Bridging a (mis)perceptional gap: the EU's Eastern Partnership and Russia
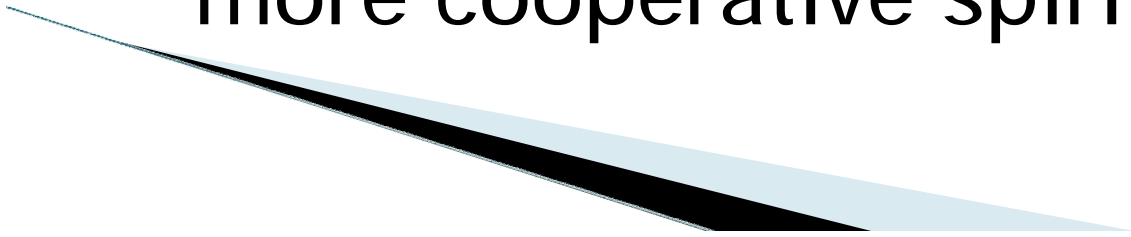
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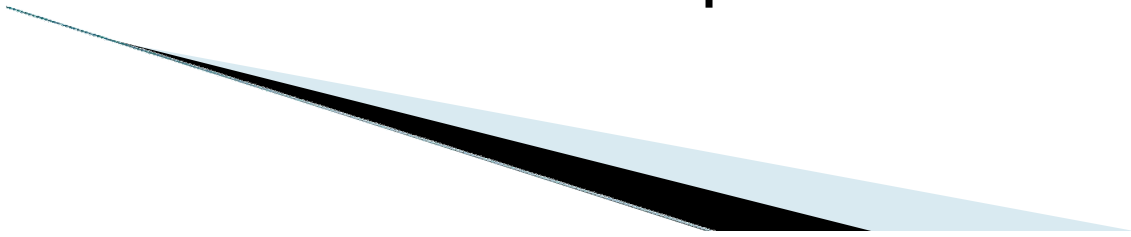Budapest

Research Objective:

It is two-fold:

- to identify major sources of the EU-Russian misperceptions in case of the Eastern Partnership (EaP)
- to contemplate how these misperceptions could be overcome and how the EU-Russian dialogue on the EaP could be restructured in a more cooperative spirit

Research questions:

- How is the EaP perceived by the Russian foreign policy schools?
- What are the major Russian concerns about the EaP?
- What should be done to make the EaP a venue for the EU-Russia cooperation rather than a bone of contention?

Russian foreign policy schools:

Geopoliticians/realists (currently the dominant schools both in the Russian academic community and among the decision-makers): the EaP is a continuation of power politics but by other (non-military/economic) mean. The EU/West uses 'soft' instead of 'hard' power. The main EaP's geopolitical purpose is to side-line Moscow in this part of the post-Soviet space or (even better) to force out Russia from its traditional sphere of influence

Russian foreign policy schools:

Liberals and globalists (quite marginal and highly divided groupings): the EaP being an integrationist project by its spirit will be helpful in creating a more prosperous and secure EU's neighborhood. It will be beneficial for six partner countries because the EaP aims at promotion of socio-economic, political and administrative reforms in these post-Soviet states and preparing association agreements with the EU. It could be another avenue for the EU-Russia cooperation on creating common spaces in Europe. The current EU-Russia problems with the EaP is a result of misperceptions and misunderstandings rather than a fundamental difference of interests. Balance of interests instead of power balance
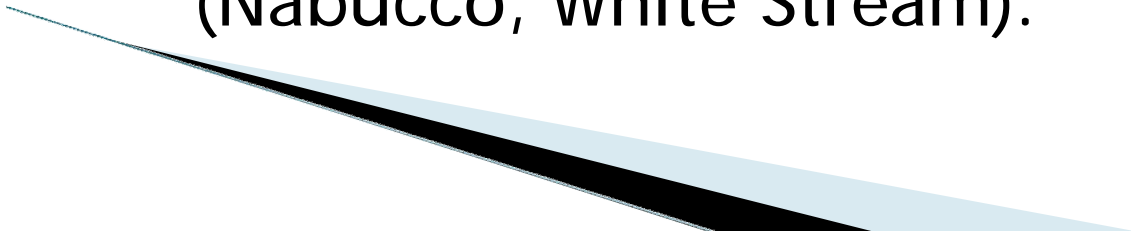
Russian foreign policy schools:

Social constructivists:

▸ The EaP is a typical case of securitization from both sides. The EU exaggerates Russia's 'imperialist' ambitions in the post-Soviet space and Moscow's inclination to use 'energy weaponry'. Russia securitizes 'normal' challenges of European/Eurasian integration by perceiving them as 'soft' security threats.

