

The EU's Eastern Partnership: normative or geopolitical power projection?

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Abstract

This paper examines the European Union's Eastern Partnership (EaP) initiative through the lens of theoretical debate between constructivist and rationalist approaches with a specific focus on the normative and geopolitical dimensions of the EU's power projection in a specific region. In doing so the paper aims to determine whether the initiative is a pursuit of the EU's interests in the post-Soviet area and an attempt to weaken Russia's traditional great power potential in the region or a policy to enhance regional stability through the promotion of fundamental European values which serves as a framework for democratic institution-building in partner countries. This paper argues that the EU's ambivalent actorness in this particular post-Soviet region, which is shaped both by value considerations and self-interest concerns, while lacking a strategic coherence, constitutes a fundamental reason behind a policy failure.

Keywords: European Union, normative power, geopolitical power, Eastern Partnership, value-based transformation, post-Soviet countries

1. Introduction

The European Union's (EU) eastward advancement has significantly changed the security environment and has brought an end to the post-Cold war configuration of relations with Russia further splitting divergent approaches to the shared neighbourhood. Since the eruption of the Ukrainian crises and Russian military intervention with subsequent annexation of Crimea in early 2014, the EU's Eastern Partnership (EaP) initiative aiming to bring six former Soviet countries closer to the European order has become one of the most debated policy initiatives. The focus of the debate is about an urgent need to revamp the underlying idea and mechanisms of Europe's attempt to shape its eastern neighbourhood through political and economic association based on the principle

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of political conditionality. This, in turn, implies a need to reconsider an applicability of “normative” power projection concepts in this particular region. Accordingly, in this paper, we explore the EU’s Eastern Partnership policy through the lens of theoretical debate between constructivist and rationalist approaches with a specific focus on normative and geopolitical dimensions of the EU’s regional power projection. We aim to determine whether the initiative is a pursuit of the EU’s interests in the post-Soviet area and an attempt to weaken Russia’s traditional great power potential in the region or a policy to enhance regional stability through promotion of fundamental European values which serves as a framework for democratic institution-building in partner countries.

The main assumption we develop in this paper is that the absence of a clear balance between the EU’s geopolitical interests and its core values resulted in a failure of its EaP initiative as a value-based transformation project as well as an interest-laden geopolitical power projection. From this perspective, it is important to emphasise that though in the context of the initiative, a certain level of political dialogue has been reached between the EU and six partner countries, in reality, most of the targeted reforms are inadequate, particularly in terms of democratization and ensuring the rule of law. After the Ukrainian crisis, the limits of the EU’s transformative power capacity have become more evident; regardless of the EU’s normative and structural efforts in the region, political systems in partner countries have become increasingly unstable (Ukraine and Moldova), authoritarian regimes have gained more strength (Azerbaijan and Belarus). On the other hand, the EU’s rationalist attempt to attach these countries to its own area of economic influence through the Association Agreements (AA) and Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreements (DCFTA), which in turn means their estrangement from Russia, has created new division lines instead of avoiding them since the partner countries have been forced to choose between two integration projects meaning two geopolitical actors. Consequently, the EU has also failed to ensure stability and security in the region which was clearly illustrated by the case of the Ukrainian crisis. Therefore, we suggest that this failure in its core is a consequence of the EU’s ambivalent actorness in the post-Soviet region, which is shaped both by value considerations and self-interest concerns while lacking a strategic coherence.

In this paper, we will proceed in the following three steps. First, we will introduce rationalism and constructivism as two opposing approaches to study the EU’s regional actorness. Second, we will give a brief summary of the content and implementation mechanisms of the EaP initiative per se. Third, we will take a closer look at some important institutional and geopolitical challenges for the EU’s aspiration to Europeanize the region. This section will include the detailed examination of the inadequacy of the incentives offered for transformation and limits of political conditionality policy which, in conjunction with internal political weaknesses in partner countries, considerably retard democratic

transformation in the region as well as hinder the EU's "normative" power projection.

2. The EU's regional actorness: contrasting rationalist and constructivist approaches

The ability to influence the outside world is one of the essential characteristics of an international actor. From this perspective, there is a differentiation between "presence" and "actorness" in international relations. While the notion of "presence" in international relations refers to the ability to influence due to certain characteristics such as territory, population, economic strength etc., "actorness" implies the purposive ability to influence through shaping the perceptions and expectations of others (Koops, 2011, p. 128). In a policy discourse, there are three lines of thoughts concerning the EU's international actorness: one of them questions its collective foreign policy actorness per se; another claims its distinctiveness from traditional international actors which emanates from autonomy it enjoys in making its own rules and laws (Wunderlich, 2008, p.15); the third line insists that although the EU constitutes a powerful model for the rest of the world, which enjoys a significant "presence" in international relations - "most neighboring countries wish to join it rather than balance or resist it, and other regional groupings around the world seek to emulate it" (Smith, 2014, pp. 104-109) – it falls short to convert its "presence" into a strategically assertive "actorness" in the regional system. In other words, while conceived and analyzed as a new (post-Westphalian or neo-medieval) type of political and economic entity (Zielonka, 2006), the EU's presence in the international arena has not reached the level of coherence actorness yet.

