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Overcoming European Extremes – Towards One European Neighbourhood

Kiev is an old city and an ageless eastern European centre. Even though its hills are not high, they are high enough to provide a good view on our continent and the threats to its existence.

Today's Europe, as viewed from Kiev, is a space of growing extremes. By 2016 the eastern neighbourhood of the European Union (EU) has turned into a region of intercultural conflicts, interstate wars and authoritarian experiments betraying the bright hopes for continental cooperation, freedom and peace of the early 1990s. The western neighbourhood of post-Soviet Europe has been sucked into the maelstrom of crises that has been testing the EU's institutional and ideological ability to survive, progress and remain faithful to its founding cosmopolitan ideas. The fissure between eastern and western poles of Europe is now being filled by post-communist 'sovereign democracies' with a doubtful allegiance to human rights, civil liberties and European solidarity. The bigger the gap, the more essential it is to mend it, and propose a wise and healing strategy for Europe to become a united, peaceful and progressing region.

In my Kieville opinion, this strategy should soberly assess the long-term tendencies in post-Soviet Europe, the EU's ability and responsibility to be an agent of change in total Europe, and the existing possibilities in the east to rebuild Europe as a politically, socially and economically developing and inspiring continent.

The Ukrainian experience of the last two years of hybrid war, hectic reforms and re-emerging authoritarian perspectives, as well as our experience of the last 25 years of fruitless transition, can teach some lessons which are valuable for the whole of Europe. Our bitter experience may inspire others to value peace, democratic procedures and trans-national pan-European cooperation more than ever before in the post-WWII era.

The EU's eastern neighbourhood

'Oh God, what's wrong with me? Why does nothing ever work out?'

Helen Fielding, Bridget Jones's Diary

In the countries which used to be part of the Soviet Union, the easily comprehensible and predictable world of totalitarian industrial modernity was rapidly replaced by the age of the scare of unpredictable history. At first, the uncertainty of the leap to freedom was welcomed, since it was opening up a space for experiments with the personal and collective life, nation-state building, free market, political and ideological pluralism, business and religion. Mikhail Gorbachev proclaimed Europe to be a 'common home.' Ukraine, Russia and other former Soviet countries joined the Council of Europe and implemented most of its requirements. Back then in the early 1990s, one big Europe from Dublin to Vladivostok seemed a realisable plan.

However, empirical reality made its adjustments to the bright expectations of the experimenters: oligarchy substituted the freedom of enterprise, authoritarianism suppressed civil liberties and intrusive clericalism emerged from spiritual freedom. The early 1990s dreams of modernisation have strangely led to the hastily de-modernising eastern European world of the 2010s.

Here I use the term de-modernisation to denote a number of different tendencies in cultures, societies, political systems and religious life that are inspired by the forms and meanings of the pre-Soviet era. While other parts of the world go on with new forms of collective and private life, former Soviet peoples, after the future shock and disorientation of the ‘wild 1990s’, are wasting time by trying to realise modes of collective life characteristic for pre-industrial societies with respective political regimes and 19th century style nationalisms.

Most of the former Soviet republics today are a group of fragile, repeatedly failing states. Russia, once encompassing the promise of a liberal democratic future, turned into a source of ideological inspiration, economic resources and political models of authoritarianism. A clique of KGB officers dwelling in the Kremlin with very ambitious plans for the Russian Federation and the former Soviet Union region, former ‘brigadiers of Perestroika’ erected despotic regimes in Central Asia and the Southern Caucasus. Belarus got stuck with a nostalgic dictatorship. Putinist Russia and its allies have been promoting an authoritarian agenda throughout eastern Europe.

By 2010 the authoritarian regimes managed to create their own international ‘self-support group’. The Eurasian Union and its informal allies promote superiority of ‘state sovereignty’ over human rights, dominance of tradition over individual, self-sufficiency over European integration. The Eurasian conservative project is a danger not only to the post-Soviet nations, but also to the EU and the West at large.

