

EU'S EASTERN PARTNERS AND THE VILNIUS SUMMIT: OPPORTUNITIES SEIZED AND MISSED

This article examines the significance, outcomes, and implications of the third Eastern Partnership summit of the EU, which was held on 28-29 November 2013 in the Lithuanian capital of Vilnius. Despite the significant progress in the partnerships of Moldova and Georgia, the negative responses of Ukraine and Armenia to the possibility of adopting Association Agreements with the EU, and the lack of interest of Azerbaijan and Belarus in adopting a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA) with the EU dashed the hopes for a successful summit. In explaining this failure, this article concludes that the culprit is mainly Russia's systematic use of manipulative tactics that exploit the vulnerabilities of EaP countries.

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The third summit of the EU Eastern Partnership (EaP) initiative was held in the Lithuanian capital of Vilnius on 28-29 November 2013. It was hoped that the summit could be a golden opportunity for deepening the cooperation among the EU and its partners in Eastern Europe – namely, Belarus, Moldova, Ukraine, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia. Although Moldova and Georgia have enhanced their partnerships with the EU considerably, the negative responses of Ukraine and Armenia to the EU’s offer of Association Agreements, and the lack of interest of Azerbaijan and Belarus in adopting a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA) with the EU dashed the hopes for a successful summit in Vilnius.¹

This paper seeks to analyze the responses of the EU’s Eastern partners during the Vilnius Summit by focusing on their priorities and positions through a comparative perspective. The paper employs this comparative method in order to explain the differences in the responses of these six countries in terms of their domestic political orientations, economic structures, as well as their degree of dependence on Russia, particularly in the field of energy. Finally, this paper aims to highlight the negative impact of Russia’s policies on the positions of the EU’s Eastern partners at the EaP 2013 Vilnius Summit.

Some arguments have placed the responsibility of the Vilnius Summit’s failure in promoting cooperation between the EU and its Eastern partners on either Brussels or the EaP countries. In contrast, this paper argues that the policies of a third country –Russia– played a more decisive role in obstructing EaP countries’ opportunities to deepen and institutionalize the level of their cooperation with the EU. In particular, the paper asserts that Moscow systematically manipulated the dependency of EaP countries on Russia –especially in the field of energy– in order to lure these countries toward its own Moscow-centric, Eurasian Union regional integration project.

The EU’s Eastern Partnership Initiative and the Significance of the Vilnius Summit

The EU’s EaP initiative has its roots in the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), which was formally adopted by the European Council in 2004.² The main declared goal of the ENP was to strengthen stability, security, and well-being in the neighborhood of the EU. In order to prevent the emergence of new dividing lines between the EU and its neighbors, the ENP offers non-EU member states in its neighborhood various opportunities to participate in several EU activities in the fields of culture, economics, politics, and security.³

1 See: “The Third Eastern Partnership Summit in Vilnius,” *Lithuanian Presidency of the Council of the European Union 2013*, <http://www.eu2013.lt/en/vilnius-summit>

2 “What is EaP,” *EaP Community*, <http://www.easternpartnership.org/content/eastern-partnership-glance>

3 “ENP – A Path Towards Further Economic Integration,” *European Commission*, 4 December 2006, http://ec.europa.eu/world/enp/pdf/non-paper_economic-integration_en.pdf

Nevertheless, the original format of the ENP suffered from two main limitations. The primary limitation was financial, as the main financial tool of the ENP, the European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument (ENPI), which became operational only after 2007, is too little to achieve the stated objectives of ENP in a meaningful way. Another important limitation of the ENP stemmed from its bilateralism. It deals with countries on an individual basis through action plans. Although

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the European Union could ostensibly manage to converge its policies with those of its neighbors in Eastern Europe, this may not always be the case in other regions such as the Middle East and North Africa. The ENP’s lack of a regional perspective towards Eastern Europe weakened the EU’s capacity to promote Europeanization in its Eastern neighborhood even if it had a significant potential for achieving successful Europeanization in this region.⁴

Bolstering of the ENP with the adoption of the EaP initiative is a quite important step also for deepening the cooperation between the EU and its partners in Eastern Europe, as it developed a regional perspective. By creating a positive environment for its Eastern partners, the EU’s EaP was expected to promote mutually beneficial interests of the EU and its partners in various areas. For the effective implementation of the EaP, it was essential to promote regional cooperation among these partners too.⁵

The EU’s EaP initiative—covering Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine—was launched through a summit in Prague in May 2009. All of these states are post-Soviet countries, though they have differing levels of orientation towards Russia and the EU. While Belarus, which has problematic relations with the EU, is oriented toward Russia, Georgia has conflictual relations with Russia and is EU-oriented. The EU developed the EaP initiative in order to develop closer relationships with its Eastern partners, since the region is of strategic importance and faced the risk of coming under the Russian sphere of influence.⁶

4 Narine Ghazaryan, “The Evolution of the European Neighbourhood Policy and the Consistent Evolvement of Its Inconsistencies,” *Review of European and Russian Affairs*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (2012), pp. 1-18.

