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# POLICY BRIEF

2017/January

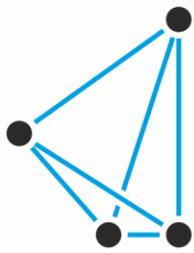
Think Visegrad in Brussels

## The European Union and Eastern Partnership: Crises and Strategic Assessment<sup>1</sup>

*Tomasz Stępniewski*

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<sup>1</sup> This policy brief was compiled during the author's study visit in Brussels in 12-16<sup>th</sup> September 2016. The author's stay was a part of the project titled Think Visegrad – V4 Think Tank Platform in Brussels.



## Introduction

The EU's Eastern Partnership (EaP)<sup>2</sup> is frequently perceived as an inefficient policy. One may even risk saying it has become obsolete. The changes occurring in EaP states (the victory of a pro-Russian president in the election in Moldova and slow reforms in Ukraine and Georgia), make, at this point, a consideration of prospects of the project and of its future opportunities and challenges necessary. Is it true that the EaP has not lived up to its expectations? Are the EaP's future and objectives becoming increasingly insecure? Do Russia's actions towards EaP countries run the risk of the policy's objectives becoming unachievable? Will the EU, facing multiple parallel crises and the prospect of Brexit, be able to keep a intent focus on the situation EaP countries are in and continue to create the conditions of change? Will Poland, supported by V4 states, be able to convince EU countries to become actively invested in the affairs in the East?

## The EU and EaP countries – overview of the current situation

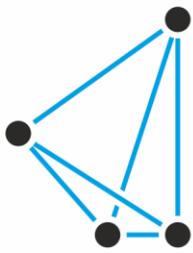
According to a representative of the EEAS (European External Action Service), the EaP is a mature project<sup>3</sup>. Despite the fact that it has been losing momentum, and the peculiar period of time the project has been running in, one cannot forget that the resolutions of the Vilnius and Riga EaP summits are being successfully implemented<sup>4</sup>. Multilateral platforms are still in operation and meetings on various levels are still being held, but outside of the public eye. Nevertheless, they do take place, and exert a variable level of impact upon the situation of EaP's states.

Undeniably, the greatest issue the EaP is faced with is the perception of the project in geopolitical categories. The false dichotomy placing EaP countries in the context of a choice to be made between either the EU or Russia (seemingly the only options, according to EU officials) may be the weakest point of the project. When Poland and Sweden initiated the EaP, they did not foresee that signatory countries would face such a choice. This dichotomy presents a set of very tough challenges, such as in the case of Ukraine, where these issues have now become existential in character.

<sup>2</sup> The Eastern Partnership was initiated by Poland and Sweden in 2008. The project was launched by the European Union at the Prague Summit on 7<sup>th</sup> May 2009. The EaP is a European project addressing six countries in the EU's eastern neighbourhood: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine.

<sup>3</sup> Interview 1, European External Action Service (EEAS), Headquarters Brussels; Russia Division, 15 September 2016.

<sup>4</sup> Interview 2, **Permanent Representation of the Republic of Poland to the European Union**, Brussels, 13 September 2016.



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In order to decisively impact a given country, the policy leading up to EU membership remains the most effective. The lack of such a prospect deprives the EU of a leverage for democratic reform in EaP countries<sup>5</sup>. However, the fact that they are currently not ready for European integration (as far as virtually all membership criteria are concerned) needs to be taken into account. It is worth mentioning that according to the latest corruption perceptions indexes, Ukraine ranked 107 worldwide in 2005 and moved to 142 in 2015. Moreover, not all EaP countries, at the political or popular level, and sometimes both, even express willingness for EU integration. Even though Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine desire to join the EU and implement the Association Agreement / Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas (AA/DCFTA), Armenia, Azerbaijan and Belarus do not wish to do so. Only Armenia has engaged in the negotiation process of a DCFTA; it is however doing so with the goal of not colliding with the country's involvement (since 2014) in the Eurasian Economic Union led by Russia. Should the negotiations with Armenia be successful, opening new discussions with Azerbaijan and Belarus would be made easier to consider<sup>6</sup>.

