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Stepping into the geopolitical game

The European Union and its Eastern neighbourhood

2007 is shaping up to be (yet another) defining year for EU foreign and security policy. Dealing with Iran, establishing the independent status of Kosovo, not mention the EU Constitution will concentrate the EU's collective mind.

At the same time Brussels is stepping up its interests and engagement with the East, and not just with the EU's immediate neighbours, but also the neighbours of our new neighbours; in the Caucasus and Central Asia. The way the EU approaches these states cannot be linked to the question of a future enlargement and possible membership for the countries of the region. Instead, the question has to be what kind of foreign and security policy should the EU have towards its immediate next door neighbours and those that are a little further afield?

Numerous issues are at stake. The politics of energy supplies and the pressing need for Europe to diversify its sources bring into clear focus the importance of the region and the imperative for the EU to develop clear and collective policies. The prospect, however distant, of Turkey's EU accession is another reason for the EU to deepen its engagement with its near neighbours, sooner rather than later, as this would help the Union prepare for when it moves into an even more diverse and dangerous neighbourhood

The region in question is both immense and diverse. States such as Moldova, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, Armenia and Georgia, represent text-book case studies of the types of challenges and risks that EU member states identified when they drafted the

'European Security Strategy' in 2003. Frozen conflicts, access to future energy supplies, shaky democratic foundations and questionable commitments to human rights, not to mention trans-national crime, poverty and religious extremism are problems common to virtually all of our neighbours. Such interrelated political, security, social and economic challenges as these are exactly the types of issues that EU institutions and foreign policies are suited, at least in theory, to address.

The EU has been far from absent in the region. In the 1990's it was the biggest founder to the region, it has long since institutionalised its bilateral relations with the countries in Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asian, most of whom are now partners in the EU's European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) - a framework which includes the EU's neighbours to both the South and the East. Despite this, the EU has not been nearly as visible or coherent as it needs to be. A key and well documented problem is that more often than not the EU does not speak nor act with a unified voice vis a vis Russia - a situation which hinders the development of an EU energy policy as well as Brussels' wider hopes for the region. It is also a fact that the EU's quiet foreign policy methods and the incentives that it has been laying out to the countries of the region are being overshadowed, even sidelined by a bigger political game between the US and Russia. So, is there still the space in the region for the EU?

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The current Germany EU presidency has put a new Ostpolitik on the table - a move which shows de facto that a shift to the East in the EU's foreign and security policy agenda is occurring. Preparations for a new EU strategy on Central Asia, alongside a beefed up ENP and a new framework for Russian-EU relations are the three pillars of this initiative. The objectives of the new Central Asian strategy, which will be delivered this year, will revolve around the setting up of an EU agency for stability in Central Asia, to create good governance and ensure the rule of law. All of this will draw the states closer to the EU's orbit. On all of these counts the EU will need to act (uncharacteristically) quickly, not least because there has been a palpable hardening of US-Russian stances in the region.

In developing its new initiatives the EU needs to recognise that there is a wider geopolitical struggle going on and that it needs to enter the game. The EU's strategy for the East needs to be based on a sober, yet self-confident analysis of what the EU and its member states can do in and for the region. The EU has an advantage that it has yet to fully capitalise upon. Crucially, neither the US nor Russia can offer, nor do they have a real stake in, what a growing number of states in the region desire. Our neighbours' aspirations as seen in their national programmes for development and foreign policies are linked explicitly to expectations of better economic and political relations with the EU. The EU's success in this respect is dependent on three factors. First, enhancing the EU's visibility and presence. Second, rethinking the time-frames and methods by which we deal with our neighbours. Third, realising the gains that can be made by developing an EU approach based on a regional focus.

I. Improving the EU's Visibility

The EU needs to considerably enhance its visibility as an agent for stability and reform in a region plagued by a number of frozen conflicts. The EU's Rule of Law mission to Georgia and the Border Mission to Ukraine/Moldova demonstrate that already the EU is regarded as both a legitimate and effective security actor in its neighbourhood. So, as the EU ups its presence in the region, future possible deployments to or at least greater engagement in troubles zones such as Nagorno-Karabakh (Azerbaijan), Abkhazia (Georgia) and South Ossetia (Georgia) should not be ruled out. Enhancing the role and presence of the EU's Special Representatives to the region is already on the agenda and is a process which can only improve the Union's visibility. Greater EU visibility and tangible commitments sends out all the right signals, it brings the EU closer to home and shows that Brussels is serious about transforming the region. Just as importantly it will be a much needed recognition that these states belong to Europe.

