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THE NORTHERN DIMENSION
POLICY: CURRENT STATE
AND DEVELOPMENT
PROSPECTS

This article examines the evolution and current state of the Northern Dimension policy and its role in Russia-EU relations. The authors analyse the discrepancy between the actual achievements of the Northern Dimension and its potential and the over-high expectations, which accompanied the policy renewal.

Key words: Northern Dimension, EU-Russia relations, Northern Europe, cross-border and interregional cooperation.



The priority of European aspect of Russian foreign policy, including that in the field of economy, is obvious. The nature of relations between our country and united Europe calls for special attention to all European cooperation initiatives — both to undoubtedly successful and controversial ones.

The Northern Dimension (ND) initiative dates back to 1997, when the prime minister of Finland P. Lipponen gave his famous speech [20, p. 25—132] in Rovaniemi and wrote to the chairman of the European Commission. He emphasised that, after the enlargement of 1995, the EU acquired a natural Northern Dimension and there was a need to develop a strategy that would outline the economic and social challenges and threats to the EU soft security and offer a list of actions aimed to use the ample opportunities of the region.

In June 2000, the European Council approved the *Action Plan for the Northern Dimension in the external and cross-border policies of the European Union for 2000—2003* [11]. As a result, in October 2003, the second action plan for Northern Dimension was approved [25].

The objective of the Northern Dimension was the development of cross-border cooperation between the EU and the neighbouring countries as well as regions of Northern Europe — first of all, the Baltic States and North-west Russia. The major aspects of the programme were environmental protection and nuclear safety, the improvement of energy and transport infrastructure, healthcare, cooperation in the field of energy, etc.

The most remarkable achievement of the Northern Dimension is the performance of the Northern Dimension Environmental Partnership (it implements projects worth a total of 2.4 bn EUR [5]) and the Northern Dimension Partnership in Public Health and Social Well-being. At the same time, one can hardly compare the results of the two partnerships. The Environmental Partnership (NDEP) attracts more attention and funds. Although, the overwhelming majority of NDEP project financing comes from raised funds, its performance can be evaluated as successful. The largest project implemented under the auspices of the NDEP is the construction of the Southwest Wastewater Treatment Plant in Saint Petersburg.

Academic and expert community welcomed the ND initiative. The Northern Dimension was expected to facilitate a radical change in the relations between the EU and neighbouring countries so that Northern Europe would become an example of cooperation based on the logic of transnationalism and the concept of Europe of regions.

According to P. Joenniemi, Ch. Browning, and S. Medvedev, the inclusive nature of the ND corresponds to the Europe of Olympic rings concept, which gives prominence to regionness as the key principle of the European political space and makes the decision making process dispersed and brings it closer to the people [19, p. 129—131].

The states participating in the Northern Dimension programme were given a significant role, at the same time the ND paved a path for non-governmental actors.

The ND initiative, which contributed to the development of regional network structures, decentralised governance models, "fuzzy" borders, and overlapping political spaces [15, p 67], was recognised as innovative.

In accordance to the postmodern interpretations of international relations, Northern Europe became a unique site of an experiment with new forms of governance that go beyond the jurisdiction of a sovereign state, while the Northern Dimension was an attempt to take the advantage of the opportunities of multivariate development characteristic of the post-cold war period [13, p. 26]. The Northern Dimension supported the idea of the regionalised neo-medieval Europe, which was perceived as a challenge to the centralistic attitude [14, p. 8]. Such openness and inclusive nature should facilitate the joint pursuit of common goals. Overcoming the borders and differences between "insiders" and "outsiders" helps reach a new cooperation level.

The Northern Dimension, according to analysts advocating the policy, could become the concept of the future development of Northern Europe as an ideal model region. Indeed, the idea of "northernness" pertaining to the ND has a significant consolidating and developing potential. Moreover, the idea of "northernness" is important for Europe as a whole. The Northern Dimension lets the EU and other actors look at themselves from another perspective exempting them from the limitations imposed by the East-West division. A peculiar value of the northern dimension is that it serves as a forum, a meeting point, which is associated with neither East, nor West [18].

