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**Article**

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CES Working Papers

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*Suggested Citation:* Petriashvili, Sophia (2016) : The Influence of the Refugee Crisis on the EU's Perspective of Eastern Partnership, CES Working Papers, ISSN 2067-7693, Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iasi, Centre for European Studies, Iasi, Vol. 8, Iss. 3, pp. 426-442

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/198471>

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## THE INFLUENCE OF THE REFUGEE CRISIS ON THE EU'S PERSPECTIVE OF EASTERN PARTNERSHIP

Sophia PETRIASHVILI\*

**Abstract:** *Given paper represents analytical overview unpacking the relationship between the refugee crisis and the EU's perspective towards the Eastern Partnership countries. It reviews the journey of the creation and development of the EaP policy by paying a special attention to the changes reflected in the Joint Declaration of the Riga Summit participants. The paper also analyses the revision in the EU's Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) as well as tries to explore the intra-Union dynamics happening as a result of the huge influx of the refugees to Europe. Special attention is also paid to Russia's possible influence on the refugee crisis (considering its engagement in the Syria crisis and Assad's backing) on the one hand and EU's position vis a vis the EaP countries on the other. A key trend is identified that within the current challenging context the EU is less proactive and more cautious when it comes to its partnership with the EaP countries.*

**Keywords:** Eastern Partnership; refugee crisis; European Neighbourhood Policy; Russia

### Introduction

Conflict and persecution in their own countries forced about 1 million people to leave their homes and flee to Europe. In the period of December 2014 and December 2015 21, 2015 972 500 had crossed the Mediterranean Sea and more than 34000 have crossed from Turkey to Bulgaria and Greece by land (UNHCR, 2015). Huge influx of hundreds of thousands of refugees to Europe has its own influence on intra-Union dynamics, impacting societal attitudes, political agenda as well as changing the foreign policy perspectives towards the EU's neighbourhood. As a quick finalization of the crisis is not expected and on the contrary the Europe expects some more inflows of the migrants trying to escape life threatening conditions in their homelands, it is of crucial importance to analyse how the refugee crisis has already influenced the EU and its neighbourhood and what the potential implications might also be.

We do acknowledge that not so much time have passed since the inflow of refugees into Europe to become able to do some in depth analysis of the refugee crisis' influence on the EU's perspective towards Eastern Partnership countries. However, we still believe that some initial overview of how the Union's position vis a vis its eastern neighbours and the refugee crisis correlate with each other (if at all) might be interesting, especially for the EaP countries fighting for their European future.

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As part of this paper we will try to answer a question: how the refugee crisis influenced the EU's perspectives towards the EaP members. Under the refugee crisis we will primarily mean the inflow of hundreds of thousands of refugees to Europe. The EU's perspectives towards the EaP countries will be unpacked in the following way. In the beginning we will try to analyse a journey of the EaP from its creation up until the Riga summit. We will continue our discourse with the exploration of the revisions of the European Neighbourhood Policy trying to find some correlations between identified policy shifts and the refugee crisis. Next we will analyse what steps the European Union took to address the refugee crisis by unpacking some legal and policy entrustments adopted in the period of May-December 2015. This will help us to see a bigger picture within which the EU's foreign policy perspectives, including the one towards its eastern neighbors, might be assessed. We will also focus on the examination of the intra-Union dynamics and Russia's role in the Syria crisis as influential factors on the EU foreign policy perspectives. In each of those cases our purpose will be to identify any changes in EU's approaches to the EaP countries or at least try to see some correlations in the EU perception shifts towards the EaP and the refugee crisis.

### **1. Eastern Partnership: A Journey from Creation to Riga Summit 2015**

Few years after the launch of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), which unified under its framework Eastern Europe and South Mediterranean, it became clear that a greater differentiation of the ENP was needed. Later, in 2008 a Polish-Swedish initiative of the Eastern Partnership was born and was officially inaugurated in May 2009 in Prague.

While it is not our primary purpose to provide in depth exploration of the content of the EaP, we believe that a brief overview of priority areas of this policy will still be helpful to understand the transformations that we will be further unpacking below.

