

THE EASTERN PARTNERSHIP – A PREMISE FOR AN ENHANCED EU-EASTERN NEIGHBOURS COOPERATION RELATIONSHIP

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Abstract. *The enlargement of the European Union towards the Central and Eastern Europe has brought to attention the necessity to reshape the EU institutional framework and specific policies addressing its new neighbourhood. Repeatedly stating that the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) is not a preceding phase for membership, the European Union also embraced the Polish-Swedish initiative for an Eastern Partnership (EaP). Meant at first to counterbalance the Union for Mediterranean project, the EaP has developed into a distinct project, with specific and ambitious cooperation goals, a positive and constructive agenda meant to support six countries (Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, Azerbaijan, Armenia and Belarus) develop and harmonize with the European standards and, at the same, attempting to build and further develop an Eastern dimension of the ENP. The questions of the efficiency of the conditionality derived from the EaP and also the complementarity of this initiative with other regional projects in the area can also be important matters of concern.*

Keywords: *Eastern Partnership, European Neighbourhood Policy, conditionality, regional initiatives, Eastern neighbours, enlargement*

The need of reshaping the European Union's external policy as regards its new neighbourhood appeared alongside EU enlargement towards the Central and Eastern part of Europe. Apart from several economic opportunities, the new Eastern EU border has brought along more new challenges determined by the need to have and to permanently maintain a stable and secure climate in the area, by the demands for an efficient management of borders, at the same time *avoiding new division lines in Europe*¹.

The European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), initiated in 2003 through the Commission's Communication on *Wider Europe* and officially launched in May 2004, by the strategy document *European Neighbourhood Policy – Strategy Paper*² came out as a result of the EU borders repositioning process towards the East and also of the need to adapt the working mechanism with the states which had now become closer neighbours of the European Union. The strategic goal of the ENP, as stipulated in the strategy, was to

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¹ European Council, Copenhagen, 12-13 December 2002, Presidency Conclusions, http://www.consilium.europa.eu/ueDocs/cms_Data/docs/pressData/en/ec/73842.pdf

² European Commission, Communication from the Commission, *European Neighbourhood Policy – Strategy Paper*, COM(2004) 373 final, Brussels, 12 May 2004 http://ec.europa.eu/world/enp/pdf/strategy/strategy_paper_en.pdf

share with the neighbouring countries the benefits of EU enlargement to the Central and Eastern Europe, for their consolidated stability, security and prosperity.

The Eastern Partnership (EaP), originally emerged in May 2008 as a Polish-Swedish proposal³, was created with the aim of *strengthening the relations between the European Union and its Eastern neighbours*, passing beyond the objectives of the current European Neighbourhood Policy. Having as goals to deepen the *bilateral* cooperation with the Eastern partners, to ensure an increased economic integration as well as to create a permanent formula for a *multilateral* cooperation, the EaP could be perceived as yet another EU initiative in the area, embracing a multitude of demanding objectives and quite few sensible instruments.

At present there are strong debates upon the concrete instruments that the EaP intends to bring into play and also on whether the efficiency of the so-called *conditionality* within EaP and also its desired *complementarity* with other regional cooperation initiatives in the area can be practically proven.

Eastern Partnership: Initial Steps and Launch

Concept firstly delivered by Poland and Sweden on 23rd May 2008, the Eastern Partnership (EaP) initiative became more comprehensive in October 2008, when an extended, more pragmatic, project-oriented proposal was conveyed to all

the EU Member States.

The Eastern Partnership was officially launched on May 7th 2009 during the *Prague Summit*. The Joint Declaration adopted on this occasion enshrines the proposals of the European Commission from December 2008, reaffirmed during the European Council held in March 2009, setting out “*an ambitious partnership*” based on common interests and commitments.

