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The Promise of Eastern Partnership

7 May 2009 marked the beginning of a new phase in the European Union's relationship with its eastern neighbors. In an effort to strengthen the eastern dimension of the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) the EU reached out to the six ex-Soviet states of Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine and launched a new initiative aimed at promoting a deeper political and economic engagement with these countries. One of the major premises of the EU's Eastern Partnership (hereinafter EaP) is to build on existing instruments of co-operation with eastern European partner countries by introduction of a more structured mechanism for advancing the dialogue between the EU and its eastern neighboring countries. While it is high time for the EU to respond to the new realities existing on its eastern borders by reshaping and reinvigorating the policies pursued vis-à-vis these nations, successful implementation of EaP largely depends on the political will and commitment of the participating countries to the principles put forward by this initiative.

By launching EaP the EU finds itself in a more comfortable position by establishing a new, and arguably, more effective channel for cooperation with its eastern partners, without extending the promise of the eventual EU membership. On the other

hand, existing different conditions and attitudes toward the EU integration within the countries in question represent major challenges for making this initiative work. As a result, EaP runs the risk of turning into yet another benign but ineffective endeavor if it does not take into account current realities within the EU as well as in its eastern neighborhood and develops adequate and necessary tools for strengthening the EU's role in promotion of stability and security at its eastern borders. To this end, EaP should take into account the following realities:

- Given that the six target nations have different policy priorities in their relationship with the EU, the latter needs to clearly define the *modus operandi* vis-à-vis each of these countries. This involves a realistic, case-by-case assessment of each country's ability to comply with the principles put forward by the initiative and employment of an adequate approach by the EU in its relations with the countries.
- EaP does not address the problems of protracted regional conflicts; however, the EU has to strengthen its role in the conflict resolution efforts in the eastern neighborhood. August 2008 war in Georgia demonstrated that this type of conflicts bear direct threats to the EU's own security.

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Abstract

The European Union's Eastern Partnership emerged in a changed environment where the EU faced the necessity to upgrade its relations with the neighbouring countries and channel its interactions with them in a more effective and responsive manner. Launching of this initiative demonstrates that notwithstanding the "enlargement fatigue" and the EU's cautious stance toward raising any membership expectations among the aspiring nations, the EU considers it necessary to restructure its relationships with the neighbours in the way that brings them politically and economically closer.

At the outset of this initiative one could argue that there is a long way to go for EaP to prove its viability and effectiveness. As it stands now, EaP presents an opportunity to beef up EU's relations with the eastern partner countries, yet, without committing itself to a major strategic shift with an appropriate financial input. On other hand, the partner countries will have to demonstrate their willingness to pursue all needed reforms that will raise the level of their integration with the EU. Based on these constraints, the effectiveness of this initiative in promoting its overall goal of accelerated political association and further economic integration will depend upon the establishment of clear and realistic benchmarks per each country and adherence to the principle of conditionality on the part of EU.

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Moreover, development of the sound political and economic interactions between the EU and its eastern partners is impossible in an environment prone to the outburst of violence and conflict. Thus, the efforts undertaken by means of EaP should eventually contribute to the stability and security in the eastern neighborhood.

- EaP should not turn into a sole prism through which the EU sees its relationship with the partner countries. Given the fact that expectations toward the EU among the six countries vary, there should exist a certain degree of willingness on the part of EU to take the dialogue with the particular partner country to a higher level if the latter demonstrates a strong and steady record of adhering to the necessary political and economic reforms. By doing this, EU will provide a strong incentive to the interested countries to proceed on the path of further Europeanization.

The whole package of bilateral and multilateral tools is designed to bring Eastern partners closer to the EU. Besides providing new opportunities, EaP will test the ability and readiness of the partner countries to fully comply with the demands of the EU and promote further Europeanization in their countries.

From ENP to EaP

By development of the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP)¹ the EU defined concrete

¹ First outlined in EC Communication on Wider Europe

terms on which it proposed to cooperate with its neighbors, both at its southern and eastern borders, in the post-enlargement period. By bringing the countries of Eastern Europe, South Caucasus, North Africa, the Middle East² under a single ENP umbrella, the EU communicated two important messages: firstly, it established a clear separation of its policies toward south and eastern neighborhood from that of enlargement process. Secondly, the EU offered to upgrade existing cooperation frameworks to a privileged relationship, which would imply a deeper political and economic integration. The introduction of ENP was generally perceived as a positive step forward in terms of introducing a clearer focus and the country-tailored agendas for political and economic reforms. However, certain concerns were raised by EU membership aspiring countries and some experts alike about the wisdom of segregating ENP from the enlargement process. As the evidence suggests this has not diminished the desire of some eastern European ENP countries to seek regular EU membership³.

