

From Prague to Riga: Has the EU's Eastern Partnership Been a Failure?

Written by Maryia Hushcha

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2017/04/14/from-prague-to-riga-has-the-eus-eastern-partnership-been-a-failure/>

MARYIA HUSHCHA, APR 14 2017

Developments in Eastern Europe have received renewed attention in the EU in the past couple of years. With Russia's intervention in politics of its neighboring states, the EU's role in the region is now seen differently and so its previous policy requires reassessment. This paper will take stock of the EU's Eastern Partnership (EaP) policy. It will demonstrate that the EaP has largely failed to achieve its goals of democracy promotion in Eastern Europe. Some reasons for why it might have happened will also be offered here. Afterwards a case of one of the EaP countries – Belarus – and its relations with the EU will be analyzed in more detail. The paper concludes by summarizing the main points accounting for the EaP failure in general and speculating about the prospects of further cooperation between the EU and Belarus.

Taking stock of the EU's Policy in the Eastern Neighborhood

The Eastern Partnership was established in 2009 within the framework of the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) and included six former Soviet Republics in Eastern Europe and South Caucasus, namely Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine[1]. The Prague Declaration that officially launched the EaP stated that the policy is to be based on 'shared ownership and responsibility' of all parties and 'will be developed jointly' by the EU, its Member States (MS) and six Eastern European countries[2]. The document established two tracks of engagement among the partners. The bilateral track covered issues such as New Association Agreements, EU technical assistance in institutional building matters, visa liberalization agreements, as well as energy security. The multilateral track was envisaged as a broader framework for information sharing and cooperation among all partners in the areas of democracy and good governance, sustainable economic development, energy security, and people-to-people contacts[3].

Despite the official rhetoric about 'joint ownership' of the EaP, in practice the EU has been the sole agenda setter. The policy itself was initiated by Poland and Sweden – two EU member states – and its entire budget has been coming from the EU's pocket. Despite a rather dubious record of democratic transformation in Eastern Europe all parties to the EaP, including the EE countries committed themselves 'to the principles of international law and fundamental values – democracy, the rule of law, human rights and fundamental freedoms'[4] – another proof that the whole policy framework was established by the EU. While the politics towards the EE countries largely drew on the EU's previous experience with democratization in Central Europe – by far the biggest achievement of the EU's normative power- unlike the Central European countries, the EaP countries were never offered an EU membership prospect. The outcomes of the EaP were also rather poor. It can be argued that neither one of the partner countries has become a full-fledged democracy. Corruption and lack of rule of law are still wide-spread and all EaP countries but one currently have territorial disputes with Russia.

The theories of conditionality and socialization that view the EU as a *sui generis* normative power are commonly applied to explain the Union's democratization impact[5]. Conditionality approach holds that the EU plays a role of an incentives provider. It offers lucrative economic and political cooperation to other countries in exchange for democratic transformation. The socialization theory states that through more intensive interactions with the EU and greater exposure to the ideas of liberal democracy, the society of a partner country starts appropriating them and

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changes from within.

In his account of the EaP achievements, Buşcaneanu concludes that only half of the EaP partner countries (Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine) have attempted to carry out certain democratic reforms[6]. However, the success of these attempts is also debatable. Buşcaneanu argues that one of the reasons for such a poor performance was the EU's inconsistency in its incentives approach. The principle 'more for more' was steadily applied only to Georgia and Armenia, while, for instance, Azerbaijan kept receiving increased financial aid despite the lack of democratic progress. At the same time, Ukraine was treated unfairly, having been provided little increase in benefits despite significant democratic transformations it had accomplished[7].

By the time of the EaP 2013 Summit in Vilnius, it became clear that aspirations of the EaP countries in relation to the EU differed substantially. While Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine were actively seeking closer integration with the EU, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Belarus took a more distanced approach and preferred closer ties with Russia. Applying the differentiation principle that the EaP was based on, the EE countries were divided into two groups according to their visions of relations with the EU. Obviously the 'second-tier' countries were less engaged in the EaP and some experts even argued that the Partnership would effectively transform into a forum for civil society and expert community without the governments' participation in it[8]. The Riga Summit held in 2015 indicated a further decline of the EaP. The final document adopted by the Summit has not produced a lot of practical steps for action. The EU has increasingly paid attention to the situation in Ukraine. However, as Brussels' support to Kiev is not primarily channeled through the EaP (which could perhaps also be considered as a sign of the policy weakness), the statements were of a rather declarative character. Dominik Tolsdorf, a TAPIR fellow, argues that one of the reasons for the lack of political will to reinvigorate the Partnership was dismay among the EU decision-makers at the slow progress on reforms in the EE countries[9]. Another factor was a concern over Russia's reaction to enhanced cooperation within the EaP. After all, Moscow has always viewed the EaP as an infringement on its legitimate sphere of influence[10]. Another factor that accounts for the EaP's decline is little attention the EU pays to construction of identity ties with the EaP countries, 'whereas Russia does not lose any opportunity to evoke 'fraternity' with the people in the neighboring countries'[11].

