

# The European Union and its European Neighborhood: Before and After the Vilnius Summit of the Eastern Partnership

*"With great power comes great responsibility."  
Voltaire*

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## Introduction

In the 1990s, a wide-range power vacuum emerged in the Eastern European neighbourhood countries as a result of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the lack of involvement of third parties in the region. A situation of absent or weak state system structures occurred in the whole region – starting with the Baltics and Central Europe, and extending to Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus. Over the last two decades, the power vacuum has caused many security issues which have been only partially solved through the last enlargement rounds of the European Union (EU). Since then, Eastern Europe has been generating various soft and hard security threats ranging from human, drugs, and weapons traffic as well as terrorism to the frozen conflicts in and around Nagorno-Karabakh, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and Transnistria.

The six countries in Eastern Europe are *weak states* – ranging from democracy in transition (Moldova), through semi-authoritarian (Georgia, Ukraine, and Armenia) and defect regimes (Azerbaijan) to presidential dictatorships (Belarus). Furthermore, the direct neighbourhood consists of countries which are not interested in interacting with each other because of a very low level of willingness for regional cooperation. The lack of regionalisation processes can be explained with the absence of common economic and political values, or a common future perspective. Thus, regionalisation could be seen as one of the most effective mechanisms for prosperity and stability in Eastern Europe aimed at transferring the region from a geographic to a geopolitical zone, where the states are more interconnected with each other than before, leading to similar comprehension of security threats and risks.

From the perspective of the EU, the main idea is to promote regionalisation in the direct periphery so that the countries prefer regional cooperation to unilateral steps when faced with the challenges of globalisation and security threats. However, Eastern Europe cannot be seen as a regional entity because of various intraregional problems, on the one hand, such as ethnic conflicts, domestic structural problems, a low level of economic development and bad governance, and also extra regional problems, on the other hand, such as the high number of external players interfering with the region for their own security reasons.

## The EU's approach towards Eastern Europe

The EU's approach towards the Eastern European neighbourhood stems from the theoretical framework of the democratic peace theory as well as from the centre-periphery approach. The former assumes that democracies do not wage wars with each other because they are mutually interdependent as well as economically and politically stable enough to manage their conflicts through peaceful means, having so much to lose. The latter builds further on the democracy peace theory by assuming that there is one wealthy centre, which is usually democratic as well, acting as a stabilizing force for the politically and economically unstable and not wealthy periphery. Based on these approaches, it follows that the EU itself can be seen as the wealthy and primarily normative power centre aimed at promoting liberal democratic principles – such as the Copenhagen criteria – around which unstable and characterised by power vacuum peripheries – such as the Eastern European neighbourhood – exist and thus have negative implications.

The EU's approach towards the direct Eastern European neighbourhood evolves out of various political documents and concrete institutional instruments such as the European Security Strategy (ESS 2003), the European Neighbourhood policy (ENP 2004), the Black sea synergy (2007), the Report on ESS (2008), and the Eastern partnership (EaP) (2009). Generally, all these documents and political instruments build on particular objectives and priorities of the EU with regard to its relations with the six countries in the direct European neighbourhood. One of the major security objectives laid down in all documents is to establish a security zone around Europe and to stabilize the European neighbourhood by promoting actions to improve the soft skills agenda in the six Eastern European countries concerned. For this reason, the EU's legal instruments and measures focusing on the region are designed, in the first instance, to guarantee security, stability and prosperity along the periphery to the East. Furthermore, the EU's approach is aimed at avoiding buffer zones and dividing lines between the EU and its European neighbourhood. For that matter, the EU is determined to intensify the relations with the Eastern European countries without losing the main focus on its strategic partner – Russia, which however remains predominantly excluded from the documents and policy instruments mentioned above.

The Eastern European countries' rapprochement with the EU encompasses different levels of engagement – starting with political association and economic integration, as well as energy security relations, extending to increased mobility through visa liberalisation, institution and administrative capacity building, and ending with a wide-range sectorial cooperation.

