

European Union and its Eastern neighbours. Challenges and new chances of policy shaping - Moscow's attitude towards the Eastern Partnership (EaP)

Alexander Strelkov, Institute of Europe Russian Academy of Science, Moscow

At the beginning, the Russian political elite adopted a rather alarmist approach towards the Eastern Partnership (EaP). By the end of 2008 and at the beginning of 2009 quite rigorous evaluations from the State Duma were voiced. Despite adopting a more cautious attitude and expressing due doubt in the efficiency of the project, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs was not very positive. During the last year the notion of “possible new dividing lines in Europe” became firmly associated with the Eastern Partnership in the parlance of the Ministry's representatives. The experts were also rather critical of the Eastern Partnership, comparing it to GUAM (Georgia Ukraine Azerbaijan Moldova) and claiming that the project is meant to push Russia out of the post-soviet sphere. Those members of the expert community, who assumed that the Russian factor wasn't the main driving force behind the Eastern Partnership were doubtless in a minority.

Unfortunately, the mutual lack of trust that is present in the EU-Russia relations may have its influence on the Eastern Partnership project. There are some voices saying that the EU should “downsize” the Russian factor when carrying out the EaP. Although there might be some truth in such a proposal, it should be fully understood that to one extent or another Russian attitudes have to be taken into consideration: both Moscow and Brussels have legitimate interests in the region. Secondly, in its own turn the European Union hasn't become a “political giant” in the post-soviet region. Brussels has ambitious goals which aren't fully matched by corresponding means. It may be even argued that in practice the EU doesn't have a clear view of what to promote in the region: be it democracy or efficient governmental structures, promotion of governance or simply of electoral schemes. To sum it up, both Moscow and Brussels lack a clear coherent strategy in the post-soviet sphere and their “projection power” is comparable: the one of Russia is diminishing and is in need of an overhaul; the one of the EU can't yet deliver and will bear fruit only in the long term.

Another and arguably the most important part the of Eastern Partnership equation are the post-soviet states themselves. To a certain extent, not only the governments, but the local NGOs, tend to perceive the European Union as a wish-list. This means that when a wish doesn't come true, the states may be tempted to use the Eastern Partnership not as a chance for development, but as an instruments to play on the contradictions between Russia and the EU.

In spring 2010 the situation started to change somehow. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs adopted a more positive approach to prospective Russia's participation in the thematic programmes of the "Eastern Partnership". Work began on drafting a set of policy proposals on how to positively engage the new EU project. It is hence very likely that this issue will be discussed during the next EU-Russia summit in May this year. Basically, despite being a bit slow to react as any bureaucratic structure, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs is now in favour of engaging in the Eastern Partnership regardless of the suspicion it still bears towards the project. It is worth mentioning that the Ministry of Economy adopted such a pragmatic approach from the start and expressed its interest in the programme well back in 2009. The evaluation of the experts' community started to change as well. The value of participating in the Eastern partnership seems to become more widely acknowledged.

Despite these positive trends, I suggest there still exist certain areas of tension, that could undermine Russia-EU cooperation in the region. First of all, it's the issue of the *acquis communautaire*. The EU claims that the basis of the Eastern Partnership is the adoption and implementation of the *acquis*. This raises a question of how such "legal expansion" will affect the Russian position. It would be highly desirable if a working group could have been established in order to compare the legal systems (or various fields of the legal systems) of Russia, the EU and post-soviet states. Such comparative analyses may exist in certain limited areas but there seems to be no comprehensive work dedicated to such a topic. Without such a laborious task, I am sure that unwanted surprises may arise when cooperation trickles down to the technical level. The flagship initiative on SME support fund may serve as an example. It was stated by the Commission that the *acquis* is the legal basis of the project. Hence one does need to know to what an extent is the legislation of the EU/Russian/EaP states' compatible with one another. This issue has implications for efficiency of both Russian and EU policies in the region. In certain areas Russia has been much better in adapting the *acquis* than the post-soviet states and that should also be duly taken into consideration.

Secondly, the format of possible negotiations on the EaP during the EU-Russia summit. It does not suffice to sign a grand framework strategy on the principles of EU-Russian cooperation in the post-soviet region. This might even be counterproductive as Moscow will run the risk of being accused of establishing the "spheres of influence" and the question of values will turn the negotiation tables into a battleground again. Instead, it would be better to develop a roadmap or a technical programme pertaining to Russian participation in the EaP thematic projects and flagship initiatives. The option to co-finance the projects will also help offset Russian worries about "joint ownership".

Thirdly, the format of Russia's participation in the Eastern Partnership. An idea circulates that the "Four common spaces" can be used as a template for cooperation of Moscow and Brussels. Another likely scenario mentions that in the framework of Eastern Partnership EU-Russia relations can shrink to cross-border cooperation. Given that Moscow and Brussels have recently come to terms on financing cross-border cooperation under the European Neighborhood and Partnership Instrument, this can turn out to be quite beneficial. Still, two important issues remain unsolved. Possibly, the Russian regions of North-West will get the most of such a format, given they have amassed experience under the "Northern dimension". It means that other border regions will have to catch up or compete if they want to get their own share of resources. Second, if Russian presence in the EaP will be limited to cross-border cooperation, most problems of the post-soviet area will be left out of scope of the Russian attention. Moscow will find it even harder to "project" and present its point of view on "grand issues" pertaining to the region as a whole.

Last is the issue of the civil society cooperation and the Civil Society Forum. Russia does have to take part in it, especially if even the NGOs from "West orientated" Ukraine had no objections. The only remaining question is as follows: who exactly will participate? It would have been very beneficial for Russia's international image and its "soft power" but it seems that this question can't find its way to the top of the agenda or NGOs are reluctant to show their anticipation. As was mentioned during our debates, setting up a Russia-EU civil society forum can help resolve the issue. Nonetheless, I don't think such an option is viable – a working group on human rights already exists. Also, the merit of the Forum is to engage and integrate the civil society into solving a multitude of regional issues that go beyond human rights proper.

In conclusion, I'd like to underline that Russia's attitude to the Eastern Partnership is changing and became much more cooperation orientated. It's a positive sign, meaning that there's a chance that the EU-Russia relations in the region won't always be conflict driven. Still, a number of salient technical issues exist that have to be tackled in order to get the most out of the Russian presence in the EaP.