

Schools of Political Studies
Thematic meetings during the World Forum of Democracy (3-7 November)

Thematic Group Meeting
“What kind of Future Link Between Association Partners and the EU?”
5 November 2014
Synopsis¹

Introduction

In the aftermath of last year's events in Ukraine, the question of the review of the EU policies is a crucial one. Today's discussion will be a great opportunity to openly confront ideas about the future of the Eastern Partnership (EP) and the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP); and about the possibilities for improving dialogue and co-operation with Russia.

Presentation

The invited expert Dr **Joerg FORBRIG** suggested that the focus is shifting from EU policies - the Eastern Partnership or the Association Agreements - towards something that is difficult to describe today. Therefore, we have to dig deeper in order to understand the current situation and foresee future developments.

A first condition for the discussion is to **call the events by their name**. We are witnessing a war in Europe, caused by annexation. The daily provocations are reminiscent of the Cold War. Many aspects that were taken for granted in Russia-EU relations no longer exist. Sanctions, for example, would have not been conceivable just one year ago. There is a new situation, a profound and rapid change taking place. Policy makers are quickly adapting and integrating new policies related to military and energy conflicts. We should all be humble and avoid quick, easy analyses which do not take into account the complexity of the situation.

Three aspects: the EU, its policies towards the East, and Russia

The **EU is now vulnerable**: it is divided internally, populism is spreading throughout the continent and economic and energy interdependence has become a central issue. The EU lacks the capacity to secure its defence. The alliance with the USA has been comfortable, but now the EU is confronting a new external actor: Russia. Regarding the EU institutions, many would say that there is too much focus on who gets what jobs and not enough on what policies should or are being carried out.

Although the European economy appears to be slightly improving, the conflict with Russia may be a breaking point for European Union integration.

The enlargement of the EU has by-and-large been a success story - societies advanced and security improved - but it has now come to a halt. It is difficult to say when and how a country is ready for EU accession. Confidence in the evolution of the candidate countries, provided they keep an acceptable pace of reform, should be the norm. Clearly, countries such as Belarus cannot reasonably expect membership and these countries are now, more than ever, facing hard choices.

Russia's actions surprised many capitals, although predictive signs were evident long time ago. The roots of the crisis in Ukraine can be found in Russian domestic politics. Vladimir Putin has

¹ Notes taken by Alberto Maynar-Aguilar, DPP

succeeded in his goals: he was re-elected to the President's office and restored public confidence when Russia's influence was weak on the international scene. He quickly had to look for new allies and the rhetoric of a decaying West fitted well with this revival of Russian nationalism. Meanwhile his legitimacy was challenged by internal protests. Oil prices were still high, but it was already foreseeable that the national budget would only shrink.

As a consequence, the **crisis is likely to be long**, even if the Kremlin will want to end it at some point in the future. Russia will keep and even increase the pressure on its neighbours. The Kremlin has taken a too ideological, messianic stand which it cannot control anymore. Western sanctions may only reinforce this tendency, and even if the conflict freezes at the current stage, it might re-emerge elsewhere. Regrettably, the time-frame, institutional setting and strategic thinking in Brussels are not aligned with these basic realities.

Discussion with the Schools' participants

Europe is facing a **deep international relations crisis** and to address this it is essential to prioritise international law and treaties and address the aggression against Ukraine for what it is. It would not be difficult to make public the evidence of such aggression, but often politicians hide the truth from the public and it is difficult to find factual information and consequently make a solid opinion. A participant thought that while truthfulness is crucial, Russia is investing a lot in obscuring the facts. Ukrainian sources are unreliable too and if Western political correctness is added, the result is great confusion.

Relations of the Eastern European countries with the EU should be moved forward, but this is made more difficult because these countries are disconnected. The EU policies have only gained tangible results recently; at the beginning they were too diverse. The speaker suggested that EU policies are not aimed at helping countries to accede, but to keep them "out and happy". This makes co-operation between Eastern European partners all the more important.

Russia is carrying out an **information war**, giving rise to multiple conspiracy theories. However, it is not winning this battle because it cannot convince Western opinion-makers: the media and technological lobbies are too big and complex for a single country to navigate.

Participants noted that energy is increasingly a factor in the crisis and that a response to this would be that the EU includes Ukraine in its pan-European Energy Space. That would change its bargaining position, especially if the EU is part of the negotiations with Russia. We are witnessing a great effort for energy diversification in Europe; sooner or later the energy weapon will lose its power.

European leaders are **depressingly weak**: on the economic front, on the symbolic front and on the military front. The policies of the new EU leadership are raising great expectations. However, European leaders' inability is more a perception than a reality. Sanctions against Russia, for example, have been taken because Angela Merkel changed her position last summer.

The **inconsistent approach of the EU capitals** adds to the difficulties, especially as EU external affairs are in their hands and this does not facilitate fluidity. Rather, it makes the EU response weak and slow; consensus is required but things on the ground change very quickly. Decision-making is so complex that a defence strategy is almost impossible. **NATO seems outdated** and all this leaves Russia free to develop further its tactics. Humanitarian initiatives are important, but when there are tanks in the streets, the response should be different. From

the point of view of European defence, there is still much to be done. However, the speaker also suggested, once the EU machinery moves, results can be achieved. For example, the EU could be evolving towards a federal structure, an Association Agreement with Ukraine has been signed and, despite Russia's reaction, the EU will not step back. As for Belarus and Azerbaijan, Dr FORBRIG suggested that an accession perspective is needed if their shift towards other spheres of influence is to be avoided.

The fact that Ukraine gave up its nuclear military power in 1994 may have made easier Russia's recent action as nuclear military capabilities in the region would have increased the current tension enormously. One unanswered question is why Ukraine has not used the technological and scientific co-operation agreements it has with Russia as a bargaining leverage.