Among the big and officially recognised post-Soviet states, there is a constantly growing chain of un-recognised, de-facto states. Between 1990 and 2014 every eastern European country participating in the European Neighbourhood Policy and the Eastern Partnership programmes was involved in a territorial dispute over these de facto states. The general population of Nagorny Karabakh, South Ossetia, Abkhazia and separatist Donbas totals up to 4 mln people. Most of these peoples have lived in political, economic and cultural isolation for over twenty years. By today, they evolved into unrecognised nations with a strong Soviet nostalgia and hostility towards the existing western-dominated international order. These de facto states keep post-Soviet European states fragile, limit their chances for decisive change and add to the general entropy and depopulation in the region.

The wave of ‘colour revolutions’ (Georgia, Ukraine, Kyrgyzstan, 2003-2005) and recent civil revolts in Kiev and Chisinau (2013-2016) aimed to reverse the de-modernisation trend. So far, these attempts did not lead to any continuous success. Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova and Ukraine are indeed the ‘weak links’ in the network of eastern European and Eurasian dictatorships. But they did not bring any decisive change into the main trends of the regional reverse development.

The revolutionary attempts to return to the democratic political agenda and launch a more inclusive and socially responsible socio-economic model failed pathetically in the post-Soviet area. We, activists of these revolutions, have managed to inspire our societies and the

neighbouring peoples to try to return to the social modernisation and common European integration plan. What we did not manage is to propose a working alternative neither to our nations, nor to our neighbours. Against our will, our repeated failures decreased the support for a democratic breakthrough in other post-Soviet countries.

Our failures were predominantly caused by the interplay of two factors: suppression from the outside and the betrayal of elites from the inside. The Russian and other authoritarian regimes have been supporting political forces inside the revolting countries to win in the political competition and lead the countries back to the Eurasian agenda. In two extreme cases, the Kremlin used armed forces to launch ‘small wars’ (Georgia, 2008; Ukraine, 2014-15) that caused short- and long-term effects which were destructive for the democratic development of revolutionary countries.

But Georgian and Ukrainian experiences also show that elites that came into power as a result of revolutions and proclaimed ‘pro-European vector’ were eager to abuse Western support. The same happened in Moldova, which missed the revolution, but managed to vote for a European choice peacefully. The post-Soviet power elites learned how to use international aid provided by the EU and the USA to establish their own personalistic regimes, promote their clans’ interests and win in competition with other political and financial groups.

Whichever path has been chosen by post-Soviet nations – desperate revolutionary cycle and/or authoritarian dystopia – it does not come with a local vision and opportunity for a common European future. The real eastern European neighbourhood is now a playground for diverse ideologies, all hostile to freedom, equality and justice. The decline of human, social, economic and political resources in eastern Europe is not helpful for European integration. And the major trends in our region are increasingly dangerous for the existence of the EU.

In this context, European integration remains the only *realistic* democratic and peaceful *alternative*. In absence of trustworthy counterparts in the east, the future of all of Europe depends on the EU and its leaders, whether they want it or not.

Post-Soviet Europe’s western neighbourhood

‘You become responsible forever for what you’ve tamed.’

Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, *The Little Prince*

The nations of the western part of the European continent have profoundly changed their region by abolishing those economic, political, social and cultural factors that caused wars and conflicts in this part of the world. This preventive strategy was realised by creating a number of highly intelligent self-evolving institutions that ensured multilateral super-, inter- and sub-national cooperation between actors in all EU Member States.

From a Kieville perspective, the EU seems to be a self-perfecting set of institutions that has emerged from profound conflicts and historical cleavages that were tearing western Europe apart for many centuries. It can therefore be concluded that, once having solved the crises, the EU will translate its newly gained experience into an institution that makes it continue to function by preventing this specific type of crises. This way western Europe ceased the wars between France and Germany, created one economic zone, and united itself as one educational space with respect for cultural diversity.

In this regard, the paradoxical meaning of Europe, about which Ilana Bet-El (Bet-El, 2016) writes – that Europe ‘is a continent in concept as much as pure geography’ – can be resolved by looking at the EU as an extreme example of making this concept real. Conceptually, Europe is an idea of prosperous peace among nations. Realistically, the EU is an extreme, unprecedented long-lasting attempt to make the peaceful cohabitation of nations a reality.

