

Slowly But Surely?

The European Neighborhood Policy as a New Framework for Transatlantic Integration

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Arkady Moshes

Finnish Institute of International Affairs

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In the aftermath of the April 2008 North Atlantic Treaty Organization summit, there is a need to conceptually rethink the Euro-Atlantic agenda in post-Soviet Eastern Europe and the Caucasus. The Bucharest summit confirmed NATO's open-door policy yet still refused to extend a Membership Action Plan (MAP) to either aspiring candidate, Ukraine or Georgia. Grand agendas for Euro-Atlantic expansion were admittedly not on the table prior to the summit: due to the European Union's refusal to grant membership prospects to any new aspirants, neither "the Baltic option," a simultaneous enlargement of the EU and NATO, nor "the Polish option," in which NATO expansion precedes and is understood to presage EU expansion, was possible. On the other hand, a "quasi-Turkish option," by which the more advanced Eastern partners could be admitted into the Atlantic security zone in order to postpone *ad infinitum* their entry into the European prosperity zone, was conceivable, even if those partners failed to comply with all the criteria (Georgia) or lacked full popular support (Ukraine).

Now, a double rejection is a more probable mid-term scenario. There are a number of reasons why several key European NATO members did not embrace the applications of Ukraine and Georgia. These include internal problems in both states, an unwillingness to provoke the new Russian leadership, and the recent legacy of controversy between the United States and Europe. These issues will still be relevant in December 2008, when the issue is to be revisited, and possibly

afterwards. If Russian behavior toward the area becomes openly aggressive and destabilizing, it is conceivable that these states will change their position. Still, change should not be taken for granted. EU negotiations with Russia on a new framework agreement have just begun, while a more general interest in building a so-called “strategic partnership” with Russia still prevails in much of Europe.

Should Euro-Atlantic integration of at least some states in the region be considered a realistic goal? If so, when and how can it be achieved? I argue that the key lies with the EU’s increasing regional involvement at the less ambitious, but practical, level of the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP). European policy in the “Eastern Neighborhood” is becoming more active by design and by default. This process can positively affect the prospects of transformation in the region and create a new platform for transatlantic interaction. Like any palliative, it is not an ideal policy for all parties concerned, but undoubtedly it has potential.

Why Would Europe Care?

It would not be an exaggeration to say that in the years before the enlargement of the EU in 2004, its Eastern policy was largely driven by the motto “Russia first.” This was not only because of European reliance on Russian energy imports. Many Europeans still viewed Russia as a champion of liberal reforms in the post-Soviet space and, having declared its adherence to a “European Choice,” as interested and capable of establishing sustainable cooperation with the EU. It was anticipated that this would have a positive spillover effect for the whole region in terms of stability and transformation.

In 2004, the situation changed. After enlargement, the EU formed a common border with the post-Soviet space, and Europe as a whole learned that its new eastern periphery mattered. First and foremost, protecting itself from soft security risks that emanated from the region would only be possible by bridging the wealth gap. This would require promoting the rule of law, human rights, and democracy in the region; otherwise, all assistance programs would fail. Meanwhile, new member states began pushing the EU to pay greater attention to the East, while bringing to the corridors of Brussels a much more skeptical view of Russia.

In turn, Russia felt increasingly threatened by the policy of democracy promotion and embarked on an assertive course in the common neighborhood aimed at regaining Russia’s predominant geopolitical status. Moscow perceived that the EU was playing a zero-sum game against Russia’s interests. The open controversy between Russia and the EU triggered by Ukraine’s Orange Revolution revealed that the neighborhood had become the single most important conflict-prone issue on the Russia-EU agenda.

Even if most EU members are far from perceiving the region as a bulwark

against the resurgence of Russian imperialism, as some of its newer members propose, they do view “sphere of influence” thinking as a challenge to which the EU should respond. At the same time, Europeans are looking for ways to have a positive impact on political processes inside Russia. Europeans place much hope in potential demonstration effects from successes in its vicinity, and nothing could be more promising than success in states with large ethnic Russian populations and/or shared historical experiences.

After the Russian-Ukrainian gas war of 2006 and smaller incidents between Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus, European states have also come to appreciate the fact that their own energy security begins with the energy security of transit states. European energy policy remains incoherent and is often driven by selfish and not fully transparent monopoly interests. However, many Europeans no longer see transit states as spoilers of an otherwise “happy” union of suppliers and consumers but as part of a more complex framework.

European Neighborhood Policy: What’s Next?