II. A Question of Timing

To reap the benefits of its new Ostpolitik the EU needs to think about its current *modus operandi*. The ENP in its current incarnation works in many ways like the EU accession process; the EU offers opportunities for a partner state to move closer to the EU and to enjoy certain benefits if certain political, economic, legal and social reforms are carried out. Whilst the overall aims and objectives of this method make sense, we

need to think about the timeline of the EU's efforts and the expectations of our neighbours. The EU should ensure that ENP and its broader regional strategy are capable of dealing out benefits and incentives good for the short and medium term, since the EU is often viewed in the region as having too many exacting standards to meet with goals which are too distant in the future. Moreover, without the actual prospect of membership, or a clearly defined idea of what their relations with the EU will ultimately look like, the EU's capacity to incentivise and shape reforms in the region cannot be as strong as it should be. Quicker opening of markets for trade in certain products, swifter progress on the Nabucco pipeline project, as well as an EU commitment to easing the region's frozen conflicts must be priorities.

III. National Approach

For the most part the EU has conducted its foreign policy relations with its Eastern neighbours on bilateral bases. Beginning this year the ENP has begun to operate also on a regional level, with cross-border initiatives and funding instruments. The EU has also upgraded its links with such regional fora as the Black Sea Economic Co-operation Council (BSEC). Regional inter-institutional approaches will serve the EU well when dealing with its Eastern Neighbourhood. This is though, no easy task since it brings to centre stage the complexity of relations with Russia. The current tenor of the discussion amongst EU member states is that EU policy should avoid, at all cost, moves which would alienate Moscow. Not unsurprisingly though, this caution is not universally shared and will be challenged by a number of the 2004 entrants. EU hesitations towards Russia should not though lead to a total resignation from the idea of a regional approach. After all, the types of challenges and problems faced by our eastern neighbours are pretty much endemic across the region. An EU foreign and security policy for the region would provide an important impulse for greater interregional collaboration, conflict resolution and enhanced trade, not to mention co-operation on energy questions.

How can the EU do this? An obvious, but highly controversial institutional partner

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in the East would be the Organisation for Democracy and Economic Development or 'GUAM', a regional body which brings together Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia and Azerbaijan. Established in 1996 as an attempt to counterbalance Russia's preeminence within the CIS it lay dormant for much of its life to be reawakened by Ukraine's Viktor Yushenko. Its members have called for greater EU interaction and increasingly see GUAM's development as a way of strengthening their collective ambitions to get closer to the EU. From the Kremlin's point of view GUAM is a four letter word, consequently it is currently unlikely that the EU will hook up with this regional organisation. The EU should not give up on a regional approach just because of this.

The EU needs to start talking with GUAM. There is a growing will within the East to embark upon region building as a means to move closer to the EU - Brussels needs to respond to this, if it is to have credibility and leverage in the region. An EU regionally focused policy need not cut across the grain of relations with Russia, indeed the renewal of the latter's PCA with the EU this year could provide an opportunity to link up the relevant aspects of the European Union's Eastern policies in a way which serves the EU, its eastern neighbours and that doesn't leave Russia out in the cold. In fact the EU has perhaps not sufficiently tested the waters regarding Russia's likely response to an EU regional approach; there maybe greater space and manouvrebility in this respect than Brussels currently thinks.

IV. A Test of Principles and Practice

The challenge of dealing with our Eastern neighbours, near and far, is a key test of EU foreign policy and its maturity as a global player. It is first and foremost a test of the Union's ability to put into practice its principles of 'effective multilateralism' and the goal of creating a neighbourhood of 'well governed and friendly states'. If we are to succeed, and succeed we must, then the EU and its member states must learn to stick their collective necks out and to quickly engage in the geopolitics of its new neighbourhood, speaking with one voice, armed with collective guns as well as collective purse strings.

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