

## POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE EASTERN PARTNERSHIP FOR UKRAINE: A BASIS FOR RAPPROCHEMENT OR DEEPENING THE RIFT IN EUROPE

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**Abstract:** *Being a logic continuation of the European Neighbourhood Policy endowed with several innovative instruments the Eastern Partnership inherited predominantly depoliticized nature with normative convergence remaining the centrepiece of the EU policy towards East European states. But even deprived of clear political grounds the EaP has significant political implications for the Eastern Europe as a whole and particularly for Ukraine which has the most advanced level of cooperation with the EU among the EaP partner state. After exploring these political implications it becomes clear that the Eastern Partnership does not offer a feasible way out of major dilemmas the EU faces in its policy towards East European states and in relations with Russia. So far it contributes to complicating political context for Ukraine without enabling it to solve basic foreign policy tasks. But at the same time it contains valuable instruments which in case of modification of the laid framework and of conceptual approaches underpinning the EaP may be utilized for political stabilization of the European continent.*

**Keywords:** *European Union, European Neighbourhood Policy, Eastern Partnership, Eastern Europe, Ukraine*

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Despite its relative short history the Eastern Partnership (EaP) managed to attract great attention of European political, scientific and societal circles. With events in the Eastern Europe coming to the forefront of political agenda in Europe in the second half of 2008, the launching by the European Union of a new project in the Eastern neighbourhood appeared to be the only substantial response of the Western community to the challenges resurfaced after Russian-Georgian and Russian-Ukrainian crises. Practical components of this project have already been explored in full details

by many researchers, but its political implications have not been adequately analyzed up to date. So far, this article is intended to ascertain the implications of the Eastern Partnership for political architecture of the European continent, establishing political order in the Eastern Europe and for Ukraine's foreign policy. Today when the Eastern Partnership approaches its first anniversary it would be appropriate to make several analytical conclusions about its political usefulness drawn not only on provisions of foundational documents but also on some initial results.

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The article starts from exploring the roots and premises of the Eastern Partnership and reviewing basic approaches on which the EaP is founded. Then it proceeds to answering central questions of what significance the EaP has for geopolitical configuration of the East European space, how it correlates with current trends in EU-Russia relations, and how its initiation impacts the overall political landscape in Europe. Finally opportunities and perspectives available for Ukraine with the launching of the EaP would be outlined taking into account the results attained one year after its official inauguration.

Formally the main impulse for launching the Eastern Partnership is supposed to have been given by the common initiative put forward by Polish and Swedish governments in May 2008. But actually, discussion about possible ways of improving the EU policy in its Eastern neighbourhood has been conducted since 2006. The necessity of such improving was imposed by the apparent conceptual ambiguity and functional incompleteness of the European Neighbourhood Policy which from 2003 emerged as the general framework for pursuing EU policy towards neighbouring states.

On the one hand, the principal idea of the ENP consisted in centralization of the whole European continental space around the EU by means of involving Eastern neighbours in some forms to integration processes. So, the ENP represented an attempt to extrapolate integration logic of the EU in continental scope, inducing convergence with EU norms and practice of states without clear perspective of joining the EU and thus securing their acceptance of EU normative agenda (Averre, 2005). Due to externalization of the own methods of governance to third countries and application of less formalized and more flexible forms of engagement of these countries to integration processes, intermediate between traditional

association and membership, the European Union increases its influence on structuring political space of the European continent in general and on political processes within partner states in particular (Gänzle, 2009). Normative convergence, in its turn, enables to contribute to stabilization of states on the EU margins and neutralize challenges emanating from low quality of state regulation and high security and economic vulnerability of these states.

But on the other hand, by introducing explicit normative dimension in the ENP the EU significantly altered the modality of its policy in Eastern Europe since at the previous stages normative convergence was inextricably linked to enlargement process exclusively. That's why the ENP, as presented at the time of its initiation, emerged rather as a 'policy in making' (Solonenko, 2007), a framework mechanism whose structure was intended to develop in the course of its practical implementation, than as an accomplished policy format. In this context events in the East European countries themselves have seriously influenced further development of the ENP. Political upheavals in Ukraine and Georgia which brought into power democratically oriented and pro-European (at least rhetorically) forces required the extension of the EU instruments in dealing with those states and, hence, increasing of the ENP integrative capacity as opposed to much less ambitious tasks laid down at the outset.