While EaP follows the suit of ENP in not offering any

in March 2003 and next thoroughly articulated in a *Strategy Paper on the European Neighborhood Policy* published in May 2004.

² ENP is not applied to Russia. Its relations with EU are governed through a separate *Strategic Partnership* covering four “common spaces” – on economy; freedom, security and justice; external security; research and education.

³ H. WALLACE, *The European Union and Its Neighborhood*, ELIAMEP Thesis, 4/2009, May 2009, p. 3.

membership perspective to the partner countries, it reiterates that there will be no prejudice to individual partner countries’ aspirations for their future relationship with the EU and the principles of differentiation and conditionality still stand among the governing principles of this initiative⁴. This said, development of EaP marked yet another shift in the EU’s policies toward its neighbors. EaP emerged as a response on the part of some EU member states, namely, Poland, Sweden and Czech Republic, to the initiation of a Union for Mediterranean endorsed by European Council in March 2008. While the latter presented a new framework for strengthening the EU’s southern partnerships, EaP was envisaged to address existing disparities between the EU’s southern and eastern dimensions⁵ and develop the EU’s eastern policy based on upgraded contractual relationships. Some argue that EaP is another pragmatic response to “enlargement fatigue”, which allows for bringing eastern neighbors close to EU without alienating EU member states not prepared to discuss new enlargement commitments at this stage. In this context, EaP provides a chance for closer cooperation with the Eastern neighbors adding a “new quality” in their relations with the EU⁶.

Georgian-Russian war in August 2008 gave an impetus to the

⁴ *Joint Declaration of the Prague Eastern Partnership Summit*, 1 May 7, 2009, www.eu2009.cz.

⁵ *Eastern Partnership: The Opening Report*, The Polish Institute of International Affairs, April 2009, www.pism.pl.

⁶ *Ibidem*.

process of developing this new regional cooperation proposal. Besides the clear repercussions that this conflict had on stability and security in Europe, it demonstrated to the EU that it needs to develop an unambiguous policy toward its eastern neighborhood which would take into account existing political realities and serve as a tool for securing the EU's interests as well. In this light, EaP provides an opportunity to increase the EU's role in the region through strengthening bilateral and multilateral interactions with the partner countries on the matters of common interest.

This emphasis on common interests and commitments is made in the very first paragraph of the Joint Declaration of the Prague Summit of 7 May 2009. Unsurprisingly, the reference to the values that EU stands for comes next. This is explained by the limitations that the existing conditions in partner countries set on EU's application of its core standards of freedom and good governance. Moreover, since the summit declarations bear no binding force, some argue that this will hardly guarantee commitment of the partner countries. Ahead of the Prague Summit certain skepticism was aired on the Joint Declaration being an ambitious articulation of ideas, rather than a summary of conditions that make closer cooperation unavoidable⁷.

Certainly, EU member states have been very careful in choosing the wording for

⁷ A. LOBJAKAS, *EU's Eastern Partnership Strains To Juggle Interests, Values, RFE/RL*, April 29, 2009, www.rferl.org.

announcing this initiative. To begin with, the draft text of the Joint Declaration was amended to change the definition of six partner countries from "European" to "Eastern European" to prevent encouragement for EU membership and appease concerns of some western European EU members. Besides the softened language on advancement of European values, the summit document is particularly cautious with regard to the issue of visa liberalization. Respective clause articulates the EU support for mobility of citizens and pledges "to take gradual steps towards full visa liberalization as a long term goal for individual partner countries on a case-by-case basis provided that conditions for well-managed and secure mobility are in place"⁸. This modest articulation comes as a toned-down version of the wording that the proponents of this initiative put forward in their original proposals, namely the one put forward by Poland on introduction of visa facilitations for eastern neighbors with the abolition of visas envisaged in the long run⁹ and Czech proposals which spoke of "visa free" travel¹⁰.

What's New in EaP?

In addition to the existing bilateral cooperation mechanisms between the EU and

⁸ *Joint Declaration of the Prague Eastern Partnership Summit*, May 7, 2009, www.eu2009.cz.

⁹ *Eastern Partnership: The Opening Report*, The Polish Institute of International Affairs, April 2009, www.pism.pl.

