

# Debating the Eastern Partnership: Perspectives from the European Union

ROSA BALFOUR

In only two years of existence, the Eastern Partnership (EaP) has already attracted considerable attention in the world of analysts and think tanks. Much of this focuses on the weaknesses of the new initiative, questioning its added value, and on the resonance of the incentives on offer in the six countries of Eastern Europe and the Southern Caucasus.

While the EaP shares the deficits of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), it has been overlooked how perceptions and attitudes towards Eastern Europe have evolved within the EU. Supported by interviews with (anonymous) EU and civil society representatives, this article aims to uncover some of the views behind the conceptualization of the EaP, which in turn will help us understand some of the policy choices this entails, as well as highlighting possible areas of tension. The divergent views of member states on key themes such as relations with Russia and the debate on future EU enlargement remain a firm boundary to the scope of any policy towards Eastern Europe. However, analysis based on a longer term perspective also shows a growing convergence on raising the profile of Eastern Europe and on stepping up EU responsibility there, through incremental engagement rather than the elaboration of a strategic vision.

## Setting up the EaP: Multilayered Policies for Eastern Europe

Launched in Prague in May 2009, pursuant to a joint Polish–Swedish idea and a Commission proposal of December 2008, the EaP aims to step up EU engagement with Eastern Europe and the Southern Caucasus, building upon the framework developed through the ENP from 2004 onwards. Rather than promote a new vision or strategy for Eastern Europe, it builds an additional layer on top of existing policies and adds a multilateral framework that was missing in the ENP.

A number of reasons underlie the initiative. First and foremost, it represents the EU's traditional compromise between the Eastern and Southern dimensions of its relations with its periphery. It is no coincidence that the Polish–Swedish proposal came a few months after the French-led Union for the Mediterranean (UfM), launched in Paris in July 2008 in an ill-fated attempt to revive EU relations with the countries on the southern shore of the Mediterranean. As we shall see, however, the story of the EaP differs from the UfM in many respects, making its prospects for future development brighter. The war in Georgia in the summer of 2008 gave sufficient impetus and reason for engagement to persuade those member states whose geographical positions make Eastern Europe of lesser concern.

Alongside this rationale, internal to the EU, of balancing the two neighborhoods, the EaP also illustrates a deeper trend of increasing engagement with Eastern Europe, especially if compared to the 1990s, when attention was focused on Central Europe and Russia, rather than on the »lands in-between«. The Orange and Rose Revolutions were a wake-up call, and the 2004 accession of Central European countries boosted the EU constituency in favor of strengthening ties to the East.

The EaP's construction reflects a perceived twofold need: to provide a path of integration and association for those countries aspiring to achieve a prospect of accession (Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia), but without making any concessions on eventual EU membership; and to try to engage those countries most impermeable to EU influence (Belarus, Azerbaijan, and Armenia). Especially with regard to Belarus, the EU's policy of isolation pursued through targeted sanctions since the freezing of the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement in 1996 as a result of human rights violations had not produced any results, and the EU had been searching for new ways forward without compromising its principled position.

The introduction of the multilateral dimension, the flagship projects, and the multi-level initiatives engaging different actors from the EU and the EaP countries – such as the four thematic platforms,<sup>1</sup> the Civil Society Forum (CSF) and the EU–Neighbourhood East Parliamentary Assembly (EuroNest) – all represent attempts to make inroads in Belarusian society, as well as the other countries, and to strengthen the means for cooperation

---

1. Platform 1 is on »Democracy, Good Governance and Stability,« Platform 2 is on »Economic Integration and Convergence with EU Policies,« Platform 3 on »Energy Security,« and Platform 4 on »Contacts between People.«

beyond the ministerial level. Flagship initiatives,<sup>2</sup> all of which are cross-border and address areas of common interest, are another field in which EaP countries can cherry-pick their participation and involvement and in which third countries, such as Russia and Turkey, can participate. This is an area of potential overlap with other regional initiatives such as the Black Sea Synergy, launched in 2007.

