

The Eastern Partnership: An Interim Step Towards Enlargement? (ARI)

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Theme: The EU's *Eastern Partnership* is a new regional initiative for its eastern European neighbours and this review looks at it in relation to the existing Enlargement and European Neighbourhood policies and in light of their future development.

Summary: In 2008 the EU's relations with its neighbours were marked by a particular interest. After the re-launch of its relations to the south with the establishment of the Union for the Mediterranean, a new initiative for the east immediately followed: the Eastern Partnership. The Partnership aims to intensify the EU's relations with three of its eastern and three of its south-eastern European neighbours. This ARI examines the most recent developments in the neighbourhood, with a special focus on the latest Commission's Communication on the Eastern Partnership, and also provides a short overview of the initial Polish-Swedish proposal. It then evaluates the impact of the initiative on already existing EU-policies –Enlargement and European Neighbourhood– and discusses the possible future development of relations between the EU and its eastern neighbours participating in the Eastern Partnership.

Analysis:

'To the south, we have neighbours of Europe, to the east we have European neighbours'.
Radosław Sikorski, Polish Foreign Minister.

A Stronger Engagement Beyond its Eastern Borders

The numerous recent initiatives in the field of European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) promoted by some EU Member States indicate the need for a new impetus in the form of regional cooperation initiatives. After the EU focused on the east in the process of eastern Enlargement (2004 and 2007), a new engagement with its eastern neighbours emerged in 2008.

With the establishment of the ENP back in 2003, the EU had intended to anticipate the danger of creating new dividing lines between the new eastern EU Member States and their closest neighbours. In this regard, the Eastern Partnership (EaP) is a continuation of that approach.

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The Polish-Swedish proposal for an Eastern Partnership was launched in May 2008¹ and was adopted by the Council in June 2008. The Council called on the European Commission to establish the modalities for the EaP for the EU's Spring Summit in 2009. It will aim for a political declaration establishing the EaP and outlining its main goals and principles. Following the crises in the southern Caucasus in the summer of 2008, the extraordinary European Council reaffirmed its wish to set up an Eastern Partnership and asked the Commission to accelerate its work on the proposal.² The Commission's Communication was published on 3 December 2008 and will be discussed in the Council and Parliament in the forthcoming months.

Eastern Partnership: From a Member State's proposal to the Commission's Communication

The initial proposal for the *Eastern Partnership* (May 2008) underlined that the European commitment towards the Union's eastern neighbours had to be strengthened. After the re-launch of the European Neighbourhood Policy to the south leading to the establishment of the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) in July 2008, it was now time for an initiative aimed at the EU's eastern neighbours. A new partnership based on the existing ENP framework and its principles (differentiation, regionalisation and conditioning) was promoted, giving the initiative a stronger European vocation. The Polish-Swedish proposal developed along two main axes: (1) an enhanced bilateral cooperation between the EU and its partners, leading to further economic and social integration; and (2) a renewed project aimed at multilateral cooperation.

The geographical scope of the Eastern Partnership includes the 27 EU Member States and six partners in the neighbourhood: Belarus,³ Moldova and the Ukraine to the east and Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia to the south-east.

Having been put on the spot by the Polish-Swedish proposal, the EU institutions had to react. In its Communication the Commission refers to the need to strengthen the European offer for its eastern neighbours.⁴ It reaffirms the call of the Polish-Swedish proposal for a policy which goes beyond the current ENP both by deepening the bilateral cooperation and by creating a permanent framework for multilateral cooperation.

The Communication supports the aspirations of the eastern neighbours for closer ties with the EU, basing its commitment on conditionality –especially regarding progress made by the partner countries in the areas of human rights, democracy and the rule of law–. The Commission underlines that the EU's ambitions for the relationship will depend on the extent to which these European values are respected and implemented in each country. The EU proposes more intensive day-to-day support for its partners' reform efforts through a new Comprehensive Institution Building programme.⁵

¹ <http://www.msz.gov.pl/Polish-Swedish,Proposal,19911.html>.

² Council (2008), Conclusions, 1 September 2008, 12594/08, Point 7; Document Eastern Partnership.

³ The level of Belarus's participation will depend on the overall development of EU-Belarus relations.

⁴ Commission (2008), Communication, Eastern Partnership, 823/4; Wiegand, Gunnar, GD Relex, European Commission; Workshop KAS: Eastern Partnership - Strengthening the Eastern Dimension of the European Neighbourhood Policy? KAS European Office, Brussels, 17 September 2008.

