

QUEST FOR HARD POWER: THE EUROPEAN UNION AND THE BLACK SEA REGION AFTER THE RUSSIA-GEORGIA WAR

The European Union sees itself as an advocate of the “soft power” approach in its external relations. The author argues that, due to the presence of an increasingly assertive Russia in the Black Sea region, this policy is no longer sustainable. The urgent need for a common stance towards Russia –but not to be confused with a stance against Russia– is not the author’s wishful thinking but is rather a necessity unless the EU is ready to withdraw as an actor from its Eastern neighborhood. The sooner the EU realizes the need to integrate more “hard power” components in its strategy, the more it will be able to adequately confront the current challenges in the Black Sea region.

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Soft Power vs. Hard Power?

During the early 1990s, Harvard University Professor Joseph Nye elaborated on the unique concept of “soft power” as a projection of a state’s political influence. References to “soft power” or “hard power” in this article are in the context of Nye’s teachings. The intention is to distinguish between the basic qualities of both powers rather than to provide an in-depth analysis—and to integrate them with EU policies and of inevitably in the case of the Black Sea region: Russia.

By its very nature, “soft power” is a rather passive concept, yet not a weak one. Nye defines “soft power” as “... getting others to want the outcomes that you want – co-opts people rather than coerces them.”¹ Basically, “soft power” is rooted in the power of attraction. “Hard power”, on the other hand, is based on a more active concept, consisting of sticks (coercion, the use of force, threat of force, sanctions, etc.) and carrots (incentives, payments, promises, etc.). More simply, the actor endowed with a high level of “soft power” does not need to make many efforts to persuade others. The main point of the “soft power” or “hard power” debate is not to decide which one is better; both are needed depending on the context. As Joseph Nye puts it: “Smart power is neither hard nor soft. It is both.”²

For the purposes of this article, the boundaries between some elements of “soft power” and “hard power” are not always clear. Take, for example, the policy of “passportization” (the granting of citizenship to the people in conflict regions) applied by Russia in what Moscow considers to be its “Near Abroad”, i.e. in Ukraine (Crimean peninsula), Moldova (Transnistria) and Georgia (South Ossetia and Abkhazia). It could be considered as a bribe/payment delivered by Russia. However, it could also be recognized as a tool to increase Russia’s “soft power,” because it enables citizens from breakaway regions to travel abroad. Sanctions or even the use of force against one actor can raise attractiveness of the coercer in the eyes of the adversary of the coerced actor.

If the author argues that the EU needs to apply some “hard power”, it simply means that the EU has to come to the realization that what it considers to be “soft power” policy may look as policy of appeasement (or Russia-first policy) for its Eastern neighbors. Application or rather readiness to apply the “hard power” approach therefore means to recognize sticks and carrots as complementary

¹ Joseph S. Nye, Jr., *Soft Power: the Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2004), p.5.

² *Ibid.*, p. xiii (preface).

tools to existing ones. The urgency of this need further increases in the face of the EU's falling "soft power." One of the most recent examples is the EU's failure to promote the human rights agenda –one of its core values– at the UN³. In short, only "smart power" policy can tackle challenges posed by Russia in the Black Sea region.

Sources of the EU's Soft Power

Until the "great enlargement" in 2004, the most significant and successful EU "foreign" policy was the policy of enlargement. What characterized the EU's "soft power" was the openness and attractiveness of its model for countries of Central and Eastern Europe. These countries went through painful and domestically problematic reforms to fulfill the EU membership criteria one by one. One can argue –and that is absolutely correct– that these reforms were necessary since post-communist countries had to accommodate their economies, to transform themselves from centrally planned to open markets. Nevertheless, the perspective of EU membership has been something that helped governments of the Czech Republic, Poland, Hungary and others reduce opposition to painful but needed reforms from the part of people in respective countries. It also helped cultivate domestic political debate and competition of political parties in respective post-communist states. In the Czech Republic "way to Europe" or "return to Europe" was a common call for all relevant political parties, except for the Communist party.

Yet, the EU lost its momentum of willingness and openness. The enlargement enthusiasm has been replaced with "enlargement fatigue." Countries like France or the Netherlands started to voice their opposition to further enlargement and the discussion turned to the "absorption capacity" of the EU. There is still in force Article 49 of the Treaty on European Union stating that every European country has the right to enter the EU under the condition of fulfillment of membership criteria. However, no legal commitment is strong enough when there is no strong political support. The crisis over the EU's "soft power" has been only further deepened with the double rejection of new legal frameworks more suitable for the EU-27 plus, i.e. the so called "EU constitution" rejected by popular referenda in France and the Netherlands in spring 2005 and the Lisbon treaty rejected by the people in Ireland this summer. The "enlargement fatigue," EU's constitutional crisis and the need to offer a somewhat different policy than enlargement to countries that have emerged as EU neighbors after the 2004 and 2007 enlargements, gave birth

³ For detailed information see recent report of European Council on Foreign Relations. Richard Gowan and Franziska Brantner, "A Global Force for Human Rights? An Audit of European Power at the UN", *European Council on Foreign Relations*, www.ecfr.eu.

to the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) between the years 2003 and 2004.

