The EU-Russia relations and the Eastern Partnership

When analyzing EU-Russia relations in the past decade, we can observe two general patterns. First the relationship is dominated by crises. The gas crisis between Russia and Ukraine in January 2009 led to a level of mistrust within the EU about the reliability of Moscow as an energy supplier unheard of since the depths of the Cold War. The crisis between Russia and Georgia in August 2008 led to a war that stoked fears about aggressive expansion plans from the Kremlin that Europe also hasn’t experienced since the Cold War. The debate about the positioning of a missile shield by the United States in Poland and the Czech Republic led to reaction by Russian President Dmitry Medvedev to station Iskander missiles in the Russian exclave of Kaliningrad.

The second pattern is that no progress for improving EU-Russia relations – despite all the good will and recommendations – seems to be achieved. As a result of the aforementioned crises, negotiations about a new Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) between the Russian Federation and the European Union have been temporarily suspended. Cooperation in the energy sector is marked by bilateral agreements for instance between Moscow and Berlin upsetting Warsaw. And although the initial missile shield programme ended with the presidency of George W. Bush, a solution that is acceptable for all involved parties has yet to be found.

Both patterns – crises and stalemate – could also be observed in the institutional set up of the European Union and the Russian Federation. While there have been different attempts to solve these problems, this inevitably influences the foreign policy towards the direct neighbours of Brussels and Moscow. With the Eastern enlargement of 2004/2007, the EU now shares a border with countries in the Near Abroad\(^1\) of Russia. With the launch of the Eastern Partnership (EaP) in 2009 Brussels is now targeting six countries of the former Soviet Union – Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine – with an initiative especially designed within the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP). Different priorities within the EU towards the ENP (South vs. East) and the long and difficult process of the implementation of the Lisbon treaty on the EU side and the struggle for a way out of the post-Soviet crisis and the search for a place in the international system on the Russian side, led to a

\(^1\) This term is mainly used by Russians to refer to the former Soviet states that emerged from the collapse of the Soviet Union in the CIS area (cf. Oliker et al. 2009: xv).
difficult situation in the vicinity of both partners that will remain a big challenge for the next years.

The examples for the problems within EU-Russia relations already indicate that there is distinction to be made between economic and political relations as well as relations on the EU level and the bilateral relations between the Russian Federation and the member states (cf. Stewart 2009: 126). This problematic relationship has been analyzed in many publications (Gomart 2008, Leonard/Popescu 2007). The Eastern Partnership also has been the topic of several publications from a EU perspective (Łapczyński 2009, Schäffer 2010) and in the context of EU-Russia relations (Semenij 2010, Stewart 2009). This paper will therefore focus on institutional developments in both the European Union and the Russian Federation. This will explain the difficult relation between both partners and the results will be applied to the current developments in the Eastern Partnership. I will argue that the development – economically and politically – in the target countries of the EaP is also beneficial for the Russian Federation and therefore could improve the relationship between Brussels and Moscow. In order to achieve that, the Kremlin must give up its zero-sum thinking in its Near Abroad while the EU needs to better communicate its aims in that area and its desire for cooperation with Russia.

**Current state of EU-Russia relations**

The past decade has been an extremely difficult one for EU-Russia relations. Although undoubtedly progress in many fields like trade, energy or visa facilitation has been achieved, institutional development of both partners led to an increasingly difficult relationship. The strengthening of the state after the election of Vladimir Putin as president and the resulting new self-conception of the Russian Federation had a considerable influence on Moscow’s foreign policy. As a consequence thereof, old patterns from the Cold War found their way back into the Kremlin. *Spheres of influence* became again important in Russia’s relations with it neighbouring countries. With the Eastern enlargement in 2004, the European Union now shares a border with several countries in the very centre of those spheres, like Ukraine or Belarus. How serious Moscow takes these spheres could be seen during the war with Georgia in August 2008. It was unnecessary for the Russian troops to march within 50 km of Tbilisi to protect their citizens in South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Nevertheless, the Russian government wanted to set an example. As a consequence, the negotiations for a new Partnership and Cooperation Agreement between the EU and the Russian Federation have been suspended
only a few months after the old one expired in 2007. Although the negotiations have resumed and several rounds took place, until now a conclusion cannot be foreseen in the near future. The gas crisis between Russia and the Ukraine in January 2009 and the resulting shortening of supply to (South)Eastern Europe put EU-Russia relations to another test. In May 2009 the EU started an Eastern dimension of the European Neighbourhood Policy with the Eastern Partnership, excluding the Russian Federation because of the explicit will of Moscow not to be part of the ENP. Nevertheless the EaP deals exactly with the aforementioned sphere of influence.

