

After Vilnius: the European Union's smart power and the Eastern Neighbourhood

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Abstract

The concept of “smart power” is relevant for the analysis of European Union's external action, insofar as the relations with other parties include conditionality and payments. The Eastern Partnership falls in that category, and the recent developments associated with the 2013 Vilnius Summit can be understood in relation with the European Union's policies toward the Eastern neighbourhood. The article suggests that a better combination of hard power and soft power strategies is needed, in order to promote European values and interests in the region.

Keywords: Eastern Partnership, Vilnius Summit, Eastern Neighbourhood

1. Introduction

The Eastern Partnership (EaP) summit took place in Vilnius (November 28-29, 2013), confirming the pessimism of the political commentators in Brussels and elsewhere. The ambitious agenda set up for the summit was not completed, and the build-up to Vilnius showed several weak points of the EaP. Ukraine's last minute decision not to sign the Association Agreement (AA) while particularly significant, was not a singular setback: Armenia had already chosen to seek membership in the Russian-dominated Custom Union, despite an initial interest in the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA) included in the AA. As for the two authoritarian post-Soviet regimes that participate in the EaP, Azerbaijan opted for a low-level type of cooperation with the European Union (EU), while Belarus maintained its usual distance. The fact that Moldova and Georgia initialled their AAs, while positive in itself, could not alter the overall unsatisfactory outcome, from an EU perspective.

The European Union has often been associated with the concepts of “soft power”, “hard power” and “smart power”, it would seem appropriate to

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reassess, in the light of the recent developments, the salience of the soft power/smart power wielded by the EU in its Eastern neighbourhood.

As the EU will probably proceed to an evaluation of its policies toward the Eastern neighbourhood, the soft power/smart power perspective might contribute, despite its limits, to the development of new approaches that would help the EU promote its vision regarding the post-Soviet area.

The first section of the paper introduces the issue of EU “power with adjectives”, providing a discussion of several influential concepts in EU political studies. Its main aim is to distinguish between “soft”, “civilian” and “normative” power, and to argue that the interactions between the EU and its Eastern partners are not immune from hard power behaviour. The next section is dedicated to a review of the external governance vs. partnership issue in EU’s policy toward the Eastern neighbourhood, and illustrates some of the limits of the Eastern Partnership model, identified in the literature. The third part includes a round-up of several expert opinions on the context and outcome of the Vilnius EaP summit. The final section advances a number of tentative conclusions and argues in favour of a “smarter” strategy based on the combination between “hard” and “soft” approaches. The EaP and, in more general terms, the relationship between the EU and its Eastern neighbours cannot be framed exclusively in terms of soft power.

2. European Union: power with adjectives

Soft power is one of the most influential concepts in contemporary International Relations. Introduced by Joseph S. Nye in his work *Bound to Lead* (Nye, 1990), it was later refined in several books and articles, including *Soft Power: the Means to Success in World Politics* (Nye, 2004) and *The Future of Power* (Nye, 2010).

Nye defines power as an actor’s ability to act, in a social situation, so as to influence others in order to get the desired results. While hard power implies the use of coercion and/or rewards, soft power is the ability to obtain what you desire through attraction, rather than coercion. “Hard and soft power are related because they are both aspects of the ability to achieve one’s purpose by affecting the behaviour of others. The distinction between them is one of degree, both in the nature of the behaviour and in the tangibility of the resources” (Nye, 2004, p.7).

Soft power is, consequently, the ability to affect others by means of cooption, including agenda-framing, persuasion and fostering positive attraction. Among the major soft power resources available to actors, one should count: multiple channels of communication that contribute to agenda-setting; cultural customs and ideas that approximate the prevalent global norms; and a credibility that is reinforced through values and policies. In terms of soft-power behaviour, Nye identifies three fundamental types: agenda-setting, attraction, and persuasion.

Nye warns against confusing resources with behaviour: many types of resources can contribute to soft power, but this does not entail that soft power is any type of behaviour.

