Which Geopolitics for the European Union?
The EU's Eastern Partnership

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This article discusses whether the European Union (EU) has engaged in a geopolitical approach when it comes to its Eastern neighbors, now included in the EU's Eastern Partnership. The paper concludes that the EU has not engaged in a geopolitical approach when it comes to its policies towards its Eastern neighbors. Instead, it has approached them through the prisms of inter-connectedness and interdependency. The main reason for that rejection of geopolitical approach lies in the role that the EU has assigned to itself as an international actor, i.e. as a civilian and normative power. Finally, the use of civilian instruments would avoid the EU falling into a geopolitical trap that would lead to a zero sum game situation for its Eastern neighours in their relationships with Russia.

Keywords: European Union, geo-politics, Eastern Partnership

Introduction

For many observers, the events unfolding in Ukraine since the autumn of 2013 have exposed the shortcomings of EU policy towards its Eastern neighbors known as the Eastern Partnership. To be sure, the seemingly new rivalry between the EU and Russia triggered or intensified the geopolitical discussions about EU external policies (House of Lords, 2015, pp. 94-104; Klubman, 2014).

The underlying argument of this paper is to say that the EU has been reluctant to engage in a geopolitical approach in the development of its external policies towards its Eastern neigbors. That reluctance can be explained by the very specific role the EU has assigned for itself as an international actor, i.e. as a civilian and normative power.

Finally this paper concludes that the development of these civilian and normative instruments would provide the EU with the best option in dealing with its Eastern neighbors and the best insurance of not falling into a geopolitical trap.

The European Neighborhood Policy

The EU's Eastern Partnership originated from the existing European Neighborhood Policy (ENP). Therefore, there is a need to go back to the ENP to understand both the nature and the limitations of the EU's policy towards its Eastern partners (Korosteleva, 2011).

The European Neighborhood Policy originated from a convergence of concerns about the effect of the EU enlargement on countries such as Belarus, Moldova, Russia and Ukraine. These concerns were reflected in the letter sent in January 2002, by the British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw, to Brussels calling for a new approach

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towards these four "new" neighbors in the light of the upcoming EU enlargement of the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. Later in the same year, the Polish government submitted a Non-paper to the EU member states calling for an "Eastern dimension", i.e. a new and specific EU approach to countries such as Belarus, Moldova and Russia, including the possibility of EU membership for Ukraine. Interestingly, the Polish memorandum also emphasized the need to expand this Eastern dimension to the South Caucasus. These initiatives, however, were met with some concerns by the Southern EU Member States, France and Spain especially, who asked for the countries of the Mediterranean to be included in the new policy as well (Schäffer & Tolksdorf, 2009).

As a result, in November 2002, the Member states gave the mandate to both the High Representative for Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), Javier Solana, and the EU External Relations Commissioner, Chris Patten, to develop the new policy under the concept of "Wider Europe". That decision was endorsed by the Copenhagen European Council in December 2002 whereby the EU Heads of State and Government stressed to need to design a new policy towards the EU's neighbors in the Eastern part of Europe and in its Southern part including Russia. In reaction, the European Commission released its first communication on the subject by launching the new concept of "Wider Europe". However, the discussions over the geographical scope of that new policy quickly renamed under ENP were still uncertain. Russia refused to be included in the initiative. Officially, the country rejected the idea of being included in a group of countries from Morocco to Ukraine and emphasized instead the need to conduct its relations with the EU on a strictly bilateral basis. There were more fundamental reasons to explain Russia's position. These were linked with its rejection of the new normative hegemonic policy that transpired through the ENP project, i.e. to export EU norms, rules and values to the rest of the continent, including Russia itself (Haukkala, 2012). After Russia's opt-out, the ENP would eventually include the South Caucasus Republics. The importance of these countries was highlighted in the EU Security Strategy approved by the Member States in December 2003 (Edwards, 2008).

More concretely, the ENP was based on the conclusion of Action Plans negotiated on a bilateral basis leading to the conclusion of Partnership and Cooperation Agreements (PCAs) with the EU neighbors. These Action Plans included the proposal to the countries concerned to have a stake in the single market, including the four freedoms attached to it as well as security issues and conflict management.

That being said, the literature on the ENP has been divided on the question as to whether it could be defined as a new policy or rather as a composite and multidimensional one. For example, the ENP was not designed to replace existing relations between the EU and its neighbors (Kelley, 2006). At best it consisted mainly of reinforcing the *acquis* set up by the existing PCAs concluded with the partner countries (Korosteleva, 2011). One of the innovations brought about by the ENP concerned the strengthening of coherence between the two existing EU pillars, namely the Community pillar and the CFSP/European Security and Defense Policy (ESDP) pillar (Crombois, 2010).