The European Neighborhood Policy is at the one hand the most complex policy concerning the “new” EU neighborhood; on the other hand, it is an instrument, which is subject to different competing interpretations and lacks of any finality. The membership perspective is clearly missing. Ironically, the concerned countries of East Europe (Ukraine, Moldova and Belarus⁴) and the South Caucasus need even wider and deeper reforms than did the countries of Central Europe in the 90s. When the membership perspective –probably the most significant driving force of domestic reforms for nowadays “new” EU members– is not in place, when there is lack of inducements, incentives and benchmarks, as a consequence there is inclination to do “business as usual” politics even under the umbrella of the ENP.

The ENP Strategy Paper released in May 2004 claims that “the European Neighborhood Policy’s vision involves a ring of countries, sharing the EU’s fundamental values and objectives, drawn into an increasingly close relationship, going beyond cooperation to involve a significant measure of economic and political integration. This will bring enormous gains to all involved in terms of increased stability, security and well being.”⁵ Yet, four years later we can hardly talk about the Black Sea region as a region where security, stability and well being has increased. It seems that there is something wrong with the EU’s engagement.

The European Union and the Black Sea Region: Black Sea Synergy and Russia

It would not be fair to claim that the EU is not aware of the challenges it is facing in its neighborhood. In December 2006, the European Commission released another paper on strengthening the European Neighborhood Policy,⁶ in which the strengths and weaknesses of the ENP are assessed. The paper identified three crucial weak areas:

- Trade and economic integration
- Mobility and migration
- Conflict regions

⁴ Belarus does not take part in the ENP due to the undemocratic nature of Lukashenka’s regime.

⁵ *European Commission*, “European Neighbourhood Policy – Strategy Paper”, http://ec.europa.eu/world/enp/documents_en.htm, p. 5.

⁶ *European Commission*, “On Strengthening the European Neighbourhood Policy”, http://ec.europa.eu/world/enp/documents_en.htm.

The Commission proposes to start negotiations on Free Trade Agreements between the EU and individual states participating in the ENP or to start negotiations on visa facilitation. But there is no concrete proposal on how to deal with conflict regions, the so-called “frozen conflicts”, with the exception of Black Sea Synergy. The idea of Black Sea Synergy is to use a synergic effect on existing formats under the ENP strategic partnership (with Russia) or accession process (Turkey) in the Black Sea. Basically, it addresses regional cooperation as a tool for dealing with conflict regions. It is fundamentally not a bad idea if we were not in the Black Sea region.

When it comes to “frozen conflicts” such a synergy can work only if all concerned parties take existing formats seriously, however, this is, unfortunately, neither the case for the Black Sea Economic Cooperation Organization (BSEC) nor for other regional initiatives like the GUAM. No matter the initiatives the European Commission comes up with, the major issue is that there is one power present that sees any other activity in the region as hostile to its interests. This power is, of course, Russia. And relationship with Russia is shaping the EU’s overall policy in the region.

What is Russia’s actual stance towards the presence of any other “player” in what it considers to be its exclusive zone of influence? It is worth to remind the words of Sergey Ivanov from January 2006, then Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defense of Russia and part of Vladimir Putin’s “inner circle”. Writing in the *Wall Street Journal*, Ivanov stated: “... we need to consider the implications of the “uncertainty factor” as well as high level of existing threats. By uncertainty we mean a political or military-political conflict or process that has a potential to pose a direct threat to Russia’s security, or to change the geopolitical reality in a region of Russia’s interest. Our top concern is the internal situation in some members of the Commonwealth of Independent States, the club of former Soviet republics, and the regions around them.”⁷ If we compare it with what the EU declares in the ENP strategy and other documents related to the ENP, then it simply says that the EU seeks to change the geopolitical reality in its neighborhood, including resolution of the “frozen conflicts”. Russia clearly states that it does not like the EU being politically engaged there.

Actually, Russian disapproval would not pose that serious of an obstacle if there were no fundamental differences of opinion over how to deal with Russia within the EU. Russia is very well aware that there are member states that are either ready to make business with Russia at the expense of the other members,

⁷ “The New Russian Doctrine,” *Wall Street Journal*, 11 January 2006.

or member states that fear to upset Moscow. The “divide and rule” principle drives Russian policy towards the EU. It is quite remarkable that the “new” EU member states are among those who are more critical towards and proponents of a tougher stance, or say, a united position in EU-Russian relations. The “old” member states (with the exception of UK) and states that are in favor of a EU that is more focused on the Mediterranean often do not see reason to antagonize Russia in matters they do not regard as their priority areas. Germany has a very ambiguous position, having eastern neighborhood as her priority area but with great emphasis on strategic partnership with Russia. These are limits for creating a common position on Russia within the EU. Taking this into consideration it is more correct to say that the EU institutions as such have more or less an idea of what to do in the Black Sea region but because disagreement lies between respective member states whatever strategy made in Brussels is difficult to transform in real policy making.