▸ The EaP has intensified the debate on identity issues both in six partner countries and Russia (European, Asian, Eurasian identities). It seems that most of the EaP partner countries opted for the European identity while Russia claims a Eurasian one and tries to make it attractive for the post-Soviet states.

Russia's concerns about the EaP:

- The EaP's 'hidden agenda' includes the EU plan to undermine Russia's geopolitical dominance in Eastern Europe and Caucasus.
- Moreover, the EaP may potentially undermine Moscow's own integrationist projects (CIS, Customs Union, Eurasian Union, Belarus–Russia Union State, etc.).
- The EaP may weaken subregional organizations where Russia participates (e.g., the Black Sea Economic Cooperation).

Russia's concerns about the EaP:

- The EaP may downgrade the status of the EU–Russia Four Common Space arrangement and make the EaP participants a more important priority for the EU than Russia (in spheres such as preparing Free Trade Area, Association agreements, visa regime facilitation, etc.).
- Kaliningrad: if included to the EaP, local separatism can be encouraged.
- The EaP's main real aim is to build alternative gas and oil pipelines bypassing Russia (Nabucco, White Stream).
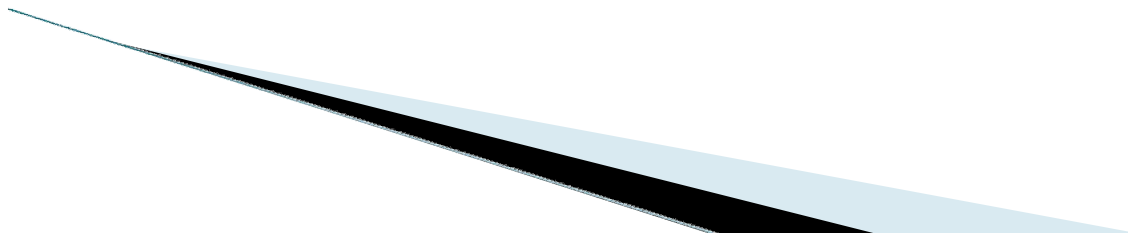
Existing pipelines + Nabucco and South Stream
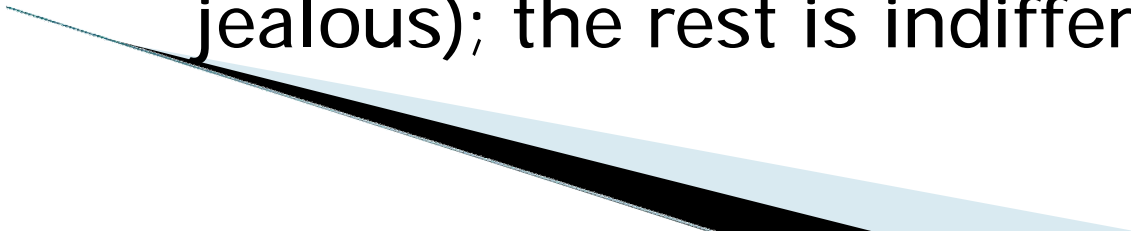
Russia's skepticism about the EaP:

- Poor funding (for 2010-13: Prague summit – €600 mln; Warsaw summit – €1.9 bln) prevents project's effective implementation. Global crisis and Eurozone crisis are not conducive to the better funding.
- Since the EaP does not promise the EU membership to the partner countries most of them are quite skeptical about the project as such and often imitate its implementation rather than do a real 'homework'.

Russia's skepticism about the EaP:

- Doubts about the feasibility of democratic reforms by the EaP participants: some of the partner countries (e.g., Belarus, Azerbaijan and Ukraine) are led by authoritarian or cleptocratic regimes that are reluctant to implement any serious democratic reforms.
- There is also a big difference of opinion among the project participants on project's priorities, final outcomes, ways and means of its implementation.