Since its inception, the ENP was poised by some important divergences between the Member states. The first one was revealed in its uncertainty regarding its geographical scope. Linked to this dimension lay the question of conditionalities. Some EU member states such as Britain were defending strong conditionalities while others like France and Germany were advocating softer ones, each for different reasons. The French were concerned about the impact of too strong conditionalities on the Mediterranean partners while Germany was concerned about their impact on Russia. The ambiguity relating to the prospects for EU membership highlighted another cleavage between the Member States. Indeed, the new EU Member States refused the idea

of rejecting in principle such a possibility, especially as far as the Eastern neighbors were concerned. As a result, the ENP remained at best ambivalent on the subject in avoiding it altogether from the discussions. In this respect, inclusion in article 8 of the Treaty on the European Union by the Treaty of Lisbon stressing the need for the EU "to develop a special relationship with the neighboring countries" (Official Journal, 2012, 326/20) contributed to close the discussions (Ghazarian, 2012). That being said, the Eastern partners still have the possibility of applying for EU membership in accordance with article 49 of the Treaty on European Union. So far, Georgia and Ukraine are the two countries that have demonstrated their willingness to apply for EU membership at some point in the future (House of Lords, 2015). Furthermore, some observers still believe that such a possibility should remain on the table for the countries interested (Park, 2014). The most recent developments indicate the growing dichotomy between the Eastern Partnership and EU Membership. In a proposal supported by about 12 member states—among which are Germany, Britain and most of the Central and Eastern European countries—the Swedish government put forward the concept of a European package to be offered to the Eastern partners stressing the need for closer involvement of them in the EU programs and agencies while falling short of mentioning membership prospects in February 2014 (Non Paper, 2014). In the last summit between the EU leaders and the Eastern partners that took place in Riga in May 2015, the question of EU membership was not mentioned at all. Moreover, EU leaders such as Angela Merkel made it quite clear that the Eastern Partnership should not be considered as a preparation for EU membership for the countries concerned (Euractiv, 2015).

Eastern Partnership: EU's Eastern Neighbors as a Buffer or a Bridge?

In May 2008, the "Eastern dimension" resurfaced in a proposal made to the Council in by the Swedish and Polish governments for an "Eastern Partnership" to be developed by the EU with its Eastern European neighbors (Polish-Swedish Proposal-Eastern Partnership, 2008). In June 2008, the Council asked the European Commission to prepare a proposal for an Eastern Partnership. This proposal took the form of a Communication released by the Commission on 8 December 2008 (European Commission, 2008). The Eastern Partnership was officially launched at the EU Summit that took place in Prague on 9 May 2009 (Council of the European Union, 2009).

The Eastern Partnership is addressed to Belarus, Moldova and Ukraine as well as to three South Caucasus Republics of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia. The Eastern Partnership proposes to develop a new relationship with these countries that goes beyond the existing one within the framework of the ENP while keeping the door for new membership closed. More concretely, it offers the Eastern partners the conclusion of a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA) in view of establishing a Neighborhood Economic Area[1]. The Eastern Partnership also focuses on the creation of new areas of multilateral cooperation in five specific fields of actions that include good governance and democracy, economic convergence with EU legislation, energy security and people to people contact (European Commission, 2008).

The Eastern Partnership also reflects some deep divergences between the EU Member states. As such, the Eastern Partnership was proposed both by Sweden and Poland as a reaction to the founding of the Union for the Mediterranean launched a year earlier under EU French Presidency. This divergence may be explained by the need to balance between the Eastern and the Southern neighbors within EU's external policies (Gromalki, Peters, & Rood, 2009).

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[1] To date Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine have concluded such agreement with the European Union.

Another line of division between the Member States concerns their views on the position of Eastern neighbors as either buffer zone or bridge between the EU and Russia. These positions were revealed in US diplomatic telegrams released by Wikileaks to some leading European newspapers. In these telegrams, Radowslav Sikorski, the Polish Foreign Affairs Minister was expressing his fears after the Russia-Georgian conflict of 2008 and the need thereof to strengthen the relations between the EU and its Eastern neighbors (Poland, 2008).

It should be borne in mind that the conflict in Georgia was not mentioned in the Swedish-Polish memorandum that focused its attention instead on Ukraine. Nevertheless, the conflict contributed to accelerate the agenda of the discussions for the adoption of the Eastern Partnership by the EU Member States. Central, however, to these discussions was division between the same Member States on the issue of the future of EU-Russia relations. In other words, the EU was divided between countries such as Poland and the Baltic States that saw the Eastern Partners as buffers against possible Russian revisionism. For other countries led by Germany and to some extent France, the Eastern partners were seen mostly as a possible bridge between the EU and Russia (Depo, 2012).

The recent events linked to the Ukrainian crisis have indeed hidden the important point that both the Eastern Partnership and EU-Russia relations were discussed in parallel. In the aftermath of the Russian Georgian war of August 2009, the French were even threatening to block the Eastern Partnership unless significant progress was made in the EU-Russia negotiations in view of concluding a new Partnership and Cooperation agreement (House of Lords, 2009).

Which Geopolitics for the European Union?

Since the start of the Ukrainian crisis, the EU has been caught in a whole array of geopolitical discussions. Most of them would attribute among the reasons for the fall out between the EU and Russia, the lack of clear strategic thinking from the part of the EU or a lack of a clear geopolitical approach (Byrne, 2014; Klubman, 2014). The Russian decision to launch a Eurasian Economic Union mutally exclusive with the DCFTA to be concluded with the EU's Eastern partners contributed to exacerbate such discussions[2].

