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**The Eastern Partnership Project:  
Can Democracy and Security Concerns Be Reconciled at a New Stage?**

*Policy brief by the "The Answer to the Eurasian Challenge for Eastern Europe" project<sup>1</sup>*

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**Taking stock before the Riga summit**

Regardless of what opinions people hold about whether the Eastern Partnership (EaP) project has really been able to make a serious impact on shaping the course of “larger Europe’s” democratic development, it is obvious that after the events of 2014 in and around Ukraine the EU finds itself at a crossroads in its Eastern policy, confronted with a dilemma of reconciling its goals of assisting democratic transition of EaP countries in line with European values with the new security concerns resulting from the crisis around Ukraine. A lot in the EU’s ability to find a way out of this dilemma depends on what happens at the Riga Summit of EaP and immediately afterwards. Stakes are so high that the meeting in Riga has been called by observers a “survival summit”.

The original concept of the EaP project offered by the EU to its Eastern neighbors included the vision of “Europe whole and free.” In 2014 it was confronted by with a fierce opposition from the autocratic Russian leadership, prompted popular uprising in Ukraine against refusal of the previous government to proceed with the EU association process which in turn caused Russian aggression.

On a positive side, the EaP project has created a mechanism of the EU association for the post-Soviet states and a way to transfer the European aquis to the candidate countries. It has made a genuine attempt to involve civil society actors into the process. Three countries – Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia – have signed the Association Agreement. Moldovan citizens are already enjoying visa-free regime with EU.

Unfortunately, while the vision of EaP was attractive on the level of a concept, the means and specific strategies of achieving the ambitious goals of EaP have been largely inadequate and insufficient. The level of engagement from the EU side seems often to be defined by the lowest common denominator as the political will of EU member states towards the EaP project is very uneven, which leaves the EU accession prospects for the EaP countries, even distant ones, unclear, and therefore their motivation to engage on a path of difficult reforms undermined.

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The price of making a clear European choice and escaping the Russian domination has always been serious for the post-Soviet states; it entails a risk of irritating Russia and hence facing strong economic and political pressure from the powerful former empire. The example of Ukraine in 2014-15 has shown that this risk includes now a direct military response, making the costs even higher. Apparently, most of the EaP countries have not seen enough incentive from the EU that would counterbalance potential losses from disassociating themselves from Russia and make this risk worth taking. While the prospect of the EU membership has never been on the table within the EaP policy, many experts believe it should be included there now, due to the current context and in order to create a true leverage over the reform processes in the EaP countries that are often lagging behind or paying only a lip service to the reform promises.

Two strongest failures of the EaP project have been the EU's inability to develop comprehensive and consistent policy towards Belarus and Azerbaijan. This has sent wrong signals to both countries' autocratic regimes and has discouraged societies there.

Obviously, Armenia's decision not to sign the Association Agreement (AA) was a result of strong pressure from Russia and a lack of sufficient incentives offered by the EU. Together with the rigid position of autocratic Azerbaijan regarding the European values, this is a serious loss and a source for continued instability in the Caucasus, given all the frozen conflicts in the region. While there is important homework that the EaP countries have to do themselves, and nobody from the outside can truly make them do it, the EU has not focused enough on addressing these protracted conflicts. No doubt, open instability is fuelled by Russia in the whole EaP region. This should be a reason for a serious debate on new elements in the EaP design, and in particular of new security architecture.

### **“Dances with dictators”**

Will the EaP project continue to be a larger Europe development factor, how countries of different level of progress (or lack thereof) should be treated and what would be the best answer to the “Russian factor” – these are the key questions confronting the EU today in its EaP policy.

The need to revise Eastern Partnership had been discussed even before the post-war order shattering events took place in 2014. Predictably, these events reshaped the whole discussion and shifted its focus. In fact, the present circumstances are a litmus test for the EU and its principles: would it keep to the proclaimed cornerstone of the EaP – advancement in democracy and human rights, as well as to Article 21 of the Lisbon treaty, or will give up to the pressure of circumstances and become “practical” and “realistic” for the sake of short-term stability and attempts to restore security in the continent. Will the EU pursue its own vision (if we admit that such a vision exists) or will it let the Russian factor dominate the agenda and allow itself to “dance with dictators” for the sake of security and business interests?

Indeed, we have been observing “dances” with two EaP dictators – Lukashenko of Belarus and Aliiev of Azerbaijan – for some time now. One is skillfully selling to the EU the fear of Russia and the geostrategic position of his country; another is exploiting the EU's need of an alternative to Russia's energy resources. In Brussels this approach of sidelining human rights and democracy for the sake of security and business interests is increasingly referred to as being “practical” and “realistic”.

