



Institute for Regional and International Studies

**TOWARDS
A EUROPEAN COMMONWEALTH OF
NATIONS**

***A STRATEGIC RESPONSE TO THE EU
“ENLARGEMENT FATIGUE”***

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**IRIS
2005**

TOWARDS A EUROPEAN COMMONWEALTH OF NATIONS

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There is a growing dilemma what should be done with the new neighborhood of the European Union – encompassing the territories of the post Soviet East and the South East of Europe – that is the Western Balkans.

Due to political, financial and institutional reasons it is impossible to contemplate a further enlargement of the EU in a mid-term perspective of the next ten to fifteen years (after the accession of Bulgaria, Romania and – most likely – Croatia). The results of the referenda in France and the Netherlands, the political discourse in Germany and the complicated institutional infrastructure after the accession of 10-12 new members of the EU now indicate that the European project might need a period of time to digest those changes and to redefine its identity and potentials.

At the same time, it is obvious that the European Union is the only institution capable of inciting reformist mobilization in the countries of the EU periphery along the lines of three intertwined goals:

- Democratization

- Modernization
- Development

On the one hand side the European Union is the model in pursuing these goals. On the other hand, the membership in the EU is the most powerful stimulus for the nations in transformation to pay the efforts, to bare the pain of reform in order to gain the status of affluence and prestige in the Club.

Translated into political talk this means that putting an official end – or at least break on the enlargement, the EU sharply reduces its potential to exert influence on its neighborhood. The only substantial resource of the EU to exert such influence is the process of negotiation for full-fledged membership. This is highly visible when even dipping into the relations between Brussels and non-member countries of CEE and SEE since the early 1990s. The interactions are superficial, bureaucratized, not really deep and substantial and without potential for exercising impact on the reform process, unless a clear horizon for membership is set up. Even the associated status does not provide enough conditions for making a real difference – as the extended Association and Stabilization Agreements with some Western Balkans nations demonstrate. In short, the association status makes deeper societal, economic and political changes dependent only on the domestic reform potential of the countries concerned, while the role of the EU remains largely consultative. The association process has just a short-term political effect and the only valuable component is mentioning – in the signed agreement – of the explicit opportunity for starting membership negotiations. The weakness of the EU to engage in effective interaction before membership negotiations is due to two reasons: first, there is the relative weakness of the CFSP, as applicable to influencing the reform process in transitional societies within the bilateral relations; second, there is an inherent structural shortage of the European Union for exerting influence with effective institutional instruments before the membership negotiation process begins. These are the two reasons why the Union fails to effectively influence societies in transition prior the moment of starting negotiations for membership.

Were the horizon of membership disappear, the political, financial and institutional mechanisms for exerting systemic pressure on the transitional societies would also vanish. In practice, the ability of Europe to influence the reform in such societies is exercised at two very different institutional levels. The first one is the Council of Europe, which is characterized by broad, consultative framework, with a certain influence only in monitoring of human and minority rights environment and the abolition of (or moratorium over) the death penalty. The second level is the EU membership negotiations.

However, the distance between the Council of Europe membership and EU membership negotiating process is vast. The absence of a mid-term perspective for European integration of the new neighborhood countries creates a vacuum in the relations between these countries and the Union. The filling-up of this vacuum is of primary political and strategic importance. The farther one goes to the East and the South, the more limited are the resources of these societies to manage on their own with the parallel challenges of democratization, modernization and development. The economic hardships, the sociological and political weakness of civil society, the fragility or absence of democratic traditions, the inherited weakness of the state, the chaotic status quo in the transitional institutions, the powerful mafia structures, promoting mass scale corruption and oligarchic control, the ethnic and inter-communal conflicts, the outside interventions, the threats of fundamentalist ideologies – all these factors prevent the fragile pro-Western, modernizing elites from implementing this three-faceted process just relying on their own potential.

It's more and more often that one could hear prominent politicians and opinion makers in the West stating that the problems of those countries in the East are not a responsibility of Europe. Such understanding, however, is a miscalculation – those are also problems for Europe - as far as the vacuum in the process of democratization, modernization and development will not remain static, but will be filled in by alternatives to the European model of democratic development. These alternatives are strategically visible as they have already adopted shape:

The **first** alternative is the authoritarian type of political development and state control over the society, which is in the process of synthesis in Russia. There are voices of growing popularity among the Russian elite, advocating Eurasian ideology of development, combining capitalist economy and controlled communal life within an authoritarian political framework of a paternalist neo-imperial state. If successful, such restoration of the “strong hand” would be readily applied also to the countries of the Russian “near abroad”, reversing their hesitant reformist impulses back into a state system of non-democratic and oligarchic rule under neo-imperial Kremlin supervision.

The **second** alternative is the initial, yet powerful influence, which China exerts upon Central Asia. The remarkable economic success of China in a framework of preserved authoritarian political and ideological control over society has a strong appeal to a number of autocrats in Central Asia and the Caspian region, leaving apart the simultaneous growth of Chinese geopolitical influence upon those regions.