There is no doubt that the end of the Cold War in Europe has led to a return of geopolitics in Europe if we refer to a book recently published on the subject (Guzzini, 2012). Even if the causes for this comeback go beyond the scope of this paper, it is, however, worth mentioning the kind of geopolitical approaches we are talking about. Critical geopolitics has emerged as a reaction to classical geopolitics and its dubious legacy from Nazism. Instead of emphasizing the relations between geography and politics, critical geopolitics focuses on geographical representations and how these interact with foreign policy analysis using a more constructivist approach. In other words, the extent to which geography can be a social construct that may be used to legitimize political decisions. Another approach called neo-classical geopolitics has tried to propose a fresh view that would break with the excesses of the past while re-assessing the importance of some forms of environmental determinism (Haverluk, Beauchemin, & Mueller, 2014). Neo-classical geopolitics is more embedded in the realist approaches to international relations. Its core principle lies in the concept of power expansion seen as a necessity even though a distinction can be made between a political brand and a military brand of these approaches (Guzzini, 2012).

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[2] To date, among the Eastern partners, only Armenia and Belarus joined the Eurasian Economic Union.

The Eastern Partnership and Geopolitical Approaches

The discussions about the geopolitical dimensions of the Eastern Parnership have flourished in the aftermath of the Russia-Ukraine crisis of 2013. In reality, two sets of discussions have emerged. The first one takes its inspiration from neo-classical geopolitics and emphasises the fact of the geopolitical nature of the Eastern Partnership. These views would refer to the Eastern neighborhood as a loci of competition between Russia and the European Union. In this perspective, they would explain the reasons for the Russian opposition to Eastern Partnership as an attempt to control both politically and economically the space between the EU and Russia (DeBattista, 2013). Others prefer to rely on some more classical geopolitical concepts such as the one of rimland to describe the countries included in the Eastern Partnership. As a result, they call for the need to strenghten the political and security alliances between some of the Eastern neighbors and the "West" through NATO membership and more economic and political closeness with the European Union (Velenciuc, 2014).

The second set of discussions would instead consider that the Eastern Parnership is an essentially technocratic project based on legally binding instruments that excluded all geopolitical implications. For the proponents of such views, the European Union should instead develop a more political dimension to the Eastern Partnerhsip, including a new geopolitical or geostrategic view (Delcour, 2015; Nitoiu, 2015).

Since its inception, the Eastern Partnership reflects the role that the EU assigned for itself as a civilian and normative power (Sjursen, 2007; Telo, 2007). That is a power that has been reluctant to use military power and that focused instead on the expansion of its norms and values. Indeed, in relying essentially on financial assistance, partnership, conditionality, expansion of norms to partner countries and reluctance to use military force in the Eastern neighborhood, the Eastern Partnership appears as a good example of the use of civilian and normative instruments (Manners, 2012) .

The use of such civilian and normative instruments renders all discussion about the EU's geopolitical views very difficult if not impossible. Indeed such instruments are premised on the rejection of a neo-Malthusian view of a world based on the idea of inherent competition and scarcity. They also challenge any geographical determinism in favoring the need to build partnership and to export EU norms. That being said, the ENP, and the Eastern Partnership are not exempted from ambiguities. For example, research in discourse analysis of the EU's policies towards its neighbors shows the extent to which they reflect conflicting geopolitical discourses: one emphasizing a geopolitics policy of cooperation and the other advocating a geopolitics of securitization (Boedeltje & van Houtum, 2011).

Nevertheless, as a civilian and normative power, the EU has been reluctant to adopt the views of neo-classical geopolitics in its external policies. Instead of approaching geography in terms of distinct spaces and as a loci of competition, the EU is has been emphasizing the expansion of norms and values based on the inter-connectedness with its partners.

The use of civilian instruments presents the last advantage of giving the EU the possibility to re-connect with Russia at some latter stage. They would enable to EU to avoid falling into the geopolitical trap of a zero sum game for Eastern partners (either Russia or the EU) while being able to offer in the long term a prospect for some positive sum game (Youngs, 2015).

Conclusion

The main conclusion of this paper is that the EU has not approached its external policies vis-à-vis its

Eastern partners through the lenses of geopolitics. Since their inception, both the European Neighborhood Policy and the Eastern Partnership were based on the principles of inter-connectedness and interdependency between the EU and the countries concerned. In doing so, the EU has constructed the space with its neighbors, not as a space of confrontation and rivalry but as a space of inter-connectedness and interdependency based on the expansion of values and norms. In other words, with the Eastern neighbors, the EU has assigned for itself the right to act as a civilian and normative power. The use and the strengthening of normative and civilian instruments should enable the EU not to fall into the geopolitical trap in its relationship with its Eastern neighbors.

Finally, the irony of the Russian-Ukrainian war lay in the fact that Russia saw the EU policies through its own geopolitical lenses of confrontation and rivalry to justify its actions, something that the EU was trying to avoid when developing the Eastern Partnership.

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