In a theoretical discourse, there are also two radically opposing approaches to the EU's actorness – the constructivist (liberal-idealist) understanding of the EU as a "normative" or "civilian" power and their rationalist (neo-realist) critique. Before examining this division in conjunction with the EU's actorness, we will briefly define the notion of constructivism and rationalism in international relations.

A plethora of definitions of constructivist and rationalist approaches as well as various attempts to reconcile them within a single explanation has been developed in the international relations theory. In its roots, constructivism contains assumptions similar to the ideas of English School of international relations. It offers to consider international relations as a society of states at the international level in which states, despite being involved in a power struggle in an environment of anarchy, are substantially constrained by common rules and institutions, moral imperatives and legal norms (Murray, 2015, pp. 1-3).

Constructivists are convinced that ideas, rather than material capabilities, generate the process of international politics. Alexander Wendt delineates two

basic assumptions of constructivism: “structures of human associations are determined primarily by shared ideas rather than material forces, and the identities and interests of purposive actors are constructed by these shared ideas rather than given by nature” (1999, p. 1). Therefore, constructivism is an approach based on the assertion that the environment in which states act is rather social than material. States articulate and pursue their interests within this socially-constructed rather than rationally-predetermined reality. From this perspective, international relations are based on certain socio-cultural factors and identities which, in turn, define states’ interests (Jackson and Sorensen, pp. 168-172).

Unlike constructivism, rationalism subsumes a number of theories such as neorealism and neoliberal institutionalism. Thus, as a broader approach, it includes theories emphasising the rationality of actors as their main defining characteristics and asserting the dominance of material over ideational factors in international relations. While for constructivists, ideas constitute a major factor in international relations and social actors’ behaviour is rule-guided, rationalists maintain that social actors are primarily concerned with maximizing their material self-interest and therefore, their behaviour is strategic (Risse, 2005, p. 148).

From the perspective of this theoretical division and referring to Arnold Wolfers’ definition of “possession goals and “milieu goals”, it is relevant to distinguish foreign policy objectives between those based on values and moral principles, and those that are formed in accordance with the material and strategic (non-normative) interests. “Possession goals” are primarily associated with national and strategic interests. Guided by them, states intend to preserve or strengthen “material values” (such as territorial integrity and sovereignty) and seek to obtain certain advantages in the realm of economy, energy and military security. The main characteristic of “milieu goals”, in turn, is to shape conditions beyond own boundaries and transform the environment the given actor exists in rather than to defend or increase its possessions (Wolfers, 1962, pp. 67-80). Despite the fundamental differences in the nature of milieu and possession goals, many authors indicate that there is no strict separation between the two. Milieu goals sometimes contribute to the implementation of possession goals or states may use them to cover certain strategic purposes. Various efforts undertaken under the banner of democracy and human rights, for instance, can be designed to ensure energy and military security or to establish control over a given strategic territory. An aspiration to shape the regional or international environment according to one’s own vision and normative order, therefore, may be directed by such a fundamental motivation as ensuring own security and survival.

How can we explain and understand the EU’s regional actorness from the perspective of the aforementioned theoretical division? According to the constructivist understanding, the EU’s regional actorness emanates from a certain system of values and principles which constitute the essence of European identity and defines its foreign policy objectives. The EU’s normative nature is also

stipulated in the founding treaties which assert that “in international relations, the Union should be guided by and would seek to spread the values upon which it is founded – democracy, human rights and the rule of law” (Treaty of Lisbon, article 21). The dramatic historical experience of world wars strengthened a common belief in Europe that these principles constitute an absolute value which defines the Union’s external borders and, at the same time, should be projected to the outside world.

Since the beginning of 1990’s, the EU’s milieu goals have been focused primarily on Central and Eastern Europe. After the enlargement process, the EU’s aspiration to shape its external environment concentrated on neighbouring post-Soviet countries as well as on the Mediterranean, the Maghreb and the Middle East. The European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) and numerous partnership initiatives within its framework, including the EaP, have become a concrete embodiment of the EU’s aspirations to reshape and reorder its close proximity, in other words an actualization of its milieu goals. Therefore, the promotion of European values and norms constitutes one of the most important dimensions of the EU’s identity and its international and regional actorness. Such understanding of the EU’s actorness is conceptualized by Ian Manners as a “normative power Europe”. By introducing the idea of normative power, Manners asserts that the EU is determined to shape or normalize the international environment through rules and values rather than coercive military means. The EU’s endeavour to reproduce itself or create an international environment similar to its own order, according to Manners, represents one of its key foreign policy objectives (Manners, 2006, pp. 182-199).

