

Euronest provides 'legitimacy' in face of Russian aggression

Written by Heidi Hautala on 27 March 2015 in Opinion
Opinion

With Russia seeking to reclaim influence through its Eurasian economic union, the EU must maintain the attractiveness of the eastern partnership, says Heidi Hautala.



The view from an ancient hilltop monastery from Armenia across the Turkish border is stunning. The peak of mount Ararat is hidden by clouds but the mighty white slopes dominate the landscape.

The border is closed because of the slow process of unearthing the truth on the Armenian genocide during the Ottoman empire. This is just one of the conflicts which hamper the development of the EU's eastern neighbourhood.

The fourth Euronest parliamentary assembly was held in March in Armenia's capital of Yerevan just prior to the centennial of the genocide.

"Opening the EU energy union to eastern partners must be a part of the future of the EaP"

Without the parliamentary dimension provided by Euronest, the eastern partnership (EaP) would lack legitimacy, and the assembly proved that it can also touch on painful issues where national interests differ. Two resolutions of this nature were adopted - one on Russian aggression on Ukraine and the other on the Armenian genocide.

The debates among MEPs and colleagues from five partner countries focused on the ongoing review of European neighbourhood policy and the Riga summit of 21-22 May. When the eastern partnership was first established in 2009, Russia had expressed its discontent and wanted to be involved.

Few foresaw that the eastern neighbourhood would become an arena where Russia would seek to reclaim its influence and, through various means, prevent eastern partners from choosing integration with the EU. This Russian military aggression sets a frightening example for other eastern partners.

A very interesting study conducted by the parliament was published in Yerevan, with the title 'When choosing means losing: the eastern partners, the EU and the Eurasian economic union (EEU)'. This report analyses the complex trade relations of eastern partners between Russia and the EU.

The conclusion is that their losses in trade with Russia are not easily compensated by gains in their trade with the EU. Therefore, it could be suggested that some convergence between the EEU and EU would be vital to the eastern partners.

A leading thought on the future of EaP is to go for differentiated approaches between the EU and the partners. Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia are guided by association agreements (AAs) with the EU. Armenia had to withdraw from its AA at the last minute in 2013 and instead joined the Eurasian economic union, as has Belarus. The orientation of an Azerbaijan rich with oil and gas remains to be seen.

The countries with association agreements must implement 300-400 EU legal instruments. This should not be a simulation exercise, as monitoring will be particularly challenging. MEPs can guide their eastern colleagues using their legislative experience, as strong institutional support will be needed.

Despite its difficulties, the eastern partnership must maintain its attraction to all participating members. It should be remembered that a dependency on Russian energy is common to both sides.

Opening the EU energy union to eastern partners must be a part of the future of the EaP. Energy efficiency and renewables represent significant potential for the east.

Despite the present situation, all eastern partner countries will gain from reforms. Solid and accountable institutions and the rule of law are the best guarantees of sovereignty.

About the author

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