A Changing Eastern Neighbourhood
Launch of the European View June 2014 issue

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In order to launch its latest publication, the Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies organised a panel debate with Jadwiga Rogoż, Senior Fellow at the Centre for Eastern Studies in Warsaw, Giselle Bosse, Assistant Professor at the University of Maastricht, and Ambassador Salome Samadashvili, former Head of the Mission of Georgia to the EU and Visiting Fellow at the Martens Centre. The speakers had also contributed an article to this issue of the European View.

Roland Freudenstein, Head of Research at the Martens Centre, moderated the panel; Tomi Huhtanen, Director of the Martens Centre, made opening remarks, stating that although Russia is always an important part of the debate, the challenges in the eastern neighbourhood are not only about Ukraine and Russia.

Ingrid Habets, Research Officer at the Martens Centre and Assistant Editor-in-Chief of the European View, presented the June issue ‘A Changing Eastern Neighbourhood’, concluding that with Russia being a disturbing factor in the region, the EU should mobilise its economic and political resources in order to bring about much-needed change, whereby democratisation plays a key role.
Jadwiga Rogoža discussed Russia’s conservative project, stating that if the country was culturally European, the Europeanness of its current political makeup was questionable. She underlined that the recent ideology of the Kremlin was opposed to the values the EU is based upon. Russian President Vladimir Putin has resorted to an old, authoritarian vision and needed an ideological basis to strengthen it. This ideology rests on Russia being the anchor for strong morals and traditional values, as opposed to the ‘Western’ liberal societies, which emphasise tolerance and yield to the vanishing of faith and tradition. This conservative, even reactionary, ideology aims at undermining the Western model of development and promoting the Russian one, which consists of a top-down management of society, a strong and unquestioned leader and ‘stability’. This ideology was at first essentially defensive, but today it has become much more offensive, both domestically and internationally.

Salome Samadashvili stated that the neighbourhood of Europe and Russia had become a battleground. She added that the EU should recognise that it is facing an unprecedented geostrategic challenge and highlighted that it had exposed how unprepared the EU is in the face of Russia’s new ideology and strategy. She stressed that Russia’s main aim is to destabilise the EaP countries and ultimately generate their collapse.

Taking all six EaP countries, both Russia and the EU/NATO are trying to attract them. However, EU integration would have a very dire price in the short term, while NATO offers the enhanced cooperation on defence, rather than membership. She added that the Eastern Partnership Initiative would fail if the sovereignty of the EaP countries was not secured, emphasising that, for instance, Georgia needs to be part of a larger security organisation to guarantee its sovereignty. As Armenia and Belarus have chosen their side, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine are the decisive EaP countries, and a retreat of the West would cause a dramatic drawback of Western values in those countries.

Samadashvili’s advice to the West by and large would be to abandon wishful thinking and deal with reality. However, Moscow remains too weak to fight a full-scale war against NATO. The Western strategy should be deterrence, making it too costly for Russia to pursue its policy, as well as support for Ukraine and Georgia. She also mentioned that the polls in Russia showed the effects of propaganda on the citizens.
Giselle Bosse discussed the effectiveness and setbacks of EU democracy promotion in the EaP countries. She pointed out that there had been no significant progress in the field of democratisation in the EaP countries. The democratisation process is connected to the number of linkages that the EU has with the EaP countries; Moldova has the highest linkage level and is also the most democratic of those countries, whereas Belarus scores the poorest on both standards. Unfortunately, the EU’s democracy support is not visible in statistics.

Regarding the benchmark system (direct budget support, visa liberalisation), implementation in countries such as Moldova or Ukraine is a problem, and the EU should become more realistic about this as well as about the democratisation process; mentalities cannot be changed overnight, the EU must promote but not impose. The EU should undoubtedly carry on promoting democracy, but it should also at the same time take the way Russia feels about this process into consideration. Moreover, she said that the West was not willing to follow a risky strategy of attracting Georgia which would further anger Russia.

Ambassador Samadashvili took the floor to voice a different view, emphasising that giving priority to Russian concerns would not lead to a successful conclusion. She stressed that the threat came precisely from the West showing weakness, since Russia is already waging war; though the war of today has nothing to do with the 20th century wars. Rogoża agreed with Samadashvili, adding that the West was in full knowledge that Ukraine would be the price to pay for de-escalation.

There were a great number of questions from the floor. They dealt with topics such as the strategic aim of the EU in its neighbourhood, the issue of Nagorno-Karabakh, democracy promotion at local authorities’ level, the relevance of the Eastern Partnership and the short-term political future of Russia.