5 Sebastian Schäffer and Dominik Tolksdorf, “The Eastern Partnership – ‘ENP Plus’ for Europe’s Eastern Neighbors,” *CA Perspectives*, No.4 (2009), pp.1-4.

6 See: Iana Dreyer and Nicu Popescu, “A Solidarity Package for the Eastern Partners,” *European Union Institute for Security Studies*, Alerts No 32, 19 September 2013, http://www.iss.europa.eu/uploads/media/Alert_DCFTA.pdf

“The Ukrainian refusal to sign was a very bad surprise both for the EU diplomats and the Ukrainian people.”

After Prague, the second EaP summit was held in Warsaw on 29-30 September 2011. This meeting was important in specifying the bilateral and multilateral mechanisms of cooperation between Brussels and its Eastern partners in concrete terms. The summit also adopted a declaration on the worsening human rights situation in Belarus.⁷

The significance of the Vilnius Summit of the EaP stemmed from the fact that the Eastern partners of the EU were expected to demonstrate their commitments to adopting institutionalized special trade regimes, as well as new rules for human mobility between the EaP countries and the EU. After such institutionalized links would be established, it was thought unlikely that the committed EaP countries would re-orient themselves toward Russia and its hegemonic project of a Eurasian Union.⁸

Opportunities Seized and Missed at the 2013 EaP Vilnius Summit

When EU members and EaP country delegations met at the Vilnius Summit on 28-29 November 2013, it was clear that only few of the EaP countries, namely Moldova and Georgia, were seriously interested in seizing the opportunity to deepen their level of cooperation with the EU. Moldova and Georgia initialed Association Agreements with the EU, which clarified the road map for their “special partnerships,” including the DCFTA, and a new regime setting the rules for the mobility of human beings between these countries and the EU. This was the good news that came out of the Vilnius Summit. The next stage in these two countries’ EU relationships will be the signing of the Association Agreements.⁹

Unlike other EaP countries, Moldova and Georgia have common characteristics that account for their readiness to seize opportunities at the Vilnius Summit. The most decisive common factor for both countries is the existence of the highest levels of popular support for enhancing cooperation with the EU. There are also relatively less decisive three other common factors. To start with, these countries have strong anti-Russian orientations due to their reactions to Moscow’s support to the

7 “Joint Declaration of the Eastern Partnership Summit, Warsaw, 29-30 September 2011,” *Council of the European Union*, http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_Data/docs/pressdata/en/ec/124843.pdf

8 See: Ramunas Vilpisauskas, et al., *Eurasian Union: a Challenge for the European Union and Eastern Partnership Countries* (Vilnius: Eastern Europe Studies Centre, 2012).

9 Alexander Sjödin, “The Vilnius Summit – What’s in for Moldova?,” *European Parliamentary Research Service*, 26 November 2013; Tornike Sharashenidze, “Georgia and the Vilnius Summit—Before and After,” *Caucasus Analytical Digest*, No.58, 18 December 2013, pp. 5-7.

secessionist ethno-territorial units of Transnistria in Moldova and Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Georgia. Georgians are particularly critical of Moscow due to the Russian invasion of Georgia in 2008. Moreover, both Moldova and Georgia see their “special relationships” with the EU as guarantees against Russia’s periodic meddling in their domestic affairs and trade embargoes.¹⁰ Finally, these countries are not heavily dependent on Russia for their energy supplies. Romania and Azerbaijan provide Chisinau and Tbilisi alternative energy supplies, denying Moscow the option of using the energy card to keep these countries under its sphere of influence.

The bad news of the Vilnius Summit was Ukraine and Armenia’s refusal to adopt an Association Agreement (AA) with the EU. Although Armenia’s decision not to initial the AA was declared well before the Vilnius Summit, the Ukrainian refusal to sign was a very bad surprise both for the EU diplomats and the Ukrainian people. Kiev, which had initialed these documents two years earlier, shocked world by declaring just before the EaP 2013 Vilnius Summit that it had decided not to sign the AA.¹¹ Civil society groups and democratic movements called for the revision of Ukraine’s decision on the AA. Pro-Russian Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich’s initial stubborn response to the demands of the pro-European Ukrainian opposition led to the outbreak of the EuroMaidan resistance movement in December 2013. This popular resistance demonstrates the unpopularity of Yanukovich’s decision and the strength of anti-Russian positions within Ukraine.¹²

“Belarus and Azerbaijan prioritize political stability over European-style democratization processes.”