⁵ This programme aims to provide advice and training for public administrations as well as the equipment and infrastructure needed for their operation.

At the bilateral level, the Polish-Swedish aim of a closer relationship between the EU and each of the partner countries is confirmed. Despite the new impetus for bilateral cooperation, its basis should continue to be the existing Partnership and Cooperation Agreements and Action Plans already provided by the ENP framework. The Commission considers it is necessary to upgrade the contractual relations by launching a new generation of Association Agreements. It also wants a network of Free Trade Areas that could lead in the longer term to the establishment of a Neighbourhood Economic Community. Other objectives are a progressive visa liberalisation for citizens from partner countries, deeper cooperation to enhance mutual energy security and support for economic and social policies in order to reduce disparities within each partner country and across borders.

At the multilateral level, the Commission proposes a new framework where the region's common challenges can be tackled. A project-oriented approach with concrete initiatives on the ground in the six partner countries on issues such as common border management and joint research initiatives had already been suggested by the Poles and Swedes and taken on board by the Commission. Hence, four concrete policy platforms are proposed: (1) democracy, good governance and stability; (2) economic integration and convergence with EU policies; (3) energy security; and (4) contacts between people.

Financial Resources

Given the financial limits of the existing European Neighbourhood Policy Instrument (ENPI) and, at the same time, the ambitious nature of the Eastern Partnership, the Commission claims that new financial and human resources are needed to effectively upgrade the already existing relations. Increased resources are required to bring funding levels in line with these political ambitions. They should also finance the operations of the four policy platforms and support the establishment of the partner countries' internal cohesion and the reduction of socio-economic disparities.

In 2008, the funding for the eastern neighbours in the framework of the ENP amounted to approximately €450 million. According to the Communication 'the Commission intends to propose progressively raising this amount to reach approximately €785 million in the year 2013'. This would mean €350 million of fresh funds supplementing the current ENPI, in addition to the planned resources for 2010-13.⁶ Further investment funding, notably through the European Investment Bank (EIB) and European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), is requested. The Commission also calls on EU Member States to contribute financially through increased own contributions.

Differences with the Union for the Mediterranean

In contrast to the Union for the Mediterranean –that foresees a Secretariat with a rotating Presidency– the establishment of new institutions is not part of the Eastern Partnership. The Commission's aim is to place the EaP within already existing EU structures, without establishing or duplicating institutions but proposing an effective operational framework with high-level meetings.⁷ The idea is that at the level of senior officials, meetings should be held at least twice a year with panels to support the work of the four policy platforms.

⁶ Commission (2008), Communication, Eastern Partnership, 823/4. Some €250 million under the current ENPI could be re-programmed for the period 2010-13. Altogether, the total amount of resources devoted would be €600 million.

⁷ Meetings of Heads of State or Government every two years and annual spring meetings of Ministers of Foreign Affairs; Foreign Ministers review progress and provide policy guidance; see also Parliamentary Question to Commission, Eastern Partnership, 2 July 2008, H-0560/08, Nr. 53.

Whereas the Union for the Mediterranean caused discussions and diverging ideas between the Member States (namely France and Germany), the Eastern Partnership was brought on the political agenda very smoothly, without giving rise to any important disputes between Member States. From the beginning, all EU Member States were asked to be equally involved and to actively participate in the EaP. Poland and Sweden did not make the mistake of presenting the initiative as a one-state prestige project –as France had done–. Also, the timing of the Polish-Swedish proposal was good. After intensive discussions within the Member States, the UfM had finally been brought into the EU's structure. The first Polish-Swedish document was based on this recent consensus,⁸ foreseeing a close link between the initiative and the Commission. Whereas the UfM emphasised the importance of private funding, the financial support for the EaP should derive from the EU budget itself.⁹

The Eastern Partnership: A Step Towards Potential Membership for Eastern European Neighbours?

The strategic purpose of the new regional cooperation initiatives such as the UfM and the EaP remains unclear and leaves enough space for interpretation. It is unquestionable that the new dynamics in the neighbourhood will influence and have a significant impact on the development of the Enlargement policy, but more likely on the development of the ENP. The question whether these initiatives are complementary or whether they compete with existing policies –such as the EU's Enlargement policy or Neighbourhood policy– remains unanswered. EU institutions claim that the new initiatives are complementary to the existing policies. Nevertheless, some member states interpret the regional initiatives as intermediate steps for future Enlargement.

