia would not be a participant in the initiative but would be eligible to be involved as a third country on a case-by-case basis as determined by common interests. Both Russia and some EU member states raised the question of Russia’s precise role in the Eastern Partnership. EU Commissioner for External Relations and European Neighbourhood Policy Benita Ferrero-Waldner told the Russian newspaper *Kommersant* (February 5, 2009) that Russia had not been included in the Eastern Partnership because it had decided to remain outside the ENP framework. However, she left open the question of Russian participation on certain issues. Most EU members with a strong interest in the Eastern Partnership, such as Poland and Germany, advocate including Russia in specific projects. France even favours inviting Russia to important summit meetings held in connection with the initiative.

How Did Russia React and Why?

Both the Russian press and official government statements generally portray the Eastern Partnership negatively. A case in point was a statement by Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, who equated the Eastern Partnership with the establishment of an EU sphere of influence in its eastern neighbourhood. Other commentaries from the Russian Foreign Ministry claimed the initiative was forcing the countries involved to choose between the EU and Russia. Critical evaluations were also to be heard from the Russian legislature. Deputy Duma Chairman Aleksandr Babakov called

on the EU back in June 2008 to consult with Russia before it launched initiatives that would affect Russia’s “traditional interests”. Another member of the Duma, Sergei Markov, described the initiative as hindering “strategic cooperation” between Russia and the countries scheduled to participate in the Eastern Partnership. At the same time, informal statements by high-ranking officials indicate that Russia would be willing in principle to collaborate on certain projects under the auspices of the Eastern Partnership. The Kremlin has now even welcomed the EU’s invitation to Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko to attend the Prague Summit on 7 May, although in doing so the Russian leadership primarily wished to emphasize its claim that the EU is following Russia’s lead in pursuing co-operation with Lukashenko.

That the Eastern Partnership is the subject of such intense discussion in Russia is surprising for a number of reasons. First of all, in many respects the initiative simply represents a continuation of the ENP, to which Russia has never been deeply opposed. Secondly, the economic crisis is likely to prevent the eastern partners from forging closer ties with the EU quickly. Thirdly, the EU tends to proceed incrementally, so the Eastern Partnership is unlikely to bring about any radical changes. Fourthly, the financial resources available for the Eastern Partnership—600 million euros in additional or rededicated funding for all six partner countries by 2013—are rather meagre. Fifthly, Russia has recently been focusing more on hard security questions and on reshaping its relationship with the USA and less on the soft security issues that are the chief concerns of the Eastern Partnership.

Russia’s negative reaction to the Eastern Partnership must therefore be attributed to more recent developments—two in particular. The first is the EU’s desire to use the Eastern Partnership as a vehicle for establishing better relations with Belarus; the second is the declaration on the modernisation of Ukraine’s gas transit network,

adopted by the EU and Ukraine on 23 March, which foresees no explicit role for Russia in this project. Russia regards both these developments as confirmation of its dwindling influence in the post-Soviet space. Although this process has been going on for some years, it was partially concealed by the Russian “victory” in the war with Georgia and by the partial economic successes of the Putin years, which were made possible by substantial revenues from the energy sector. Thus, the EU is asserting itself more strongly in the “common neighbourhood” just as Russia’s loss of influence starts to become increasingly apparent.

Russian Perceptions of EU Policy in the Neighbouring States

For the past fifteen years *Belarus* has been one of the Russian Federation’s closest allies. This helps to explain why Moscow perceives the EU’s decision to engage in rapprochement with Belarus to be directed against Russia. The EU’s intention to include Belarus in the Eastern Partnership was formulated in the final document of a session of the European Council held on 20 March that paved the way for the initiative. In the eyes of Russian observers the inclusion of Belarus distinguishes the new initiative from the ENP. Nevertheless, both Russian and Belarusian observers believe Lukashenko will try to exploit the new ties with the EU as much as possible while simultaneously avoiding any far-reaching changes in his own country that could threaten his control over domestic affairs. The Russian media assume Lukashenko’s manoeuvring is mainly financially motivated and they therefore believe he will play Russia and the EU off against each other in order to obtain as much money as possible from both. Russia sees the EU’s overtures to Minsk as threatening its “special relationship” with Belarus precisely because this relationship is far from unproblematic and hence vulnerable.

