

EU'S ENGAGEMENT IN THE EASTERN NEIGHBOURHOOD AMIDST INCREASED GEOPOLITICAL COMPETITION

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Abstract

This paper looked into how the Chinese presence in the EaP area is affecting the strategic calculus of the EU and the EaP countries. The eastern neighborhood is at the crossroads of a possible new configuration, where the EaP countries have found themselves increasingly at the intersection of the interests of competing great powers that have changed the international environment. The ongoing conflict between an increasingly assertive and aggressive Russia and the West and increasing interests and financial investment from China as it implements its Belt and Road Initiative have put pressures on the EaP states. This raises the question regarding the possibility of cooperation between Russia and China in the region and how feasible that is. On the other hand, the EU is facing its own challenges regarding its relationship with the Chinese state in an increasingly adverse international environment. While the EU needs a functioning security system on its eastern border while maintaining functioning relations with competing powers, China's geopolitical status is rapidly changing. This is becoming particularly relevant today because Covid-19 has accelerated the US-China strategic rivalry and the prospect of new sanctions hangs over China. Beijing's growing influence in Eurasia has the potential to create new geo-economic divides, requiring the EU to reassess its focus on the EaP area.

Keywords: Eastern partnership, Eastern neighbourhood, competition, Belt and Road

Introduction

The Eastern neighbourhood of the European Union (EU) has found itself between a rock and a hard place in the past years, especially because of the geopolitical tensions that have sent ripples throughout the region in the past decade, culminating with the occupation of the Crimea by the Russian Federation and essentially, the warning that this sent to all the countries in the area, especially those which are cornered by the presence of the frozen conflicts within or around

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their borders, instruments that can always be activated in order to serve Russia's regional interests.

Overall, the region is facing many challenges, being surrounded by an array of international actors with interests in the region, such as the EU, Russia, the US and a more recent addition in the region, China. As the last years have shown, the EU is not the most serious of partners that most countries in the region have been hoping, being beset by internal crises, such as the United Kingdom leaving the European or the rise of the far-right and European skepticism amidst its ranks. Likewise, the relations between the EU and the US were very conflictual during the Trump administration, which affected their cooperation and others' perception of it, which I believe it to be a most important thing, since EU lacks the determination and hard power instruments that the US can provide as part of their partnership.

At the same time, the US itself has seen a decline in relation to its influence around the globe, relative to the growth and expansion of other actors such as China, which means that the US is being forced to pick and choose its main areas of interest. As a traditional presence in this geographical area, this is a development that is raising eyebrows around the leaders of the countries residing here about its commitment to the threats that they are facing, which is a fair question that has been on the minds of the leaders of every allied country of the US, be it in the Atlantic region or in the Pacific region, where the US government is in a full process of rebuilding its alliances and strengthening its allies' confidence in the alliance and US presence in the region.

However, this has allowed for the resurgence and strengthening of the presence of other actors in the Eastern neighbourhood region. This is Russia's traditional sphere of influence and it possesses a vast array of coercive and soft power means in order to ingratiate itself in the issues which are relevant to the future of the region, as was seen in 2014 in Crimea, or as it can always do so in Transnistria, for example. However, a new global player has arrived in the past decade in the region and it is progressing with including the countries into a series of foreign policy instruments meant to extend its influence globally and achieve its national objectives. That international actor is China, a revisionist power and a great power with a global reach, which is solidifying its presence in places starting from Asia, to Europe, Africa and Latin America, promoting its self-rated success story and its flagship foreign policy instrument, the Belt and Road Initiative.

This paints a relatively complex picture for the region because it presents a gathering of great powers with regional and global reach in the region, a region which is beset with long time unresolved issues, such as the competition between East and West, the countries there always being forced to choose between the two, a main cause of the Crimea invasion in 2014. However, this also means more options for the Eastern Partnership countries, China adding not only increased competition and instability to the region, but also representing an alternative, a viable one for the residing countries. It remains to be seen how this will play out in an age of strategic competition such as this one that we are living, which has been



enhanced by the coronavirus pandemic, much in the same way that the financial crisis from the late 2000s helped China advance its interests and presence at a global level.

