Russia's perceptions and misperceptions of the EU Eastern Partnership

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Abstract

This article is devoted to the problem of the reaction to the Eastern Partnership by Russia’s both the political establishment and the expert community. The question of reactions to the Eastern Partnership in the target countries has been extensively posed in academic literature. However, the question of Russia’s reaction to the Eastern Partnership, one of the most important actors of the region, has been rarely raised by the academic community. A wide array of factors impacted Russian elites’ perception of the Eastern Partnership – from problematic issues in the EU-Russia relations to the post-Soviet states’ political and economic transformation. Studying the dynamics and peculiarities of Russia’s perspective on the Eastern Partnership makes it possible to draw meaningful conclusions on the nature of Russia’s phobias that fuel its domestic and foreign policy.

The Eastern Partnership was implemented as a foreign policy initiative of the EU back in 2009 in order to maintain and help develop what is called the European Project (Korosteleva, 2011). As members of the Eastern Partnership, post-Soviet States were offered a new formula for interaction with the EU and some ambitious cooperation programs. However, the essence and scope of the term "partnership" still remains somewhat vague. Such conceptual uncertainty not only poses a threat to the effectiveness of the Eastern Partnership (further – EaP), but also has caused much worry with the EU strategic partner – Russia.

It should be pointed out that the EaP has been influenced by a range of complex processes taking place within the common neighborhood between Russia and the European Union. Among those was the contradiction between Russia and the EU on the future of the post-Soviet region, bearing effect on both the form and content of the EaP and on its perception in Russia. Shying away from participating in the European Neighborhood Policy (further – ENP) and having revitalized its policy in the post-Soviet territory, Russia, like no one else, has influenced the EaP to take the very form that causes its own most fierce criticism; that is, Russian policy in the post-Soviet area became hostage to the longevity of the logic of confrontation with the West. Russia’s actions, aimed to consolidate the post-Soviet area, often against the will of individual states in that region, provoked retaliatory measures by Brussels and vice versa. As a result, the air of mutual distrust between the EU and Russia was growing worse. The EaP became, in part, one of the unintended consequences of this mistrust.

Ever since it emerged, the EaP has been constantly present on the agenda of the Russia-EU relations. However, the question of Russia’s reaction to the EaP – one of the most important actors of the region – has been rarely raised by the academic community (Haukkala, 2008; Nervi Christensen, 2010). The question of reactions to the EaP in the target countries has been extensively posed in academic literature. In the meantime, the need to study the reaction in Russia to the EaP can hardly be
overestimated, for not only could it contribute significantly to the study of the ENP’s impact on East European countries, but it could also be of great help for EU-Russia political cooperation in the region.

In the following parts we shall analyze the reaction to the EaP in Russia exhibited by both the political establishment and the expert community. As mentioned above, the EaP by design is a regional dimension of the ENP. Therefore we will approach the subject from a lengthier historical perspective, and concentrate on the features and dynamics of Russia’s perception of the EU policy toward European post-Soviet states within the ENP. Next we will consider the reaction of the Russian ruling circles and the expert community to the idea of the EaP on the onset of its implementation, as well as the ongoing discussions on the possibility of Russia’s joining the program. The following sections will describe the gradual changes in Russia’s perception due to the key events that had taken place in the post-Soviet area, such as Ukraine’s Orange Revolution and the Russo-Georgian war. Finally, the last sections will discuss Russia’s attempts to expedite alternative models of integration and to counteract both the EaP, and the setting of the European model in the post-Soviet area at large.

1. Russia’s self-exclusion from the ENP

A detailed discussion of the significance and implications of the EU Neighborhood Policy began among Russian experts after the European Commission released the report “Wider Europe” (March 2003). From the very start the discussion focused on two main questions: 1) the possibility for Russia to take part in the proposed by the EU “Wider Europe” and the cohesiveness of the Northern Dimension with the new EU initiative; 2) the compatibility of the European and Russia-led integration models in the post-Soviet area.

The Russian expert community responded to the ENP with an element of ambiguity — the assessments seemed contradictory with a light sense of puzzlement. On the one hand, there were voices warning that “counteracting the implementation of the Neighborhood Policy vis-a-vis Moldova, Ukraine, and Belarus would be counterproductive” (Karabeshkin, 2004, 45). Therefore, it was suggested that Russia not only integrate into the formats proposed by the EU, but also actively promote its own models of cooperation. On the other hand, there were opinions that the: “Eastern Dimension carried a number of risks for the Russian interests” (Karabeshkin, 2004, 44), particularly since the EU’s and Russia’s visions of the post-Soviet area were far from being identical. Generally, the Russian experts believed that a synergy between the processes of European integration and the integration in the post-Soviet area was possible with Russia leading its Eastern neighbors by way of actively integrating with them first and then into the common European market, using the framework of the future Neighborhood policy (Kazin, 2004, 33).