Russia's skepticism about the EaP:

- There are serious disagreements and even conflicts between the EaP participants themselves which may prevent effective implementation of the project (Nagorny Karabakh, Transnistria, Romania–Ukraine tensions on minority rights, etc.).
- There are serious disagreements among the EU member states regarding the EaP: Central and East European countries, Germany, Sweden – pro; France and Spain – contra (or jealous); the rest is indifferent/skeptical.

Russia's skepticism about the EaP:

- The so-called EU 'dimensionalism', i.e. various EU regional/sub-regional initiatives in its "new neighbourhood" (Black Sea Synergy, Central Asian Strategy for a New Partnership, Northern Dimension, Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region, Arctic Strategy, etc.) may result in numerous inconsistencies and parallelisms between these programs and thus undermine their effectiveness (including the EaP).

What could be done?

- Having in mind that the EaP is only an element (and not the most important one) of the EU-Russian relations, first, the major barriers to bilateral cooperation should be removed. Among these barriers the lack of a proper legal basis for the bilateral relations (no new strategic partnership agreement to date), the lack of substantial progress in the EU-Russia energy dialogue, slow progress in implementing Common Spaces concept (especially Common Space on External Security), etc. should be mentioned. Without doing this, the EU-Russia cooperation on the EaP will be sluggish or limited.
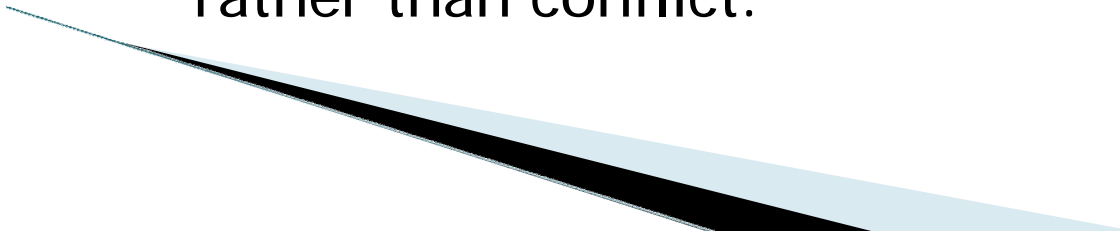
What could be done?

But even in the current situation some opportunities for a more intense cooperation are available:

▸ Changing focus from national to subnational level: Brussels and Moscow can encourage the border regions and municipalities of the EaP partner countries (Belarus, Ukraine, Azerbaijan) and Russia to cooperate. The experiences of the Euroregions and city-twinning could be helpful.

What could be done?

▸ Most of the EaP *multilateral platforms* (democracy, good governance and stability; economic integration and convergence with EU policies; contacts between people) and *flagship initiatives* (border management program; integration of electricity markets, energy efficiency and renewable; SME development; response to disasters; good environment governance) could be linked to the similar EU–Russian programs (*via* joint training, seminars, exchanges, etc.).

▸ The EaP flagship initiative on the Southern energy supply corridor could become a subject for joint discussions (and probably cooperation) with Russia rather than conflict.

What could be done?

- The EU could remove one of Moscow's major concerns about the EaP (that some partner countries may be put on a 'fast track' and go faster than Russia in integration with the EU) by synchronizing and harmonizing cooperation with these countries in areas such economy, trade, customs, investment, visa regime facilitation, etc.

- The EU, Russia and six partner countries should start their dialogue from searching common points that unite rather than divide them. The same is true for individual countries: for example, cross-border cooperative initiatives could be first launched between Russian, Belarusian and Ukrainian neighboring regions (where some positive experience is already there).

What could be done?

- One may even suggest that Brussels could use Moscow for putting indirect/'soft' pressure on those EaP countries (say, Belarus, Ukraine) that have problems with human rights or too slow in democratic/market reforms.

- A series of 'trilateral' (EU, Russia, six EaP countries) expert seminars to discuss mutual perceptions and approaches to the EaP could be helpful. A number of joint (multilateral) research projects on the EaP under the auspices of, say, national academies of science could be initiated.