

Analysis

The Eastern Dimension of EU External Relations

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Abstract

The eastern dimension of EU external relations has become more differentiated over time. While still embedded in the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP), it has been given new impetus with the introduction of the Eastern Partnership (EaP) in May 2009. However, the ENP has been plagued with a series of problems which are likely to carry over into the EaP, and the global economic crisis has created a very difficult environment for EaP implementation. Furthermore, Russia's sense of a growing competition between the EU and the Russian Federation in the EaP partner countries makes EU-Russian cooperation in the "common neighborhood" unlikely. Thus while there is some potential for progress in the civil society realm, the overall prospects for the EaP appear rather bleak.

The Emergence of the ENP

The "eastern enlargement" led to a new geopolitical situation for the European Union (EU). While it had shared a border with the Russian Federation since the accession of Finland in 1995, nonetheless with the entrance of 10 eastern and southeastern European countries by 2007, the center of the EU shifted further eastward. The expansion served as an impetus for the development of a policy toward the new EU neighbors. This policy was first reflected in a communication from the European Commission in March 2003 entitled "Wider Europe – Neighbourhood: A New Framework for Relations with our Eastern and Southern Neighbours". The European Neighborhood Policy, which has come to define relations with the countries to the east of the EU, was spelled out more precisely in a further Commission communication in May 2004, so that the elaboration of the policy coincided with the major wave of eastern enlargement encompassing ten countries, eight of them from eastern or southeastern Europe (Bulgaria and Romania joined later). While the impetus for developing the policy came from the changing geopolitical situation of the EU in the east, it was decided to have the ENP cover both the eastern and southern neighbors. This meant that ten states of the Maghreb and Mashreq regions involved in the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, or Barcelona Process, were now subsumed under the ENP. The logic behind this was twofold. First, it was believed important to create a policy which would have the backing and interest of all the member states. By including the southern ones, EU member states with little connection to eastern Europe could also be brought on board. Second, it was hoped that the ENP might rejuvenate the stagnating Barcelona Process. Thus it came about that the EU policy toward the neighbor-

hood countries acquired both an eastern and a southern dimension.

The Eastern Dimension of the ENP

The core of the ENP consists of bilateral action plans, which are agreed upon between the EU and each of the participating partner countries. In the east, such action plans were adopted in the cases of Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan. Belarus remained outside the ENP framework because it was judged by the EU not to meet the criteria for democratic governance to an extent sufficient to make cooperation within the ENP possible. The original idea for the ENP foresaw the inclusion of Russia in the policy, but the Russian Federation declined to participate on the grounds that its "strategic partnership" with the EU called for a separate framework for relations, one that would not simply group Russia together with the other eastern neighbors. The Russian refusal led to the creation of the "four common spaces", which, along with the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement from 1997, currently structure the relationship between the EU and Russia.

The action plans for the various countries have a similar format but have allowed for some differentiation in terms of the areas covered and the priorities set. Nonetheless, each action plan deals with a very comprehensive set of issues, covering almost all areas of EU relations with the state in question. Even the list of priorities often encompasses 12–15 areas of cooperation. The action plans are generally valid for three to five years, after which the intention was either to continue with that format or to take the relationship to a more advanced level, depending on the readiness of each individual partner. The ENP thus constitutes an ambitious and

long-term approach to relations with the neighboring countries.

As time has passed, several problems with this approach have come to the fore. First of all, the incentives built into the policy for the partner countries are frequently characterized as inadequate, both by political actors in the countries themselves and by outside observers. This lack of attractive incentives stems from two factors: the inadequacy of dialogue processes between the EU and the partner countries, and the high expectations raised by the EU eastern enlargement. Due to the asymmetric nature of the EU relations with the states of the eastern neighborhood, there was not a sufficiently intensive dialogue about the priorities of these countries within the ENP framework. This was particularly due to a lack of clarity on the part of actors in the partner countries about their own priorities. The high expectations raised by the enlargement translated into a strong focus on obtaining an EU membership prospect in some of the states involved (Ukraine especially, but also Moldova).

Second, the EU often failed to take specific country contexts adequately into account. Although there was some potential for flexibility within the action plan format, this potential was not utilized as fully as it could have been because a serious engagement with the conditions on the ground in the individual countries was in large part lacking. This led to a situation in which the action plans could be only partially implemented, and in which implementation at times occurred mainly on paper without adequate translation into the country context. The reasons for these problems were manifold and range from poor coordination among institutions in the partner countries to insufficient awareness of the consequences of agreed-upon measures to interference due to domestic political wrangling in the eastern neighborhood. Third, and closely related to the problems described above, the visibility of EU initiatives in the partner states has remained low. This is due in part to the diffuse presence of the EU in many fields and the lack of “flagship initiatives” which could make the role and interests of the EU clearer to the population at large.

The Eastern Partnership

From the very beginning of the ENP there were some skeptical voices within the EU with regard to combining the eastern and southern dimensions in one policy. This skepticism has proved somewhat justified, since a differentiation has indeed taken place, both between the two dimensions and within each of them. In ad-

dition, a competition has developed between the two dimensions for attention and resources within the EU. While the French President Nicholas Sarkozy has promoted a “Union for the Mediterranean”, which is focused on the southern dimension of the ENP, Poland and Sweden have been instrumental in proposing an “Eastern Partnership” (EaP) to intensify EU relations with the countries belonging to the eastern dimension. The EaP was clearly a response to the Union for the Mediterranean and a signal that EU member states with strong interests in the east would not permit the southern dimension to “get ahead” of the eastern one. Despite the advantage of an earlier start, the Union for the Mediterranean has had difficulty progressing much beyond the initial declaratory phase. The EaP was officially launched by the Czech EU Council Presidency in Prague on 7 May. Like its southern counterpart, however, the initiative has experienced a relatively rocky start and is still very much at the developmental stage.