As part of the Eastern Partnership multilateral framework following thematic platforms were created: a) democracy, good governance and stability, b) economic integration and convergence with EU sectoral policies, c) energy security, d) people to people contacts (Council of the European Union, 2009). In addition to the aforementioned, the EaP, more than any previous EU policy, paid a special attention to civil society in its member states by creating a platform in the form of the EaP Civil Society Forum, unifying representatives of the civil society, including local NGOs, think tanks, research institutions etc. from the EaP and EU member countries. One of the primary purposes of this forum was to advocate and promote European values thus making the EaP countries closer to the EU (Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum, 2009).

While the progress in above listed areas would truly be helpful for further development of the six EaP countries, a conception of the given policy went beyond its understanding as of a simple transformational tool. In 2008, when the Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council set out a proposal for a ‘more ambitious partnership,’ aiming at bringing a lasting political message of EU solidarity to Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine (Commission of the European Communities, 2008), a perception of the Eastern Partnership as a quasi-pre-accession policy was born (Tsantoulis, 2009, p.4). Eastern Partnership’s restrictive membership – excluding Turkey and Russia – was further interpreted by some as an attempt of the European Union to pave the way to the membership advancement for at least some of the EaP members (Tsantoulis, 2009). And yet, years later before and during the EaP Riga Summit of 2015, different European leaders underlined that the Eastern Partnership was not “an instrument of enlargement politics for the European Union (Russia Today, 2015).” European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker, when stressing that the membership issue would not be an issue of focus at the Riga Summit, also emphasized: “they are not ready, we are not ready” (Russia Today, 2015).

While the exploration of the readiness of either the EU or the EaP countries is not a key goal of our analysis, we still believe that it’s important to speculate around this issue a bit more, as it might help with answering a question, how the refugee crisis influenced the EaP.

We link the readiness to the in-country developments of the six EaP members, as we believe that the more they progress, the more their readiness for the EU integration increases. Accordingly, an overview of changes happening as a result of the EaP policy is important. When talking about success, scholars often underline that the EU has become the top trade partner for five out of six EaP signatory countries (except Belarus). Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine have signed deep and comprehensive free trade agreements (DCFTAs) that will gradually create enabling environment for barrier-free trade in goods and easier trade in services with the EU. Mobility has also increased as travel between the EU and most EaP countries has become easier (in case of Moldovans the application of the visa-free regime was extremely influential), which has had positive spill-over effects in areas like education, joint investment projects, tourism etc. (Kobzova, 2015, p. 2). Along with signing the Association Agreements (AA) including the DCFTA (in case of Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine) as well as the visa liberation (the latter in case of Moldova only), some scholars also refer to the membership in the Energy Community for Moldova (in 2010) and Ukraine (in 2011) as indicators of success (European Parliament, 2015, pp.20-21).

One of the fact sheets of 2015 published by the European Commission provides more details about the achievements of individual EaP states. Georgia’s increase of exports within the first 6

months of the DCFTA by 12%, increase of the EU imports from Moldova by 20%, almost half a million Moldovans travelling to the EU visa free are only few among those successes described by the document with a very ambitious title: *The Eastern Partnership – A Policy That Delivers* (European Commission, 2015a).

So, if the EaP does deliver and the signatory countries do progress, how do we interpret the Riga Summit statements of the European leaders that neither side is ready for the EU's expansion? Some might try to explain this by referring to the unequal development of the six EaP countries. Scholars talk about the clear division of the EaP members into two main groups: Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia unified as one more progressed group of nations and Armenia, Azerbaijan and Belarus as the second group (European Parliament, 2015, p.34). Some experts even refer to the EU's approach to the EaP countries as *zigzagging* depending on the mixed enthusiasm of respective states (Kobzova, 2015, p.1). Riga Summit Declaration further revealed the heterogeneity of the EaP states. We also acknowledge that the signatories of the AA, including the DCFTA do reveal a greater interest for further EU integration, while for Belarus and Azerbaijan the EaP seems to be just a way of dealing with the EU somehow balancing between Europe and Russia. Armenia's membership into the Eurasian Union further weakened its positions vis a vis the other progressing EaP countries. However, a question still remains whether such diversity and differences in the levels of development of the EaP countries are what might explain why the EU is not ready for its expansion? And what does this all have to do with the refugee crisis?

