



GLOBSEC 2010  
5<sup>th</sup> BRATISLAVA SECURITY CONFERENCE

LEADING SECURITY AND FOREIGN POLICY CONFERENCE IN CENTRAL EUROPE

# PAPER SERIES

## SUMMARY

Although the EU presents a civilization model that the partner countries of the Eastern Partnership would like to follow, it cannot be perceived as a feasible political alternative without real EU membership perspective. With no membership attached the political elite of Eastern Europe has been kept focusing on gaining the most benefits from the instruments offered. The EU's economically successful model of cooperation has respect in the post-Soviet societies. On the other hand, the euro crisis has further confirmed the European Union's enlargement fatigue, and both are factors tarnishing the Union biggest weapon in the region: its image. Toward the region, the main Russian response was an offer to post-Soviet countries of Eastern Europe to establish organizations for economic cooperation. Moscow supports multi party candidates, non-governmental organizations, media. This was a Western "monopoly" up until now. However, the interdependency of global players should help the Eastern European countries to re-determine its policies and relations. The first step seems to restore trust. The other is to re-define mutual interests of the European Union and Eastern Europe.

# SHIFTING POSITIONS: WHO IS PROMOTING DEMOCRACY IN EASTERN EUROPE?

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Since its 2004 enlargement the European Union has been trying to extend its soft power to Eastern Europe with the main aim of making its new neighbours more democratic and stabilized. But with no membership attached the political elite of Eastern Europe has been kept focusing on gaining the most benefits from the instruments offered. EU aid is never enough, advice is fragmented and has little impact. Local elites prefer to have modernization by European assistance, but without taking European standards too seriously. Building economic and political monopolies are not really EU-compatible. Still, the EU's economically successful model of cooperation has respect in the post-Soviet societies.

The EU's increasing interest in Eastern Europe was not without response. But the only country which took seriously the deepening engagement of the EU in Eastern Europe was Russia. At first, it has perceived the EU as intruder that entered in its sphere of influence. First, Moscow has fostered an assertive policy to counter the Europeans, and made it clear that it considers the "near abroad" its own exclusive sphere of dominance. Toward the region, the main Russian response was an

offer to post-Soviet countries of Eastern Europe to establish organizations for economic cooperation. The last project, the Customs Union among Russia, Kazakhstan and Belarus entered into force in 2010. In case of Belarus, it seems, Russia literally had to use force.

**Russia: Soft Power, Hard Currency**

Belarus especially offers a fresh look on how Russia's policy and assistance repertoire toward its neighbourhood has been enlarged and shifted. In spite of earlier opinions, Russia may not been interested in promoting its "managed democracy", but rather is engaged in classic democracy promotion activities. Moscow supports multi party candidates, non-governmental organizations, media. This was a Western "monopoly" up until now.

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Soft power projection has been added to the Russian policy and assistance repertoire for a reason.



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In this phase of transition in the post-Soviet region democratic credentials (such as free and fair elections or even freedom of media) have been unable to ensure sustainable democratic development. Given the weak middle class and lack of political culture, fierce political competition may lead to weak governments, heavily misused public finances and forced concessions. One of the differences between the EU and Russia is that the latter has the hard currency to invest into strategic assets and manner to push for the concessions it needs.

On the contrary, Moscow seems challenged by strong authoritarian leadership in the neighbourhood. Alexander Lukashenka of Belarus is only the latest example whose main sin - in Moscow - is that has been able to keep Russia's influence at a gate (of Belarus). Other similar case studies are Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan or Azerbaijan, although Moscow certainly is less inclined there to employ a similar change as it was recently happened in the autonomous republic of Bashkiria, where the longest-serving regional leaders in Russia suddenly resigned. The policy goal in Belarus may not be a change of a disloyal ally, though, but a weakened authoritarian leader.

Indeed, Russia adopting an increasingly pro-democracy policies may be sparked by the rationale of keeping its neighbourhood weak. Moreover, it strengthens the image of Russia and the West cooperating. This is also happening when the honeymoon of the West with Ukraine or Georgia is over. The more the regional leaders rolling back democratic credentials, the more they make the West "ignorant". Thus, democracy promotion has helped to make Russia the most serious player in the region. This change in tactics in Moscow along with some other global shifts have been reducing the room for manoeuvring for Eastern Europe.

### **Global Shifts, Local Implications**

There have been a number of global developments what have greater implications on Eastern Europe. The global economic crisis has been changing policies and focus of both Russia and the West. The euro crisis has further confirmed the European Union's enlargement fatigue, and both are factors tarnishing the Union biggest weapon in the region: its image. Moreover, the EU's foreign policy has been over going a major overhaul due to the Lisbon Treaty. The very first EU policy focusing exclusively on the region - the Eastern Partnership - could hardly mediate the political consequences of all these factors.

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Meanwhile the US-Russia reset increased the worry of regional leaders that more two global adversaries of the 20th century could have been agreeing on the faith of regional actors. The two working together to address the Kyrgyz crises has been certainly adding to this image in the region. Russia has announced modernization while offering itself as a new guarantor of European security. Cautious discussion between Russia and Germany has returned the shadow of a Western "Russia first" policy in Eastern Europe. State-backed unilateral energy deals between major European and Russian companies have been raising serious question mark over the EU capacity as a regional actor.

