

## The EU, Russia and Eastern Europe – Dissenting views on security, stability and partnership?

The expert roundtable conference “The EU, Russia and Eastern Europe – Dissenting views on security, stability and partnership?”, organised by the IEP in cooperation with the Trans European Policy Studies Association (TEPSA) and the Volkswagen Foundation, took place on the 22<sup>nd</sup> and 23<sup>rd</sup> of November, 2010. At the same time, the conference was also the final event of the IEP’s Study Programme on European Security (SPES). Forty participants, including international experts from academia and the policy-making community, gathered at the Representation of Saarland to the German Federation to discuss three different, though interrelated, topics: the issue of the ‘shared neighbourhood’ in the EU-Russia relations, the future of the European Neighbourhood Policy and the security dimension of EU external action in the (South-) Eastern neighbourhood.

### Rethinking EU-Russia relations: Towards a constructive dialogue on the shared neighbourhood?

The first panel discussion of the conference dealt with the current and prospective state of EU-



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Russia relations in light of recent European foreign policy trends towards the ‘common neighbourhood’. In this panel discussion, an intense review of the possibilities for political cooperation between the EU and Russia in the post-Soviet space crystallized diverging positions on possible policy fields, tools and relevant actors.

As outlined by the chair of the first panel, divergent perceptions of the modernisation agenda, coupled with recent developments in EU-Russia relations, make for a rather pes-

simistic outlook on the future of the EU’s relations with Russia. According to one speaker, Russia, whilst having experienced a significant strengthening of the internal ‘power vertical’ since 2000, has reenergized its foreign policy activity in the former Soviet Republics, through instruments such as energy policy, military presence and cultural influence. Furthermore, a low degree – if not absence – of democratic transformation in the Eastern European countries, and their tendency towards multivectorialism lead to sceptical evaluations of the current impact

of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) and the Eastern Partnership (EaP). At the same time, the EU-ropcan side was criticised for remaining divided on questions relating to its neighbourhood, which might also serve as an explanation for the prevailing focus on long-term goals. Indeed, it was further argued that the development of short-term goals may enhance the EU's influence on the 'common neighbourhood' as these not only result in earlier outcomes, but are also easier to measure and evaluate.

As an overarching recommendation to substantially improve the relationship between the EU and Russia, it was advised that a closer cooperation be initiated between both actors, based on mutual interests. A vivid discussion developed on the question of which specific topics should be included in the EU-Russia agenda and by whom such cooperation should be carried out. One speaker advocated a hard-security approach starting with close cooperation on conflicts in the common neighbourhood (e.g. Transnistria), thus suggesting cooperation among political elites. The potential of this approach was regarded sceptically by other participants. As an alternative to this suggestion, one participant recommended that the EU should instead acknowledge its own strengths and weaknesses, in particular the division on core foreign policy issues along the lines of its member states' interests. Moreover, as another participant concluded, bilateral relations between Russia and individual EU member states have yet to be seen as more conducive to progress in EU-Russia relations, since the EU tends to be inflexible after protracted negotiation processes. As was further argued, future failures in this regard could be countered by including Russia in the early stages of future EU foreign policy development processes. Nonetheless, the EU – as a supranational actor – was also described as “weak in strategic and strong in economic politics”. Thus, to more effectively promote the EU's interests, an important measure was seen in further enhancement of multinational business relations. Whilst analyses have shown that this mechanism contains both positive (spill-over effects and socialisation through 'EU values') and negative effects (furthering of bribery and corruption in the business sector), further research on these processes seems desirable. More consensus could be observed with regard to civil society cooperation, providing a value based and bottom-up impetus with expected spill-over effects to high-level political cooperation. The goal of abolishing the current visa regime for Russian citizens is seen as an important step in this regard.

It can be concluded that the discussions attached only minimal importance to the NATO-Russia path towards a strategic partnership and focused on the EU-Russia relationship. In order to prevent Russia from 'dictating the agenda' and to convince Moscow of the benefits of EU involvement in the common neighbourhood, the recommendations mainly addressed the EU. However, as many participants diagnosed, the EU's inner divisions remain a weakness that might undermine its role in this competition.