The EU’s decision to make the possible recognition of South Ossetia and Abkhazia by the Belarusian parliament an issue in the context of Belarus’ participation in the Eastern Partnership has touched a nerve in Russia. Both Czech Foreign Minister Karel Schwarzenberg and Ferrero-Waldner have warned Belarus against recognising the independence of the two regions. The Russian media interpret these warnings as imposing a condition on Belarus’ involvement in the Eastern Partnership. The parliament in Minsk has failed to put the issue of recognition on the agenda, which Moscow interprets both as a sign that Belarus is yielding to pressure from the EU and as a slap in the face for Russia. Russian commentaries frequently portray the EU’s appeal as unjustified interference in the decision-making competence of the sovereign state of Belarus.

The joint declaration of the EU and *Ukraine* on the modernisation of the Ukrainian gas transit network has been linked with the Eastern Partnership both in the Russian press and in statements by EU officials. The declaration was signed only by European and Ukrainian actors; a Russian delegation that arrived to attend the meeting at the last minute left the venue in protest. Subsequently Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin threatened to review Russia’s relations with the EU. In spite of Ukraine’s reassurances that Russia could still be included in the modernisation projects in retrospect, Russia saw the declaration as confirmation of its impression that Ukraine is intent on expanding its cooperation with the EU in the energy sector. This is an alarming prospect for Russia, which fears a loss of its dominant position in the energy sector in the post-Soviet space. What is particularly important for Russia is not simply that external actors would participate in modernising the Soviet gas supply network, but especially that this network would be integrated into the overall structure of the EU energy market. Moreover, the utility of the North and South Stream pipelines, which

Russia has sought to promote, would be undermined by a possible expansion of the Ukrainian transit network.

The examples of Belarus and Ukraine make it clear to Russia that in launching the new partnership initiative the EU aims to intensify its relations with its eastern neighbours. This in turn reinforces Russia's perception of its own waning influence in these countries.

Including Russia Will Not Solve the Fundamental Problem

The negative perceptions of the Russian foreign policy elite regarding the Eastern Partnership have much to do with the fact that the initiative has been launched in a phase when Russia's economic and foreign policy weaknesses are becoming all too apparent. Russia's declared willingness in principle to become involved in the Eastern Partnership on specific issues indicates a certain ambivalence, however. The Russian elite would like to be recognised as a valuable potential participant in European initiatives, even though it often harshly criticises those very initiatives. It would certainly make sense to include Russia in concrete projects of the Eastern Partnership involving common interests. The close contacts that key German economic and social actors maintain with Russia make them ideally suited for the task of identifying potential projects in advance, while political actors could help to launch and guide such projects.

The Eastern Partnership initiative is regarded in Russia as further evidence of the increasing failure of Russian foreign policy in the post-Soviet space—an area accorded top foreign policy priority by Russia. Other indications of this failure include: Georgia's departure from the CIS, stagnating progress towards a Russian-Belarusian Union, and the refusal of the other post-Soviet countries to recognise South Ossetia and Abkhazia as independent states. All these developments may serve to aggravate the feelings of inferiority that

many Russian politicians already have vis-à-vis their western counterparts. This would put a further brake on the already faltering dialogue between Russian and European actors. It is therefore unlikely that project-based cooperation will be sufficient to counteract a further deterioration of relations between the EU and Russia. A real improvement will only be possible once Moscow's dominant patterns of thinking about foreign policy (identified in this analysis as the fundamental problem) undergo crucial changes. This is likely to be a long-term process. Nevertheless, successful cooperation in the context of the Eastern Partnership can constitute one small but significant component in the necessary process of confidence-building.

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SWP
Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik
German Institute for International and Security Affairs

Ludwigkirchplatz 3–4
10719 Berlin
Telephone +49 30 880 07-0
Fax +49 30 880 07-100
www.swp-berlin.org
swp@swp-berlin.org

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