

David Cadier

**'EASTERN PARTNERSHIP' VS.
'EURASIAN UNION':
TOWARDS AN EU-RUSSIA
COMPETITION FOR THE
COMMON NEIGHBOURHOOD?**

Dahrendorf Symposium Paper Series

Summary

About the author

Dr. David Cadier is a Fellow in Diplomacy and International Strategy at LSE IDEAS and a teaching fellow in the International Relations Department at the LSE. He earned his PhD in Political Sciences and European Studies from Sciences Po in 2012 and was a visiting scholar at the Centre for Transatlantic Relations at SAIS Johns Hopkins University (2011), at the Prague Institute of International Relations (2010) and at the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy (2009). He also had professional experiences at the OSCE Headquarters in Vienna, at the OSCE Mission to Serbia and at the French Embassy to Estonia. His research interests lie with Central Europe, Foreign Policy Analysis, EU policies towards the East (European Neighbourhood Policy and EU-Russia relations) and transatlantic relations.

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Abstract

'EASTERN PARTNERSHIP' VS. 'EURASIAN UNION': TOWARDS AN EU-RUSSIA COMPETITION FOR THE COMMON NEIGHBOURHOOD?

Background

The Eastern neighbourhood is a region where the EU could – and will probably need to – affirm itself as a foreign policy actor. As acknowledged in the founding European Security Strategy of 2003, the credibility of the EU's aspirations to play a role in international affairs will be judged first and foremost on its achievements in its own periphery. The Russo-Ukrainian gas disputes of 2006 and 2009, the South Ossetia War of 2008 and the post-election repression in Belarus in 2011 illustrate both the volatility and the strategic importance of the Eastern neighbourhood. Today, the need for renewed attention and increased political presence on the part of the EU is made more acute, on the one hand, by the progressive disengagement of the US after the re-balancing of its foreign policy priorities away from Europe and, on the other hand, by the strategic reinvestment, by a less compromising Russia, of a region it has always regarded as its 'near abroad'.

The full array of EU tools and actors has been deployed in the neighbourhood, from CSDP missions established in Moldova and Georgia to the European Commission and Council Presidency mediating the aforementioned gas disputes. The Eastern Partnership (EaP) initiative launched in 2009 is the latest and most comprehensive EU instrument towards the region; it will be the object of inquiry of this research paper. This initiative consists of a series of bilateral contractual agreements and regional frameworks through which the EU offers financial aid, market access and visa facilitations to countries of the neighbourhood in exchange for the conduct of domestic reforms in the political, economic and administrative spheres.

To this day, the EaP remains an overly technical and rather modest initiative, as testified by its small budget endowment. Yet its reception by Russia has been eminently political and surprisingly negative: in 2009 Foreign Minister Lavrov denounced it as a "sphere of influence policy". For the first time, an EU initiative was met by Moscow with the kind of rhetoric usually reserved for NATO, although these critics were temporarily toned down in the early 2010s, corresponding to the warming up of EU-Russia relations. Since then, however, Vladimir Putin has returned to the Presidency with a more confrontational stance towards the West and with the will to push assertively for Russia's own integration projects for the post-Soviet space, the Customs Union and the Eurasian Union. These programmes have been largely framed in reaction to the EaP. Moscow thus seems to regard the EU as a competitor in this regard and has not hesitated to use, over the last weeks, coercive measures to discourage countries of the neighbourhood from concluding Association Agreements with the EU. In other words, in Eastern Europe, Russia is drawing the EU into a geopolitical game that Brussels has so far refused to play.

Research Question

The paper will analyse EU policies towards the Eastern neighbourhood and will seek to shed light on whether an EU-Russia competition is emerging in the region. More concretely, taking stock of the Eastern Partnership four years after its inception, the paper will explore the modalities, impact and implications of EU Eastern policies. What means are the EU mobilising and how efficient is Brussels in deploying them? How are countries of the region receiving these policies and can we talk of a EU transforma-

tive power? How might this involvement in the Eastern neighbourhood, facing Russia's geopolitical competition, affect the EU's identity as a foreign policy actor? Based on this analysis, the objective is to be able to formulate recommendations on how to strengthen EU Eastern policies in this evolving context.

Taking this angle, the paper hopes to contribute to two broader questions at the heart of the Dahrendorf WG5 research endeavour, namely that of EU 'actorness' and of the attractiveness of its model for the rest of the world.

Firstly, the Eastern neighbourhood stands out as a real test for the EU's capacity to behave as an actor in international politics in light of both the strategic challenges emanating from the region and the powerful presence of Russia. The paper will assess the coherence, cohesion and recognition of EU efforts in addressing the former and shall contemplate what a competition with the latter could be and what would it imply. Russia constitutes a useful mirror in trying to grasp the essence and impact of EU foreign policy.

Secondly, the fact that another actor is offering an alternative integration framework makes the common neighbourhood a good testing ground to assess the attractiveness of EU model. Until now, most states of the region have been caught between the competing regional frameworks but a choice will soon have to be made as several of them have completed (or are close to complete) the requirements to sign a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA) with the EU and as Moscow is, on its part, increasing the diplomatic pressure to encourage adhesion to the Customs Union. The case of Ukraine, whose signing of a DCFTA with the EU in November 2013 is expected but not guaranteed, will undeniably be the most decisive in this regard. More generally, lessons can be drawn from

the EU's ability to diffuse its norms and values in the Eastern neighbourhood to assess its ability to contribute to setting up a new world governance architecture.