This ontological quality of the EU as a promoter of values distinguishes it from traditional state actors, which are guided primarily by national and strategic interests. As a post-Westphalian political entity, the EU, with its powerful experience of integration and cooperation, is also conceptualized as a “civilian power”. This concept, which is based primarily on the ideas of Francois Duchene (Tocci, 2008, p. 2), asserts that, by using its *idee force* (magnetic attraction), Europe is pursuing the “domestication” or “normalisation” of international relations (Johansson-Nogues, 2007, p. 188). The EU as a civilian power pursues certain foreign policy goals which coincide with such domestication attempts as cooperation and tackling international problems within the sphere of contractual politics, ensuring the rule of law; strengthening democracy and protection of human rights within and among states (Tocci, 2008, p. 7). Thus, for the EU, the best mechanism to pursue its interests is cooperation with and strengthening its neighbours.

While normative power concept represents an attempt to divert attention from empirical aspects of actorness and tries to define “what the EU is”, the rationalist understanding is mainly focused on instruments and capabilities and tries to determine “what the EU does or says” (Johansson-Nogues, 2007, pp. 188-

189). From the rationalist perspective, the “EU’s distinctive international stance and nature including the idea of civilian power is indeed a rationalisation of its weaknesses” (Kagan, 2003, p.104; Hill and Smith, 2011, p. 557). In other words, by promoting a Kantian view of world order, the EU seeks to disguise the inefficiency of its foreign policy instruments and inability to generate a coherent and decisive response to potential threats.

Though the EU’s foreign policy rhetoric is value-oriented, its actual policies, according to another group of opponents of normative power explanation, are guided by vital economic interests and security concerns. Such rationalist opposition considers democracy promotion as an integral part of the EU’s security strategy which aims to stabilize its external borders. Acting as a “force for good”, the EU aspires to create a “ring of friends” – democratic, stable and prosperous countries with efficient governance, sharing European values which in the end objectively serve the interests of European security. In his realist critique of normative power, Adrian Hyde-Price (2006, pp. 222-223), for instance, asserts that normative agenda in the external relations of the EU and its member states always remain a subsidiary concern compared to their interest in security. Consequently, given the anarchic structure of the international system, the EU’s role in world politics cannot be conceived merely as a norm promoter. The EU is a collective actor with a vital concern to ensure its survival in an anarchic international system. The EU’s aspiration to collectively shape its neighbourhood according to its own economic and political interests serves, in the end, its survival concerns (Hyde-Price, 2006, p. 221). Therefore, the EU’s various partnership initiatives to project stability and prosperity to its eastern neighbourhood under the guise of normative and civilian intentions, according to the rationalist perspective, should be conceived as a reflection of its interest to increase economic strength and regional competitiveness.

In the academic literature, there are also attempts to bridge these two opposing approaches considering that material interests and normative principles are always intertwined within the actual foreign policy practices. From this point of view, values can serve as a conceptual prism through which strategic interests are constructed, interpreted and pursued. The pursuit of strategic objectives, therefore, is not necessarily “un-normative” (Tocci, 2008, p. 8). At the same time, values may be formulated and interpreted under the influence of interest. Therefore, the pursuit of interests often goes in parallel with a norm promotion. The altruistic aspirations of the EU to disseminate values to the outside world serve to strengthen its economic power and security. Such a “strategic use of norm-based arguments” as a way to legitimize foreign policy actions (or maintain a collectively esteemed position in the international world) as well as to assert own self-interested preferences, according to Frank Schimmelfennig, reflects the EU’s regional actorness’ specific characteristic (2001, p. 62). Consequently, considering the cases of combination of normative and rational goals in actual

foreign policy (enlargement as well as neighbourhood and partnership policies), it is erroneous to separate pragmatism from altruism in the Union's external actions.

To conclude, it should be emphasized that despite all claims about the EU's distinctiveness as a new type of foreign policy actor, its behaviour cannot be placed into purely constructivist or purely rationalist modes of actions. This is because in practice, both rational considerations (interests) and altruism may play their role in conducting a certain foreign policy initiative. In order to avoid the criticism over a pursuit of strategic interests while positioning itself as a normative power, the EU needs to find the right balance between interests and values within its specific policies and regional approaches. From this perspective, as it is rightly pointed out by Richard Youngs and Kateryna Pishchikova, the EU can indeed act as a rational geopolitical power and, at the same time, remain committed to its norm-based reform agenda towards its external environment. But, to ensure the right balance among two alternatives, the EU must be coherently strategic (Youngs and Pishchikova, 2013).