While the experts were still debating possible scenarios of Russian participation in the European Neighborhood Policy, the Kremlin had already made its decision. The refusal to participate had officially been come to a holt by the May 2003 EU-Russia Summit in St. Petersburg where a decision was made to develop strategic cooperation in the form of four common spaces.¹ The final document of the Summit contained no mentioning of the ENP in any form whatsoever (Council of the European Union, 2003). Despite the fact that back in November 2003 the European Commission representatives repeatedly stated that a “Wider Europe” was to enhance the strategic partnership between Russia and the European Union (Frellessen, 2004, 70–71), Russia’s refusal to participate in the ENP was inevitable and quite final. The reason was that the country’s financial clout was growing, thanks to the rising price of crude oil in the global markets. It provided solid grounds for Russia to review its place in international and regional politics. By then the process of strengthening the ‘vertical of power’ in Russia had been completed. In the meantime a rift in the perceptions of Russia’s role by its elite and the Western partners was getting increasingly evident. Hence, Russia’s political leaders treated the ENP with caution and even distrust, showing scepticism regarding the idea of a possible Moscow’s participation in the ENP as just one of the “neighbors.”

As Finnish researcher H. Haukkala (2008) explained, Russia was unwilling to participate in the ENP not merely because of a greater international weight that it believed to possess over the other country-participants of the ENP, but also because the EU tended to dialog with its neighbors from the position of “normative hegemony,” which implied bringing the national law in compliance with the acquis communautaire and the national value system with that of Europe. In other words, the essence of the process is in changing the national legal system of a state-participant of the ENP, while the state itself may not exert influence on changes to the acquis. Moscow resisted it, stressing constantly that it would dialog with the EU on an equal footing only, provided that all parties involved would take part in working out norms and regulations of their interaction. It should be noted that the principle of equality in interaction between Russia and the EU was later inserted in the 2008 Russian Foreign Policy Concept. The phraseology clearly demonstrated Moscow’s perception of the asymmetric nature of the existing cooperation formats with the EU as well as its desire to overcome such asymmetry.

The perception of Russia’s political leaders of the ENP was further influenced by the 2004 EU enlargement and a follow-up document, “European Neighborhood Policy. Strategy Paper,” released by the European Commission. It listed specific directions, forms and mechanisms for intensifying interaction between the EU and its Eastern and Southern neighbors, which now included three additional former Soviet states: Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia (Commission of the European Communities, 2004). This document raised concerns in some Russian expert quarters regarding a perceived weakening of

Russia’s strategic position in the post-Soviet countries as a result of the emergent ENP. Public calls were made for an agile revamping of the strategy towards the countries in the region (Rossia v novom veke, 2005, 136).

Unlike the expert community, the early views taken by Russian politicians and officials ranged from neutrality to a guarded reaction towards the EU initiative. This was partly due to the fact that on the eve of the 2004 EU enlargement the Russian establishment was primarily preoccupied with the following three issues: the upcoming revision of trade regulation and economic relations between Russia and the acceding states; protecting the rights of the Russian-speaking minorities in the Baltic countries; and the problem of people’s transit between Kaliningrad Region and the rest of Russia. It is noteworthy that the State Duma raised no concerns about any possible risks to Russia’s interests in the post-Soviet area as a result of the enlargement (Gosudarstvennaya Duma, 2003, 2004a).

2. Initial perceptions of the ENP

The initial absence of any negative reaction to the ENP on the part of Russia was partially due to the specific deficiencies of the ENP that had caused some serious discontent with a number of new neighbors. Firstly, the Neighborhood Policy applied a rather unilateral treatment of them, using the patterns of the past successful enlargement. A number of practices had been borrowed directly from the policy of enlargement when drawing up the ENP. Those included the plans of action and methods of monitoring the intermediate results of their implementation, the conditionality principle, and so on (Treshchenkov, 2013, 48).