¹⁰ A. RETTMAN, *EU Summit Text loaded With Eastern Tension*, EUObserver.com, May 7, 2009.

partner countries, which constitute a central element of ENP, EaP offers a multilateral track in its relations with the eastern neighbors. This multilateral component will function as a forum for exchange of experiences and development of joint activities. In terms of operational structure, it will involve: (a) meetings of Heads of State or Government of the EaP every two years; (b) annual meetings of the Ministers of Foreign Affairs; and (c) establishment of four thematic platforms which will convene at least twice a year with participation of senior officials from respective policy areas. The four themes are developed in accordance to the main areas of cooperation: 1. Democracy, good governance and stability; 2. Economic integration and convergence with the EU policies; 3. Energy security; 4. Contacts between people. In addition, supporting panels for the thematic platforms are to be established in specific areas with the format and participants to be determined according to the need¹¹. In an effort to showcase and augment this multilateral component European Commission promotes five flagship initiatives on Integrated Border Management Programme; SME facility; regional electricity markets, improved energy efficiency and increased use of renewable energy sources; southern energy corridor; and response to disasters.

¹¹ EC Communication on Eastern Partnership. Brussels, December 3, 2008, http://ec.europa.eu/external_relations/eastern/index_en.htm.

Another new element is the offer of a new contractual basis¹² – Association Agreements (AAs) between EU and partner countries «who are willing and able to comply with the resulting commitments»¹³. As a manifestation of a deeper bilateral engagement with the eastern partners, the EU extends new AAs which will provide the legal basis for a higher degree of political and economic engagement with the eastern partners.

While the detailed analysis of the new bilateral and multilateral frameworks that EaP offers goes beyond the scope of this paper, there are several key elements that should be emphasized. First of all, EaP paves the way for establishment of deep and comprehensive free trade areas (DCFTAs) with each partner country's WTO membership being a necessary prerequisite. DCFTAs will contain legally binding commitments on regulatory approximation in trade-related areas and will anchor the necessary economic modernization within the partner countries¹⁴.

The EU will adopt a gradual and case-by-case approach in dealing with the visa facilitation issue and will link this process to the existence of conditions for well-managed and secure mobility within the partner countries. Based on the "mobility and security pacts", specific roadmaps will be

developed in relation with the partner countries which will entail progressive visa policies subject to the compliance of the partner country to the obligations of respective agreements.

As means of strengthening capacities of the eastern partners in implementation of political and economic reforms the EU will develop Comprehensive Institution-Building Programmes (CIBs) to improve administrative capacities of individual countries through trainings and technical assistance. This element is of a particular importance in terms of reinforcing the potential impact of the EU support. By investing in strengthening local capacities for negotiating and implementing EaP commitments, the EU will maximize the receptiveness of reforms in the partner countries, thus contributing to the sustainability of these reforms.

In parallel to the multilateral framework for cooperation in the area of energy security, EaP will employ bilateral measures ranging from inclusion of "Energy interdependence" provisions in the AAs to gradual convergence with the EU energy markets and infrastructure integration.

All these elements build into the common policy that EU pledges to promote vis-à-vis its eastern neighbors. Clearly, much depends on the existence of the necessary political will within EU member states as well as eastern partners which will allow for turning this ambitious agenda into a reality. The emphasis on joint ownership threads all documents on EaP and this is something that the

EU and partner countries will need to nurture.

Challenges ahead

There are certain problems which might turn into spoilers if not addressed and accommodated throughout the process of EaP implementation. These problems are of geopolitical as well as functional nature. As expected, the most conspicuous one refers to relationship with Russia in the context of this new EU undertaking. Russia's reaction came in the words of criticism from the country's foreign minister Sergei Lavrov who suggested that EU was seeking to build its sphere of influence into the former Soviet territory. In addition, Lavrov demanded the right for Russia to have a say on international questions affecting Russia¹⁵. In a response to this allegation EU High Representative for CFSP Javier Solana noted that by means of this effort EU wants to «establish a mechanism of relationship which is more stable, more institutional, and that has nothing to do with our [EU's] relationship with Russia»¹⁶.

Opinions in Russia consider this initiative largely in the geopolitical terms and regard it as an effort against the geopolitical interests of Russia. The major argument suggests that by reaching out to the countries constituting sphere of "Russia's privileged interests"

¹² ENP builds on existing Partnership and Cooperation Agreements (PCAs)

¹³ *Ibidem*.

¹⁴ EC Communication on Eastern Partnership. Brussels, December 3, 2008, http://ec.europa.eu/external_relations/eastern/index_en.htm.

¹⁵ *Moscow Worried over Eastern Partnership*, May 6, 2009, www.earthtimes.org.

¹⁶ *EU Hits Back at Russian "Nonsense" over Eastern Initiative*, Source: silverscorpio.com.

the EU seeks to weaken Russia and cause an ultimate separation of former Soviet states from Russia¹⁷.