In this sense, a growing presence in the last few years of Chinese military capabilities around the wider Black Sea region has changed the perspective regarding the increase in Chinese influence in the area. For example, in May 2015, Russia and China concluded their first-ever joint naval exercise, named Joint Sea 2015, in the Mediterranean Sea, demonstrating Chinese readiness to continue with its endeavours in becoming a global naval power. This event was also important because the Mediterranean represents the western end of the ‘New Silk Road,’ the maritime section of the Chinese Belt and Road mega-project to link China with Central Asia, the Middle East and Africa and into Europe.

In the following pages of this paper, my approach to the analysis will be focused on three main things. First of all, understanding the current state of relations between the EU the Eastern Partnership countries, which have been beset by many crises in the past years. Secondly, understanding the presence of China in this region and the level that it has reached, because it has been able to provide a frame in which it is able to promote its interests both at a bilateral and multilateral level. Thirdly, understand the power dynamics in the region, both from the standpoint of the relation between Beijing and the Kremlin, as well as the enhanced strategic competition and the tensions that have been created during the pandemic and the opportunities that it offered for countries such as China to once again promote its interests and increase its influence and presence at a global level.

1. The EU and Eastern Partnership

The Eastern Partnership is a joint policy initiative which aims to deepen and strengthen relations between the EU, its Member States and its six Eastern neighbors: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. Its purpose is to promote peace and intensify trade and political relations with the neighbors of the EU, turning them into democratic countries that could potentially join the EU using its normative power. Essentially, the EU is offering assistance and a preferential treatment to these countries based on a certain set of incentives and conditionalities. Has the EU been actually acting as a normative power in connection with its Eastern Partnership member countries? Some would argue that they have not.

Political values and the way the EU formulates its foreign policy are important sources of soft power which are able to build or destroy credibility at an international level. The European Union relies heavily on its soft power and it tries to spread the values on which it is based in its foreign policy. Jean Crombois, which has written extensively on the geopolitics surrounding the Eastern Partnership, argues that instead of actually promoting democracy and acting as a normative power by pushing the countries in question to become democracies, the EU has been unable to move past developing pragmatic relations that push



transformative reactions in these countries even further, which in turn such a move could weaken the EU's role in its eastern neighbourhood but also undermine the added value of its foreign policy (Crombois, 2019).

According to the same Crombois, this basically leads the EU's foreign policy related to the Eastern Partnership to enter a period of inertia (Crombois, 2019), where the results are not being accomplished, only functioning with the purpose of maintaining EU's presence in the region, which is already hurt because of the fact that it has few instruments available in order to react to an event like the one in Crimea, where Russia may decide to make use of the frozen conflicts over which it holds sway and keeps a veto right in these countries, such as Transnistria in Moldova.

One clear case in this line of argument is Belarus. Out of all of the Eastern Partnership countries that I have mentioned above, Belarus is the least integrated with the European mechanisms and institutions provided through the Eastern Partnership. As such, Belarus is not a member of the Council of Europe and its engagement within the EaP is very basic, the two sides having never ratified a Partnership and Cooperation Agreement and so Belarus was never included in the different tracks of relations provided through the Eastern Partnership. This leads back to the argument above, meaning that contact with Belarus has only been done for the sake of doing it, keeping intact an array of supposedly incentivising tracks of political and trade relations, but with no continuous dialogue between the two sides about political, institutional, or economic reforms in Belarus (Foundation Robert Schuman, 2021).

A similar case is unfolding in Georgia, where political polarisation remains a strong source of tension inside the country and democratic reforms are nowhere to be seen in the near future, considering the fact that the Georgian Dream, the dominant party since 2012, has succumbed to the temptation to control the political scene, including by arresting an opposition leader (Foundation Robert Schuman, 2021). Likewise, Sergiu Bușcăneanu, analyses in his article „EU Democracy Promotion in Eastern ENP Countries” that only a half of the countries that are members of the Eastern Partnership initiative (Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine) have attempted to carry out certain democratic reforms throughout the past decade, since the program has been in function, those ones being debatable as well, since they were not sustained reforms that would plunge the countries into a full democratic process (Bușcăneanu, 2015).