This kind of thinking has already had an impact on EU policy and that of its members. The original European Neighborhood Policy (ENP), launched in 2004, does not deserve to be called anything more than a bureaucratic exercise; it offered the same stakes to every EU neighbor from Morocco to Belarus. To post-Soviet European states, the initiative’s vague statements contained no encouragement, while their alleged status as “Europe’s neighbors” offended. Individual action plans signed with Ukraine and Moldova in 2005 were only interim solutions.

The end of 2006, however, was a turning point, ushering in an era of “ENP plus.” New initiatives began to surface regularly. In December 2006 the European Commission tabled a set of specific proposals and financial instruments later endorsed by the European Council. In the spring of 2007, “Black Sea Synergy,” a new regional cooperation program, was launched. In September 2007, the first ENP conference was organized, bringing together 27 member states and 16 partners. In December 2007, the Commission drafted another communication outlining the contours of a stronger ENP. In May 2008 Poland and Sweden unveiled a joint proposal for a new “Eastern Partnership” envisaging a specific forum between the EU-27 and Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan. Other important developments included the mushrooming of cooperative mechanisms in the energy sphere and the EU’s more active stance on frozen conflicts, especially through the EU Border Assistance Mission for Moldova and Ukraine. Without going into the details of all these initiatives, it is possible to conclude that they are based on the principle of positive reciprocity. According to the above-mentioned 2007 communication, “the more deeply a partner engages with the Union, the more fully the Union can respond, politically, economically and through financial and technical

cooperation.”

All these initiatives serve the old goal: to deny the “Eastern Neighbors” the prospect of membership. Yet it is precisely because the EU now genuinely strives to prove the possibility of successful reform without membership that it is ready to give neighbors much more than before and has come to take the idea of “everything but institutions” quite seriously. Specifically, the EU has declared its readiness to finalize free-trade agreements with partner states, a major breakthrough for this rather protectionist entity. The EU has also launched enhanced partnership agreement talks with Ukraine. More generally, the “ENP plus” is an instrument of incremental integration of partner states into the EU’s economic space and zone of internal security. If utilized in full, this would give ENP partners, like Ukraine and Georgia, a variation of the same status currently held by Norway, Switzerland, or Iceland, with the exception of a right to full membership.

Talking To Russia, or About It?

Moscow seems to be concerned about the developments it has witnessed in the region. In February 2008 it criticized the final document of the “Black Sea Synergy” meeting in Kyiv. Although all other EU and Black Sea Economic Cooperation states supported the report, Russia disliked it apparently because the document called for increased EU involvement. The media reaction to the regional energy summit in Kyiv in May 2008 was openly agitated.

It is not difficult to understand why Russia would be far from welcoming forums in which it is not a participant of discussions but an object. There is an emerging (albeit weak) circle of solidarity that excludes Russia and blurs boundaries between EU members and non-members. At the same time, it symbolically points to differences between “Wider Europe,” understood as “ENP Europe,” and Russia. It would be wrong to expect this process to result in the transfer of Europe’s frontiers from the Ukrainian-Polish to Ukrainian-Russian border, but it is still a blow against the “line in the sand” thinking of Moscow’s conservative foreign policy establishment.

As recently as the beginning of Vladimir Putin’s second presidential term, Moscow had little reason to worry about sliding toward outsider status. In 2004, Russia was invited to join the ENP, but it saw no reason to do so. Indeed, at that time its individual “strategic partnership” relationship with the EU was much more conceptually developed and relied on a sound legal and institutional basis (the year before, Russia and the EU had agreed to create four common spaces covering economics, security, research, and culture). However, as part of the general alienation between Russia and the West that ensued, bilateral EU-Russian relations stagnated and Moscow’s ability to influence EU decisions became limited.

Conclusions

The ongoing changes in the European approach toward the EU's Eastern Neighborhood should be taken seriously. Without exaggerating their potential to have immediate positive effects, they should be welcomed both intrinsically and because they help create a new framework for transatlantic policy.

In the current circumstances, the often-criticized slow pace of European policy may do more good than harm. There is no "quick fix" to the internal problems in the region; consistency is needed more than speed. This is already the case for NATO expansion: even if Ukraine and Georgia were to be granted MAPs, it would still take years before full membership would be possible. In this sense, "everything but institutions" will remain a workable EU formula for the foreseeable future.

Europeans should not cling to the illusion that the ENP can somehow be decoupled from EU-Russian relations or that the latter will view European actions in the region benignly. Instead, they should anticipate a Russian reaction. This, in turn, could help facilitate the emergence of a coordinated Western policy towards Russia.

In conclusion, the goal of both the EU and the United States in the Eastern Neighborhood should be to ensure the region's successful liberal and market transformation, rather than to create specific institutional arrangements. While nothing can yet beat the promise of EU membership for promoting reforms, the ENP can still become a realistic and promising conceptual basis for cooperation.

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