According to S. Medvedev, the North can become an alternative solution for Europe in general, since it is unique from several points of view. Firstly, it differs from other territories stretched along the "great cultural divide" by its general peripheral nature in relation to both East and West. Secondly, the North is less affected by the influence of vertical discourses and subordination structures. Finally, an important asset of the North is the interaction between the West and the East, since it holds the EU-Russia border with its complex network of "horizontal" border dependences and a significant potential for the development of regionalism. The North becomes one of so-

called "mesoregions", i.e. not communities brought together by geography, but rather ideas, symbols, concepts or strategic instruments aimed at the mobilisation of resources in order to solve common problems [21, pp. 98—99].

Of course, one should mention that, when analysing the ND, scholars has described the desired rather than the actual state of affairs. The practical activity in the framework of the Northern Dimension produced less impressive results. The principal downsides of the programme are as follows:

Firstly, no permanent administrative bodies were established. Secondly, the EU did not allocate any special funds; an exception is the NDEP foundation created by contributions of donating states.

It is being frequently mentioned that the action plans were apparently oriented towards the exploitation of resources of North-West Russia [1].

It is beyond doubt that the central problem was the process of decision making within the programme. So, the Russian party emphasised that its proposals were not taken into account and that, during the preparation of the first Action plan, a list of projects, which had earlier been approved of by the parties, had been excluded from the document [10]. According to the head of the Department of Pan-European Cooperation of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs D. Polyansky, at the adoption of the second Action Plan, the proposal of the Russian party was met with the following words: "You can express any position, but the Northern Dimension is the northern aspect of the foreign policy of the EU and it is the EU alone that makes decisions regarding this policy" [3, p. 300]. Russia took into account this position, which could not but affect Russian attitude towards this initiative. As a result, Russian reaction did not go unnoticed, and in 2005, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Finland addressed Russian colleagues with a proposal to revitalise the ND. This time, the Russian party immediately pressed a demand that the Northern Dimension become a project equally supervised by the EU, Russia, Norway, and Iceland. After a number of consultations, the Framework Document and the Political Declaration on the Northern Dimension Policy were approved in November 2006; their central provisions are as follows:

The most important novelty is the documented equality of Russia, the EU, Norway, and Iceland. As the Framework Document stipulates, "the Northern Dimension policy is henceforward a common project and a common responsibility", rather than an EU programme, as it was the case before. The document also emphasises the "principle of co-financing from the Northern Dimension partners". The importance of this clause can hardly be overestimated, since true equality can hardly be achieved, when all initiatives are financed by only one partner.

An important achievement of the renewed ND policy is the establishment of the Steering group, which contributes to the coordination, better management and performance of the Northern Dimension.

Moreover, the ND occupied a certain place in the system of Russia-EU relations. In particular the Framework Document stipulated that the Northern Dimension will be a regional expression of the common EU-Russia spaces.

The Russian Federation and the European Union will consider the Northern Dimension policy as a cross-cutting topic and a tool where appropriate for the implementation of the road maps for the Common Spaces [6]. The document also stresses that the Northern Dimension is focused predominantly on the North-West of Russia [6].

Thus, the Northern Dimension underwent significant changes. Russian attitude to the policy changed as well. Cooperation within the ND became the sphere in Russia-EU relations, which satisfies Russia the most.

As a proof of its devotion to the Northern Dimension, Russia held the first meeting of the senior officials of the renewed Northern Dimension in Saint Petersburg in November 2007, as well as the first ministerial meeting in October 2008. In May 2008, Saint Petersburg hosted the first Northern Dimension international forum.

The tone of statements made by Russian officials regarding the ND has radically changed. According to the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation S. Lavrov, "the conversion of the Northern Dimension from an EU policy to a common policy of Russia, the EU, Iceland, and Norway has proved its worthiness and let this format gain more strength and expand its scope. We are convinced that the potential of the Northern Dimension is so great, that it can embrace almost all spheres of cooperation in this large region" [7].

Another proof of the revitalisation and development of the northern Dimension policy, as well as a manifestation of the positive evaluation of the performance of partners and evidence of devotion to this format of cooperation is the development of new partnerships.

So, at the first ministerial meeting of the renewed ND, which took place in October 2008, a decision was made to establish the Northern Dimension Partnership on Transportation and Logistics. The Memorandum of Understanding was signed in October 2009; on December 8, 2009, the first meeting of the Steering Committee of the new Partnership took place in Stockholm. Finally, in June 2010, a decision was made to establish until January 1, 2011 the Secretariat of the Partnership, which would be based in Helsinki on the premises of the Nordic Investment Bank [17]. The new Partnership is expected to accelerate the implementation of transport projects in the North of Europe, facilitate not only the construction of physical infrastructure facilities, but also the improvement of coordination of regional transport systems, the development of multimodal means of transportation, and a more efficient use of the existing infrastructure facilities.