The EaP initiative envisages the relations of the EU27 with Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, Azerbaijan, Armenia and Belarus, all the six countries already under the ENP umbrella. The Eastern Partnership has a positive, constructive agenda, meant to support these six countries develop and harmonize with the European standards. Complementary to the bilateral contractual relations under ENP, the Eastern Partnership aims to respect the *principles of joint ownership, differentiation and conditionality*. As the partner countries (from the Eastern Europe and the Southern Caucasus) have different levels of economic and social development, democratization and modernisation, a unitary approach of these relations between the EU and these states may also seem rather impossible.

What does the EaP imply?

The most important elements envisaged by the EaP, as set out in the *Joint Declaration of the Prague Eastern Partnership Summit* in May 2009⁴

³ Polish-Swedish Proposal: Eastern Partnership, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Poland <http://www.msz.gov.pl/Polish-Swedish,Proposal,19911.html>

⁴ Council of the European Union, Joint Declaration of the Prague Eastern Partnership Summit, Prague, 7 May 2009, 8435/09 (Presse 78) available at: http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_Data/docs/pressdata/en/er/107589.pdf

and also in the Communication of the European Commission in December 2008⁵, regard the following:

a) Strengthening and intensifying the bilateral relations between the European Union and the partner countries by:

- Concluding *new association agreements* and establishing *deep and comprehensive free trade areas* with each of the partner countries, and, as a long term goal, even developing a *Neighbourhood Economic Community* (which in time would provide the partner countries full access to the single market), accompanied by the creation of a bilateral agreements network among the partner countries;

This new framework that would gradually replace the old Partnership and Cooperation Agreements would entail a much stronger commitment, from both sides. Given that the confidence-building is a key issue in such relations, the stronger and more practical the agreements and measures are to be taken, the more valid and result-oriented the cooperation relation between the parties will be.

The *differentiated approach*, brought about by the rhythm of liberalization of each one of the partner economies will still be a principle to be pursued.

- Increasing mobility of citizens through gradual steps towards visa liberalisation, growing partners' stability and safety, increasing border security (through the creation of *mobility and*

security pacts)

The pacts would incur negotiations for visa facilitation for the EaP partner countries, up to the waiving of fees and, finally, visa-free travel with all the partners. The pacts envisaged would also entail progress in key areas such as: fight against illegal migration, asylum system modernisation, more efficient border control structures, improved judicial system for the fight against corruption and organised crime.

- Strengthening the energy security through cooperation in long-term energy supply and transit policies;

The European Union foresees the inclusion of energy interdependence chapters in the Association Agreements; Ukraine and Moldova's rapid accession to the Energy Community; closing up several Memoranda of Understanding on Energy with Moldova, Georgia, Armenia; consolidating the political commitment with Azerbaijan - exporter of hydrocarbon to EU⁶.

- Improving the administrative capacity and supporting the economic and social development of the partner countries (through enhanced dialogue on regional policy memoranda, for example, increased cross border cooperation, development of transnational cooperation programmes)

b) The multilateral framework of the EaP which will support at the same time the differentiated bilateral relations of the partner countries with the EU, will

⁵ European Commission, Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council, *Eastern Partnership*, COM(2008) 823 final, SEC(2008) 2974, Brussels, 3 December 2008, available at <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=COM:2008:0823:FIN:EN:PDF>

⁶ European Commission, Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council, *Eastern Partnership*, COM(2008) 823 final, SEC(2008) 2974, Brussels, 3 December 2008, available at <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=COM:2008:0823:FIN:EN:PDF>

be organized at the following level:

- Meetings of the Heads of State or Government of the countries involved – every two years;
- Meetings of the Ministers of Foreign Affairs - every year;
- Development of four *thematic platforms*: Democracy, good governance and stability; Economic integration and convergence with EU sectoral policies; Energy security; Contacts between people – meetings at the level of senior officials engaged in the reform work in the relevant areas/at least twice a year;

The *multilateral cooperation* that the EaP foresees should be project-oriented, flexible and all the projects should be performed on a voluntary basis. There cannot and will not be any imposition either on EU member states, or on the six Eastern partners.

