

Chapter 12

An Eastern Partnership for Peace: Why NATO and the EU need a Coordinated Approach to their Former Soviet Neighbors

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If Europe is surrounded by impoverished and unstable neighbors, its security, stability and prosperity will be damaged; if its neighbors are flourishing, Europe will benefit. That simple equation should lead both the EU and NATO to invest more in strengthening the countries beyond the borders of the Union and the Alliance. Yet so far, the two organisations have been slow to react to the failure of their existing regional policies, and reluctant to work together more effectively. Twenty-two countries are members of both organisations, yet it often seems as though the Union and the Alliance occupy different planets, rather than office buildings a few kilometers apart in Brussels.

It is understandable that the chaos in the Middle East has become Europe's main preoccupation. State failure in Libya and brutal civil war in Syria have created the conditions in which hundreds of thousands of refugees and migrants are now heading for the EU. But Russia's behavior means that the future of both Europe and the transatlantic relationship will be shaped as much by what happens in Donetsk as in Damascus.

Putin vs. the EU and NATO in Eastern Europe

While the EU and NATO are distracted and uncertain, President Vladimir Putin of Russia knows exactly what he wants in his neighborhood. He wants either pliant authoritarian countries like Belarus, or weak, unstable and poorly-governed democracies like Moldova, which show the Russian people the terrible fate awaiting them if they turn their backs on Putinism. And he wants to divide and undermine the EU and NATO; in Putin's view they humiliated Russia when they opened their doors to former Soviet vassals and offered them an alternative future, and a stronger Russia can now turn the tables.

So far, Putin has played a weak hand very well, because he has been allowed to do so. Russia is an economic basket-case. Andrey Movchan has made a powerful case that the Russian economy is even more dependent on oil and gas extraction than official figures suggest.¹ The country is expanding its armed forces and plowing money into modernizing military equipment at the expense of investing in education, health and civilian infrastructure. Russia's demographic prospects are poor. Yet the West often behaves as though Russia is a country too powerful to stand up to.

The EU's Eastern Partnership, bringing together the EU and Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine, has failed. It was launched at a summit in Prague in 2009, with the goal of creating "the necessary conditions to accelerate political association and further economic integration between the European Union and interested partner countries." More than six years later, three of the partner countries are not pursuing political association or economic integration with the EU; Ukraine has been invaded by Russia in an effort to block Kyiv's shift towards the EU; and none of the six can claim to show full respect for the values of democracy, the rule of law and human rights which are supposed to underpin the Eastern Partnership.²

On the NATO side, things are no better. At their summit in Bucharest in April 2008, NATO leaders confidently stated:

NATO welcomes Ukraine's and Georgia's Euro-Atlantic aspirations for membership in NATO. We agreed today that these countries will become members of NATO.... MAP [a NATO Membership Action Plan] is the next step for Ukraine and Georgia on their direct way to membership. Today we make clear that we support these countries' applications for MAP.³

Seven years and two Russian invasions later, neither Georgia nor Ukraine has a NATO Membership Action Plan, and as President

¹ Andrey Movchan, "Just an Oil Company? The True Extent of Russia's Dependency on Oil and Gas," Carnegie Moscow Center, September 14th 2015.

² Joint Declaration of the Prague Eastern Partnership Summit, EU document 8435/09 (Presse 78), May 7th 2009.

³ Bucharest Summit Declaration Issued by the Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Bucharest on 3 April 2008, NATO document Press Release (2008) 049, April 3rd 2008.

Obama said in March 2014, after Russia had annexed Crimea, “Neither Ukraine or Georgia are currently on a path to NATO membership.”⁴

A Common EU/NATO Vision of Europe?