Despite the general consensus around the idea of stabilization of Eastern neighbours through projecting own norms, the EU lacked clear vision of mechanisms for delivering normative convergence of those states, sufficient level of stabilization, degree of the EU readiness to get involved into those states affairs for sake of their stabilization and also of scope of resources the EU members were willing to spend for this purpose. Finding the

appropriate formula for these issues proved to be centerpiece of discussions, within EU institutions and between member states, leading to establishment of the Eastern Partnership. Notably, it didn't mean the renouncement of the ENP, but sought to extend and improve its initial structure by means of supplementing it with new components, enabling to implement the key idea of stabilization through normative convergence in consistence with innovations in the EU own configuration, current realities in domestic processes of the partner states and political situation in the Eastern Europe and in the European continent as a whole.

An important step in this direction was made during the German presidency in the European Council in the first half of 2007. Berlin's efforts were aimed, first, at general strengthening and development of the European Neighbourhood Policy resulted into GAERC Report 'Strengthening the European Neighbourhood Policy' of 16<sup>th</sup> June 2007<sup>1</sup> and Council Conclusions on that matter of 18<sup>th</sup> June<sup>2</sup>, and second, at segmenting autonomous regional dimension in the form of the launch in April 2007 of the Black Sea Synergy program<sup>3</sup>.

But with these steps the need in intensification of the EU Eastern policy has not been completely satisfied. Further debates were conducted within the EU institutions and by national governments on setting up new formats of this policy allowing to take into account specific context of Eastern Europe as a distinct geopolitical space and

to provide adequate differentiation among partner states in accordance with the extent of their internalization of the EU norms and values. Particular interest to evolution of the EU policy towards Eastern neighbourhood was displayed by governments of Visegrad group, Baltic states, Sweden, Germany, France etc.

Throughout these debates five main approaches to the future configuration of the EU policy in Eastern Europe have been outlined.

The first approach, widespread among German and Scandinavian representatives, consists in establishing in the Eastern neighbourhood a project similar to the EU Northern Dimension. Its core sense lies in building a multifaceted mechanism of transborder cooperation and other forms of transnational interactions in order to stimulate positive dynamics of relations without direct dependence on progress of political dialogue and to mitigate diving effect arising from EU enlargement. This approach is put in the foundation of the Black Sea Synergy program. Though this approach does not evoke serious objections, it is viewed rather as useful supplement to basic format, given that these are shifts at the political level which seem to be the most urgent in relations of the EU with East European states.

Qualitative upgrading of those relations at the political level is the centrepiece of the second approach propagated actively by the Polish government and presented in Polish-

<sup>1</sup> General Affairs and External Relations Council, Council Conclusions *On Strengthening the European Neighbourhood Policy*, 11016/07, 18-19 June 2007, <http://register.consilium.europa.eu/pdf/en/07/st11/st11016.en07.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> General Affairs and External Relations Council, Council Conclusions *On Strengthening the European Neighbourhood Policy*, 11016/07, 18-19 June 2007, [http://ec.europa.eu/world/enp/pdf/enp\\_progress-report\\_presidency-june2007\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/world/enp/pdf/enp_progress-report_presidency-june2007_en.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> European Commission, Communication from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament, *Black Sea Synergy – A New Regional Cooperation Initiative*, COM(2007) 160 final, Brussels, 11 April 2007, [http://ec.europa.eu/world/enp/pdf/com07\\_160\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/world/enp/pdf/com07_160_en.pdf)

Swedish proposals on Eastern Partnership. Such upgrading could take place due, first, to the establishment of new multilateral formal mechanisms enabling to give impetus to political dialogue and, second, to the offer of opportunities for the deepest possible integration of partner countries with the EU, not excluding long-term membership perspective (Война, 2009).

According to the third approach, EU policy towards East European countries should rely upon concrete practical projects in key spheres of mutual interest for both these countries and the EU. For these purpose institutional framework of relations can be modified in some way but has not to undergo profound transformations. Such project-oriented approach was manifested in less resonance but no less influential Czech republic's memorandum 'The European Neighbourhood Policy and the Eastern Neighbours: Time to Act' (Тульмец, 2008) presented two months before the respective Polish-Swedish proposal. This approach won the greatest consensus of the EU members and institutions since major participants strived to insert the Eastern Partnership in the existing institutional mechanism without creating new structures (Mocanu, 2009).