Yes, nowadays the EU faces an exponential increase of emergencies including, among others, the refugee crisis, the ISIS-inspired terrorism, the Grexit, the Brexit, the Ukrainian crisis and the Russian threat. Each of these crises is an overwhelming challenge for the fundamental goals and values of a united Europe. However, if/when adequately treated, these problematic situations can empower the EU and increase its institutional power (more on this see: Krastev, 2012; Meiner & Veel, 2012). The experience of successful treatment of crises is fundamental for the EU’s existence and progress.

Nowadays this ‘learning from crises’ effect must be used to improve the EU policies vis-à-vis the post-Soviet Europe and the ‘One Europe’ perspective. So far, neither the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) nor the Eastern Partnership policy (EaP) were adequate to deal with the immensity of the problems in the east. The current crisis in eastern Europe must lead to the creation of better, long-term European policies adding to democratic development, peaceful cooperation and pan-European integration.

The new EU policies towards eastern Europe must take into account the defects in its previous regional and country-specific approaches in the framework of ENP and EaP:

- the unforeseen effect of the ENP/EaP provoking inadequate overestimating expectations concerning EU membership in Eastern European societies, while the EU was not ready to propose clear membership perspectives;
- the absence of vision regarding the competition with Russia and the Eurasian Union in the region;
- the lack of adequate policies regarding the territorial integrity of the partnering states in the region;
- the shortage of ENP instruments for country-specific actions in times of crisis.

When the ENP was launched in 2004, it was a somewhat directionless policy with the aim of promoting democracy, socioeconomic development and security. The first approach of the ENP was based on joint Action Plans and Progress Reports with the involved parties. It involved the post-Soviet states Azerbaijan, Armenia, Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova. We must say that the ENP looked at cooperation with eastern European partners without clearly established goals; yet it signalled that Brussels sensed the need to deal with eastern Europe in one way or the other.

In 2009 the EU made a (in comparison with the previous policy) daring attempt to deepen the integration with its east European neighbours and launched the Eastern Partnership Initiative. It was a more intelligent ENP strategy based on the idea that the EU development model was superior to other models in terms of the quality of its regulatory impact and the effectiveness of reforms that it entails. The EaP’s plausible hypothesis was that – by applying the EU model of regulation and governance – all participating partners would benefit from

modernisation of their economies and political systems (more on this see: Eastern Partnership. Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council, 2008; Lightfoot, Szent-Iványi & Wolczuk, 2016). It was expected that whichever motivations partnering countries have, their development would be faster and bring these states closer to the EU socially, economically and, possibly, politically.

Taking the opportunities the EaP offers, some of the partner countries (e.g. Ukraine, Georgia) started negotiations on the Association Agreements (AA) with the EU, which are a binding legal framework for economic and political integration. Thus the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA), as crucial part of the AA, promotes a regulatory approximation that, in turn, opens for the partners a greater access to the EU market. In some cases, the DCFTA was followed by a political part of the AA with some additional obligations for an associating state. If the eastern European region evolved peacefully and democratically, the ENP/EaP would be a brilliant strategy and increase chances for pan-European unity and cooperation.

However, post-Soviet Europe developed in a different direction, as I argued above. In the wake of the conservative, anti-western backlash in post-Soviet Europe, the EaP had an effect that was not foreseen by Brussels. By promoting socio-economic modernisation in eastern Europe and closer integration with the EU, ENP/EaP triggered unrealistic expectations regarding a full EU membership. These unrealistic expectations became an important factor in the internal politics of Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia and Armenia. It also had its impact on the Russian and Belarusian opposition. In absence of strong and consequent pro-democracy parties, the EU membership perspective became some sort of surrogate liberal ideology inspiring democratic movements in the region. Unwillingly, the EU became an important inner political factor in the eastern European countries, while EU decision makers were not ready to address this problem timely and adequately.