Secondly, the success of the EU enlargement policy depended on high levels of motivation of the candidate countries, when the reward for complete and often painful reforms in the sphere of politics and economy (through the implementation of acquis communitare) was the EU membership. The ENP, while presenting commensurable to the enlargement policy requirements, offered neither guarantees, nor prospects of the EU membership, which significantly reduced the motivation for the neighboring countries, and called into question the effectiveness of the Neighborhood Policy. The European Commission was well aware of the fact that “the most effective tool of Europe’s soft power is to offer membership in the EU” (Patten, 2006, 158). However, to offer the ENP member states the prospect of joining the EU was not on the Brussels’ options list, due to some objective reasons. The EU has already been facing gigantic challenges to deal with—like economy, common currency, markets, and others, to name just a few—in the aftermath of the greatest enlargement on record that far. In that context a discussion of the prospects for any further enlargement seemed not only premature, but also dangerous. Besides, the Eastern neighbors of the EU themselves were showing an inadequate degree of success in carrying out their reforms. Last but not least, Brussels was factoring in the possible consequences of a further enlargement for its relations with Russia.

Thirdly, the Neighborhood Policy prescribed political reforms that often involved certain domestic political risks: liberalization of politics implies some real political competition, increasing the probability of a regime change (Schimmelfennig and Scholtz, 2008; Strelkov, 2009, 125). The Policy of Enlargement compensated the candidate countries for the political costs by guaranteeing the EU membership, which meant receiving large amounts of financial assistance and political support from the European Union. By contrast, the ENP did not offer similarly effective incentives or compensations.

Lastly, at the beginning of 2004 a good deal of scepticism was still prevalent in Russia regarding the foreign policy potential of the EU as a community capable of uniting multiple states with diverging international interests and priorities.

3. The Orange catalyst

The aforementioned circumstances led to a predictable decline of interest in the ENP on the part of some post-Soviet countries. In this sense, the case of Ukraine is quite exemplary. Since 2003 Ukraine’s Foreign Ministry had been repeatedly making the inadequacy of the ENP to meet the Ukrainian foreign policy priorities, of which joining the EU was extremely momentous (Lubkivs’ky, 2003). Indeed, the ENP was created for the countries that were geographically close neighbors of the EU, but would not be able to become members in the medium term due to the enlargement fatigue.

This formula did not meet the expectations of Kiev however. In the meantime, Ukraine was unable to obtain the prospect of membership in the EU while interacting with Brussels outside the ENP format, which apparently prompted the Ukrainian leaders to sign the agreement on forming the Common Economic Space (hereinafter — CES) with Russia, Kazakhstan, and Belarus in September 2003. It was then that the representatives of the European Union made it clear that Kiev’s participation in integration projects with the former Soviet Union states might inhibit Ukraine’s integration into Europe. Indeed, a few days before the signing of the CES, European Commissioner Günter Verheugen visited Kiev. He admonished President Leonid Kuchma that “in case of establishing a customs union as part of the CES, the European integration process for Ukraine could be stepped down or even cease completely” (Shapovalov, November 13, 2003). It became obvious that the post-Soviet states that wished to broaden cooperation both with Russia and the EU were held hostage to the dynamics and quality of the EU-Russia ‘Strategic Partnership’.

Meanwhile, the process of forming the ENP was yet provoking no negative reaction from either Russian politicians or bureaucrats. Moscow viewed it as an intrinsic need of the EU to build relations with its new neighbors. Even afterward the experts of the Russian Federation Ministry of Foreign Affairs regarded the ENP as a rational necessity for the EU to support the social and economic stability in the neighboring countries to seal itself from the export of modern security threats such as illegal immigration, organized crime, and others. (Kravchenko, 2006). Nonetheless, Moscow still rejected the idea of
participation in the project, wishing to build a unique relationship with the EU. At the same time, Russian diplomats tried to delineate the sphere of exclusive Russian interests, above all, implying the post-Soviet countries. The latter, in their opinion, “should not become an arena of competition by the parties pursuing different interests, because it was about ensuring Russia’s national security and protection of its political and economic interests” (Chizhov, 2004).

Russia’s attitude towards the ENP, as well as to the activity of the EU on the international scene in general, began to change as a result of the events of the 2004 Orange Revolution that turned out crucial beyond just the Ukrainian society. First, the Orange Revolution led to a substantial correction not only of the Ukraine’s foreign policy but also of other post-Soviet states. It demonstrated the vulnerability and limited appeal of the Russian model of integration and, in fact, formalized the abandonment by a number of the former Soviet republics the strategy of balancing between Russia and the EU, giving way to a closer political and economic integration with the Euro-Atlantic structures. Second, it brought about a changing perception of the post-Soviet area by both Russia and the EU, prompting them to review their policies vis-à-vis the states in the region. On the Russian part, this review meant a transition to market pricing of energy exports. Thus, the economic fundamentals of functioning of the CIS had changed, determining even greater appeal of the EU to a number of states in the region (Glinkina et al., 2007).