How can the EU and NATO start to put things right in the east? First, the 22 countries that are members of both organisations need to clear away the political obstacles and the silo thinking that bedevil EU-NATO co-operation. They have to look at European security in the round; and they have to ensure that the leaders of the institutions follow suit. The Secretary General of NATO and the President of the European Commission should not be taking diametrically opposed lines on the future development of relations with Russia, as Jens Stoltenberg and Jean-Claude Juncker did in separate remarks on October 8, 2015. Stoltenberg noted that NATO had to respond to Russia’s annexation of Crimea, its intervention in eastern Ukraine and its occupation of parts of Georgia, and had therefore reinforced the Baltic states and Poland. Juncker said that Europe had to ease tensions with Moscow, and could not allow its policy towards Russia to be dictated by Washington.⁵ The members of the EU and NATO need to establish a common vision of Europe that they can both work to realize: a translation of the hallowed phrase “Europe whole and free” into coherent strategies and practical policies for European and Euroatlantic organisations and states.⁶

Before they can start to build a Europe whole and free, however, the EU and NATO need to decide which Europe they are talking about. It is often said that Russia historically lacked natural boundaries, and that this led it to seek security by constantly expanding to prevent threats emerging beyond its borders.⁷ Both the European Union and NATO have suffered since the end of the Cold War from analogous problems: they have defined political boundaries to their enlargement, but not

⁴ Press Conference by President Obama, European Council President Van Rompuy, and European Commission President Barroso, Whitehouse transcript, March 26th 2014.

⁵ Press conference by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg following the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Defence Ministers session, NATO transcript, October 8th 2015; “Europe Needs Better Relations with Russia—Juncker,” Reuters, October 8th 2015.

⁶ A Europe Whole and Free: Remarks to the citizens in Mainz, President George Bush. Rheingoldhalle. Mainz, Federal Republic of Germany, May 31st 1989.

⁷ See for example, Andrei Tsygankov, *Russia and the West from Alexander to Putin: Honor in International Relations*, Cambridge University Press, 2012.

geographical ones. Thus the Washington Treaty of 1949, which established NATO, stated: "The Parties may, by unanimous agreement, invite any other European State in a position to further the principles of this Treaty and to contribute to the security of the North Atlantic area to accede to this Treaty", without seeking to define which states were or were not European.⁸ The Treaty on European Union similarly states that any European state which respects the values of the Union and is committed to promoting them may apply to become a member. The values are defined as "respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities."⁹

These vague criteria have produced two contrasting but negative effects. For a Russian regime obsessed with the fear of encirclement, they justify the belief that the EU and NATO have unlimited territorial ambitions in Russia's neighborhood, which Moscow must resist. At the same time, they enable those within the two organisations who oppose further enlargement to argue either that potential new members are not European; or that their membership would not contribute to European security; or that they do not in practice respect and promote the values of the EU.

There is no perfect definition of Europe: the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) includes the five Central Asian states and Mongolia; the Council of Europe excludes Belarus on human rights grounds, but includes Russia; the Treaty on Conventional Forces in Europe has part but not all of Kazakhstan within its area of application. What matters is that the EU and NATO should agree on which countries are in principle eligible for membership, and state clearly that if those countries meet the criteria for joining then the two organisations will not allow any third party to stop them.

Europe United, or Europe Divided?

Meanwhile, regardless of which countries may eventually join, the EU and NATO have to accept that their security interests do not stop at their current borders; and they have to decide what kind of neighbors they would ideally like to have. They have a number of options. None is

⁸ The North Atlantic Treaty, Washington DC, NATO Official Text, April 4th 1949.

⁹ Articles 49 and 2 of The Treaty on European Union, Lisbon, December 13th 2007.

problem free, though some risk worse outcomes than others. They can accept that the countries of the former Soviet Union lie within Russia's sphere of influence and that their fate is for Russia to decide; they can have implicit or explicit understandings with Russia to allow the countries concerned to remain independent but neutral and non-aligned; or they can push forward with integrating those countries that want to become members of the EU and NATO, concentrating on making them as secure as possible in the face of (inevitable) Russian pressure while accepting that some former Soviet countries are headed in a different direction.

The first and second options would accept the division of Europe into spheres of influence. They differ only in the degree to which the sovereignty of the states between Western Europe and Russia would be limited. In the second version, they would presumably be allowed to pursue democratic and market reforms internally, but would not have full autonomy in foreign relations. In the first version, Russia's view of how its interests should be protected, including the kind of governments its neighbors could have, would count for more than the will of the inhabitants.

