

Debating the Eastern Partnership: perspectives from the EU

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Executive Summary

This paper explores the changing attitudes within the EU towards Eastern Europe and the Southern Caucasus and how these are reflected in and influence EU policies. A mixture of internal motivations and externally driven challenges have led the EU to develop multilayered policies, the latest of which is the Eastern Partnership (EaP), which overlaps with and builds upon the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP). Developments in the region which continue to reveal its fragility, coupled with strong demands from countries like Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia for a stronger European commitment there, have put external pressure on the EU to step up its policies. Internally, the accession of the member states from Central Europe strengthened a constituency in favour of deeper ties to the East also as a counterbalance to the EU's Mediterranean vocation.

The Eastern Partnership does not reflect a new strategic vision. It falls short in addressing the key political and security dilemmas that unravel in the lands between the EU and Russia. Instead, it focuses on soft policy and external governance tools. Notwithstanding assurances that the EaP is not intended to foster competition with Russia, it is embedded in a 'European' style of setting up external policies, by introducing a novel multilateral and multilevel framework for cooperation between all countries and between sub-state and civil society organizations, and by clarifying avenues for closer association of these countries to the EU through refined tools developed in the existing Neighbourhood Policy. Unlike the Union for the Mediterranean, its sister framework for the Southern neighbourhood which also prompted the creation of the Eastern Partnership, the Commission is firmly involved providing policy continuity and input. This could help provide a greater continuity of EU engagement and commitment, at a time of economic crisis, enlargement fatigue, discontinuous attention towards the Eastern neighbourhood, possible especially in the light of the importance of maintaining good relations with Russia.

Existing literature has focused on policy analyses of the added value of the Eastern Partnership vis-à-vis the Neighbourhood Policy and the expectations of offering a prospect of accession to these countries. While critical analyses of the benefits or deficits of the incentives on offer, of the uncertain ultimate *finalité* of the Eastern Partnership, and of the limits of EU engagement remain a valid approach, the degree of convergence between the member states on the need to develop more substantive relations with Eastern Europe and the Southern Cauca-

sus is overlooked. Taking a twenty year historical perspective, the EU has gradually increased its level of engagement and the process has led to a greater convergence of views and perceptions of the regions.

This paper is based on research on perceptions within the EU institutions and between the its member states, and of civil society representatives, attempting to reconstruct the reasons that led to the creation of the Eastern Partnership, the relationship it has with other regional initiatives, and the motivations behind the introduction of new levels of policy tools (section 2). Conceptualisations of Eastern Europe, the convergences and divergences behind these on part of the member states, the Commission and the European Parliament are assessed in section 3, which also includes an analysis of the limits to the way in which the Eastern Partnership was devised, focusing on two red lines: relations with Russia and the ambiguities of the accession prospect. Section 4 will focus on the response of civil society organisations, including their plans to carve out greater influence in the policy making process. Section 5 will try to bring out the continuities, cleavages and problems that might emerge in the development of the Eastern Partnership in the near future.

1. Introduction

With only one year of activities, 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, the resonance of the incentives on offer in the six countries of Eastern Europe and the Southern Caucasus.

While the EaP imports the same deficits of the European Neighbourhood Policy, one overlooked area has been the ways in which perceptions and attitudes towards Eastern Europe have evolved within the EU. Supported by interviews with (anonymous) EU and civil society representatives, this paper aims to uncover some of the views behind the conceptualization of the Eastern Partnership, which in turn help understand some of the policy choices this entails, as well as highlight possible areas of tension. Divergence of views between the member states on key themes such as relations with Russia and the debate over future EU enlargement remain firm boundaries to the scope of vision in any policy towards Eastern Europe. However, an 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 strategic vision.

2. Setting up the Eastern Partnership: multilayered policies for Eastern Europe

Launched in Prague in May 2009,¹ following a joint Polish-Swedish idea and a Commission proposal of December 2008,² the Eastern Partnership aims to step up EU engagement with Eastern Europe and the Southern Caucasus, building upon the framework developed through the European Neighbourhood Policy from 2004 onwards. Rather than promote a new vision or strategy for Eastern Europe, it builds an additional layer to existing policies and adds a new multilateral framework that was missing in the ENP.