Differing Objectives and Interpretations

In order to analyse the impact of the EaP on existing policies it is essential to give an overview regarding its perception in the different groups of interest. First reactions to the new initiative indicate two main tendencies: one towards a 'soft' Enlargement policy, aiming for the progressive integration of the eastern countries to the EU; and another to upgrade the ENP, ignoring membership aspirations.

When conceptualising the ENP and placing it in relation with Enlargement, the old member states (EU-15) did not sufficiently take into consideration the possible spheres of interest of the new Member States and their impact on shaping existing policies. The strong lobby in favour of further EU enlargement –such as for the Ukraine and Moldova– by new Member States was not sufficiently anticipated. The central and eastern European states have taken the opportunity presented by Eastern Enlargement in 2004 and 2007 to profit from their long experience and existing relationships with their neighbours. Traditionally Germany and Poland lobby more strongly for their eastern neighbours than Spain or Portugal, who are especially interested in Latin America. France lobbies –as it did with the UfM– for North Africa and the Middle East. However, Poland's incentive for the proposal on the EaP is more than just a move in favour of the east to counter balance the recent focus to the south.

⁸ Given the strong reaction to the UfM, Poland and Sweden cut down their proposal from 60 to 3 pages.

⁹ Stuttgarter Zeitung, "Die Nachbarn rücken wieder in den Fokus", 20 November 2008, Interview with Benita Ferrero Waldner, "My wish would be to provide ENP-countries gradually with the same budget as countries that will be EU-members".

Whereas the French President Nicolas Sarkozy's initial motivation for launching the UfM was understood by some stakeholders as a proposal to find alternatives to Enlargement, especially regarding Turkey,¹⁰ Poland's motivation regarding the EaP seems to be the opposite. The Polish Foreign Minister, Radosław Sikorski, commented in June 2008 that the EaP had 'no official tie-in to the enlargement policy', but that it would make future accession 'natural, once EU Enlargement fatigue'¹¹ had passed. The intention is not only to strengthen the EU's relation with its eastern neighbours in the form of a specific partnership, but reflects the advocacy of prospective membership. Concerning the Ukraine's aspiration to membership, Poland requires that the new engagement with Eastern Europe should at least facilitate application for membership if not the actual opening of negotiations.

The EaP countries are not yet ready for membership –as it should be borne in mind that the basic needs for stable development in the region, such as well functioning and continuous state administration, are absent– and neither is the EU –or its institutions and citizens– prepared for further enlargement. Given the existing 'Enlargement fatigue', further enlargement beyond the Western Balkans and Turkey will be difficult to justify to the EU's citizens. For the time being, both EU member states and institutions are avoiding messages regarding the approval of prospective membership bids. Nevertheless, certain member states are keen not to close the doors of the EU to their eastern neighbours. Poland is trying to speed up their possible transformation into EU members and its stance was reinforced when Sikorski made the following statement in June 2008: 'We in Poland make a distinction between the southern dimension and the eastern dimension of the ENP and it consists in this: to the south, we have neighbours of Europe, to the east we have European neighbours. They all have the right one day to apply, to fulfil the criteria for EU membership, and, perhaps, to become members'.¹² Clearly, the motivation is to link the Eastern Partnership to the Enlargement policy, even though this is not directly claimed in the Polish-Swedish proposal.

Impact on Existing Policies: A Trend Towards a 'Soft' Enlargement?

There are several motives for proposing new forms of cooperation. One interpretation is that the aim is to bring the eastern neighbours closer to the EU while opening up the prospect of membership for them. Therefore these new initiatives could be interpreted as a first commitment for the eastern neighbours towards further Enlargement. This could imply a 'soft' version of the existing Enlargement policy, stressing the possible eligibility of those concerned within the framework of Enlargement policy.

Nevertheless, the Commission stresses that cooperation within the EaP will be below the threshold of membership. There is no reference to Enlargement in its Communication. However, the fact that no parallel structures are foreseen for the Eastern Partnership indicates a tendency towards future possible Enlargement. For its initiators it seems more advantageous to tackle the Eastern Partnership in the framework of existing EU structures than establishing parallel institutional structures that make future EU membership redundant.

¹⁰ Turkey was confronted with this idea and was initially very hesitant until just before the Summit at which the UfM was established (Paris, 13 July 2008).

¹¹ Unian, "Poland's 'Eastern Partnership' set for summit approval", 17 June 2008.

¹² Radio Free Europe Documents and Publications, "EU: Poland, Sweden breath new life into Eastern Neighbourhood", 26 May 2008.