The EaP began as a Polish-Swedish initiative, which was raised to the EU level by the European Council in June 2008, and was elaborated in a communication from the European Commission in December 2008. The promotion of the EaP on the EU level was accelerated due to the Georgian-Russian war in August 2008, which was seen by many in the EU to signal the need for intensified relationships with the countries of the eastern neighborhood. The December 2008 communication was approved in its essence by the European Council in March 2009, although some accents were set slightly differently. In particular, the role of the “mobility and security pacts” foreseen by the Commission was downplayed, which meant that a key issue for the partner countries, visa policy, was significantly watered down. (This was later reflected in the declaration signed at the 7 May summit, in which even visa liberalization became a long-term goal.)

In the communication the European Commission stressed two aspects of the relations with the partner countries: the bilateral and the multilateral. The bilateral aspect focuses on “association agreements”, including the establishment of free trade areas, as a major goal of each individual relationship. The bilateral component is also concerned with energy security, visa and border control questions, and economic and social development. In sum, a deepening of the relationships developed under the ENP framework of bilateral action plans is envisaged. However, it is the multilateral aspect which is presented as the innovative portion of the EaP. The idea is to achieve a much higher

degree of networking and exchange among the partner countries than has previously been the case, in order for them (and the EU) to profit from each other's experience and to initiate cooperative projects. Four "thematic platforms" are foreseen for this purpose: democracy, good governance and stability; economic integration and convergence with EU policies; energy security; and people-to-people contacts. The dual focus on energy security at both the bilateral and multilateral levels is a clear indication of its high priority for the EU.

Despite the fact that the EaP has only just been launched, a number of problems have already emerged. Due to their differing levels of progress in developing relations with the EU, the degree to which the partner countries are prepared to make use of the EaP varies widely. Ukraine has progressed the farthest, and is currently involved in negotiations with the EU on an association agreement with a free trade component. This means that Ukraine has already advanced in its relationship with the EU to a point that makes the EaP appear only moderately relevant. Belarus is at the other end of the spectrum. Its cooperation with the EU is just starting, and the potential for developing the relationship is unclear due to the nature of the Lukashenka regime. Thus Belarus' participation in the EaP is likely to remain at a low level for the time being. Some states, such as Moldova and Georgia, as well as Ukraine, are currently preoccupied with internal political developments and have limited capacity available to invest in the EaP. Azerbaijan has little incentive to cooperate, as it already has sufficient interest and resources flowing in from both western countries and Russia due to its significance as an energy supplier.

Furthermore, the financial basis of the EaP is meager (€600 million, with only €350 million new as opposed to rededicated funds), and even that sum remains a source of controversy within the EU. Especially in times of economic crisis, the amounts provided for by the EaP are unlikely to make a significant difference, except perhaps on the civil society level. Civil society activists have indeed expressed interest in the EaP, and in its multilateral aspect in particular. However, the extent to which political actors will be interested in multilateral contacts is questionable, as no strong regional mentality exists among these actors, and some of them (notably Armenians and Azerbaijanis) are involved in serious conflicts. Nor has it been made sufficiently clear how the multilateral aspect of the EaP is supposed to mesh with the existing Black Sea Synergy initiative, which was launched under the German EU Council

Presidency in 2007 and in which some EU member states (especially Greece, Bulgaria and Romania) are actively involved. In fact, the difficulty the Black Sea Synergy has had in getting off the ground indicates that the implementation of the multilateral component of the EaP will be far from easy.

Russia and the EU's Eastern Dimension

As mentioned above, Russia declined involvement in the ENP. However, while there has been a latent competition between the EU and Russia in the post-Soviet space, Russia has only seldom expressed overt dissatisfaction with the development of EU relations with the ENP partner countries. This has changed, at least at the rhetorical level, with the Eastern Partnership. The change is due in part to the inclusion of Belarus, which has traditionally been perceived as a strong ally of Russia in the region. In addition, the declaration on modernization of Ukraine's gas transit network, signed on 23 March by both European and Ukrainian actors, raised a warning flag for Russia with regard to its control over energy flows in the post-Soviet space. In short, the Eastern Partnership, despite being plagued by the problems described above, has led to an increasing awareness among Russian actors that Russia's influence on several of its neighbors is declining. This awareness is heightened by the impacts of the economic crisis, which has thrown into sharp relief some of the political and economic weaknesses of contemporary Russia.

Conclusions

The eastern dimension of EU policy has undergone a significant amount of development and elaboration since its beginnings in 2003. Although the ENP remains the overarching framework, with the EaP the specifically eastern component of EU policy has received a new impetus. However, initial difficulties with the EaP indicate that learning from the problems encountered in pursuit of the ENP has been insufficient. Inadequate learning processes, combined with the impacts of the economic crisis, which has highlighted not only the economic but also political fragility of many countries of the eastern neighborhood, combine to generate the prognosis that the Eastern Partnership will result in only incremental changes in the relationships between the partner countries and the European Union. The greatest potential for the EaP appears to lie in the civil society realm, which has been neglected during the implementation of the ENP. With regard to Russia, the current approach of the Russian

foreign policy elite makes it unlikely that a significant convergence of Russian and EU agendas in the “common neighborhood” will occur in the near future. Thus EU-Russian relations and development of EU policy toward the eastern partner countries will probably

continue on parallel tracks, with occasional (and likely problematic) intersections due more to Russian perceptions of competition with the EU in these countries than to any potential for cooperation.

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Recommended Reading

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- Michael Emerson et al., *Synergies vs. Spheres of Influence in the Pan-European Space*. Brussels: Centre for European Policy Studies, 2009, available for download at http://shop.ceps.eu/BookDetail.php?item_id=1831