3. The EU's Eastern Partnership as a regional power projection

The region of Eastern Europe and South Caucasus with its important geostrategic position at the intersection of international energy and communication flows constitutes a significant interest for the EU. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the region faced a power vacuum which caused a range of serious security problems and conflicts with potential impact on the European security and stability. This situation in conjunction with the EU's big bang enlargement, which created not only new boundaries but also new challenges and threats, necessitated a greater involvement of the EU in the region of eastern neighbourhood. In this regard, the EU considers the post-Soviet Eastern Europe countries as a region still in transformation and believes that it can make its own historic contribution to this process. Such an aspiration is accompanied by a belief that transformation should take place in accordance with the EU's normative order and strategic interests. The European Neighbourhood policy (ENP), as a specific value-oriented approach towards contiguous countries, in this regard, has become the EU's strategic response to new challenges. The ultimate goal of the neighbourhood policy as an expansion without enlargement was to create a "ring of friends" on the European borders which can share with the Union "everything but institutions" (Prodi, 2002). Subsequently, recognizing the ineffectiveness of the ENP's single framework of cooperation for completely different countries situated in completely different regions, the EU initiated various subregional cooperation frameworks within its neighbourhood policy. In this context, the Eastern Partnership (EaP), as one of the offshoots of the ENP, has become the EU's main policy initiative in Eastern Europe and South Caucasus which includes

six post-Soviet countries – Georgia, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Ukraine, Moldova and Belarus. Forged by Poland and Sweden, the project was launched in May 2009 at the Prague Summit following the Russian-Georgian conflict and its implications on regional stability.

Aiming to ensure further rapprochement with the EU, the EaP as a foreign policy instrument envisages the acceleration of political association and further economic integration, facilitation of visa regime, ensuring effective governance and energy security. The initiative is designed as a framework for fundamental transformation in the region based on commitments to fundamental values such as democracy, the rule of law and the respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms as well as to market economy and good governance (Council of the European Union, 2009, p. 5). The EaP initiative is based on the “more for more” (or conditionality) approach that implies that those partners that deliver on reforms promoting democracy and respect for human rights will get more support from the EU institutions, including financial assistance (European Commission, 2015).

It should be emphasized that the initiation of the EaP project meant, to some extent, the recognition of these six post-Soviet countries as an integral part of modern Europe which implied the possibility of their acceptance to the EU in the perspective. However, the EaP does not include a membership prospect for the partner countries and merely focuses on forging closer ties and mutual convergence. Therefore, similarly to the case of ENP, the partnership initiative avoids enlargement but at the same time continues it by other means (Haukkala, 2008, pp. 1601-1622).

The EaP envisages advancing relations with these countries through both bilateral and multilateral dimensions. These two tracks of cooperation, in turn, are the main features differentiating the EaP initiative from the ENP. Within the framework of bilateral cooperation, the EU has introduced a new generation of more tailored Association Agreements (AA) which replaced previous Partnership and Cooperation Agreements. These upgraded contractual relations are specifically designed to encompass the needs of each partner country and are aimed to create a strong political bond between the EU and partner countries and to promote further convergence by adapting the EU’s legislation and standards. It provides an enhanced political association, increased political dialogue and deeper cooperation on justice and security issues among parties (European Commission, 2008, p. 4). The EU has negotiated and succeeded to sign the AAs only with Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. In terms of contractual relations with Armenia, Azerbaijan and Belarus, the EU follows a differentiated approach beyond the AA framework.

Countries that succeeded at completing the AA have also concluded negotiations of Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA) which constitutes an integral part of the AA. The DCFTA with these three countries in its turn envisages access to goods and services, a reduction of tariffs, quotas and

barriers to trade, insurance of a stable legal environment and aligned practices and norms (European Commission, 2008, p. 9). The reform process in partner countries within the framework of bilateral cooperation is reinforced through the Comprehensive Institution Building Program which was financed by the European Neighbourhood Instrument.

From the EU's perspective, the existence of shared problems among partner countries demands tackling them jointly in cooperation and exchange of practices. For this reason, the EU in the framework of EaP, introduced multilateral thematic platforms on democracy, good governance and stability; economic integration and approximation to the EU policies; energy security; and mobility contacts between people through visa liberalization (European Commission, 2008). The multilateral track of cooperation and encouragement of direct links between partners despite differences in their foreign policy priorities and existing territorial disputes presents the main novelty of the EaP initiative.

