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Articles

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THE EU'S EASTERN PARTNERSHIP IN THE SOUTH CAUCASUS: USING GEORGIA AS A MODEL TO UNDERSTAND REFORMS AND SECURITY CHALLENGES

ABSTRACT

The main goal of the Eastern Partnership (EaP) is political and economic stabilization of the region threatened both by its post-Soviet systemic predicaments such as weakness of state institutions, the gap between the ruling oligarchy and citizens and corruption, and by Russia's attempts to maintain or extend its sphere of influence, which involves fomenting separatist tendencies of minorities and promoting anti-EU narratives. Among the six EaP countries, Georgia is most advanced in implementing reforms; however, there is still immense work to be done, despite the EU's economic and technical support. Another aspect of the EU's involvement in the region is the security dilemma whether to accept Russia's influence in the former Soviet republics together with authoritarian models of governing or to make efforts towards democratization of those countries, risking the increase of Russian hostility, an example of which could be seen in 2014 conflict with Ukraine.

Key words

Eastern Partnership, Georgian reforms, South Caucasus, EU-Georgia raltions

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The Eastern Partnership (EaP) has been the most successful of the initiatives the European Union has extended to its Eastern neighbourhood. The EU's Eastern policy's main goal is to stabilise this volatile region. However, creating a more stable and secure environment does not exclusively imply resolution of the long list of frozen conflicts in Azerbaijan, Georgia and Moldova; this year further enlarged by Ukraine's Crimea and Donbass secessions. There are two driving forces of instability in the region: the democratic and functional weakness of post-Soviet state institutions and the destructive impact of Russia's attempts to re-establish its hegemony in the post-Soviet region. While trying to contain aggressive Russian actions, the EU should not forget about its main policy goal, which is helping the regional states in a systemic transition towards democracy, rule of law and a free market environment.

This article focuses mainly on the case of Georgia. This country is one of thosee more advanced in its transformation towards EU standards, but at the same time shares with other states of the region post-Soviet systemic predicaments such as corruption and blurred lines between the executive and judicial powers. Georgia leads in security sector reforms but still has serious problems with its territorial integrity – equal to those of Azerbaijan or Ukraine. Therefore, conclusions from the analysis of Georgia's case are relevant to EU Eastern policy not only towards Georgia but also towards other members of the EaP.

1. The Eastern Partnership So Far: Achievements and Failures

The launch of the Eastern Partnership (EaP) initiative in 2009 was a response to challenges the EU faced in its Eastern neighbourhood after the Russo–Georgian War in August 2008. Although the project did not encompass security issues, undoubtedly it was a reaction to the security problem. The EU decided to involve itself more seriously in the East, anxious to stabilise politically and economically the countries of the region.

The EaP and its high-level summits have prioritised six countries – Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan and Belarus – on the EU political agenda. As a consequence, Eastern Europe, now including the South Caucasus region, has started to be perceived as a part of the common political and economic area within the European Union. Putting Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan in

one basket of countries with Ukraine and Moldova, which were more advanced in terms of relations with the EU, has upgraded the entire region and has given the Caucasus states equal integration opportunities including options for a visa-free regime, a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA) and an Association Agreement (AA). The concrete political results of the Eastern Partnership were the AAs signed on 27 June 2014 with Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine.

Thus the EaP should be considered more successful than previous EU initiatives such as the European Neighbourhood Policy, the European Neighbourhood Policy plus[1], Black Sea Synergy or the Partnership for Modernisation with Russia. These initiatives did not deliver long-lasting positive effects in the EU's Eastern neighbourhood. Particularly, the 2010 Partnership for Modernisation (PfM) project was disappointing as it did not lead to sustained improvement in the EU–Russia relations. The weakest point of this initiative was its lack of focus the fact it was not focusing on authoritarian trends in Moscow.