The **third** alternative is radical Islam. This alternative is especially viable, given the crisis of post colonial nationalism in the Muslim world, as well as the cultural idiosyncrasies that prevent the adoption of Western style democracy in most Islamic societies. Islam – and mostly its radical versions - plays an expanding role in the Caucasus, on the Balkans and in Central Asia, challenging strongly the fragile attempts towards democratization.

If Europe – in cooperation with the United States – does not design and implement a strategy for a steadfast modern and democratic development in the new neighborhood of the European Union, it runs the risk of turning its borders into division lines of conflict with culturally and ideologically hostile political systems. From such a perspective the EU is bound either to support the reformist agenda of the societies in the new neighborhood, or to deal with the strategic implications of this agenda’s failure.

This problem is not central to the political discourse in Brussels today, because the dominant issue now is the internal debate and the dilemmas surrounding the internal development of the Union. However, the significance of the issue of the eastern and the southern periphery will soon rise dramatically, to be elevated to a major problem of the European agenda, if not addressed properly.

What can be done now?

There are a number of examples in the modern European history of creating communities on the principle of the least possible denominator of overlapping interests after the dissolution of a more intensive community (a more tightly integrated community that was bound by stronger interests). The demise of the British Empire brought about the establishment of the British Commonwealth. The dissolution of the French colonial empire led to the establishing a network of determined cultural, economic and military influences of Paris upon the former colonies, especially in Africa. This applies to a certain extent to the Belgian and the Portuguese colonial systems. After the break of the USSR, the Commonwealth of the Independent States was established as an attempt to preserve the economic – and partially – the political control, and the cultural and social influence of Moscow upon the former Soviet republics.

The European Union faces an analogical, yet opposite challenge. While the former colonial powers have sought to partially preserve their influence through commonwealth structures after the imperial break-up, the EU faces the opportunity to create a commonwealth framework as a first substantive and systemic step towards a potential future of stronger integrative bonds with the new neighborhood countries. Currently, there are powerful voices saying that the European Union should identify its final borders and stop the enlargement process. But in case these borders are stiff and rigid, the frontier will be a line of division and conflict, not partnership and cooperation. Now, the countries of the new neighborhood have three different options: the European path, the alternatives of Russia, China and the Radical Islam, or a buffer identity. The latter two options are open, but are not desirable – neither by the local reformers, nor from the perspective of the long term interest of Europe. Therefore, the EU should devise a policy of making the first option realistic and worth pursuing in a longer run.

For example, in Ukraine there are two competing visions for the future – a pro-Western one, which is more popular in the western part of the country and a pro-Russian one, which is popular in the eastern and north-eastern part due to historic reasons. A stalemate between those two options could lead to a Ukraine with a buffer status between Russia and the West. The EU could open opportunities to Ukraine to have a choice for a

European option, because the eastern option is the easy, “natural” one given the historical background of the country within the Russian Empire. The pro-Western option demands efforts, but Ukraine should be given the opportunity to undertake these efforts.

Georgia is a similar case. Russia’s policy of division and partitioning makes the pro-Western option the only possible one to achieving the Georgian territorial integrity and independence. Georgia as a “buffer zone” is destined to be a Georgia in a permanent inter-communal conflict.

Azerbaijan is the country that explicitly states its interest in maintaining a buffer position and identity. On the one hand, the Azeri nation is a community with a Shiite Muslim identity (more Azeri nationals live in Iran than in Azerbaijan itself), but on the other hand the influence of Russia is exceptionally strong. Azerbaijan is also keen in attracting European and American interests by virtue of balancing between Russia, Iran and the West. Azerbaijan does not aspire to membership neither in NATO nor the EU, but it does desire to cooperate with these organizations.

A third type is exemplified by Belarus and – in a very particular way – by Armenia, which desire to develop along the lines of a different orbit. Belarus is entrenched into a Russian-centric Eurasian project. Armenia is a different case, which is prompted by two pragmatic – strategic, not societal - reasons: the intention to keep the territories gained in the war with Azerbaijan and the necessity to withstand Turkey’s pressure through aligning with Moscow.

The European Union should provide the opportunity to the countries of the new neighborhood – which wish to do so – to join a certain format of a European Commonwealth. This is a weaker form of integration than that of full EU membership but much stronger than membership in the Council of Europe.

The European Commonwealth should include:

1. Shared values of social and political constitution, including:
 - Respect to human rights;
 - Guaranteeing of the autonomy of the citizen from the state;

- Free economic initiative;
- Respect to ethnic differences;
- Resolving inter-communal disputes by peaceful and democratic means.

The institutional forms of implementing those values and their incorporation by the society may differ in their efficiency because of intrinsic historic, cultural and other factors.