The above effect has coincided with another one. The strategy underlying ENP and EaP was focused on a process of rule transfer to the post-Soviet European countries (e.g. see European Neighbourhood Policy: Working towards a Stronger Partnership, 2013). The idea was that convergence with EU rules would bring stability and prosperity to the eastern neighbourhood. This idea mirrored the policies applied earlier to other post-communist countries, e.g. the Baltic countries; but in these cases there was a clear perspective of EU accession, which was a decisive motivation for elites and citizenry to support the integration. In an ENP/EaP context this motivation was absent, so the integration had no clear result for any of the parties. In many ways, the process added to the utopian European aspirations of Ukrainians, Georgians and Moldovans. These, in turn, opened a window of opportunities for certain political groups to use the unrealistic expectations for gaining power and later discrediting the EU regarding the (lack of) results. This effect has been obvious in the protests in the Moldavian capital and the support of Ukrainians for a ‘strong hand’ shown by recent opinion polls (KIIS poll as of June 2, 2016).

A review of the documents defining ENP and EaP policies in the period between 2004 and 2014 shows an avoidance to address the questions concerning Russia’s role in the region and the role the EU wants to play (only the 2014 ENP strategic document describes Russia’s critical steps for destabilising Eastern European region; see: Neighbourhood at the Crossroads: Implementation of the European Neighbourhood Policy in 2013, p.3). These

documents also failed to acknowledge the change in the Russian Federation's stance towards ENP and EaP. In this article I will skip the lengthy analysis of this change; I just want to point out that there were periods when the Kremlin could be a partner in joint regional projects with the EU, or when it was simply indifferent towards preparations for the Association Agreements not seeing them as a danger to its interests in the region. In those periods there were some opportunities to diminish the risks for the successful implementation of EU strategies in eastern Europe. In its preparations for an EU Global Strategy for Foreign and Security Policy, it is crucial for the EU to address Russia as a factor in the realisation of its interests in the eastern neighbourhood and as a threat to EU unity.

The general ENP/EaP approach to post-Soviet Europe contained one more flaw. It treated all five eastern European countries in the same way without taking into account that some of them (and since February 2014, all of them) do not fully control their territories. This territorial incompleteness of partner states and the presence of a number of de facto states was an important factor to understand the risks presented by separatist movements. These risks have been clearly shown during the Ukrainian crisis and the Novorossian revolt. Activists from South Ossetia, Abkhazia and Transnistria were and remain important factor of the Donbas war in particular and the regional destabilisation in general (Trenin, 2014).

Finally, with the deepening cooperation between the EU and some eastern neighbourhood partners in the 2010s, the cohesion between regional and country specific EU policies was declining. This lack of strategic coordination was one of the reasons why the EU lost its proactive position and was belatedly reacting to the snowball of problems on its eastern borders. Here I will use the example of Ukraine to show how inadequate were the aims and tools of EU policies during the crisis of 2014-16.

The EU-Ukraine Association Agreement has had huge significance for Ukraine. If implemented properly, the AA could have been a part of an important strategy to help Ukraine develop and become a safer neighbour for the EU. Ukraine as an EU success story could also have set an example of democratic development for other post-Soviet countries. However, it became one of the causes for Euromaidan and the Russian aggression.

So far the EU-Ukraine AA has had limited success concerning economic development. Although some Ukrainian companies and products got access to the EU market, many more companies lost the Russian market due to Russia's decision in December 2015 (The EU has helped Ukraine to limit its dependency on gas and oil supplies from Russia to a minimum. However, the fuel Ukraine buys from EU Member States is of Russian origin.)

The political part of the AA is critical for the development of anti-corruption institutions and judiciary reform in Ukraine. Yet the newly established law enforcement agencies are adding to the president's control over the power elites in Kiev. And the EU-backed constitutional reform has increased the Ukrainian president's control over Ukrainian judges for several years.

This mismatch between the goals and tools of the EU's policy towards Ukraine, as well as the lack of monitoring how the EU support to Kiev adds to reaching the ENP/EaP strategic goals, is highly problematic and requires maintenance at all levels of EU involvement in Ukraine.

Rebuilding the European Neighbourhood

'World peace cannot be safeguarded without the making of creative efforts proportionate to the dangers which threaten it.'