Additionally, different priorities between the EU member states divide Europe when it comes to relations with the Kremlin and the Eastern neighbourhood in general. States like Poland or Germany are more oriented towards Russia, although with different approaches. While Berlin has rather close ties to Moscow not only because of the common pipeline project in the Baltic Sea (North Stream), Warsaw is currently trying to normalise relations with the Russian Federation after the Kaczynski years. France, on the contrary is traditionally much more interested in the Southern part of the ENP and was the driving force behind the creation of the Union for the Mediterranean.

**Internal uncertainty leads to external stalemate**

The most crucial aspect however is not the lack of a coherent approach. The often neglected fact that the EU didn’t have a clear institutional framework until the ratification of the Lisbon treaty can be seen as one of the primary reasons for the difficult development of foreign policy in Brussels. The reason why this factor hasn’t been included in some of the explanations might be the fact that the EU had a functional basis with the Nice treaty. However competences in foreign policy remained very fragmented and only with the entry into force of the Lisbon treaty on December 1st 2009, the position of a High Representative for the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy had been created. Prior to the installation of this post, it was very difficult for external observers and even policy practitioners to determine which institution of the EU is responsible – whether the European Council, the Council of the European Union, the European Commission or in some cases even the European Parliament. Unfortunately, until now no substantial improvement for the foreign policy of the EU and therefore also in the relationship to its Eastern neighbours including Russia can be observed. Reasons can be found in the overall rising euroscepticism among the member countries of the EU and the fact that foreign policy is still seen as one of the core
competences of a nation state. Also, the appointment of the rather unknown Catherine Ashton for the position of the High Representative may contribute to this lack of development. As a result, Moscow still takes advantage of signing bilateral agreements for instance in the energy sector and a coordinated approach by the EU remains unlikely.

Institutional reform has also been ongoing in Russia. One of the results – the strengthening of the state and a more assertive self-perception – has already been mentioned. Within this new self-perception, Russia wants to be treated equally. This is also a reason why Moscow refused to take part in the ENP and is therefore also not a target country of the EaP. The implications for the EU-Russia relations will be further elaborated in the next paragraph. The institutional changes in the Russian Federation however led to a development similar to the problematic setup of the EU. During the past decade, United Russia became the dominant party in the Duma – the Russian parliament – and Vladimir Putin has been the dominant figure in the political system since his election as president in 2000. Although this development has been a major setback for Russian democracy and leaving aside the potential dangers arising from this, it has been clear who determines foreign policy in the Kremlin. After two terms as president Putin wasn’t, according to the Russian constitution, allowed to run again. In 2008 Dmitry Medvedev won the election and became the third president of the Russian Federation. Although being the candidate endorsed by United Russia and Putin, Western observers set high expectations for a change of the political trajectory since Medvedev was considered a liberal reformer. Although a major change of the political system failed to appear, one development could be observed. The Russian constitution lists foreign policy as one of the core competences of the president. However during the war with Georgia, prime minister Putin, who had been appointed by Medvedev after his election, was the person to travel to the war zone and brief the president about the developments. Throughout the presidency of Medvedev it remains unclear who is making decisions and what can be expected. Recently the speculations about whether Medvedev or Putin or even both are running for president in the next election 2012 have created an uncertainty that makes it difficult for the EU to determine the course of foreign policy of Russia in the future.