The use of force, payment, and some agenda-setting based on them I call hard power. Agenda setting that is considered legitimate by the target, positive attraction, and persuasion are the parts of the spectrum of behaviour I include in soft power (Nye, 2010, p. 20).

On the other hand, “payments, aid and other positive sanctions . . . have both a hard and a soft power dimension . . . Providing a payment and removing a payment are two sides of the same coin” (ibidem, p. 76).

Smart power refers to the strategies which link means and goals: in order to achieve its goals, an actor must effectively combine hard and soft power resources, in changing social circumstances (Nye, 2010, p. xiv). Consequently, international exchanges that imply economic payments contain a hard power component and require adequate combinations of strategies – in other words, wielding smart power. From this perspective, the European Union is involved not only in military, but also in non-military exchanges that involve coercion, and needs intelligent strategies for combining coercion and attraction.

The soft power approach to the EU has become popular among political scientists, and has been eagerly adopted by EU and member-states officials. For instance, Eniko Landaburu, at the time the Commission’s Director General for Enlargement, argued that enlargement and the ENP are illustrative examples of “soft power Europe” (Landaburu, 2006). Regarding the ENP, he wrote:

The ENP therefore nicely defines the nature of the EU's soft power; it is the credibility of the Community method within the EU itself that gives us our ability to persuade others outside our borders. The corollary of this is that the further away from the magnetic attraction of the EU itself we intend to deploy our soft power, the clearer must be our member states' commitment to the unique formal and informal processes that make up the Community method. If we are to preserve an international order based on the rule of law and respect for human rights, democracy and good governance, the EU needs to persuade others of its own unwavering commitment (Landaburu, 2006).

For the Swedish foreign minister Carl Bildt, soft power is equally important:

Again and again, we see how the soft power of Europe - the inspiration of our model of integration and shared sovereignty, the magnetism of our

process of integration and of building increasingly close relations with our neighbours, the transformational capacity of our experiences in conflict resolution and state-building in complex areas - is becoming increasingly relevant in the world in which we are living (Bildt, 2007).

The peculiarity of European Community / European Union as an actor in international affairs has been a constant point of interest for political theorists, especially since François Duchêne introduced the concept of civilian power, in the 1970s (Duchêne, 1972). His perspective generated ample discussions, including rebukes from the Realist standpoint, such as Hedley Bull's assertion that civilian power is a contradiction in terms (Bull, 1982), and that Europe should in fact strengthen its military capacities and build a military alliance within the already existing NATO framework (ibidem, p.164). The debate over "civilian power Europe" has continued, and has in fact gained in relevance after the Maastricht Treaty created the political framework for an EU security policy. However, the theoretical exchanges concentrated on the first half of Duchêne's definition ("a civilian group long on economic power and relatively short on armed forces"), and largely ignored the second half ("a force for the international diffusion of civilian and democratic standards"), which is in fact normative (Stavridis, 2001, p. 44). According to Karen E. Smith, the civilian ends envisaged by Duchêne and other supporters of "civilian power Europe" were "international cooperation, solidarity, domestication of international relations (or strengthening the rule of law in international relations), responsibility for the global environment, and the diffusion of equality, justice and tolerance" (Smith, 2005, p. 66). Interpretations of civilian power also tend to highlight the role of diplomatic cooperation in solving international problems, the importance of economic power, and the legally-binding institutions of international law (Diez and Manners, 2007, p. 178).

Arguing that civilian power is not the same thing as pacifism, Stavridis writes that a civilian power by design – rather than by default, due to the lack of capacities – would consider "military means to be on one end of a long spectrum, with trade and use of economic sanctions on the other (ibidem, p. 50).