The instruments and mechanisms within the framework of the ENP clearly focus on soft power issues and are defined by the supranational community method because of the non-political decision making as being conducted by the EU institutions.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, the policy instruments considered within the framework of the ENP are expected more likely to have a medium to long-term effect since they are geared towards long-term structural reforms and state system change. Moreover, the focus on the use of non-military means refers to the non-political decision making process within the framework of the ENP. Another important issue is that of the legal basis and of the need for legally binding requirements. The legal basis of the EU's neighbourhood policy stems from the bilateral relations between the EU and the six Eastern European countries concerned. The deepening of the relations depends on the extent to which the common values are shared and the obligations are fulfilled. This also involves a normative value-based approach of conditionality resulting from the Copenhagen criteria, which is tied to mutual commitments to particular norms and principles such as good governance, respect for human rights, democratic transition and economic liberalisation, just to mention a few. It should be noted that both bargaining parties address the issues and agree on the legally binding requirements on a free base (Ibid). The ENP approach is generally lacking a geostrategic direction because of several significant aspects. The ENP's framework is not aimed at resolving the ethnic conflicts in the direct neighbourhood and it remains excluded from the larger framework of the EU's enlargement policy, leading to a number of uncertainties regarding the long-term geostrategic interests of the EU along the Eastern periphery, which consists of both enlargement candidate countries (South-Eastern Europe) and ENP partner countries (Eastern Europe). Moreover, the absence of a comprehensive strategy on the Black sea area which encompasses, among others, the countries of the Eastern European neighbourhood stresses the need for geostrategic repositioning of the EU in this geographic area.

### **Eastern Partnership as the new paradigm of the EU's approach towards Eastern Europe**

With the launch of the Prague Summit in 2009 a new EU strategic initiative towards the Eastern neighborhood was introduced by Poland and Sweden, which is aimed at promoting the relations with the six eastern European neighbors. Its main objective is to provide a long-term vision and an action plan for the relations with them in response to their aspirations for more EU involvement during the complex transformation processes. Basically, the Eastern Partnership initiative seeks to promote further the stability, security and wealth fare in the common neighborhood in Eastern Europe by supporting the transformation of the political, economic and social system of the six Eastern European countries.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, the main objectives behind the EaP initiative are to intensify the political association and the economic integration, to facilitate visa liberalization as well as to accelerate cooperation in various sectors. So far, there have been three official summits (Prague 2009, Warsaw 2011 and Vilnius 2013), which take place every two years based on a rotation principle. Moreover, there are annual meetings with the foreign ministers as well as regular meetings with the parliament assembly and local regional assembly members.

The EaP initiative is built around three thematic axes dedicated to improving the good governance and the rule of law, the respect for human rights and basic freedoms, as well as promoting the principles of democracy and market economy. Based on the *more for more* principle, the EU relationship with each of the six EaP countries is determined by the level of development of the three thematic axes and by the progress of the transformation processes. In this respect, six areas of bilateral relations have been specified including as follows 1) new Association Agreements (AA) to strengthen the political engagement; 2) a Comprehensive Institution Building Program to improve the administrative capacities; 3) Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas to further the economic integration; 4) Mobility and security pacts with the long-term goal of full visa libera-

lization; 5) Energy security to enhance the cooperation in the field of energy; 6) and regional programs to promote economic and social development with the support of the EU's cohesion policy (Ibid).

Furthermore, the development of the ENP towards the eastern neighborhood is marked by the new momentum through the option of a multilateral cooperation between the EU and the six EaP countries. The multilateral element of the EaP initiative allows the participants to discuss topics and official positions on all relevant themes as well as to agree on joint activities. The four main themes of the multilateral platform encompass the fields of 1) democracy, good governance and stability; 2) economic integration; 3) energy security as well as 4) the contacts between people.

Moreover, several important flagship initiatives have been introduced since 2009 including the Integrated Border Management Program, the Small and Medium Enterprises (SME) Facility, the Regional Electricity markets, the Southern Energy Corridor, the Natural and Man-made Disasters and the Environmental Governance (Ibid).

Between 2010 and 2013 the EaP funding included the Comprehensive Institution Building (175 million); regional development programs (75 million) and the multilateral dimension (350 million) amounting to 600 million euros.<sup>3</sup> Additional funding such as the Eastern Partnership integration and cooperation (EaPIC) program is also very important and necessary to boost democratic transition and the commitment of the EaP countries to fundamental values and norms. In this regard, Moldova, Armenia and Georgia have received from the EaPIC additionally 87 million euros in 2013.<sup>4</sup>

### **Eastern Partnership and the Vilnius summit**

With regard to the estimates and expectations set out by the Vilnius summit agenda, one should first point out the most important achievements of the EaP initiative so far, which are 1) finalized Association Agreements including Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) with