A number of reasons lie behind the initiative. First and foremost, it represents the EU's traditional compromise between its Eastern and Southern dimensions of its relations with its periphery. It is no coincidence that 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

¹ Council of the European Union (2009): *Joint Declaration of the Prague Eastern Partnership Summit*. 8435/09 (Presse 78), Brussels, 07.05.2010.

² European Commission (2008): *Eastern Partnership*. COM (2008) 823 final. Brussels, 03.12.2008.

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 a 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 neighbourhoods, 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 Rose and Orange Revolutions were a wake-up call, and the 2004 accession of Central European countries boosted the EU constituency in favour of strengthening ties to the East.

The EaP’s set up 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 negotiations in 1997 on human rights grounds 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 Eastern Partnership countries, such as the four thematic platforms,³ the Civil Society Forum (CSF), EU-Neighbourhood East Parliamentary Assembly (EuroNest) all represent attempts to find inroads into relations with Belarusian society, as well as with the other countries, and to strengthen the means for cooperation beyond the ministerial level. Flagship initiatives,⁴ 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

³ 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’, Platform 4 on ‘Contacts between People’.

⁴ Currently progress is being made on the integrated border management programme, the facility for small and medium sized enterprises, cooperation in preventing and responding to natural and man-made disasters, good environmental governance, energy efficiency, while the programme on diversification of energy supply still needs to be further developed.

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, people-to-people contacts, had created the Euro-Mediterranean Parliamentary Assembly, networks of local government representations, as a means to encourage engagement between the two shores at the social, and 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 neighbourhoods 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, for which negotiations should terminate between 2010 and 2011, this prospect had not been clearly spelt out for the other countries, and a consensus on what type of agreement to put on the plate for 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, financed with Euro 175 million for 2011-2013 is intended to support the countries to 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 specific situation rather than 'one size fits all'. The package also includes the prospect for a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA), 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 to achieve, it will not deliver those 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 enjoy a prospect of accession.

If Ukraine already had a visa facilitation agreement with the EU and is starting a visa dialogue (the step before visa liberalization), 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 keep 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, Stefan Füle, has indicated this among his priority areas, implicitly recognizing that visas have become one of the most sought after incentives for EU partners.

Overall, in policy terms, the Eastern Partnership falls in between the debate on ‘ENP Plus’ and ‘Enlargement-lite’.⁵ 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 and the CIB programme), represent forms of external governance and the translation of tools the EU acquired from the experience of enlargement to external policies, but without making any clarification whatsoever on possible future prospects for accession. The multilateral dimension also builds upon the Commission’s *acquis* developed 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 modesty of vision of the Eastern Partnership might well turn out to be a good ingredient for its continuation over the foreseeable future. The deliberate avoidance of addressing the unresolved security problems in the region, of the underlying tensions with Russia, the different views of relations with Moscow between the European capitals, and of the possible enlargement prospect 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 red lines that continue to exist in the Union: the ‘highest common denominator’ that could be realistically reached in light of the underlying differences within the EU.⁶

⁵ Emerson, Michael, Gergana Noutcheva, Nicu Popescu (2007): ‘The European Neighbourhood Policy Two Years On: Time for an “ENP Plus”’. *CEPS Policy Brief* 126. Brussels; and 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.

⁶ Using the apt definition of Grzegorz Gromadzki at the Workshop organised by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation and the Centre for Eastern Studies, *Debating the Eastern Partnership. A comparison of perspectives and expectations*, Warsaw: 26 March 2010.

3. Building an EU convergence of views?

In the 1990s, Eastern Europe was hardly on the mental map of European policy makers, and when it was, the dominant view of the region saw it as 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 noticeable. The EU has engaged with Eastern Europe in such a way to antagonize one of its most important partners further East. For Russia, while digesting the accession to NATO and to the EU of Central Europe, the attraction of the Union in parts of Eastern Europe has had strong reverberations in its relations with the West and in its policies towards its Western neighbourhood, with the Ukrainian Orange Revolution as a defining moment leading to a re-evaluation of Moscow’s regional and international role.⁷

The forms and pace of EU engagement, however, have been incremental. The 2004 Orange Revolution, EU involvement in finding a solution to the political crisis there, European Parliament support for political change in Ukraine, were all important events that precipitated engagement. But more structural shifts occurred with the accession of the Central European countries, which strengthened significantly the constituency within the Union in favour of deepening relations with Eastern Europe. Already in the late 1990s Poland had been proposing a review of relations with Ukraine and Belarus; in 2002-2003, Sweden and Britain, 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 decoupling conceptually Eastern Europe from Russia.