These two options would essentially represent a return to pre-1989 Europe, but with a more porous Iron Curtain (it is hard to see the Russian elite accepting the kinds of restrictions on their travel or right to own property in London that their parents or grand-parents had to), and the division drawn further to the East.

To the extent that the countries of the Warsaw Pact were relatively stable for most of the four decades after World War II, the Cold War system of Western and Soviet spheres of influence could be said to have 'worked'. A similar system might still work in the former Soviet countries that have reformed the least. But it is highly unlikely that it could be imposed on Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. In all three countries there is some degree of civil society; a reasonable amount of democracy; and popular support for EU and/or NATO membership. People have shown their willingness (repeatedly, in Moldova and Ukraine) to take to the streets to press their governments to be more 'European.' Russia would have to be willing and able to use considerable force to crush opposition and reimpose some sort of stability; and it would need the resources and economic model able to sustain conquered territory. The experience of eastern Ukraine suggests that Russia is ready to use force, but only within limits and preferably covertly; and (with the obvious

exception of Crimea) it has shown no wish to administer or subsidise the areas where it has intervened.

Moreover, the second of these options would effectively codify the unsuccessful policy that the EU and NATO have *de facto* (but not officially) pursued ever since Ukraine first raised the possibility of joining the two organisations in the early 1990s.¹⁰ The problem with it is that Putin fears not only the possibility that former Soviet countries might host NATO military bases but that European standards of governance might be contagious, threatening the survival of the corrupt post-Soviet system in Russia. He therefore wants a cast-iron guarantee that the buffer states of Eastern Europe will stay out of both NATO and the EU. Since he does not trust the West to keep its word, the guarantee has to come by means of destabilising or intimidating Russia's neighbors so that it is impossible for them to join Western organisations.

Ukraine and its neighbors have certainly provided the West with many excuses to exclude its ex-Soviet neighbors from its clubs; but Western countries have been only too eager to grasp those excuses. Bulgaria, Croatia and Romania have joined the EU and NATO despite performing worse than Georgia (though significantly better than Moldova) in terms of corruption and poor governance.¹¹ The members of the two organisations accepted that the countries of Central Europe and the Balkans were unquestionably European, while they looked at former Soviet states (with the exception of the Baltic States) as being in a special and less European category.

The EU and NATO cannot and should not try to impose a Western orientation on countries that are not ready for it or do not want it; the countries of Eastern Europe are not homogeneous. Both organisations need to pursue differentiated policies towards Armenia, Azerbaijan and Belarus, rather than (as hitherto) trying to keep them in a single group both with each other and with Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine.¹²

¹⁰Ian Bond, "The EU, NATO and Ukraine: Prospects for Future Co-operation" in Artis Pabriks and Andis Kudors (eds.), *The War in Ukraine: Lessons for Europe*, The Centre for East European Studies/University of Latvia Press, Riga, 2015.

¹¹"Corruption Perceptions Index 2014," Transparency International website (www.transparency.org).

¹²Ian Bond, "Eastern Mess: The EU's Partners Need Attention," Centre for European Reform, September 24th, 2015.

But while some countries may not (yet or ever) aspire to join Western organisations, the current members of the EU and NATO should accept that they cannot force the other three countries of Eastern Europe to remain post-Soviet societies against their will forever. If the people and governments of Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine make clear choices in favour of the West, it is at least as destabilising for the West to keep them at arm's length as it is do everything possible to support their choice. That should be the lesson of the aftermath of Ukraine's Euromaidan.

