ULKOPOLIITTINEN INSTITUUTTI
UTRIKESPOLITISKA INSTITUTET
THE FINNISH INSTITUTE OF INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

December 2013

FIIA COMMENT 20/2013

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The EU's defeat in Vilnius > Can the Eastern Partnership be salvaged?

Instead of geopolitics, the EU should concentrate on incremental reform promotion among its willing partners and properly calibrate the "more for more" principle.

The EU's Eastern Partnership summit in Vilnius was anticipated with a palpable sense of satisfaction in Europe, and viewed as a powerful indicator that EU policy in the Common Neighbourhood with Russia is bearing fruit. Not even the September announcement by Armenia of its intention to join the Eurasian Customs Union and bury its earlier plans of association with the EU could deter some commentators from heralding the event as a success ex ante.

The reality, however, did not live up to expectations. The decision by the Ukrainian authorities to suspend the signing of their association and free trade agreement with the EU makes the actual results of the summit look rather meagre in comparison. Although all due respect must be given to Moldova and Georgia – the two partner states which have now initialled similar agreements, this fact alone cannot save the diplomatic face of Europe. Failure has to be conceded.

The good news is that this is not the end of the EU's engagement in its eastern periphery, which will continue regardless. EU policy in the Eastern Neighbourhood is in better shape now than it was two years ago, largely because Brussels and the member states were able to agree on the following conceptual premises of this policy. First, Eastern Neighbours are important for Europe's future. Second, the policy in this neighbourhood is no mere appendage to the relations with Russia, but may have independent goals and dynamics. Third, practice should be based on the "more for more" approach, namely differentiating among individual partners and offering the willing greater incentives. This positive experience is something to build upon.

Yet there is also a serious lesson to be learned.

As a foreign policy actor, the EU simply cannot combine geopolitical motivations with promoting the systemic transformation of its neighbours. Moreover, the EU is not capable of playing geopolitical games at all. In order to do so, there has to be internal cohesion, clarity of goals and messages, and the willingness to use all available resources.

Russia has all of the above. Its message is clear and, to all intents and purposes, very honest. It is requesting a subordinated relationship in exchange for massive economic assistance. Its subsidies to Belarus, for example, amount to 20 per cent of the latter's GDP, and it has offered Ukraine an estimated equivalent of 9 to 13 billion dollars a year if Kyiv chooses to join the Eurasian Customs Union. The EU, in turn, is also proposing an unequal relationship, since the membership perspective is not offered. But unlike Russia, the EU is offering practically no money.

The EU tries to compensate for this fundamental weakness by telling Moscow that Europe's actions are not targeted against Russia's interests, which is, however, a pointless exercise. Moscow perceives it as a zero-sum game, and acts accordingly.

Moreover, those regional partners with a poor democracy record see the geopolitical framework as an opportunity to obtain more from the EU in exchange not for internal reforms, but for some demonstration of readiness to move a bit further away from Russia. This was a trick that Belarus' Alexander Lukashenko played before the 2010 presidential elections. The calculation that Brussels will see Ukraine as too big to fall into Russia's orbit, and will duly drop its insistence that Yulia Timoshenko should be released from jail before Vilnius, was evident in the behaviour of Ukraine's leader Viktor Yanukovych.

The geopolitical thinking is inertial. It uncritically takes it for granted that if Ukraine now decides to move closer to Russia, the latter

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will become stronger and more aggressive. But this is not necessarily the case.

It is, in fact, more likely that Moscow will face such demands from Ukraine, which will decelerate or wholly derail Eurasian integration and give rise to classic imperial overstretch. Suffice it to say that raising Russian subsidies for Ukraine to the Belarusian level of 20 per cent of GDP – which, incidentally, did not make Belarus a prosperous economy either – would require 35 billion dollars annually, which Moscow hardly has at its disposal.

Instead of the geopolitical tug of war with Russia in the Eastern Neighbourhood, the EU should further develop the meritocratic approach and work primarily with those partners that share its vision of the goals.

If Moldova now looks set to be the best candidate to become a success story (and "best" here does not mean "very good", due to domestic political uncertainty and influential oligarchic structures), the EU should concentrate its resources, expertise, and economic assistance on actually achieving success.

Moscow will still do what it deems necessary. But the ability to resist the pressure, albeit in one specific case, will increase.

The "more for more" principle implies "less for less" and even "zero for zero". The unwilling partners, and their leaders, may be left to explore other options that are more to their liking. The EU should be ready to respond and reciprocate when partners are ready, but the partnership will only be reduced to empty rhetoric when they are not.

The most important point to bear in mind is that the key components of Europe's own past successes, its remaining soft power and external attractiveness, have been its norms and values. The yardstick for measuring the success of the EU's regional policy should also be internal transformations in partner countries, however small and incremental.