This, however, 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 historic partner, and their interests in maintaining good relations will override their interests in Eastern Europe, despite growing

⁷ For a brief but insightful analysis which interprets the Orange Revolution as Russia’s 9/11, see Krastev, Ivan (2005): ‘Russia’s Post-Orange Empire’. *Open Democracy*, 19 October, www.opendemocracy.net/democracy-europe_constitution/postorange_2947.jsp (20.10.2010).

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. But the gradual shift to a higher level of relations with Eastern Europe helps 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 Eastern Partnership 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, in public and in private, that the EaP is not conceived as antagonizing Russia, and that the initiative, as the Neighbourhood Policy beforehand, can be open to Russian participation should it want to, for instance through the flagship projects or the thematic platforms. There also is a general perception that Russia's objections are not as vocal as they were at the time of the launch of the EaP, and less substantive.⁸ This is also due to the nature of the EaP, with its focus on soft policy issues rather than on hard security ones,⁹ to its lack of strategic vision especially with regard to the political and security issues in the region, and to the fluidity in the region itself. The increasing diversification of the foreign policies of Ukraine, returning towards its traditional multi-vector foreign policy, Armenia and Belarus, more open to possibilities in the West, is also perceived positively inside the EU, as it takes pressure off the demand for an accession prospect.

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, border management. But its whole 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 labour mobility and visa free travel, making the region a space of competition despite EU assurances of the contrary. The likely uneven pace of visa liberalization in the region, and

⁸ See also Stewart, Susan (2009): 'Russia and the Eastern Partnership. Loud Criticism. Quiet Interest in Cooperation'. *SWP Comments* 7 (May).

⁹ See, for instance, Emerson, Michael (2009): 'Do we detect a neo-Finlandisation in the Eastern neighbourhood?'. *CEPS European Neighbourhood Watch* 49 (May).

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 1 June 2010 over the visa liberalization offer, due to preoccupations within and outside the Union that the EU would privilege 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 regards offering a prospect of membership to those countries which have been aspiring towards 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. Those countries that pushed the EaP are pragmatic in this regard, even if they would support further enlargement of the EU.

The ‘enlargement-neutral’ wording and set up of the Eastern Partnership, however, makes it curiously subject to interpretation, when scratching beneath the surface of official statements and positions. For those member states which are not inclined towards further enlargement, EaP 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). Thinking hypothetically, it could not be excluded that European capitals would envisage Turkey to be included in the group of countries not to be fully integrated, but strongly anchored to the EU.

The other interpretation sees the EaP quite differently. The policy’s emphasis on approximation and governance, according to those countries pushing for stronger relations with the Eastern neighbourhood, and with Ukraine in particular, 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 ambition, but as a framework to prepare the ground for a possible future accession prospect for Eastern Europe.

The lines of differentiation within the EU reflect proximity, history, attitudes towards EU integration, but also the specific issues at play. These lines overlap in the case of the Central European countries (indeed, the first discussions on the ideas that led to the Eastern Partnership were held in the Visegrad Group), all geographically close, in favour of enlargement, and haunted by the legacy of the Soviet empire. But they become more blurred in continental Europe, where priorities can clash between the Eastern and Southern neighbourhoods, between supporting enlargement and deeper integration, while importing gas from Russia. Germany is probably the most emblematic country, with growing relations with and interests in both Eastern Europe and the Southern Caucasus, concerned with stability there, but also with strong ties with Russia, and preoccupied about any plans for further enlargement.

The Commission has been supportive of the EaP and pragmatic about the vision the EU could realistically propose in light of these limitations. More importantly, the Commission has been involved in the conceptualization of the policy from the beginning. In contrast with the Union for the Mediterranean, in which the Commission was sidelined, the EaP gave it the coordination role. It comes as no surprise that the Eastern Partnership was launched with a budget of Euro 600 million, whereas the UfM remains without resources. The engagement of the Commission, which has created a special task force, has provided continuity to the initiative, and helped keep up its momentum. What remains to be seen is whether and how the development of the European External Action Service will introduce changes to the set up of the EaP.