When considering the internal situation of EaP countries, the most effective solution for the EU would be to place emphasis on pragmatism, flexibility and to search for opportunities for cooperation with political leadership and civil society<sup>7</sup>. Clearly, the EU policy should be based on the “more for more” principle (one which is not enforced in the ENP anymore, but whose rationale still functions in the framework of the European Neighbourhood Policy<sup>8</sup>), and in parallel on the “less for less policy” as well.

Examples of such a pragmatic approach are seen in support for reforms in EaP states. The effectiveness of these reforms translates directly into the efficiency of these countries' transformation. Should the reforms fail, it will be difficult to speak about the relationship between the EU and EaP states becoming stronger. It ought to be clearly asserted that the EU cannot do EaP countries' homework for them. They must make an effort to reform, transform and do so on their own – with EU support of course, but in a proactive fashion. In order to support this, the EU ought to invest much more substantial financial resources for reforms in these countries, while remaining cautious because of rampant corruption in some countries, as illustrated by the recent defrauding of EU funds in Moldova. On 22 September 2016, the World Bank published its forecast on the economic situation in Ukraine. According to the Bank's data “the

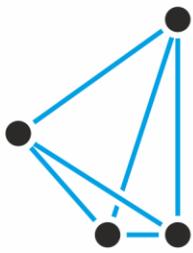
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<sup>5</sup> Interview 3, European External Action Service (EEAS), Headquarters Brussels; Eastern Partnership, regional cooperation and OSCE, 15 September 2016.

<sup>6</sup> Interview 1, European External Action Service (EEAS), Headquarters Brussels; Russia Division, 15 September 2016.

<sup>7</sup> Interview 2, **Permanent Representation of the Republic of Poland to the European Union**, Brussels, 13 September 2016.

<sup>8</sup> Maciej Popowski, Deputy Director-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations (DG NEAR), European Commission, during a panel discussion on “Money in Politics: State-building, democracy and corruption in the Eastern Neighbourhood,” European Endowment for Democracy and the Office of International IDEA, Brussels, 16 September 2016.



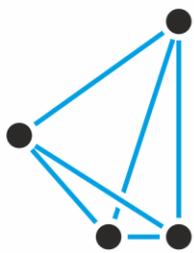
economy grew by 0,8 percent in the first half of 2016, compared to a contraction of 16 percent in the first half of 2015, but significant recovery and growth have not yet taken hold except in select sectors”.<sup>9</sup> The Bank sees the reforms as too slow, and weak internal demand coupled with the conflict with Russia, are identified the main challenges hampering growth. It seems to be high time for the EU to take action since a slow economic uptick and a continuously challenging security situation are undermining the chances of an economic revival in Ukraine, which may result in the country gravitating towards Russia.

The liberalisation of visa requirements constitutes a further issue. Even though Moldova is incorporated in the visa-free regime, Ukraine and Georgia are not. Ukraine has met all the EU requirements to obtain no-visa traffic but a final decision has not been made yet, and is now rumoured to be pushed back to accommodate eventual electoral changes in France and Germany. However, the European Parliament sent a positive signal with this respect in September, and prospects remain positive for Georgia and Ukraine to be granted visa-free travel. The EU is currently working on a so-called ‘safety mechanism’, which would open the possibility of suspending visa-free travel to the EU if a country violates the afferent regulations. The mechanism was designed for the purpose of a prospective visa-free regime with Turkey, and has now been turned against Ukraine. Moreover, the fact that Ukraine and Georgia do not control their whole territory, Crimea being annexed by Russia while the war in Donbas rages on, cannot be forgotten and, according to some member states, openly questions the implementation of the visa-free regime. From the point of view of the EU policy’s efficiency, it is critical that the public of these countries does not fall hostage to the political situation. Even though Ukraine’s oligarchy and the authoritarian systems in other EaP’s countries are very much alive and kicking, the general public of these countries ought to be able to visit the EU freely. It is even more important due to the EU’s people-to-people contacts policy which is implemented in EaP countries.

