

Alargamento e Vizinhança: balanço e perspectivas futuras

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Going strategic in Eurasia: the European Neighbourhood Policy's challenges in the South Caucasus

Background

During preparation of the 2004 enlargement, the European Union (EU) began to realize the need to develop a new framework for relations with its Eastern neighbours. Poland was particularly active in underlining the need to “abolish existing division lines through assistance and closer co-operation with the adjacent countries that should be based on the common values and interests”¹, thinking particularly of Ukraine. Previously, External Relations Commissioner Chris Patten together with High Representative Javier Solana prepared a letter, in 2002, presenting the challenges and interests of the EU in a Wider Europe context and advancing a series of possible areas and legal frameworks in which relations with the Eastern neighbours might proceed². The European Commission (EC) through its enlargement directorate was entitled with the task of devising a strategic document on relations with the “New Neighbourhood”. In March 2003 a first communication came out on *Wider Europe: A new framework for relations with our Eastern and Southern neighbours*, outlining the objectives and principles under which the EU would develop relation with its neighbours³, and in May 2004 a Strategy Paper on the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) was released developing the operational lines to implement the policy.⁴ The initiative is “intended to foster long-term structural change in the economic, political, legal and institutional spheres within and between third states”⁵, sharing the benefits of enlargement and promoting stability and prosperity in the periphery of the enlarged Europe, based on shared values and acting on the principle of differentiation.

The South Caucasus countries were not included in the first communication of March 2003. However a series of events and efforts inside the EU would make it unavoidable to bring Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia to the Wider Europe initiative. The European Parliament was particularly active raising awareness of the region in the Council and the Commission, which eventually led to the appointment of a Special Representative of the EU for the South Caucasus in July. The Finish diplomat Heikki Talvitie was appointed with a mandate to “assist in the resolution of the conflicts”, and to “enhance visibility of the EU in the region”⁶. Furthermore, in December 2003, the European Security Strategy, developed by the office of the High Representative for External Relations Javier Solana was presented and it specifically underlined the need to “take a stronger and more active interest in the problems of the South Caucasus”⁷. As Dov Lynch points out “much of the EU thinking and policy [towards the South Caucasus] is the result of contingent circumstances, the pull of events from the region itself, functional to the member

¹ Non-paper containing Polish proposals concerning policy towards the new eastern neighbours after EU enlargement, presented on 21 February 2003, and available at www.msz.gov.pl. Cited by Kaczynski and Kazmierkiewicz (2005), p. 13.

² Joint letter on Wider Europe by Commissioner Chris Patten and High Representative Solana, available at http://ec.europa.eu/world/enp/documents_en.htm#8

³ European Commission, Communication on Wider Europe: A new framework for relations with our Eastern and Southern neighbours COM (2003)104 final, Brussels, 11 March 2003.

⁴ European Commission, Communication on European Neighbourhood Policy – Strategy Paper COM(2004) 373 final, Brussels, 12 May 2004

⁵ Tocci, Nathalie (2005) “Does the ENP respond to the EU’s post-enlargement challenges?” *International Spectator* 1(XL), January-March, pp. 22-23.

⁶ Council Joint Action 2003/496/CFSP, <http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cmsUpload/L169-8.7.2003.pdf>, 7 July 2003.

⁷ European Security Strategy (2003) “A secure Europe in a better world”, p. 4 and 8

state holding the presidency at a particular period, as well as the role of strong individuals inside the EU machinery”⁸. This reflects the lack of an integrated vision for the region, still much criticized today, as the ENP is in place: it is by far a comprehensive strategy for the EU to guide its action in the region.

Strategic developments and options in a globalised Eurasia

The South Caucasus region has hardly been a priority for the EU since independence in 1991. Relations developed in the framework of the Partnership and Cooperation Agreements provided a broad legal agreement under which assistance could be delivered, but political relations continued to be marked by a “Russia first” approach, more or less in most of the post-Soviet space. Only in 2003, with the “Rose Revolution” in Georgia and the peaceful change of government, bringing to power the pro-western leader Mikhail Saakashvili did the EU start to take a more pro-active stance that after enlargement in May 2004 would be highly influenced by the new member states, particularly the Baltic countries. This was a region regarded as highly unstable, ravished by organised crime, conflicts, contested borders, political instability and economic bankrupt and very much under Russian direct influence. Moreover, it was a region crowded with international actors dealing with highly intricate problems, to which the EU seemed to add very little.

The ENP revealed to be a timely initiative supporting the expectations of the young and demanding Georgian leadership and creating the momentum for Euro-Atlantic integration support in the region. By focusing on a regional approach, along with differentiation in the content and implementation of the ENP Action Plans, it promised to reward reformers having in mind regional needs. Georgian efforts worked as a powerful driver for Armenian and Azeri interest in the Euro-Atlantic integration presented by both the ENP and the NATO Partnership for Peace initiative. These seem to reinforce mutually⁹ and to provide the EU with a unique opportunity to act as stabilizing actor in the region.