The events of the Orange Revolution forced Russia to face an open competition with the EU in the post-Soviet space (Raš, 2009, 39). In addition, the Russian side emphasized particularly the destabilizing activity of some EU countries. For example, the Russian State Duma emphasized a one-sided approach by “a number of representatives of the European Union, including the European Parliament,” to the situation in Ukraine (Gosudarstvennaya Duma, 2004b). In general, the outcome of the Orange Revolution forced the Russian leaders not only to change their tactics in dealing with Ukraine (Gretskiy, 2010, 190–191) and other European members of the CIS (Curanović et al., 2008, 65–66), but also to take a more defensive stance toward any EU initiatives directed to the post-Soviet area.

In the wake of the Orange Revolution Russia’s expert assessments of the ENP acquired a much greater degree of anxiety. Stressing that the European integration and that of the CIS could not go hand in hand (Rossia v novom veke, 2007, 74–75), domestic analysts were pinpointing that under those circumstances Russia had no countermeasures in dealing with the European Union.

In effect, one can find a significant contradiction in Russia’s position at that time. On the one hand, Moscow realized that the enlargement of the European Union entailed a tangible change in the composition of countries along its border, which now would require closer attention because the former Soviet republics were among those countries too. On the other hand, Russia was attempting to conduct the dialogue using the terms of the Cold War, distancing itself from participation in the ENP, and denying the actuality of competing interests in the post-Soviet area. Indirectly, it meant that Moscow recognized the lack of competitiveness of its political projects in the post-Soviet area, such as the CIS, the Union State of Russia and Belarus, and the Eurasian Economic Community (EurAsEC).

4. Forming the Eastern Partnership with a watchful eye on Moscow

From the very beginning Russia distanced itself from participating in discussions on the ENP. Such stance was quite consistent with the circumstances. First, the ENP was indeed carried out as a unilateral initiative of the European Union. Second, a progressive increase in the world energy prices had created a financial springboard for Russia’s return to the ranks of the world’s powers and raised assertiveness of the Russian leaders when acting in the international arena. Moscow predictably refused to participate in the ENP, as it obviously sought for a special status in relations with the EU that could have confirmed its unique role and influence across the post-Soviet area.

However, such self-exclusion from the ENP and the resultant status of a third party observer had narrowed Russia’s potential influence on the format of the forthcoming Eastern dimension. Its nature and its focus were now dependent on how Russia’s policy in the post-Soviet area was perceived by the EU member countries and their Eastern neighbors. It was exactly those perceptions that had had a fundamental impact on the Eastern dimension of the European Neighborhood Policy — the Eastern Partnership.

Apart from Russia’s attempts to influence the process of presidential elections in Ukraine in 2004 and the subsequent Orange Revolution, the design of the future Eastern dimension of the ENP was further influenced by regular Russia–Belarus and Russia–Ukraine gas crises, as well as the August 2008 Russia–Georgia conflict. These events contributed to a gradual convergence of views of the EU member states on the nature of the Russian impact on what was happening in the region of common neighborhood with Russia and the EU. For example, France, which had never previously had any explicit foreign policy regarding the affairs in the post-Soviet area, following the events of August 2008 in the Caucasus, acted as one of the main initiators of engaging Belarus in the future EaP initiative (Treshchenkov, 2013, 315–316).

Previously the object of attention of France was the Mediterranean. Back in 2007 French President Nicolas Sarkozy took the initiative to strengthen the EU foreign policy by creating a Mediterranean Union. Sarkozy’s idea drew criticism from Germany. Under those circumstances Warsaw and Berlin tried to find common ground on the issue of shaping the ENP Eastern dimension. However, Germany feared initiating any regional dimension within the Neighborhood Policy that would exclude Russia. Then the role of a locomotive for the ENP Eastern dimension was picked up by Poland. Already back in 2002–2003 the latter came up with an initiative to create an ‘Eastern Dimension’ of the EU policy that would preclude Russia from participating. For developing and issuing the Eastern Partnership it managed to bring on board Minister for Foreign Affairs of Sweden Carl Bildt who was quite sceptical about Russia. The main idea of the Swedish proposal was that there existed a need
to intensify the EU’s relations with its Eastern neighbors (notably with Ukraine) in a new format that, based on the provisions of the ENP, would, however, be an independent mechanism for cooperation (Polish-Swedish proposal ‘Eastern Partnership’, 2008).

