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Still all quiet on the Eastern front? The European Union's Eastern Partnership one year after the Prague summit

One year ago the Eastern Partnership (EaP) was launched by the European Union. It has been argued that the EaP should neither become just another regional initiative nor should it be over-burdened with expectations. Both views are still valid after the first 12 months. Nevertheless, the launch of the first projects within the EaP allows us to draw some first conclusions and look at the EaP's developments both in the target countries and the EU. The recommendations set out before the Prague summit 2009 can then be revised and adjusted according to these new developments.

What counts for the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) in general, is also true for the Eastern Partnership in specific: The interest of the target states in cooperating with the EU vary greatly. On the other side, the EU member states also have different priorities for bringing the EaP-countries Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine closer to the EU. Initially set up to counterbalance the Union for the Mediterranean within the European Neighbourhood Policy, the EaP now functions as the Eastern dimension of this policy. The ENP-east countries also vary in other regards as compared to the ENP-south countries, especially regarding their long-term EU membership prospects. The EaP allows deepening relationships with the EU in several fields:

1. Gradual integration into the EU economy through deep and comprehensive Free Trade Areas
2. Easier travel to the EU through the long-term goal of full visa liberalisation
3. Energy security cooperation through interconnection and integration of energy markets and
4. Regional development through the EU cohesion policy.

Bilateral and multilateral dimension

The Eastern Partnership has a bilateral and a multilateral dimension. The first dimension aims to "upgrade" the contractual relationships between the

EU and the target countries, replacing the Partnership and Cooperation Agreements that the EU signed with all EaP-countries, except for Belarus, in the 1990s with Association Agreements. Negotiations with Ukraine have already been going on since 2007 and could be concluded by 2011. At the beginning of 2010 negotiations with Moldova opened and on May 10 the General Affairs Council of the European Union adopted negotiation directives for the future Association Agreements with the countries of the South Caucasus: Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia. So far Belarus is still excluded from the bilateral dimension due to their lack of progress on the issues of human rights and democratization. Nonetheless, cooperation within the multilateral framework is, to a certain extent, foreseen. Within this multilateral framework the EaP has four thematic platforms:

1. Democracy, good governance & stability
2. Economic integration and convergence with EU policies
3. Energy security
4. Contacts between people

The four thematic platforms have adopted Work Programmes for 2010-11 and several flagship initiatives have been approved in the areas of *integrated border management, support for small and medium enterprises, energy efficiency, civil protection and environmental governance.*

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Civil Society Forum

Following a call from the European Commission on June 2009, civil society organisations (CSO) from the ENP-east and EU member countries met in Brussels for the first Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum (CSF) on 16-17 November 2009. This format aims to promote and strengthen the dialogue between CSOs and the authorities as well as to provide a forum in which to share experiences regarding the European integration process in the EaP- countries. Working groups reflecting the thematic platforms of the EaP were established in order to facilitate input from the civil society sector. Furthermore, the Eastern Partnership Culture Programme, to be funded under the European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument (ENPI), will commence by the end of 2010. The objective of this Programme is to support the role of culture and to promote regional cooperation between public institutions, civil society cultural organisations, foundations and academic organisations in the EaP region and the EU.

Problematic developments in some target countries and within the EU itself

Although in theory these developments seem to be going into the right direction, there are practical problems both from the side of the Eastern Partnership countries as well as from the side of the European Union.

Belarus is financially and economically torn between Europe and Russia, but also China is emerging as a possible partner. Nevertheless, in 2009 good progress in the relations between Brussels and Minsk was made, though in the last six month Belarus has once again put increased pressure on NGOs. Furthermore, the leadership of the Polish minority has been imprisoned. Lukashenka is facing presidential elections in 2011 and therefore restrictions on the civil society from the regime will likely become even more severe over the next couple of months.

The recently passed Ukrainian deal with the Russian Federation to get a 30% reduction off the price of gas in exchange for the prolongation of the contract for the Russian Black Sea fleet's base in Sevastopol

seems at first glance to be a major setback for the EU-Ukraine relations. Although this agreement has been made by the Ukrainian side without any urgency, since the initial base contract runs out only in 2017 and the gas price reduction might bring *cheaper* gas but not *cheap* gas and therefore have no real impact on the economy, it is a clear sign of a more pro-Russian policy from Kiev. This does not, however, mean that Ukraine is now turning away from the EU. Their economy is still highly dependent on financial aid from Brussels, as shown by the recent 500 million EU loan to Ukraine approved by the European Parliament.

