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The Eastern Partnership – “ENP plus” for Europe’s Eastern neighbors

On May 7th, 2009, the European Union’s Eastern Partnership (EaP) is going to be launched at a summit in Prague. The current Czech council presidency will host representatives from all EU member states as well as from Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine. Russia objects the EaP, accusing the EU of trying to widen its sphere of influence in the region. While the European Union should try to disperse these concerns it should also more strongly address other political issues in the neighborhood, particularly in order to support stabilization processes. Thus, the Eastern Partnership should not become just another regional initiative without further surplus.

The initial idea for the Eastern Partnership (EaP) was set out almost four years ago and was based on the notion that if the addressed countries were to at least formally be ready to join the EU in 10 to 15 years, some EU instrument more effective than the rather technical European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) ought to be launched. This initial approach evolved into the EaP through a joint Polish-Swedish proposal, which was introduced at the General Affairs and External Relations Council in Brussels on May 26th, 2008, and was followed by a communication from the European Commission to the European Parliament and the Council. The EaP was formally launched on March 20th, 2009, during the Brussels European Council to complement the already existing regional initiatives of the Northern Dimension, covering the Nordic countries, the Baltic states, and Russia, as well as the Union for the Mediterranean, of which all EU member states and the non-EU countries that border the Mediterranean Sea are participants. Thus, the EaP is also in a way meant to counterbalance the Union for the Mediterranean. Among other things it will provide new association agreements, including deep and comprehensive free-trade agreements with the EU, assistance to improve the administrative capacity of the addressed countries in order to enhance the fight against corruption, organized crime and illegal migration, and closer cooperation in the field of energy in order to enhance energy security between the EU and the countries covered by the EaP. As an important incentive, visa-free travel is intended as a long-term goal. Thus, the EaP goes in some aspects beyond the already existing framework of the ENP.

“The EaP is to complement the already existing regional initiatives and to counterbalance the Union for the Mediterranean.”

No added value for the ENP states?

Some criticism, however, remains, particularly from Ukraine, which already has bilateral agreements with the EU covering most of the aforementioned issues. Particularly in the field of establishing a free trade area and visa policy, Kiev argues that the EaP does not provide any added value in comparison to the negotiations that are already conducted between the European Union and Ukraine. Furthermore, all other EaP countries already have separate Partnership and Cooperation agreements (PCA) with the EU, except for Belarus. Therefore the question remains why the EU proposes a new initiative to put all those countries into one basket instead of trying to pursue deeper integration individually, as it was pursued in the case of Ukraine so far. Furthermore, other regional initiatives in the EU’s Eastern neighborhood already exist. Five of the six EaP countries are already participating in the Commission’s Black Sea Synergy (BSS) that was just launched in April 2007. The only country not included is Belarus because of geographical reasons among other things. However, in the latest progress report on the BSS, it is stated that Belarus could be included “in some BSS activities at technical level”. In contrast to the European Partnership, one big advantage of the BSS is that both big regional actors, the Russian Federation and Turkey, are included. As the program seeks to increase cooperation between the countries surrounding the Black Sea, a multi-lateral dimension is certainly necessary.

In the initial proposal for the EaP, at least the Russian exclave of Kaliningrad was mentioned as a potential partner. However, the Russian participation is no longer present in the final document. Not surprisingly, the Russian foreign minister Lavrov accused the EU of trying to widen its sphere of influence through the EaP. Even if the Commission tries to emphasize that the EaP is not an initiative against Russia, the question has to be asked why the EU sets up a new framework that explicitly excludes Russia, but to some extent duplicates the already existing EU initiatives in the Black Sea region.

Different map of interests in the EU

Among the problems prior to the EaP's launch was the financial configuration of the program. The Commission has proposed a funding of 600 million Euros for the period 2010-2013. 250 million will be refocused from the ENP regional east program. The provision of the additional 350 million have, however, caused frictions between the EU member states that have a strong interest in the southern neighbors, e.g. France, Italy, and Spain, and those that are focusing more on the Eastern neighborhood. Where this funding comes from is very vaguely described in the final document of the EaP: "Increased financial support in line with the Commission's proposal of 600 million Euros for the time period until 2013 will respect the resources available under the multi-annual financial framework, including adequate margins". Or, in other words: Additional 350 million Euros yes, but probably not from the framework and not at the cost of those countries that are addressed in the framework of the Union for the Mediterranean. It is, however, not only the financial configuration of the EaP that reveals the different maps of interests between the EU member states. A EU membership perspective for the countries covered by the EaP for 2020 or later was not ruled out in the Polish-Swedish initiative. Warsaw is certainly interested in the EU membership of its Eastern neighbors, particularly Ukraine, and Stockholm is traditionally among the enlargement advocates. However, after a continuing downgrading of the initiative during the negotiations, the word EU membership was carefully avoided in the final conclusion of March 2009. This has of course to do with the increasing enlargement fatigue in Western Europe.

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While "downgrading" is a common practice in the EU policy-making process in order to find a compromise between the member states, the exclusion of the membership perspective also decreases the EU's potential leverage on the region. However, if the visa facilitation process will actually be improved, it can be considered as a strong incentive for the EaP countries to participate in the program. Nevertheless, this deeper cooperation can moreover be achieved if Russia is involved in the program. Even if the Russian fear of being circumvented seems absurd to many EU member states it needs to be respected. On the other hand, Moscow needs to understand that a stable and economically prosperous region is in its own interest, and therefore closer cooperation in the shared neighborhood with the EU is not directed against Russia, but beneficiary for all parties involved.