After presenting the technical aspects of the initiative it is relevant to question the essence and actual outcomes of such a policy. The EaP, as an eastern dimension of the EU's attempt to shape periphery, constitutes one of its main instruments of regional power projection and, based on two conceptual frameworks which explain such a policy as a continuation of internal logic of integration, an extension of its security policy. In other words, a process of convergence with neighbouring eastern European countries which replaced the enlargement process is essentially about the implementation of the EU's internal system of rules and practices. Through this way of "external governance", the EU transposes its internal governance externally meaning that parts of the European *acquis* become extended to non-member states (Lavenex, 2004, p. 683). On the other hand, aiming to transform the EaP region through external governance/Europeanisation, the EU seeks to guarantee security and to ensure geopolitical and geo-economic interests. In addition, the EU's eastern policy contains an element of geopolitical competition with Russia over the influence in the region. Nonetheless, the inability of the EU to offer strong incentives for ensuring real democratic reforms in partner countries as well as a lack of relevant geopolitical leverages to counterbalance Russian presence in the same region have revealed the inconsistency of the EU's approach which swings between liberal rhetoric and a realpolitik approach. The inconsistent and incoherent nature of the EU's regional actorness, on its turn, has mirrored on the failure of the EaP initiative.

Despite the significant expansion of economic cooperation, including signing the AAs with three partner countries out of six, an implementation of the EaP, particularly in regard with its normative dimension, has not achieved its declared goals. On the other hand, the EU's aspiration to spread its economic and political influence in the region has encountered Russia's resistance, which perceived such a policy as an interference into its traditional sphere of power

projection. This situation has created new division lines instead of avoiding them since the partner countries were forced to choose between two integration projects meaning two geopolitical actors. Consequently, the EU has also failed to ensure stability and security in the region which was clearly illustrated by the case of the Ukrainian crisis.

From this perspective, in the following two sections, we will examine the roots and reasons of such policy failure in more detail. We will take a closer look at the institutional and geopolitical challenges for the EU's aspiration to Europeanize the region. In doing so, we will examine the inadequacy of incentives offered for transformation and the limits of political conditionality policy. Additionally, we will dwell on internal political weaknesses in partner countries which, on the one hand, considerably retard their democratic transformation and on the other hand, hinder the EU's "normative" power projection. Further, we will examine the Russian factor and intra-European division in terms of necessity of common eastern strategy as two major impediments for the EU to become a "geopolitical" ("rational") power in the region.

4. The EaP as a weak attempt to promote Europeanization

The EU as a model of normative power is founded on a system of values and principles which are placed at the centre of its external relations. Adoption of these values is a key requirement for countries striving to be integrated into the EU and Europeanised. This process of integration through Europeanization concluded with the integration of former communist countries in Central and Eastern Europe. As a result, these countries have successfully overcome the consequences of transition through restructuring their legal and institutional system which extended the scope of European norms and regulations, as well as the space of democracy and freedom.

A long and challenged way of integration based on values and principles has weakened the EU's structural strength and ability to absorb more countries. Hence, since the last enlargement wave, the EU has shifted from integration/enlargement strategy with a precise membership prospect to a new partnership policy based on value-oriented mutual cooperation. In the context of initiation of neighbourhood and partnership relations, the process of "internal" Europeanization has generated "external" effects. Consequently, the notion of Europeanization, which was previously used almost exclusively in connection with enlargement processes and intra-EU integration/governance, has gained an external dimension meaning the extension of the EU's normative influence far beyond its formal boundaries (Schimmelfennig, 2012, p. 10, 18). The expansion of the EU's normative boundaries towards eastern European countries was necessitated by the growing interdependence with these countries which in turn has generated new threats to the EU's security and prosperity. Therefore, the

export of *acquis* to the neighbouring countries is not only a benevolent but a strategic attempt to gain control over political and economic processes through “external governance” (Lavenex, 2004, p. 685).

However, it is evident that the partnership initiative as an external Europeanization has not worked as effectively as democratization through enlargement. Within the context of the normative dimension of the EaP, it is possible to distinguish two groups of challenges which, on the one hand, hinder the EU's “normative” power projection and on the other hand, considerably retard the democratic transformation of partners: first, *problematic issues emanating from the EU* (such as motivation crisis, cooperation with official governments rather than with civil societies and primarily EU-focused approach to partner countries); second, *internal political constraints emanating from the partner countries* (such as resistance of national elites in partner countries to be transformed democratically and inappropriate internal conditions for such democratic transformation).

