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The EU's Eastern Partnership: expectations and new opportunities^(*)

After the fall of the Soviet Union, Armenia retained strong ties with Russia, while at the same time attempting to find areas of political, economic and social cooperation with the European Union. The relations between the EU and Armenia are governed through the framework of the EU-Armenia Partnership and Cooperation Agreement signed in 1996 and implemented in 1999. With the continued enlargement of the EU, the European Neighbourhood Policy Instrument was launched, and was joined by Armenia in 2004. Specifically, the Armenian government finally adopted the ENPI on 14 November 2006. A National Indicative Programme (NIP) was also adopted by Armenia, covering the period from 2007 to 2010 with a total sum of 98.4 million euro allocated. Along with the ENPI national programme, Armenia has benefited from the ENPI regional and interregional programmes and from other thematic programmes such as the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR).

With some background on the current socio-political situation in Armenia, we can begin to look at how various instruments such as the ENPI and the EIDHR are being implemented. The ENPI in Armenia is now focused on three major areas: support for democratic structures and good governance, support for regulatory reform and capacity building, and support for poverty reduction efforts. The ENPI addresses a limited number of priorities that are relevant for Armenia but also have a regional impact on the Caucasus at large. There are some examples of implementation capacity visible in ENPI projects for Armenia. For example, a set of five thematic programmes will be available under the new set of instruments, including food security, migration and asylum, investing in people, local actors in development, and environment and sustainable management of resources, including energy.

There will also be a Stability Instrument for providing flexible integrated responses to crises. The Stability Instrument will be particularly relevant for Armenia, considering the situation with Nagorno-Karabakh and possibilities for a peaceful settlement of the conflict. The situation in Nagorno-Karabakh has been in stalemate with a ceasefire but no real lasting peace, thus the Stability Instrument may augment the negotiations currently underway within the OSCE Minsk Group. The Stability Instrument will also complement the civil

No. 29 – NOVEMBER 2010

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society and “person to person” initiatives that are underway, including the joint publications by the Yerevan and Baku National Press Clubs.

In the “EU - Armenia Action Plan”, European Community assistance priorities became even more specific, being centred on the topics of reforming democratic structures and good governance, support for regulatory reform and capacity building, and support for poverty reduction efforts. These specific assistance priorities now include the following: strengthening of democratic structures of the rule of law, strengthening respect for human rights and fundamental freedom, encouraging further economic development/enhancing poverty reduction efforts and social cohesion, further improvement of the investment climate, strengthening of private sector-led growth, further convergence of economic legislation and administrative practices, development of an energy strategy including early decommissioning of the Medzamor Nuclear Power Plant, contributing to a peaceful solution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, and enhanced efforts in the field of regional cooperation. These assistance priorities apply to all assistance instruments and programmes which will or might be available for Armenia.

While many ENPI initiatives for Armenia should be implemented before 2013, there has already been progress in certain areas. With respect to the ENP Action Plan, progress has been achieved in the areas of judiciary reform and election administration. Besides these areas, there has been some progress on conflict prevention and crisis management. The government has decided to re-launch the ratification process of the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court. Armenia also continues to cooperate with the UN and NATO in exchanging information on terrorism issues, through the assessment mission of the UN Counter Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate in Yerevan. On education reform, Armenia continues along the lines of the Bologna Process to modernise its curricula and make improvements to the administration and organisational structures of universities. Armenia has also drafted an updated action plan for the modernisation of vocational training for 2008-2010, to improve governance and financing and introduce merit-based standards and examples of quality monitoring.

The EU assistance programmes for partner countries are based on the proven instruments which were applied in East-Central European states during the enlargement process. The EU has also created several new tools. In June 2008, at the request of Poland and Sweden, the Council of the European Union instructed the European Commission to expand the European Neighbourhood Policy in the form of the Eastern Partnership. The EU’s Eastern Partnership (EaP) was introduced in Prague on 7 May 2009. It represents a concerted effort by the EU and six non-EU former Soviet republics – Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine – to upgrade and expand their relationship. The project is designed to facilitate the political and economic integration of the EaP countries with the EU, with the help of various bilateral and multilateral cooperation programmes. At the same time, the EaP should not be seen as an alternative to the action plans signed by the EU and partner countries within the ENP framework. Instead, it aims to give new impetus to existing cooperation initiatives. At the same time, it must be mentioned that two things make the EaP different from past and ongoing cooperation formats. On the one hand, the scope of cooperation between the EU and each partner country is determined by the scale and progress of the reforms implemented by that country. On the other hand, the EU is well aware that civil society can play a special role in the political decision-making process. It was for this reason that the Civil Society Forum was founded in Brussels on 17 November 2009. The best, most innovative recommendations given by participants in the Civil Society Forum were presented to the foreign ministers of the EaP member states on 8 December 2009. According to European Commission officials, the recommendations would be useful during discussions on the EaP thematic platforms.