Aforementioned narrative clearly represents the transformations inside the EaP countries. It shows the route of the six states that started their joint journey in 2008 under the umbrella of the Eastern Partnership up to now. While the dynamics can be explained by changes and reforms that individual states have passed through (or not) since the development of the policy, those interpretations will only be one sided. We believe that what matters is not only the in-country developments, but also how the EU perceives them, which in turn strongly depends on the wider regional and even international context and its influence on the Union.

Even though we do not aim at theory testing as part of this analysis, still neorealist theoretical perspective underlining the influence of systemic changes on individual players and their foreign policies does provide a good foundation for the comprehensive interpretation of the EU's current approach to the EaP countries. We do acknowledge that some might consider the application of the neorealist perspectives to the analysis of actions and conceptions of the European Union towards its neighbours irrelevant, proposing neo-functionalism (Haas, 1970), intergovernmentalism (Mattli, 1999) and/or liberal institutionalism (Baldwin, 1993) as best explaining the EU dynamics. However,

certain influential EU member states have been demonstrating more and national interest driven behaviour in response to the mass migration and refugee influx (for more details please see respective section in this article below). Thus, we believe that it's relevant to apply the neorealist assumption according to which in order to explain what the actors will or currently do, then, in addition to paying attention to the features of those actors, we must also look to the constraints of the strategic setting in which the actors interact (Baldwin, 1994). 2015 marks not only the year when a Riga Summit took place. It was also a year when Europe faced an influx of around one million asylum seekers, which unsettled the Union as no other crisis before. We believe, that this can be perceived as a constraint of the setting that the EU member states consider while pursuing their policies and taking steps vis a vis their eastern neighbours and other partners. Accordingly, our analysis will focus on the exploration of the effect of the refugee influx on the European Union within the changed setting.

In the Riga Summit Declaration the European Union clearly revealed its more cautious approach to the promotion of the Eastern Partnership agenda by stating that 'the Summit participants reaffirm the sovereign right of each partner freely to choose the level of ambition and the goals to which it aspires in its relations with the European Union. It is for the EU and its sovereign partners to decide on how they want to proceed in their relations' (Council of the European Union, 2015). While it is hard to show the direct causal relationship between shifts in the EU's EaP positions and the refugee crisis, considering timing and the context we believe that there is a correlation between those two. We believe that the Union's leadership as well as the individual member states do understand that the active promotion of the EaP will require more than just supportive statements towards the six EaP countries. However, considering enormous resources needed for proper management of the refugee crisis, which won't stop in the nearest future per experts' forecasts, it would not be groundless to assume that the EU de-prioritized the promotion of the EaP agenda.

We have to admit that the Riga Summit was only one more affirmation of the shift in the EU priorities in regards to its eastern neighbours. Following the arrival of the new Juncker Commission, the position of European Commissioner for Enlargement and European Neighbourhood Policy was renamed into the European Commissioner for European Policy and Enlargement Negotiations. While for some it might be just an adjustment of the title of the Commissioner under the new Commission, others perceive it (and we believe, rightly so) as an evidence of the shifted EU priorities, leaving very little (if at all) hope for the eastern neighbours like Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine to further pursue their EU membership aspirations, at least in the nearest five year period. (Hug, 2015, p.8). So, if the EU officially reflected in its structure the shifted priorities, how this can be linked to the refugee crisis and migration in Europe?

As mentioned before, the in-country dynamics do also play a big role. Crisis in Ukraine and annexation of Crimea are clearly among those influential factors having an impact on the EU's position vis a vis the EaP. However, 2008 Russian military intervention into Georgia not only did not hinder the Eastern Partnership idea, but actually contributed to the acceleration of the process of the launch of the policy (European Parliament, 2015, p.7). We acknowledge the existence of differences between Ukraine and Georgia cases and yet, we believe that changed regional and international context due to refugee crisis pushed the EU to reprioritize its foreign policy perspectives (rebranding of the Commissioner's position somewhat coincides with the influx period). Nowadays, when the Union faces the rise of the populist anti-EU parties in many member states reflecting in reassertion of national identities at the expense of the EU integration support, which has been, at least partially, a reaction to the massive influx of the refugees, the Union has not enough resources nor will to actively push the EaP countries towards their greater integration to the EU.