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However, it is not only the target countries of the EaP that have seen problematic developments. Again an EU member state's government has

collapsed, this time not during but shortly before taking over the presidency of the EU. After the elections in Belgium on June 13, it is unlikely that the parties will be able to form a government before taking over the presidency of the European Union on July 1st. The formation of the current collapsed government after the last election in 2007 took nine months. With the New Flemish Alliance (Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie N-VA) winning the most seats of all parties represented in parliament, negotiations about a coalition will certainly not be easier than three years ago. The N-VA strives for an independent Flanders. However, in order to form a government a coalition partner from Wallonia is needed and therefore negotiations are expected to be very difficult. In that case the EU will be without clear leadership during the whole Belgium presidency. Nevertheless the Lisbon treaty provides the mechanisms to handle this situation better than last year, through the appointment of a permanent president – ironically Herman von Rompuy who was the Belgian prime minister until December 1st 2009 – and a High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. Additionally, the EaP is not one of the main priorities of the Belgian presidency.

Adding to the difficulties, the European Union is currently facing the biggest crisis in the Eurozone since its foundation. The negotiations over a stabilisation mechanism to prevent the Greek debt crisis from spreading have forced the EU to focus on internal problems and, therefore, Brussels is unable to

devote its attention to its neighbourhood both politically and financially.

Recommendations

1. The EU should use the multilateral framework to further integrate Belarus. Isolation as a policy has not worked during the last years. If Minsk participates in some of the multilateral projects, diffusion of best practices in democracy, good governance & stability might be possible. Admittedly this is a rather optimistic assumption, but in the field of energy security it is not too unrealistic given the current potential for a new gas crisis between Minsk and Moscow. Additionally, the Civil Society Forum can help to strengthen the civil society, which is still heavily suppressed by the Belorussian authorities. In 2011 presidential elections will be held and given that Lukashenka remains firm that there will be no coloured revolution the CSF remains the only practical option to bring about change in the medium-term perspective.

2. Although Ukraine has elected a new president the EU should not see this as a challenge but rather as an opportunity. Yanukovich is more oriented towards Russia than Yushchenko but that doesn't mean that Ukraine is turning away from the EU. Kiev is highly dependent on financial and trade relations with Brussels. As a member of the WTO and with ongoing negotiations about a free trade area (FTA) with the EU, Ukraine can't afford to rely only on Moscow. Just as Brussels wants to establish and maintain good relations with its neighbours through the Eastern Partnership, Kiev has to do so towards Russia as well. This has become much easier with the change of the president. The EU should make use of this situation and foster relations to both countries. Therefore, negotiations about an Association agreement with Ukraine should be continued. Apart from the FTA, visa liberalisation is also part of this deal. Advancements in this area are also desirable regarding EU-Russia relations.

3. The Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum has great potential to promote democratic and market-oriented reforms based on shared values, i.e. respect for democracy and human rights, the rule of law, good governance, principles of market economy and sustainable development as conceptualized by the

EU. Nevertheless, until now it couldn't live up to these expectations as the CSF has been unable to provide substantial input on the EaP. However, this format has great potential and the EU should continue its efforts in this sector.

4. To date, the thematic platforms are very technical and progress has been achieved only slowly. In addition to the funding shortfall that is problematic not only for the platforms but also for the EaP in general, bilateral problems between the target countries, e.g. Armenia and Azerbaijan or Georgia and Russia (which could also participate in certain efforts) hinder progress. The European Commission is currently trying to push some of the initiatives forward but

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many of the target countries don't seem to be fully committed. The thematic platforms can be a way to foster the Association Agreements with the EU and can also help to overcome the bilateral tensions between the EaP-countries.

This needs to be emphasized by the EU.

5. With the new European Commission the responsibility for the European Neighbourhood Policy shifted from the department of external relations, which is now represented by the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, to the department for enlargement. Although this is largely seen as only a symbolic shift, this can be interpreted in a more optimistic way for the EaP. Stefan Füle, a Czech, currently holds this position and given his background he might be more oriented towards the Eastern Neighbourhood. Nevertheless, the new position of a High Representative is still struggling to implement all the provisions foreseen in the Lisbon Treaty. Therefore Cathrine Ashton hasn't been very active in the ENP-field. The current political situation in Belgium is an opportunity for her, together with Herman van Rompuy, to change that during the second half of 2010.

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