

Europe's neglected east: forging partnership

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The European Union has an uncertain relationship with the ex-Soviet states to its east. A meeting in Poznan under the auspices of the union's "eastern partnership" is a timely moment to examine what Europe needs to do to revivify its engagement, says Gevorg Ger-Gabrielyan.

The European Union's Eastern Partnership programme is a diplomatic initiative that seeks to improve relations with, and consolidate democracy and good governance in, six states in its eastern neighbourhood that once belonged to the Soviet Union: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine.

The programme's Civil Society Forum is meeting in Poznan on 28 November - 1 December 2011 - an appropriate location, both because Poland currently (from July-December 2011) holds the presidency of the European Union and because the European Partnership (EaP) was a joint initiative of Poland and Sweden.

This gathering is of great importance to many people working to advance democracy and civil society in these six states. But its relevance goes wider, and this article - written by a citizen of Armenia - suggests that the states and concerned citizens of the European Union also need to take more account of the world to the union's east and far southeast. To this end, the article outlines the context of the Poznan meeting and makes some substantive proposals about how the EaP might develop constructively in the period ahead.

The interim region

For most former Soviet republics, the transition from Soviet Union to independent democratic states with market economies did not go according to plan. The transition happened relatively smoothly in east-central Europe (including the Baltic states), in great part because the option of joining the European Union was open - even in the most difficult cases, such as the Balkans (albeit the process is incomplete there). The newly independent and liberated states were able to adopt and implement strategies, standards, norms and principles rooted in international, democratic, European experience. In the former Soviet Union, this route - and the clarity of perspective that underlay it - was not possible.

In Russia, the extreme stress of "shock therapy" in the 1990s led the population to consent to the return of authoritarianism. This brought clearer rules of the game - if not the rule of law, fairness or justice. The game was one that Russia historically was familiar with: cronyism, corruption, the unchecked use of power, an economy based on extraction of natural resources, and nostalgia for the great imperial past.

Russia could not find (and still has not found) a clear identity in the new and rapidly changing globalised world. In search of this identity, it is drawn deeper into a clash between its ideology of radical nationalism and the reality of its multinationalism. The permanent wars in the north Caucasus, and tensions between Russians and people of other ethnicities

reflect the problem. The population is shrinking, which in turn increases the worry of nationalists. Now that Vladimir Putin plans to return to the presidency, Russia seems likely to continue the course it has been on from 2000.

In fact, even under Putin's restored leadership, new challenges may force Russia to change. But any change will be slow to alter Russia's geopolitical behaviour, including its fight for influence in its "near abroad" and (when the chance permits) to play a global geopolitical role.

Russia's retreat from eastern Europe is today considered by its leadership a defeat, and the decade following 1989 as one of indecision.

The exception was the war with Georgia in 2008, which signified Russia's desire to return to a more confident and decisive policy in the "near abroad" - though with justification in terms of international law that it still considers important to express.

In other respects, the entire European part of the former Soviet Union entered a sort of limbo, as Russia's indecision towards this region was matched by that of Europe and the United States. The region became a hostage of the Russia-west pendulum. Ukraine, for example, moved from having a pro-Russian government to a "Russia-neutral" one and (after this produced huge discontent) a pro-Russia (or rather post-Soviet) one.

This leaves Europe stuck, not knowing what its policies *vis-à-vis* Ukraine should be. Belarus created its own form of "paternal authoritarianism", and used the Russia-west pendulum to its advantage. The other, smaller states tend to be mired in territorial conflicts which make them manipulable (thanks to the differences between Russia and the west) at present, some beyond hope of serious progress in terms of democracy.

The lost momentum

The Europeans have offered a series of plans to the ex-Soviet states: the Partnership and Cooperation Agreements (PCA), which became incorporated in the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), and then in the more coherent notion of the Eastern Partnership (EaP). In its various guises, the European approach has remained the only geopolitical option for the region apart from what Russia itself can propose.