## **2. European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) – Shifts in EU's Foreign Policy Perspectives**

While the 2015 Riga Summit was one of the good examples of the EU's position shifts, for a more comprehensive picture we also need to analyse the Union's review of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP). As the European Neighbourhood Policy provides the overall strategic vision of the Union towards its eastern and Mediterranean neighbours, we believe, it will be helpful to unpack the revised document, which will further complement our understanding how the EU, at the time of the refugee crisis, approaches the countries in its east, including the six EaP states. What we need to remember during the analysis of the revised ENP is the timing, as the review also took place in 2015 – a year when the Union faced the inflow of around one million refugees.

In the beginning we would like to provide a brief overview of the European Neighbourhood Policy before its revision. We believe, this will help to better represent the changes and adjusted focus in the ENP II discussed below. Created in response to the largest single EU enlargement of 2004, the European Neighbourhood Policy a formal representation of the organizational vision towards its new neighbours. The document underlined the EU's commitment to do everything to avoid drawing the new dividing lines in Europe. It also stressed the importance of promoting stability and prosperity within and beyond the new borders of the EU (Commission of the European Communities, 2003, p. 4). Poverty reduction as well as the creation of the area of shared prosperity and values founded on greater economic integration, stronger and more intense cultural and political interaction, enhanced cross-border cooperation and shared responsibility for conflict prevention between the official

Brussels and its neighbourhood were indicated as priorities (Commission of the European Communities, 2003, p.9). Positive results of the EU enlargement were supposed to be spread among the organizations' member states as well that way reducing the prosperity gap (Commission of the European Communities, 2003, p. 9).

Unlike the previous ENP document, the revised one stresses the stabilization of the neighbourhood as the primary goal of the policy for the next few years (European Commission, 2015b, p.1). It does not mean that other objectives related to democratic reforms, human rights, open markets or good governance were disregarded, but their achievement would never be possible without the stable and secure environment in the EU's neighbourhood (European Commission, 2015b, p. 1).

Not only the stabilization of the neighbourhood becomes the primary objective of the Union as reflected in the revised ENP, it is also directly linked to the recent refugee crisis which is considered as central to the stabilization in the neighbourhood (European Commission, 2015b, p.15). "Therefore, the EU needs a more integrated and more comprehensive response promoting close linkages between short-term humanitarian needs and longer-term development and security responses (European Commission, 2015b, p. 17)."

All the aforementioned clearly shows us that the European Union in its revised neighbourhood policy puts the overriding priority on ensuring stability and security in the neighbourhood – a need (at least partially) taking its roots from the refugee crisis. But how does it help us with analysing the influence of the refugee crisis on the EU's EaP perspectives? Here again we would like to stress that due to objective reasons (some of which are directly related to the fact that not enough time since the refugee influx has passed to see the full scale influence of the refugee crisis) it is hard (if not impossible) to show the causal relationship between refugee crisis and shifts in the EU's attitudes towards the EaP countries. However, we believe that we can identify some trends that correlate. In this regards tailor-made relationships and vague promises to Associate Agreement countries attract our attention.

On the one hand the EU does recognize that not all partners aspire to rules and standards of the Union and accordingly the Union should take this into consideration and develop a more differentiated approach reflecting different ambitions, interests and abilities of its partners and neighbours (European Commission, 2015b, p. 4). We believe those statements can be directly linked to three out of six EaP countries (Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine) and EU's changing attitude towards them. The Union will no longer treat Armenia, Azerbaijan and Belarus the same way as Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova even though these six are still the EaP countries. Due to the changing environment and hundreds of thousands of refugees expecting support from Brussels, the Union no



longer has time nor resources to push those states towards transformation and alignment with the EU high standards who are not pioneers. Furthermore, the budget of the new ENP for the period of 2014-2020 is almost the same as the previous round budget consisting of 16 million USD to be allocated for 16 neighbourhood countries for a seven year period (European Union External Action, 2014), while the context of the neighbourhood has changed seriously. Accordingly, when the EU facing a harsh need of taking care of soft and hard security issues within and outside its borders as well as preventing (wherever possible) or following up with the refugee crisis, no time is left for the back runners. It has to and did change its approach to such countries including three EaP states.