Developing democratic institutions with an increased participation of the civil society should be a common goal for these partner countries. The potential benefits that a future Neighbourhood Economic Community would entail could represent not only a stringent need to adapt to the EU standards, but also a proof that these economies are able to become competitive on the European and international market and able to cope with the competition pressures of the Single Market. A development of a mutual energy security system, including an early-warning system will be implemented in the framework of EaP. The speeding-up of energy policies' harmonisation and of related legislation of the partner states, together with the development of an inter-connected energy market, with

various routes of supply and transit are also objectives of the EaP. Cooperation in the field of education, research, youth programmes, development of the information society and culture are also to be followed and fulfilled within the EaP.

The setting-up of brand new institutions (as it is the case for the Union for the Mediterranean project) is not an objective for the Eastern Partnership. The Commission intends to place the EaP within already existing EU structures, without establishing or duplicating institutions⁷.

c) The Flagship Initiatives, designed to increase EU visibility in the region, i.e. Integrated Border Management Programme; SME facilities; regional electricity markets, renewables and energy efficiency; developing a Southern energy corridor; prevention of, preparedness for, and response to natural and man/made disasters;

These initiatives would assemble different potential donors, international financial institutions, private sector funding in order to channel the support to this kind of multilateral cooperation, with a view on raising EU's impact on and visibility in this region.

d) The need of co-financing the EaP projects.

The proposal envisages a variety of *financial sources*: starting from the European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument (ENPI), the Neighbourhood Investment Facility (NIF) and reaching to additional funds from EBRD, EIB, cross-border cooperation instruments, bilateral assistance from some of the EU Member States.

⁷ Deniz Devrim, Evelina Schulz, *The Eastern Partnership: An Interim Step towards Enlargement?*, 10 February 2009, Real Instituto Elcano, p. 3

Only through the Neighbourhood Investment Facility⁸ (NIF), the allocation from the European Commission in 2009 amounts to 70 million euro⁹ (out of a total of 700 million euro intended for 2007-2013 through NIF), planned for major investment projects i.e. energy, transport, environment, SMEs development and social sector.

The EaP has nearly 600 million euro¹⁰ at its disposal for the implementation of the policy. Unlike the Union for Mediterranean, which is much more oriented towards attracting private funding and international financing, the EaP's finances derive mainly from the EU budget.

The Eastern Partnership will attempt to enhance the bilateral relations (existing already under ENP), but at the same time, to focus more upon the *regional* component, deeply supporting the cooperation among the partner countries.

Initial meetings on the four thematic platforms already took place this summer, *thus opening the way for the implementation of the EaP*. The Prague Summit also confirmed the Commission's proposal to establish an *Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum* in order to promote dialogue between

civil society organisations in the partner countries and public authorities.

Eastern Dimension of ENP

At start, the Eastern Partnership initiative was perceived merely as an equivalent for East of the project initiated by President Sarkozy regarding the Union for the Mediterranean. Furthermore, it became clear then that there was a strong need for developing an Eastern dimension of the European Neighbourhood Policy¹¹.

The six countries under the EaP have rather different levels of development and also different aspirations. Some of them have been expressing their European vocation and perspective quite firmly for quite some time, at the same time they are more advanced in the process of economic and political reform, thus rightly imposing an asymmetrical approach. Even under ENP, the focus is upon the Action Plans, differentiated targeted to a specific country.

The main goal of EaP was to accelerate the process of political association, economic integration between the EU and the partner countries from Eastern Europe and Southern Caucasus, EU aiming to constantly encourage and

⁸ NIF was officially launched in May 2008, "to strengthen Community and Member States' grant support for lending operations carried out by European multilateral and bilateral development finance institutions in ENP partner countries". Source: EUROPA, Press Release, *The European Commission allocates €70 million for key investment projects in the EU's Neighbourhood*, IP/09/1164, Brussels, 20 July 2009 available at <http://europa.eu/rapid/pressReleasesAction.do?reference=IP/09/1164&language=EN>

⁹ EUROPA, Press Release, *The European Commission allocates €70 million for key investment projects in the EU's Neighbourhood*, IP/09/1164, Brussels, 20 July 2009 available at <http://europa.eu/rapid/pressReleasesAction.do?reference=IP/09/1164&language=EN>