The concept of "normative power" introduced by Ian Manners (2002) is a late response to Bull's scepticism toward civilian power (Bull, 1982) – in fact, Bull's question ("a contradiction in terms?") is included by Manners in the title of his article. Arguing that the civilian vs. military power led to an inadequate concentration on the state-like features of the EU, he looks at Europe's identity in the international system: the EU's "normative difference" comes from its historical context, hybrid polity and political-legal constitution (Manners, 2002, p. 240). The EU's normative basis is defined by core norms (peace, liberty, democracy, rule of law, human rights) and minor norms (social solidarity, anti-discrimination, sustainable development, good governance), and these norms

allow the EU to “present and legitimate itself as being more than the sum of its parts” (ibidem, p. 244). The diffusion of these norms is shaped by a set of factors that actually define the EU’s normative power: contagion, informational diffusion, procedural diffusion, transference, overt diffusion, and the cultural filter (ibidem, pp. 244-245).

Returning on the concept of normative power two years later, Manners (2004) elaborated on the differences between normative power and civilian power. Certain contributions dealing with the EU as a “civilian power” have bridged the gap between the two concepts, in the sense that, by using and practicing particular kinds of norms, civilian power can be read as one specific form of normative power (Diez and Manners, 2007, p. 177).

However, Manners points out that the former emerged from a rationalist theoretical field and was attached to a Westphalian, inter-state system frame of reference, which neither Duchêne nor other analysts of civilian power thought of altering (Manners, 2004, pp. 3-4). By contrast, the normative power approach attempts to “transcend the normality of world politics towards world society” (Diez and Manners, 2007, p. 179).

3. Partnership and external governance in the Eastern neighbourhood

The theoretical literature on the Eastern Partnership (EaP) is understandably related to the earlier contributions on the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), so that reviewing a few issues covered by the latter would be relevant for the purpose of this study. A major point of interest is the influence of the logic of the Eastern enlargement over the ENP and, later, over the EaP. Topics such as leverage, conditionality of external governance have inspired all three bodies of literature.

Sandra Lavenex argues that “with its emphasis on hierarchical and horizontal, formal and informal forms of policy-making, the notion of governance is particularly useful for studying relations with third countries which, although not EU member states, are included in the pursuit of (internal) policy goals” (Lavenex, 2004, p. 682). External governance occurs when “the institutional/legal boundary is moved beyond the circle of member states” (ibidem, p. 683). From the EU perspective, this generates a clustering of the regions and countries with which EU develops institutionalised relations, and several modes of interaction can be identified. The Eastern neighbours are subject to the logic of association, which is, in effect, a securitizing response to interdependence (ibidem, pp. 687-688). However, while enlargement was designed in order to minimise the variation of EU external governance rules, the relations with the European neighbourhood should be open to a wider variety of instruments, especially since enlargement is not (yet) on the table and accession conditionality is not particularly relevant (Lavenex, Schimmelfennig, 2009, p. 794). As far as democracy promotion is concerned, the governance approach

privileges sector-based, functional cooperation, which promises to yield better outcomes than the top-down, leveraged accession conditionality (Lavenex and Schimmelfennig, 2011, p. 887). The horizontal model of governance seems to be more suitable than the hierarchical one, in terms of democracy promotion in the Eastern neighbourhood (Moga and Pascariu, 2013, p. 157).

Nevertheless, the logic of enlargement strongly influenced the ENP and, later, the EaP. Writing from a historical institutionalist perspective, Gebhart argues that EU policies have shown strong signs of structural borrowing from previous policies (Gebhart, 2010, p. 98) and that one should not be surprised to find its logic reflected in the ENP, since enlargement was widely seen as a success. The totally different conditions under which the ENP develops raise, however, a serious risk of failure: “The ENP offers a set of weak tools, a softened and diluted version of the enlargement model, while the nature and level of challenges to be tackled in the European neighbourhood have reached an all-time high in terms of complexity and geopolitical disruption” (ibidem, p. 104).

The present circumstances in the Eastern neighbourhood would require, argues Korosteleva, a new approach – one that would depart from the logic of enlargement and external governance, and would turn to a logic of genuine partnership. Lacking a suitable notion of partnership, as well as a clear understanding of “joint ownership” and “shared values”, the EU “elected to deploy a means-tested notion of external governance, used for EU enlargement and operating through conditionality and top-down rule transfer” (Korosteleva, 2011, p. 6). This leads to a situation in which the neighbours are transformed from “others” – sovereign subjects with values and interests of their own – into “objects of governance”, undermining the very idea of partnership (ibidem, p. 7).