However, the EU's changed position towards the EaP countries as a result of the refugee crisis did not apply only to the back runners. The revised ENP does not provide the Association Agreement countries like Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova with much hope related to their EU integration either. The document only talks about the chances of economic integration with the EU market in case of the successful implementation of the DCFTA (European Commission, 2015b). We believe that this shows how much the Union is concerned with the changed security challenges and the urgent need of following up with the refugee crisis.

### **3. EU's Response to the Refugee Crisis: Institutional, Policy and Legal Aspects**

2015 turned out to be a very challenging year for the European Union. It was some sort of a test of the EU institutions and their ability to efficiently respond to the refugee crisis. Hundreds of thousands of people in difficult conditions, trying to escape dangers in their homelands, reaching the EU borders in search for shelter and support, accompanied by the huge media attention and public outcry, raised lots of concerns and questions related to the desire and/or ability of the European institutions as well as the EU member states to address the refugee needs, provide them with needed support in the most efficient manner without violating human rights or other laws. In this chapter of the given paper we will try to analyse what mechanisms the official Brussels applied in response to the refugee crisis and what implications they might or did have on the EU's perspectives towards its eastern neighbours.

In his opening statement in the European Parliament Plenary Session of July 15, 2014, President Juncker indicated that the EU had a responsibility to address daily concerns of their fellow citizens related to illegal as well as legal migration. For that the organization needed a common asylum policy and that there was much to learn in this area from countries like the United States of America, Canada and Australia. Border protection was also indicated as one of the key priorities. "Illegal migration and

the refugee crisis are not the problems of Malta, Cyprus, Italy or Greece, they are the problems of Europe as a whole,” \_ said Juncker (Juncker, 2014, p. 21). Aforementioned clearly outlines the EU’s prioritization of migration, asylum and border policies. Emphasis on the need of a new migration agenda reveals lots of aspects of the EU context. On the one hand it does refer to a lack and/or inefficiency of mechanisms which would better enable the Union to address the refugee crisis. On the other hand it has also become clear that the EU de-prioritized some other areas as the development and follow up with a new migration agenda in itself would be very resource consuming. Even though the latter is not directly concluded in Juncker’s suggested political guidelines, we believe there is much evidence to reach such assumption. Re-prioritization of the EU’s foreign policy directions is well reflected in President Juncker’s Political Guidelines for the next European Commission, where it is stated that

the Union needs to take a break from enlargement so that consolidate what has been achieved among the 28. This is why ... ongoing negotiations will continue, and notably Western Balkans will need to keep a European perspective, but no further enlargement will take place over the next five years. With countries in our eastern neighbourhood such as Moldova or Ukraine, we need to step up close cooperation, association and partnership to further strengthen our economic and political ties (Juncker, 2014, p. 12).

So, how we can interpret this statement and what it has to do with the refugee crisis? We believe, that President Juncker made it very clear in his guidelines that the Union is too busy with some other urgent and important tasks to re-allocate its energy and other resources on additional responsibilities. While some hope was given to countries from Western Balkans, perspectives for the countries from its eastern neighbourhood were limited to economic and political partnership (whatever it might mean). What is extremely interesting is that when talking about the EU’s eastern neighbours only two countries – Moldova and Ukraine – were mentioned, not even Georgia was named. We believe, this once again represents how the EU perceives its eastern neighbourhood – no common attitude towards the group of countries situated on the EU’s east, something that was also addressed in the narrative above.

Under such increasingly pressing political context the European Union adopted several legal and political instruments to address the refugee crisis and related needs. One of the first mechanisms was a very controversial idea of establishment of a Temporary EU Relocation System for the redistribution of asylum seekers among different members of the European Union (Guild and Carrera,

2015). Given initiative derogated from the EU Dublin system which set a requirement of the first entry EU member state to be responsible for reviewing the asylum application. According to the new temporary system a model of the so called 'distribution key' was proposed setting criteria like GDP, number of population, unemployment rate etc. based on which it was decided to re-allocate the number of asylum seekers among the EU member states other than the first entry (Carrera *et al.*, 2015, p. 5). Per various official agreements around 160 000 persons in real need of international support were agreed to be relocated from Greece and Italy as well as 22 000 people were decided to be resettled from outside Europe (Carrera *et al.*, 2015, pp. 5-6). The idea of finding solutions to the existing crisis on the basis of shared responsibility with the application of more consolidated approach is truly a good one. So, what could cause controversies concerning the relocation plan?