Indeed, the temptation to give in to the pressure of a compromise with dictators is quite high. Analysts close to the EU Latvian Presidency were calling right after the EaP Vilnius summit to stand firm on values and principles, but a year later they are suggesting that some sort of an “advance payment” in a form of economic benefits and eased conditionality could be considered as a new approach to the EU policy on Belarus. Latvian foreign minister himself has spoken about some kind of a reward that Lukashenko deserves for his position on the Russian-Ukrainian conflict.

However, giving in on the human rights and rule of law conditionality in these two cases (as in any case) would play directly into Putin's hands, as autocracy is the one of the political goods that Russia is offering as an alternative to the “spoiled Western democracy”. Gaining an autocratic ruler as an occasional and temporary ally means for the EU losing the people of the country and their faith in values different from those imposed by the current regime. It will definitely weaken the chances of democratic changes that are long overdue.

This would also give a bad example to those EaP countries that are undertaking the reforms, currently at a much smaller scale than needed for a successful transition, or to Armenia, which is becoming increasingly authoritarian. Autocracies, resting on personal rule and hard force are themselves a source of instability and uncertainty.

The last but not the least: all the benefits that are given to them unconditionally, the authoritarian regimes do not perceive as advance payment they need to pay back by some progress, but as an ultimate prize for being firm in their position and outsmarting “the weak West”.

### **The Russia factor**

This would also mean that Russian government is effectively influencing the EU policy and its relations with the neighbors by undermining and destroying the values that are seen as a cornerstone, a main attraction for the EaP countries and a basis for EU stability.

Calls to re-negotiate a new security/sphere of influence order with Russia are heard not only in discussions regarding the EaP but also within the OSCE. This is exactly what Russia wants. In the current situation any such negotiations would lead to an official and legal acknowledgment of a division of spheres of influence, leaving no choice for the “buffer” zone countries. The fact that “Finlandisation” of Ukraine is discussed by influential experts in this context is a vivid illustration.

It is not ungrounded to predict that the Kremlin would see this as a new Molotov-Ribbentrop pact, though in a milder form, with no official occupation of all EaP countries but definitely keeping the annexed territories. Similarly, engaging directly with Russia or the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) on the future of EaP would also mean acknowledging these spheres of influencing.

Consequences of such dealings would lead to a catastrophe in the mid- or long term as this would demonstrate that the EaP countries are not equal partners, since the future of the EaP region would be discussed over their heads and without them. Direct engagement between the EU and the EEU would show that EEU is something more real and has more weight than the EaP, and even that it is equal to the EU as an integration project. This would be even more harmful, as two of the EaP countries are also part of EEU, namely Belarus and Armenia.

In short, absence of a future prospect of the EU accession will considerably slow down reforms in the most advanced countries (which are not sufficiently deep and fast even now) and open their ruling elites even to more influence from Russia. For those who lag behind, like Belarus, this would be also a discouragement for civil society and the population at large.

The main issue at stake now is continuation of the whole EaP process and its deepening in the context of Russia's aggression against Ukraine that confirmed that Russia perceives European perspectives of EaP countries as a direct and unacceptable challenge and is doing everything to prevent closer ties of these countries with the EU. Russia should be unambiguously notified by the EU that this process is irreversible and it is upon the EU and in particular the EaP countries how the process will be continuing. EU should send a signal to Russia that in any circumstances Russia does not have a veto to stop or break the EaP process and that the future of EU-Russia relations will to a large extent depend on how Russia will treat the EU associated countries.

Two tracks of the EaP – multilateral and bilateral – allow for different ways of engagement. Bilateral track gives more opportunities for influencing, but also is more demanding, and one of the key issues there is consistency.

The “more for more” principle should be applied to avoid the lowest common denominator approach, in order to stimulate those performing better and show what benefits are being missed by the “underperformers”. We are far from being naive to suggest that missed opportunities will upset Aliiev or Lukashenko (though for the latter any assistance that includes financial reward is important) but the mindset of the people in those countries would be directly affected. We have observed what envy the visa-free regime introduced for Moldova has caused among members of the public in other EaP countries. This is something very real and important for people in all six EaP members.

### **The Belarus dilemma**

This is very true for the EaP worst performer, Belarus, whose population holds the largest percentage of Schengen visas among all EaP countries. This country is a true paradox as, on the one hand, it has a long European tradition, history and modern European ties, and on the other hand, is rightly branded “the last dictatorship in Europe”. Now a number of policymakers shy away from this notion in return for Lukashenko's “position” on Ukraine and his “peacemaking” efforts.

Being supportive to Ukraine in words, Lukashenko is using Maidan as a bugaboo inside the country to justify his “strong hand”. A threat of economic disorder and rampant corruption are also used for internal propaganda, scaring the public away from challenging the autocratic rule by following the example of the Ukrainians.