The European Parliament's views of Eastern Europe by and large reflect the divisions between the member states, rather than by 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 and especially since the Orange Revolution. The creation of EuroNEST was also a long standing demand traceable in the EP's resolutions on Eastern Europe and the Southern Caucasus. Paradoxically, it is currently blocked 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, are ready to accept the delegation of MPs from Minsk, the European People's Party, in which the Polish representation is large, are against involving MPs who are not democratically elected in the new institution.

4. Civil society

The introduction of the fourth thematic platform on contacts between people is seen as a positive development all round. 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 and ownership, promoting common knowledge and media attention on EaP issues, and supporting the exchange of ideas, with the aim of supporting networks for ‘socialisation’. The first meeting was convened by the Commission in November 2009.

What remains unclear is what kind of influence the Civil Society Forum 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 working on a regular basis and with stronger links with the thematic platforms and flagship initiatives.¹⁰ While the institutional activities of the Forum are financed by the Commission, the Forum also wants to increase the funding aiming at developing common projects between NGOs from EU and EaP6 countries.

While it is early to assess the impact of civil society engagement, the steering committee of the Forum has identified a number of weaknesses and areas for improvement. First of all, it does not want to limit its involvement to participation but clarify the ways in which it could contribute. Input into the policy making processes are the prime concern, while at the same time identifying specific means for engagement in the thematic platforms. The mechanisms for influencing policy papers, monitor progress and provide inputs to governments, EU institutions and the joint bilateral and multilateral meetings still need to be defined, so far limiting the scope for civil society involvement in the conceptual and political stages defining EaP policies and initiatives.

The processes and format of CSF participation in the variety of meetings held under the EaP, such as thematic platform meetings, still needs to be defined. In this sphere, some of the tensions within the Eastern Partnership might emerge. While the Commission has no objection to such participation, there will be limited role 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 relating

¹⁰ Boonstra, Jos and Natalia Shapavolova (2010): ‘The EU’s Eastern Partnership: One year backwards’. *FRIDE Working Paper* 99 (May).

to democracy. Its first meeting took place without any prior information offered to the CSF.¹¹ This sheds some doubt over the opportunity of dealing with democracy issues in multilateral platforms, though Commission and EU officials insist that these themes still play an important role in bilateral relations.

Alongside civil society organisations, the Committee of the Regions has also engaged actively in the activities of the Eastern Partnership 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 on the programme for training and networking of local authorities and on natural and man-made disasters.

5. Prospects for the future

The Eastern Partnership is not safe from critique. Among the arguments voiced against it are 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.¹² The equilibrium between engaging the countries least interested in developing relations with the EU and those which ultimately aim for a prospect of accession is eschewed in favour of the former. There is a risk that some countries will cherry pick what is on offer according to their interests only, or that EU policies are 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. Competition with Russia does exist in the region, where Russia 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.¹³ The policies that focus on external governance have so far had a limited impact. The recently established democracies remain fragile, political reform is stalled in most cases, and

¹¹ Hale, Jaqueline (2010): ‘A Seat at the Table. Eastern Partnership: What Role for Civil Society Organizations?’. *Global Europe*, 2 February, <http://www.globeurope.com/standpoint/a-seat-at-the-table> (20.10.2010).

¹² Shapovalova, Natalia (2009): ‘The EU’s Eastern Partnership: still-born?’. *FRIDE Policy Brief* 11 (May).

¹³ 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.

since the immediate months after the Orange Revolution the EU has loosened its pressure on Kiev to persevere in its political reform path. Authoritarian regimes remain so, and opening avenues for greater contacts with the EU so far has not produced political liberalisation in these countries.

The red lines of convergence between the EU member states illustrate the deeper blockages to engagement. The EaP, as 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 those underlying political tensions which hamper the development of the region, rather than focus 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.

Also, the EU would need to get more involved in political issues. The Eastern Partnership managed to garner consensus by de-politicising some of the problems in the region and dressing them in the technical and bureaucratic language of the Commission. Yet some of these issues will emerge, potentially feeding straight into those issues the EU would want to avoid. Visa liberalization and the processes leading towards the DCFTA, for instance, at some stage will require addressing 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 fields too are severely undermined by the conflicts in the region making it difficult to decouple governance from security.

Nonetheless, the role that the EaP has played in raising the profile of the region and in stepping up EU responsibility there 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 in devising and executing policy, and the

growing convergence of the member states on recognizing greater importance to the Eastern Europe and the Southern Caucasus all contribute to an expectation of continuity over the next few years.

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

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