The recognition of the importance of multilateral frameworks also stems from comparisons made with the policies devised towards the South Mediterranean. Prior to the Union for the Mediterranean, the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership had developed networks of non-governmental organizations, academic institutions, inter-faith dialogue initiatives, and people-to-people contacts. It had also created the Euro-Mediterranean Parliamentary Assembly, along with networks of local government representations – all as a means to encourage engagement between the two shores at the social – not just political – levels, and to foster bottom-up approaches to addressing issues of common concern. The diversity between the frameworks developed by the EU in the two neighborhoods had been lamented, especially by members of the European Parliament.

But the priority track is accorded to the bilateral level, where the EaP reinforces the path for greater association with the EU, offering new Association Agreements (AA) to replace the outdated Partnership and Cooperation Agreements (PCAs) of the 1990s. While Ukraine was already on track for reaching an Association Agreement with the EU this prospect had not been clearly spelt out for the other countries, and a consensus on what type of agreement to offer them had not been reached before the launch of the EaP. Negotiations with Moldova have now begun, while the Council has approved a mandate for the Southern Caucasus countries.

A Comprehensive Institution-Building Programme (CIB), with financing worth 175 million euros for 2011–2013, is intended to help the countries meet AA commitments. This is supposed to ensure that the EU's involvement in the reform process in individual countries is tailor-made to each situation rather than »one size fits all.« The package also includes the prospect of a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA),

2. Currently, progress is being made on the integrated border management program, the facility for small and medium-sized enterprises, cooperation in preventing and responding to natural and man-made disasters, good environmental governance, and energy efficiency, while the programme on diversification of energy supply still needs to be further developed.

more extensive than the free trade envisaged by the PCAs. One noticeable limit of the DCFTA as an incentive lies in the fact that, as a long-term and complex objective, it will not deliver the short-term benefits which would support the anchorage of these countries to the EU.

The final incentive on offer is the prospect of visa liberalization, on the successful model adapted for the countries of the Western Balkans, all of which have the prospect of accession. While Ukraine already had a visa facilitation agreement with the EU and was starting a visa dialogue (the step before visa liberalization), the prospects for the other countries of reaching similar arrangements were far from certain before the EaP came into being. Visa liberalization is likely to be the most appetizing incentive on offer, but it will be necessary to maintain the commitment of the EU member states throughout the process to ensure that visa-free travel will become a reality for the citizens of Eastern Europe. The new Commissioner for Enlargement and Neighbourhood, Štefan Füle, has indicated that this is a priority area, implicitly recognizing that visas have become one of the most sought after incentives for EU partners.

Overall, in policy terms the EaP falls between the debate on »ENP Plus« and »Enlargement-lite.« It remains anchored to the umbrella framework of the ENP, adding more focused and tailored tools for its implementation, while making explicit what is on offer from the EU side. Its bilateral aspects – the AAs, the DCFTAs, and the CIB program – represent forms of external governance and the transposition to external policies of tools the EU acquired from the experience of enlargement, but without making any clarification whatsoever with regard to future prospects of accession. The multilateral dimension also builds on the Commission's *acquis* in regional policies: the European Mediterranean Partnership, but also the Baltic Sea Strategy and the Northern Dimension, which have a strong focus on »soft policies« of transnational relevance, such as the environment and energy.

As we shall see, the EaP's modesty of vision may turn out to be a positive force for its continuation for the foreseeable future. The deliberate avoidance of the unresolved security problems in the region, the underlying tensions with Russia and the different views on relations with Moscow between European capitals, not to mention enlargement prospects have all helped the EU member states and institutions to find a common position that can upgrade the profile of Eastern Europe without crossing the remaining red lines: the »highest common denominator« realistically attainable in light of the underlying differences within the EU.

## Building an EU Convergence of Views?

In the 1990s, Eastern Europe was barely on the mental map of European policymakers, and when it was, the dominant view of the region saw it as lying in the sphere of the former Soviet Union. A »Russia first« political position dominated most policy decisions regarding Eastern Europe, which was subordinated to the priority of maintaining good relations with Moscow.

