

## The Eastern Partnership at 10: achievements, challenges and prospects di Elena Tosti Di Stefano

On the 7<sup>th</sup> of February, Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) and the European Union Institute for Security Studies (EUISS) organised a panel discussion entitled “Eastern Partnership at 10: the way forward?”. The event has represented a timely opportunity to reflect on the past achievements and future perspectives of the Eastern dimension of the European Union Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) ten years after the launch of the Eastern Partnership (EaP), that currently includes Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. This is all the more relevant as the new EU Commissioner-designate for Neighbourhood and Enlargement, Oliver Varhelyi, was requested in his mission letter to “put forward a new set of long-term policy objectives for the EaP by mid-2020”. In the light of this, we provide a short comment on the issues covered throughout the seminar, based on the EUISS *Chaillot Paper* “The Eastern Partnership a decade on: looking back, thinking ahead”<sup>1</sup>. Furthermore, we’ll seize this opportunity to spend a few words about the Italian position on the most sensitive topics linked to policy conduct in this area.

“Europe has never been so prosperous, so secure, nor so free”, reads the opening accord of the 2003 European Security Strategy<sup>2</sup>. This optimism could not be more in contrast with the current diagnosis of a “more connected, contested and complex world”<sup>3</sup>. The emergence of an ‘arc of instability’ beyond the EU’s borders has overshadowed the original aspiration of being surrounded by a “ring of well-governed friends”, i.e. the stated objective of the 2004 European Neighbourhood Policy. Increasing turmoil in the Eastern and Southern neighbourhood has undermined the Union’s normative<sup>4</sup> ambitions in these

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<sup>1</sup> Secieru S. and Saari S. (Eds.), “The Eastern Partnership a decade on: Looking back, thinking ahead”, *Chaillot Paper* n°153, Paris: EUISS, July 2019.

<sup>2</sup> European Council, *A Secure Europe in a Better World. European Security Strategy*, Brussels, 8 December 2003.

<sup>3</sup> European External Action Service, *Shared vision, common action: A stronger Europe. A Global Strategy for the European Union’s Foreign and Security Policy*, Brussels, 28 June 2016, p. 7.

<sup>4</sup> According to the influential argument first put forth by Ian Manners, the Union is “predispose[d] to act in a normative way”, i.e. to promote the core European norms of democracy, rule of law and respect for human rights through its relations with other actors. See in this respect Manners I. “Normative Power Europe: A Contradiction in Terms”, *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 40 n°2, 2002, pp. 235-258.

territories, where the promotion of democracy and good governance turned out to be a more complex endeavour than expected. In parallel, the EU's 'uncontested' power of attraction in the neighbourhood has declined. In 2014, the American political scientist Walter R. Mead took Russia's annexation of Crimea as an occasion to claim that "geopolitics is returning"<sup>5</sup>. As such, competitive multipolarity confronts the institutionally post-modern Europe, whose model has already been put into question at the internal level.

In this context, a sincere assessment of the first decade of the EaP needs to take into account the aforementioned factors as well as the peculiar developments in the EU's Eastern neighbouring countries, with the aim of charting a constructive way forward.

The EUISS publication identifies a number of megatrends that are shaping the trajectories of the Eastern partners. Three of them are worthy of mention here: first, the increasingly heterogenous socio-political scenario, leading to the conclusion that this area cannot be defined anymore as a 'post-Soviet space', but rather as a 'post-post-Soviet space'. During the past decade, this reconfiguration has manifested itself, *inter alia*, through protest movements against local *élites* and oligarchic structures that swept across several EaP countries, bringing into light a process of societal transition, i.e. from 'subjects' to 'citizens' (2° trend). Most notably, the so-called Euromaidan Revolution in Ukraine was primarily motivated by a pro-European sentiment and willingness to seek a closer relation with the Union. As is known, social unrest triggered Russia's reaction, which culminated in armed intervention in February-March 2014. This leads us to the third point, namely the ever-growing Russian presence in the EaP states as a response to rising polycentrism in the region, where the progressive diversification of political, economic, diplomatic and military engagements allowed the Eastern neighbours to widen their room for manoeuvre in regional affairs and deepen contacts with other external actors.