Both Ukraine and Armenia also have several common characteristics that could account for their rejection of an AA with the EU. Firstly, the political leaderships of Viktor Yanukovich in Ukraine and Serzh Sargsyan in Armenia have been backed by Moscow against the more liberal political opposition movements in these countries. Secondly, the economies of these countries are heavily dependent on trade with Russia, as Moscow is a leading trade partner for both of these countries. Thirdly, energy sectors of both countries are highly vulnerable to the manipulations of Moscow.¹³ Finally, Russian President Vladimir Putin prioritized the inclusion of both Ukraine and Armenia in its Eurasian Union project. Moscow actually threatened that it could

¹⁰ Sjödin (2013); Sharashenidze (2013).

¹¹ Ian Traynor and Oksana Grytsenko, “Ukraine aligns with Moscow as EU Summit Fails,” *The Guardian*, 29 November 2013; Mikhayel Hovhannisyan, “Armenia Before and After Vilnius,” *Caucasus Analytical Digest*, No.58, 18 December 2013, pp. 2-4.

¹² See: Jan Piekło, “Euromaidan: Russia and the European Choice of the Ukrainians,” *CICERO Foundation Great Debate Paper*, No.14/01 (January 2014).

¹³ Traynor and Grytsenko (2013); Hovhannisyan (2013), pp. 2-4.

impose economic sanctions if these EaP countries decided to adopt AAs with the EU.¹⁴

“Putin’s idea of a Eurasian Union reflects Moscow’s desire to restore its hegemony in the post-Soviet space, which is also covered by the EU’s EaP initiative.”

It was not surprising that both Belarus and Azerbaijan adopted a low profile position during the Vilnius Summit. The Belarusian and Azerbaijani leaders are not interested in deepening their level of cooperation with the EU in the short run. They are pragmatically oriented towards the Eastern Partnership as part of their strategy of maintaining a degree of dialogue with Brussels. This strategy aims to reduce the criticisms of European countries concerning authoritarian trends in both countries. Although

staying engaged in the EU frameworks does not actually reduce the criticisms of European countries concerning their problems in the process of democratization, both Belarus and Azerbaijan could use their EaP status to claim that they are different from other post-Soviet countries like Turkmenistan and that the EU is hopeful about at least their “potential” for becoming more democratic and their “potential” to take their place in the European family of nations.¹⁵

The similarities between Belarus and Azerbaijan could also account for their low profile positions during the Vilnius Summit. Firstly, both Belarus and Azerbaijan prioritize political stability over European-style democratization processes. They both have a “gradualist approach” to democratization. Secondly, the economies of both countries are characterized by monopolistic rules. The industrialists of Belarus and the state-owned energy company of Azerbaijan –SOCAR– prefer to operate without the trade and competition rules of the EU’s DCFTAs. Finally, both countries are keen not to antagonize Russia, for fear of retaliation as in the cases discussed above.¹⁶

The Russian Factor in the EaP 2013 Vilnius Summit

Based on the responses of the EaP countries to the opportunity of deepening and institutionalizing their partnerships with EU at the Vilnius Summit, Russia, which was

14 Vilpisauskas, et al. (2012).

15 “EaP Summit in Vilnius: Weak But Positive Signals on Belarus,” *Belarus Digest*, 29 November 2013, <http://belarusdigest.com/story/eap-summit-vilnius-weak-positive-signals-belarus-16298>; Anar Valiyev, “Azerbaijan after the Vilnius Summit: What Next?,” *Caucasus Analytical Digest*, No.58, 18 December 2013, pp.8-9.

16 “EaP Summit in Vilnius: Weak But Positive Signals on Belarus” (2013); Valiyev (2013).

neither a subject of EaP nor present in Vilnius, played the most decisive role in the Summit's outcomes. Examining the obstructive and uncooperative role played by Russia in its own bilateral relations with the EaP countries is important for explaining why and how Moscow, as an outside player, has managed to shape the responses of some of the EaP countries.