At the same time, the establishment of a fund for financing partnership projects is not planned, which reduces its role to the functions of a consulting, in the best case, coordinating body for projects implemented in the North Dimension area in the framework of other initiatives.

In November 2009, at the meeting of senior officials of the ND, a decision was made to establish the Northern Dimension Partnership on Culture. In May 2010, the corresponding Memorandum of Understanding was signed

[22], which appointed the new Partnership to the role of coordinator of various networks, projects and other types of activities in the sphere of culture on the territory of the Northern Dimension. The ND Partnership on Culture is meant to become a platform for experience exchange and meetings between the interested parties and to facilitate the dialogue between culture and business community in order to identify mutually beneficial cooperation and the development of creative economy.

The new Partnership is expected to have a three-tier organisational structure: strategic decisions should be taken at high-level meetings (preferably, at the level of ministers of culture), the main activity should be coordinated by the Steering Committee, and it is expected — if this decision is made at the high-level meeting — that a small Partnership secretariat will be established as well.

Alongside the establishment of new partnerships, the cooperation in the framework of the Northern Dimension manifested in other institutional cooperation forms. So, at the meeting of senior officials in November 2009, the establishment of the Northern Dimension Business Council (NDBC) — an informal community of representatives of business circles of the region — meant to strengthen ties between companies and develop the dialogue between business and state and local authorities. The new structure is co-chaired on the Russian and EU sides by outstanding representative of business circles of North-West Russia and Northern European countries — the director general of OAO Severstal A. Mordashov and the President of Fortum Corporation T. Kuula [9, p. 73].

The principal aspects of the Council activity are attracting investment to the priority spheres of the Northern Dimension, establishing and developing contacts between the business circles of member states, augmenting business activity in the region, exchanging experience and opinions, and formulating proposals for the meetings of senior ND officials. The NDBC Concept stipulates that:

- 1) the NDBC serves as a platform for company interaction;
- 2) the NDBC ensures that the opinion of business community of the northern Dimension territory is taken into account when developing the Northern Dimension policy.
- 3) the NDBC also serves as a platform for meetings between business and authorities [2].

Another interesting format of cooperation in the framework of the Northern Dimension is the Northern Dimension Institute — an open network of universities and research institutes, combining expertise following the priority sectors of the Northern Dimension policy. The activities of NDI aim at providing high-quality research, and later also higher level education in the fields of energy and the environment, public health and social well-being, transport and logistics, as well as culture and society. The activities of NDI are based on the organised work of the NDI Coordinator — the NDI Steering Group — and, most importantly, the research work carried out in NDI Scientific Thematic Groups, and the active participation of NDI partner universities and institutes [23]. The purpose of NDI is to bridge the gap

between universities and policy-makers, and promote knowledge and welfare in the Northern Dimension region.

The renewed Northern Dimension activated cooperation in the North of Europe, but this form of cooperation with the EU, in order to reach a new level, requires a general improvement in Russia-EU relations and, probably, the absence of competition from other European cooperation programmes.

The analysis of the Framework Document shows that the principles of the ND are equality and mutual benefits. Thus, one can say that the logic of transnationalism and network governance, which was regularly ascribed by scholars to the old Northern Dimension, was replaced by intergovernmentalism and the logic of negotiation.

The renewed Northern Dimension puts more emphasis on reflections about the elimination of borders, horizontal cooperation, common values and ideals. Priority is given, as mentioned above, to "result-oriented proposals" — concrete projects that can be of practical use. All parties share the principles of equal attention to the interests of partners, as well as equal financial contribution to common projects.

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The ND concept has been developing from the 1990s; earlier, it revealed the weakness of Russia as a partner of the EU. Over the last years, Russia's perception of its place on the global stage has changed. Russia started to protect its interests more energetically than in the 90s, when the framework for the Northern Dimension policy was developed. Russian foreign policy adopted pragmatism as the key principle. For the first time, Russia has stated its unwillingness to be an object of EU policy in the discussion of the European Neighbourhood Policy in 2003. Russia insisted on the formulation of a special format of relations between Russia and the EU, which manifested in the strategic partnership developing in the framework of four Common Spaces.

