



Keeping the Eastern Partnership on track

by Nicu Popescu

Sir Humphrey Appleby, the suave civil servant in the British sitcom ‘Yes Minister’ known for his wise but cynical pessimism, once remarked that diplomacy is about surviving until the next century - while politics is about surviving until Friday afternoon.

Such differences in time horizons apply also to the pace of European foreign policy when dealing with post-Soviet realities, as the EU and most of its Eastern partners enter the finishing line on Association and Deep and Comprehensive Free-Trade Area agreements. For in the case of EU-Armenia relations, things have not survived intact until Friday afternoon. After having been engaged for years in the preparation and negotiation of an Association and Free-Trade agreement with the EU, Armenia has aborted the process just before its conclusion and announced its intention to join the Russian-led Customs Union.

The bigger picture

This summer the EU and Moldova, Georgia and Armenia finalised talks on Association Agreements and Deep and Comprehensive Free-Trade Area provisions. The agreements – now with the exception of Armenia – are scheduled to be initialled at the Eastern Partnership (EaP) Vilnius summit in late November. Ukraine has also finalised such talks and initialled the agreement, although it has yet to sign it. The conclusion of talks on association and free trade brings to an end the most important project

of the first decade of the European Neighbourhood Policy. It is a near historic achievement.

But it is too early to sit back and relax, as Armenia’s *volte face* has demonstrated. The agreements will only have legal value (and be provisionally applied) once they are signed, not just initialled. For now only Ukraine is procedurally close to signature, since the agreement has been through the legal ‘scrubbing’ and translation process necessary for all the international agreements signed by the EU. In the case of the other Eastern partners, the Vilnius summit will not produce new quasi-irreversible legal realities, but would only be an important political and symbolic step towards signature of the agreements some time towards the end of 2014, as it would take up to a year, after the November Vilnius summit, to fine-tune, legally screen and then translate the agreements into all 24 official EU languages.

Changing weather conditions in the East

Domestic politics are volatile throughout Europe. But in the EU’s Eastern neighbourhood domestic political volatility is accompanied by geopolitical volatility, with the countries’ strategic future – not just economic governability – being at stake. And a one-year limbo between initialling and signing the agreements puts the countries in a rather vulnerable position since, until the signature is in place, external opponents of this process have ample



incentives and time to try a last-minute attempt to derail the process just before the finishing line. For now, none of the bilateral dialogues between the EU and its Eastern partners are immune to the vagaries of post-Soviet politics.

One danger is that the EU-Ukraine ‘who blinks first’ standoff on whether the Association Agreement can be signed without Yulia Tymoshenko’s release will lead to non-signature in Vilnius. This could see EU-Ukraine relations deteriorating from the current state of wary partnership into much chillier territory – all made worse by the fact that Russia is stepping up economic pressures on Ukraine to make it think again on whether it needs the DCFTA rather than the Russia-led Customs Union.

The situation with Georgia is even more perilous, as the cautious EU-Georgia partnership risks turning into a ‘cold peace’ if the current government decides to arrest President Saakashvili after his term expires this autumn. Prime Minister Ivanishvili, who is in a tense cohabitation with Saakashvili, recently suggested such an arrest might be a distinct possibility. Irrespective of what one thinks of the Saakashvili-Ivanishvili conflict, further episodes of ‘prison politics’ would be catastrophic for EU-Georgia relations. If Georgia joins Ukraine on this path, its whole *rapprochement* with the EU would be gravely jeopardised. To add even more ambiguity to the situation, Prime Minister Ivanishvili recently suggested that he might consider whether the Eurasian Union has anything interesting to offer for Georgia. This was quite a change of tone in the one Eastern Partnership country which, until recently, boasted the strongest pro-EU and pro-NATO consensus among both the elites and the public.

Track changes

In Armenia, things were tricky from the very beginning. Erevan is a close military ally of Moscow, although it trades more with the EU than with Russia (27 percent vs. 21 percent of trade shares, respectively), and its exports to the EU are almost double its exports to Russia (at 35 percent vs. 18 percent). Thus Armenia argued it wanted ‘economic partnership’ with Europe and ‘military partnership’ with Russia. But once Russia launched its own economic project – the Customs Union, designed eventually to lead to a Eurasian Union – Armenia found itself stymied in its attempt to run with the hares and hunt with the hounds. As a result, after

some diplomatic pressure from Moscow, Armenia has just announced that it will join the Customs Union with Russia, following a press conference where both President Putin and President Sargsyan appeared more tired than upbeat about such a historical step.

Moldova, which is the best pupil in a problematic class, is on a firmer track to initial and sign the agreements with the EU. Yet it has just emerged from a five-month-long domestic political crisis that almost derailed the process. Significant reforms still need to be carried out, not least the reforming of law-enforcement agencies. And Russia is likely to start turning up the diplomatic heat. On a visit

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to Chisinau, Russian deputy-prime minister Dmitry Rogozin joked that he hopes Moldovans ‘won’t freeze in winter’ – a chilling reference to the country’s en-

ergy dependency on Moscow. Russian authorities also threatened to apply ‘draconian measures’ to Moldovan exports. Moldova is likely to resist, but its resilience depends quite a lot on that of Ukraine.

The other two countries of the region, Belarus and Azerbaijan, are rather disinterested in the Eastern Partnership and have been mostly reluctant to sign up to what the Eastern Partnership had to offer. Azerbaijan has a strong energy partnership with the EU, but is rather uninterested in political reforms or non-energy related trade dialogue with the EU.

Given the overall situation, Sir Humphrey would probably say that if one wants to survive until the next century, one has first to survive until Friday afternoon. And that even though the Union’s most important projects of the last decade in the Eastern neighbourhood are nearing completion, things might still get side-tracked. Only signing the agreements will create a legal reality and lock the states in question into binding trade arrangements with the EU. Thus the sooner the EU signs the agreements with Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia, the stronger the insurance will be against the vagaries of the East European political weather.

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