More broadly, the 'Russia factor' and the EU's handling of the crisis in Ukraine, primarily done by by Angela Merkel rather than Frederica Mogherini, seriously undermined the Union's credibility as a unified actor[12]. Among other reasons that weakened the EU's image in its neighborhood was the financial crisis and its harsh consequences for Greece that revealed that the EU was not a 'panacea for progress'[13]. Finally, the EU's 'enlargement fatigue' and rise of Eurosceptic parties on the domestic scene of many member states have also contributed to the decline of the EU's soft power in the near abroad or, in words of Menon, exposed the EU's 'hard powerlessness' as 'normative delusions'[14].

Thus, the intrinsic flaws of the EaP coupled with the exogenous political factors have resulted in the Partnership gradually losing its significance. Some experts argued that after the Riga Summit the EaP would start to slowly dismantle until it eventually transforms into six bilateral tracks of relations[15].

EU in Belarus: A Toothless Value Diffuser?

Out of all of the EaP countries Belarus is the least integrated in the European fora. It is not a member of the Council of Europe and its engagement within the EaP is very basic. The EU has never ratified a Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) with Belarus and thus the country was included neither in the ENP nor in the bilateral track of relations within the EaP. This in turn means that there has been no continuous dialogue with the EU about political, institutional, or economic reforms in Belarus. Even the visa facilitation deal that has been negotiated since 2014 is still pending[16]. The EU's financial support to Belarus is even more telling. In 2014 the EU allocated around EUR 19 million of bilateral assistance to Belarus and pledged between EUR 129 million to EUR 158 million for the period of 2014-2020[17]. In comparison, Georgia received around EUR 131 million in 2014 and Armenia and Azerbaijan who also demonstrated little progress on democratic development received EUR 34 million and EUR 21 million respectively [18].

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Well before the ENP and EaP were launched, the relations between the EU and Belarus had already seen ups and downs. After the 1996 constitutional referendum that had vested crucial executive and legislative powers solely in the hands of the President, Belarus' authoritarian turn became crystal clear. In the aftermath of the referendum, Brussels imposed on Minsk a package of sanctions, thereby expressing its discontent with the political developments in the country. Several rounds of sanctions followed in the next two decades targeting the whole country as well as specific individuals and companies. Clara Portela concludes in her research that the sanction regimes before 2010 were successful not solely due to the political restrictions they created per se, but rather due to their economic 'by-products', i.e. lack of financial investment and assistance from the EU[19]. Portela concludes that 'Sanctions ultimately proved successful because of the leadership's desire to preserve wealth'[20]. Unfortunately, they had little to no impact on the government's thinking. Despite a thaw in the EU-Belarus relations prior to the 2010 presidential elections, the regime brutally suppressed the opposition's protest against the vote rigging in the immediate aftermath of the elections[21].

While traditionally it is assumed that the EU's foreign policy is based on a normative liberal approach, Ian Klinke contends that Belarus has been an exception to this rule[22]. Therefore, an image of the EU as a 'toothless value diffuser' is flawed, as it presupposes that the EU's primary interest in Belarus is to spread democracy[23]. According to Klinke, the EU has always viewed Belarus in rather realist terms. It has considered this country to be in Russia's sphere of influence and the only goal of Brussels in Belarus has been to secure a 'hard' border with its neighbor and ensure political stability in Minsk. Klinke concludes that the concept of 'strategic non-engagement' would therefore be more appropriate to describe the EU's policy towards Belarus.