In an effort to somehow accommodate Russia's concerns the EU has included provision on development of bilateral cooperation with the third states (namely, Russia and Turkey) which will go in parallel with EaP. In addition, EC Communication on EaP offers a possibility to cooperate with the third countries within the multilateral framework and reads as follows: "third countries could be involved in the work of a thematic platform, a panel or an initiative, on a case by case basis and if there is agreement that common interests in a topic, geographical proximity or existing economic links would make this beneficial"¹⁸. This, however, is expected to be hardly sufficient to change Russia's mindset on the matter.

In the context of this geopolitical dilemma, the EU will inevitably face the problem of accommodating certain contradictions in the partner countries' commitments as well. This is most salient in the case of Belarus. Despite strong reservations voiced within the EU toward extending EaP to this country, ruled by an authoritarian regime of Alyeksandr Lukashenka, the EU eventually decided to abandon its policy of isolation in favor of the policy of engagement. Besides running the risk of

legitimizing Lukashenka regime, EU also opens the door to serious legal questions over where the jurisdiction of Eurasian Economic Community (EuroAsEc) ends, with Belarus being a member country¹⁹, and that of EaP begins²⁰. In case of Belarus, however, further skepticism is invited by the unfavorable political conditions within the country which may render EU's principle of conditionality unworkable in this particular case.

Generally, EaP will have to deal with a very diverse group of partners and this factor particularly complicates engagement of all partners in the multilateral framework of cooperation as envisaged by EaP. Different values, political agendas and alliances that drive the policies of the six EaP countries present a challenge to their compliance to the EU *acquis*.

Significance of EaP for the countries of South Caucasus largely relies on the hopes for a larger degree of EU involvement in the region that will reinforce stability and bring positive effect to stalled processes of conflict resolution. Security considerations are at the core of the approaches undertaken by these countries in their relations with EU. While all of them have declared EU integration as their "strategic choice" (with the different degree of practical evidence to support these declarations), there is no

coherence within the group due to the existing security problems and, hence, different perceptions on ensuring one's security. For instance, for Georgia Russian policies constitute a major security threat, while Armenia regards Russia as a guarantor of its security and heavily relies on it not only militarily, but also politically and economically.

All three countries of South Caucasus praise the possibility of creating free trade zones and visa liberalization that EaP offers. It is yet to be seen what will be their record of compliance to the conditions and requirement put in place by EU in return to these rewards.

Georgia regards EaP as another avenue to intensify its interactions with the EU. However, it should be mentioned that there is a limited debate on the issue within Georgian society at large. Generally, this initiative is perceived as a contributor to increasing the EU's role in the region and an opportunity for Georgia to draw the EU's attention to the most salient problems Georgia faces in the aftermath of the August 2008 war. In addition to the traditional set of expectations – visa facilitation, establishment of free trade area – Georgia hopes that the EU will significantly contribute to the economic reconstruction of the country. As regards to the direct benefits this initiative offers in terms of consolidating and fostering democratic and economic reforms, Georgia considers EaP as a valuable tool for advancing on its path to the EU integration and by no means as a substitute to the EU membership perspective. The most immediate concern that

¹⁷ Сергей Жильцов, *СНГ под натиском "Восточного партнерства"*, in «Независимая Газета», April 30, 2009, www.ng.ru.

¹⁸ EC Communication on Eastern Partnership. Brussels, December 3, 2008, http://ec.europa.eu/external_relations/eastern/index_en.htm.

¹⁹ Established in 2000, EurAsEc created a single economic space and free trade zone among its members.

²⁰ *Belarus and the Dilemmas of the Eastern Partnership*, in «Eurasia Daily Monitor», 6, 82, April 29, 2009.

comes into view at this stage refers to Georgia's inability to comply with EaP on the policies reflecting EU's regulatory approach. As an expert on Georgia-EU relations Kakha Gogolashvili suggests "The government's ultraliberal economic policy, taking "deregulation" as a founding principle, has conflicted with ENP Action Plan commitments. There is still a lack of understanding of the importance of compliance with all topics of the Action Plan, if real progress on the way to closer integration with the EU is desired"²¹.

Ukraine, the country which is well ahead of other EaP nations in its bilateral relations with EU, is particularly concerned over the possible perception of EaP by some western European officials as a substitute for the promise of country's EU membership. Ukraine regards it as yet another phase in the process of eventual accession to the EU and stresses the fact the EaP recognizes Ukraine's European identity. In his comments on EaP, the President of Ukraine Victor Yushchenko welcomed this initiative as a «separate formula of relations with Eastern Europe countries», underlining, however, that «Ukraine does not perceive the dialogue within the framework of Eastern Partnership as an alternative to our integration expectancies, we are developing through the Association Agreement....We would not like the dialogue of integration replaced by other form, which does not foresee

Ukraine's membership in the EU»²².