The forth approach suggests enlarging the European Economic Space model enacted in relations of the EU with members of the European Free Trade Association to East European states. Many policymakers and analysts tend to view this model as the most realistic final goal of integration progress for these states. Altogether, its enforcement requires prior achievement of sufficient level of conformity with the EU standards which needs particular mechanisms and instruments.

Peculiar to the last, the fifth approach is focusing on inducing integration within the East European space proper. It is reflected in the provisions of the Commission's Communication dated 3 December 2008 asserting that 'establishment of a network of FTAs can grow into a Neighbourhood Economic Community in the longer term'<sup>4</sup>.

The final version of the Eastern Partnership initiative represented a compromise based on project-oriented approach while embracing some elements of other approaches as supplementary constituents. It is of no surprise given that essential political issues were not at the heart of the discussion leading to the EaP initiation which, in its turn, draws from depoliticized nature of the ENP. Preserving normative convergence as central point of the EU policy towards Eastern neighbours meant an absence of qualitative conceptual innovations. Instead, with the launching of the EaP this policy turned into distinctive program endowed with own aims, instruments and mechanisms (Mocanu, 2009), so the main added value of the EaP lies in establishing clear but rather flexible framework for further developing this policy. But, though for the EU foreign policy the Eastern Partnership presents a way of deepening existing trends and patterns, its political significance for the Eastern Europe and for the European continent as a whole even if not intended by the EU is quite perceivable and cannot be neglected.

In defining the political significance of the Eastern Partnership for the Eastern Europe it should be noted that its initiation symbolizes first of all a political signal to the neighbouring states that the EU has a particular interest in them and is ready to engage in their stabilization in broad

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<sup>4</sup> European Commission, Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council, *Eastern Partnership*, COM(2008) 823 final, Brussels, 3 December 2008, <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=COM:2008:0823:FIN:EN:PDF>

term. Nevertheless, proceeding from the provisions of foundation documents and comments by the EU functionaries, such readiness is limited and restricted to selected areas of direct interest for maintaining security of the EU itself.

Also the EaP reflects the EU's political will to undertake the role of leading driving force of internal reforming in Eastern neighbours and its aspiration to affirm own political influence in this strategically important space. The EU attempts to acquire new leverages due to offering partner states new forms of rapprochement and to enhance own standing in the continent. It is not unjustified that in the form of such initiative the European Union offers these states somewhat alternative to NATO Membership Action Plan, since the EaP was developed as another framework of strengthened cooperation with another Western institution which can give them advantages both in terms of status and of practical cooperation and avoid outburst of tensions unlike MAP.

Many observers point to multilateral dimension of the Eastern Partnership as the basic novelty in the EU Eastern policy. Its political significance is also not unambiguous. On the one hand, multilateral dimension is intended to give neighbouring states a consultative voice in issues of common interest and in this sense can be regarded as an important step forward. But on the other hand, advancing political dialogue is only a subsidiary component of the EaP. Integrity of this program depends on carrying out major practical projects. But apart from energy security there are very few realms where interests of the EU and East European states really converge and projects embracing all the participants can be set up. And in its present form the multilateral dimension of the EaP 'does not aim at regional cooperation among the eastern neighbours in its own right, but at a

regionally structured approximation process between the eastern ENP countries and the EU' (Fischer, 2009). It means that realization of practical projects will be closely tied to internalization by the partner states of the EU rules. Moreover, a multilateral dimension may look not so beneficial for these states in comparison to arrangements at bilateral level where prospects of concluding Association agreements and establishing free trade areas are envisaged (Hillion, Mayhew, 2009).

But the potential of the EaP multilateral dimension is linked not so much to its own configuration but to the degree of consolidation of East European space. Presently this degree is rather low owing to prevailing political contradictions and uneven ties of economic interdependence. Without solving or at least dampening of pressure generated by these contradictions on governments of East European states it would be extremely difficult to induce them to implement joint projects even those that provide obvious benefits. Thus, for the EU to focus on particular spheres of cooperation without due attention to political aspects of interactions and contributing to economic development of partner states may prove rather low-efficient strategy for dealing with Eastern Europe.

Overlooking political realities and general context is imminent to the European integration, but in the case of the Eastern Partnership it may turn into serious obstacle to its realization. One of reasons for that is the effect of complicating the EU relations with Russia and aggravating political polarization of the European continent. This also justifies political significance of the Eastern partnership in continental scope.

