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## **RUSSIAN PRESSURE ON EASTERN EUROPEAN PARTNERSHIP MEMBERS**

**Abstract.** As long as the European Union has formed, it has various interests in cooperation with the Eastern European neighbours. In the article *Prospects for an upgrade in trade relations with Eastern Partnership countries* it is mentioned that in early September Armenia suddenly “announced plans to join a Customs Union with Russia, Kazakhstan and Belarus”, which the European Parliament explains only by so called Russian “pressure on Eastern Partnership countries”. It is extremely important to investigate all the details of the problem to understand the points of view of all stakeholders and to think about the possible solutions of the deal. First of all, we will describe the current situation in Eastern partnership countries and analyse their relationships with both Russian Federation and the European Union. Then, it is necessary to understand the point of view of Europe, when they refer to “Russian pressure”, on the one side, and the Russian point of view to the problem, on the other side. All these will help us to conduct an independent analysis of the problem and to decide whether the Russian pressure is really truthful and what are the possible solutions for all the parties in the regarding case.

**Keywords:** the European Union, the Eastern European countries.

### **Introduction**

As long as the European Union has formed, it has various interests in cooperation with the Eastern European neighbours. It was always clear for both parties (the European Union and the Eastern European countries) that the cooperation in different fields would lead to “prosperity and stability” of the European continent (Füle, 2013). From the end of the last century, the European Union signed many Partnership and Cooperation Agreements with the Eastern Partnership countries which, as it was mentioned at the European Parliament Plenary in Strasbourg on 11 of September 2013, enabled to start a new period in economic relations between the these two sides (Füle, 2013). From that time, the development of “a free trade area” started, which finally led “to the development of so called Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas (DCFTAs) as an integral part of the Association Agreements (AA)” between the European Union and Eastern Partnership countries (Füle, 2013).

For the European Union there are four Eastern Partnership members with whom it is most strategically important to sign the Association Agreements: Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova, Georgia, and Armenia (EP Library, 2013). Meanwhile, the Customs Union between Russia, Kazakhstan and Belarus is also interested in those Eastern European countries to cooperate. However, the goals of the European Union and the Customs Union are quite different, and it is actually impossible to join both parties and cooperate on both levels. Thus, it can be said that Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova, Georgia, and Armenia are facing difficult times deciding which organisation

they will enter. On 28 and 29 of November 2013 the Vilnius Eastern Partnership Summit will take place, which is considered to be the turning point in relations between the Eastern European countries and both the European Union and the Customs Union. In the article *Prospects for an upgrade in trade relations with Eastern Partnership countries* it is mentioned that in early September Armenia suddenly “announced plans to join a Customs Union with Russia, Kazakhstan and Belarus”, which the European Parliament explains only by so called Russian “pressure on Eastern Partnership countries” (EP Library, 2013).

The closer the date of the Vilnius Eastern Partnership Summit, the more they discuss the phenomenon of Russian pressure on Eastern European partnership members. Furthermore, it is extremely important to investigate all the details of the problem to understand the points of view of all stakeholders and to think about the possible solutions of the deal. First of all, we will describe the current situation in Eastern partnership countries and analyse their relationships with both Russian Federation and the European Union. Then, it is necessary to understand the point of view of Europe, when they refer to “Russian pressure”, on the one side, and the Russian point of view to the problem, on the other side. All these will help us to conduct an independent analysis of the problem and to decide whether the Russian pressure is really truthful and what are the possible solutions for all the parties in the regarding case.

### **Current Situation**

The main attention from the European Union in case of the Eastern European countries is paid to Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova. As far as Armenia surprisingly announced about cooperation with the Customs Union, it is no longer discussed widely. Thus, we will first examine the current relations between the analysed countries (Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova) and the EU, and the same with Russia.