Moreover, the EU ought to support civil society, young politicians and political leaders who seek changes, as well as various media and SMEs in these countries in order to favour their chances to be part of the new political regimes that may emerge. It was the general rebellion against Yanukovich’s regime, named the Euromaidan (or the Revolution of Dignity) in Ukraine in February 2014, which led to the change in the country’s political situation. This is the reason (as a symbol) for Ukraine’s, and to a lesser degree other EaP countries’, civil potential being strong. EU decision makers ought to bear this fact in mind.

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<sup>9</sup> The World Bank, Ukraine Economic Update, September 22, 2016, <http://pubdocs.worldbank.org/en/705541474523591719/WB-Economic-Update-September-2016-en.pdf>.



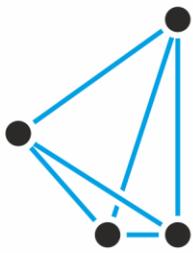
## Russia and its fait accompli policy towards the EU's Eastern Neighbourhood

EaP countries do not function in a vacuum but depend on internal and external factors. The actions of both the EU and Russia seem vital as far as external factors go. Therefore, from the point of view of EaP states, taking into close consideration Russia's objectives (the realistic rather than declared ones) for these countries is critical as it allows to identify Russia's tactical, but also strategic objectives towards the EaP in particular, but also post-Soviet states in general. It can be said that since the very beginning of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, Russia intended to destabilise the situation in southern and eastern Ukraine in order to disconnect the areas from the country or to turn them into "occupied territories" or establish a quasi-state in the area (as in the case of Transnistria). An essential tool of Russia creating a fait accompli is its use of propaganda in the conflict with Ukraine, which the West urgently needs to respond to. Ukraine is experiencing not only a news blackout, but also a disinformation campaign which is intended to accentuate internal destabilisation in the country. Russian propaganda is spread by Russian mass media, and television is an important instrument of implementing Russian policy in Ukraine. Hence, the EU needs to find a way to support the independent (or, at least not pro-Russian) media channels – and even consider setting one up based for example on the BELSAT channel aimed at Belarus (but operating from Poland<sup>10</sup>).

Moreover, Dmitri Trenin observes that "Russia's Ukraine policy is in the spotlight once again over the fragile ceasefire in Donbas and talk of resurrecting the so-called Normandy format negotiations between the leaders of Ukraine, Russia, Germany, and France on resolving the conflict in eastern Ukraine. Moscow should realize that Kiev's anti-Russian stance is here to stay, and reassess its long-term policy regarding its neighbour accordingly."<sup>11</sup> According to Russian politicians, swift democratic reforms in Ukraine pose a deadly threat for Russia's interest and its political decision-makers. Clearly, Ukraine's democratisation will only be possible with the assistance of and close cooperation with western structures (EU, NATO). Russia is well aware of this fact, and it is the reason for its strong opposition to the prospect of Ukraine becoming an EU and NATO member. One may go so far as to claim that Russia's strategic objective for Ukraine is to prevent its democratisation and integration with the West.

<sup>10</sup> Tomasz Stępniewski, The EU's Eastern Partnership and the Way Forward After Riga, "International Issues & Slovak Foreign Policy Affairs", Vol. XXIV, No. 1-2, 2015, pp. 17-27.

<sup>11</sup> Dmitri Trenin, Russia's Next Move on Ukraine, Carnegie Moscow Centre, 27.09.2016, <http://carnegie.ru/commentary/2016/09/27/russia-s-next-move-on-ukraine/j60e>.



