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Riga Summit: Implications for the Eastern Partnership

The Riga Eastern Partnership summit was held against the backdrop of traditionally high expectations, and consequently – certain disappointments. This piece analyses the relevancy of the eastern neighbors' expectations; the validity of skeptical estimations of the summit results; and the implications of summit outcomes for the future of the Eastern Partnership that faces a number of challenges.

Assessing the results of the Riga Eastern Partnership summit of May 21-22, 2015, one should consider a particular political environment, in which it was held as well as the initial goals of the Eastern Partnership program.

Firstly, the Eastern Partnership (EaP) is one of the two directions of the EU European Neighborhood Policy (ENP), the essence and prospects of which are now under revision. In early March 2015 the European Commission launched a process of public discussion of the ENP main directions revision. Accordingly, provided the ENP uncertain future, the Eastern Partnership Riga Summit could scarcely lay down any radically new principles for relations with neighbors.

Secondly, the EU has not still elaborated a clear and coherent strategy for relations with Russia in a situation, when all the Eastern Partnership members are in the focus of Russia's interest and pressure. And Ukraine's intention to sign the Association Agreement and DCFTA with the EU entailed the Russia-Ukraine conflict or – to think wider – the Russia-Europe conflict.

In such circumstances, one should not have anticipated any ambitious initiatives from the Riga summit.

Regardless the abundant criticism, the Riga Eastern Partnership summit should not be considered a failed one. Unlike the truly disastrous 2013 Vilnius Summit, the Riga meeting was not entrusted with any particular

mission: no Association Agreement was scheduled; and the postponement of a visa-free regime was accorded with Ukraine and Georgia long before the summit.

Impartial analysis of the tasks, outlined by the Vilnius Declaration (2013) for the Eastern Partnership until 2015, proves that they were generally implemented, unless The Open sky Agreement with Ukraine was not signed due to the non-agreed issues over Gibraltar between Britain and Spain. The main EaP achievements of the last year and a half are the following: the Association Agreements with Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine have been signed; and the visa-free regime for Moldova has been launched. Therefore, from the EU perspective, the partners approached the summit with certain progress that proved the viability of the EaP program.

It's another matter that the Riga summit has demonstrated the discrepancy between the expectations of some participant states from the Eastern Partnership Riga Summit and the EU readiness to meet those expectations. First of all, it is about Ukraine, the political and diplomatic circles of which speculated too much (to achieve the domestic political effect) on the issue of inclusion into the final document of the reference on the EU membership prospects. The Riga Declaration did not include such a provision, as in fact no one had given Ukraine the respective promises. The Summit Declaration only "acknowledged the European aspirations and European choice of the partners concerned, as stated in

the Association Agreements.”

To refer to the roots of the Eastern Partnership, the program was conceived as an alternative to the EU enlargement, at least in the medium or long term. Angela Merkel proved this on the eve of the Riga summit, stating that “The Eastern Partnership is not an instrument for [EU] enlargement.”

For the six years of the EaP functioning Ukraine has neither elaborated a clear strategy of participation in it with usage of its opportunities, nor has worked out the mutually beneficial initiatives for cooperation with the EU. From the start of the Eastern Partnership, Kyiv has expressed scepticism, appealing to the understated level of the program ambitiousness. Ukraine considered itself as the program’s front-runner, being sure that all the other participants are the factor of slowing down the Ukraine’s rapprochement with the EU. However, the decision of then-president Viktor Yanukovich, taken on the eve of the Vilnius summit of 2013, shifted the balance in the project bringing Moldova and Georgia as the EaP leaders. They signed the Association Agreements before Ukraine, and Moldova even enjoys a visa-free regime with the EU.

The normative nature of the Eastern Partnership offers ample opportunities, providing that the main goal (the approaching of partner states to the EU) is achieved through the tools of the Association Agreements, Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas, and visa-free regimes. The implementation of the Association Agreement provides for a number of reforms towards the convergence with the EU standards. Their successful implementation opens direct way to bring the membership perspective closer. Therefore, instead of pushing forward the idea of membership prospects in the framework of the Eastern Partnership, Ukraine better focus on full usage of the EaP potential as the most efficient tool for approaching membership.

The post-Vilnius events in Ukraine and the Russia-Ukraine conflict have consolidated the society over the European integration perspective, and currently 57 per cent of the Ukrainians support for the EU membership. The Association Agreement stands in focus of Ukrainian society as a tool to overcome the post-Soviet heritage, to bring changes in political, social and economic model of development, and to finalize the transition period. Moreover, the society has become the initiator of reforms and the factor of pressure on government, demanding their implementation. It forms a fertile ground for bottom-up reforms, when a society is aware of and

ready to accept the adaptation costs required by reforms – for the goal of approaching the EU. If the authorities do not waste this chance, the membership prospect will objectively arise.

Another expectation, which was widely discussed in the expert and analytical circles as well as in the media on the eve of the summit, was the differentiation approach, depending on the participants’ ambitions towards the depth of their relations with the EU and their progress in implementing reforms. Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine have signed the Association and DCFTA Agreements and aspire to more ambitious proposals. Belarus, Azerbaijan and Armenia are at a larger distance from the EU. For them (especially for Belarus and Azerbaijan) the implementation of reforms in accordance with the EU-proposed scheme would mean the ruining of political, social and economic systems, which shape the foundations of their political regimes. Such situation causes the reforms imitation effect or their slow implementation, provided that just the amorphous “bringing closer to the EU” is the only incentive.