Taking a brief historical perspective, the contrast with the second half of the 2000s is apparent. The EU has engaged with Eastern Europe in such a way as to antagonize one of its most important partners further East. For Russia, having digested Central Europe's accession to NATO and to the EU, the attraction of the Union in parts of Eastern Europe has had strong reverberations that have affected its relations with the West and its policies towards its Western neighborhood, with the Ukrainian Orange Revolution as a defining moment, leading to a re-evaluation of Moscow's regional and international role.

The forms and pace of EU engagement, however, have been incremental. The 2004 Orange Revolution followed by EU involvement in finding a solution to the political crisis, and European Parliament support for political change in Ukraine were all important events that precipitated engagement. However, more structural shifts occurred with the accession of the Central European countries, which significantly strengthened the constituency within the Union in favor of deepening relations with Eastern Europe. As early as the late 1990s, Poland had been proposing a review of relations with Ukraine and Belarus; in 2002–2003, Sweden and the UK had pushed for the Neighbourhood Policy with Ukraine in mind, while at the same time the Prodi Commission, External Relations Commissioner Chris Patten, and High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy Javier Solana were reflecting on new ways to address post-enlargement's wider Europe. These have all contributed both to raising the EU's responsibility and profile in the region, and to conceptually decoupling Eastern Europe from Russia.

However, this does not mean that the divergences over Russia have changed. Countries with strong political, economic and energy-related ties with Moscow – such as France, Germany, and Italy – continue to be sensitive to the concerns of their historical partner, and their interests in maintaining good relations are likely to override their interests in Eastern Europe, despite growing economic and trade relations. Indeed,

an internal discussion leading to a redefinition of relations with Russia represents one of the red lines the member states remain unwilling to cross. Nevertheless, the gradual shift to a higher level of relations with Eastern Europe helps to provide continuity of engagement, as long as this does not entail reviewing relations with Russia. Despite the fact that Eastern Europe is not high on Madrid's foreign policy agenda, Spain ensured that the EU remained focused on the EaP during its term at the head of the rotating presidency of the EU during the first half of 2010, a commitment that is recognized by its partner countries.

Member states and EU institutions insist that the EaP is not conceived as antagonistic towards Russia, and that the initiative, like the preceding ENP, is open to Russia's participation, should it so wish – for instance, through the flagship projects or the thematic platforms. There is also a general perception that Russia's objections are not as vocal as they were at the time of the EaP's launch and less substantive. This is also due to the nature of the EaP, with its focus on soft policy issues rather than hard security ones, not to mention its lack of strategic vision – especially with regard to the political and security issues in the region – and the fluidity in the region itself. The increasing diversification of the foreign policies of countries such as Ukraine, returning to its traditional multi-vector foreign policy, or Armenia is also perceived positively inside the EU, as it takes the pressure off as regards accession prospects.

This view of the EaP is seen as useful because it does not harm relations with Russia. However, it could run up against some political realities. The EU is aiming to improve the quality of governance in key fields, such as energy issues, rule of law, fighting organized crime and corruption, and border management. But its entire model of legal approximation, benchmarks, and reform could be challenged by the greater leverage and incentives that Russia can offer to the region – as the recent Ukrainian–Russian gas deal showed – especially if EU incentives are not within short-term reach. Russia can use other tools of interest to the EaP countries, such as labor mobility and visa-free travel, making the region a space of competition despite EU assurances to the contrary. The likely uneven pace of visa liberalization in the region, and some of the implications of getting closer to the DCFTA, will also force EaP countries to make choices between the preferential avenues available.

Indeed, Russia remains a contentious subject in the EU. Diplomats had long and heated discussions before the EU–Russia Summit of June 1, 2010 on the visa liberalization offer, due to worries within and outside the

Union that the EU would favor Russia at the expense of the EaP countries. The deal reached ensures that the visa dialogue with Russia will be conducted in parallel to negotiations with at least one EaP country.