The Schuman Declaration, May 9, 1950

'That kings should philosophize or philosophers become kings is not to be expected. Nor is it to be wished, since the possession of power inevitably corrupts the untrammelled judgment of reason. But kings or kinglike peoples which rule themselves under laws of equality should not suffer the class of philosophers to disappear or to be silent, but should let them speak openly.'

Immanuel Kant, Perpetual Peace

The growing gap between two European neighbourhoods creates an increasing tension among all parties involved. This tension may kill not only the perspective of a united Europe from the Atlantic to the Pacific Ocean, but destroy the EU from within. It may sound too alarmist, but the idea of 'sovereignism' of Putinist Russia is more and more shared in the east: it is winning in Turkey, it rules in Belarus, it gains support among conservative parties in Ukraine, the Balkan and the Visegrad Four countries. The conservative backlash in eastern and central Europe is a real danger.

The EU is the only agent that can revert the threatening tendencies in Europe. This is why a new EU policy towards the eastern neighbourhood is critical not only for the EU's survival, but also for the democratic future of the eastern European nations and for persistence of Europe as idea and reality.

EU decision-makers stand in front of difficult choices. One option is to turn the EU into a 'Fortress Europe' and build an Iron Curtain separating it from the rest of the world. Yet Roman experience and the Cold War legacy teach us that the limes/wall falls sooner or later.

The option of 'One Big Europe' seems too utopian today. Without trustworthy partners in the east, this project is simply undoable.

The real option which is demanded by the situation inside and outside the EU, as well as empowered by the learning-from-crises nature of the EU institutions, is the middle way: ensure solidarity of the Member States around the fundamental issues of EU survival, establish united EU security mechanism and build an effective EU foreign policy.

The latter should include a wise, creative and proactive strategy towards eastern Europe. This strategy should combine three major directions:

- a general approach to the post-Soviet European countries;
- country-specific policies;
- a policy towards growing competition and possible cooperation with Russia in the region.

The general approach towards the post-Soviet European countries has the aim to increase resources for a peaceful co-existence between and possible integration of all countries. It is critical to work with all countries of the region, independently of the fact,

whether their governments signed a common agreement or not. Which means that Belarus, as well as the populations of unrecognised states should also be covered by this policy.

Since the Novorossian revolt and the unfreezing of the Karabakh conflict, all six governments are keen on cooperation with the EU and the West in the security area. By using the separatist threat and its Russian endorsement, the EU may gain new perspectives for cooperation with all governments in the region.

Even though it is a difficult task, the EU should be in permanent communication with all political forces in Ukraine, Moldova and the other countries. These channels of communication, as well as the involvement of all different opposition groups in a European dialogue, can balance the Eurasian networks, and start gaining in a competition for the hearts and minds of eastern European leaders. It will also decrease the communication monopoly of the ruling groups with the west.

Furthermore it is crucial to promote horizontal communication between civil society organisations, mass-media, leaders of local self-governance, local business association and art communities in western and eastern Europe. This network of networks must become a tool to oppose new dividing lines developing within Europe.

The EU should also cooperate with all governments to cut the ground away from separatist movements. Support for decentralisation, subsidiarity and more inclusive cultural and social policies should become part of the conditionality for EU/western aid.

Unlike in previous years, the ENP regional framework should include the populations of 'unrecognised states'. It is a very delicate and sensitive area for national governments, but continuation of isolation policies will work against peace and progress in Europe. Populations of de facto states should become an integral part of future European integration.

One more issue, which will remain critical for all ENP partner nations: EU membership. The more blurred the EU's response is on this perspective, the more utopianism it will create in the east, and the more damage it will do to the future of a unified Europe to one Europe future. In contrast, whatever Brussels and the EU Member States will decide, it will increase the rational behaviour of eastern European citizens and leaders, as long as it is clear.

Separate country-specific policies should be developed for Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan, as well as for Nagorny Karabakh, South Ossetia, Abkhazia, separatist Donbas and Transnistria. There are many features that eastern European societies share. But when it comes to real political, diplomatic and security issues, the EU should be ready for country-specific aims and actions. This forces the EU to invest in a new generation of specialists and institutions able to implement this policy.

For example, the West had had three times (in 1992, 2005, and 2014) the chance to have a trustworthy partner in Ukraine for building a safe and blooming Europe. Yet the interplay of local weaknesses and the EU's flaws prevented that these opportunities were taken.