In the context of abovementioned institutional challenges of the EU's attempt to approximate these countries to Europe, it should be emphasized that through exporting its values, rules and standards, the EaP lacks strong incentives for adopting necessary reforms. Instead of a clear membership perspective in the framework of partnership initiative, the EU offers a vague concept of convergence with partner countries. Consequently, in the absence of an adequate set of instruments to stimulate democratization, a value-based transformation has been perceived by some of the partner countries' semi-democratic and authoritarian political elites as a substantial threat to their power; thus they prefer to focus solely on interests such as security, economic and trade relations, and tend to preserve the current political status quo. Furthermore, the EaP initiative is mainly based on top-down relations. This means that the EU has conducted its value-based transformation policy based on conditionality mainly directly through cooperation with high level government institutions, accordingly, the financial support for this purpose has also been allocated through these top institutions (Wisniewski, 2013). The role and the level of engagement of civil society organization in this process remain secondary. This approach is conceived as a legitimization of authoritarian governments which also contradicts the EU's aspiration to spread its liberal values and democratize the region through the EaP.

With its EaP initiative, The EU has set an ambitious goal to bring partner countries closer to the EU through comprehensively and deeply transforming their political and socio-economic system of governance. This attempt of normative power projection, however, presents an asymmetric model of relations, primarily focused on the European agenda, which significantly limits its credibility in the region. In other words, the EaP, in its institutional design, context and implementation mechanisms, is essentially a EU-centred initiative. A key objective of such a policy is to tackle issues which are urgent and problematic

primarily for the EU itself. As the EU's 2003 Security Strategy puts it clearly, neighbours engaged in violent conflict, weak states where organised crime flourishes, dysfunctional societies or exploding population growth on its borders, all pose problems for Europe (European Council, 2003). While vital for the countries of the region, such issues as peaceful settlement of frozen and active territorial conflicts (Transnistria, Nagorno-Karabakh, Abkhazia, South Ossetia) remain but a secondary question for Brussels. Most importantly, the EU lacks a consolidated strategy for resolution of these territorial disputes. Instead of taking active initiative in this process, the EU prefers keeping it in the framework of other international organizations such as Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE).

In the context of challenges emanating from partner countries, it should be emphasized that a value-based transformation of the region can be successful if there are favourable and appropriate domestic conditions necessary for democratization and political conditionality in each partner country. The success or failure of reformation largely depends on the transformation capabilities of partner countries which include such crucial internal factors as aspiration and political will of the ruling powers and the level of development of civil societies in partner countries. In this context, the six partner countries which share a common Soviet past are weak states – ranging from democracies in transition or electoral democracies such as Georgia, Ukraine, Armenia and Moldova to autocratic regimes or presidential dictatorships such as Azerbaijan and Belarus (Tchakarova, 2013; Gromadzki, 2015, p. 11). Although some of these countries have demonstrated progress in terms of ensuring relatively transparent elections and establishing some fundamental elements of civil society and despite political authorities' declared commitment to European values, these political systems remain weak and unstable and many Soviet system elements such as widespread corruption, absence of respect for the rule of law, human rights violation have not been yet completely eliminated (Silander and Nilson, 2013, pp. 441-458) .

5. The EaP as an incoherent attempt at geopolitical power projection

The EU's failure to produce a balanced and coherent power projection towards its eastern neighbourhood along with institutional and instrumental shortcomings has important geopolitical roots as well. Within this context, we will examine the Russian factor and intra-European division in terms of necessity of a common eastern strategy as two major interconnected geopolitical challenges and key impediments for the EU's ability to become a "geopolitical" ("rational") power in the region of EaP. Additionally, the existence of different geopolitical expectations of partner countries constitutes an important impediment for the EU to converge these countries within a single cooperation framework.

The eastward expansion of the EU and its growing influence in the region of shared neighbourhood within the framework of EaP caused Russia's resistance and counteractions which was vividly demonstrated by the case of Ukrainian crisis. In this context, the region of Eastern Europe and South Caucasus has become a major point of confrontation of two geopolitical centres with divergent projects of creating outer circles. In other words, the EU's EaP initiative as an attempt of geopolitical power projection inevitably collides with Russia's attempt to reconstruct its traditional sphere of influence within the framework of the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU). Russia perceived the initiation of the EaP as an alternative to the further expansion of NATO to the east.