The EU temporary relocation system was a truly welcomed shift from the so called Dublin system which was perceived as ineffective and malfunctioned. The member states of the Union were recalled to make changes to ensure that the responsibility of addressing the refugee crisis was shared in an equitable manner by all the members of the EU (Carrera *et al.*, 2015). And yet, even this welcomed approach raised lots of questions and concerns. Unfortunately, despite a high sense of urgency, in the first months after the announcement about the relocation plan for resettling the refugees, only 87 people were removed. At that pace it would take the European Union more than 750 years to resettle all the 160 000 asylum seekers (New York Times, 2015). Slow implementation of agreed plans might only be a symptom revealing deeper root causes hindering a more efficient follow up with the refugee needs. Whether these are technical and/or administrative problems (e.g. transportation) or a lack of political will to speed up those processes in the time of crisis, it is clear anyway that the Union and its member states will need to once again think about how to follow up with the shortcomings of the relocation plan which will further take their attention away from other less urgent foreign policy aspects, including the relationships with its eastern neighbours.

Other measures taken by the EU in response to the refugee crisis include the creation of hotspots in relatively problematic areas such as in Italy and Greece, aiming at the setting up the joint operational headquarters called the European Union Regional Task Force (EURTF). The approach included the deployment of experts by Frontex, Europol and EASO in order to screen the third country nationals and provide help to applicants requesting international protection and the preparation and removal of irregular immigrants (Carrera *et al.*, 2015, p. 7).

The Union also adopted a special Regulation according to which a list of the so called safe third countries, in particular the potential EU candidates from the Western Balkans, was developed. According to this Regulation, nationals from those states are not a priori deemed as refugees (Carrera

*et al.*, 2015, p. 7). In order to better control irregular migration, trafficking and smuggling the European Union also adopted the Action Plan against Migrants' Smuggling, Action Plan on Return as well as the Common Return Handbook (Carrera *et al.*, 2015, p. 9). Refugee Crisis and challenges that the European Union faced while trying to follow up with the influx of asylum seekers led the Commission to the development of a special Communication and a package of legislative measures according to which a new European Border and Coast Guard Agency was created (Carrera *et al.*, 2015, p.10-11). A body of the Union with a semi-military nature will be responsible for facilitating the development and implementation of the border management standards that are common for all the EU members. It will also be supporting the frontline EU members who struggle to effectively cope with the problems related to the border control and migration (Carrera *et al.*, 2015, pp. 10-11). Creation of the Agency would also have some financial implications in the amount of minimum 31.5 million to be added to the budget of the Agency in 2017 (Carrera *et al.*, 2015, p. 11).

The refugee crisis had some additional financial implications on the Union and its member states. The EU Regional Trust Fund in Response to the Syrian Crisis (the Madad Fund) with about 500 million Euros as well as the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa with 1.8 billion were created to not only accommodate hundreds of thousands of asylum seekers but also to address the root causes of the crisis (Carrera *et al.*, 2015, p. 10).

We believe that the aforementioned steps taken by the EU do clearly demonstrate what the Union's priorities are and how committed it is going to be in the new several years to the refugee crisis management and some other related tasks. While several priorities are possible to exist, we believe that the crisis in Syria and Africa did and will continue to shift the EU's attention from its eastern neighbourhood. Firstly, it will be too busy with following up with all those regulations and other legislative measures that it established in 2015 in response to the refugee crisis. Secondly some steps and regulations themselves do imply the priority shift. For example the 300 million out of 500 million under the Madad Fund was re-allocated from the European Neighbourhood Instrument (Carrera *et al.*, 2015, p. 10) to be used for the management of the Syrian Crisis. For sure, the ENI does cover both southern and eastern neighbours of the Union, however, we believe, there is enough evidence to assume that such reallocation of a big amount of money does also demonstrate a priority shift.

