

THE EASTERN STALEMATE: A MULTI-TRACK APPROACH

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In the EU's own admission, the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) failed in the East and 'today's neighbourhood is less stable than it was ten years ago' (Commission 2015:2). It became an area of political contestation between EU and NATO on one hand, and Russia on the other. The Russian-Ukrainian conflict, with potential involvement of regional states, has been overshadowed by the European refugee crisis in 2016, but remains a challenge to peace and stability in Eastern Europe. The EU's policy of exporting its internal norms and standards beyond its borders has reached its limits in the East, facing political-military contestation from Russia.

The origins of this conflict lie in the post-Soviet politics in Russia and Ukraine, and Vladimir Putin's interests in Ukraine, all of which were ignored in Brussels due to the technocratic and unilateral nature of ENP. This approach was also the result of liberal triumphalism after the end of the Cold War and the Soviet collapse. Ignoring conflict of memories and insecurities between Russia and NATO, and between Eastern Europe and Russia, was not only naïve but counterproductive for European policies.

The EU response to the emerging crisis in the East was ad-hoc and reactive. Russia was held as the main source of all problems in the region, while broader reasons for instability were side-lined in official discussions. The agreement over sanctions against Russia was a surprising achievement of EU policy-making in 2014, but this response remains a substitute for a comprehensive approach to the region. The lifting of these sanctions is linked to the fulfilment of the manifestly unfeasible Minsk-II agreement. EU member states insist that the broader question of peace, security, and cooperation in Eastern Europe can only be discussed after the conflict in the East of Ukraine is resolved, while Moscow tends to regard it as a point of this discussion. Indeed, the European response to Russia seems to be: NATO takes care of the security concerns of Russia's neighbours, while the EU Eastern policy remains even more technocratic and norms-centred than before.

How can the EU, divided inside and with new uncertainty about its future, deal with the Eastern challenge in a longer term? Would it be enough to focus on the maintenance of sanctions and updating the content of Minsk agreements? The members of the group had diverse opinions on this subject. Some of us believe that the continuation of the current approach may cause changes in Russia's behaviour. Yet others believe that Vladimir Putin's Russia can remain a resilient and resourceful challenger. Putin himself can hardly be expected to return to "business as usual" with EU, and probably considers any concessions on Crimea unacceptable. He will not let the separatist regions of Donetsk-Luhansk go down under pressure. If the latter is the case, then the EU-centred approach in the East may be "sleepwalking" into a protracted regional conflict with unpredictable consequences. And it is not certain that in the current climate the European politics is prepared to accept this outcome – from economic, political, and security perspectives.

An alternative that preserves the shaky consensus within EU and offers a reasonable road out of the current deadlock should be a new comprehensive and **multi-track policy** in the East. This means differentiation of the 'one-size-fits all' technocratic approach to the region. This differentiation should not be understood simply as 'deviation' from EU norms and hence eventual re-alignment with

the former, but rather as an opportunity to understand and engage with the interests of the partner-states, to build the foundations for sustainable cooperation. It also allows less room for arbitrary decisions by Russia and acts to balance the unpredictability of Ukrainian politics.

The **first track** should explore the potential for common economic ground between ENP and the members of the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU). The members of the Working Group and experts at the Dahrendorf seminars remain divided about whether it is practicable – the EEU remains a weak structure, and EU prefers bilateral relations and direct programmes with separate states currently in the EEU. The benefit of this track, however, is to give Russia a bigger stake in the negotiations about the future of the region and combine bilateral and multilateral approaches to the states that for various reasons cannot participate in ENP.

The **second track** should aim at sustaining Ukraine as a governable and fiscally viable state, with greater conditionality of any aid on juridical and constitutional reforms, anti-corruption struggle, and assistance to small business. The experts disagree about future stability of Ukraine: some take note of vitality of Ukrainian civil society and robust shadow economy; others point out that regional divisions in Ukraine are coming back, and the state and court system remain corrupt, weak, and subdued to the interests of regional ‘oligarchs’. Even with European assistance, another explosion/implosion of the Ukrainian state remains a possibility, and Russia may exploit it.

The **third track** should aim at conflict-management in Luhansk and Donetsk, with a broader look at the experience with other “frozen conflicts” in Nagorno-Karabakh, Abkhazia and Ossetia, and Transnistria. Experts believe that this track opens the room for a new role of OSCE, whose forces (rather than UN or NATO forces) could act as a mediating element between the Ukrainian army, the separatists, and the Russian military on the Ukrainian border. Some experts also believe that the issue of Crimea should be shelved until the political situation in Russia changes and Ukraine has consolidated its overall state capacity.

This multi-track policy could help check the ongoing securitization of regional politics. It would enhance the clarity of EU goals and policies in the East, and lessen the danger for the EU to become a hostage of political decisions made by Russia and other actors in the region.

The Panel at the 2016 Dahrendorf Symposium will look closer at these and other questions of Europe, Russia and Ukraine relations.

THE EU, RUSSIA AND UKRAINE: MANAGING THE STALEMATE AND GOING BEYOND IT

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