Although, at the official level, it was declared that the EaP initiative was not against Russian presence in the region and that it would be developed within a strategic partnership with Russia, in reality, the EU fell far short in taking into account Russia's historical interests and influence over the region and built its partnership separately rather than in accordance with the EU-Russia strategic cooperation. At the same time, in terms of the current crisis of multilateral relations in the shared neighbourhood, neither Brussels nor Moscow recognizes the possibility of trilateral configuration of relations in the region. In other words, both sides exclude the possibility of partner countries to develop equivalent forms of cooperation with both major players in the region. From this perspective, the EU has developed completely separate foreign policy approaches towards Russia and countries of their common proximity ignoring the objective existence of intertwined socio-cultural bonds and deep economic and political relations in the entire post-Soviet area due to common historical past. The same assumption is true concerning Russia's vision towards the region which ignores the volatility of foreign policy priorities and aspirations of its former allies in the post-Soviet area (meaning Europeanization) which was demonstrated by the Ukrainian crisis and subsequent war on its territories. Therefore, establishing closer ties with certain post-Soviet countries, particularly with Ukraine, at the expense of unambiguously distracting them from the Russian sphere of influence has created an atmosphere of tension in the region which is partly connected with the EU failure to take into serious consideration Russia's geopolitical concerns over its EaP initiative and strong leverages it employs in the region.

Since the current structure of the AAs does not include the possibility to join other integration projects, the region of EaP has been forced into a choice between Moscow and Brussels (Youngs and Pishchikova, 2013; Casier, Korosteleva and Whitman, 2013). In this regard, the EU and Russia, as representatives of liberal democratic and illiberal authoritarian systems, have proposed qualitatively divergent prospects for the countries of shared neighbourhood. By contrast to the EU's target to build a value and norm-based partnership based on a political conditionality, Russia, due to closely intertwined common historical and cultural ties with the region, perceives it as its "own

backyard”. By offering a “simulated” version of economic integration, it does not in fact propose an alternative model of modernization or democratization which seems more attractive for non-democratic and authoritarian regimes in some EaP countries. Additionally, Russia enjoys two major leverages to pressure and distract partner countries from the EU path; trade and energy-related issues and existing territorial conflicts in the region with implicit or explicit involvement of Russia. As a result of such strategy, in September 2013, Armenia opted against proceeding trade-related issues within the EaP and Ukraine’s similar decision at the EaP November 2013 Vilnius Summit brought the country to a political and socio-economic mayhem with a subsequent division of its eastern territories by Russian-backed separatist forces. The same leverage was used in Georgia’s breakaway territories South Ossetia and Abkhazia. In November 2014, Russia signed a Treaty on Alliance and Strategic Partnership with the latter through which Moscow gained significant control over Abkhazia’s military and police forces, its borders and customs services (Devdariani, 2014). This strategic partnership also envisages a possibility of inclusion of Abkhazia into the Russia-led integration process in the post-Soviet area within the framework of the EEU.

The way out of the current crisis in the EU’s eastern policy and in the EU-Russia relations is a necessity to revamp or restructure the EaP initiative and to seek new mechanisms of cooperation with partner countries which also include Russia as an important regional power with its own vision concerning the post-Soviet area. In other words, the EU needs to create a mechanism of coexistence (Krastev and Leonard, 2014). In this sense, the major challenge for the EU is to focus on the cooperation between the EaP and the EEU as two different but equivalent integration projects in the region. The launch of the EEU has significantly complicated the configuration of relations between two major actors in the shared neighbourhood. Neither the Customs Union, which includes Belarus, Kazakhstan and Russia, nor its successor, the EEU, launched by the same countries with the subsequent inclusion of Armenia and Kirgizstan generally envisages a real integration in the region. Both of them are a simulation of the European integration experience since the main objective in initiating such a project is purely Moscow’s attempt to bind post-Soviet countries by ensuring their loyalty. Nevertheless, despite the negative perception of Eurasian integration in the European political establishment, it has become an objective reality of the EU’s neighbourhood which cannot be ruled out by the European leaders. Therefore, in its relations with countries of the region, the EU needs to face this reality and base its approach on inclusiveness rather than competition. Moreover, the gradual process of delegating national competences in trade and economy-related issues to the supranational institutions of the EEU makes it inevitable for the EU to take this new institutional reality into consideration in advancing its relations with the countries of the region. Hence, the creation of an inter-regional

free trade area which would include the member states of the EU and the EEU seems the most effective mechanism for ordering shared neighbourhood.