The second important red line that the EaP avoids addressing concerns extending the prospect of membership to those countries which aspire to it (Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia). There is no appetite in the EU for a discussion on this issue, and in the midst of an economic crisis the time is far from ripe. The countries that pushed the EaP are pragmatic in this regard, even if they would support further enlargement.

The »enlargement-neutral« wording and construction of the EaP, however, makes it curiously open to interpretation, when one scratches beneath the surface of official statements and positions. For those member states which are not inclined towards further enlargement, the EaP is seen as a potential alternative, possibly reminiscent of the ideas of »confederation« that were put forward by supporters of deeper EU integration in the 1990s as alternative options to opening the doors to the countries of Central Europe. This prospect would be all the more attractive to enlargement-sensitive countries (such as France and Germany). Hypothetically, it cannot be excluded that European capitals might envisage Turkey as belonging to the group of countries which would not be fully integrated, but strongly anchored to the EU.

The other interpretation sees the EaP very differently. The policy's emphasis on harmonizing legal systems and governance allows those countries pushing for stronger relations with the Eastern neighborhood, Ukraine in particular, to see the EaP as a policy framework that could prepare for possible accession once – or if – the EU is prepared to start discussing further enlargement. In other words, the EaP is seen as a recognition of the current limits of EU ambitions, but also as a framework within which to prepare the ground for future accession prospects for Eastern Europe.

The lines of differentiation within the EU reflect proximity, history, and attitudes towards EU integration, but also specific issues. These lines overlap in the case of the Central European countries – indeed, the first discussions on the ideas that led to the EaP were held in the Visegrad Group – which are all geographically close, in favor of enlargement, and haunted by the legacy of the Soviet empire. But they become more blurred in Western Europe, where priorities clash between the Eastern and Southern neighborhoods: between supporting enlargement and further integration, while importing gas from Russia. Germany is

probably the most emblematic country, as it has growing relations with and interests in both Eastern Europe and the Southern Caucasus, and is concerned with stability there, but also cultivates strong ties with Russia and is reluctant about further enlargement.

The Commission (since January 2010 the European External Action Service [EEAS]) was supportive of the EaP and pragmatic about the vision the EU could realistically propose in light of these limitations. More importantly, the Commission was involved in the conceptualization of the policy from the beginning. In contrast with the Union for the Mediterranean, in which it was sidelined, the EaP gave it the coordinating role. It comes as no surprise that the EaP was launched with a budget of 600 million euros, whereas the Union for the Mediterranean remains without additional resources. The engagement of the Commission, which has created a special task force now transferred to the EEAS, has provided continuity to the initiative and helped keep up its momentum.

The European Parliament's views on Eastern Europe by and large reflect the divisions between the member states rather than cross-party divides. But on the whole it has been an advocate of deeper involvement in Eastern Europe and the Southern Caucasus, at least since 2004, when it was among those pushing for the inclusion of the Southern Caucasus in the ENP. This was enhanced by the occurrence of the Orange Revolution. The creation of EuroNest was also a longstanding demand traceable in the EP's resolutions on Eastern Europe and the Southern Caucasus. Paradoxically, its activities were blocked for more than a year because of a division within the European Parliament over the participation of Belarusian representatives in EuroNest meetings. While the Socialist and Liberal groups, as well as the representatives of the other five EaP countries, were ready to accept the delegation of MPs from Minsk, the European People's Party, in which the Polish representation is large, were against involving MPs who are not democratically elected in the new institution. Following the regime's crackdown on the opposition in the elections in December 2010, Minsk has ended its brief period of interest in Western Europe, while the EU has returned to its position of targeted sanctions towards government representatives there.