The fact that the Eastern Partnership is the only strategic alternative may not be so obvious, in that from the European Union's standpoint it is tempting to see the EaP states as merely the EU's eastern neighbours. But they are more than this: they are - and will be more so after the Balkans states enter the union - the "soft underbelly" of the EU. The union will have to learn (similar to Russia) that it needs to make more strategically of the EaP than it has hitherto. If Russia learns faster and makes effective moves, the situation will become even more complex.

The EU needs to accelerate the pace. It took two stages of enlargement (2004 and 2007) for the union - specifically, Poland and Sweden - to come up with the idea of the EaP. The Russia-Georgia war of 2008 was another factor in its creation. If Europe waits for the second stage of Russia's comeback - and marks time by arguing that the Balkans should first be absorbed - it may be shocked by the turn of events.

There is a problem here, for the EaP is not the darling of the entire EU. It was principally an interest of northern European states, though not even among their main priorities. By contrast, “Latin” Europe (particularly France) - which traditionally regards Russia as an alternative pole of its diplomacy - was cautious about encouraging a wholesale shift of orientation by the EaP states from Russia to the EU.

Moreover, after Ukraine’s last elections - even more than after the 2008 war - the momentum of the EaP has slowed. The severe problems of the eurozone have come to occupy much of the EU’s attention, and pushed far into the distance any idea of an equivalent of a “Marshall plan” for the EaP (which had in any case never got far) as an entrance-ticket to the EU. With such little effort, the EU cannot realistically hope to swing the pendulum back from Russia to any great degree.

In this situation, it is timely to ask questions: of the role of the EaP, of the lessons that can be learned from its experience so far, and of what strategy might make it effective and contribute towards moving the region in the direction of stability and fairer societies.

The five messages

In answering these questions, two qualifying factors should be made. First, none of the states in the EaP region is a full democracy, yet all are aware that the European Union itself falls short of the high principles of democracy it preaches. There is corruption in it (which sometimes it brings to the region); it is bureaucratized; it contains different traditions and speaks different conceptual languages to the people in the EaP (for instance, cronyism and political correctness are major issues for the Scandinavian states and perhaps Germany, but less so for the “Latin” states).

Second, if a full-scale Marshall plan is impossible, some elements of it - such as accelerating student exchanges and visa facilitation for young people - are possible. The use of “soft power”, modern and global in its character - of a kind Russia has not been able to develop - would be very welcome. But really to make a strategic difference within a few years, the political will of the EU is needed.

With this in mind, the EU could send five messages to signal its support for the EaP that might encourage the EaP to take the union more seriously:

* France and Germany, and other key EU players - particularly Italy and Britain - share a united interest *vis-à-vis* the EaP

* The EaP is a very specific strategic focus of EU for a long time; it is not going to be over, forgotten or withdrawn any time soon; the EU’s attention will not be diverted inwards or elsewhere because of the union’s various crises

* The newer EU members, thanks to their Soviet-bloc experience, have a special role to play in EU-EaP relations; but they should show their best rather than their worst. Here, the capacity of Germany (incorporating former East Germany) to act as a facilitator is vital

* The standards for ethical behavior at the EU and then the EaP level are set by the Scandinavian states. For instance, if a corruption case is found involving the EU and EaP, the Scandinavians are good candidates to play a lead role in investigation and adjudication

* The EU should avoid transmitting to the EaP any indication that it is not serious about itself and its own future - and to that end the union must resolve its internal problems decisively by bringing politics and economics into institutional alignment.

The civil-society role

These messages are only the start of the process. They must be followed by practical steps. Here, the European Union must understand that where its “democracy assistance” is concerned, the ex-Soviet world has a great capacity to fake results - and the EaP itself is a good learner in this respect.

The inherited capacity has two aspects: the Potemkin village (which became both a means of survival and a value system in the gulag era) with its tendency to present a picture where the work has been done without actually changing anything; and the shadow or black economy, which has so penetrated the post-Soviet system that no word of any post-Soviet government official whatsoever should fully be trusted.