Another interesting aspect of the EU proposed migration agenda is that it is mainly driven by home affairs and the interests of the Union and its member states. This particular aspect was even noted by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe underlining that the organization revealed a tendency of taking efforts to keep refugees 'out or at the periphery of the European

Union'' (Parliamentary Assembly, 2015, p. 3). For sure, it is important and necessary to take care of the security and national and organizational interests of the EU and its member states. However, when this is done in a way that the EU members are reluctant to take a responsibility for the protection of the refugees or to share a burden of their resettlement (Parliamentary Assembly, 2015, p. 3), lots of questions and concerns rise about effectiveness and the ability of the EU to follow up with the refugee crisis and the real priorities of its member states. But how those dynamics inside the EU might be influencing the organization's relations with its eastern neighbours? Here again, we believe that the aforementioned context provides us with a good foundation to assume that the EU will be too busy with filling the gaps and identifying better ways to address the Syria crisis and the crisis in Africa. This will require serious commitment and resources which might further shift the view of the official Brussels from its eastern neighbours. In addition, the Union, nationalist senses have been growing complementing the not so welcoming attitudes towards the asylum seekers, might not feel ready to discuss the full integration of its eastern members into the EU – an expectation that three out of six EaP countries have been cherishing for some time.

#### **4. Intra-Union Dynamics and the Factor of Russia**

One last aspect that we would like to explore as part of the analysis of influence of the refugee crisis on the EU's EaP perspectives is to have a quick look at the intra-Union dynamics happening as a result of the refugee influx as well as speculating on the role of Russia in this changing context.

While the EU is used to diffusing problems of political nature with technocratic discussions, this did not work in case of the refugee crisis as the issue is too sensitive and directly linked to the EU's citizens. Most of the decision-makers approached the issue from the perspective of domestic politics; accordingly it became hard to lead a discussion on the refugee crisis in the format of the genuine transnational discourse (Lehne, 2016). Furthermore, a great influx of refugees revealed not only different societal attitudes (with central European countries showing less enthusiasm and moral responsibility to host refugees) but also showed a tendency of increasing polarization of the EU's political landscape between two major groups: populists and mainstream parties. Those changes are extremely important as the EU's traditional politics are based on the mainstream centre-right and centre-left parties and the shift from this tendency will put under the big question mark the EU's ability to in solidarity as a single player (Lehne, 2016).

The way how those challenges are reflected in the behaviour of the EU member states is well represented in effectiveness with which they have been implementing the EU standards and

requirements related to the asylum seekers. For example, in 2015 40 infringements decisions against several the EU member states were started for failing to meet the EU asylum legislative requirements (Carrera *et al.*, 2015, p. 14). Different civil society organizations as well as the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights recalled upon the EU member states to ensure that the asylum seekers are treated with respect and dignity and that they are provided with adequate conditions (Carrera *et al.*, 2015, p. 15). Special concerns were caused by the behaviour of some countries like the Czech Republic (e.g. subjecting the refugees to detention for 40 days or even longer) and Hungary (building of walls in the border zones between Hungary and Croatia and Slovenia and a new Hungarian asylum law) and in December 2015 the Commission even opened infringement against Hungary (Carrera *et al.*, 2015, pp. 15-16). The focus in the G20 speech of the president Juncker that there is a need to delink terrorism and the refugee debate in Europe (European Commission, 2015c) further refers to some troublesome intra-EU dynamics.

Changes in the political establishment of the European Union have already been reflected in more individual, even national approaches of its member states towards the refugee crisis. Some of the EU members have somehow prioritized interests of their own nations over the EU institutional positions. It signalled to the plethora of the EU's weaknesses. The current mode of the Union does not allow it to play a crucial role of the transformer and democratic reforms promoter in the neighbourhood as it is already overwhelmed with intra-Union challenges. This well aligns with the shifts unpacked in our earlier discussion on the Riga Summit and the revised ENP. While the EU stays committed to the core European values, when it comes to their active promotion in its neighbourhood, due to internal impediments and short falls the Union is less proactive and more cautious.