The reason for Moscow's determination to spoil the Vilnius Summit and to obstruct the Association Agreements between EU and EaP countries is linked to Russian President Vladimir Putin's commitment to broaden the existing membership of the planned Eurasian Union among Russia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan, to include other post-Soviet countries such as Ukraine and Armenia. In fact, Putin's idea of a Eurasian Union

reflects Moscow's desire to restore its hegemony in the post-Soviet space, which is also covered by the EU's EaP initiative. Consequently, Moscow and Brussels have considered the formation of "special partnerships" with the countries located in the overlapping neighborhoods in "zero-sum terms."¹⁷ Since Moscow perceived the EU Association Agreements as a relative loss for its own strategy, it used all instruments of power at its disposal to spoil the Vilnius Summit.

"The majority of leaders of EaP countries do not embrace the democratization agenda of the EU's Eastern Partnership enthusiastically."

One of Moscow's main sources of influence over the EaP countries, in particular Ukraine and Armenia, has been over their over-dependence on Russia's energy supplies, and thus the vulnerability of their energy sectors to the manipulations of Moscow. The centrality of the Russian-controlled energy sectors in the economies of these EaP countries makes their business community and political leadership more vulnerable to Moscow's manipulative tactics.¹⁸

Another source of Russian influence stems from the continuity of the Soviet era trade networks between the EaP countries and Russia. Russia's threat of imposing trade embargoes on these countries was also quite effective, since the DCFTAs required a commitment to the EU's very competitive trade rules, making the Soviet-era trade networks redundant.¹⁹ As a result, some business groups in Ukraine and Armenia with strong trade relations with their Russian counterparts were reluctant to accept the EU Association Agreements.

¹⁷ Vilpisauskas, et al. (2012).

¹⁸ Rajan Menon, "Russia's Ukraine Power Play Pays Off," *National Interest*, 26 November 2013.

¹⁹ Vilpisauskas, et al. (2012).

Russia's commitment to support authoritarian political leaders and their regimes constitutes another source of Moscow's influence over EaP countries and their decisions to reject or slow down the EU Association Agreements. In fact, the majority of leaders of EaP countries do not embrace the democratization agenda of the EU's Eastern Partnership enthusiastically. By contrast, establishing partnerships with Vladimir Putin's authoritarian regime is seen as a guarantee for the survival of their authoritarian regimes.²⁰

Finally, Russia's claim for a "great power status" at the global level and its readiness to use military force to suppress the signs of independent foreign policy in the post-Soviet space, as seen during the Russian invasion of Georgia in 2008, also result in frightening most of the EaP countries.²¹ Consequently, these countries tend to accommodate Russian interests, thus avoiding antagonizing Moscow *via* their positions at Vilnius.

Conclusion

The EU's Eastern Partnership initiative has experienced a serious setback at its third summit in Vilnius. As argued in this paper, Moscow's use of manipulative tactics over EaP countries played a decisive role in preventing EaP countries other than Moldova and Georgia from seizing the golden opportunity to deepen and to institutionalize their level of cooperation with the EU. Thus, in order to enhance the effectiveness of the Eastern Partnership, Brussels needs to take measures to curtail Moscow's tutelage over the domestic and foreign policies of EaP countries.

In this respect, Brussels could take some concrete actions to back up its Eastern Partnership strategy with a mix of sticks and carrots. To enhance its deterrent power, Brussels could impose selective economic sanctions to actors in EaP countries that suppress the pro-European civil society and/or join Russia's hegemonic "Eurasian Union" project against the will of their populations.

To enhance its power of attraction, or soft power, Brussels could offer the EaP countries that initialed AAs more favorable conditions in EU community programs, such as Erasmus+. Last but not least, Brussels could deprive Moscow of its tools for meddling in the Europeanization process of the EaP countries by decreasing their overdependence on Russia's energy supplies. To enhance European energy security, Brussels could financially assist dependent EU countries in building new LNG terminals in order to import natural gas from overseas countries. Besides,

20 David Marples, "What Putin, Lukashenko and Yanukovych Share," *Kyiv Post*, 31 October 2013.

21 Hannes Adomeit, "Russia as a 'Great Power' in World Affairs: Images and Reality," *International Affairs (London)*, Vol.71, No.1 (1995), pp. 35-68.

Gazprom could be prevented from dominating the energy markets in the EaP countries by strengthening antimonopolistic market rules and their implementation in such countries.

Adopting Association Agreements with the EU seems to be the only opportunity of the Eastern neighbors of EU to ensure their place in a democratic, peaceful, and prosperous Europe. Those countries that missed this golden opportunity during the Third EaP Summit in Vilnius could still seize this opportunity during the Fourth EaP Summit in less than two years' time.