Nonetheless, the EaP may also be assessed as only a partial success considering that three participating countries – Belarus, Armenia and Azerbaijan – were not interested in comprehensive rapprochement with the EU, but only in sectorial cooperation. They were reluctant to introduce the EU recommended reforms, which would challenge the established post-Soviet oligarchic or authoritarian systems in these countries. After Armenia switched its integration plans from the EU to the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union (EEU)[2], in the region of South Caucasus only the government in Tbilisi was eager to continue systemic transformation in line with Brussels' recommendations.

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[1] For criticism concerning the European Neighbourhood Policy and its offer to the EU's Eastern neighbours, particularly Georgia, see: Chkhikvadze, I. (2013). EU–Georgia Relations: Where It Starts and Where it Goes. In K. Kakachia, M. Cecire (Eds.) *Georgian Foreign Policy. The Quest for Sustainable Security*. Tbilisi: Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, p. 58–59.

[2] Armenia planned to sign an AA with the EU; however, in September 2013 – two months before the EaP Vilnius Summit – President Serzh Sargsyan abandoned this goal, declaring at the same time Armenia's will to access Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union. The Armenian president made this decision after a number of signals that the Kremlin (which saw the rapprochement between Yerevan and Brussels as a threat to its own interests) might support Azerbaijan in its conflict with Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh. Eventually, Armenia and the EU signed a less significant document, the Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement, which excludes the DCFTA, the most important part of the AA, related to the economic integration.

2. The Security Dilemma

The Euromaidan revolution in Ukraine came as a surprise both for the EU and Russia. European political elites underestimated Ukrainian society's support for European values. The Kremlin believed that it had enough economic and political leverage to keep Ukraine in Russia's sphere of influence. After the Ukrainian revolution became a *fait accompli*, the EU continued the process of rapprochement, which resulted in signing of an AA with Ukraine in June 2014 with the new post-revolutionary government.[3]

However, the price for this economic and political integration was high. Before 2013, Russia neither treated the Eastern Partnership as a security issue, nor did Moscow perceive it as a geopolitical challenge. However, the Kremlin's attitude changed in 2013. Ukraine had to face Russia's aggressive reaction: annexation of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea and the instigation of a pro-Russian rebellion in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions. Therefore, the security issue – namely Russia's involvement in escalation of the military conflicts in the post-Soviet region, which was a stimulus for the EU's engagement in Eastern Europe in 2009 – returned as a challenge for the EU in 2014. This may lead to two contradictory approaches.

The first one, which may be called a "non-interference" approach, assumes that the EU should agree to Russia's special status in the post-Soviet area. This implies acceptance of the idea that Moscow decides on crucial issues in the post-Soviet states' foreign policies such as the choice of integration with any international organisation. Considering that the main driver of democratic and free-market reforms in the region is political rapprochement with the West, accepting Russia's veto on further deepening of the EaP countries' relationship with the EU would have profound consequences. The EU would have to accept dominance of the post-Soviet oligarchic or authoritarian political models (invariants of Russia's "sovereign democracy"'model) in the region. Therefore the implication of the non-interference approach would be growing cultural, economic and political distance between the EU and the EaP countries remaining in the Russian sphere of influence. Moreover, the "non-interference" policy would not guarantee stability in the EU's neighbourhood as Russia's hegemony is based more on continuation of management of regional conflicts than on cooperation aimed at their resolution.

[3] The political parts of Association Agreement with Ukraine were signed as a first step at the extraordinary EU-Ukraine summit on 21 March 2014.

The other approach resulting from rethinking of the EaP and PfM shortcomings is that the EU should not accept the post-Soviet *status quo* and should continue to cause positive changes in its Eastern neighbourhood. In the context of the 2014 Russian-Ukrainian conflict such a proactive approach does not guarantee stability either. Yet, it still provides the EU with an opportunity to help strengthen EaP countries' state institutions, which is a *sine qua non* condition of stabilisation. When adopting the latter approach, it seems logical to focus on the EaP countries where political elites accept the EU offer and are eager to continue reforms. In the South Caucasus region, Georgia is politically the most EU-oriented country and the most advanced in terms of reforms. On the other hand, the country faces internal and external challenges, including Russia's military occupation of two Georgian regions: Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Therefore EU policy towards Georgia necessitates confrontation of this Caucasian state's security problems.