In the period of such challenges faced by the European Union it becomes even more important to further explore the role of Russia. The way we perceive the Kremlin's stance in the given context is more like a compounding factor which might individually influence both the refugee crisis as well as the EU's perspective towards the Eastern Partnership countries.

Considering Russia's engagement in the Syria crisis and its support to Assad's regime via providing military equipment and other means (Lister, 2015) it becomes clear that Russia has enough power to (at least indirectly) influence dynamics of the refugee crisis as well. The EU, which has been troubled by the influx of migrants from the conflicting areas, will think twice before making any serious steps that would directly contradict Russia's interests. When it comes to the changing EU perspective towards the EaP countries, we definitely do not claim that the differentiated approach and identification of two groups within its eastern neighbours is the direct result of the Russian influence

on either the EU or the refugee crisis. We also acknowledge the EU's position in supporting territorial integrity of both Georgia and Ukraine as also underlined in the Joint Declaration of the Riga Summit participants (Council of the European Union, 2015, p.2). However, we still believe that within the current context the EU would play far more cautious game, which would imply non-consideration of Ukraine's EU membership in the near future, perceiving Armenia's membership of the Eurasian Union as a sovereign country's right to decide its future (even if it was meant to get closer to the Union under the EaP umbrella) and focusing mainly on economic and market integration of those countries which will successfully implement the DCFTA. Within such a quickly changing context inside or outside the Union the official Brussels might be less inclined to take some steps which might possibly upset the Russian bear, considering that not so long ago the launch of a new game without rules was already officially announced by Putin (Meeting of the Valdai International Discussion Club, 2014).

## **Conclusions**

Given paper was an attempt to briefly overview the influence of the refugee crisis on the EU's perspective towards the Eastern Partnership countries. While we acknowledged that not enough time has passed yet to be able to see the in depth interrelationship between those two factors, identification of trends is still possible. Accordingly, we tried to provide some analysis of how the refugee crisis in Europe and changes in the EU's perspectives towards the EaP states have been correlating so far.

Overview of the journey of the creation of the Eastern Partnership policy up until the last year's Riga Summit as well as the review of the EU's Neighbourhood Policy have revealed very clearly a shift in the official position of Brussels: due to scarcity of resources and a hard reality of addressing needs of hundreds of thousands of refugees, the EU neither wants nor is able to actively push its eastern neighbours towards more dynamic and consistent democratic reforms which might make those states closer to the EU standards. This time Brussels chooses to play a more cautious and less proactive role. That's why it has distinguished two groups among six EaP countries (front runners like the AA signatories and other three countries whose development is relatively slow or diverted) and decided to proceed further with the application of the tailor-made approach.

Intra-Union analysis also showed us that as a result of the huge influx of refugees, the EU faced a tendency of polarization of the traditional political agenda between populists and mainstream parties (centre-right and centre left which has always been the core of the EU's politics). Many EU member states prioritize their nation's interests over the Union's position vis a vis refugees. In certain cases,

even negative societal attitudes towards migrants have been traced. This in turn further paved the way towards more cautious and less active approach of the Union to promote democratic reforms in its eastern neighbours. Russia's increasing role in the neighbourhood (but not only) and its engagement in the Syria crisis made the Kremlin a special power openly going against whom would not be welcomed by many EU members.

Accordingly, within the current context the EU might still prefer not to go beyond economic integration, keeping a more reserved position in the area of active promotion of transformational processes in its eastern neighbours, while acknowledging and appreciating achievements of the EaP countries, especially the ones with the AA. Continued crisis in Syria and Africa with a little or no hope that those conflicts might be over in the nearest future, reluctance of some other outside players to take a leading role in the conflict management or limiting their actions to certain type of interventions only might further justify the EU's less active mode vis a vis its eastern neighbours. Following up with the shortcoming identified in the EU's migration agenda will further require additional recourses, time and commitment leading to the shift of Brussels' attention from six EaP countries. Due to all the aforementioned Union might stick to the tendency to de-prioritize some of its previous neighbourhood perspectives (without completely neglecting them) to be able to duly follow up with Syria and Africa crisis, intra-Union challenges and a new migration.

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