



Geopolitics, Security and the Eastern Partnership

by André P. DeBattista

One of the priorities of the Lithuanian Presidency of the Council of the European Union will be to strengthen the EU's relationship with its Eastern neighbours. This objective has been formalised into a process referred to as the Eastern Partnership (EaP). The EaP was launched in May 2009 and aims to foster political cooperation and deeper economic integration between the 28 EU states and their six partner countries in Eastern Europe: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and the Ukraine. In view of the meeting scheduled for the 28 and 29 of November in Vilnius, this essay aims to highlight some geopolitical aspects of the EaP.

The Eastern Partnership: An Overview

The EaP operates within the framework of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP). The European Neighbourhood Policy Strategy Paper (2004) summarises its aims: ensure that stability, security and prosperity are sustained at the new borders of the European Union. The arrangement does not necessarily encourage or discourage EU membership; although with gradual economic and political integration, the question of membership will be debated and considered.

The Euro-Med Partnership and the subsequent Union for the Mediterranean provided a framework for cooperation between the EU and its Mediterranean partners. The Eastern Partnership hopes to achieve a similar result. It is a *“contractual framework governing relations between the European Union and each of the partner countries.”* (Delcour, 2012)

Moscow's Challenge

The partner countries are all former republics of the USSR. Russia is a key player in this area and seeks to deepen its influence. Its political interest in the region is cemented by geographical proximity and historical ties.

Moscow's attempts to set up regional institutions have often been dogged by a weak institutional set-up and the lack of political will. The Eurasian Customs Union, however, is the first initiative which seems to be challenging the EU's engagement in the region. Although its economic rationale has been described as *“weak”*, the Eurasian Customs Union boasts of a robust institutional

structure: *“It functions as a rule-based body, consistent with the World Trade Organization (WTO) regime and modern international norms”* (Dragneva&Wolczuk,

2012). The Eurasian Customs Union is modelled on the EU. Russia seems to be succeeding in articulating this organisation as a viable regional alternative which will offer economic benefits underpinned by a strong and well-designed institutional setup. Two Eastern Partners have already signed up to the ECU: Belarus as a member, and Armenia as candidate.

This initiative has attracted considerable criticism. Its most vocal critic is former US Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, who has decried the process as sovietisation: *“let's make no mistake about it. We know what the goal is and we are trying to figure out effective ways to slow down or prevent it.”* Other

Moscow's attempts to set up regional institutions have often been dogged by a weak institutional set-up and the lack of political will.

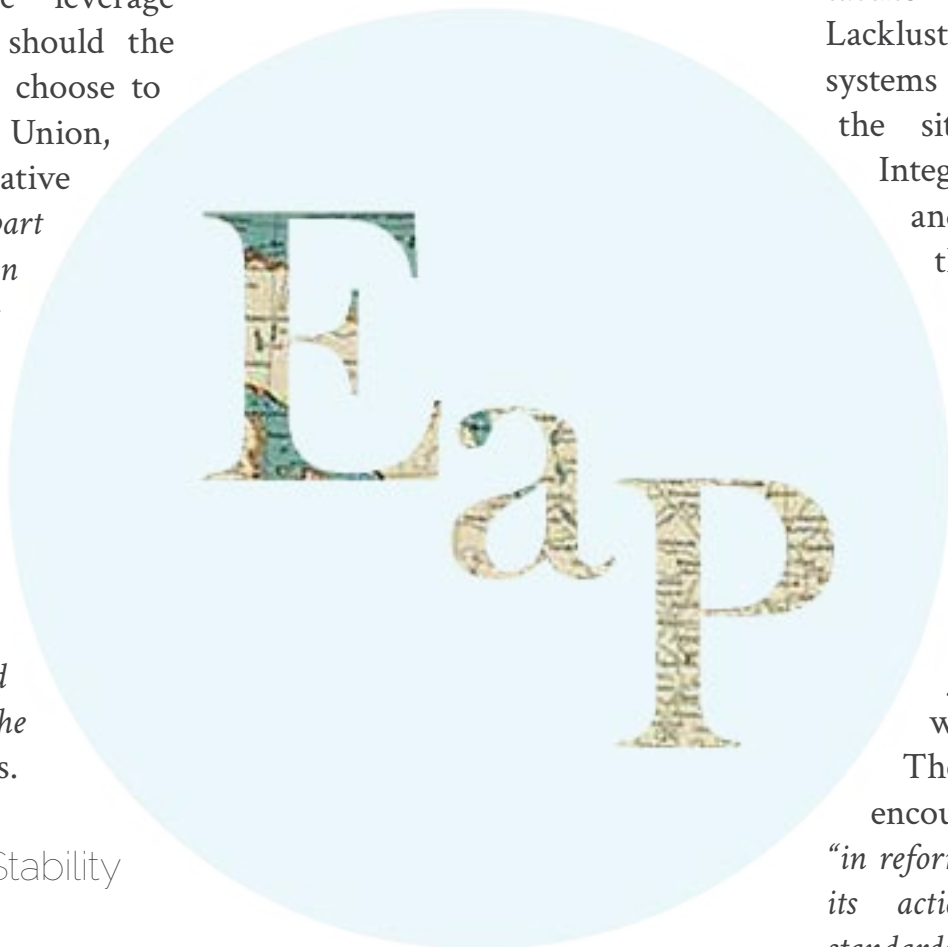
analysts have been equally scathing: “the Eurasian Customs Union is marked by authoritarian politics, oligarch-dominated business and unhealthy alliance between economy and politics.” (Kasciunas, 2012)