Alongside these notions, there are the issues which have given a grave blow to the EU's soft power, namely its own homegrown crises, such as the rise of the far right inside the European Union and the leave of the one of the biggest and most important members of the bloc, a country with tradition regarding the crafting of the human rights agenda in Europe and one of the few countries which was able to provide a hard power edge to the EU's strategies and instruments, namely the United Kingdom. Information must be credible. This is the issue that most differentiates public diplomacy efforts from propaganda: credibility. Politics have



become a competition for credibility and governments no longer compete only with other governments for credibility but also with countless other actors, from non-governmental organizations and corporations to intergovernmental organizations, all due to the abundance of information and the one that gains a reputation. the actor who provides credible information wins, which is especially important in the face of the phenomenon known as fake news (Gass, 2009).

This is especially important in the context of the fact that I have described in the initial pages of this paper, which is that there are new actors with the possibilities and the influence to offer the same type of pragmatic relations without the incentives and the conditionalities that the EU is offering currently to the Eastern Partnership countries. Likewise, right now we are finding ourselves in a great pandemic that has affected us all deeply. The pandemic caused by the coronavirus has plunged the states into a real medical, social and economic crisis, the effects of which are very severe, both in terms of the number of victims and in terms of numbers indicating the economic performance of states, with the EU actually implementing a new type of Marshall Plan to revive the economies of the EU members states.

In this context, the leaders of each state has had to face their own test in managing the outbreak and implementing a response. While Western governments are under increasing pressure to stop the spread of the virus and find a solution to the increasingly visible economic problems, China has taken the opportunity to change the narrative around the coronavirus and its own efforts. domestically as well as internationally. During the rush to produce and deliver vaccines to every country, China makes vital deliveries to other nations, as part of an effort to present the CCP's efforts to combat the virus as a symbol of its leadership and power. At the same time, the Chinese state is using vast resources for a very aggressive propaganda and misinformation strategy, aimed at spreading chaos and confusion and inciting the distrust of governments in democratic countries (The Diplomat, 2020).

This intensive process in which Beijing was engaged in the context of the crisis caused by the coronavirus pandemic is a continuation of China's constant efforts in recent years to emerge as a capable leader on the global stage, to increasingly influence the structure of the international order according to its interests, and to export its economical and political. This pandemic provides a good opportunity to creates new relationships and set the agenda regarding recovery plans, which means that the competition on the global stage is that much more intense. This presents a much more competitive landscape in the Eastern neighborhood area, which requires a refreshed approach by the EU.

This is highly important in the context of the perceived decline in US power and the Obama administration's strategic approach of leading from behind" in the Middle East, as the term was coined by a White House official in 2011 to describe President Obama's Libyan policy, was already worrying some of its allies with regard to whether the US will continue to respect its security commitments (Moyar, 2016). The Trump administration was exacerbating this issue with a commander-

in-chief that seemed to want to pull back the US from its traditional role as guarantor of the liberal international order and who has publicly questioned the US commitment to defend its NATO Allies.

Even if that did not end up being the case, the perceived relative decline of the US is well recorded by its allies, partners and enemies around the globe and it has real consequences. In this case, there is also a question related to whether the US will be able to continue to commit resources in this area when its focus seems to be on the Korean peninsula and the maritime areas in the East and South China seas. All of this paints a very complex imagine to the Eastern neighbourhood area.

2. Russia and its sphere of influence

Considering the soft power push that the EU was doing in the traditional sphere of influence of the Russian Federation, two divergent political models were being constructed and going head to head between the EU and Russia, the later becoming an obstacle that constantly impeded economic and political development set by the ENP in the region. One of the main concept, policy drivers, that the Russian government pushed to set it as a big differentiator between themselves and the EU was their idea of sovereignty, which was essentially born through the Kremlin's leadership search for a concept that would place Russia in a distinct ideological space at an international level.