3. Georgia: a Model of Transition

First of all, Georgia's transformation was not initially driven by the goal of integration with the EU. Many of Georgia's reforms (predominantly in the security sector) were initiated by former president Mikheil Saakashvili's administration and were not necessarily related to EU influence or recommendations. Police reform and establishing a business-friendly environment were among the particularly successful achievements of Saakashvili's United National Movement (UNM) government. The Georgian police reform in 2004–12 was appreciated internationally as it managed to transform one of the most corrupt and criminalised institutions in the country into a well-functioning police force (Bakhtadze, 2014). After the Rose Revolution in 2003, combating corruption was initiated and the budget crisis was overcome. In 2005, the new tax code significantly lowered the tax burden; moreover, the government introduced new, neoliberal labour legislation, giving employers considerable freedom in managing employees (Papava, 2013). One of the important elements of business-oriented reforms was the establishment of the so-called "one-stop kiosk" office so that the citizens could pay their bills, register new businesses and solve any issue related to administration in one building, without the need to visit various government agencies. The government in Tbilisi claimed to be pursuing the goal of establishing a neoliberal or a "Singaporean" model in the South Caucasus.

Yet, after the EU initiated the EaP, the Georgian administration shifted its interests from non-European to European economic models. Although Saakashvili's party lost the parliamentary elections in October 2012, the new Georgian Dream coalition government continued negotiations of the AA with the EU and signed the document on 27 June 2014. Thus the progress in Georgia's integration with the EU was a result of efforts made both by Saakashvili's United National Movement and the Georgian Dream governments (Cornell, 2013, pp. 28–29).

4. The EU's Impact on Georgia

While acknowledging the crucial role of subsequent Georgian governments in adopting EU standards, the EU's role itself should not be underestimated. The EU, despite not offering the prospect of a membership for Georgia, represents a political model appreciated by Georgian society. Such a model implies establishment of democratic mechanisms, rule of law, respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. According to a survey by the National Democratic Institute, public support for Georgia's integration with the EU and NATO in August 2014 was 78% and 72%, respectively ('Public attitudes', 2014). The process of the country's political rapprochement with the EU is itself of value as subsequent ruling political elites in Tbilisi are obliged to develop democratic standards, required for both EU and NATO integration.

That does not mean that Georgia's democratisation has been a smooth and straightforward process. The success of the UNM's reforms was accompanied by numerous human rights violations and abuses of power by the ruling elite (Radziejowska & Zasztowt, 2014), which were not effectively controlled by opposition parties until 2012. Building strong state institutions, the UNM governments ended with the creation of autonomous institutions such as the police, army and other forces of the Interior Ministry. Yet, the UNM failed to establish infrastructural power to ensure civil society's engagement in state affairs (Jones, 2014).

Although Georgia experienced authoritarian practices under UNM rules, the democratic transfer of power from this party to Georgian Dream after parliamentary elections in October 2012 was unique. More importantly, this resulted from the framework created by the geopolitical choices of Georgia's ruling elite. The role of European and Euro-Atlantic allied pressure on the government in Tbilisi to conduct free elections should not be underestimated either. Subsequent presidential elections in October 2013 and local elections in June 2014 were

assessed by international observers as free and fair. However, many analysts warn that the rise of another dominant one-party system, now with Georgian Dream playing this role instead of the UNM, is still a threat (Fairbanks, 2014, p. 160). Georgia's further political integration with the EU is necessary to protect the country's democratic achievements in the upcoming years.