The fact that the six partner countries of the EaP are not as heterogeneous as the countries in the UfM (candidate countries, countries with recognised membership prospects and southern ENP countries without membership prospects) also underlines a clearer vocation towards Enlargement.

Upgrading ENP or Dividing it into Eastern and Southern Dimensions?

Given the different interests of member states in respect to the new initiatives a tendency to divide the single nature of the European Neighbourhood Policy can be observed. The initial approach in 2003 of creating one coherent framework for all neighbours might in the long term be divided into two different dimensions. The southern countries of the ENP, which generally do not have any possibility of membership, could form a southern dimension and the eastern European neighbours an eastern dimension.

It is important that each dimension should not be promoted solely by its own advocates as this could lead to a split between the member states supporting the southern dimension on the one hand and the eastern on the other. Therefore, the EaP should be promoted at all the EU's institutional levels and by all member states, including the southern ones such as Portugal and Spain.

Conclusion: The EaP can be understood by some stakeholders as an intermediate step to future EU membership. The scope of interpretation provided by the ambivalence regarding possible membership for the eastern ENP countries implies opportunities as well as dangers. On the one hand, it could be positively interpreted and therefore play an important role in the partner countries as a driving force for reform regarding the establishment of the rule of law, democracy and a market economy, which are important steps towards EU integration and membership. The demand to implement elements such as the rule of law is much more promising in the framework of the eastern dimension than it is in the southern dimension. A more ambitious political approach has prospects for success in the EaP countries, especially as the possibility of membership is not explicitly excluded. In this respect it is likely that the Ukraine will not wait for another decade before handing in its EU membership application. It is both right and important that the ENP participating states are informed frankly about who has no prospects of accession and who might possibly accede at a later date in return for the fulfilment of the existing criteria. By allowing its European neighbours to hope for membership and thus functioning as an incentive to carry out reforms as defined by the EU, an accelerated process of 'Europeanisation' could be achieved. Nevertheless, such an option can be maintained only for a limited period of time. In the medium term, the EU must reach an agreement on this point, in particular concerning the idea of clearly distinguishing Enlargement and ENP policies. Not having a clear message regarding possible future membership could be discouraging and serve as a barrier to reform. The question of how to deal with growing membership aspirations in the framework of the EaP and whether this could evolve in the future into a 'soft' Enlargement must be clarified in the long term.

It is important to prevent regional initiatives from competing with each other and each EU rotating presidency from coming up with new proposals which in the end do not lead to any added value but are a purely technical exercise for the EU institutions. If national interests and spheres of interest come into conflict and neighbourhood projects fail to find a comprehensive consensus in the EU Council, the EU will be faced with a recurring problem every six months, questioning the effectiveness of its neighbourhood policies. It is vital to debate whether enhanced cooperation with its neighbours will be a substitute for or the first step towards EU membership.

Outlook

The next rotating EU Presidencies seem to be point to a balanced mix of southern and eastern interests. The French launch of the UfM in 2008 favoured the south and so will in all likelihood the Spaniards (2010) and perhaps the Belgians (2010). The upcoming Czech Presidency has already announced its strong support for the EaP, aiming to launch it in a special summit in Prague in the spring of 2009. The Swedes, co-initiators of the EaP (2009), and the Hungarians (2011) will probably promote the east before Poland presides the Council in 2011.

Regarding the UfM, the Commission's Communication followed by the Council's decision implied a scaling down of Sarkozy's initial expectations. Taking into account the various interests and views of the EU member states concerning a new EU approach to Eastern Europe, the Commission's Communication on the EaP will surely require a reconsideration before it can be adopted by the Council. Visa facilitation agreements, for instance, are likely to run into substantial resistance from certain member states.¹³ Other might also want to distance themselves from any discussions on further enlargement, especially in view of the upcoming European elections in June 2009. Another important question concerns Russia and the integration of third countries into the initiative. As regards the current economic downturn, it would seem to be of the utmost importance for the effectiveness of this new initiative to analyse the financial resources the EU will actually have to develop its European Neighbourhood Policy in the desired way. The real added value of the EaP will mainly depend on how much financial resources the EU will be willing to devote. The increased financial support would be an added value to the existing ENP framework.

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¹³ Gunnar Wiegand, Gunnar, GD Relex, European Commission; Workshop KAS: Eastern Partnership - Strengthening the Eastern Dimension of the European Neighbourhood Policy?, KAS European Office, Brussels, 17 September 2008.