

The Outlook for the Eastern Neighbourhood

The major challenges for the Eastern Partnership in the years ahead

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“The South Caucasus and Wider Black Sea Neighbourhood:
Regional Developments and Euro-Atlantic Integration”

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The Goals of the Eastern Partnership

According to the Prague Summit Declaration of 7 May 2009, the goal of the Eastern Partnership (EaP) is to “create the necessary conditions to accelerate political association and further economic integration between the EU and interested partner countries.” The EaP further seeks to “support political and socio-economic reforms of the partner countries, facilitating approximation towards the European Union” and to serve the “shared commitment to stability, security and prosperity of the European Union, the partner countries and indeed the entire European continent”.

Involving all 27 EU member states and six partner countries in the eastern neighbourhood of the EU (Belarus, Ukraine, Moldova and the three South Caucasus countries of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia), the EaP is more explicitly strategic and political than the ENP, but will continue to make use of conditionality (albeit with clearer incentives such as free trade zone and visa liberalisation), and will be based on new contractual relations between the EU and the partner countries (Association Agreements that are yet to be negotiated).

Four thematic platforms have been created to facilitate bilateral cooperation in order to achieve the ambitious goals that the EaP has:

- Democracy, good governance, stability
- Economic integration and convergence with EU sectoral policies
- Energy security
- Contacts between people/civil society exchange

The Impact of, and on, EU-Russia and Transatlantic Relations

The outlook for the Eastern Neighbourhood, and thus the challenges for the EaP, are best understood in the wider framework of the EU’s strategic relations with US and Russia, which remain the EU’s two most significant strategic relationships.

In terms of relations with Russia, EU member states remain deeply divided, and as a consequence, the EU lacks a clear Russia strategy. Yet, at the same time, EaP signals to Moscow the increasing significance of the EU in the post-Soviet space—the last area in Europe with some remaining geopolitical flux and unresolved alignments—and the potentially competitive and confrontational nature of EU engagement there. This is also evident from the origins of the EaP: initially an initiative by Poland, it failed to get German co-sponsorship, was then picked up by Sweden and co-promoted in the EU institutions in spring 2008, only to see a much accelerated drive towards finalisation and inauguration after the August 2008 Georgia-Russia war.

Thus, while EaP may not be intended to be anti-Russian, it creates, at a minimum, a perception problem in Moscow. Moreover, without getting Russia to believe that EaP is not part of a new containment policy, it is unlikely to succeed in its ambitions and will contribute to further deterioration of EU-Russia relations; after all, two recent major low points in relations between the

two, the gas crisis in January 2009 and the Russia-Georgia war in August 2008, were directly linked to the EaP area.

In terms of transatlantic relations, the challenge is different: rather than EaP being a major issue, it is at best one of many in what the European Parliament considers “the most important strategic partnership for the EU”. Moreover, this perception of the significance of the transatlantic relationship is not necessarily shared in Washington—at best, the EU is seen as one among many strategic partners for the US, and perhaps decreasingly so. One also needs to bear in mind, of course, that even in Brussels/Strasbourg there is an acceptance of strategic priorities: the European Parliament considers the Eastern Partnership in the context of a much broader set of issues on the agenda of EU-US relations and places it after the Middle East, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran, and Iraq.

The US, furthermore, also pursues its own, at times contradictory, geostrategic goals in relation to the EU’s eastern neighbourhood. Improving relations with Russia by scrapping plans for a missile defence shield runs in tandem with seeking a new form of containment by maintaining a push for closer links between Georgia and NATO. Both issues are highly divisive within the E; and as the US pushes ahead with its own agenda, the EU finds itself relegated to a player of at best secondary significance in US-Russia relations.

The South Caucasus in the Broader Context of the Eastern Partnership

The geostrategic significance of the South Caucasus is obvious. It is a link between the Caspian Basin and the Black Sea, a juncture between the greater Middle East, Turkey, Iran and Russia, a vital crossroads from Central Asia to Europe, a bridgehead to control and pressure Iran, an alternative transit route for oil and gas to European and global markets that avoids Russia, and a vital outpost for the fight against terrorism and organised crime. Yet, much of this, albeit in somewhat different ways, is also true for the other three EaP countries, especially Ukraine which is perhaps the more significant “prize” to be won when the EU talks about EaP offering an alternative to Russian influence.

Moreover, the South Caucasus while geographically a region of its own, requires a highly differentiated country-by-country approach alongside a regional approach. Two examples can illustrate this. When it comes to energy/security, Azerbaijan is a major exporter, Georgia a key transit country, and Armenia entirely dependent in its energy supplies on Russia. Likewise, the issue of conflict resolution in the South Caucasus requires highly differentiated policies: the Nagorno Karabakh conflict is primarily a dispute between Armenia and Azerbaijan, South Ossetia and Abkhazia—quite different in themselves—are disputes within Georgia and between Georgia and Russia; they all are at different stages of resolution; and in none does the EU play a major, let alone leading, role in settlement efforts (even though its crisis management in the Georgia-Russia war of August 2008 was a relative success, and the continuing crisis management in the context of the Geneva talks has not yet failed).

In conclusion

The EaP has yet to prove its worth as a policy tool for managing the EU’s relations with six of its eastern neighbours. Whether it will live up to the anyway quite diverse aspirations and ambitions that the 27+6 countries involved in it have, depends on the answers to two key questions.

The first is whether EaP in a post-Lisbon institutional setting provides a framework of flexible policy instruments, funding, and coordination mechanisms within the EU and with other third parties, especially Russia, to realise its goals. The second, closely related one, is whether the EU’s partners in the Eastern Neighbourhood, as well as Russia and the US, will be able and willing to grasp the opportunity that EaP potentially offers.