Korosteleva’s recent book on the EaP (Korosteleva, 2012) criticises the EU’s inability to advance a genuine partnership to its Eastern European neighbours. Her starting point is the notion of partnership as mutual adjustment of actors’ policies in the international arena, drawn from the neoliberal literature on cooperation. She stresses the importance of learning during the interactions, as well as of an anticipated outcome that leads to the joint ownership of goals and benefits (ibidem, pp. 20-21). However, the ENP/EaP framework displayed a vision of partnership as complementary to external governance, so that the normal concern for mutual goals and benefits stands alongside EU’s request that partners develop allegiance and commitment to its norms (ibidem, pp. 27-28).

Portraying itself as a ‘pole of attraction’ . . . or a ‘civilising’, ‘ethical’, ‘normative’ or indeed transformative force . . . to justify its ownership of decision-making and agenda-setting may be constructive for promoting reforms, but incongruent with the principles of partnership-building . . . It promotes what it deems to be valid and ‘universal’ norms, but which are essentially EU-owned and Eurocentric (ibidem, p. 56).

A failure to comprehend the “other” and its “otherness” favours its representation as a threat and leads to a securitisation of EU’s external governance and to a drive to change it, according to your own image. Such an attitude toward the non-EU “other” in the ENP/EaP framework, argues Korosteleva, would lead to its failure (*ibidem*, p. 59).

4. The Eastern Partnership and the Vilnius moment

The perspectives of the Eastern Partnership (EaP) were seriously challenged by the setbacks recorded in the run-up to the Vilnius summit, as Armenia and Ukraine cast doubts over the future of the EaP.

Blokmans and Kostanyan deplore the fact that the final declaration of the summit did not include any reference to Art. 49 of the Treaty of the European Union, which covers enlargement, the official document remaining somewhat vague, though the use of “ever closer relationship” might be read in the Thessaloniki spirit. Pointing out that, in certain respects, the commitments taken by the Eastern partners in the Association Agreements (AAs) are more advanced than those operating in the Western Balkans, the authors argue that the EU should open its doors to the Eastern European partners (EEP) (Blokmans and Kostanyan, 2013, p. 2). In an earlier piece, written before the Armenian and Ukrainian defections, Kostanyan had illustrated the difficulties which a “maximalist scenario” – granting the prospect of EU membership to the EEPs would have to face. At the current stage, several member-states opposed any perspective of such an enlargement, but their positions might, however, change in time (Kostanyan, 2013, p. 2).

A membership-lite or associated membership alternative might prove attractive for certain EEPs, writes Kristi Raik, since they are far from ready in terms of the criteria for enlargement. “However, the option of having to implement EU rules without taking part in their creation is hardly tempting, unless it is an intermediary phase on the path towards full membership” (Raik, 2013, p. 23). In fact, given the conditionality the EEPs are submitted to – which is comparable to the one applied to the candidates for enlargement – the EU has already created “an exclusive model of differentiated integration” (*ibidem*, p. 24). In time, a decision should be taken regarding the EEP’s prospects for accession, which currently lacks enough support from the member states.

The impact of developments taking place in the EU itself over the dynamics of the EaP should be taken into account, argues Rafał Sadowski, pointing to the consequences of a possible multiple-speed Europe: the issue of enlargement would lose much of its relevance, accession might become easier for outsiders, but membership would be less meaningful and beneficial for EEPs. Consequently, both the elites and the general public would become less willing to pursue significant reforms (Sadowski, 2013, p. 44). His general conclusion is

that the EaP has failed to foster sufficient change in the partner countries, and that the bureaucratic structures developed within its framework are not able to respond to the changes taking place in both the EU and the partner countries (ibidem, p. 47). Another major limitation of the EaP process lies in the fact that the public opinion in the EEPs has not yet received tangible benefits, which would create societal pressures towards reform.