First of all, Ukraine is one of the most important Eastern European partners both for Russia and the European Union. It can be easily noticed that Ukraine is seeking to improve the economic and political relations with the EU, and the negotiations on signing the Association Agreement between both parties are the real evidences of that case. For that reason, Ukraine, in general, is ready to satisfy the EU’s requirements to sign the Association Agreement. For example, one of the main EU requirements for Ukraine was to “free jailed former Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko by 18 November, i.e. before the last Foreign Affairs Council meeting ahead of the Vilnius Summit” (EP Library, 2013). At the same time, Ukraine is very important partner in many spheres for Russia, and Russia is trying to “make” Ukraine join the Customs Union. For the members of the Customs Union (Russia, Kazakhstan and Belarus) it would be a move to a new level of economic and political cooperation

between the influential post-Soviet states (Vasylyev, 2013). For Ukraine, it seems that signing an Association Agreement with the European Union is more preferable than entering the Customs Union. The cooperation with the European Union will be the “first step on the road to EU membership and a clinical break from Moscow’s sway.” (EUbusiness, 2013) Thus, it becomes clear that Russian authorities do not want to give up easily, but the methods which they are using to attract Ukraine to cooperate are regarded as pressure. For instance, in the middle of October 2013 “Russian Prime Minister stated that if the EU-Ukraine agreement is signed, Kiev will have “virtually zero” chance of joining the Customs Union and will risk a negative impact on its trade” (EUbusiness, 2013). However, regardless the high level of Ukrainian export dependency on Russia, it is widely considered that the president of Ukraine Viktor Yanukovich still wishes to decrease the pressure from Russia, so he “needs to move to the EU, otherwise Russia will just swallow him.” (EUbusiness, 2013)

Second of all, Georgia is now considered to be an important Eastern European party for the European Union. Plus, in spite of the conflicts with Russian in August, 2008, historically Georgia has always been an important political and economic partner for Russia. For that reason, Russia and the EU are now competing for the role of the leading party in relationships with Georgia. It has been long time that Georgia is trying to strengthen the cooperation with the European Union regardless the one with Russia. Especially after the conflict in 2008, Georgian authorities are attempting to avoid the influence and dependency on Russia. Georgia, like Ukraine and Moldova, is negotiating to sign the Associate Agreement with the European Union at the end of November, 2013. And again, as Molly Corso mentions in her article *Georgia: Tbilisi Bracing for Russian Pressure*, “officials and analysts in Tbilisi believe the Kremlin is ready to . . . try to coerce Georgia into ditching its European Union membership ambitions and embracing . . . Eurasian Union vision.” (Corso, 2013) In Georgia, it is widely thought that Russia is not interested in cooperation between Georgia and the European Union because it will place “an economic obstacle between Russia and Armenia, the lone Caucasian country to sign on to the Customs Union.” (Corso, 2013). It was even stated once by Georgian Prime Minister Bidzina Ivanishvili that Georgia could join Russian-led Customs Union if it would be interesting for them (Corso, 2013). However, in case of Georgia, all the official actions indicate that they do not regard “negotiations with Russia”, and that they are mostly interested in “European integration” (Corso, 2013).

Third of all, the Republic of Moldova is significant economic partner for both Russia and the European Union, and now, as Chris Borgen said, this former-USSR country is also “debating internally whether to become more integrated with the EU or to rebuild close ties with Russia.” (Borgen, 2013) Currently, Moldova conducts 53 % of its trade with the EU, so it is clearly