In post-bipolar period EU and Russian policy in Eastern Europe developed relatively autonomously, according to their own inner logic. Discrepancies between them in particular issues did not lead to serious

conflicts though created preconditions for competition. Figuratively speaking, these actors occupied different niches and directed their influence at different objects within this space. It resulted into getting accustomed to unilateral actions in common neighbourhood and obscuring the necessity to establish some mechanism of coordination of efforts of the two powers having decisive impact on situation in Eastern Europe.

Although unfolding of the EaP does not mean drastic shifts in EU policy towards this space, it has significantly altered the boundaries of EU governance in Europe (Gänzle, 2009). Paying progressively more attention to Eastern Europe and allocating increasing amount of resources the EU aims at spreading in it own norms and rules pressing the East European states to assume obligations on law adaptation to which these state actually are not ready (even if they declare EU membership aspirations). Taking into account the formidable extent of interdependence between them and Russia, such normative convergence cannot but affect Russian interests.

The Russian position in this respect is determined both by political and practice considerations. Russia is no less than the EU interested in stabilization of the Eastern Europe given its strategic value for ensuring stability in Russia itself. However, the Russian authorities view this mission as belonging exclusively to its competence, all the more bearing in mind that until recently it was commonly held that stabilization of the Eastern Europe is possible only with Russian participation. There is also a tangible status aspect in this matter: throughout the last decade Russia tried to balance asymmetry in its interaction with NATO and the EU at the expense of maximizing own capacity of regional security provider in the Eastern Europe and Central Asia (Averre, 2007). With launching the Eastern Partnership the

EU in fact has announced its readiness to assume the main role in stabilization process through defining the direction and character of internal reforms in neighbouring states. Russia does not object EU engagement in this space as such. After all, the Russian lack of resources and leverages of influence constrains its ability to retain control of it and stipulates objective need in partial involvement of other actors. But Russia cannot let the EU turn into a sole driving force of Eastern Europe transformation and monopolize influence on political processes and practical developments in this space. No more can Russia let sliding down to open confrontation with the EU in the common neighbourhood because of close interdependence ties linking it to the Union. Russian leadership reacts to EU advancement trying to contrast EU normative power with intensification of own presence in the countries concerned and affirming its leverages of influence provoking thus rising of tension and seriously complicating implementation of the EU strategy.

For a long time Russia pretended to be the only generator of integration impulses in the Eastern Europe. Currently introducing integration elements in the EU relationship with the states of this space contradicts in a way to Russia promoted initiatives (Бордачев, 2010). Such mutual exclusiveness cannot facilitate conducting fruitful dialogue between the two main European powers and ensure stabilization of the Eastern Europe. Certainly, general orientation of the Eastern Partnership on carrying out concrete practical projects with explicit possibility for Russia and Turkey to be involved on case-by-case basis may mitigate to an extent this mutual exclusiveness but cannot compensate for effect of excluding Russia which emerged due to establishing within the EaP (loose and restricted) mechanism of deepening political

dialogue in 27 + 6 format while Moscow still remains in EU Troika + Russia format. In addition to this, the EaP documents don't advance substantial proposals on how its multilateral dimension may constructively correlate with the existing patterns in EU-Russia relations (Bendiek, Wilson, 2010).

Here is the greatest source of potential political controversies between Russia and the EU in the Eastern Europe. EU engagement in this space can only be efficient in case of adequate coordinating its strategy with Russia and proper taking into consideration domestic political realities in the neighbouring states. On the ability of leading powers to downplay controversies between them around East European stabilization depends without exaggeration consolidation of the European continent in general.

It should be noted in this context that despite wide criticism of ENP and CFSP as a whole for its extremely general character and too extensive geographic scope, EU policy towards the Eastern neighbourhood has always been and remains deeply fragmented. Though ENP introduced several common principles, internal context in each partner state requires specific individually tailored measures and thus bilateral agenda with each partner state presents the main channel for implementation of the ENP (Gawrich *et al.*, 2009). This can be partly ascribed to the normative nature of the ENP: its core preoccupation is the convergence of internal norms which is deemed to be able to generate consequent political effect. Such fragmentation impedes adopting comprehensive strategy capable to account for various factors of internal, regional or continental level.

