



# BULLETIN

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## Eastern Partnership: Its Origin, Opportunities and Challenges

by Beata Wojna and Mateusz Gniazdowski

*Eastern Partnership (EaP) is a new proposal for regional cooperation, addressed by the EU to Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. Enhancement of these countries' relations with the EU rests upon their will and progress in the pursuit of democratic values and the implementation of market economy principles. Those member countries that are particularly interested in cooperation with the EaP addressees will be responsible for upholding political support for this initiative within the EU and the acquisition of funds to finance it, but also for persuading the Eastern neighbors to introduce the essential political and economic reforms.*

**Origin.** Eastern Partnership,<sup>1</sup> which will be inaugurated on 7 May during an informal EU summit in Prague, was initiated by Poland and Sweden. In May 2008 the two countries proposed to deepen relations with the Eastern neighbors embraced by the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP), although the final project has been shaped by a number of EU members. The need to intensify relations with the Eastern neighbors has been consistently emphasized by the Visegrád Group states, and a similar view was held by Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia. Germany, which introduced the "ENP Plus" proposal during its EU presidency in the first half of 2007, has played an important role. Over the past few years the constraints of the current ENP concept have become more visible and a growing number of countries were willing to admit that a special attitude to "European EU neighbors" in Eastern Europe was necessary. These states struggle with different hardships than those faced by Middle Eastern and North African countries, which indeed neighbor on Europe, although they remain culturally and politically distinct. The alternations in the policy of France and the establishment of the Union for the Mediterranean were also conducive to the Partnership. Additionally, the EU was growing more aware of the challenges and threats emerging in Eastern Europe and South Caucasus, which was the reason why work on the project has gained new impetus after the Russian-Georgian war. Despite the differences in their assessment of Russia's role and aspirations to consolidate "its sphere of influence," EU member states realized that political and economic destabilization as well as "frozen conflicts" in their eastern vicinity could directly affect the EU, so the Union's increased attention was needed. With the commitment of Sweden the development of the EU's independent Eastern policy was no longer seen as an area of particular interest of the "new" member states alone. Had it not been for the concretization of the project by the European Commission, the EaP would not have gained the support of the whole EU, and the Czech presidency contributed to the launch of the EaP significantly by listing it among its priorities.

**Opportunities.** Eastern Partnership is a plan for the development of relations between the EU and the countries of Eastern Europe and South Caucasus that allows for a gradual incorporation of these countries in EU policies and programs as well as their integration in the Union's common market. In its bilateral dimension it provides for the signing of association agreements and the creation of deep and comprehensive free trade areas. The EaP also enables EU's Eastern neighbors

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<sup>1</sup> For more on the EaP see: B. Wojna, M. Gniazdowski (eds.), *Eastern Partnership: The Opening Report*, [http://www.pism.pl/zalaczniki/Report\\_EP\\_2009\\_eng.pdf](http://www.pism.pl/zalaczniki/Report_EP_2009_eng.pdf).

embraced by the ENP to develop multilateral cooperation with the Union through regular meetings on various levels: of heads of state and prime ministers, ministers of foreign affairs, senior officials and experts. The Partnership is to be a forum for exchanging information and experience, playing the role of a confidence-building measure. Desecuritization of the EaP agenda is to allow for a thorough exercise of EU's "soft power" and, therefore, indirectly contribute to the improvement of international security in the region.

The realization of Eastern Partnership requires, *inter alia*, steps towards future liberalization of visa policies in relations with each partner country and cooperation in energy security. In the latter sphere, however, high expectations should only concern the EaP role in promoting market economy mechanisms and facilitating the elimination of nontransparent economic structures. The EU has committed itself to assist more forcefully in the pursuit of reforms in the neighboring countries through support for administrative improvements in those states, transfer of good practices in trade and economy, as well as development and consolidation of democratic institutions.

Eastern Partnership is not a strategy for enlargement, but it does not rule out the possibility of an EaP state becoming a member of the EU in the future. The model of developing relations under the EaP appears flexible enough to satisfy the countries that are merely interested in close cooperation with the Union (Armenia, Belarus) as well as those striving to become included in the integration process (Ukraine, Georgia). The inclusion of Belarus in the EaP project is aimed at creating a platform for permanent dialogue with lower and middle level structures of the Belarusian establishment, thus contributing to transformations in the country. The quality of political elites is a problem, however, also in other partner states, so the EU is supporting nongovernmental institutions advocating the implementation of European standards of governance. The inauguration of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum a day before the summit in Prague shows that Eastern European societies are also among the EaP's addressees. To meet their expectations, the EaP will encourage the development of human relations and the forging of civil societies and democratic institutions.

**Challenges.** The EaP is an auxiliary instrument, not a package that will serve the EU to solve all the problems of its Eastern neighborhood. Giving substance to the framework of cooperation defined by the EaP will to a large extent depend on the countries it is addressed to, on their political will, readiness and progress in strengthening ties with the EU. The consent of all EU members to pursue the EaP is a political impulse, which the countries especially interested in developing the initiative (Visegrád Group members, Baltic states and Sweden) should duly catalyze. In time these countries' ability to collaborate with Germany will determine the preservation of political support for the initiative, the acquisition of funds for its financing, as well as the assistance for EU's Eastern neighbors in implementing indispensable political and economic reforms. Defining the correlation between the EaP and EU's relations with Russia, as well as the inclusion of Turkey and Russia in certain projects and safeguarding EaP's complementarity to other regional initiatives—all these will prove a challenge for the EU.

The implementation of the EaP at the time of an economic crisis will be a challenge in itself. Difficulties in partner countries could impede adjustment processes in their economies. The EU should no doubt coordinate activities within the EaP with those undertaken by the International Monetary Fund, which approved loans for Armenia, Belarus, Georgia and Ukraine. Tackling corruption could be of special economic significance. The EU should engage in cooperation with the Council of Europe and appropriate NGOs to influence the EaP countries effectively in this respect.

In order to safeguard thorough benefits from the potential of the member countries, conditions ought to be created for the coalescence of groups of states aimed at closer cooperation and deeper involvement in the pursuit of certain EaP flagship projects. This idea was initially included in the Polish-Swedish proposal, whereas the European Commission in its December 2008 communiqué highlighted the special role to be played by member states with experience in transformation processes. In the course of the EaP's implementation the coordination of member states' development aid for the Eastern neighborhood should be borne in mind so that financial resources are allocated in the most efficient manner, and enhanced coordination of development aid directed at EaP states by the Commission and by the member countries poses yet another challenge.

Given the diversity of the member states, the multilateral dimension of cooperation should not be overestimated, nor should the success of the entire EaP project rest upon it. Closer cooperation between those beneficiaries of Eastern Partnership that are most interested in specific projects would be a step in the right direction. Multilateral collaboration merely ought to complement bilateral relations between the EU and the Eastern neighborhood countries.