Kasciunas also points out that Russia would gain considerable leverage in regional trade policy should the Eastern Partnership states choose to join the Eurasian Customs Union, and this could have negative security implications: “apart from preventing the promotion of political and economic reform in the EU’s Eastern neighbourhood, this would also keep the Eastern Partnership countries on the path of development marked by an unhealthy alliance between authoritarian politics, economy and business – characteristics of the post-Soviet countries.”- he says.

The Rule of Law and Stability

The Post-Soviet period was one of uncertainty and pressure to reform, which was particularly tough on the former constituent republics. The challenge for reformers was to create effective institutions to replace arbitrary and authoritarian systems. In addition, the socialist planned economy needed to be transformed into a dynamic market economy. The outcomes have not always been positive. Strengthening of the rule of law, democracy and good governance

are priorities listed in the [Eastern Partnership roadmap](#). It aims to “foster approximation to EU standards through dialogue and exchange of best practice.” It covers areas such as electoral standards, freedom of press, the strengthening of the office of the ombudsman, public administration reform and the



administrative capacities of regional and local authorities.

These initiatives may indeed contribute to strengthen the rule of law and provide much needed stability. However, they strongly depend on the political will of each government. Dialogue is a two-way process and some governments, in particular those of Belarus and Azerbaijan, may not be forthcoming on this front.

Crime and Justice

Cross-border crime across has wide-ranging implications on the security of the Eastern Partnership states and the EU as a whole. The effectiveness of criminal organisations is due to stealth tactics and wide-spread corruption. Lacklustre border controls and visa systems may further exacerbate the situation. The EU supports Integrated Border Management, and is to provide tangible help through training of border guards and custom officers, supplemented by information sharing and institution-building exercises aimed at tackling issues of asylum, migration, and human or drug trafficking.

The functioning of the Justice system is another area with potential for collaboration. The Eastern Partnership will encourage the sharing of experiences “in reforming the judiciary and adjusting its action to European/international standards” (EC, 2012). This extends to law-enforcement agencies, particularly in their fight against corruption and cybercrime.

Energy Security

A reliable and uninterrupted source of energy is now considered to be a matter of national security. The Eastern Partnership thus seeks to “contribute to the establishment of a transparent and

stable regulatory” framework which can “attract investment, increase competitiveness and enhance the security of supply” (EC, 2012). The Eastern Partnership hopes to contribute to the establishment of a “regulatory and legislative framework which promotes energy efficiency and the use of renewable energy.” It seeks to enhance nuclear safety by encouraging a strong nuclear safety culture and “establishing a solid, legally binding framework, in line with international treaties and conventions” (EC, 2012).

Critical Appraisal

Security issues require a multilateral, rather than bilateral, approach. Thus, the Eastern Partnership can be the right vehicle for the EU-28 to engage in the region. However, one cannot underestimate the difficult political climate in the region. Armenia and Georgia have enacted much needed reforms in accordance to international praxis. Nonetheless, both remain embroiled in regional conflicts. Georgia and Russia are at loggerheads over South Ossetia and Abkhazia whilst Armenia and Azerbaijan are deadlocked over Nagorno-Karabakh. Moldova is also in conflict over the region of Transdnistria. These heated situations have wide-ranging security implications. There can be doubts over the success of reforms in the Ukraine and Moldova. The rule of law appears

A reliable and uninterrupted source of energy is now considered to be a matter of national security.

to be weak and corruption is still widespread. Azerbaijan and Belarus are still dominated by an autocratic neo-Soviet style of governance. Very little has been achieved in terms of human rights. These issues are further compounded by Russian influence in the region. Moscow’s participation in the territorial disputes and its attempt to establish an economic and political union should be closely monitored.

The European Union can (and should) lead by best practice in the areas where it has been successful. However, the European External Action Service (EEAS) is still in its infancy and it needs to develop institutional capabilities to deal with such complex issues. The Eastern Partnership can be a useful framework serving to consolidate what has been achieved and to lay the groundwork for further action. However, it should be guided by realistic aims and avoid the overly formal and burdensome structure which sometimes characterises EU policy making.

Realistic aims coupled with an equally realistic institutional framework will be determinant of the success of this partnership.