These features being analyzed, it becomes clear that the Eastern Partnership is of dual political significance for Ukraine. On the one hand, EU recognition of Ukraine's

central role in the EaP grants it obvious status advantages which Ukraine can employ for consolidation of this space around itself on a pro-European basis. But on the other hand, increasing competition between the EU and Russia tremendously narrows *marges de manoeuvres* for Ukrainian diplomacy. Bearing in mind that even in the absence of systemic antagonism in EU-Russia relations unilateral character and diverging vectors of their influence exert substantial pressure on East European states (Sherr, 2009), Ukraine needs to avoid being drawn into processes likely to intensify competition between major powers.

Notably, the Eastern Partnership as a format is designed not to fix automatically some new mechanisms of cooperation but rather to let the partner states understand that such mechanisms can be established provided that political will of the parties and appropriate domestic reforms are implemented by East European states. Configuration of the EaP is flexible and variable what makes it possible to use it as an instrument of alleviating political polarization of the European continent currently under way. Activating such possibilities should be the central object of Ukrainian diplomacy in the framework of the Eastern Partnership.

Up to now it was inherent to all Ukrainian governments to regard any mechanism of cooperation with the EU and the process of law approximation to the EU norms through the prism of geopolitical motives in the context of approaching membership in the European Union though neither the ENP nor the EaP bear that meaning. On the contrary, these formats help to shift key focus of debate from membership perspective to gradual approximation and integration (Sasse, 2008). That's why their benefits in the eyes of Ukrainian elite looked rather relative leading to the flawed enforcement of obligations undertaken by Kiev within these formats.

Today it is too early to judge what position the new Ukrainian government will adopt. There are some signs that obsession about a membership perspective can be put aside for a while but surely it will not be abandoned. For the time being the basic question is whether Yanukovich team can be smart enough to strike a right balance between EU integration course and reestablishing strategic partnership with Russia. Though future developments look rather vague, a desire expressed by the new government to seek such a balance is quite hopeful, and instruments offered by the EaP for these end may be of great use for Ukrainian diplomacy.

On its side, the EU has until now demonstrated a lack of proper understanding of how its actions correlate with domestic context of the neighbouring states (Stewart, 2009). First of all it concerns incentives announced under the Eastern Partnership which besides visa free regime have limited attraction to those states. As Gawrich *et al.* (2009) indicate, in contrast to a comprehensive idea of sectoral cooperation during enlargement, ENP concentrates on specific areas which figure high on the EU's list of priorities which cannot become equally attractive for all local actors concerned. Political and status differentiation has much more appeal for them in comparison to the benefits in selected functional realms with the only exclusion of energy security. In Ukrainian case it must be acknowledged that the EU depoliticized normative strategy offers Ukraine opportunities to solve neither its short-term tasks of mitigating tension around it nor middle-term tasks of affirming own standing in the European system and acquiring leverages of influence at regional and continental level.

So, a year after its initiation the Eastern Partnership looks not very persuasive. Having defined the principal practical priorities of cooperation between the

European Union and the East European countries, the EaP does not provide a way out of main dilemmas facing the EU in its policy in the Eastern neighbourhood, above all, the dilemma between the necessity of deeper engagement in processes within this space and maintaining non-conflict interaction with Russia. In its current parameters the Eastern Partnership founded on tactical compromise between the EU institutions and member states and not on strategic vision of the European system evolution rather underpins political polarization of Europe than allows to overcome it. Such political incompleteness results in decreasing the EaP and as a consequence the EU ability to exert structuring impact at political order in the European continent. Instead, the EU and its policy is subject to structural pressure generated by other transformation processes under way in Europe, notably the process of revising the European security architecture.

However, such situation is not immutable. The European Union's capital advantage lies in the fact that it is an extremely dynamic entity whose conceptual approaches and practical instruments of any policy can undergo considerable transformations depending, firstly, on current priorities of key actors and, secondly, on urgency of challenges emerging before the EU at a particular stage. At the end, the Eastern Partnership was produced in a highly intense context in the wake of Russia-Georgia war, thus alterations in this context, including those resulting from the new team coming to power in Ukraine, may push for essential shifts in the EU policy either within the EaP framework or outside it.

For Ukraine the political implications of the Eastern Partnership consist in laying basic incentives, mechanisms and realms of cooperation in the middle-term perspective. Further political and practical substance of this program will depend on



the political will of the European Union and on Ukraine's willingness to utilize the offered opportunities. But to achieve it, the Ukrainian diplomacy should focus not so much on the membership perspective, but

rather on ensuring support and engaging EU resources for internal stabilization, conducting structural reforms and carrying out meaningful practical projects in Ukraine.

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