Thanks to a stricter and more pragmatic foreign policy, Russia managed to insist on a principal change to its role in the Northern Dimension, where it transformed from an object of the EU programme to an agent of common policy.

In this situation, priority is given to the popularisation — both in official and academic circles — of construing the Northern Dimension as a "test site" for Russia-EU relations. It seems that Russia would like to extend the new logic of relations with EU in the North of Europe to the relations with EU in general. At the same time, as several years have passed since the Framework Document and the Political Declaration were signed, it would be logical to expect pronounced results of the Northern Dimension activity in the light of increased interest to the policy after its renewal. Nevertheless, at the moment, the northern dimension cannot boast of significant achievements.

Still, an important problem of the Northern Dimension is the lack of individual financing. It relates to another problem — the absence of concrete projects in all spheres of cooperation except the Environmental Partnership.

Despite the recurring emphasis on the need for providing the ND with political content and result-oriented proposal and projects, the actual situation has not changed.

In contradiction to the impressive phrasing of the Framework Document, which harmoniously includes the Northern Dimension in the Context of Russia-EU relations, the ND turned out to be in an uncertain state. Probably, it resulted from the fact that the attention of parties was diverted to the European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument (ENPI), which finances Russia-EU cross-border cooperation programmes.

The European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument is a financial mechanism developed by the European Union in order to support its initiatives within the European Neighbourhood Policy (with the ENP member states) and strategic partnership with Russia. It is aimed to ensure the EU assistance to the development of a well-being and good-neighbourhood area around the EU. The ENPI has been functioning since 2007 and is meant to replace a number of instruments that existed at the moment of its development. In 2007—2013, in the framework of the ENPI, the EU intends to allocate a total of 11,181 mln EUR, not less than 95% of which should support bilateral assistance programmes and the other 5% cross-border cooperation programmes [24, p. 13].

Joint EU-partner country cross-border cooperation programmes were launched within the ENPI. These programmes are given priority in the framework of the EU-Russia cooperation: the Russian Federation showed keen interest in full participation in the development and implementation of such programmes. It manifested in considerable co-financing. So, the announced financing of the cross-border ENPI component for seven RF-EU partnership programmes for 2007—2013 amounts to 307,448 mln EUR, the Russian party plans to provide co-financing of 122 mln EUR for 2008—2013 [4]. Cross-border cooperation programmes hold an important position in the context of Russia-EU relations, which is facilitated by the active participation of the Russian party in the discussion of programmes and full-scale co-financing. Despite a number of complications, first of all those related to the procedure of approval and adoption of programmes, the ENPI is an effective mechanism, which proved to contribute to both cross-border cooperation and the whole spectrum of Russia-EU relations.

The fundamental documents of the European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument mention the Northern Dimension several times. For instance, it expresses hope that the ENPI will facilitate the implementation of the ND [24, p. 2], while some cross-border cooperation programmes are expected to facilitate the achievement of the ND objectives [16, p. 27]. At the same time, a mechanism of interaction and, first of all, financing the ND activities from the funds of the ENPI has not been created yet. Thus, in effect, Russia and the European Union preferred to support the development of cross-border cooperation in the framework of the ENPI pushing the Northern Dimension to the side-lines.

The slow progress of the Northern Dimension can be seen in that Russian officials and representatives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs have

not recently made statements regarding the ND. Especially striking was that the topic of the Northern Dimension was not included on the agenda of the visit of the President of Russia Dmitry Medvedev to Finland, which took place on July 20—21, 2010. The fact that the presidents of Russia and Finland did not pay attention to the Northern Dimension indicates decreasing interest in the ND as opposed to the visit of the president of Russian V. Putin to Finland for the Russia-European Summit in November 2006. Then, the Northern Dimension was an important topic of negotiations between Russia and the European Union. After a meeting in the classical Russia-EU format, the prime ministers of Norway and Iceland joined the summit: that part of the summit was dedicated to the renewal of the Northern Dimension and concluded with signing the ND Framework Document and the Political Declaration.