Fundamentally important was the fact that the start of the discussions on the EaP coincided with a period of tensions between Russia and several EU member states. From 2006 to 2008 first Poland and then Lithuania vetoed the negotiations on a new Agreement between Russia and the EU. It made Russia to perceive the EaP as being a Polish initiative. For example, in the words of Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov (2009c) “Someone would not mind to put the invited to the EaP countries before a choice: either you are with Russia, or with the European Union.” Despite the fact that the Russian Foreign Policy Concept contained a statement that it was interested: “to strengthen the European Union,” the document also said that “Russia’s attitude towards sub-regional entities or any other entities within the CIS area that excluded Russia would depend on their real contribution to good neighborly relations and stability, their willingness to take indeed into account Russia’s legitimate interests and to respect the already existing cooperation mechanisms (italics by the author)”.

5. The Caucasian factor

Though the 2003 ‘Rose Revolution’ in Georgia was conducive to the inclusion of the South Caucasian states in the ENP, it had little effect on Russia’s perception of the EU Neighborhood Policy. In 2008 it was a much different story. Judging by the events in the Caucasus in August 2008, the impact of the Russian factor on the EaP seems evident. A more active EU policy in the region had already been prompted by the assessments of trends in Russian politics and the actual nature of its impact on the neighboring countries (Khudoley and Izotov, 2011, 205). Nevertheless, the Russia—Georgia conflict was crucial for propelling the EaP initiative. It helped dispel every doubt among most of the EU member states regarding the need to organize and strengthen the EU policies in the post-Soviet area. The conflict significantly strengthened the position of those forces in the EU that advocated the creation of the EaP as a structure that would be a bulwark against any “negative trends” coming from Russia.

On September 1, 2008 an emergency meeting of the European Council was held in Brussels. During the meeting, the EU leaders condemned the “disproportionate reaction of Russia” as well as Russia’s recognition of independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. According to the European Council, the conflict was making a direct impact on the entire region, and under those circumstances the need to support regional cooperation among the EU’s Eastern neighbors was obvious. The European Commission was asked to prepare specific proposals for the EaP by December 2008 (Council of the European Union, 2008).

There were concerns in the EU about other potentially explosive regions in the post-Soviet area. For example, they referred to the Crimea since the Russian side, as the conflict was in progress, accused the Ukrainian government of supplying arms to Georgia. It was after the August conflict in the Caucasus that the EU Council began consultations with Ukraine on visa liberalization and it intensified talks on the future Association Agreement. In a similar fashion the situation was developing in Belarus. After the conflict in the Caucasus visa sanctions for the highest-ranking Belarusian officials were lifted, and it was decided to invite Foreign Minister of Belarus Sergei Martynov to a meeting with the EU Troika (October 2008). Moreover, it was made clear by Brussels that the future participation of Belarus in the EaP depended on whether Minsk would recognize independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia or not. A similar statement was made by Karel Schwarzenberg, Foreign Minister of the presiding at the time in the EU Council Czech Republic (Lobjakas, February 23, 2009).

Meanwhile, in December 2008 the Commission presented a report to the EU Council and the European Parliament titled “Eastern Partnership”. The key idea of the document was laid down in a thesis about the need for a more active involvement of the EU in the East-European affairs and, above all, the need for concerted efforts to support and develop democratic institutions and governance in that region. At the same time it was pointed out that the EaP would be developed in parallel with the EU-Russia strategic partnership. The document contained a clear proposal on the forms and institutions of multilateral cooperation among Eastern partners and with the EU (Commission of the European Communities, 2008).

6. Russia’s changed viewpoint

It is noteworthy that, unlike the ENP, the emergence of the Polish-Swedish initiative led to lively debates in the Russian political quarters and the expert community. The latter unfortunately failed to understand that the initiative was a regional dimension of the ENP and this led to serious misperception of the EaP by the experts.