## The European Neighbourhood Policy: How to give new impetus to its Eastern dimension?

The presentations and discussions in the second panel discussion focused on the achievements and limitations of both the ENP and the EaP. Special emphasis was put on the tools and mechanisms used in both policy frameworks, the EU's foreign policy objectives, as well as potential agents of change in the Eastern neighbourhood.



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The speakers and discussants agreed that the EU has had some impact on the political developments in the EaP countries. It was argued that due to institutional cooperation with the EU, the expertise and transparency of some local ministries and agencies have increased. Moreover, institutional and personal contacts with the EU were seen as important socialisation channels that are conducive to fostering domestic change and moving European integration forward in the

long term. It was also stated that the establishment of a new multilateral framework within the EaP is an important attempt to strengthen cooperation among the EU's Eastern partners. Finally, it was argued that the EU has become an important reference point for the advocacy and monitoring efforts of civil societies in Eastern Europe.

However, all participants clearly pointed to weaknesses and limitations in the EU's transformative power in the Eastern neighbourhood. Limitations were firstly detected in the use of conditionality. Participants agreed that the ENP lacks clear incentives, rewards and benchmarks for progress. Consequently, it was claimed that the EU should redefine conditionality in the ENP and explicitly link incentives to rewards. Another recommendation aimed at introducing a competitive element by clearly pointing out leaders and laggards. Against a background of short term thinking and cost-benefit calculations by national elites in Eastern Europe, the need for short and medium term objectives in the EU's neighbourhood policy was recognised, as already argued in the first panel of this conference. Secondly, the speakers focused on contradictions in and limitations of the EU's democratisation agenda. The EU was portrayed as being more interested in technocratic modernisation (i.e. economic reforms, improvements in infrastructure, etc.) in its Eastern neighbourhood and Russia than in the transfer of common values and the implementation of political reforms. Whereas one speaker called on the EU to officially explain its political choices, others claimed a clearer commitment to common values.

The ensuing discussion focused on the theoretical, practical and psychological impacts of membership conditionality. According to some, the membership perspective was a "game

changer” for the Central and Eastern European countries in the accession process. In order to prevent the further consolidation of authoritarian regimes, such a crucial element is also needed in the ENP. Giving countries that culturally and geographically belong to Europe a membership perspective was considered by some to be a moral obligation of the EU in this regard. In contrast, given the challenges the EU is facing in Turkey and the Western Balkans, other participants stated their belief that membership claims by the EU’s Eastern neighbours are unrealistic. Moreover, some participants contradicted the argument that the membership perspective is the only key mechanism (employed by the EU) that has considerable impact on transformation processes. The ‘carrot’ of membership, it was argued, has not been sufficient to foster domestic change in the Western Balkans to date. In addition, it was highlighted that the EU employed other mechanisms in its enlargement policy that could also strengthen the EU’s transformative power in the context of the ENP. As already mentioned in the first panel of this conference, supporting actors other than political elites in the Eastern partner countries, such as local firms, could be conducive to the implementation and enforcement of European norms and standards.



*H.E. B. Tarasyuk*

In his **dinner speech**, H.E. Borys Tarasyuk, Former Minister for Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, and currently Chairman of the Parliamentary Committee on European Integration in the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, focused on reasons for the failure of the Orange Revolution, the state of affairs of EU-Ukraine relations and Ukraine’s positioning between the EU and Russia. Referring to the title of the expert conference, he stated that diverging views on the concepts of stability, security and partnership by the EU, Russia and the Eastern European countries lay the basis for difficult relations between the three sides of the triangle.

## **The EU as a successful security actor in its immediate neighbourhood: How to consolidate CSDP?**

The third panel discussion focused on the security dimension of the EU's policy towards its Eastern and South Eastern neighbourhood, the innovations of the Lisbon Treaty in this policy area and the lessons learnt from the Western Balkans.