¹⁰ European Commission, Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council, *Eastern Partnership*, COM(2008) 823 final, SEC(2008) 2974, Brussels, 3 December 2008, available at <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=COM:2008:0823:FIN:EN:PDF>

¹¹ Council of the European Union, *Joint Declaration of the Prague Eastern Partnership Summit*, Prague, 7 May 2009, 8435/09 (Presse 78), p. 6, available at: http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_Data/docs/pressdata/en/er/107589.pdf

support the process of economic and social reform of the targeted states, so that the *gradual harmonization with the EU standards might be achieved*.

The participants at the European Council held in Brussels between 19th and 20th June 2008 once more set forth the need to promote the Eastern dimension of the ENP, to strengthen the regional cooperation between the Eastern neighbours of the EU as well as between the EU and this region on differentiated grounds. The *EaP* was therefore considered to be *a good opportunity to reform the ENP* in favour of the Eastern neighbours, also aiming at reducing the gap towards other regional projects such as the Northern Dimension or the Black Sea Synergy¹².

At the same time it is clear that, whilst the Union for Mediterranean was more focussed upon a multilateral approach (if we mention only the historical background of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, the Barcelona Process and then the main components established in July 2008 at the Paris Summit regarding a multilateral partnership meant to increase the opportunities for the regional cohesion and integration), the Eastern part benefited more from bilateral schemes, the focus being more evident on the Action Plans within the framework of the European Neighbourhood Policy. *A strong regional or even multilateral component was lacking* as regards the Eastern component of the EU's neighbouring countries. From this point of view, the *EaP* was meant to restore the balance.

Different commitment?

The Eastern Partnership initiative was basically a Polish-Swedish initiative. Further on, not all the countries in EU embraced the project in the same manner. The options and visions were somehow different, both regarding the *EaP* principles and objectives, and to some extent, results and also an important aspect was *the necessity not to overlap with other similar initiatives*. At first, Romania and Bulgaria were a bit reserved, given their strong and steady support for the Black Sea Synergy project, at the same time the strong focus that France and Spain placed constantly upon the increased cooperation with the Southern neighbours within the Union for Mediterranean project contributed to a certain cutback of interest for *EaP*. Several analysts even evaluate in comparison the festivity of the launch of the Union for Mediterranean and the modest presence of high level officials at the Prague Summit launching the Eastern Partnership¹³. EU's foreign policy seems to continue to be well-dominated by national interests and to have more than a single voice, even when issues like EU's neighbourhood are at stake.

If the older EU Member States might show some resistance to the pro-active attitude towards the *EaP* partners, the new Member States have a more open attitude and are willing to make alliances in building common positions for consolidating the partnership. It is a known fact Poland's position in supporting Ukraine to follow the European path,

¹² Agnieszka K. Cianciara, „*Eastern Partnership – Opening a New Chapter of Polish Eastern Policy and the European Neighbourhood Policy?*”, *Analyses and Opinions*, No. 4, June 2008, The Institute of Public Affairs, Warsaw, Poland, p. 13

¹³ Wiebke Drescher, „*The Eastern Partnership and Ukraine – New Label – Old Products?*”, ZEI Discussion Paper C 1894, 2009, Centre for European Integration Studies, Bonn, p. 12

developing and consolidating an Eastern dimension of the ENP being one of the proposed goals.

If at first the EU Member States' focus upon the Eastern Partnership was rather low, after the war in Georgia, in August 2008, the topic gained more interest and concern within the European Union.

Needless to mention that the reactions of the EaP partner countries envisaged were also different. Ukraine, with a long history of affirming its European vocation and aspirations was definitely not to accept the EaP as alternative to membership. A necessary step towards accession maybe, but not an alternative. The same case could apply for Moldova, though the 2009 events raised partly the criticism amongst the European political arena, and the European vocation and aspirations were somehow damaged and placed, at some point, under certain doubt.

