



Russia's perceptions and misperceptions of the EU Eastern Partnership



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ABSTRACT

This article is devoted to the problem of the reaction to the Eastern Partnership by Russia's both the political establishment and the expert community. The question of reactions to the Eastern Partnership in the target countries has been extensively posed in academic literature. However, the question of Russia's reaction to the Eastern Partnership, one of the most important actors of the region, has been rarely raised by the academic community. A wide array of factors impacted Russian elites' perception of the Eastern Partnership – from problematic issues in the EU–Russia relations to the post-Soviet states' political and economic transformation. Studying the dynamics and peculiarities of Russia's perspective on the Eastern Partnership makes it possible to draw meaningful conclusions on the nature of Russia's phobias that fuel its domestic and foreign policy.

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The Eastern Partnership was implemented as a foreign policy initiative of the EU back in 2009 in order to maintain and help develop what is called the European Project (Korosteleva, 2011). As members of the Eastern Partnership, post-Soviet States were offered a new formula for interaction with the EU and some ambitious cooperation programs. However, the essence and scope of the term “partnership” still remains somewhat vague. Such conceptual uncertainty not only poses a threat to the effectiveness of the Eastern Partnership (further – EaP), but also has caused much worry with the EU strategic partner – Russia.

It should be pointed out that the EaP has been influenced by a range of complex processes taking place within the common neighborhood between Russia and the European Union. Among those was the contradiction between Russia and the EU on the future of the post-Soviet region, bearing effect on both the form and content of the EaP and on its perception in Russia. Shying away from participating in the European Neighborhood Policy (further – ENP) and having revitalized its policy in the post-Soviet territory, Russia, like no one else, has influenced the EaP to take the very form that causes its own most fierce criticism; that is, Russian policy in the post-Soviet area became hostage to the longevity of the logic of confrontation with the West. Russia's actions, aimed to consolidate the post-Soviet area, often against the will of individual states in that region, provoked retaliatory measures by Brussels and vice versa. As a result, the air of mutual distrust between the EU and Russia was growing worse. The EaP became, in part, one of the unintended consequences of this mistrust.

Ever since it emerged, the EaP has been constantly present on the agenda of the Russia–EU relations. However, the question of Russia's reaction to the EaP – one of the most important actors of the region – has been rarely raised by the academic community (Haukkala, 2008; Nervi Christensen, 2010). The question of reactions to the EaP in the target countries has been extensively posed in academic literature. In the meantime, the need to study the reaction in Russia to the EaP can hardly be

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overestimated, for not only it could contribute significantly to the study of the ENP's impact on East European countries, but it could also be of great help for EU-Russia political cooperation in the region.

In the following parts we shall analyze the reaction to the EaP in Russia exhibited by both the political establishment and the expert community. As mentioned above, the EaP by design is a regional dimension of the ENP. Therefore we will approach the subject from a lengthier historical perspective, and concentrate on the features and dynamics of Russia's perception of the EU policy toward European post-Soviet states within the ENP. Next we will consider the reaction of the Russian ruling circles and the expert community to the idea of the EaP on the onset of its implementation, as well as the ongoing discussions on the possibility of Russia's joining the program. The following sections will describe the gradual changes in Russia's perception due to the key events that had taken place in the post-Soviet area, such as Ukraine's Orange Revolution and the Russo-Georgian war. Finally, the last sections will discuss Russia's attempts to expedite alternative models of integration and to counteract both the EaP, and the setting of the European model in the post-Soviet area at large.

1. Russia's self-exclusion from the ENP

A detailed discussion of the significance and implications of the EU Neighborhood Policy began among Russian experts after the European Commission released the report "Wider Europe" (March 2003). From the very start the discussion focused on two main questions: 1) the possibility for Russia to take part in the proposed by the EU "Wider Europe" and the cohesiveness of the Northern Dimension with the new EU initiative; 2) the compatibility of the European and Russia-led integration models in the post-Soviet area.

The Russian expert community responded to the ENP with an element of ambiguity – the assessments seemed contradictory with a light sense of puzzlement. On the one hand, there were voices warning that "counteracting the implementation of the Neighborhood Policy vis-a-vis Moldova, Ukraine, and Belarus would be counterproductive" (Karabeshkin, 2004, 45). Therefore, it was suggested that Russia not only integrate into the formats proposed by the EU, but also actively promote its own models of cooperation. On the other hand, there were opinions that the: "Eastern Dimension carried a number of risks for the Russian interests" (Karabeshkin, 2004, 44), particularly since the EU's and Russia's visions of the post-Soviet area were far from being identical. Generally, the Russian experts believed that a synergy between the processes of European integration and the integration in the post-Soviet area was possible with Russia leading its Eastern neighbors by way of actively integrating with them first and then into the common European market, using the framework of the future Neighborhood policy (Kazin, 2004, 33).

While the experts were still debating possible scenarios of Russian participation in the European Neighborhood Policy, the Kremlin had already made its decision. The refusal to participate had officially been come to a holt by the May 2003 EU-Russia Summit in St. Petersburg where a decision was made to develop strategic cooperation in the form of four common spaces.¹ The final document of the Summit contained no mentioning of the ENP in any form whatsoever (Council of the European Union, 2003). Despite the fact that back in November 2003 the European Commission representatives repeatedly stated that a "Wider Europe" was to enhance the strategic partnership between Russia and the European Union (Frellessen, 2004, 70–71), Russia's refusal to participate in the ENP was inevitable and quite final. The reason was that the country's financial clout was growing, thanks to the rising price of crude oil in the global markets. It provided solid grounds for Russia to review its place in international and regional politics. By then the process of strengthening the 'vertical of power' in Russia had been completed. In the meantime a rift in the perceptions of Russia's role by its elite and the Western partners was getting increasingly evident. Hence, Russia's political leaders treated the ENP with caution and even distrust, showing scepticism regarding the idea of a possible Moscow's participation in the ENP as just one of the "neighbors."

As Finnish researcher H. Haukkala (2008) explained, Russia was unwilling to participate in the ENP not merely because of a greater international weight that it believed to possess over the other country-participants of the ENP, but also because the EU tended to dialog with its neighbors from the position of "normative hegemony," which implied bringing the national law in compliance with the *acquis communautaire* and the national value system with that of Europe. In other words, the essence of the process is in changing the national legal system of a state-participant of the ENP, while the state itself may not exert influence on changes to the *acquis*. Moscow resisted it, stressing constantly that it would dialog with the EU on an equal footing only, provided that all parties involved would take part in working out norms and regulations of their interaction. It should be noted that the principle of equality in interaction between Russia and the EU was later inserted in the 2008 Russian Foreign Policy Concept. The phraseology clearly demonstrated Moscow's perception of the asymmetric nature of the existing cooperation formats with the EU as well as its desire to overcome such asymmetry.

The perception of Russia's political leaders of the ENP was further influenced by the 2004 EU enlargement and a follow-up document, "European Neighborhood Policy. Strategy Paper," released by the European Commission. It listed specific directions, forms and mechanisms for intensifying interaction between the EU and its Eastern and Southern neighbors, which now included three additional former Soviet states: Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia (Commission of the European Communities, 2004). This document raised concerns in some Russian expert quarters regarding a perceived weakening of

¹ The Common Economic Space; The Common Space of Freedom, Security and Justice; The Common Space of External Security; The Common Space of Research and Education and Culture.

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