## Civil Society

The introduction of the fourth thematic platform (on contacts between people) is seen as a positive development. The Civil Society Forum (CSF) brings together civil society actors working in the region on a regular basis, increasing local, regional, and multi-level involvement, promoting the exchange of ideas and knowledge with the aim of supporting networks for »socialization« and bringing media attention to EaP issues. The first meeting was convened by the Commission in November 2009. Civil society support will be further strengthened following the ENP Review of May 2011.

What remains unclear is what kind of influence the CSF may have on the EaP in terms of influencing policy development and as facilitator of people-to-people contacts. The Forum aims to become an institution operating on a regular basis and with stronger links with the thematic platforms and flagship initiatives. While the institutional activities of the Forum are financed by the Commission, the Forum also wants to increase the funding targeted at developing common projects between NGOs from the EU and six EaP countries.

While it is too early to assess the impact of civil society engagement, the Forum's steering committee has identified a number of weaknesses and areas for improvement. First of all, it does not want to limit its involvement to participation but to clarify the ways in which it could contribute. Input into policymaking processes is the prime concern, together with identifying specific means for engagement in the thematic platforms. The mechanisms for influencing policy papers, monitoring progress, and providing inputs to governments, EU institutions, and the joint bilateral and multilateral meetings still need to be defined, insofar as they limit the scope for civil society's involvement in the conceptual and political stages during which EaP policies and initiatives are defined.

The processes and format of CSF participation in the variety of meetings held under the EaP, such as thematic platform meetings, still need to be defined. In this sphere, some tensions within the EaP might emerge. While the Commission has no objection to such participation, there will be limited room for manoeuvre in some crucial areas where the role of civil society would be essential. The platform on democracy, for instance, will be particularly difficult to influence, as some of the countries are notably resistant to issues in that area. Its first meeting took place without any prior information being offered to the CSF. This casts some

doubt on the opportunity to deal with democracy issues in multilateral platforms, although Commission and EU officials insist that these themes still play an important role in bilateral relations.

Besides civil society organizations, the Committee of the Regions has also engaged actively in the activities of the EaP and will set up an EaP Local and Regional Assembly on the lines of other regional fora of sub-national authorities (the Mediterranean dimension, the Northern Dimension and the Black Sea dimension) to promote regional and decentralized cooperation. The areas of most interest to the Committee are the Comprehensive Institution Building Programme, focusing on administrative capacity, and the platforms on democracy, good governance and stability, and on contacts between people. On the flagship initiatives, it intends to contribute to the program for the training and networking of local authorities as well as the program for natural and man-made disasters.

## **Prospects for the Future**

The EaP is not safe from criticism. Among the arguments voiced against it is that, in policy terms, it offers too little to the frontrunners and too much to the laggards. The visa liberalization and the DCFTA are incentives that can be delivered only in the long term. The equilibrium between engaging the countries least interested in developing relations with the EU and those which aspire to accession is skewed in favor of the latter. There is a risk that some countries will cherry pick what is on offer solely in accordance with their own interests, or that EU policies will be biased by specific interests in a certain area. The disparity of treatment between Azerbaijan (an energy supplier with which the EU is keen to deepen relations) and Belarus is already evident, with tougher conditions based on human rights and democracy principles demanded from Minsk. There is naturally competition in the region with Russia, which has more leverage and access to more immediate incentives. This can allow the East European countries to take an »à la carte« approach to engagement with the EU. The policies that focus on external governance have so far had limited impact. The recently established democracies remain fragile, political reform is stalled in most cases, and since the months immediately following the Orange Revolution the EU has slackened its pressure on Kiev to persevere in its political reform path. Authoritarian regimes

remain so, and attempts to open up avenues for greater contacts with the EU have so far not produced any results.

The red lines of convergence between the EU member states illustrate the deeper obstacles to engagement. The EaP, like the ENP, does not address the underlying reasons for the EU's relative weakness in the region. One consequence of the reluctance to step on Moscow's toes is that the EU is haphazardly present in the region through its Common Foreign and Security Policy, and where it is, it has a limited mandate. The absence of clear links between the EaP and security and foreign policy issues is a fundamental obstacle to the EU developing a transformative strategy that could address the underlying political tensions which hamper the development of the region, rather than focusing on maintaining a precarious status quo. This would also require the involvement of other countries of the region beyond the format of involvement in projects, notwithstanding their potential for confidence-building.

