



Visegrád School

of Political Studies



2015

The project is cofinanced by the European Academy of Diplomacy, the Council of Europe, the International Visegrad Fund and the Department of Public and Cultural Diplomacy of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Poland within the frames of “Public Diplomacy Cooperation 2015”.



Ministry
of Foreign Affairs
Republic of Poland



Can the Eastern Partnership Region Live up to Visegrad Example?

Launched in May 2009, Eastern Partnership (EaP) embodies a more narrow European Union approach to its Eastern neighborhood. With a primary goal of expanding political and economic ties between EU and the six partner countries (Belarus, Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan), EaP was envisioned as a framework for deeper cooperation and eventually, EU integration. EaP, as well as European Neighborhood policy (ENP), the more general structure of cooperation, derives from the constant need of reassessing EU's normative power. By "exporting" its values and standards, EU legitimizes its domestic construction and ensures lower costs of interaction with external world.¹ By means of political association and economic integration, EU ensures the europeanization of its neighborhood. As a result of conditionality, socialization or lesson-drawing,² EU already gained the status of "missionary" normative power by relying soft power mechanisms only. The logic of attractiveness works well in persuading EaP countries of the rationality behind adopting EU values and standards.

Despite this EU normative power approach, EaP was primarily conceptualized by EU eastern member states (Poland, Sweden, Baltic States, Czech Republic). Thus, certain security concerns were also attached to the soft power logic. By making the proximate neighborhood predictable and stable, these countries gained a degree of certainty concerning their eastern borders. On the other hand, EaP epitomizes their contribution within EU decision-making and their response to the launching of Mediterranean Union. EaP exemplified their intra-EU visibility³ dressed in a "sharing experience" cloak. The common socialist past and the painful road towards reforms, serves as a rational argument in making EaP a fruitful ground not only for the europeanization exercise, but also for developing Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), plus Sweden – EaP cooperation towards European integration.

Despite being an EU project, EaP countries also represent a region with common past and similar political, social and economic problems. Thus, a number of questions with major political ramification arise. Is there room for a common identity of EaP countries? Can these countries develop a common foreign policy mechanism in advancing their relations with EU? Can these countries surpass the tag of being an outside-born mechanism of partnership and build-up an intra-regional framework of cooperation?

"Return to Europe" vs. "Rapprochement to Europe" GUM – "new Visegrad"?

Five years from its inauguration, EaP become a two-tier

frame of cooperation. Moldova, Georgia, Ukraine signed and ratified their Association Agreements (AA) and DCF-TAs, thus, making their choice for European integration and their commitment to pursue structural reforms clear. The other half of EaP countries either showed no interest in advancing their relation with EU (Belarus and Azerbaijan) or changed their option for other economic integration structures. Beside their preference in slowing down the path of reforms (Armenia, Azerbaijan) or choosing the "no EU reforms" option at all (Belarus), there is a trend of opinion rooted in the socialist past that European values clash with local ethics.⁴ Respect of sexual minority rights or religious non-discrimination coupled with general values of democracy and economic pluralism are not suited for the local cultural background. Certainly, there are significant "domestic veto players" which only identify EU with LGBT rights, but still this was not the main reason for choosing a more diluted way of cooperating with EU. The choice these countries made suggest that "EU's attractiveness" can still be countered by other poles of power and that these countries, due to their political construct, are not yet prepared to undertake costly reforms for still a blurred membership perspective.

So, there remain three "prominent pupils" – Moldova, Ukraine, and Georgia (GUM) that are committed to their European choice. Based on this common foreign policy goal, can these countries develop a common identity and cooperate on their own in achieving EU or/and NATO membership? Can GUM share the Visegrad Group "raison d'être," i.e. European membership? In addition to its primary goal of furthering European integration, Visegrad Group was also designed as a framework for advancing intra-group military, economic and energy cooperation.⁵

These efforts were rooted in a common foreign policy identity of "return to Europe" – return to democracy, liberal economic and social order.⁶ Return to values already experienced by CEE countries during the inter-war period. In case of GUM countries, there was no such previous experience of sovereignty and "free choice" before the fall of USSR. Thus, "return to Europe" identity can be substituted by "rapprochement to Europe," based on their free and voluntary choice of EU association and economic integration.

Beside their shared common past, GUM countries experience common security concerns coming from Russia's "neuralgic imperial hangover".⁷ The recent destabilization in Ukraine reminds Georgia and Moldova about their separatists regions and security drawbacks. Are this security needs sufficient to foster a regional security alliance? Being a military neutral country, Moldova will hardly re-

announce its current status for an uncertain regional alliance with few security guarantees. Georgia and Ukraine are also more eager to find security protection under the umbrella of robust political-military structures, rather than be engaged in weak regional security groupings.

