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Event Report: Round table discussion on „EU-Eastern Partnership and Russia“*

25 June, 2009, from 13:30-18:45, at the Sakharov Center, Zemlyanoy val street, 57/6, Moscow

Background:

In recent years Russia and the EU have constantly switched between cooperation and confrontation. The creation of four common spaces in EU-Russia relations, however, has shown that there is a basis for cooperation between the two partners. The war in Georgia and its aftermath as well as the conflict on gas supplies and transits from Russia to the EU, on the other hand, displayed an increased danger of confrontation in the shared neighborhood. On both sides one observes a lack of common visions on how to move forward. The negotiations on a renewal of the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) between the EU and Russia are pending and no side seems to be exigent about making quicker progress. For the time being the EU and Russia seem to come to a mutual but unpronounced agreement on being neither friends nor foes.

The EU Eastern Partnership (EaP) initiative has been launched on 7 May 2009 in Prague with the aim to give the EU's Neighborhood Policy a specific Eastern dimension. According to the published joint declaration the initiative focuses on establishing a multilateral framework for relations with Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine in specific thematic areas for cooperation including democracy, good governance and stability, economic integration and convergence with EU sectoral policies, energy security, and contacts between people - all aiming at the promotion of integration between EU member states and EaP countries as well as among EaP countries. In practice, however, first doubts already arose with regards to the political assertiveness of the initiative, including possible budgetary shortcomings, as well as a coherent political approach among EU member states. Moreover, given the long-established ties between Russia and the EaP-countries and their shared participation in the CIS, the EaP is regarded by some as already lacking coherence and political sustainability for not having invited Russia to join the discussion table.

The EaP is therefore not only facing the challenge of integration between the member states of the EU and Partnership countries, but also the gap of diverging interests between Russia and the EU. In order to get a clearer perspective on the pitfalls and chances of the EaP, we have invited a selected group of domestic and international experts and policy analysts.

Before being able to discuss the advantages and disadvantages of the newly launched EU Eastern Partnership (EaP) initiative, it seemed reasonable to recapitulate, what it really entails and straighten out some facts that are sometimes overlooked in the heat of the debate. The discussion therefore opened with a presentation that sought to be both, clarifying and explanatory as regards to the actual aims of the EaP.

Since the text of the invitation for the roundtable already included a tone of a presumed upcoming conflict between the EU and Russia with regards to the Partnership countries, the explanation included some defensive elements when acknowledging that the EaP is indeed excluding Russia, nevertheless adding that this is so by design. The EaP is after all an eastward

deepening of the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) to that Russia did not want to sign up to in the first place, but rather choosing a distinct approach in the framework of the currently re-negotiated Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA). In this sense, the EaP is now largely addressing objectives, such as visa freedom and energy security that are also key to EU-Russia relations, but are dealt within a different constitutional set-up. The remark about simply having excluded Russia from the Initiative was therefore said to not exactly be based on facts and to rather be worked out in practice.

Understanding who is Concerned: The Issue of Being “In Between”

The EU is very well aware of the numerous and long-standing relationships between EaP countries and Russia and respects that it might be perceived as stepping in the “backyard” of the Russian sphere of influence. The EaP therefore really meant to be an attempt to provide a complementary rather than competitive framework of cooperation, as has been clarified by a EU Commission representative. Citing the case of Belarusian competition policy, the dilemma of the actual “competition” between two converging integration processes has been illustrated by a panelist, who underscored that if Belarus was seeking to adopt the EU’s regulatory norms, it cannot adopt the Russian framework at the same time.

This perception has been underlined by recent research done by the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR) that presents mixed findings from public opinion polls held in Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, Belarus, Azerbaijan and Armenia. While some countries’ public opinion preferred CIS integration, the enthusiasm for EU integration has been prevailing in only three countries.

In continuation of this dilemma, the perspective on the EaP from a Partnership country is somewhere in between being skeptical about it but feeling torn at the same time. As an example, the views in Ukraine are undoubtedly acknowledging that the EaP is first of all a platform in order to foster closer cooperation. However, at the same time it would be difficult, if not impossible, to choose sides if the question were about “going East” or “going West”. It has therefore been noticeable that while about 60% of Ukrainians are still in favor of association or even integration with the EU, it is still difficult to answer how serious both sides are about it. The logic behind the delays in approving legislation in the parliament as well as the avoidance to adopt a set of concrete benchmarks were said to be main obstacles here. Also, Ukraine has not really been involved in preparations of an action plan of the EaP, which just underlines once more that the Eastern Partnership is more about the “West’s path to the East than the other way around”, as has been observed by a Ukrainian participant. Indeed, at this point it seems as if Brussels does not know exactly what it wants the EaP to be or to do for the relations with the EU, more than just being another platform for cooperation between the countries addressed. Another participant from an EaP country underlined that the perspective of democratization, better standards of living and freedom of expression have, however, already manifested as fundamental improvements that are irreversible in the sense that a development backwards would never be permitted.