Olaf Osica sees the EaP as “an emanation of European soft power” and suggests that it possesses a geopolitical dimension, as it “has become a tool with the potential to violate the economic, and hence political, *status quo* in the common neighbourhood of Russia and the EU” (Osica, 2013). A strong offer for the EEP is needed, including the abolition of visas and other measures, including steps that would foster society-to-society relations. In the more distant future, the EaP might open the door for enlargement.

Peter Munk Jensen argues that a reconsideration of the EaP is necessary, after the Vilnius summit, in order to avoid the unravelling of the entire instrument. As there is a notable divergence in terms of outcomes, and only two out of six countries are prepared for a stronger relationship with Brussels, Jensen suggests that the EaP be replaced by individual agreements, adapted to the needs and wishes of the EEPs. “The current situation is not tenable, as it implies the risk of ending up with a new division of Europe” (Jensen, 2013).

In an opinion piece published by EU Observer, Forbrig writes that the setback in the EU-Ukraine relationship had three concurrent explanations. At an individual level, the tactics of President Yanukovich and his dual game with Brussels and Moscow prevented the signature of the AA. The second point refers to the time frames with which the two sides operated: the reforms required by the European Union offer long term positive effects, but bring about serious costs, in the shorter run; on the other hand, the Kiev government needed short term benefits, for both economic and electoral reasons. Finally, “the EU has been slow to respond to the new geopolitical competition over the eastern neighbourhood, into which it is being drawn by Russia” (Forbrig, 2013). His recommendations include engaging directly with the EEP societies and enhancing people-to-people contacts, but also mobilising a much larger financial and institutional support – similar to the one that accompanied the Eastern enlargement.

Rejecting the “geopolitical catastrophe” thesis relative to the Vilnius outcome, Popescu suggests that serious challenges lie ahead for Moldova, Georgia, as well as for Ukraine – which in fact “chose not to choose” (Popescu, 2013, p. 1). On the other hand, the EU would be well advised to treat these countries as if the AAs were already in force. Other issues, such as the liberalisation of the visa regime for the countries that meet the conditions, would be helpful in building domestic support for the pro-European choice (ibidem, p. 2).

Similar proposals regarding the temporary application by the EU of certain trade concessions included in DCFTA after signing or initialling the agreement are included among the recommendations of a paper published by the Eastern Europe Studies Centre in Vilnius (Kasčiūnas *et al.*, 2013, p. 7). The effectiveness of the EaP would have a lot to gain if association were treated as a stage in the EEPs evolution towards full integration, with the possible introduction of transitional intervals on the road, in order to delay accession (*ibidem*).

A rather pessimistic view of the EEP elites and their commitment to change can be drawn from Stefan Meister's article for the European Council on Foreign Relations (Meister, 2013). Lacking sufficient commitment for the implementation of the rule of law and other norms promoted by the EU, the elites should not be treated as EU's partners for modernisation; instead, EU assistance should target civil society, and a productive dialogue must involve the ordinary citizens. "The EU must realise that sustainable reforms demand the involvement of wider society, longer-term engagement, and high implementation costs" (*ibidem*). As far as Russia is concerned, the EU must not grant Moscow any right of veto over its policies in the Eastern Neighbourhood, but should maintain a framework for discussions (*ibidem*).

The polarisation of the Russian and EU positions on the EaP is detrimental not only to their bilateral relations, but also to Ukraine, writes Peter Havlik, since both trading partners are equally important for Kiev (Havlik, 2013, p. 7). He argues that the AA/DCFTA would bring Kiev long term benefits, as the economy would undergo a process of modernisation and would prove more attractive for Foreign Direct Investment (FDI). However, the EaP is deemed to be a failure (*ibidem*, p. 4)

Alexei Sekarev concludes that the EU has not succeeded in making the EaP attractive to Russia, and pleads against the "either-or" approach, which is detrimental to the EEPs (Sekarev 2013, p. 32). Commenting on the Armenian decision to seek membership in the Customs Union, and on Ukraine's decision not to sign the AA, Sekarev highlights the fact that, while the orientation toward the EU had been thoroughly prepared, these decisions lacked proper impact assessments and concludes that weak institutions tend to generate weak policies (*ibidem*, pp. 32-33).