However, in less than four years, the topic of the Northern Dimension is not addressed at the negotiations between the presidents of Russia and Finland — the leaders of the two countries that are mostly interested in the development of the policy. This situation is especially surprising since Finland — the initiator and inspirer of the Northern Dimension — aspires to use every opportunity for its promotion and a visit of the Russian president could be a good chance to draw attention to the Northern Dimension. Probably, the fact that the parties ignored this topic comes from understanding that the achievements of the Northern Dimension are quite modest and do not live up to the expectations, which were raised as the policy was renewed.

It seems that, at the current stage, the Northern Dimension "project" can be interpreted in two ways. On the one hand, at the political level, it is a format of interaction between Russia and the EU (with the participation of Norway and Iceland) resting on the principles of equality and respect to the interests of the partners. At this level, the Northern Dimension looks advanced and efficient, since its fundamental documents reflect the transformation of Russia from an object of the EU programme to an agent of the general policy, which was sought for by the country. It is the conceptual principles of the ND that give rise to reflections about whether it is called for to extend the logic of Russia-EU relation in the north of Europe within the renewed Northern Dimension to Russia-EU relations in general.

On the other hand, there is a practical level to cooperation in the framework of the Northern Dimension. Unfortunately, the renewal of the Northern Dimension did not represent a significant achievement at the practical level of cooperation, nor did it bring tangible results. The only success story is the performance of the ND Environment Partnership, which raises funds — grants and, first of all, credits — for projects in the fields of wastewater treatment, agricultural waste management, solid waste treatment, energy efficiency, and nuclear safety.

It is worth mentioning that the successful performance of the ND Environmental Partnership stems from the understanding by all parties of the importance of projects proposed within the Partnership, the competence of financial organisations supervising the Partnership and hardly depends on the performance of the ND in whole. Moreover, the NDEP action mecha-

nism had been fully developed until November 2006, thus the achievements of this Partnership do not pertain to the renewal of the Northern Dimension.

A researcher from the Finnish Institute of International Affairs Hiski Haukkala, when emphasising the role of environmental projects, mentions the general efficacy of cooperation in the framework of the ND. "The Northern Dimension Policy made it possible to implement in North-West Russia only a few projects in the field of environment protection, for example, to construct Southwest Wastewater Treatment Plant in Saint Petersburg. A lot has been said about cooperation in the social sphere and healthcare, as well as about projects on transport and logistics, however, there has been no progress in these aspects" [8]. Although, this article was written four years ago, the situation has not changed radically since then.

Let us focus on another reason to consider the situation with the ND as a critical one. In the recent years, there has developed a tendency to interpret the Northern Dimension as a region bringing together the Baltic Sea region and the Barents region. Such extended interpretation makes it possible to include into the ND all projects implemented by different countries, the European Union, various organisation, regions, and local authorities in the Northern Dimension region. However, the artificiality of ascribing different initiatives of cross-border an interregional cooperation in the North of Europe to the Northern Dimension is obvious, since these projects would be implemented if the Northern Dimension had never existed.

Such approach to the Northern Dimension implies a tacit acknowledgement that the ambitious expectations of the ND renewal period were heightened. The Northern Dimension returns to the condition of an "umbrella concept", to which initiatives and events that do not have direct relation to the ND are ascribed.

Probably, the Northern Dimension can become something like a brand, the use of which would make it easier for projects to find financing and increase their importance in the eyes of those interested. The meaning of the Northern Dimension as a discursive resource can be significant but it does not reflect the great potential imparted to it by the policy renewal. The same can be said about the other functions of the Northern Dimension. Of course, the ND initiatives, especially given the keen interest to the policy over the last years, are a convenient platform for discussing regional problems. The Northern Dimension also contributes to drawing attention to the North of Europe, inspiring the feeling of unity and trust in the region, developing cooperation in different fields between representatives of different countries.

At the same time, these functions were being fulfilled by the Northern Dimension before the groundbreaking and promising changes adopted in 2006, thus, this role seems to be too modest for a policy, which earned trust and gained attention and recognition at the highest level. We would like to hope that the institutional development of the Northern Dimension over the recent years and the attention paid to this policy after the renewal will activate cooperation and result in actual achievements so that the potential of the renewed Northern Dimension will be fully developed.

It would be a pity, if the Northern Dimension followed the path of another European project — the Eastern Partnership — with which it shares a number of features: pompous proclamation, active political discussion and a slow loss of significance.

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