The Russian factor comes here into play again, as Lukashenko is truly scared and at the same time is skillfully selling the fear of Russia to the EU. He needs rapprochement with the EU now more than ever, and this is a window of opportunity for the EU. Unfortunately, instead of using Lukashenko's need for economic and security engagement as leverage to set more human rights conditionality, it seems that Brussels is ready to weaken its stance. From Brussel's point of view, the recent rapprochement is still below the level to be considered as “normalisation” of relations, but it is enough for Lukashenko to feel safe in the view of the upcoming presidential elections.

He is selling, also in the framework of EaP, a promise of his ensuring Belarus' sovereignty in the context of Russia's imperial ambitions and his support for the sovereignty of Ukraine. This is designed to come in exchange for uncorrected appalling human rights record inside the country to go if not unnoticed by the EU, then less criticized, with no changes made by the regime inside the country. However, it is obvious that the ruler of the country that is completely open to Russian propaganda and has a Russian military base on its territory cannot be a guarantor of security and sovereignty.

Weakened (or absent) conditionality, combined with expanding cooperation would play into the hands of Lukashenka and subsequently Putin, as it would allow Belarus to avoid making reforms and continue suffocating civil society and independent media, which are exactly the two actors which could help prevent Russian economic and ideological expansion.

In any case the EU should not leave behind democratic forces and civil society actors in Belarus. It should be provided that in the case of discussed division of EaP countries into two groups – those that have signed the AA and those that have not – civil societies of the latter would still enjoy all opportunities for engagement in direct dialogue in the EaP framework. They have to be part of the process in any circumstances, as the whole society should be the partner, not just the government. The EU should stand firm on this principle while negotiating with the government and engaging with genuine civil society, avoiding government-organised groups, or GONGOs.

The need to treat the GONGO issue seriously has been demonstrated by the situation in another EaP most problematic country, Azerbaijan. Government-controlled fake NGOs have managed to penetrate the EaP Civil Society Forum and block a number of resolutions criticising the Azeri government.

### **The EU role in the future of Ukrainian transition**

All said above is especially important for Ukraine, as it happened to be the bone of contention between the EU and Russia and a subject for open Russian aggression. Inside Russia, neither Ukraine nor Belarus are seen as real, full-fledged states – unlike Georgia or Moldova. This means that any negotiations regarding the fate of Ukraine excluding Ukraine itself will serve to strengthen this attitude by Russia. The story of Ukraine is exemplary for the EaP countries, as people rose there to defend their European choice, and this choice should be treated with respect.

Ukraine has had to fight the hardest for the European choice among all EaP countries and has suffered the most. This is why it is of paramount importance that Ukraine becomes a success story, both for its citizens and the whole neighbourhood.

Therefore, it becomes even more important that despite the war-time difficulties, the EU pushes strongly for reforms in Ukraine in all key areas, including building strong democratic institutions, reforming public administration, combating corruption, strengthening rule of law, developing market economy and pushing for energy efficiency. Success of Ukraine will largely define success of the whole EaP project. It is also of paramount importance that Ukraine does not allow the Belarus regime to take a “free ride” to Europe on its back without internal changes and that EU does not accept this.

The role of the “new” EU member states in supporting the Ukrainian transition and stimulating changes in Belarus is potentially enormous. These Central European countries bear the most valuable

models and experiences of the post-Soviet bloc transition. These experiences should be taken into account for a design of Ukrainian democratic and economic reforms.

### **Key issues and main challenges**

We believe that (some) of the key issues that the EU faces now regarding the EaP project, being stripped of all political correctness, are the following:

- the EU should not try to get on its side as many partners as possible at the cost of sacrificing its values and conserving the autocratic regimes, like the ones of Lukashenko and Aliiev, even if the rivalry with Russia continues;
- the EU should not try to appease Russia by creating a new security architecture /division of zones of influence and leaving the Eastern partners in some sort of a grey, buffer zone, even the most progressive ones, without any prospects for a future EU membership;
- The EU should not engage in negotiations on the future of EaP directly with EEU above the heads of the EaP countries, as some experts recommend;
- The EU should try to take the path of pursuing real progress in democratic reforms and genuine engagement with the EaP countries by working with civil society and democratic members of the public, considering that a nation as a whole is a partner and not just a government.

The main challenging tasks for the EU at the next stage of the EaP project in general and regarding Belarus and Ukraine in particular are seen by us as follows:

- to formulate response to Russia's threats in the context of EaP;
- to elaborate a model of conditionality for EaP countries on their way to the EU;
- to support the reform process in Ukraine as a core element of the country's association with the EU;
- to formulate the comprehensive EaP policy toward Belarus based on unconditional respect to the EU core values, with involvement of civil society actors and representatives of democratic forces;
- to give special attention to the role of the media and civil society in Belarus in countering Russian propaganda.