Delcour and Wolczuk explain that, in its relations with the EEP, the EU offered templates for reform that raised serious difficulties for implementation: "Regulatory approximation with EU *acquis* in the Eastern neighbourhood is a costly and challenging proposition. It requires bearing upfront political and economic costs and embarking on challenging reforms in pursuit of probable long-term benefits from modernisation" (Delcour and Wolczuk, 2013). They argue that the EU's strategy has been designed "with internal lenses", overlooking the specific situations of the EEPs, including their ties with (and

dependence on) Russia. A differentiation within the EaP will be necessary in the future, leading to more flexible frameworks of cooperation (*ibidem*).

Several of the arguments illustrated above can be found in a study elaborated just one year after the launching of the EaP (Boonstra, Shapovalova, 2010). The terms offered by the EU are too vague and cannot provide sufficient incentives for reform. The EU assistance is directed mainly toward governments, while civil society actors receive too little support (*ibidem*, p. 12). Security remains a major concern for the EEPs, but the EU cannot offer short-term solutions: “[S]o far, the EU is a weak actor in terms of promoting security in the region” (*ibidem*, p. 13). Finally, stronger incentives – leading up to eligibility for accession – are needed if conditionality is to work in the region.

However, the current stage of the EaP has not brought about the expected changes. Nielsen and Vilson provide a critical account, from the perspective of soft power: the European Union was not able to effectively project its power in the Eastern neighbourhood (Nielsen, Vilson, 2013, p. 430). The perspective of enlargement would have been an important source of soft power in the whole region, and its presence would have given more credibility to EU conditionality (*ibidem*, pp. 430-431). The EaP framework deals primarily with governments does not pay too much attention to the civil society and to the alternative elites that might generate pressures for domestic change. The EEP citizens have not yet received tangible benefits, especially since the visa regime has not yet been liberalised, while the funding directed towards the EEP is insufficient (*ibidem*, p. 431). Last, but not least, divisions arose within the EU regarding member states’ bilateral relations with Russia and with certain Eastern partners, which negatively affected the EU’s ability to wield its soft power in the Eastern neighbourhood (*ibidem*, pp. 432-433).

5. Conclusions: a need for a smart power Europe in the Eastern Neighbourhood

By avoiding the simplistic assimilation of hard power with military power and by taking into account Nye’s suggestion that any relationship involving payments has a hard power component, one could gain a new understanding of EU’s action towards the Eastern neighbourhood, in particular towards the Eastern Partnership. Most of the objections and criticisms expressed by the experts quoted in the preceding section could be met if the EU’s strategies in the region were more effective – that is, if they created a better mixture of hard power and soft power.

While the EU is propagating its values and exporting its norms in the region, neither “civilian power” nor “normative power” can account for the actual process by which these norms are transmitted to the Eastern partners. On the other hand, the concept of EU external governance relies on conditionality

and includes elements of (economic) hard power. In this sense, there is a need for a Smart Power Europe.

There is an obvious need to define the goals of EU's interaction with its Eastern European partners. Milieu goals are important, and Europe's soft power has contributed to their pursuit, but the EU needs to define and improve its concept of partnership, as well as to decide, in the future, on a possible new wave of enlargement.

The European Union must also redefine its goals relative to Russia, the other major regional player. Geopolitics has been a relatively weak point in its approach in the Eastern neighbourhood.

Combining hard power and soft power strategies would probably lead to a less integrated approach, heavily influenced by the peculiarities of each EEP, but there is a need to devise new policies to deal with the weak states and defective democracies in the region.

The mixture of hard and soft strategies would lead to different policy constellations, but offering tangible support to the civil society organizations. The societal pressure exerted on the EEP governments by the civil societies would be a helpful complement to the inter-governmental front of the bilateral relations.

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