**EU-Russia relations in the context of the Eastern Partnership**

This uncertainty and the incoherence within the EU results in a difficult environment to conduct consistent policy towards the neighbourhood of both partners. The initial idea for the Eastern Partnership goes back to a debate shortly after the Eastern enlargement of the EU in
2004. The general idea was that if the target countries Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine were at least formally ready to join the EU in the future, a EU instrument more effective than the rather technical European Neighbourhood Policy ought to be launched. This initial approach was introduced at the General Affairs and External Relations Council in May 2008 through a joint Polish-Swedish proposal. In March 2009, a communication from the European Commission to the European Parliament and the Council evolved into the EaP. The formal launch of the programme took place at a summit in Prague in May that year. The Eastern Partnership can now be seen as the Eastern dimension of the European Neighbourhood Policy and therefore in a way meant to balance the Union for the Mediterranean that includes the Southern neighbours of the EU. Foreseen in the proposal were the provision of new association agreements, including deep and comprehensive free-trade agreements with the EU, assistance to improve the administrative capacity of the addressed countries in order to enhance the fight against corruption, organized crime and illegal migration, and closer cooperation in the field of energy in order to enhance energy security between the EU and the countries covered by the EaP. As an important incentive, visa-free travel is intended as a long-term goal. Thus, the Eastern Partnership goes in some aspects beyond the already existing framework of the ENP. Four thematic platforms have been formed in the meantime\(^2\), however, according to participants of these working groups from the EU, they remain very technical and progress has been achieved only slowly. Additionally, the initiative lacks substantial funding that is not only problematic for the platforms but also for the EaP in general, and bilateral problems between the target countries, e.g. Armenia and Azerbaijan or Georgia and Russia hinder further achievements.

Within the Eastern Partnership, a Civil Society Forum (CSF) has been formed and the first meetings already have been held. The format has considerable potential to promote democratic and market oriented reforms based on shared values, i.e. respect for democracy and human rights, the rule of law, good governance, principles of market economy and sustainable development as conceptualized by the EU. Nevertheless, until now it couldn’t live up to these expectations, as the CSF has been unable to provide substantial influence on the EaP. However the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum seeks a permanent dialogue with the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum. Even when both formats haven’t had a major impact on civil society in the targeted countries, the recent revolutions in Tunisia or Egypt have proven that change has to come from within the state. The EU respectively the ENP has

played only a minor role in the so-called Arab spring and therefore a stronger emphasis on the CSF could be a way to foster democratic development. The EU has only a limited leverage in that field, especially in Russia, with its traditional foreign policy instruments like the ENP due to the lack of a carrots and stick approach as it is the case with enlargement. Within the framework of the EaP, the EU cannot offer institutional participation in exchange for democratic reforms. However, offering the target countries a clear membership perspective, as has been the case for the Western Balkan states, should still be considered. It is obvious that neither the EU nor the EaP countries are ready for it in the near future. The general enlargement fatigue and the pending applications from Croatia, Iceland, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Montenegro and Turkey as well as the potential candidates from the Balkan Peninsula make further prospects very unlikely. Additionally, the aspirations of the countries of the EaP to become a EU member vary to a great extent: from a clearly stated goal in the case of Georgia to no interest at all in the case of Azerbaijan. Nevertheless, offering that perspective can help to support pro-European forces in the target countries and would answer the question if the EU has a hidden agenda in that area. It has to be made clear to both those countries and Russia that this is an open process and not an imperialist expansion of the EU - as the Russian public often sees it. Admittedly, this will not be as easy as it sounds. However, if Brussels is able to communicate that it has no geopolitical interest in encircling Russia, but rather that a politically and economically stable neighbourhood is beneficial for every party involved, progress for EU-Russia relations can be achieved as well. Considering the Russian view of the European Union, that it is a soft power compared for instance to NATO, should enable Brussels to convince that today’s security situation doesn’t require a buffer zone for neither the EU or Russia in their immediate neighbourhood.

**EU-Russia relations reloaded**

Although cooperation between the EU and Russia seems to be rational, a mutual understanding of aims and perceptions is the basis for an improvement of EU-Russia relations. Brussels therefore needs to understand the fears of Moscow that the EaP could be an imperialist expansion to encircle Russia. In return, the Kremlin has to understand that the countries in its vicinity do not have to make a choice either for or against the EU. A stable and economically prosperous region is beneficial for all parties involved. Otherwise Russia risks a further decline of influence in the CIS region. While it might not make a big difference whether Putin or Medvedev will win the presidential election in 2012, an announcement who
will run for office could create a limited amount of certainty for Brussels. But this certainty will be much more complicated to achieve within the EU. Especially in the context of EU-Russia relations and the Eastern Partnership, clear responsibility and commitment is necessary, because Brussels cannot communicate the benefits of mutual cooperation to the Kremlin and the Russian population if it isn’t able to communicate the benefits to its own capitals and people. Therefore, the most important step is to refrain from shifting capacities from the East to the Mediterranean within the ENP in the next multi-annual budget despite the current revolutions in Northern Africa. Furthermore, the member countries of the EU should not focus only on internal problems and projects like the currency crisis or the internal market or otherwise it might just as well lose its influence in the region.

Bibliography


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