Cooperation and trade relations among the six partner countries register quite a low level and the cooperation initiatives in the area, were not always a success. Given the relatively small degree of success of ENP in the area¹⁴ (low commitment and implication in solving the conflicts in the area, frail energy security supply for the EU, democracies of partner countries still fragile), the EaP could be perceived as a breath of fresh air and new impulse/incentive for modernisation, democratisation and economic and social development in the region.

EaP also invites Russia to join the agreement in particular policy fields.¹⁵

However, it seems that Russia has so far treated EaP as a competitor in gaining even more influence in the region.

If we were to identify possible weak points for the EaP at this incipient stage, there could be mentioned: a rather low degree of interest among the Member States of EU27 (also an obvious interest separated into pro-Eastern and Pro-Southern projects), an overall regional perspective not always unitary and coherent (the EaP partner countries themselves have different expectations, aspirations, and -most important- diverse levels of development and commitment to the European values), many ambitious objectives and relatively low level of financial assistance.

Complementarity and conditionality

Despite the official constant reassurance that the regional cooperation initiatives or projects in the area are, above all, *complementary* to one another, there is a risk of overlapping, their substance might water down. Initiatives such as the *Union for the Mediterranean* or the *Eastern Partnership*, which operate in parallel with the *Black Sea Synergy*, as well as a series of regional cooperation bodies (Black Sea Forum for Dialogue and Partnership, Organisation of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation etc) seem to hinder to a certain extent a consistent development of the ENP. If the *Black Sea Synergy* is more focussed on the regional approach, the *EaP* promises to focus both on the multilateral approach and on consolidating the bilateral approach

¹⁴ Kerry Longhurst, Susanne Nies, "Recasting relations with the neighbours – prospects for the Eastern Partnership", Europe Visions 4, IFRI/Bruxelles, February 2009, p. 10

¹⁵ Wiebke Drescher, "The Eastern Partnership and Ukraine – New Label – Old Products?", ZEI Discussion Paper C 1894, 2009, Centre for European Integration Studies, Bonn, p. 24-25

of the neighbourhood relations. It is true that both initiatives can further develop. Differentiation should be correlated to performance and a particular attention must be paid to the areas eligible for each of the two initiatives. While the Eastern Partnership is focusing on supporting the Eastern partner countries meet the European standards, the Black Sea Synergy is based upon confidence-building regional projects, equally important to the area.

The sensitive issues regarding the identity of the area, the regional power asymmetries, the vulnerabilities induced by the political and economic fragility of some of the states from this part of Europe, the conflicts more or less frozen from this area and the need for a pragmatic approach in their case, together with the need to pay more attention to the issue of resources, transport routes and energy security are important problems which must be solved in the following period in order to ensure the functionality of the policies and initiatives, be they even multiple, in the area.

In this context, an issue which also requires special attention is the fact that the *EaP*, although likely to be compared to the pre-accession stage of the former candidate states from Central and Eastern Europe (based on the instruments and objectives concerning the harmonization with EU standards) *does not aim to offer* the Eastern European partners *the prospect of accession*. Although at some point the goals of ENP or EaP seem similar

to those of the enlargement (stability, prosperity, promoting democracy, rule of law, market access), the outcome differs¹⁶. This also generates the fear that, without the incentive of a future accession to the EU, the elements of *conditionality* from the ENP and EaP approach will not have the expected result in the evolution of the democratisation and economic and social modernisation of the partner countries. Addressing with maximum attention at least three key issues: trade, mobility and energy, the EaP must definitely list the clear advantages for the partner countries, otherwise the reforms expected might not have the highest degree of commitment, implementation and success.

Analysts consider that the EaP is a unitary message transmitted to countries with various expectations¹⁷, the opportunities envisaged, from visa facilitation, free trade areas, strategic partnerships representing value added for the EaP partner countries.

There is also an impression that, “only by allowing the European neighbours to hope for future membership will be a strong enough incentive to carry out reforms as defined by the EU”¹⁸. After a short period of time though, the partner countries will most certainly require a much stronger promise to EU membership, otherwise their commitment (anyway at a rather low level) towards real reforms and transformations in the economic, social and most of all, political area will certainly decrease.