The fact that assistance from the EU is channeled mainly through the governments creates fertile grounds for the reproduction and even strengthening of gross “fake success” stories. The empowerment of independent civil society is the best way to avoid this - for the latter is best able to monitor, challenge, criticise, publicise, and investigate governments; create and implement alternatives; and distinguish fake from real work. The double benefit of civil society is that it can change minds via increased networking and cultural-educational interaction, and check and counterbalance dishonest states.

But civil society has its own problems. It is not fully formed (though stronger now than it was). Even more seriously: *there is also a fake civil society*. The governments of the region are smart, with great survival skills. They realised around ten years ago that civil society is becoming the buzzword of the new globalised social networks, and capitalised on that (partly as a way also to absorb western money) - and initiated hundreds, if not thousands, of fake NGOs. Civil society is and should be unruly. But under the EaP this has an additional sense: fake civil society part uses this genuine reality to inject chaos and expand its power.

Even so, the idea of the EaP to create a Civil Society Forum (CSF) has proved timely and valuable. The most important thing about it is that while civil society is of its nature usually ungovernable, the EU manages the CSF tightly, allows for feedback, and helps to sustain its positive momentum. If that can continue and be turned into a qualitative difference, then some definite advance will take place and the entire EaP project could escape its current dead-end.

The seven recommendations

In order to address these issues, I would make five recommendations:

- * the EU should continue to manage and control the CSF structures, based on clear and transparent criteria, while leaving freedom for ideas to flourish and for participation to enrich the discourse

- * This could be done by introducing a serious annual civil-society audit for the EaP, similar to the global corruption, human rights and freedom of expression audits that other institutions operate. This would be need to be deeper than the existing Civil Society Index (which is useful, but does not distinguish the fake civil society from the real one)

- * After these two recommendations are implemented, democracy assistance should be delivered only to states fully under the supervising eye of civil society

- * Civil society should be supported independently of connections with state structures, with the EU Civil Society Facility and other funding tools tailored to that need. Civil society should undergo a very tough periodic audit - and only those who pass that audit with high marks should be validated or awarded a grant

- * The EU should attempt to conceive the relationship between all the existing states in the region as a single geopolitical unit, at least in aspiration. To make this a functional reality will obviously be difficult, but even to consider them in terms of their common interests and problems would be a step forward in understanding what kind of policies could lead to real improvement across the many borders. This might unlock further possibilities for joint agendas on the part of various EU/EaP configurations, with the ultimate aim of building a joint geopolitical identity of EaP (perhaps on the model of the Baltic states or Visegrad states).

- * The building of this geopolitical entity should go hand-in-hand with encouraging civil society network building of EaP states with Russia and Turkey under the auspices of EU, two regional superpowers with whom EU has a special relationship and who play a huge role in EaP region.

- * The EU should encourage and support civil society work in the break-away regions: via building civil society networks across the conflict divides, it will be possible to increase the level of stability and preventive structures for conflicts not to deteriorate further, which in turn will create grounds for democratic advance.

There is much that could be done to revivify the EaP. But to do any or all of these, the political will of the European Union is vital. A good way for it to increase its credibility in the EaP states would be by rewarding evidence of genuine reform with increased support, both financial and in terms of opportunities in the international arena; and conversely, by withdrawing support from states that fail to demonstrate advance, particularly in the reform of its elections and juridical systems. But to avoid the danger of a backlash and hardening of attitudes in the latter case, civil society should continue to receive any money denied to states. This is how the slogan of 'more for more and less for less' should be reconceptualized.

The Potemkin village is an infectious thing, and Europe can easily be infected by it. There are many examples of people from the EU coming to work in embassies or international organisations in the EaP states and becoming corrupt, financially or mentally.

This is a difficult time in the EaP countries. There are many social and economic problems, which make it both harder and more essential for civil society to become a positive alternative to careers in corrupt authoritarian or business systems. The European Union has the capacity to offer that alternative to the fullest. It should use the best tools at its command, not least to avoid a regression in which the more likely outcomes include de-development, new wars, revived authoritarianism and restored Russian influence. If the EU and the Eastern Partnership understand the stakes they are involved in, they can still make a real and positive difference.