This concept was introduced in 2006 by Vladislav Surkov, then deputy chief of staff of the Russian president, during a meeting with foreign journalists and he coined the term in the context of how the West perceives Russia's domestic policy. Surkov argued that a double standard is applied to Russia's political system and that Russia's way of perceiving democracy is no different from its generally accepted European concept and that in the same, it will not allow Russian democracy to be ruled from the outside (Okara, 2007).

The development of this concept of sovereign democracy has the role of representing the foundations of Russia's national idea (Popescu, 2006). Originally, the concept of sovereign democracy was born in Ukraine in the sense that it comes from the way the Kremlin leadership conceptualized the Orange Revolution that took place between November 2004 and January 2005 in Ukraine (Krastev, 2007). Ivan Krastev believes that sovereign democracy is thus Russia's response to the combination of populist pressure and international pressure that destroyed Leonid Kuchma's regime, with the Orange Revolution posing the greatest threat to Moscow: remote-controlled popular uprising (Krastev, 2007). We can thus consider that this concept of sovereign democracy is a response for the entire international community, more precisely for the European Union and the United States, for the way in which they try to undermine Russia's influence in the post-Soviet space. In 2005, shortly after the end of the orange revolution in Ukraine, Putin said that Russia was aware that certain non-governmental organizations in Ukraine were being funded by foreign governments (The Guardian, 2005).

As I have said earlier, one of the main ideas that Russia comes up with when proposing this concept is that the Russian nation is a democracy like any other, just like the European democracies, so any type of accusations towards Russia are unwarranted. However, these democratic values that the EU and Russia supposedly share will be implemented by Russia according to its own history and tradition (Ryzhkov, 2005). This concept gives Russia legitimacy to maintain a strong presence in the post-Soviet space. In the words of Vladimir Putin, Russia must play a strong role in its neighbourhood as "dictated by its civilizational model, its great history, geography and cultural genome in which foundations of a Western civilization and centuries-old experiences of interaction are organically combined with the East, where centers of economic power and political influence are actively developing" (Putin, 2012).

In this way, Russia seeks to extend this notion of sovereignty over its neighborhood, proposing the idea that it has a responsibility for its neighbors, taking on the task of guiding their development, which shows that, for example, the policies of the Union European principles for the promotion of democratic principles are not needed in the post-Soviet space. Russian minorities throughout this space are the preferred tool used by the Kremlin to aid their arguments. A person's Russian ethnicity is recognized only in that its native language is Russian, and ethnic Russians living outside the Russian Federation do not constitute a diaspora, but are an integral part of a broad Russian civilization that was divided after the fall of the Soviet Union (Russia Today, 2012).

This concept of a great Russian civilization that stretches across the post-Soviet space and even beyond it, in fact wherever there are people who claim to be of Russian ethnicity, which is characterized by Putin as having a common identity and history it is closely related to another concept, namely that of *Russkiy Mir* (Russian World). The Russian world was first proposed in 2003 by Anatoly Chubais, but the ideas contained in this concept have been exposed since the 1990s, in an attempt to fill the identity gap left by the collapse of the Soviet Union. He argued that Russia's mission should be to promote Russian culture and protect the Russian population in its vicinity, while establishing a dominant position in the world of trade and business and guaranteeing the freedom and democratic principles of Russia to its neighbors (Polegkyi, 2011). In other words, this concept does not only refer to the Russian diaspora, but it is a concept that refers to the mission of Russian culture and dominance in Russia's neighborhood.

Based on this type of Russian exceptionalism and 'duty bound role' in its neighborhood, Russia has developed its polycentric view of the world, argued that the day when the US was the preeminent power in a unipolar system is long gone, the US/EU having no right to intervene in its sphere of influence. These are explained in the foreign policy concept from Russia in 2013. This concept is based on a changing world, characterized by a weakening of the West's power to control world politics and the economy. In such a world, Russia must strengthen its international position and become an influential player, which can restore stability in certain areas destabilized by the West, like the post-Soviet space, due to the



inability of states to maintain their dominance (Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2013).