Ukraine, Georgia, Armenia, and Moldova, 2) advancing visa facilitation and liberalisation, 3) multilateral cooperation in the fields of agriculture, environment, trade, migration and Common Security and Defense Policy, 4) advancing sectorial cooperation, 5) social dialogue through the multilateral cooperation platform, 6) several flagship initiatives and last but not least 7) shaping the European perspective.<sup>5</sup>

However, much less than expected was achieved at the Vilnius summit of the Eastern Partnership between 28 and 29 November 2013. The Initialling of the Association Agreement (and DCFTA) with Georgia and Moldova can indisputably be described as the most significant success at the summit, which is nonetheless being completely overshadowed by Ukraine's sudden refusal to sign its trade and association agreement with the EU. Furthermore, small yet important successes could be achieved with regard to the signing of the visa facilitation agreement with Azerbaijan, the signing of a framework agreement on Georgia's participation in the EU's crisis management missions as well as the initialling of an Air Services agreement with Ukraine (ibid).

More importantly, the participants in the summit signed a joint declaration setting out a vision for the future of the Eastern Partnership. In the light of the immediate massive protests in Kiev against Ukraine's unexpected U-turn, strengthening democracy, human rights and the rule of law seem to be the logical top priority for the EaP agenda after Vilnius. Moreover, the long process of preparation for signing the AA and DCFTA includes various steps as a means of provisional application and ensuring ratification. Introducing a visa-free regime through visa facilitation was reaffirmed as an objective of the Eastern Partnership initiative after Vilnius. Increasing the financial support through the European Neighborhood instrument and additional funds as well as intensifying people to people contacts within the framework of the Erasmus program and the Horizon 2020 are also top priorities of the EaP agenda after Vilnius. Additionally, strengthening the Eastern Partnership role in the peaceful crisis resolution as well as introducing more

infrastructure projects along the transport networks is ranking among the top priorities of the EaP initiative beyond Vilnius. (ibid)

EaP's multilateral cooperation forum should further create synergies among the political leadership, business and lobby groups as well as civil society organizations to meet and discuss ongoing topics from the comprehensive agenda. Good governance performance and adherence to the fundamental values and norms, which are the foundation of the EaP initiative, will be further awarded based on the *more for more* principle. Next on the agenda of the EaP would be the signing of the AA with Georgia and Moldova, advancing visa liberalization towards visa-free regime, and speeding up all necessary reforms and commitments stemming from the ongoing the bilateral road maps.

To conclude, the Vilnius summit ended with a mixture of fulfilled goals and wishful thinking for the future. The public support and the support by EU member states is growing more and more compared to the official launch of the EaP initiative back in the 2009. Thus, a reactive approach by the EU would be counterproductive for the future of the EaP initiative, since the exerted influence by third parties such as Russia will be growing in Eastern Europe in the years to come. The main challenges the EaP initiative will be facing in the future will lie in addressing the risks of conflicts and instability, in promoting the transformation process as well as in accelerating the technical and regulatory approximation of the EaP countries with the EU.

### **Three important conclusions arising from the Vilnius summit**

A main conclusion arising from the outcomes of the Vilnius summit concerns the future EU's smart power projection towards Eastern Europe. As Voltaire once said, "with great power comes great responsibility". Since Ukraine had been the highest stake on the agenda of the EU's integration ambitions to the East, the EU experienced an unpleasant surprise with the Ukraine's sudden U-turn at the Vilnius summit triggering unprecedented waves of protests in the streets of Kiev. These events were very important because, until

that moment, this had never happened publicly and thus the EU had not been aware of its smart power projection in Eastern Europe.

So far, Ukraine has been perceived as a balancer playing Brussels and Moscow against each other in order to obtain more space for action and better negotiating positions towards both direct neighbors. Short before the Vilnius summit, Ukraine has been sending clearly positive political signals towards possible signing of the AA and DCFTA. However, Ukraine has also repeatedly made a case for immediate macro-financial loan of 10 to 15 billion USD, which was refused by the International Monetary Fund and could have been only partly covered by the European Union, which offered ca. 800 million USD.<sup>6</sup> Coincidentally, the country's financial difficulties and its severe economic situation served as a pretext for Ukraine's sudden U-turn, which caused massive demonstrations facing police violence and atrocities in the capital Kiev and several other cities. The mass political protests on Kiev's Independence Square following Ukraine's sudden refusal to sign AA and DCFTA with the EU express the desire of younger generations who seek the European way of life and want to see their country integrated into the EU in the long term.<sup>7</sup> Growing civil society conscience – promoted within the multilateral framework of the EaP initiative – bore first fruits by becoming "an independent player in national politics" of Ukraine (Krastev 2013).