Obviously, Georgia has also other incentives to cooperate with the EU such as financial support or technical assistance for reforms. The EU's budget support in 2007–2013 amounted to 258 million euros (Kaca, Sobjak & Zasztowt, 2014, p. 25). The EU budget-supported operations in Georgia covered areas such as poverty eradication through assistance to conflict-affected and displaced populations; sustainable and inclusive economic growth through support programmes for vocational education; regional and agricultural development; border management and migration. The EU also provided budget support in democracy consolidation through its support for public financial management and criminal justice reforms. The EU-Georgia budget support cooperation can be assessed as efficient since about 90% of allocated resources were distributed after the Georgian government fulfilled the criteria (Kaca et al., 2014, p. 17).

The EU is the main trading partner for Georgia and accounted for 27.5% of the country's overall goods and services exchanged in 2013. In that year, Georgia exported to the EU goods worth 668 million euros, and total imports amounted to more than 2 billion euros. Georgia's main export goods to the EU were mineral products, chemicals, metals, and food (e.g. vegetables, fruits and wine). From the EU's perspective, Georgia is a minor trading partner as its share of total EU trade is about 0.1% (similar to Armenia) (European Commission, n.d.). However, Georgia has attracted EU attention as a transit route for energy supplies from the Caspian Sea basin, as reflected in the DCFTA's energy security chapter. This includes the Southern Gas Corridor, which will link Azerbaijan's gas fields with the EU's energy system.

The DCFTA raised hopes as an opportunity to fight monopolies typical for post-Soviet oligarchic systems. The plight of UNM-ruled Georgia was the impact of the political elite on business circles (a common problem for the other post-Soviet countries as well). The ruling party politicians were helping politically loyal businessmen while hampering the activities of others, who were subjected to periodic capital levies. However, such a system of state-supported oligarchic monopolies is inconsistent with the EU anti-monopoly regulations. Even if the implementation of the DCFTA has not brought expected economic benefits to Georgia yet, certainly it helps to create more trustworthy, business-friendly free market environment in the country.

5. The Frozen Conflicts

Another area of the EU's impact on Georgia is national security. The August 2008 Russo–Georgian conflict was an important stage in EU–Georgia relations. The EU, keen to end hostilities, took leadership in conflict mediation following ramped-up violence in 2008. As France held the EU presidency in August 2008, French President Nicolas Sarkozy and Russian President Dmitri Medvedev negotiated the six-point ceasefire agreement between the governments in Moscow and Tbilisi. However, the majority of the agreement's points were ignored by Russia. The territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia/Tskhinvali region were recognised by the Kremlin as independent and remained occupied by Russian forces. Moscow declared that Georgia should accept these "new realities". Moreover, international observers from OSCE in South Ossetia and the UN Observer Mission in Abkhazia were forbidden by Russia's veto to continue their activities in the conflict zones.

Nevertheless, the EU managed to stop Russia from the total occupation of Georgia and a military overthrow of the Georgian government. By sending two hundred unarmed observers to the region in the form of the EUMM (*European Union Monitoring Mission*), the EU undertook an indispensable post-war security role (Penska & Dojcanova, 2013, p. 214). Asthe mission's civilian observers have not been allowed by Russian and separatist forces to enter occupied territories, this means another breach of the Sarkozy–Medvedev six-point agreement. However, even if the EUMM is able only to observe the administrative border with Abkhazia and Tskhinvali regions from the Georgia-controlled territories, such monitoring is crucial for stability in these areas.