Such a period, which can be characterized as a period of decentralization of the global system of governance, the regional system of governance is becoming more and more important, transforming the international system into a polycentric one (The Bureau of the President of Russia, 2014). This term, polycentric, which implies the existence of several centers of power, is a strong one in the concept of foreign policy of Russia. Thus, Russia emphasizes an emergence of a new world order, in which Russia, in its individual form and as a member of international organizations such as the BRICS, must play an important role in this new world order, being an actor that will lead in the development and stability of the international system.

3. China and Russia's converging interests

In this sense, China and Russia are natural allies in promoting a multipolar world and undermining the US on the global stage. In his speech at the 19th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), Chinese President and CCP Secretary-General Xi Jinping reaffirmed his commitment to fulfilling the „Chinese dream”, announcing a new age for the Chinese nation and promising the fulfillment of the Chinese dream of national rejuvenation (Xinhua, 2017). This statement essentially represents the promise of the CCP under its most powerful leader after Deng Xiaoping of not repeating the mistakes of the century of humiliation that caused China's decline and allowed its fragmentation at the hands of foreign powers. In the past it was a tool often used to mobilize the Chinese people in support of the CCP's actions, but this rallying cry was reshaped by Xi Jinping and is now being used to promote the Chinese dream of national rejuvenation, which is the promise of bringing China back to its former glory, when it was empire placed in the center of the world.

This new era announced by Xi Jinping demonstrates major implications for China's role in international relations, presenting itself as a real and viable alternative for developing nations, as Xi Jinping said, while guaranteeing the „preservation of their independence” (Xinhua, 2017, p. 9). The ideal promoted by the CCP through the promise of rejuvenating the Chinese nation was accompanied by a strengthening of the CCP's domestic authority and an aggressive foreign policy, and these reforms were aimed at securing China's core interests, such as maintaining China's sovereignty, territorial integrity and political unity in the form of assuring the long rule of the CCP (Zhou, 2019). The effects of this can be seen in the Xinjiang region of northeast China, Hong Kong, the South China Sea and, of course, in China's relationship with Taiwan, to which Beijing has taken a more aggressive in recent years.

These goals mentioned above have the strategic purpose of ensuring the development and internal stability of the Chinese society and the protection of its



external borders. To this end, China must ensure it has access access to natural, financial and technological resources so that it can develop its military capabilities and ensure the CCP's capabilities so that it can compete on the global stage. Within this context, the fundamental interests of China, as mentioned above, were established by examining external threats to China's development, obstacles to China's access to overseas resources and goods with which its economy can keep growing and maintain the rule of the CCP.

In this context, China's relationship with the United States is extremely important, the latter being the main strategic rival of the Chinese state. For China, the current liberal international order, while bringing great economic benefits to it, has become increasingly a reflection of American hegemony, which in fact halts China's development because it does not take into account the interests of developing countries and does not fit the democratic criteria promoted by Washington and the West, in the same way like the argument provided by Russia (Lippert *et al.*, 2020). Again, similarly, China is dissatisfied with the predominant role of the United States in areas that affect China's economic and security interests, seeking to have a greater say in international rules and regulations governing certain areas. Thus, both states consider that the actions of the other are threatening and destabilizing for their vision of the international system.

In this case, as I have mentioned above, Beijing and the Kremlin are natural allies that can sustain each other in reaching this particular goal. Russia continues to maintain nuclear parity with the United States, and China competes with America as the world's most important economic power. Both states have considerable influence as permanent members of the UN Security Council and share countless international positions on a number of important issues, in direct contradiction with the preferences and interests of Western democratic nations. For both states, the United States and its system of alliances are the most serious threat to their regional security interests and the main obstacle to their ability to shape the regional security environment. The interests of the two states converge on the idea that the US is wielding excessive power in the international system dominated by Western values that make up the international liberal order and that it must cooperate on diplomatic, military and economic issues to combat this fact (Chase *et al.*, 2017).