The lessons of the past, as I see them, should lead to the following conclusions:

The EU delegation should be more open in its communication with the Ukrainian society, the media and the opposition. So far, the ruling groups monopolised the communication with the West. Taking into account the pluralist nature of Ukrainian politics, with the perspective of a change of the ruling group, the new government in Kiev might be less open for the perspective of European integration and respect for European values.

Also, since the trust in Europe is still high in Ukraine, an honest and open dialogue of the EU and European political leaders with the Ukrainian population is critical for current and future integration efforts.

Part of the conditionality for cooperation between the EU and Kiev should be zero tolerance for authoritarian attempts, the establishment of the vertical of power and the use of European channels for tax avoidance. Some events in interior politics show that the risks for Ukrainian democracy are increasing, while the fragile system of political checks and balances is being destroyed. Silence from the West inspires pro-authoritarian forces to go on with their non-democratic consolidation of power.

The EU may need to increase its cooperation with local communities, media, civil society organisations (CSOs) and local business associations. Simultaneous communication and support of centre and peripheries may help establish a balanced model of governance that would be more open for European practices and standards. With the current egoistic dominance of the centre, Ukraine cannot become an example of successful European reforms.

Freedom of movement and communication should remain a core value and practice for Europe. The ‘Schengen policy’ was a huge step for EU integration. But the price for this was a severe cut-off of the other half of Europe from communication, which has torn the traditional ties between central and eastern European societies and enforced anti-western resentment and isolationist tendencies in the east.

The country-specific policies should focus on forming cadres and institutions diminishing the risk of war and ethnic conflicts in Europe, and increasing long-term cooperation and integration.

The EU should treat **Russia as both a threat and an opportunity** in eastern Europe. Even though the Kremlin’s policies are one of the major sources for hazards to security and cooperation in Europe, Russia should also be seen as a source of possible solutions for a common European future.

First of all, it is important to support the Russian political and civic opposition. The resistance in Russia is weak, and it is becoming weaker with the increasing emigration of politicians, businessmen and intellectuals to eastern and western Europe. It is critical now to network these recent emigrants and help them become a cadre of change in Russia.

It is also critical to involve the Russian opposition into joint networks with western and eastern European peers to prepare for future joint endeavours. For several decades eastern European leaders have been losing the ability to communicate and jointly work for the public good. Today, in times of distrust and war, the vision of a peaceful cooperation and development is gone from public discourse, educational curricula and cultural competencies

in our part of the world. It is time to invest in a new generation of leaders able to reverse the entropic trends in eastern Europe and make the ‘One Big Europe’ idea return to the political agenda.

Another important part of the policy should be directed at limiting the Russian use of European political and financial networks to undermine the unity of the EU and peace in eastern Europe. This policy should rely on cooperation of security agencies of EU Member States, ENP partner states and other interested organisations (NATO, OSCE, etc).

The West in general, the EU and the countries participating in the ENP must jointly prepare for the destabilisation during a change of leadership in Moscow (as well as in Minsk and some other capitals of eastern European authoritarian countries). In the time of regime change, there will be a window of opportunity for promoting the EU’s political agenda in the region. Also, as Sergei Guriev warns, ‘a peaceful transition is unlikely’ (Guriev, 2016). The West and its allies in the region must be ready to act effectively and not to lose Russia again. This also implies readiness to involve Russia in a long term cooperation to realise the project of a common European home.

Lost in ad hoc aggressive acts and their unforeseen after-effects, Russian leadership has lost the capacity for long-term planning. Therefore, the EU has a chance to make progress via a combination of short- and long-term approaches in eastern Europe, as well as in other areas of competition with the Kremlin.

Even though I said above that the EU is the only agent for healing Europe, there are other important players that can be allies. Brussels must take responsibility merge existing resources for security and cooperation in Europe and ensure their growth.

From Kiev it looks as if today only a united western Europe can take responsibility for a free, safe and dignified life in the whole of Europe. There is simply no other actor able to make our continent to become ‘One European Neighbourhood’.

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