Changes in the energy sector, nevertheless, influence regional power relations. In her GLOBSEC conference paper, Brigita Schmognerova writes about the decreasing global demand toward crude oil that may keep prices low. To add to this, as the US increased its own shale gas exploration, there is more cheap liquefied natural gas available for Europe. Global media is full of alternative gas estimations for Europe (including Ukraine), although this is technologically more difficult to access. Thus, Russia is not only lagging behind Western technology, but it is also may lose its energy weapon.

These factors have been reducing geopolitical tensions in the region, one of the best selling items of the "authoritarian" Belarus, the "democratic" Ukraine and the "forgotten" Moldova. On the other hand, this provokes speedy action in the region by Moscow to make the neighbourhood more "loyal". Ukraine in particular is considered now not merely as a transit country for but an important market in its own right given that it is one of the world's biggest gas consumers. Russian interests need to be protected there, either through loyal allies or tough stances. While the West is seeing a more open Russia, Eastern Europe may experience a tougher one.

### **Eastern Europe: Accumulating Wealth**

All three Eastern European countries represent a paradox from the point of view their perception by the EU. Ukrainians have been living in a functioning/working democracy that is lacking in efficient governance structures. The main reason is

that this serves the interests of the Ukrainian power elite. Ukraine, since gaining its independence in 1991, has been controlled by oligarchs and bureaucrats that deliberately keeping the country in a gray zone. There is democracy in Ukraine, but lack of governance. Local elites cannot fully embrace rule of law and democratic institutions until monopolies bring more benefits than European competition.

Belarus is on the opposite end of the scale: the country has been well managed, and from the point of view of EU it has been relatively predictable but without a working democratic system. More and more, the country's half million or so bureaucrats are showing off their newly accumulated wealth as a concession from the authoritarian leadership for their loyalty. This cautious and off the surface re-distribution of wealth has been keeping the country stable and the authoritarian regime strong in the past few years. Neither the political leadership and bureaucrats, nor the society enjoying relatively stable political and economic environment interested in democracy, while there are enough resources to keep the system alive.

Moldavia is a "newcomer" that re-started its transformation process and integration efforts in 2009, but under a pro-European leadership it has had a sound record of implementing reforms, which would give them a chance to become a new Eastern European success story. But Moldova "has" the Transdnister, a security issue that must be dealt with if Russia wants to be serious as a new guarantor of European security. The recent referendum and especially the bad relations between political actors, however, may decrease political stability and the Moldovans' European hopes.

Although the EU presents a civilization model that the partner countries of the Eastern Partnership would like to follow, it cannot be perceived as a feasible political alternative without real EU membership perspective. The main shortcoming of the EU strategy in Eastern Europe is the lack any other comprehensive offer. The countries in this region, unlike the Central European ones, have to also face with more serious challenges than just managing transition. First of all there is the issue of maintaining territorial integrity and statehood. Moreover Brussels, in opposition to Moscow, cannot exercise its political dominance and push or influence the political leaderships of the partner countries. Therefore EU has been considered as a positive, but not really serious player, in the region. Not surprisingly in opposite to the Central Europe, EU does not present the only modernization

alternatives for the Eastern European elites, which fact is deeply rooted in the political environments in the region.

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Meanwhile local elites in all countries have developed a more or less functional models of accumulating resources, wealth and benefits throughout controlling government and politics. Different in fashion of governance, all three countries are rather controlled by various interest groups, than guided by national interest.

### **EU/EE: Mutual Interests**

The EU policy and appeal has been weakened by the economic crisis, but also member states keep individual interest first, sometimes over common values. Since its enlargement in 2004 the EU has been learning that democracy (like in Ukraine) is not enough without delivery in governance (such as in Belarus). Moldova, where there is certain combination of both, is still hindered by a frozen conflict, but also lacks resources and until recently the necessary attention.

While the EU is sitting in the classroom of Eastern European policy-making, a more assertive Russia is trying to re-shape its "near abroad" and plant loyal allies. Currently it is challenging the rule of Alexander Lukashenka in Belarus for not being loyal enough, but expecting more delivery/concessions from the new Ukrainian leadership. Moldova faces a complicated process of referendum and elections, what may halt its promising early progress in European integration.

A geopolitical rift is developing along with the global importance of how Russia is using energy in politics. This leaves less room for the usual manoeuvre for the Eastern European elites. The interdependency of global players should help the Eastern European countries to re-determine its policies and relations. The first step seems to restore trust. The other is to re-define mutual interests of the European Union and Eastern Europe.

For its own part, the EU should re-emphasize its commitment toward Eastern Europe by making the best out of the Eastern Partnership. In order to speed up the transformation process in these countries the EU programs should focus on an honest dialogue with

political and power elite in order to shape its thinking/consideration. Meanwhile it must understand that supporting the middle class is essential for any reform and democratic consolidation in Eastern Europe.

### **ABOUT GLOBSEC PAPER SERIES**

Globsec Paper Series provides Slovak and broader security community with policy recommendations by decision and opinion-makers throughout Euro-Atlantic. Their aim is to foster the discussion on current international security issues and transatlantic agenda bringing upon critical assessment the topic.

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### **ABOUT SAC**

The Slovak Atlantic Commission (SAC) is an independent, non-partisan, non-governmental organization which deals with national and international security issues. Aim of the Slovak Atlantic Commission is to support constructive and active involvement of the Slovak Republic in international affairs with emphasis on cooperation in the Euro-Atlantic community, support of transatlantic cooperation and effective implementation of foreign and security policy of SR through building a net of individuals and institutions (state, non-governmental and private), unified in strong security community. The Slovak Atlantic Commission represents a net of leaders who bring ideas to power and give power to ideas.