Nonetheless, it must be mentioned that the two powers are engaged in a tough competition in areas such as Central Asia, where China seeks to establish itself as the dominant force in political and economic relations among the regional states, of course, to the detriment of a traditional force such as Russia. However, at the regional level, China seeks to dismantle the US-established alliance system after World War II and replace it, thus having the same purpose as The Russian Federation. An important tool in achieving these goals is the Belt and Road Initiative. Although it can be described as having economic importance in the first place, along with other efforts such as the Asian Bank for Infrastructure Investment it is used to achieve strategic objectives for Beijing.



Being more than an engine for building infrastructure to strengthen connectivity between China and Europe, the destination of the land and sea routes that make up the Belt and Road, the latter is China's main policy tool to increase its influence at global. This tool uses Chinese investment to strengthen its presence and increase its capacity to influence decision-making processes in target countries in line with strategic interests. According to the document „Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road” issued by the Chinese government in 2015, the Belt and Road project is a much more comprehensive strategy, highlighting its role in strengthening cultural ties, political relations, connections between people, in the field of finance and so on (The State Council of China, 2017).

In the long run, China's strategy with the Belt and Road at its center is seen as a threat to the international order based on free market principles, because these projects are implemented by China without the political conditions and economic standards affirmed by Western states and are supported by institutions created by Beijing, such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), which do not have high evaluation standards for the economic and societal impact of the proposed projects, in many cases serving only China's geopolitical aims (UN, 2017).

4. EU's perceptions regarding the Belt and Road

The EU's interest in Belt and Road became quite clear in 2015, when a number of European states joined the AIIB, trying to strengthen their relations with China and influence the institutional structure that these organizations created by China will have, so that they can be complementary to institutions created by Western states and not their rivals (DW, 2015). Overall, however, the positions of European states on the Chinese project to increase connectivity have been mixed. EU Member States in southern and eastern Europe have been more open to Chinese investment, given the promise of economic development, while states such as France or Germany saw it as a threatening scheme meant to disrupt EU's unity (CFR, 2021).

The main critique that the EU has towards the Belt and Road is the threat it poses to the principles of the free market (EU Parliament, 2016). One such example is the second component of the Budapest-Belgrade-Skopje-Piraeus route whose goal is to connect the port of Piraeus in Greece, controlled by China Ocean Shipping Company since 2016, with the markets of Central and Western Europe. Although China, Serbia and Hungary reached an agreement in 2014, the project stalled due to non-compliance with European regulations, with the European Commission launching an investigation in February 2017, nowadays the contract having been secretized by the Hungarian government (The Diplomat, 2020).

Hungary is an EU Member State, which means that it has to comply with EU regulations which stipulate that a public process must be started for this type of



infrastructure investment. However, no contract has been made public for the construction of the railway section in Hungary. Instead, a bilateral treaty between China and Hungary in November 2015 drew attention to an appeal made to certain companies already selected for this construction. The project was to be financed by China Exim Bank, the construction was to be done by a consortium of Chinese companies, including China Railway International and China Communications Construction Company, and implemented by the Hungarian State Railways. This circumvented the European rules on public tenders, delaying the project and causing the Hungarian government to resume the tender in a more transparent way. This poses a risk both to European companies seeking to participate in these projects and to EU investment rules (The Diplomat, 2020).

In the EU's Eastern Partnership countries, China has been making strategic investments. China was interested in a series of notable investments in the region over the years, such as the investment of China Railway International Group Georgia's Anaklia Deep Sea Port project, on the shores of the Black Sea city of Anaklia, near Georgia's breakaway Abkhazia region. However, that project was stopped after a three way spat between the US, Russia and China (The Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst, 2020). In 2019, China Harbour Engineering Company has expressed its interest in investing in the Bulgarian Black sea ports of Varna and Burgas (Port Strategy, 2019). Ukraine is also an important for Chinese investments, China Harbour Engineering Company already winning a contract in May 2017 to dredge the approach to Yuzhny port near Odessa (Ports Europe, 2018).