Some critics of the EUMM underline that Russia's direct involvement in Georgia's conflicts and militarisation of the administrative border actually brought peace and ended the constant hostilities between Georgian, Abkhazian and Ossetian communities. However, this claim overlooks significant evidence to the contrary. First of all, in the case of both separatist entities, such ending of hostilities was achieved through ethnic cleansing of the Georgian population: in Abkhazia in 1993 and South Ossetia in 2008. Secondly, the situation on the ground is still unstable. Russia has continued the so-called "borderisation" process by installing wire fences and trenches on the administrative border. The result of these actions was the further hampering of the movement of people, including access to some plots of arable land belonging to villagers living on Georgia-controlled territories. Thirdly, even if Russia is now too preoccupied with support for Donbass separatism in Ukraine, in the future it may try to

destabilise Georgia using not only conflicts with Abkhazian and South Ossetian separatists, but also inspiring new ones in other minority-populated areas. In the context of possible Russian provocations, the EUMM role in publicising Russia's violations of the Sarkozy–Medvedev ceasefire agreements is of growing importance (Zasztowt, 2014).

Conclusions for the EU, Georgia and other EaP members

The EU has proved to have transformative power in Georgia. This conclusion remains true even taking into account that some important reforms in this country were undertaken even before the EU initiated its EaP programme and became more seriously engaged in the region. It is also true that achievements of the Georgian administration after the 2003 Rose Revolution have been closely watched by the political elites of other post-Soviet countries and had an impact on their policies. Among these countries, the Georgian case influenced even less reform-oriented countries such as Russia itself, Azerbaijan and Armenia. Some elements of Georgia's reforms were copied by neighbouring countries. Even Russia, though contesting the actions of Saakashvili's administration, tried to reform its police under Medvedev's presidency in 2011 using the Georgian model. As in Georgia, Russia's Soviet-style militia (*militsiya*) was renamed to Western-style police (*politsiya*) in 2011, the number of police officers was reduced (by 20%), and salaries were increased (Kosals, 2010). Another example of a country using Georgian experience is Azerbaijan. In 2012, the government in Baku established "one-stop kiosk" agencies similar to Georgia's, the so-called *Asan xidmət* – Easy Services offices to enable citizens to solve any issues with the administration.

However, these kinds of reforms, though important, do not change the core of the political systems of these countries, and neglect to alter such crucial issues as high-level (or elite) corruption, which is the one of the most dangerous features of the post-Soviet states. Such corrupt systems undermine state stability. The rise of a huge economic and social gap between the small ruling elite profiting from corruption and the rest of society leads to a revolutionary situation; for example, the revolution in Kyrgyzstan in April 2010, which overthrew the then president Kurmanbek Bakiyev and his corrupt family. The Arab Spring revolutions in 2011 were similar in nature. Clearly, in the case of the 2014 Euromaidan protests, corruption of the Yanukovych clan was one of the main issues provoking anger of the demonstrators.

Russia and other post-Soviet governments in the region often try to portray such protest movements as "colourful revolutions", artificially instigated by the U.S. or the EU through support of non-governmental organisations.[4] In such conspiratorial narratives, the main reason cited for these street protests are geopolitical games of puppeteering by foreign powers rather than the abysmal internal factors. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that these revolutionary or quasi-revolutionary movements have a social background. Obviously, it is not only poverty, unemployment or low standards of life that make people ready to start revolutions. In many cases, such as the Ukrainian revolutions in 2004 and 2014, Georgia's 2003 Rose Revolution, and anti-UNM protests in 2007, 2011 and 2012, or Russian protests on Bolotnaya square in Moscow in 2011, the driving force of the protest movements were inhabitants of the capitals – many of them relatively wealthy representatives of the middle class. However, no matter what kind of social group the protesters represent, the trigger point is consistently public anger over authorities' corruption and abuses of power.

Therefore, the EU's offer – particularly the implementation of AAs, including establishment of DCFTAs – is crucial for the stability of the EaP states. The European integration, even without the prospect of EU membership, is a means to democracy, rule of law and well-functioning free market economies. The EaP countries, including those most advanced in reforms – Georgia and Moldova – must continue painful transformations such as reforms in public administration and justice sector. Other crucial reforms are those in regional development, decentralisation and the agricultural sector.