Another important challenge for the EU's geopolitical power projection and the main determinant of its inconsistency is the existence of fluctuating perceptions and differences in understanding of what should be the essence and perspectives of the EaP initiative among the EU states themselves. As a result, there is a lack of agreement among the EU member states concerning a clear long-term vision of what the endpoint of this approach towards eastern neighbours should be (Gromadzki, 2015, p. 10; Wisniewski, 2013). This applies mainly to the question of how deep the EU should go in its affairs with Eastern Europe and South Caucasus which reveals a discrepancy between foreign policy priorities for "new" and "old" Europe. From this perspective, both in academic debate and policy discourse, there are three opposing lines of thought concerning the perspectives of the EaP, which have been articulated more clearly in the context of the Ukrainian crisis. On the one hand, Central and Eastern European countries support deeper engagement in the region regardless of Russia's concerns and do not rule out the possibility of future expansion by granting a membership perspective to some of the partner countries. They believe that despite ongoing deterioration of the socio-economic situation and the absence of real transformation in partner countries, a consideration of a long term membership perspective is the main determinant of making eastern policy efficient and adequate to the initially declared goals. On the other hand, there is a group of member states which oppose such enhancement of the EU's political engagement in the region emphasizing the need to focus on the Mediterranean. And the other line, which insists that the EU should more seriously take into account Russia's position and interest in Eastern Europe and blames Brussels for underestimating Russia's potential to confront the EU's normative and economic advancement towards a traditionally sensitive for Russia region. They perceive the crisis in Ukraine as a consequence of a geostrategically flawed eastern policy and believe that it has created an arc of regional instability and ambiguity rather than stability and prosperity. For supporters of this line, thus, the EU's priority of stabilizing the common European neighbourhood should inevitably include close cooperation with Russia.

A military aspect of regional security environment also has a growing impact on the EU's eastern policy. One of the main constraints in this regard is the existence of serious frozen and active territorial conflicts between and within partner countries (Transnistria, Nagorno-Karabakh, Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Donbas) with explicit or implicit involvement of Russian military forces which is excluded from the scope of the EaP initiative. The EU's eastern policy does not include conflict resolution mechanisms; it is merely aimed to indirectly provide an appropriate environment for their settlement through promoting democracy, cooperation and improving the socio-economic situation in the region

(Ferrero-Waldner, 2006). Thus, the EU's reluctance to being actively and directly involved in the settlement of frozen territorial conflicts in partner countries and, most importantly, the absence of consolidated strategy and mechanisms for such an involvement in contrast with Russia's military presence in the region considerably limits its power projection capacity particularly in the South Caucasus.

6. Policy recalibration: a shift from normative rhetoric to stabilization priority?

Political uncertainty and multiple crises on the borders of the EU, along with the abovementioned problematic aspects of the EaP have revealed the inefficiency and inadequacy of existing mechanisms for the Europeanization of its close proximity and made it necessary to review the entire neighbourhood policy. Failure of democratic transformation, deepening instability, uncontrolled flows of migrants from neighbouring countries and Russia's increasingly aggressive role in the region constitute the main external threats for the EU's Europeanization attempt. Therefore, in its attempt to revamp neighbourhood approach, including the EaP, the EU's main focus seems likely to shift from democracy promotion to the stabilization of its immediate neighbourhood as an urgent need and key priority.

After the EaP May 2015 Riga Summit, the EU's attempt to recalibrate the entire neighbourhood policy also reveals a gradual shift from "one size fits all" approach to a "differentiation" and "greater mutual ownership" principles. The Union recognizes that not all partners aspire to its rules and standards and that therefore, there is a need to reflect the desire of each country concerning the nature and focus of its partnership with the EU (European Commission, 2015).

According to this new differentiation approach, the EU is virtually abandoning a single set of progress reports on all countries simultaneously. Instead, it offers an individualized monitoring model, focused strictly on the areas of cooperation agreed between the EU and the specific partner country. A more differentiated approach in conjunction with the principle of "more for more" encourages competition between reform oriented partners. Deeper "differentiation" will give increased financial and technical assistance to those partners that have made a significant progress in relations with the EU and signed the AA (Moldova, Ukraine, Georgia). However, in terms of partner countries which do not have a European aspiration and which seek to avoid political and normative conditionality in their political dialogue with the EU, a new differentiation principle in the long term may undermine the EU's normative image and create preconditions for political instability in the region. With this recognition of differentiation between the EU/reform-oriented and the EU/reform-reluctant partners, it is clear that the Union's EaP initiative becomes an

increasingly symbolic framework for bilateral cooperation rather than an instrument for real democratic transformation in the partner countries.

7. Conclusion

The conclusion arising from the problematic institutional aspects and geopolitical challenges of the EU's EaP initiative examined in this paper is its ambiguity at the current state. In other words, the EaP represents a policy which combines two aspects – a geopolitical instrument for competing with Russia in the region and a framework for supporting partner countries' democratization reforms. From this perspective, the EU, on the one hand, strives to attach these countries to the European sphere of influence through the AAs and DCFTA which, in turn, means their estrangement from Russia, on the other hand; the EU demonstrates its aspirations to spread core European values in the region. Though the latter approach has been declared as a precondition for progress in terms of the former, the real state of affairs proves that the conditionality policy did not work. Therefore, in order to ensure success in its eastern policy, the EU should recalibrate it by ensuring better balance between geopolitical interests and values and by starting to build more coherent and “smart” power projection in the region of the EaP.

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