Against this background, the European Union should adopt a more pragmatic stance compared to the past, as was already acknowledged in the 2015 European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) review and, a year later, in the EU Global Strategy for Foreign and Security Policy. To this end, two policy elements are of particular importance: in the first place, the use of effective *differentiation* among the EaP members when it comes to policy-making and implementation; the second point – which is inherently linked to the first – concerns the attitude to adopt towards Russia.

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<sup>5</sup> Mead W.R., "The Return of Geopolitics. The Revenge of the Revisionist Powers", in *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2014 issue.

As previously noticed, these countries present diverse domestic situations and have different expectations regarding their relationship with the Union. Although differentiation has been one of the main features of the ENP since its inception, the adoption of a 'one-size-fits-all' approach has often weakened policy coherence and credibility – both in the eastern and southern neighbourhood. As of today, the EU should apply adequate differentiation among EaP states, especially between associated and non-associated partners.

As for associated countries (Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova), the EUISS paper stresses the need for *differentiated integration*, meaning that they should be increasingly involved into the Union's initiative in various fields, such as security and defence operations. These societies share pro-European tendencies and, therefore, the aspiration to join the EU. While it is crucial to support their European vocation, the Union should keep a healthy dose of realism and be aware from the very beginning of the complexity of such processes – and the Balkan countries integration path is emblematic in this sense. The enlargement-type toolbox should be used in a careful way, particularly for what concerns the incentive-based approach (*conditionality*), as to allow for non-Eurocentric policies based on *local ownership* and bottom-up approaches. On the economic front, even if the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreements (DCFTAs) have contributed to enhancing sectoral cooperation and improving competitiveness, it is urgent to address the unintended effects of neo-liberal blueprints in countries where the domestic structures do not ensure an equal distribution of the profit, and where structural shocks risk to be detrimental in the short and medium-runs. In a nutshell, the Union should think on the long-term and gradually include Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova into additional cooperation initiatives, while adopting context-specific policies that take into consideration national dynamics.

Non-associated countries (Belarus, Armenia, Azerbaijan), instead, do not strive for EU membership. From their perspective, joining the EaP required a considerable balancing act due to Russia's direct presence and influence within their territories. Here, the normative policies promoted by the Union during the past decade had poor and controversial effects. In fact, the conditionality method has been systematically rejected and led to disengagement, thus preventing the normalisation of relations. Rather than on democratisation objectives, future policies should focus on sectoral integration, for instance in the cultural and education domains, and – to the degree possible – on civil society support. These three partners should be provided with a new framework of cooperation reflecting the changes in bilateral relations with the Union, as well as growing polycentrism in the area and linkages between the Southern and Eastern neighbourhood. Finally, the 'Russia factor' should be given special attention.

Over time, EaP-related policies have been conducted without considering the potential impact of Russia's role and goals in the region, and without seeking dialogue with Moscow. The latter point may seem controversial in view of current EU-Russia relations, after the Union imposed restrictive measures over the Ukraine crisis. However, arguably, the Italian stand towards Russia may be considered as a positive example in this respect. Undoubtedly, Italy has many interests at stake in its relationship with Moscow, notably in the energy field. And it is also true that the so-called 'populist' parties have taken a (often too) conciliatory stance towards the Kremlin, as part of their Eurosceptic/anti-Euro-Atlantic rhetoric. This became clear during the 1° Conte government, where Minister of the Interior and Vice-PM Salvini overtly opposed the imposition of sanctions against Moscow. Nevertheless, despite the concerns about possible policy realignment, the past government did not deviate, in practice, from the longstanding Italian approach towards Russia. Indeed, the *fil rouge* running through Rome's attitude since more than a decade is the permanent attempt to strike a balance between divergent policy tendencies. Since Russia's intervention in Crimea, all Italian executives – Renzi, Gentiloni, Conte 1° and 2° – reiterated their support for Ukraine and called for the implementation of the Minsk agreements; at the same time, they all shared the idea that 'closing the door' to Russia would undermine the efforts to achieve a stable, political and balanced compromise between Moscow's arguments and those of Kyiv's. Considering Russia's role in the region and, more broadly, in other territories of strategic importance for the EU (the MENA area, the Western Balkans), a pure antithetical approach turns out to be counterproductive. In sum, the Union and its Member States shall endeavour to establish constructive dialogue with the Kremlin, while remaining committed to Western policy in relation to Moscow's aggressive stance in the Eastern neighbourhood, hence showing that transatlantic values continue to be at the core of the EU's foreign policy.