Understanding the Roots of Russian Skepticism

With regards to the Russian perspective on the EaP one has to understand the source for Russia’s reservations by acknowledging the scope of twofold concerns.

On the one hand, a Russian analyst of EU affairs did not believe that the concept of legitimacy as a fundamental principle underlying all policies coming from Brussels is *per se* a good thing. Citing the Iranian nuclear program, it can be questioned to what extent multilateral

treaties are also meaning that a certain policy is good for international relations. On the other hand, expediency as a fundamental principle to all EU policies was said to be highly questionable, as side-effects can hardly ever be calculated.

The prevailing perception from the Russian side is still that, the EaP is not much more than a reaction to the Caucasus crisis following the war in August 2008. This view, however, has been rejected as undermining the fact that talks on the EaP have already been launched during the late June European Council alongside with the discussion on a Union for the Mediterranean. On the other hand, Russia's criticism on the EaP came at no surprise, keeping in mind that the EU's Communiqué on a Wider Europe has already seen a rather unfavorable reception. By taking up a somewhat defensive stance towards the EaP's intentions not being directed against Russia, a Russian participant brought up the argument that there would probably be less criticism overall if Russia would have been included in the foundation talks on the initiative. The ball was played back again by illustrating Russia's confusion about the overall dissatisfaction with Russia's hard-handed policy in the Caucasus. If Russia was then to be blamed for wanting to expand its sphere of influence, the EaP was said to be doing hardly anything different. In the aftermath of the war in the Caucasus, it was then even argued that the initiative is really about the expansion of NATO under the cover of the EU. The June Summit in Khabarovsk and especially the proposed gas transit through Ukraine has obviously underlined how difficult it is to find any mutually agreeable solutions at the moment.

Another Russian discussant reminded the panel of the fact that with regards to the so-called domination of the post-soviet space one also has to understand the fundamental principle of Russia's policy in this area. Keeping in mind that the EU has managed to become the most stable and prosperous territory in the world exactly because it has not been dominated by a third power, the same approach should now be applied to the indeed sovereign states of the CIS.

Persistent Cold-War Mentality and Competition on the Eurasian Space

In continuation of the search for explanations for the Russian perspective, a wider Russian policy discourse was introduced that has been evident since 1992 – the competition on the Eurasian space. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union the Russian discourse had rather focused on the notion of “spheres of responsibility” rather than merely “spheres of influence”, while it has been acknowledged that this may be even more dangerous. A Russian participant further added, how unfortunate and at the same time unnecessary Medvedev's comment about “spheres of influence”, which has sparked this debate, has been to begin with.

Observations from the panelists confirm that, at this point Russia has reached a stage in international relations, where all moves are perceived as hostile. In this vein, several upcoming occasions, including the elections in Ukraine, are awaited to be occasions to harm each other rather than to find a common ground. How to move out of this vicious circle, especially in the midst of a global economic recession, is still to be seen.

Perspectives and Strategies on Moving Ahead

Policy recommendations to the EU included a strengthening of the constitutional as well as normative base of the EU, making it even more attractive for EaP countries. Also the notion of a Russian sphere of influence must be resisted, in order to be able to offer a truly innovative approach. The main difficulty was concluded to be indeed still about the fact that the persisting Cold War mentality must truly be abandoned in order to present a chance for the EaP. Therefore the support of sovereignty and self-determination in the neighborhood countries is key.

The prevailing view was that the concept of the EaP is too politically sensitive to ignore its possible implications for all actors involved - actively and passively. Not just should there be a strengthening of the dialogue between EaP states and the EU, whereby the former should be the once to voice their expectations and suggestions for the shaping of the EaP more than they do at this time. On the other hand, Russia cannot be put aside in the creation of a sustainable policy framework for the entire post-Soviet space that is partly covered in the EaP.

Overall, the EaP and the identified issues of tensions must now be worked out into policy recommendations and manifested in productive working documents that find the balance between acknowledging and addressing tensions while at the same time suggesting meaningful solutions, which are acceptable for all parties involved. So far, even Russian analysts acknowledged that Russia is still rather exhibiting a form of imperialism instead of offering something truly productive and interesting. On the other hand, the international system could be blamed for not having created mechanisms that include Russia in the international system. But trying to teach Russian elites will be as counterproductive from the outset as would be to lament existing differences in perspectives and perceptions. Participants from EU countries and Russian speakers alike agreed that both sides need to realize that they need to find a basis for cooperation – regardless of the countries’ democratic traditions. It was believed to be more fruitful to rather focus on areas that have worked so far, before expanding into more delicate policy aspects. This, at least, could strengthen the common ground that is needed for negotiations about the future of the EaP and EU-Russia relations as well as pave the way towards the establishment of a common policy agenda, one that achieves to combine “interest and intuition”, a Russian participant noted.

* *This roundtable was held under Chatham House Rules and the report at hand is based on the views presented during presentations and debate. The opinions expressed in this report do not necessarily represent the opinion of its author or the Heinrich- Böll-Foundation. For questions or comments about it, please contact Irina Dettmann at dettmann@boell.ru.*