EaP opens up new opportunities for Azerbaijan to strengthen its relations with the EU in the area of energy security by offering an enhanced engagement with Azerbaijan as the only EaP hydrocarbon exporting partner to the EU, based on Azerbaijan's gradual convergence with the EU energy market and infrastructure integration²³. However chances for developing sound democratic policies in Azerbaijan by means of EaP remain low.

In case of Moldova, the initiative was met by a criticism which largely relied on the premise that EaP serves as a tool for diverting Moldova's from its goal of EU membership and does not take into account its advance status in transformation process. Surprisingly, this statement came against the backdrop of the election crisis²⁴. However, one would also suggest that Russian factor has to be taken into account here as well.

This brief overview of approaches of the target countries demonstrates that in selecting tools for further engagement with the eastern partners the EU will need to draw upon the realistic assumptions on the conditions and capabilities of each target country and develop flexible and

specifically tailored approaches that will respond to the requirements of the partner countries.

Conclusion

EaP offers a pool of new opportunities for raising the level of engagement with the EU's eastern neighbors. It is early to assess the prospects of EaP. However, there are certain points that one could identify:

- Development of eastern dimension of ENP marks a significant shift in the EU's perception of its eastern neighbors. This provides for a more favorable environment for the six target countries to raise the level of their engagement with the EU.
- Bilateral and multilateral components of EaP further diversify mechanisms for exchange of experiences and information on the status of the processes of Europeanization in the eastern neighborhood.
- EaP steps up the EU visibility in the region that requires more resources and attention, particularly, from the EU member countries, for ensuring its stable and secure development.

In order to deliver on the major promise of this initiative – a deeper level of political and economic integration with the EU – certain challenges are to be addressed:

- A steady commitment from the EU member states should be ensured. This implies a continuous political support, with the active advocacy on the part of the architects of this EU initiative. This political support should be beefed up

²¹ K. GOGOLASHVILI, *The EU and Georgia – The Choice is in the Context. Europe in Dialogue*, Bertelsmann Foundation, 2009/1, p. 93.

²² Official website of the President of Ukraine www.president.gov.ua.

²³ EC Communication on Eastern Partnership. Brussels, December 3, 2008, http://ec.europa.eu/external_relations/eastern/index_en.htm.

²⁴ H. WALLACE, *The European Union and Its Neighborhood*, ELIAMEP Thesis, 4/2009, May 2009, p. 3.

by an adequate financial contribution, which will certainly go beyond the committed 600 mln Euros. Against the backdrop of existing unease among EU members over the enlargement, immigration, and overall instability in the eastern neighborhood, it will be particularly hard to accommodate these internal concerns.

- EU rewards in the framework of EaP should be linked to the performance level of the target countries. One of the major challenges that lie ahead for EaP is to find the tools of persuading the Eastern neighbors to implement the indispensable political and economic reforms to meet respective EU criteria.
- EaP should be complementary to the other existing or potential mechanisms for the EU's engagement with its eastern neighbors. Principles of joint ownership and differentiation should be fostered in elaboration of specific actions.
- EaP should contribute to the strengthening of security in the EU's eastern neighborhood. Without bearing in mind the security ramifications of the policies pursued by means of EaP, it will be difficult to think of any significant political and economic modernization in the region. One way to ensure this indirect effect of EaP is to promote tools for effective conflict prevention and confidence-building. For sure, successful implementation of EaP will raise the level of EU visibility in the region and this may lead to a more active EU engagement in the hard

security matters, namely, conflict resolution.

It remains to be seen whether EaP will be employed in a way that defeats argument about its offering a "typical EU solution – a long-term, technocratic instrument for a region full of short-term crises"²⁵. As EaP stands now, it is rather a conceptual framework, for streamlining the EU policies toward the eastern neighbors which in fact does not respond to the existing contradictions and differences between the policies pursued in the target countries and requirements of the EU integration. The character of these different approaches varies from country to country depending on existing internal conditions and governmental preferences. However, the EU will inevitably need to come up with the tools and mechanisms which will translate the ideas of EaP into actions. This is definitely a two-way process which calls for a development of a realistic and unambiguous agenda on the EU side vis-à-vis partners and existence of a strong political will on the part of the latter.

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²⁵ A. RETTMAN, *EU Summit Text loaded With Eastern Tension*, EUObserver.com, May 7, 2009.