

Association Agreement and Associated Challenges

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It is no secret that Russian Federation is reluctant to loosen its grip on the European aspirations of Eastern Partnership countries. Well before the Association Agreement concluded with the European Union has entered into force in Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia, the Russian media actively speculated on the subject, suggesting that visa liberalization and economic opportunities would not any tangible benefits to the citizens of the respective countries.

The goal of the strategy is twofold: on the one hand the Russian Federation tries to prevent the countries from European integration process, whereas on the other hand, it has its own stakes, retaining the Georgian, Moldovan and Ukrainian business entrepreneurs on Russian market. For these reasons, the Russian propaganda has spent many efforts in persuading the business circles of the EaP countries, that Russian economy should be favored for the very reason that it creates less barriers for the export of goods and services. Indeed, according to the Russian interpretation, their economy is 'old but gold.' If the definition applies to anything these are indeed the Russian tactics, that employ a much favored mechanism and remain strongly intertwined with Russian foreign policy: that is 'divide and rule'. The target of the divide and rule policy are the European citizens – the Russian state-run and sponsored media in Europe outnumbered the positive narratives through actively propagating about the trouble the countries could bring to Europe, emphasizing the influx of illegal Ukrainian migrant workers and the spread of Georgian criminal activities

So the rise of nationalist sentiments among the population of many European countries is a basic target of the propaganda. Existence of the stereotypes, just as the misconception of nationalism and self-preservation, creates a fertile ground, that appeals to human fallacy. Hence, the Russian narratives tried to disfigure the reputation of Eastern Partnership countries through reassuring the citizens of EU that the low social awareness of the partner countries would pose challenges to their security and identity.

The other part of the story is the spread of disinformation in the EaP countries who are tied with the European Union through Association Agreement – here, the business entrepreneurs are pushed to believe that the European market is something inaccessible, imposing high nontariff barriers and standards that would be too difficult to meet. Strange as it is, the Russian propaganda actually believes that their target communities have low social awareness and suffer from poor literacy about the European values.

As fake news gain momentum, the narratives are essentially focused on not only spreading unfavorable stories, but also on inflaming frustration among the citizens and the targeted methods spent enormous effort to brainwash the population. Such manipulations usually sought to play with the public sentiments and downplay the positive outcomes of the political association with the

European Union. Ultimately, the narratives boiled down to the logic, that it is all too early to celebrate the outcomes and the citizens already cherishing this progress, would soon realize the poor influence it made on their lives.

Interestingly, the visa liberalization is not related to economic growth or opportunities, but the Russian propaganda has been keen to portray this as an economic project, that was supposed to improve social conditions. Therefore, shortly after the countries got green light on the visa-free regime, narratives focused on the argument, that visa liberalization has done nothing to alleviate economic hardship of its beneficiaries. In this respect, a reference was made to their slow GDP growth, also stressing, that ordinary citizens could not afford traveling visa-free and therefore it was the prerogative of the elites only.

Therefore, there is a desperate need to explain the rationale beyond the paper to citizens and interested stakeholders for much closer ties with the European market. The responsible actors, like the governments and SCOs face a challenge to deconstruct the Russian myths and stereotypes to carry out the agenda and to practice what they preach. There is a need for the rise of social awareness within EaP too – the fear and frustration with the European values should not take the lead. In addition, the responsibility towards the overall process is something each citizen should be aware of. Tightened technical or legislative provisions and measures against organized crime requires not only the engagement of the authorities alone, but it needs to establish a common understanding that the citizens who travel to Europe represent their own country. Therefore, in the end, it is not about certain individuals, but the overall individuals who are responsible for the image of Eastern Partnership in Europe.