Several speakers questioned the security perspective of the EU's policies towards the Eastern neighbours, claiming that both the ENP and the EaP are in practice not about security. In contrast, others argued that the ENP does aim at stabilising the EU's neighbourhood and therefore that security is a factor. The limited experience of the EU in conflict mediation and conflict prevention was stressed and the opinion voiced that the development of these capabilities could increase the success of the EU as a security actor in the region. At the same time, however, it was argued that the EU can be reluctant to intervene in conflicts in Eastern and South Eastern Europe because too active a role would jeopardise its relations with Russia.

One of the speakers gave expression to his observation that there appears to be a competition between the EU and Russia over the shared neighbourhood. The source of this problem are the fuzzy borders of



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both the EU and Russia. This uncertainty over the common neighbourhood hampers the cooperation between the two entities, although they remain very different actors in the region. On the one hand, Russia acts as important energy supplier, supported by a sizable military and a centralised state. On the other hand, the EU derives its leverage from its significant economic status, despite being backed by scant military capacities and a political system that is far from being centralised.

One of the goals of the Lisbon Treaty however, was to make the EU more coherent and effective in its external action. These innovations have been awaited for over ten years, which created huge frustration and raised expectations. Other countries, like China, will judge the EU's foreign and security policy on its ability to deliver in its immediate neighbourhood. Although it is still too early to assess the effect of the position of the High Representative and other institutional innovations, the new European External Action Service (EEAS) has at least on paper the potential to lead to more coherent, effective and better EU foreign policy. One still outstanding question is whether the larger member states will be fully committed to the new service. Other possible improvements under the Lisbon Treaty, such as the introduction of per-

manent chairs of foreign affairs Council working groups, will alleviate the pressure created by the ambitions of the rotating presidency. This may prove beneficial for the EU's foreign policy making, which is by nature only able to progress with small steps. Another symbolic change is the replacement of 'common positions' with the more coherent and consistent-sounding 'Union positions'. Concerning the EU's role in conflict prevention, it was stated that the Lisbon Treaty hardly gives any tools for improvement. Looking back at the Russian-Georgian conflict it was questioned whether the EU's capacity to act in this scenario would have been increased under the Lisbon Treaty.

The Western Balkans can be seen as a testing ground for the more coherent, post-Lisbon EU. It was stated that while the EU's institutional presence has been significantly synchronised, the positions of the different member states are still far from streamlined. One of the lessons learnt from EU involvement in the region is the importance of local ownership of the EU's civilian missions. Given the current accession negotiations with the countries of the Western Balkan it has been perceived that in practice the EU has added a new criterion to the Copenhagen criteria: good neighbourly relations. This focus on bilateral disputes may hamper the transformative power of the EU's enlargement process. During the discussion it was remarked that declining public support in the final phase of negotiations is widespread.

Though much of the discussion focused on the effectiveness of EU policies, one speaker clearly underlined the limitations of this focus, since there are a lot of processes beyond the control of politicians and policy-makers that determine the policy outcome.

## **Conclusions: Looking ahead**

It was concluded that, today, the EU can rely on strategic partners but is in need of a strategy. To refer back to comments made during the third panel discussion, it was stated that the success of the EU's external action will be partly dependent on the weight attributed to it in the new financial perspective. Against the background of the Lisbon Treaty, which aims to increase the role of the EU on the global stage, it was further argued that the member states should allow the EU to grow into this new role. Especially the larger member states should streamline their bilateral foreign policies with EU external action. This is, however, a learning process that will take some time.

Concerning the allocation of funds to EU external action, the question was raised as to whether a strategic change is needed. Creating networks of researchers and think tanks and investing more in Twinning and TAIEX would be a desirable shift from the current approach focused on budgetary support for governments. Regarding the hotly disputed final objective of the ENP, it was highlighted that it is difficult for the older member states to understand the demanding attitude of the EU's Eastern partner countries. Without excluding the possibility of future membership, the aim of economic integration should be attractive enough to foster cooperation and reform.

*by Mirte van den Berge, Vojta Drapal and Mariella Falkenhain, 16 December 2010*