Additionally, the EU needs to get more involved in political issues. The EaP managed to garner consensus by depoliticizing some of the problems in the region and dressing them up in the technical and bureaucratic language of the Commission. But some of these issues will emerge, potentially feeding straight into the issues the EU wants to avoid. Visa liberalization and the processes leading towards the DCFTA, for instance, at some stage will make it necessary to address the open issues regarding Ukraine's border and trade with Russia.

Security remains a key challenge, especially in the Southern Caucasus. The EaP claims that, rather than address security issues directly, it can support the creation of environments more conducive to managing the security challenges by focusing on economic development and governance reform. But these areas too are severely undermined by the conflicts in the region, making it difficult to disentangle areas of engagement.

Nonetheless, the role that the EaP has played in raising the profile of the region and in stepping up EU responsibility has increased the level of commitment, to which EU credibility is attached. The upcoming EU presidencies of Hungary and Poland in 2011, but also the example given by Spain during its own term, will ensure that the EaP remains on the agenda. Furthermore, the involvement of the Commission/EEAS in devising and executing policy, and the growing convergence of the member states on assigning greater importance to Eastern Europe and the Southern Caucasus, all contribute to an expectation of continuity over the next few years.

If the EaP can help to accumulate support for this level of engagement, it is unlikely to lead, in the near future, to a more strategic assessment of relations with the region. Unless events lead to changes in their relations with Russia on the part of the EU member states – but also of the countries in the region themselves – Moscow’s ties with key European capitals and the country’s importance in regional and international dossiers will continue to constitute a crucial factor in shaping EU policies in Eastern Europe. Furthermore, the accession prospects demanded by countries such as Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia will not be addressed by the EU in the foreseeable future, also in view of the intricacies of the current enlargement process with regard to the Western Balkans and Turkey.

## References

- Boonstra, Jos and Natalia Shapavalova (2010): »The EU’s Eastern Partnership: One Year Backwards,« *FRIDE Working Paper* 99 (May).
- Council of the European Union (2009): Joint Declaration of the Prague Eastern Partnership Summit, 8435/09 (Presse 78), Brussels, 07.05.2010.
- Emerson, Michael, Gergana Noutcheva, and Nicu Popescu (2007): »The European Neighbourhood Policy Two Years On: Time for an »ENP Plus,« CEPS Policy Brief 126, Brussels.
- Emerson, Michael (2009): »Do We Detect a Neo-Finlandisation in the Eastern Neighbourhood?« *CEPS European Neighbourhood Watch*, 49 (May).
- European Commission (2008): *Eastern Partnership*, COM(2008) 823 final, Brussels, 03.12.2008.
- Hale, Jaqueline (2010): »A Seat at the Table. Eastern Partnership: What Role for Civil Society Organizations?« in *Global Europe*, February 2; <http://www.globeurope.com/standpoint/a-seat-at-the-table> (accessed October 20, 2010).
- Krastev, Ivan (2005): »Russia’s Post-Orange Empire,« in *Open Democracy*, October 19; [www.opendemocracy.net/democracy-europe\\_constitution/postorange\\_2947.jsp](http://www.opendemocracy.net/democracy-europe_constitution/postorange_2947.jsp) (accessed October 20, 2010).
- Popescu, Nicu and Andrew Wilson (2009): *The Limits of Enlargement-Lite: European and Russian Power in the Troubled Neighbourhood*, European Council on Foreign Relations Policy Report, London.
- Shapovalova, Natalia (2009): »The EU’s Eastern Partnership: Still-born?« *FRIDE Policy Brief* 11 (May).
- Stewart, Susan (2009): »Russia and the Eastern Partnership. Loud Criticism. Quiet Interest in Cooperation,« *SWP Comments* 7 (May).