¹⁶ Wiebke Drescher, “*The Eastern Partnership and Ukraine – New Label – Old Products?*”, ZEI Discussion Paper C 1894, 2009, Centre for European Integration Studies, Bonn

¹⁷ Adrian Cioroianu, “O șansă pentru vecinii Europei - și pentru Europa însăși”, published in *Foreign Policy România*, July/August 2009, p. 79

¹⁸ Deniz Devrim, Evelina Schulz, *The Eastern Partnership: An Interim Step towards Enlargement?*, 10 February 2009, Real Instituto Elcano, p. 6

The idea of a clear separation of ENP and EU enlargement policies is still to be put in place. The confusion that both Member States and ENP or EaP partner states may encounter further on can only have adverse effects, diluting the commitment of both parties in the common goal of developing towards EU standards.

Though often considered a definite upgrading compared to ENP, be there for the regional and multilateral components that it addresses, the EaP “has still some tests to pass”, those of coherence of the policies (either in the context of ENP or complementary to other initiatives) and the implementation phases that follow¹⁹.

Conclusions

There is no doubt that the enlargement of the European Union towards the Central and Eastern Europe has brought to the attention the necessity to reshape the EU institutional framework and policies addressing its new neighbourhood.

Confronted more with sensitive issues rather than with new opportunities at its Eastern border, the European Union was compelled to involve itself, beyond declarative level, in a tangible project of anticipating and solving potential problems.

EU has delimited its new neighbourhood policy, since 2003 and 2004, stating repeatedly that *the ENP is not a preceding phase for membership*. By its constant concern to strengthen the ENP, the European Union proposes a consolidation of its commitments towards the neighbours and also a reaffirmation of the proposed objective not to create new

dividing lines in Europe.

The Eastern Partnership, initiated by Poland and Sweden, has gradually become an important project for the Eastern part of EU's neighbours. Meant at first to counterbalance the Union for Mediterranean project, initiated for the Southern EU neighbours, the EaP has developed into a separate project, with specific and ambitious cooperation goals, both among EU and the Eastern partner countries. The free trade areas entailed, the visa-free travel perspective, the enhanced bilateral cooperation and the development of multilateral and, most of all, regional components of the initiative are only a few of the main goals the EaP intends to address. The EaP initiative envisages the relations of the EU27 with Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, Azerbaijan, Armenia and Belarus, all the six countries already under the ENP umbrella. The Eastern Partnership has a positive, constructive agenda, meant to support these six countries develop and harmonize with European standards.

There is a question if *conditionality* can really exist and function within EaP or ENP and to what extent the partner countries can pursue difficult internal reforms in the absence of the ultimate incentive: the perspective of full membership. The positive conditionality has quite a difficult role to play in the process of harmonisation with EU standards envisaged for the EaP partner countries.

A major concern is also *the effort not to overlap* with other regional initiatives, such as Black Sea Synergy. The issue at stake is rather delicate, since the risk of watering down the substance of the EaP

¹⁹ Gabriela Drăgan, Iulia Serafimescu, “The Future of our Neighbours: EU's Eastern Partnership Initiative”, *Strategic Impact*, no. 2[31]/2009, National Defence University Carol I, Romania

initiative, given the multitude of (more or less) complementary projects in the area, is rather high. It is true that all initiatives can further develop. Differentiation should be correlated to performance and a particular attention must be paid to the areas eligible for each of the new initiatives.

The European Union still needs to clarify the final goal of the EaP, *within the context or related* to the framework of ENP. There is still confusion among the partner countries as far as the results for their commitments to reform are concerned. Viewed as an upgrading of

ENP, the Eastern Partnership can develop itself into a more concrete, practical and efficient cooperation framework between EU and Eastern partner states.

What EU is offering through this initiative must be based on solid ground and must go beyond political statements or general strategies. The success of this new initiative will depend upon the actual measures which the EU will efficiently implement in this new framework and on the reaction and firm commitment of the EaP partner countries.

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