The EU offers each partner country long-term assistance in the implementation of democratic and market reforms which aim to bring economic and political stability. In addition, the multilateral component of the EaP can be used as a tool to assist in the implementation of reforms and the creation of a common forum and four thematic platforms for experience-sharing between the partner countries.

The EU is ready to start talks with partner countries over Association Agreements within the EaP framework. This is one of the key elements of the EaP. The Association Agreements are intended to be successor documents to the Partnership and Cooperation Agreements (PCA) currently in force between the EU and its partner countries. The Association Agreement sets forth the following priorities for bilateral cooperation between the EU and partner countries:

- Comprehensive free trade agreements.
- Support for institutional development and administrative capacity building programmes in partner countries.
- Elaboration of Mobility and Security Pacts designed to facilitate travel within the EU for citizens of the participant states, and to help partner countries to combat corruption, organised crime and illegal migration. They also aim to bring national legislatures closer to European standards, develop efficient and integrated border management/asylum systems and liberalise visa regimes. Special attention is to be given to research into workforce mobility and free access to European labour markets for citizens of partner countries.
- Measures to bolster the energy security of partner countries include investment in infrastructure, instituting better regulation of energy efficiency, and the creation of an early warning system in the energy sector to avoid crisis situations.

The EU also encourages multilateral cooperation among the EaP countries. This format of cooperation includes the following main components:

- Four policy platforms: 1) democracy, good governance and stability, 2) economic integration and convergence with EU policies, 3) energy security, 4) contacts between people;
- Cooperation in dealing with environmental problems and climate change;
- The allocation of an additional 350 m euro before 2013;
- Five flagship initiatives for sector-specific policy dialogues on the following issues: 1) Integrated border management programme, 2) energy market, energy efficiency and renewable energy, 3) small- and medium-size enterprise (SME) facility, 4) diversification of energy supply: the southern energy corridor, 5) prevention of natural and man-made disasters, preparedness for them and response to them.

The EaP also covers security issues. It aims to promote stability and security in the EU's neighbourhood, strengthen the ties between the EU and partner countries, improve cooperation, and normalise political relations between partner countries. It also provides for cooperation within the framework of the Common Foreign and Security Policy, reinforcement of early warning systems in conflict zones, and cooperation in arms exports and the non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction.

The progress achieved since 2004 as a result of the ENP will have a positive impact on future bilateral and multilateral cooperation between the EU and the EaP countries. The scope and intensity of cooperation between the EU and partner states will depend on each partner country's capabilities and resources. To this end, the EU will send a high-profile mission to each partner country at least twice a year to assess each country's progress across the four thematic platforms. Working meetings will be held on issues related to each thematic platform as often as necessary. It is also planned that the leaders of EU and partner countries will gather for summits once every two years, while foreign ministers will convene annually to assess progress.

The EaP budget totals 600 m euro. It is partly funded by the European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument, and ENPI funds account for about a quarter of the EaP 2010-2013 budget. All existing ENPI financial mechanisms, including TAIX (Technical Assistance and Information Exchange) and Twinning, will be applied to streamline the implementation of the EaP. In addition, the European Commission will establish direct contacts with partner regions through cross-border cooperation programmes. The EU will also carry out various investment programmes in underdeveloped regions.

The EU has set cooperation priorities and the scope and intensity of the reforms expected of each EaP country. In each country the process will depend on the successful implementation of reforms. This means that all partner countries, including Armenia, will be given a chance to establish a special relationship with the EU on the path towards European integration. Civil society organisations within the partner states can also play a significant role in this process. By creating the Civil Society Forum, the EU has clearly signalled that it acknowledges the special role of civil society organisations and considers them natural partners of European institutions and the governments of EaP countries. The participants emphasised that their contribution would be more beneficial if they had a role in the planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of bilateral and multilateral cooperation programmes. That is

why it is now important for Armenia's civil society to become more involved and to participate in the planning of Eastern Partnership programmes. This will help them to set up civil monitoring and assessment missions in the future to oversee the implementation of national action plans. It would also be useful for Armenian civil society to assume a greater role in the implementation of reforms in the country. This can be achieved with the help of the Civil Society Forum's thematic platforms and by being part of networks of local and international civil institutions, by capacity building in the monitoring/assessment of reforms, and by raising awareness of the principles and priorities of the EU/ENP/Eastern Partnership. The following communication mechanisms created by the Civil Society Forum will be instrumental in this respect:

- The Civil Society Forum website will give all stakeholders free access to bilateral and multilateral official documents/agreements/policy papers written by EU institutions and national governments. Stakeholders will be able to upload their comments and research to the website.
- National facilitators and working group coordinators will be in charge of communication between civil society organisations, national government and the European Commission.

Overall, the Civil Society Forum opens up new opportunities for civil society, both in Armenia and in other partner countries. It offers them the chance to take part in a tripartite dialogue (involving the EU, national governments and civil society) and to contribute to cooperation between partner countries and European integration.

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November http://ec.europa.eu/external_relations/eastern/civil_society/forum/members_sc_en.pdf