Thus, the region presents three main challenges that the ENP must approach:

State building

Georgia was close to a failed state before the Rose Revolution.¹⁰ The priorities set forth by the new leadership included assuring the territorial integrity of the Georgian state and fight against corruption; the control of the territory, including the external borders of Georgia, is still today not a reality, with two separatist conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Security concerns of possible renewal of armed conflict, organized crime, violence and the perception of a unified national Georgian state are at the heart of the Georgian concerns. State institutions need further reinforcement, namely in terms of independence of the judiciary and police forces, and control over privatisation processes. Opposition parties’ independence and Parliament control over the executive must also be reinforced. In Armenia strong state institutions exist, linked to elite groups and the oligarchs, bringing together political and economic power, making institutions highly dependent on personalised. The strong image of the state is very much linked to the victory over the Nagorno-Karabakh (NK) conflict with Azerbaijan, and therefore a strong role of the military is still felt. Opposition, civil society and parliamentary control also need reinforcement in order to guarantee a democratic exercise. In Azerbaijan, similar problems persist. The dynastic succession of Ilham Aliyev to his father in the 2003 rigged elections doesn’t bode well for democracy and has brought Azeri domestic politics under control of the President. Opposition parties are poorly organized and civil society organizations and the media are growing under state control.

Conflict resolution

The separatist conflicts of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Georgia and the inter-state dispute over Nagorno-Karabakh (NK) between Armenia and Azerbaijan make this region particularly unstable and complex. The EU, under the work of its Special Representative (EUSR) for the South Caucasus, Ambassador Peter Semneby, since February 2006, has strived to support peaceful conflict resolution measures. In Georgia, both the EUSR and the Georgian government are slowly trying to devise ways to

⁸ Lynch, Dov (ed.) (2003) “The South Caucasus: a challenge for the EU”, *Chaillot Paper* n. 65, December, p. 172

⁹ See Freire, Maria Raquel and Simão, Lúcia (forthcoming) “Integration processes in the Caucasus: the global and the regional in perspective in the cases of the EU and NATO”.

¹⁰ For an assessment of the conditions of national state-building in Georgia see Jawad, Pamela (2005) “Democratic consolidation in Georgia after the “rose Revolution”?” *PRIF Reports*, n.73

include these separatist regions into the ENP¹¹, the approach is one of “development for peace”, looking to display the benefits for the separatist regions of integrating Georgian territory. Russian influence is however central in resolving these disputes. In NK the EU is not so directly involved. Neither Armenia nor Azerbaijan have requested a stronger EU role on mediation efforts, which remain within the OSCE Minsk Group comprising France, the US and Russia. However, clear incentives have been put forward as a reward for conflict settlement and the EU stands ready to support reconstruction and post-conflict rehabilitation once a solution is reached. The NK conflict is the central obstacle to regional cooperation in the South Caucasus region, and once solved could unlock the huge potential of the region.

Energy “geopolitical revolution”¹²

The South Caucasus countries inherited with independence a situation of high energetic dependence towards Russia and lack of alternatives to the inefficient Soviet infrastructures. This situation also meant that the EU and the US were unable to diversify its energy resources away from Russia, using for instance the Caspian reserves. This was set to change with the construction of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline that was inaugurated in May 2006. Along with it a gas pipeline was also built – the Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum became operational in March 2007. These were central stepping-stones in the EU’s energy diversification strategy, and in providing the South Caucasus countries with autonomy in the development and management of its resources. Baku has developed into a central link to Central Asia both in terms of energy (it is a producer, but also a transit country for energy) and in terms of transport, as the railroad linking Kars to Baku, through Tbilisi, represents the most important project for trade development between Europe and Asia, making the South Caucasus region a crossing point. All these developments signal the potential that cooperation of the EU with the region can achieve and amount to a true revolution in energy and transport. However, Armenia’s exclusion from these dynamics is an added factor of concern further isolating it and not providing support for conflict resolution efforts. Yerevan has inaugurated a pipeline linking it to Iran, but the international situation of its neighbour leaves Armenia in a fragile position.

Conclusion

I have argued that the involvement of the EU in the dynamics of the South Caucasus, though marked by the lack of a strategic vision and an integrated approach, have however come at a crucial time and could reveal to be one of the strongest inputs for reform in the region. Although the ENP is a much more fragile approach than Enlargement and, among other factors, the internal divisions of the member states towards relations with Russia make the EU a weak regional player its capabilities are still considerable. The enthusiasm with which the ENP was received is proof of the attraction the European integration process exerts in the region and factors like the accession process of Turkey or the development of a Wider Black Sea Initiative by the European Commission¹³ could create important dynamics to further root EU involvement.

This will not, however, solve the shortcomings of the EU approach in conflict resolution issues that at the moment are not only the most important demand from states like Georgia, but also the area where consensus inside the EU is weaker. The membership perspective is another shortcoming, where the EU risks harming its geo-strategic interests by outright exclusion of the neighbours from future enlargement processes¹⁴. Therefore, political and economic reforms towards democratic rule and the strengthening of state institutions to assure control over the territory are central challenges still unachieved. The maintenance of the status quo in the region renders the present situation highly volatile and demands from the EU a pro-active stance both as a security actor and a political and economic partner.

¹¹ See Popescu, Nicu (2007) “Europe’s unrecognised neighbours. The EU in Abkhazia and South Ossetia” *CEPS Working Paper*, n. 260, March.

¹² This expression was borrowed from Georgian President’s annual address to the Georgian Parliament on the 15th of March 2007. Available at <http://www.president.gov.ge/?l=E&id=2164>

¹³ See European Commission, Communication on Strengthening the European Neighbourhood Policy COM (2006) 726 final, Brussels, 4 December 2006

¹⁴ Emerson, Michael; Noutcheva, Gergana; Popescu, Nicu (2007) “European Neighbourhood Policy Two Years On: Time Indeed For An ‘ENP Plus’”, *CEPS Policy Brief*, n. 126, March, p. 14