The intensification of work on the new EU initiative did not go unnoticed by the Russian Foreign Ministry either. The latter responded to each and every step that the EU was making in this direction. In March 2009, at the Brussels Forum, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov (2009a) expressed his concern about the ENP Eastern dimension by a rhetorical question as to “whether it is not intended to derail countries [of the former Soviet Union — auth.] from the course which they should be able to choose freely.” His European counterparts tried to reassure the Russian minister that “the EU has no such intentions that could be interpreted as directed against Russia.” (Lavrov, 2009b). Yet, Lavrov remained sceptical about the EaP. Another attempt to come to understanding with Moscow was made by Polish Foreign Minister Radoslaw Sikorski who visited Russia on May 6, 2009 on the eve of the EaP summit. Sikorski once again assured Lavrov that the EaP was not aimed to conflict with Russia (Lavrov, 2009c). However, the attempt failed to make any substantial changes in the Russian perception of the EU initiative.
On May 7, 2009 the Eastern Partnership inaugural summit was held in Prague. As the main goal of the EaP, it proclaimed the creation of indispensable conditions for the development of political association and economic integration between the EU and the interested partner countries (Council of the European Union, 2009). Such key EU countries as France and Britain showed little interest in the Prague summit, which provided somewhat of a reassurance to the Russians. As a consequence, Moscow changed the tone of its comments on the EaP, shifting the focus of criticism to the adequacy of the funding, the differences in the interests of the participating countries, and others.

This, however, did not reverse the general feeling of scepticism in Russia towards the initiative itself, which have already become evident during the Russia-EU summit, held in Khabarovsk at the end of May 2009. The atmosphere of the event bore the smoke of the Russia–Georgia conflict. It was one of the few EU-Russia summits, during which no official documents or declarations were signed. In the meantime, President Medvedev aired concern about the initiative to establish the EaP and expressed doubt as to whether the program was indeed “not directed against Russia” (President Rossi, 2009).

The EaP inaugural summit came under scrutiny of the State Duma parliamentarians of the Russian Federation. Quite typical was the statement made by Semyon Bagdasarov, a Spravedlivaya Rossia (A Just Russia) party member, who called the summit “a cynical pilfering of Russia’s heritage in the post-Soviet area,” and asked the Foreign Ministry to clarify Russia’s position on the issue (Gosudarstvennaya Duma, 2009). Meanwhile, Chairman of the State Duma Committee on Foreign Affairs, Konstantin Kosachev, warned the parties against competing in the post-Soviet area, as it was a “breeding ground” for conflicts that could arise due to an artificial clashing of interests and goals of Russia with those of the West (Kosachev, July 9, 2009).

The upper house of the Russian Parliament — the Federation Council — did not stay away from the discussions either. In the autumn of 2009 its members took part in a meeting of the Expert board of the Committee on CIS Affairs dedicated to the EaP. The main question was how the implementation of the ENP Eastern dimension would affect Russia’s interests in the CIS. The parliamentarians predominantly shared the idea that the was the European “alternative to the CIS” aiming to oust Russia from the post-Soviet “geopolitical area”. At the same time, both politicians and experts agreed that the EaP project was well designed and took into account the moods of a large part of the post-Soviet elites, whereas the CIS had lost its appeal for the latter, having failed to become an effective structure.

Of particular concern to Russian policy makers was the fact that it had taken less than a year for the EU to develop a comprehensive document and reach consensus with all stakeholders, whereas Russia had spent almost twenty years and had not been able to achieve its goals. It was recognized that, even though about 1800 agreements had been signed within the CIS, covering every area of cooperation, practically none of those documents were workable (Sovet Federatsii, 2010, 4–5).

Yet, a conceptual paper in the framework of the CIS with similar initiatives and areas of cooperation — the CIS Development Concept 2020 did exist. However, of the six “Eastern partners” of the EU only two countries — Belarus and Armenia — had signed the Concept without exemptions. Georgia had not signed the document at all; Azerbaijan signed a version with a dissenting opinion, Moldova and Ukraine signed it with reservations (CIS, 2007). It became obvious that the obstacles in the way of the Russia-led integration projects were neither particular documents nor any EU initiatives.

7. Eurasian integration as Russia’s reaction to the EaP

It is noteworthy that the Eastern Partnership policy, according to the assessments of most Russian officials and experts, had implemented the desire of the EU “to sanitarily cordon itself off from Russia” (Shishelina, 2008). The term “cordon” was knowingly carried over to the ideological level of discourse and interpreted not as a figurative description of a set of measures taken by Brussels to respond to new challenges after the enlargement of 2004–2007, but as a political project aimed at maiming Russia’s interests in the CIS. This view, which received the broadest acceptance in Russia, in effect, denied the possibility of free and informed choice for European integration by post-Soviet states.