However, the Riga summit has not proposed any mechanisms for the differentiation of formats of the EU relations with its neighbors. The final Declaration just mentioned the EU’s intention to develop the differentiated relations between the EU and the six partner countries, and “the sovereign right of each partner freely to choose the level of ambition and the goals to which it aspires in its relations with the European Union.”

The differentiation of formats of the EU relations with its Eastern neighbors should be considered in conjunction with the elaboration of a strategy towards Russia that is a key challenge for the Eastern Partnership, which the European Union will have to meet. Russia considers the EaP and the ENP as the EU’s geopolitical projects, the tools of geopolitical struggle for the common neighborhood space.

With each new summit, the Eastern Partnership acquires more and more geopolitical sense and turns into a tool of testing the EU-Russia relations. Russia resorts to the strong (non)diplomatic activities before each Eastern Partnership summit – to prevent the undesirable outcomes. However, only the last two years the EU has been facing the open counteraction by Russia against the EU rapprochement with the common neighbors, primarily with Ukraine and Armenia; the political and economic competition has transferred into a channel of open geopolitical rivalry.

Such situation dictates the need for the EU to revise its tools in this contest towards the more pragmatic ones and to reject the perception of the EaP as a merely technocratic project, aimed at bringing the neighboring states closer through the value-normative convergence. Before the Vilnius summit some European experts urged the EU to replace its technocratic approach in the ENP and the EaP concepts by “a value-oriented geopolitics.”

It is obvious that the incentives offered by the EU will have effect in the long run, while the tools of influence used by Russia trigger immediately. Therefore, applying the existing instruments in the Neighborhood Policy and the Eastern Partnership, the EU will concede to Russia with its levers, based on the foreign-policy and economic pragmatism.

Some steps of the EU reflect the beginning of its shift towards the pragmatism, e.g. a new compromise format of agreement with Armenia is being searched for, considering its membership in the Eurasian Economic Union. The Riga Declaration suggests the development of relations with neighbors, based on commonality of interests (not values) and areas of interaction.

At the beginning of this year the experts called the Riga summit as “the Mobility summit,” expecting the visa-free regimes launching with Ukraine and Georgia. However, given that these countries did not manage to fully implement the measures under the second phase of visa-liberalization plan, they have got only a promise that the next report on their progress would be prepared by the end of the year and then the decision could be made.

The Riga Declaration kept in force the fundamental EaP principle of conditionality in its modified “more for more” version; confirmed the interest of the EU and partners in energy dialogue, security of energy supplies, expansion of the Southern Gas Corridor and Southern pipelines as well as the modernization of the Ukrainian GTS.

On return to Kyiv, the Ukrainian officials reported about the following achievements: the EU confirmed the illegality of Crimea annexation; the DCFTA is scheduled to entry into force without further delay, starting from January 1, 2016; Ukraine still has a chance to receive the decision on visa-free regime by the end of this year; and Ukraine and the EU signed a loan agreement at 1.8 bln euro in the framework of the macro-financial assistance.

It is obvious that the final document of the summit had to reflect the situation around the Russia-Ukraine conflict. Regarding the protest of Belarus and Armenia and their intimidation not to sign the Declaration with the condemnation of Crimea annexation, the document shifted the respective accents onto the EU: “The EU reaffirms its positions taken in the Joint Statement made at the EU-Ukraine Summit on 27 April, including on the illegal annexation of Crimea and Sevastopol.” Thus the partner countries are not listed among those, who recognize the illegitimacy of the annexation. The Declaration called upon the parties to the conflict to fully implement the Minsk agreements, to release hostages, and “to hold to account those who are responsible for the downing of MH17.”

The Riga Declaration did not envisage any intention of the EU to deeper involve Ukraine to the mechanisms of the EU Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP). The document only reiterates the provision of the Vilnius Declaration on strengthening security dialogue and practical cooperation within the CSDP, including the possibility of participation of the partners concerned in the CSDP activities, missions and operations.

Given the nature of activities undertaken within the CSDP, they are not directed at the solution of the conflict, but rather at normalizing the situation on the stage of conflict completion. The main directions are the following: confidence-building measures, humanitarian assistance, and monitoring and mediation. Currently, one of the channels to assist Ukraine within the CSDP frameworks is the advisory mission to reform the security sector.

Regarding the fact that the original purpose of the Eastern Partnership was to provide a secure environment at the EU Eastern boundary, the new reality outlined by the Russia-Ukraine conflict dictates the need to fill the EaP with the security content. A ground for optimism is provided by emphasizing this aspect in the European Commission’s document on the key directions of the ENP revision (of March 2015). Therefore, it can be expected that the updated version of the ENP (and later possibly the EaP as well) will comprise the security issues within the CSDP.

To sum up, it should be said that the prospect of the Eastern Partnership and its efficiency will depend on the ENP revision scheduled for the fall of 2015. Many questions remain open, including the following: Will the ENP be reconfigured in accordance with the geographical principle? Will the balance between the Southern and

Eastern parts of the ENP be shifted? Will the EU abandon the current zoning of the European space into centre (core) and periphery?

The principle of transformational power laid in the ENP and accordingly in the EaP, should be reevaluated as well. Its initial version foresees no estimation of results and impact of the transformations. That means that a num-

ber of requirements for the “homework” is put forward, but no criteria for evaluating the effectiveness of certain standards implementation are elaborated. This often results into the imitation of reforms by the EaP participant states, eliminating the positive transformational implications of the program and putting its relevance into the question.

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