Can thus, European integration and commitment to EU values cultivate a sense of regional common identity? The magnetic power of europeanization incites the governments of these countries to pursue reforms supported by the majority of population who favor European integration. Europe's attractiveness, coupled with tangible incentives (such as visa liberalization), created a desired "European we" vs. a "post-Soviet other" identity dilemma. European membership can mitigate the post-Soviet labels of democratic transition, high-level corruption, monopolized economy etc. Based on this eagerness to overcome such stereotypes, GUM countries can create a regional model of active EU integration and adherence to EU values and standards, in contrast to "the second EaP tier." But, is a "rapprochement to Europe" foreign policy identity strong enough to foster intra-regional cooperation? Can this identity be irreversible?

Why is cooperation unlikely?

Despite the fact that European integration is the choice of the majority in GUM countries, important "domestic veto players" still make the process hardly irreversible. Ratification of AA and DCFTAs, coupled with the reward of visa liberalization (in case of Moldova) on the backdrop of increased assertiveness from Russia, make GUM countries ever more determined to an irreversible path. There is little chance that the process of adjustment to EU legal requirements and implementing serious reforms will be overturned for the sake of another option of economic integration (i.e. Eurasian Economic Union).⁸ This will bring not only serious adjustment costs, but also major popular upheavals (as was the case in Ukraine).

Both Tbilisi and Chisinau governments learned the "Yanukovich lesson." Even if this were enough to make the European path irreversible, it is not sufficient for building a strong and consistent "rapprochement to Europe" identity. "Rapprochement to Europe" is not only associated with tangible rewards from EU but also with important structural changes inside these countries. EU's "more-for-more" principle seems to be exhausted. The ratification of AA and DCFTAs, together with visa liberalization process, were perceived as the main incentives for reforms. Now that these incentives no longer apply, there is an expectation for new "carrots" from the EU side (i.e. labor market access, membership perspective etc.). On the other hand, there is a perception that rewards offered by the EU and the speed of signing and ratifying the AA and DCFTAs were triggered mainly, firstly by the need to make EaP a success story and later by the Ukrainian crisis. Therefore, real reforms did not matter so much. All GUM countries relapsed on their corruption perception index in 2013 compared to 2012.⁹

Nevertheless, all three countries concluded AA and DCFTA negotiations in 2013, despite serious high-level corruption scandals in Moldova and Georgia. In such circumstances, EU as a normative power compromises itself and brings about disapproval of GUM countries' electorate, who are mostly eager to see serious structural reforms. Without firm conditionality from the EU, "rapprochement to Europe" identity risks losing its attractiveness.

On the other hand, the still fragile "rapprochement to Europe" identity is not the only cause for weak intra-regional cooperation. In order for GUM countries to become a unified cooperation bloc, there is a need for strong interconnections. Georgia is geographically isolated from Ukraine and Moldova, furthermore there seems to be no other mechanisms of cohesion. Visegrad group countries, besides their European integration goals, had a considerable degree of intra-group trade exchanges. GUM countries occupy a small share in each other's trade balances, which does not allow for an economic interdependence,¹⁰ but even fosters regional competition. This competition varies from energy security concerns (competing energy projects), access to sea routes (the case of Giurgiulesti port construction),¹¹ access to EU assistance and maintaining strong EU interest in each particular country. By taking advantage of each others' weaknesses, each country tries to excel in front of Bruxelles in order to be rated higher on the EaP progress index, surpass others and receive better rewards.

Another major factor inhibiting regional cooperation is the security concerns. Even if all three countries face serious security threats to their territorial integrity, few signs of solidarity and support have gone beyond a declarative level. Reluctance to be involved in each others' difficult security milieu is manifest by the unwillingness to annoy Russia. Thus, any signs of solidarity will be reduced to formal declarations and, at best, to high-level visits of support.

Conclusions

Under these circumstances, it is highly unlikely that GUM countries will develop a level of cooperation that could live up to a new Visegrad group in Eastern Europe. Intra-regional cooperation is inhibited by the competitive nature of EaP policy and by the difficult security and geopolitical context in which these countries are trapped. However, this will not disrupt their European integration choice, quite the opposite, the competitive nature of EaP will encourage GUM countries to perform better and gain more EU rewards. From the EU side, there is a need to reconceptualize its normative power approach that has been discredited by the poor anti-corruption record of these countries. EU's attractiveness is based on a set of political, economic and social values that the people in these countries aim for. They identify deeper European integration with the respect of rule of law, healthy market economy and higher social tolerance towards diversity.

Thus, new EU “carrots” must be offered following deeper structural reforms. There is no doubt that GUM countries have undertaken serious reforms, compared to the “second-tier” EaP countries, but these reforms still need reinforcement. At the same time, there is a need to identifying a new generation of incentives for GUM countries. In this aspect, Swedish-led proposal of the “European package” at the Vilnius Summit is a good roadmap towards outlin-

ing the future cooperation between EU and GUM countries. Putting more emphasis on public diplomacy efforts, designing appropriate answers to possible security concerns and finding ways of involving EaP countries in EU missions¹² offer interesting perspectives of new partnership dimensions.

Annotations

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