Another common view of the ENP that exists within the Russian expert community is that it is a means of a turf war between the EU and Russia in the post-Soviet area (Donova, 2006; Kosikova, 2006). At the same time, many Russian and foreign experts ascertain the need for new integration projects in the post-Soviet area (Busygina, Filippov, 2010). Efforts in that direction have been stepped up at the level of the president and the Russian government exactly following the 2009 Eastern Partnership summit. They included, above all, the creation of the EurAsEC Customs Union (2010) and the CES (2012), the signing of the FTA Treaty within (2011), and the proposal of then Prime Minister Vladimir Putin to create a Eurasian Economic Union (EurAsEC, Press conference, October 20, 2011).

The full-blown crisis of the European Union, which started in 2011, has seriously weakened the interest of its major member states in the Eastern dimension of the ENP. In the meantime, it gave rise to an emerging conviction in Russia of the inevitability if not of disintegration of the EU, then, as minimum, of a serious weakening of its supra-national institutions and a return to dominance of the sovereign states in the European agenda (Bordachev et al., December 12, 2011). Against this backdrop, both the Russian expert community and the establishment changed their perceptions and began to view the EU’s activity in the post-Soviet area as having temporarily lost its urgency. This was well evidenced by how virtually unnoticed was the second EaP summit held in 2011 in Warsaw.

In the years that followed, various Russian politicians equated the term ‘Eastern Partnership’ to undesirable ways of the EU’s meddling with the affairs of the region. The attention was now focused not on the actual initiative, but on its individual elements. Among those were the association agreements prepared for a number of Eastern partners of the EU, such as
Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine, and Armenia. The agreements implied not just political association, but also creation of free trade zones between the EU and its individual Eastern partners. A sense of competition between Russia and the EU turned into rivalry. So, it was not fortuitous that when a number of Eastern partners entered the point of signing the association agreements, Russia, in addition to building the CIS free trade area, also announced the plans to create the Eurasian Economic Union.

Having recognized great potentials of the EaP, some Russian experts even suggested to create a Eurasian Partnership based on the model of the former (Vinokurov, 2013). However, such suggestions originated from misreading the essence of the EaP. The latter is not significant in itself or because of the desire of the EU to direct the transformation of the neighboring region along some expected lines, but due to the overall appeal of the European model. In order for the hypothetical Eurasian Partnership to function efficiently in the long run, it must rely on an attractive model of economic and political development. It is quite obvious that over the years since the collapse of the USSR Russia has not been able to come up with anything of the kind.

Russia’s resistance to the rapprochement between a number of states in the post-Soviet area and the EU was turning gradually from rhetoric to practical actions. Some among the Russian elite were trying to engage Eastern partners of the EU in the Eurasian Union at any cost, fearing in particular that during the 2013 Summit of the Eastern Partnership in Vilnius the former Soviet Republics would sign their association agreements with the EU. For instance, as a result of the Russian pressure, the Armenian leadership having weighed all cons and pros, in the autumn of 2013 refused to sign its association agreement with the EU and announced that it intended to join the Eurasian Union instead. In fact, the Armenian leaders made no secret of the fact that the decision had nothing to do with economic reasoning, but was necessitated by security considerations, given the smoldering Nagorno-Karabakh conflict with the neighboring Azerbaijan (Khimshiashvili, Kravchenko, 2013). Georgia and Moldova also had to face the pressure. However their cases were not as critical to Russia as, for example, the prospect of European integration of Ukraine.

Throughout the years after gaining independence Kiev had steadily shown a lack of desire to participate in any forms of economic integration with Russia that would go beyond a mere free trade area. Still, the Russian leadership had been impressively persistent in their attempts to engage Ukraine in the Eurasian integration project. When it became clear that nominally pro-Russian Victor Yanukovych was not ready for a full-fledged membership of the country in the Customs Union, Russia’s main task was now to inhibit the signing of the Association Agreement between Ukraine and the EU. As a result, by the middle of 2013 Ukraine had come face-to-face with a series of trade wars with Russia. The intent was to demonstrate to the Ukrainian establishment the costs that the country would incur if it entered a free trade area with the EU.