The dominance of Chinese companies and non-compliance with EU rules is a problem not only within the EU, but also in relation to the EU's eastern partners. In the long run, they may be inclined to no longer comply with EU rules in exchange for promises of accession, as long as they are presented with an alternative source of funding, as the Chinese development model is contrary to EU rules on public procurement and state aid. This could lead to the erosion of EU rules and regulations promoted by Brussels in the eastern region. Although European states participated in the Belt and Road Forum in May 2017, some of them, such as major European powers such as France, Germany and the United Kingdom, refused to sign the joint declaration at the end of the meeting because it did not mention principles such as social sustainability and environmental protection or the notion of transparency. Germany's requests to include guarantees on free trade and fair competition in the declaration were also ignored (The Guardian, 2017).

The EU is also increasingly concerned about issues of reciprocity and access to the Chinese market for European companies. Despite several years of negotiations, there is still no bilateral investment treaty, and European companies are finding it increasingly difficult to do business in China, given China's political setbacks in recent years and attempts to to strengthen state and party control over the economy (Politico, 2021).

In the long run, perhaps the biggest threat to the EU that Chinese investment in Belt and Road poses is the internal cohesion of EU states. The concern is



heightened by the fact that Chinese investment in Europe is supported by the 16+1 economic cooperation format between the countries of Central and Eastern Europe and China. The format brings together 11 EU members from Central and Eastern Europe, as well as five EU candidate countries in the Western Balkans, and other countries such as Greece and Ukraine have expressed interest in cooperating in this format. This framework ensures a long-term political presence in the region for China, which will intensify its relations with the states in the region formed on the basis of cooperation in the Belt and Road projects.

The effect of the rise of Chinese influence in Central and Eastern Europe is already visible on the EU's internal cohesion, with several events drawing attention to this. In July 2016, Hungary and Greece, some of the main beneficiaries of Chinese investment, opposed the inclusion of a direct reference to China in an EU statement on the Hague Tribunal's ruling on the invalidity of China's legal arguments in South China Sea (Reuters, 2016). In March 2017, Hungary derailed the EU consensus by refusing to sign a joint EU letter denouncing the reported torture of lawyers detained in China. In June 2017, Greece blocked an EU statement to the UN Human Rights Council criticizing the Chinese government's human rights violations (Reuters, 2017), and later opposed the creation of an EU-wide mechanism for more rigorous analysis of third countries' investments in Europe.

Conclusions

Considering these, I believe there is an important set of conclusions that can be drawn from this analysis. First of all, the EU has been engaged in an important normative process at its Eastern borders, but these have generally failed to provide the envisioned results, become more of a bureaucratic process that keeps these countries next to the EU without actually having them commit to a democratic path. Not only that, but the Russian government has available a set of coercive measures related especially to the frozen conflicts existing in the post-Soviet space, which act as actual veto powers for the Kremlin.

Secondly, the Russian Federation is well determined to keep hold of its influence in the post-Soviet space and regardless of the usually frowned upon lackluster of its economical plans for the region, but it is trying to provide a pan-russian conceptual basis for its control of the region, trying to argue its presence in the region and in such particular cases like the frozen conflicts. It is Russia's own stamp of soft power, one imbued in a series of coercive instruments.

Thirdly, the Chinese presence in this region provides a very much needed economic stimulus to the region, especially in the realm of big projects, like the cancelled port constructions in Georgia, however that will certainly add a new dimension to the geopolitical competition in the Eastern neighborhood area, especially in the context of the relation between Beijing and the Kremlin, where they have a set of strategic objectives that are converging. Likewise, the Russian

government will most likely receive with open arms a new source of investment in the region, increasing the opportunities of developing the region without the incentives and conditionalities of the EU. As we have seen, it is already well prepared to engage with this country both at a bilateral and also a multilateral level.

Overall, for the EU, this has the potential to increase the geopolitical divide in the region against itself because it adds viable alternatives for its Eastern Partnership countries that do not want to perform in terms of democratic reforms and instead choose to remain in a pragmatism type of relation, focused on trade and on particular points that serve their national interest.

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