Launch of the EaP in an unfavorable time

But current developments seem to make these suggestions rather a third or fourth step than a second one after the launch of the EaP. It is no longer Belarus or the Russian Federation who appear as the troublemakers for the EU. Mass protests in Moldova after the parliamentary elections on April 5th, 2009, have destabilized the country and directly affect one EU member state. Romania has been accused of heating-up the situation after the elections. The democratic revolution in Georgia that helped president Michail Saakashwili to be elected to office could now potentially get him out of office again. Thousands of opposition members gathered in the streets of Tbilisi on April 9th. And the political spectacle in Ukraine ushers in the next act as the parliament called for early presidential elections on April 1st. Thus, some countries are in a process of destabilization in the coming months and at the time of the Prague summit. On the other hand, the constitutional amendments of March give Azerbaijan's President Ilham Aliyev the chance for an unlimited presidency, which might turn out as a bitter setback for the democratization process in Baku.

In addition to that, the EU itself suffers not only from the financial crisis but also currently from a lack of leadership. On March 24th the Czech prime minister and current holder of the EU presidency had to resign after he lost the fourth vote of no confidence against his government, which means that

the host of the summit to launch the EaP is no longer the real host but the servant. He will hand over duties to the interim Prime Minister Jan Fischer only two days after the summit.

Addressing frozen conflicts

Although the Eastern Partnership already addresses political issues in the EU's neighborhood more strongly than the ENP, the Union does not really focus on conflict resolution in the south Caucasus, i.e. in Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Transnistria, and Nagorno-Karabakh. Much depends in this respect on the influence the EU can gain in the region. For a lack of leverage, the EU is hardly able to mediate in the conflict resolution process between Georgia and South Ossetia and Abkhazia, respectively Russia. This was demonstrated at the rather unsuccessful round of the Geneva peace talks in March 2009. In contrast, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, which has since the 1990s mainly been conducted by the OSCE Minsk Group but was indirectly supported by the EU, might be easier to address. Just recently, US president Barack Obama noted that the conflict has been too protracted and that Turkey might play a constructive role in the resolution. In November 2008, the Russian government was able to mediate a joint declaration between Armenia and Azerbaijan to continue their work on a political settlement of the conflict, which was welcomed in Ankara. Those are signs for more international commitment to the resolution of the conflict.

Recommendations

Although the European Union is facing many difficulties at home and its near abroad, the Eastern Partnership has nevertheless the potential to become a real "ENP plus". In order to achieve this, some points should be taken into account:

1. The EU needs to accept that Russia has a fear of being circumvented by other states. The reply by the Swedish government to the statement of Russian foreign minister Lavrov that those comments are absolutely unacceptable is certainly counterproductive for the EU, Russia, and their shared neighborhood and should be avoided in the future. Russia needs to be ensured that the EU's aim is not to circumvent Russia, but that the EU also has specific

interests in its neighborhood. Policies to address the region should therefore become more cooperative from both sides in the future. As an example, the Russian government could presently endanger the EaP by either influencing the governments of the EaP partners not to join the initiative, or by further destabilizing the region. Having only one country not participating would destroy the core idea behind the EaP, namely closer cooperation with all partners in the region. In order to achieve this, the EU needs to involve the Russian Federation in the process of the EaP, for example by a stronger exchange of information or even by inviting Russia as an observer to the EaP.

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2. The conflict between Georgia and Russia of August 2008 has proven that a strong EU presidency can have influence on its near abroad. That does not mean that only big member

states like France can achieve success for the Union in external relations. However, the current political situation in the Czech Republic makes it difficult for the EU to convince the countries in its neighborhood to be effective stakeholders in the region. In order to ensure the success of the EaP from the beginning, the next EU presidency, Sweden, should become involved in the implementation of the program as soon as possible. It should also ensure that the EU speaks with one voice in the EaP. Although it is only natural for a community of 27 different states to have different maps of interest this should not lead to division within the EU. Regional programs only make sense if every EU member country backs them in equal measure. That means that the Union for the Mediterranean is equally important as the Eastern Partnership, and funding for the EaP should not be at the expense of the southern neighbors. But without clear commitments on how both projects will be funded, the basis for neither of the two is very solid.

3. EU membership ambitions by Georgia and Armenia, and to a lesser extent also by Azerbaijan, give the Union some political leverage on all three countries. This is complemented by the more "technical" and thus – from a political perspective – rather limited Commission instruments of the ENP, the Eastern Partnership, and the Black Sea Synergy. The EU should use this increasing political influence in order to address the frozen conflicts in the region by starting with the conflict resolution in Nagorno-

Karabakh. In addressing it, the EU should closely cooperate with the Russian and Turkish governments, who are unlikely to act as “spoilers” to the process. As the chances are good that the US government will support this attempt, the conflict resolution could be pursued with a truly multilateral approach. The EU should not remain a bystander but an active participant in this process. If all parties succeed in effectively supporting conflict resolution in Nagorno-Karabakh, the EU could furthermore become involved in addressing other frozen conflicts on which it has, contrary to Russia, only minimal leverage so far. This is also an ending in itself: Existing conflicts in the south Caucasus threaten not only the region, but also the EU and undermine its policies. A successful resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is, for example, expected to lead to a further democratization of Azerbaijan and Armenia. As a potential energy supplier – with respect to Azerbaijan’s energy resources and the region as an energy transit corridor – the EU should be highly interested in a viable solution.

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