2. A growing number of elements of a common economic space:

- Customs union (or the closest possible option);
- Providing benefits in the form of relaxed import regime for country-specific products or services;
- Special regimes of privileged investment, particularly in infrastructure;
- Developing of national strategies for social and economic development, integrated with the EU experience, expertise, normative framework and common market;

3. Developing specific programs for partnership with national political elites and civic communities. Without demanding considerable financial costs, these programs should bring about significant changes in the processes of democratization, modernization and development;

- Cultural and educational exchange programs.
- Specific alleviation of visa regimes, which, while protecting EU interests would allow these countries to take part in the work of European social, educational, cultural and political institutions.
- Inclusion of new neighborhood countries in the process of creating foreign and security policies of the EU. Most of these countries have considerable internal

problems and problems with their neighbors. The principled and explicit support on behalf of the EU to their national security and good-neighborly relations would be of primary importance to them.

- A variety of political, cultural and financial forms of integration to the EU should be made available to these countries;

4. Common security system:

- Anti-terrorist infrastructure;
- Fighting organized crime;
- Inviolability of borders, peaceful resolution of conflicts;
- Military integration within NATO and the CFSP;
- All soft security issues and dimensions;

Developing a European Commonwealth throughout the new neighborhood regions could be made possible on the basis of sharing common identity of values and practices. There's no dispute that such a common identity in many of the cases may prove partial. The societies of the European neighborhood have a long history and tradition of incorporating different cultural and civilizations influences. That is the very idea of a commonwealth – a community of diverse traditions, sharing partial common identity of political, economic or/and societal values. Yet no one could deny neither the enormous influence of European modernity upon the new neighborhood societies, nor their contribution to the making of European civilization. It is hardly possible to include the Middle East, or East Asia into any kind of European Commonwealth. It's possible and desirable to do so with Ukraine, Georgia, Armenia, and in a particular framework – with Russia.

Although the idea of a European Commonwealth might initially look a bit amorphous and unclear in terms of time limits, borders, regulations, possibilities and responsibilities of integration, it has the potential in one major dimension: it can structure the relations between the EU and the new neighborhood countries on the basis of clear principles, mutually agreed opportunities and interests and guaranteed perspectives for developing bilateral and multilateral relations in a period of the next one-two decades. This is a time frame, in which the EU cannot offer an explicit membership horizon to many new neighborhood countries, yet Brussels cannot afford losing a necessary minimum of instruments to influence the agenda of societal transformation of its eastern neighbors.

The idea of a European Commonwealth creates institutional guarantees for the development and constant improvement of the relations between the European Union and its neighbors in a period, when the now existing mechanisms and instruments for exerting influence on the surrounding countries have depleted their potential.

The European Commonwealth idea is the least possible denominator between what the EU can provide and what its neighbors would like to get in a period, when the EU ability to support democracy and modernization through the instruments of direct integration is in crisis. The European Commonwealth should be developed as an aggregate of institutional guarantees for the existence and survival of this common denominator in the next ten to fifteen years, while new horizons of a mutual interests and perspectives of common development appear.

The establishing of European Commonwealth will prove vital for the EU interests because, while using minor resources, it will provide the development of these societies along the lines of the European civilization project.

The European Commonwealth membership should be subject to a set of preconditions. Being a member would bring benefits, and – therefore – entails responsibilities for the candidate members. Even if lower than the full membership requirements, the threshold for a Commonwealth entry should be substantive enough in order to make the membership worth aspiring of.

Last but not least, the founding of European Commonwealth will accumulate a powerful potential of developing and transforming the relationships between the EU and Moscow. Russia is a realm, encompassing complex identity and a variety of different alternatives of social and political development. The strategic vacuum in the post Soviet “near-abroad” feeds neo-imperial ambitions of a 19 century type “Great Powers’ game play” in and around Kremlin. Those ambitions jeopardize both the chances of Russia’s neighbors to democratic reforms and the chances for Russia to transform its nature from disintegrated empire to a prosperous member of the community of nations. The competition – and partnership between Russia and a European Commonwealth on the territories of the old Soviet and new European neighborhood will provide Russia with the positive incentives to adapt easily and favorably to its new environment.

A European Commonwealth could develop as an outer, but well structured circle of European integration, complementary to the inner circle of the EU. The Commonwealth could serve as a viable strategic tool to extending European economic, political, cultural and strategic influence in the regions of EU new neighborhood, which may prove crucial for the longer term sustainability of the entire European project. The Western Balkans and the Black Sea region represent (together with the Mediterranean) the most important border areas between the EU and the global world.

The European Commonwealth may include – apart from the new neighborhood nations – also the EU members, in this way developing as an infrastructure of a new international organization. It is an issue of political debate, how strong institutional building may the Commonwealth get, yet – at least in certain fields – the broader community, the Commonwealth may prove strategically more efficient rather than the inner circle of the EU itself. This applies particularly to some elements of the CFSP.

The least possible status of the European Commonwealth should imply a strong mechanism of multilateral consultation on vital issues of security and development, which constitute common interest among the countries involved. There are no other limits to intensifying cooperation within the Commonwealth, but the level of EU integration itself. This paper is aimed solely at presenting the idea of a European Commonwealth. A further debate could fill it with real substance and opportunities.

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