

Europe's Eastern Partnership – a successful failure?

Tanja A. Börzel

2014-03-20T14:38:29

The depiction of the European Union as an economic giant but political dwarf is a classic, and criticisms for its failure to get its act together when it comes to foreign and security policy are an old hat. With the recent events in Ukraine, however, EU bashing has reached a new dimension. Political commentators and journalists sing from the same song book. And the tune goes as follows: In the 21st century, Russia and the US play a geostrategic game of the 19th century according to the rules of the 20th century. In their competition over exclusive spheres of influence, Russia got the Crimean (back) and the US keeps the rest in the West. Europe has either been irrelevant in this power game or dealt one or two cards to the US. Either way, the European Union and its member states have betrayed the values they seek to uphold bowing to the power of Western energy companies, Russian oligarchs, US imperialism, or Russia's ambition to re-build the Soviet Union – pick your choice.

There is no question that the conflict over the Crimean involves geopolitics. While all parties justify their actions by the need to protect democracy and human rights, the bidding over Ukraine's territorial integrity is also about economic and security interests. Yet, in the 21st century, immaterial and material interests are intimately linked. For once, in a globalized economy, the prosperity of Western democracies and the survival of the Russian rent-economy both depend as much on the energy supply from Russia. More importantly, Western democracies share the belief that democracy is the best way to ensure security and prosperity in the long run. So do many Ukrainians that have been holding out in Maidan, first, to dispose of an autocratic and corrupt regime, and then to protest against the land-grab by an external autocratic regime. The European Union has been an important reference point for their demands of democracy and (international) rule of law. After all, it was the refusal of former president Yanukovitch to sign the Association Agreement with the EU last November that triggered the protest movement in the first place.

The European Union and its member states might have underestimated the political costs of the Association Agreement for President Yanukovich. They did not anticipate how far President Putin would go to protect what he sees as Russia's national interests in its near abroad. And the EU certainly failed to prevent the annexation of the Crimean, which could set a precedent for pro-Russian secessionist regions in other Eastern Partnership countries (Moldova, Georgia). Yet, what should the EU have done? Offering a membership perspective to Ukraine in return for political reforms would have been unlikely to make Yanukovich cut his own power by strengthening the judiciary, reforming electoral laws, and fighting corruption. Moreover, it would have fueled Putin's anxieties of a "Western expansion" even further. Providing massive financial aid to counteract Ukraine's dependence

on Russia would have empowered a corrupt and autocratic regime rather than transforming it. Trying to reach a compromise with Putin over the Association Agreement with Ukraine might not only have invoked memories of the 19th and 20th century. It would have been unlikely to work in Putin's world of competing spheres of influences. Imposing strict sanctions early on against Putin's attempts to undermine Ukraine's territorial integrity could have easily escalated into military conflict, a risk that seems hardly justified given that Putin is the ultimate loser of his own geopolitical game – precisely because the European Union has largely resisted playing along.

True, Russia won the Crimean, and Putin's domestic approval rates have skyrocketed. Yet, this is likely to be a Pyrrhus victory. Economically, the Rubel fell. So have the stock values of many Russian companies and the trust of foreign investors. Internationally, Russia is completely isolated, no country likes the idea of a foreign regime grabbing part of its territory, and this includes China. Russia can't have it both – be accepted by the international community but not wanting to play by its rules. Putin's foreign policy has accelerated Russia's fall from a rising power to a rent-seeking economy that has little in common with the emerging markets of Brazil, India or China. The loss in economic and political power will drive Ukraine but also other countries in Russia's near abroad even more towards the West.

The EU might have failed to actively shape the developments in its Eastern neighbourhood, arguably because it has refused to buy into Putin's world of geopolitics. This is not to say, though, that it has not had any influence. Despite its external failures, it is the internal success of the EU in transforming Europe into a region of lasting peace, prosperity and security that draws post-Soviet countries to the European Union. The depiction of the European Union as an economic giant but political dwarf is a classic, and criticisms for its failure to get its act together when it comes to foreign and security policy are an old hat. With the recent events in Ukraine, however, EU bashing has reached a new dimension. Political commentators and journalists sing from the same song book. And the tune goes as follows: In the 21st century, Russia and the US play a geostrategic game of the 19th century according to the rules of the 20th century. In their competition over exclusive spheres of influence, Russia got the Crimean (back) and the US keeps the rest in the West. Europe has either been irrelevant in this power game or dealt one or two cards to the US. Either way, the European Union and its member states have betrayed the values they seek to uphold bowing to the power of Western energy companies, Russian oligarchs, US imperialism, or Russia's ambition to re-build the Soviet Union – pick your choice.

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