The Black Sea Region After War: Changing the Security Landscape

There is no dispute that the “five-day war” between Russia and Georgia in August 2008 was the most significant event in the Black Sea region since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the subsequent conflicts in Moldova, Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan. Hopes that it could move the EU towards a much-desired common position towards Russia have remained largely unfulfilled. On the one hand, at the special EU summit on the first of September, member states agreed to halt the new EU-Russia framework treaty negotiations until all the Russian troops that have entered the internationally recognized borders of Georgia after August 8 leave the Georgian territory. This is not a baseless demand since it is basically one of the six points in the French-brokered ceasefire plan⁸ of August 15-16. However today, Russian forces are still in Akhgori –in Georgia– proper and substantial number of Russian troops remained in both breakaway regions.

Despite agreements that talks should be held on the future status of both Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Russia recognized their independence on August 26. Under these circumstances, Geneva talks on Abkhazia and South Ossetia were adjourned soon after they started and there are no expectations that they will lead anywhere since positions of involved parties are fundamentally different and Russian recognition has tended to render them meaningless. Despite this, the French presidency of the EU announced that it is in favor of resumption of talks

⁸ Point 5: The Armed Forces of the Russian Federation must withdraw to the line where they were stationed prior to the beginning of hostilities. Prior to the establishment of international mechanisms the Russian peacekeeping forces will take additional security measures. “Background: Six-point peace plan for the Georgia-Russia conflict”, *ReliefWeb*, <http://www.reliefweb.int/rw/rwb.nsf/db900SID/LSGZ-7HIGHG>.

on new EU-Russia treaty. If this happens, it would be a very dangerous step, which may undermine any future credible EU policy in the Black Sea region.

It is actually not important who starts what but what is important is that Russia demonstrated its willingness to risk confrontation with the West despite its possible costs. Russian approach must be read as a warning sign for other post-soviet states that are considering pro-Western orientation. The best example for them is Georgia –most pro-Western state from former Soviet republics– punished by Russia and abandoned by the West.

Quest for Hard Power: Why It is needed?

If the EU wants to keep its foot in the Black Sea region and pursue regional stability and security, it has to realize that the policy the EU has produced up to today is not sustainable anymore. It is not about promoting “hawkish” policy on Russia, it is about the success of what the EU strives for in its neighborhood. It is time, indeed, to review priorities. As almost everything in international relations, policy on Russia can be subject to a benefit-costs analysis. Then it is reasonable to ask what benefits the EU has or will have if it keeps on doing “business as usual” with Russia? Naturally, it is not possible to ignore the fact that Russia is a major oil and natural gas supplier to Europe. But let us look at this from the other way around. Then we can see that the EU market is of vital importance for Russia as well. The EU is not in a state of dependency on Russia, but in a state of interdependency, marked by European imports of Russian energy and natural resources. The earlier the EU will get rid of its unreasonable fear that Russia may anytime cut off Europe from its energy supplies, the more it will be able to speak as one voice with Russia.

However, the adoption of “hard power” tools is not necessary only externally; it is even more important for the EU internally. Member states that have joined the EU just recently in 2004 and 2007, were not only motivated by the benefits from accession to the common EU market, their intentions were also security related. The EU accession (which effectively means also the European part of NATO) constituted a transformation also in geopolitical terms. EU membership means that these states are not in the Russian sphere of influence anymore. If performance of EU policy in its eastern neighborhood does not change substantially and continues not to include a common position on Russia, it may leave Prague, Riga or Warsaw frustrated and they may recognize that EU membership does not provide them with the security they were looking for. Any other solution,

including strengthening bilateral military cooperation with the USA, may harm significantly EU ambitions to become more than a common economic space.

And this is what countries like Germany and France are seeking to achieve: a politically united Europe that will play a major role in global politics.

The point is that current “business as usual” dealings with Russia have not prevented Russia from becoming increasingly hostile to any EU attempts in “Near Abroad”. If “appeasement” policy leads to nowhere, change of it is at least worth considering.

Conclusion

In January 2009, the Czech Republic will become the first country from the former Eastern bloc to attain the rotating EU presidency. With the Czechs representing EU external policy, it is both a significant and challenging development. Even before the August war, the agenda was already challenging, including the stalled process of the Lisbon treaty ratification (especially as the Czech Republic is the only country along with Ireland that until now has failed to ratify the treaty). Moreover, the August conflict between Georgia and Russia also pose a new challenge for Czech policy makers in an even more complicated environment. This will make it a difficult mission also because the Prague will hardly be seen by Moscow as an unbiased actor. But it is also an opportunity to raise awareness about the concerns of Central and East European member states regarding emerging Russian “neo-imperialism” in the geopolitical space between them and Russia. We can hardly expect any substantial change coming in the first six months of 2009, also given the fact that the new U.S. administration will also be so new. However, in cooperation with Sweden, which will replace the Czech Republic as the rotating EU presidency in July, the need for a new policy on Russia and, more substantially, a need for a better performed policy in the Black Sea should be high on the agenda.