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The EU and Russia in 2008: In Search of New Approaches
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I would like to speak and give a broader picture of what the Central and Eastern Europe and Russia means these days and propose a question and dispute one of the premises at least, in my opinion, you still see in the EU.

In the EU-15, especially in the old member-states there is a kind of widely shared presumption that CEE acts as a block without Russia. In a sense that countries of the region have particular problems with Russia and due to these problems they are trying to expose somewhat anti-Russian sentiments at the EU level, and are trying to steer the EU policies with Russia in a quite anti-Russian direction. Often we hear that the CEECs like objectivity; that their positions are too emotional driven by historical reminiscences and enduring anti-Russian sentiments etc. I would like to dispute this very premise and actually suggest that the picture of the CEE these days is much more complex, and we cannot really view the countries having a single-stance policy vis-à-vis Russia. This by the way, of course, does not relate only to Russia, but to number of EU policies, where somehow the presumption is these countries always pulling in the same direction, I think, that is not applicable to the reality of region these days.

I would like to start, suggesting some patterns and some pre-conditions or some factors that determine how the countries view Russia. Firstly, just simply looking at the geography we actually see already the difference, and, I think, we can say that countries closer to Russia tend to have somewhat more cautious policy with the Eastern neighbors, would it be the Baltic States or Poland. While the other countries we see in the Central Europe, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary also Slovenia, of course, Slovenia being a very special case, tend to exhibit different patterns. And I would like to suggest that this has very much to do with the bilateral issues between these countries and Russia. If we look at the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, we do not see any particular bilateral sort of contentious issues with these countries once the Russian army were removed at the beginning of the 1990s, and the issues of the Russian, of the ex-Soviet debt was settled; they are basically enjoying, I would say, quite standard relations, which is not always the case for countries like Poland and the Baltic States. We have seen a lot of controversies in the Baltic States, for instance, in the negotiations of the border treaties, we have seen the 'meat problem' in Poland, which actually cost the blockage of the mandate of the new PCA agreement to be negotiated, and we could go on and on. Certainly from the perspective from the country I represent here, I can say that our, let's say, disputes or the controversies with the neighbors like Germany and Austria on certain issues, played much more important role than the issue of relations with Russia. That is the first thing I want to make clear here.

The other topic is the political conciliation and the countries. We see that actually as the countries of the region are moving, or we can say that disputable already are, sort of standards of the Western style democracies. We see that the position of the political parties not least on the foreign policy issues start to change as well, and I think that relations with Russia is clearly illustrative of that pattern. Again if you just take the example of Poland, we have seen, I think, quite dramatic change in the relations, at least on the rhetorical level, with Russia, when the Tusk's government came to power. It is demonstrative on issues of such as, for instance, the missile shield, where Kachinskies basically refused to talk to Russia about this. And suddenly Mr. Tusk is going to Russia and trying to explain why this issue is important for Poland. We have also seen a significant shift in Slovakia, for instance, when the left-wing government is very much more open to discuss a lot of issues with Russia, including such issues as energy or transport. We can see the different positions in the Czech Republic as well, the left wing party, the social-democrats tend to be more sort of open to discussions with Russia about concerns, for instance, the deployment of the American radar, while the right-wing government is again, somewhat, suspicious talking to Russia about these things. So, what I want to suggest here is actually the political conciliation in the CEECs as well, and that something that we should take into account.

There is also an issue of the overall orientation of the foreign policy of these countries. But generally we can see that some of the parties have more, what we can describe, value-driven policy, and that, of course, plays on the relations with Russia as well. I mean if we have the parties in power, who take more of this value-driven foreign policy, we can obviously expect in all the issues, such as democracy, human rights, rule of law being raised even in relations with Russia. But there is a significant number of parties in the CEE, who tend to take a more pragmatic view of foreign policy, saying that, well, of course, it is important to talk about such issues, but we should not rule out of the economic consideration from the foreign policy, and we should more focus on the sort of tangibility of the economic co-operation between our countries and Russia.

Moving on I would like to suggest that nevertheless, I think, there are important issues in the relations with Russia that will endure and resonate across the region, and I would like to suggest three, which, I think, are pretty obvious. So, the first one, I think, is not so obvious, will be more and more important in the future. The first, of course, is security. I think, it is also interesting to highlight that in most of the countries in the region, at least in their documents of the security strategies Russia no longer is viewed as a threat. It is responsive to the fact that these countries are the member-states of the EU, and, of course, they tend to see different kind of threats that are, for instance, defined in the European security strategy, such as the international terrorism, migration, failed states and so on. And here clearly Russia does not fit into the picture. But, I think, that we see differences in the region relating to the position of the NATO. All the countries I am talking about are member-states of the NATO these days, but the perception what role the NATO should play is starting to take diverging patterns. Again we have political forces in these countries that say that the NATO is no longer so important, and that we should focus more on building the European security and defense policy, and enhancing the role of Europe as a security provider. But we still find the political forces, which rely more on the NATO and even those that think that even the NATO is not enough to assure the security. I think, here Poland can be called as an example, when we recall the position of the former government of Jaroslav Kachinsky. We see that in fact there was quite a lot of skepticism, whether the NATO can actually assure the security of Poland, and, perhaps, that Poland should seek a different arrangement, such as the bilateral security deal with the USA similarly the arrangement that other countries have, such as Japan and South Korea. Again there is no consensus about what is the best security arrangement for the region, and we see different positions across.

I think, the energy issue is the particularly important for the region, because the CEE in particular is quite dependent on Russia in terms of the energy supplies. We have had different proposals on the table such as the Polish proposal for the kind of 'energy NATO', more solidarity on energy supplies for Europe. However, again we see that we have countries and governments in the region, which are not a priori close to suggestions that the Russian side is coming up, for instance, the 'South Stream' project, which is viewed as a sort of competitive to the EU project 'Nabucco', where we have some countries of the region like Bulgaria or Hungary backing this 'South Stream' proposal quite clearly.

The third issue is the neighborhood, where understandably this is more than issue that are close to countries like Ukraine, Belarus or Moldova, and their interest is to drive these countries more to the EU, which is sometimes for Russia viewed as an attempt to sort of take these countries away from the Russian sphere of the influence. I would again doubt that this is the primary calculation for the countries at stake, and the central- and eastern- Europeans are more concerned about having stabile neighbourhood, where they see the European perspective as the best guarantee.

I want to say the last point that can play a role in changing perception is the increasing economic and business links, and that has to do with the pragmatism that we see across the region. I will just give one example, in the Czech Republic there has been enormous increase of the Russian tourists coming to the country. They are most dynamically growing group of tourists and actually the second biggest visitors group after the Germans. I think that is an interesting patter that we should have looked at this, perhaps, increasing people-to-people contacts, which also are facilitated by some EU-Russia policy, such as visa facilitation can some substantial impact on the changing perception of Russia and the CEE.