

## **Eastern Partnership: Different Paths, Common Challenges**

In the aftermath to the Russian aggression and its subsequent occupation of Georgia, the European Union has reached out to the region through Eastern Partnership initiative. Comprising 6 countries in a post soviet space, the initiative has marked a new beginning for Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine into the relations with the EU, seeking to advance their economic wellbeing and more closer cooperation with democratic Europe.

More than 10 years after the level up, the EaP has shown both the progress and difficulties. Whilst some of the countries have certain reservations for the enhanced cooperation, Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia have established an institutional framework of partnership, signing up for association agreement and visa free regime. Yet the path to democracy is uncommon, the majority of the countries do share the same challenge, in a face of their territorial integrity. Underlined by their commitment to address the problem of separatism, the emerging or transitional democracies contradict a much complex international setting – geographic proximity with the Russian Federation makes things trickier. Indeed, the post-soviet Russia is struggling to use the separatist movements as a tool for containing the Euro-Atlantic aspirations of her neighbors.

The Russian support to secessionist regimes take different forms and varies from open aggression to covert tactics. Therefore, it is interesting the analyze the methods and look at their broader political implications.

### **Forced Passportisation and Support to Separatists**

The issue of passportisation came to the foreground especially after the breakup of the Soviet Union, when Russia had to deal with large masses of stateless persons in the separatist regions, who refused to accept the citizenship of their respective countries. The Russian Federation reacted with this uncertainty through the policy of issuing the Russian passports. The passportisation policy has become a subject to political manipulation, as it infringed on the right of a state to exercise sovereignty on its given territory. So on the one hand, Russia supported the right of stateless people to citizenship, whereas on the other hand, it threatened the sovereignty of its neighbors through subverting attempts of a sovereign country to consolidate a civic national identity over its territorial holdings.

The issue has become thornier, as later the Russian Federation started its rhetoric to protect its citizens, or the holders of Russian passports, within the post-soviet space – in Georgia (in Abkhazia, Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia), Ukraine (Crimea), Moldova (Transnistria). Further, on 6 March 2008, Russia walked out from the CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States) regime of 1996 which outlawed the member states from establishing the military-economic relations with Abkhaz separatists. This enabled Russia to deploy forces in the conflict zone, through launching social, political and economic relations with both of the separatist regimes of Georgia.

### **‘Protection of Russian Citizens Abroad’**

The notion of “citizens” is rather difficult phenomenon, if we consider, that the Russian legislation of 90’s made a reference to ethnic-Russian residents, whereas later on it referred to the holders of Russian passports. So both the ethnic-Russian and foreign residents of the EaP were subject to so called passportisation policy, which authorized them with access to Russian citizenship and undermined the sovereignty of these states.

During the military adventurism in Georgia and Ukraine, Russia legitimized its military action on the basis of the UN norm “The Responsibility to Protect,” asserting that she defended Russian citizens in Georgia

and Ukraine. However, the adherence to this norm was not compatible, as it authorizes the states with the responsibility to protect their citizens against ‘genocide, war crimes, crimes against humanity and ethnic cleansing.’ Further, the principle only applies to a state’s own territory and is thereby inapplicable to expatriate citizens. More precisely, Russia uses the argument as an essential instrument to compel the given country shape its foreign policy in relevance with Russian political objectives. Indeed, the Russian aggression in Georgia, Ukraine with a pretext of defending its nationals abroad, was designed to halt their integration into Euro-Atlantic institutions.

### **Russification**

With the decision to abstain from the recognition of Abkhazian Orthodox Church, the Moscow Patriarchy disguises its action to retain a holistic approach with Georgia’s autocephalous Church. Indeed, the argument of common faith with Russia is much favored in Kremlin, seeking to gain the hearts and minds of Georgians. However, this does not prevent the Russian Patriarch to visit the occupied Abkhazia on several occasions, or to support the Abkhaz separatists erase the traces of history through whitewashing the historical churches of Bedia, Ilori etc. in occupied Abkhazia.

The covert methods of support are designed to masquerade the Russification of Abkhazia, that basically boil down to portraying the Abkhaz history as a part of Russia. The policy of Russification is not limited to church issue however. Indeed, the increased pressure to impose a ban on education into native language for the remaining Georgians in Abkhazia, as well as the so called ‘law on property’ (legitimizing the Russian ‘property rights’ in Abkhazia), conscription into Russian army and/or restriction on the movement for all residents across the occupation line, threaten not only the human existence, but also put both the Abkhaz and Georgian identities under risk.

### **Implications of Russian Soft and Hard Power Approach**

The cases of Georgia and Ukraine have demonstrated that other EaP countries with large numbers of Russian passport-holders and separatist conflicts may come at the risk of military conflict with Moscow, if they show willingness for Euro-Atlantic integration. The Russian politics has its soft power approach too. The maintenance of Russian troops in the EaP region and/or the political loyalties achieved into bilateral relations with Belarus, Armenia and Azerbaijan are more or less substituting the Russian territorial concerns in a more elaborate manner. Likewise, the territorial influence is closely intertwined with the Russian desire to uphold ‘security and stability’ in the EaP through distancing it from Euro-Atlantic space.

Overall, the security, strategic and economic factors are the basis for which Russia perceives the EaP region as its ‘zone of privileged interests.’ As of to Ronald D. Asmus, the Russian Federation eventually has to integrate into the international community, which means playing by its rules, not breaking them. Russians may come to regret their support for separatism same because the same problem is prevailing inside Russia, in the North Caucasus. Asmus contends that Russia’s military intervention in Georgia did not intimidate separatists within Russia’s own border – indeed it may have done the opposite.

Taken altogether, these factors underscore the need to condemn Russian irregularities on international level and hold her accountable by means of legal proceedings. Indeed, since 2008, the recognition of Georgia’s occupation on international level was meant to derail Russian inclination of Abkhazia's recognition. Georgia’s active campaign has gained outcomes with a handful of countries in Europe and the United States recognizing the occupation of Georgia in the respective parliaments. Unfortunately the statements of

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European leaders on occupation has never been enough. Recognition of Georgia's occupation on legislative level is essentially important for the de-occupation of a country.

Likewise, EaP is desperately in need of employing new mechanisms to defy Russian diplomatic gambit. Any negotiated solution and or compromise that originates from Russian-initiated position should be treated as totally unacceptable. The conflict with Russia, and or Russian inspired secessionist regimes, will never be transformed unless the EaP refuses to back down on any detail. Otherwise, it is highly likely that it will be 'managed' with respect to the Russian political estimates.