Helping the Neighbors

What kind of support do the three countries need? In the security sphere, they need positive statements that their sovereignty and independence matter to NATO, backed up with concrete programs of training and assistance designed to make them as interoperable as possible with NATO forces. Some NATO members have made shibboleths of Article 5 and the NATO-Russia Founding Act. Article 5 prescribes what Allies must do in the event of an armed attack on one of them; it does not prohibit a response if a neighboring country is attacked. Nor could it: sovereign nations have the right of individual and collective self-defense under the United Nations Charter. The premises of the Founding Act have been overturned by Russia: Russia's military doctrine gives the lie to the assumption that NATO and Russia do not regard each other as adversaries; Russia is not building a democratic society, nor is it reducing its conventional and nuclear forces; it is doing nothing to create a Europe "without dividing lines or spheres of influence limiting the sovereignty of any state."¹³ There is no sense in NATO allowing its hands to be tied by the Founding Act when Russia is no longer abiding by its terms.

NATO should make clear to Russia that the security of those countries that share borders with NATO and Russia is as important to the Alliance as the security of its own members. That is nothing more than the truth: if Russia had chosen to or had been able to continue its attack on Ukraine in 2014, or on Georgia in 2008, there would have been serious security consequences for countries like Poland and Turkey. At the

¹³NATO official text, Founding Act on Mutual Relations, Cooperation and Security Between NATO and the Russian Federation, Paris, May 27th 1997.

same time, it should make clear to the countries concerned that while NATO will help them protect the territory that they hold, it will not support the use of military means to recover lands lost to Russia and its proxies: no one wants to start World War III to recover South Ossetia.

In the economic sphere, the EU needs to ensure that the Association Agreements with Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine are fully implemented as quickly as possible. Even on the most optimistic interpretation, however, that will take some years. It will be hard to ensure that the populations of the three countries see the benefits soon. Implementation will be a major challenge: these are huge and complex agreements that will oblige countries with corrupt and ineffective bureaucracies to adopt European standards and practices.

If they are left to themselves, all three countries are more likely to fail than succeed in exploiting the transformative potential of their agreements with the EU. They will need advice from the countries of Central Europe with recent experience of harmonizing their own legislation and practices with those of the EU. They will need large-scale twinning with officials and agencies in EU countries, as the Central Europeans did in the run-up to their accession to the Union. Their businesses will need advice on how to sell into EU and other new markets—and in many cases, potential Western competitors will be the best placed to offer the advice, bringing its own challenges. They will need to be open to foreign investment, even if that means giving foreigners control of the 'crown jewels' of their economies: the lesson of Central Europe is that trying to protect national champions merely delays development.

But the biggest threat to these countries' prospects of being stable and prosperous, and on course to join the EU and NATO, is not that Russia will invade them or that their economies will collapse (though both scenarios are possible); it is that the countries will be destroyed from within by corruption and crony capitalism. This is the golden thread that links together colour revolutions, street protests and popular discontent in Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine over more than a decade.

The West cannot escape its share of responsibility: it has allowed oligarchs and corrupt politicians to pretend to be 'pro-EU', even while their actions have given the concept of 'European values' a bad name. Some EU member-states have even facilitated the corruption: the Moldovan banking scandal involved 48 UK-registered shell companies,

many with bank accounts in Latvia. The EU needs to make a serious effort to stop dirty money from eastern Europe flowing through the financial systems of EU member states, as a contribution to increasing the economic and political resilience of the countries concerned; and it needs to work with anti-corruption activists in Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine, as well as with the authorities.

Initiatives such as the EU Border Assistance Mission to Moldova and Ukraine (EUBAM) can help reduce low-level corruption in customs authorities, but the EU needs also to step up its support for judicial and law enforcement reform (areas in which it had some success with its mission in Georgia from 2004-2005). Unless the EU can show more clearly that it is on the side of transparency and good governance, not simply backing local elites who appropriate the label 'pro-EU', there will be a growing risk of the EU being discredited in the eyes of ordinary people.

The West should be under no illusions: whenever it tries to help its neighbors with their defenses against invasion or corruption, it will be acting against the perceived interests of Moscow. The Russian authorities will claim that the West is acting provocatively in the historical 'Russian World.' Eastern Europe was indeed part of the Russian Empire and then the Soviet Union for many years. But that does not mean that only Russia has interests there. In the 21st century, the choice of the peoples of eastern Europe should be decisive. In defending their right to choose their futures, the West will also be defending itself.