understandable that the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA) between the European Union and the Republic of Moldova would be quite advantageous for both parties. Meanwhile, Russia is another important trade partner for Moldova, and neglecting this fact while cooperating with the European Union would lead to negative trade effects with Russia. However, the case in the Republic of Moldova is similar to Ukraine and Georgia – the country itself aims to join the European Union rather than Russian-led Customs Union. Thus, Moldova is currently negotiating with the European Union to sign the DCFTA in 2014. For that reason, the Republic of Moldova is also facing the pressure by Russia: “threatening energy cut offs, banning key exports from Moldova, bringing religion into play.” (Borgen, 2013) Again, Russia is worrying about losing one of the key Eastern European partners, and their methods of cooperation attraction seem to be quite aggressive. “In case of Moldova, Russia also supports a separatist group that has seized control of Transnistria, the eastern-most section of the country”, says Chris Borgen in his article *Russia, Moldova, and the EU: Realpolitik as Normative Competition* (Borgen, 2013). In September 2013 Russia banned some Moldovan wine and brandy manufacturers, and the European Commission, in response, proposed to “open the internal market completely to Moldovan wine, even before provisional application of the AA-DCFTA.” (EP Library, 2013) As a result, it is more likely that the Republic of Moldova will finally sign the DCFTA with the European Union and will neglect the Russian “pressure” actions.

To sum up, it is clearly noticeable that Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova are trying to move their economics and politics towards the European Union. Despite those countries are highly dependent on Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and particularly on Russia, their movements still show that the cooperation with the European Union is more important for them. Although Russia is aggressively pressing Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova not to sign any trade agreements with the EU (whether DCFTA or AA), it is more likely that those Eastern European partners would strengthen trade relations with the EU rather than with Customs Union.

### **European and Russian points of view**

In general, the European point of view is clear: the EU considers Russia to be an aggressor towards the Eastern Partnership countries. Moreover, the closer the summit of the Eastern Partnership in Vilnius, the more dangerous Russia seems to the EU (Duz, 2013). As Sergey Duz said in his article *Eastern Partnership: EU fears growth of Russian pressure*, it is commonly thought that Russian pressure is especially strong at that time because “Europe is busy with their internal affairs, and for the third countries it is very convenient to expand their influence” (Duz, 2013). In the same article Sergey Duz mentions a number of pressing issues to the European countries from

Gazprom, which is regarded as the strongest influence from Russia by many European Parliament members (Duz, 2013). However, a number of political scientists also agree on the fact that the EU always wanted to have more impact on the Eastern Partnership countries than Russia has. Plus, the image of Russia in the EU is sometimes underestimated in comparison to real situation in the country. For these reasons, it is highly possible that the EU is conducting more political than economical game with that issue (Duz, 2013).

The point of view of Russia in the issue is also not difficult to understand: Russia wants to save effective economic and political relationships with its Eastern European neighbors. Even from historical point of view, Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova had always played influential role in development of Eurasian region. Thus, the idea of Vladimir Putin to strengthen the Eurasian Union by enlarging and developing the Customs Union seems to be ideal strategic goal for former-Soviet countries (Duz, 2013). Nevertheless, there are some opinions that it would be better for Russia to cooperate with the EU and not to compete, especially after Russia finally joined the WTO (Füle, 2013).

### **Conclusion**

Analysing all the details of the issue, a balanced optimistic solution for Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia would be to cooperate both with the EU and Russia. However, the objectives of the EU and the Customs Union are quite different, and it would be impossible for the Eastern Partnership countries to satisfy both parties (the EU and Russia). The only possible solution, discussed widely, is for Russia and the EU to collaborate more intensively on that level (Duz, 2013). Thus, a good result will be to reach satisfaction of all partners by reaching a consensus.

For Russia, it is no more acceptable to press the Eastern European countries, which includes “all forms of pressure”, as Štefan Füle, the European Commissioner for Enlargement and Neighbourhood Policy, stated on the European Parliament Plenary, in Strasbourg on 11 September, 2013 (Füle, 2013). Those all forms of pressure include the energy pricing pressure, import bans and any trade obstacles, “military cooperation”, and “the instrumentalisation of protracted conflicts” (Füle, 2013).

Finally, for Europe it is necessary to develop the communication with Russia, and actually with the Customs Union itself (Füle, 2013). It is possible for the EU to assess Russian economy and politics regarding the current situation and not the past. Today, Russian and European values are much more similar than in the past, and their global goals are also comparable in many ways (Duz, 2013). As a result, more respect and tries to understand the partner would resolve the existing “crisis in Russian-European relations” (Duz, 2013).

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