Ironically, the arguments made by Klinke in 2007 are more than relevant for the EU's policy towards Belarus today. In times of tense relations with Russia, in addition to the conflict in the neighboring Ukraine that has shaken the country politically as well as destabilized its territorial integrity, the EU might indeed think twice before engaging in democracy promotion in Belarus. However, it would be incorrect to assume that the EU's efforts to democratize Belarus were not genuine from the very outset. The fact that the EU started the EaP largely based on the policy it had previously used in Central Europe points to the initial lack of understanding within the EU of the particularities of the region as a whole, speaking nothing about the differences between the individual EE countries. Thus, the argument that the EU from the beginning had a different strategy for Belarus than for other EaP states is a too flattering remark to make to bureaucrats in Brussels. Additionally, if the aim of Brussels was only to preserve stability in the country, concluding the PCA with Minsk would be a logical thing to do, as it would help feed with grants and loans an otherwise unsustainable Belarusian economic model. At the same time, signing the Association Agreement with another state that Russia considers to be in its sphere of influence – the Ukraine – demonstrated that the EU is unwilling to play realist politics even today when it would be much more justifiable than ten years ago.

However, it is undeniable that the 'Russia factor' is one of the main constraints of Belarus' rapprochement with the EU. Generally, the Belarusian government's foreign policy with its two big neighbors very often resembles the movement of pendulum. In economic and consequently in political terms, Belarus is highly dependent on Russia. As long as Moscow is willing to supply Minsk with gas below the market price, Belarus readily reaffirms its alliance with Russia. But when a crisis hits Russia, the pendulum in Minsk swings to the West. This is when 'liberalization' of President Lukashenka's regime happens, i.e., political prisoners are released and the OSCE missions are let in the country.

Being far from democratic, Belarus is not so pro-Russian in its political outlook as many in the West tend to think. According to a poll from 2013, significant majority of the population preferred to live in an independent Belarus (30.9%), rather than in a union with Russia (23.3%) or with the EU (17.1%)[24]. The Belarusian government is also interested in preserving state sovereignty, as it guarantees its grip on power. Thus, in the current Russia-Ukraine crisis Belarus is trying to stay as neutral as possible and avoids taking sides in the conflict. While Minsk was strongly criticized at the Riga EaP Summit for refusing to endorse a joint declaration that condemned the 'annexation of the Crimea', it should not come as a surprise that Belarus did not accept such wording given its dependence on Russia. As a senior fellow at the Ostrogorski Center argues, '[t]he very fact of Belarus' participation in the Summit, which a senior Russian diplomat called 'negative', and its continued status as an EU partner at a time of very strained relations between Russia and Europe is very telling when one considers Belarus' true intentions'[25].

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The Belarusian economy is in a deep crisis today, but Moscow has not offered its helping hand to Minsk. Logically enough, Minsk turned westwards. Although meaningful liberalization of the political system in Belarus cannot be expected, even small steps matter greatly. If Minsk is successful in its current negotiations of an IMF loan, some essential economic reforms are going to take place in the country[26]. In terms of the EaP, the EU will continue to finance such depoliticized sectors in Belarus as border management, environment, energy and transport, and higher education[27]. These investments are of course of great importance, but they will not remedy the errors of Belarus' political system. It is true, however, that nothing will unless there is a genuine desire for change within the country and most importantly among its elites. What the EU can do in this regard is to raise awareness about itself among the Belarusian population, which would be a first step towards rebuilding EU-Belarus relations[28].

Conclusions

This paper sought to demonstrate why the EU's policy in its Eastern Neighborhood has been unsuccessful. I argued that the main reasons for this failure were the inconsistencies of EU's approach with regards to its incentives-based policy in the EE countries, lack of understanding among the EU bureaucrats of the Eastern European region, a rather one-sided approach to agenda setting, despite the claims of 'joint ownership,' insufficient incentives as compared to the Central European states that had been promised EU membership if they had fulfilled certain criteria, and strong Russian influence on the post-Soviet space that Moscow considers to be in its legitimate sphere of influence.

With regards to the EU-Belarusian relationship within the EaP, no one could summarize it more concisely and diplomatically than the European Commission did: 'With Belarus, the EU is deepening its critical engagement in carefully calibrated mutual steps.'[29]. In other words, there has been little to no progress in the EU-Belarus relations and this is not going to change any time soon. As Yauheni Preiherman notes, elite formation is a crucial process for the former Soviet countries today [30], so even simply engaging in dialogue with the Belarusian society might have a significant impact on who the leaders of this country might be in future.

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Date written: December 2016