Thus, on the eve of the Summit in Vilnius, President V. Yanukovych announced that Ukraine was not ready to sign the Association Agreement. This was the starting point of a serious public outcry that led to the revolution and the formation of a new “pro-European” government. For the second time people’s discontent with the political regime, coupled with a destabilizing confrontation between Russia and the EU, had led to a revolution. Russia described the events in Kiev as a “coup d’état” (President of Russia, 2014). So it was against this background that the accession of the Crimea to Russia occurred. In the meantime an armed conflict broke out in the eastern part of Ukraine. The European Union responded with a series of sanctions against Russia, targeting individuals and corporations, as well as certain sectors of the Russian economy. But most importantly, the negotiations on a new basic agreement between the EU and the RF, as well as those on further liberalization of the visa regime, were frozen.

The preliminary results of the Ukrainian crisis are rather mixed for the EaP. Firstly, it has to do with defragmenting of not just the post-Soviet space, but also the landscape of the EaP. Two of the Eastern partners — Armenia and Belarus — have joined the Customs Union and the Eurasian Union; three of them — Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova — stay the course to European integration. Azerbaijan, unlike the others, has emphatically distanced itself from both Moscow and Brussels, taking a limited part in their integration projects. In this context it is getting quite obvious that the implementation of the multilateral dimension of the EaP is rather problematic.

As for the Russian perception of the EaP and of the EU activity in the region, it has changed too. The Ukrainian crisis, the Crimea’s accession, and the economic sanctions against Russia have resulted from sharpening contradictions over the recent years, manifesting not solely in the post-Soviet space, but far beyond it. The Russian political elite have conclusively convinced themselves that such events as the Arab Spring, the West’s invasion of Libya and the civil war in Syria were perpetrated by their nemesis in the post-Soviet territory—the United States of America. Moreover, the primary objective of the latter has been to encourage disintegration not only in the region, but inside Russia proper. It has been increasingly often stated that Europe is being shepherded in that process (Lavrov, 2014b). It is against this background that the ENP and EaP are viewed as just tiny elements of a larger game plan against Moscow. Indeed, in April 2014, a few days prior to the start of the International Expert Conference on the Eastern Partnership in Prague, Sergei Lavrov described the EaP as an instrument of the EU to counteract the Moscow-led integration initiatives across the post-Soviet area (Lavrov, 2014a). In this context to establish any constructive cooperation between Russia and the EU on developing the region under the aegis of the EaP has become even more difficult than ever before.

8. Conclusion

Our analysis has shown that all of the major stereotypes held by the Russian expert community and the establishment regarding the EU external activities surfaced patently during the debates on the EaP initiative. Russia’s perception of the EU
Another important feature of the Russian experts’ perception of the EaP is their dash knowledge of the EU institutions, mechanisms, and practices. Given that the ENP (and its Eastern dimension — the Eastern Partnership) is the policy of the EU and is subject to the existing institutional practices, this failing may sometimes lead to misunderstanding of the underlying causes and motives behind some actions of the European partners.

Russia’s treatment of the EaP had also been influenced by other stereotypes and phobias that trace their origins to the Cold War period, namely, a fear of being isolated from the international community and Russia’s reading of the post-Soviet space as its ‘exclusive sphere of influence’. In that respect, the consequences of Color Revolutions were regarded by the Russian elite as the result of the United States’ and the EU’s foreign policies, while the dynamic manner of implementing the EaP had only contributed to the perception of it as threatening the stability of the political regime.

Moscow’s initial reaction to the ENP was rather cautious and neutral, but still Russia tried to counter it with its own foreign policy initiatives. However, later events in the post-Soviet area (for example, Ukraine’s 2004 Orange Revolution and the 2014 Revolution of Dignity being the most critical one) have revealed limited ‘magnetism’ of the Russian model for development and cooperation among the neighboring states. Moscow still has no competitive alternatives of its own to offer in the sphere of political or economic integration that could seriously raise sustainable interest of the post-Soviet political elites. Belarus, which has opted for participation in the Customs Union and the Common Economic Space, is a rather special case, since Minsk attends an imperative need to preserve the existing political regime at any cost. Russia, in response to changes in foreign policy priorities of a number of post-Soviet states and their aspiration to extend cooperation with the EU, opted for the least effective tactics — reaction and defense. Those post-Soviet states that wished to strengthen cooperation in both Western and Eastern directions were held hostage to the discrepancies in how Russia and the EU viewed each other and their differing modes of cooperation in the region. By 2014, as a result of the Ukrainian crisis, the relations between Russia and the EU had suffered an unprecedented worsening; moreover, a fault line between the two models — the European and the Eurasian one — has now run across the post-Soviet region. Therefore, the Eastern Partnership, given that some of its members are on the way to European integration while the others take part in the Eurasian Union, finds itself in quite a predicament from a functional perspective.

References