What came out as a second important conclusion after Vilnius is that the EaP initiative was placed within a geopolitical context because it turned out that both the EU and Russia have suddenly high stakes in keeping Ukraine part of their regional integration projects.<sup>8</sup> Obviously, the common European neighborhood will be determined by the clash of the two opposing integration projects in the years to come (Krastev 2013). In the case of Ukraine, the EU has already won the hearts and minds of the people. But soft power skills will not be enough in the long run, when it comes to power projection and influence. Geopolitical considerations prove right, that Ukraine is worth the diplomatic, economic and political efforts. Therefore, it would be a positive political signal in time of

austerity and stagnating enlargement policy efforts, and thus it would show strength and determination, if the EU creates a separate financial fund for Ukraine to promote the process of political association and economic integration towards the tactical goal of signing the AA and DCFTA. As mentioned above, with growing (soft) power comes greater responsibility towards Eastern Europe.

If the Eurasian integration attempts at bringing Ukraine closer are to succeed, it would be only because enough economic, trade or gas price incentives are provided. So far, trilateral trade talks between Moscow, the EU and Ukraine as proposed by Ukraine were declined by the EU. Nonetheless, there is still a realistic option for Ukraine and it is technically possible to sign both the DCFTA with the EU and a FTA with the Eurasian Customs Union. At the time of writing, the Ukrainian premier Viktor Yanukovych was on visit to Russia negotiating on urgent financial support. As a result of the visit on 17 December, Ukraine received a large reduction in gas prices and a much needed 15 billion USD loan.<sup>9</sup> The EU simultaneously declared commitment to sign the AA and DCFTA with Ukraine in connection with the upcoming European Council meeting between 18 and 19 December, only if Ukraine sends out a clear conclusion until that day.<sup>10</sup> With this in mind, even the case of Yulia Timoshenko was obviously left aside by the EU as a precondition with a view to ultimately signing the AA and DCFTA.<sup>11</sup>

The danger of deepening the political and economic crisis in Ukraine has become quite apparent now. It seems that neither the EU nor Russia can gain much by playing out the Ukrainian card in the long run, since Ukraine's political chaos or its economic collapse are going to pose a greater danger to their common European neighborhood. As Ivan Krastev pointed out, "the country has been like an oversize suitcase without handles – you can neither take it with you nor leave it at the station (Krastev 2013)." Having failed to integrate Ukraine it is now the imminent question, how can the EU and Russia stabilize it in terms of urgent political and socio-economic issues.

As an interim summary, what can be noted is that the EU should be building its political

association and economic strategy towards Ukraine on the pillars of economy, trade and sectorial cooperation by supporting the processes technically and financially. The political agenda in terms of good governance, human rights, and the rule of law, should be separated from the technical issues of the economic integration. Both dimensions follow a different logic of development, which can sometimes create centrifugal forces instead of synergies.

The third and final conclusion from the Vilnius summit is that the levels of focus and engagement should not be confused by the EU. The EU-Russia strategic partnership urgently needs to be adapted and thus has to be renegotiated first, in order for the EaP initiative to make progress in a way which is acceptable to both the EU and Russia. More importantly, the EaP initiative has the potential to succeed only within a strategic framework of constructive and pragmatic bilateral relations between the EU and Russia. Urging one or another EaP country to make a choice in favor of the EU or Russia could only lead to the false suggestion that either Russia or the EU does not want to cooperate with its strategic partner and is trying instead to keep the eastern neighborhood in its orbit of influence.

Shaping the common European neighborhood cannot happen without Russia. Thus, the final recommendation is to negotiate and achieve a new ambitious agreement on the strategic partnership between the EU and Russia, before starting to integrate the eastern European countries. The main challenge is thus to recognize and weigh the geopolitical potential of the combination of measures, policies and strategies concerning all eastern European neighbors, to prioritize them and finally to introduce an adapted and optimised result-oriented policy package. The EU is scratching the surface of its great soft power potential by making political statements and visits to Ukraine, which in the absence of the aforementioned vision and long-term agenda with a clear focus means only a waste of European citizens' money and Ukrainian citizens' dreams. To conclude with the words of Richard Youngs "Europe can be both geopolitical and committed to reform – but to strike the right balance, the EU must be more strategic."<sup>12</sup>

## Endnoten

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