Implementation of these reforms is a challenge even for the most reform-oriented governments in the EaP. Harmonisation Bringing the national legislation to compliance with EU *acquis* is difficult, but what is worse is that it will not provide immediate benefits to EaP countries integrating their economic and judiciary models with the EU's one. The EU provides financial support and technical assistance in the above-mentioned reforms, but these reforms are still at their embryonic stage. The results of the reforms are not yet tangible to ordinary citizens. Implementation of the DCFTA will eventually upgrade EaP

[4] Recently the government in Baku adopted the Russian-style narrative about alleged Western "fifth columns" trying to destabilise the internal situation in Azerbaijan. See: Jarosiewicz, A. (2014, December 10). Azerbaijan: closer to Russia, further from the West. Retrieved on January 11, 2015 from, http://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2014-12-10/azerbaijan-closer-to-russia-further-west

economies, for instance the quality of Georgia's agricultural production, but it does not bring any immediate profits.

At the same time, after the Russo–Georgian War in 2008, Russia's annexation of Crimea and the intervention in Eastern Ukraine, the EU should be fully aware that Russia will treat any attempt to cooperate with the EaP countries as a geopolitical threat. European integration success is perceived by president Vladimir Putin and the Russian ruling elite as a threat for Russia's integration projects in the post-Soviet area, such as the Eurasian Economic Union. As the Kremlin will oppose any EU action in the post-Soviet area, the EU, willingly or not, will have to face security challenges in its Eastern neighbourhood.

While the military sphere is not the EU's domain, operational cooperation with EaP countries should be deepened in the areas which may influence the EaP states' security sector. Cooperation could be developed bilaterally between the EU and individual countries (which may take into account, for example, police and security services) (Kaca, Parkes & Sobják, 2014, pp. 2–3). The EUMM's presence in Georgia's conflict zones in Abkhazia and South Ossetia is one positive example. Another is the EU Advisory Mission for Civilian Security Sector Reform Ukraine (EUAM Ukraine), a civilian mission under the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy established in July 2014. Nevertheless, the EU should re-engage in resolution of the frozen conflicts in the post-Soviet area and the South Caucasus, including the most serious conflict in the region, the Nagorno–Karabakh conflict.

The split of the EaP countries into two groups is apparent: group one contains those who want to integrate with the EU, and includes Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia (in their case there are options for EU transformative impact). Group two is reluctant towards the EU, and is comprised of Belarus, Armenia and Azerbaijan. These countries are willing to build strong state institutions without adoption of European democratic standards. At best, such projects may resemble Georgia's period of modernisation during the Saakashvili presidency (the "Singapore" model, although obviously worded in different rhetoric). The worst-case scenario may imply economic breakdown, political destabilisation and social protests.

Still, the EU should continue cooperation with these "reluctant" and "Eurosceptical" EaP member states. Even these countries are interested in visa liberalisation and sectorial integration with the EU, and the EU should respond positively to such expectations. Such cooperation may concern transportation projects or energy cooperation as in case of the EU–Azerbaijan relationship.

On the other hand, the EU should further engage in parallel diplomacy and establishment of stronger ties with the regions' civil societies. The Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum is a useful tool, which not only enables contacts between the EU representatives and civil society representatives from the region, but also helps in exchanging experience between activists from various EaP countries. The EU should start to financially support NGOs in the region not merely due to idealistic goal of supporting democratization in the region. The EU budget support given to the EaP governments is often not efficiently spent and thus not boosting internal reforms (see Kaca, Sobjak & Zasztowt, 2014, p. 11). Therefore, strengthening the EaP civil societies and local investigative journalism creates a tool to control efficiency of the government spending on reforms. There is also a need to establish EU-friendly media (TV, newspapers, web portals) to explain the goals of the EaP to societies of the region. Such channels of information may counter the false claims of Russian-sponsored media that the EU's hidden agenda is to destabilise legitimate governments and trigger other "colourful revolutions".

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