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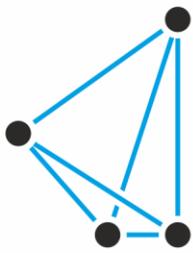
Sergey Karaganov, a recognised researcher who frequently comments on Russia's international policies in the western media, often stated that Russia will never become a global superpower unless it succeeds in being a regional one. As a consequence, according to several researchers, Ukraine is critical for Russia's regional supremacy. Undeniably, Russia is capable of becoming a regional superpower, and to play a key role in international politics in the future. However, the war with Ukraine questions its ability to achieve such an objective. When viewing the events of 2016, it may be said that by annexing Crimea and instigating the war in Donbas, Russia lost the opportunity to achieving its long-term objectives regarding Ukraine (prospects of integrating Ukraine with the Eurasian Union among others), and as a consequence, the opportunity to reinforce bilateral cooperation. Not only did the war deteriorate international relations, but it has proven considerably troublesome for citizens of both countries, and most especially Ukrainians, who are on the receiving end of Russian policy and propaganda. Of course, the war in Donbas prevented Ukraine from becoming independent from Russian influence. This should be understood bearing in mind the fact that in the past two decades, Russia was significantly determined to reintegrate the post-Soviet space in its orbit. From Russia's perspective, ensuring its hegemony in this space and forcing the West out would enforce its imperial character in a regional and eventually global dimension, and enable a series of lesser socio-economic interests to be achieved. Moreover, in order to protect its zone of influence, Russia did not hesitate to adopt a confrontational approach towards the West. In addition, the fact that the dependence of Ukraine and other EaP member states on Russia's influence (and energy) is considerable ought to be highlighted. In other words, Russia has numerous instruments to influence the situation in these countries. EU policy makers seem sometimes fairly often unaware of how much the EaP countries depend on Russia in drawing up the policies of engagement<sup>12</sup>.

## Conclusions

Seven years after the introduction of the EaP, its achievements, objectives and possibilities need to be revisited. Such a need has become even more pressing in the run-up to the EaP summit set to take place in 2017 (in Brussels or Tallinn), where a change of both the approach and narrative will be strong symbols that are now necessary to deliver on. Moreover, the predicament of the EaP countries has been pushed to the background. As a consequence, the V4 ought to bring forward the issue

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<sup>12</sup> Wider: Tomasz Stepniewski, The EU's Eastern Partnership and the Way Forward After Riga, "International Issues & Slovak Foreign Policy Affairs", Vol. XXIV, No. 1-2, 2015, pp. 17-27.



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of the dynamics in the EaP states and the long-term dangers posed by the Russo-Ukrainian conflict in Donbas. The Ukraine crisis constitutes a challenge not only for Ukraine's security, but also more generally for the European and international security and order. Paul Ivan observes that the EU continuously needs to highlight that it was Russia who annexed Crimea, Russia who is waging war against Ukraine, and Russia who violated international law<sup>13</sup>. EU sanctions imposed on Russia constitute a proper response with regards to the *fait accompli* policy applied by the Federation. As a consequence, the EU ought to finally enforce the Minsk II agreements and its implementation by Russia (and by Ukraine), even if the election of Donald Trump and political developments in France may make this more complex. The EU also needs to work out a mechanism to respond efficiently enough to emerging crises in its immediate vicinity. The adoption of the European Union Global Strategy (EUGS) in June 2016 is expected to alleviate some problems regarding the issue. However, the strategy has not been ratified by member states. As a consequence, F. Mogherini is developing a Security and Defence Implementation Plan (SDIP), to be adopted at the December EU Council. The situation in the eastern neighbourhood confirms that far-reaching changes are required. It will be difficult to reach a compromise on this issue among EU members if even the states under the EaP project failed to reach a consensus on whether or not the annexation of Crimea by Russia should be condemned.

## ***Tomasz Stępniewski***

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<sup>13</sup> Interview with *Paul Ivan* from the European Policy Centre, Brussels, 12 September 2016.