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The EU's Eastern Partnership—a Misunderstood Offer of Cooperation

Stefan Meister and Marie-Lena May

The European Union's Eastern Partnership, initiated by Poland and Sweden, may fall through without ever having really gotten off the ground. Sweden, the current holder of the EU's rotating presidency, has failed to give the deserved priority and attention to its own initiative. In Russia, the fear is that the EU is seeking to strengthen its influence in the East. Meanwhile, the leadership of Ukraine, one of the strategically most important target countries of the Partnership, opposes the initiative. As such, EU members, the target countries, and Russia misunderstand the purpose of the proposed partnership. It is important to use the Eastern Partnership as a basis for developing a essentially new policy towards EU's neighbors in the East. The Eastern Partnership is of fundamental importance for European energy supplies and the future viability of the EU. Therefore, the EU countries finally must commit themselves to a strategic development of this region and conduct an interests-oriented neighborhood policy that integrates or, if necessary, pressures Russia.

What are the goals of the Eastern Partnership?

The Eastern Partnership (EaP), established in May 2009, is meant to expand and deepen the existing Neighborhood Policy with the Caucasus states of Armenia, Aserbajdzhan, and Georgia, as well as with Belarus, Moldova, and Ukraine. In comparison to the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP), this initiative is directed solely towards former Soviet countries in Eastern Europe. As such, it is a reaction to the French-initiated Union for the Mediterranean, which seeks to develop closer relations to the neighboring countries in that region. The European Commission offers bilateral negotiations to the EaP-participating countries on association agreements including the possibility of establishing a free trade regime. Other components comprise discussion over eased visa rules, border security, and energy security. The Commission has delineated four key areas to serve in encouraging multilateral cooperation: democracy and good governance, economic integration, energy security, and the promotion of civil society exchange. Both Brussels and individual EU countries have repeatedly made statements assuring that the initiative is not in any way directed against Moscow. While Russia is not a member of the EaP, it

could be involved in projects on a case by case basis. The target countries are to receive € 600 million until 2013 for investment in state institutions and border controls, as well as for the support of small business.

Poland and the EU's Eastern Dimension

Before even receiving membership in 2004, Poland sought to create an Eastern Dimension for the EU, drawing on the Northern Dimension that Finland initiated in 1997. This was motivated by the Polish conception that Poland could only be protected from Russia if Ukraine was a fully sovereign nation and linked to the West and the EU. While Poland's initial attempts to promote a new eastern policy for the EU were unsuccessful, it experienced a breakthrough in cooperation with the Swedish foreign minister Carl Bildt at the end of 2008 – in part as a reaction to the Russian-Georgian war in summer 2008. Russia's aggressive actions in Georgia and its unilateral recognition of South Ossetia and Abkhazia increased the will inside the EU to strengthen relations with its eastern neighbors. The problem with Poland's approach turned out to be, however, that the original purpose behind creating an Eastern Dimension for the EU was to weaken Russia's

influence in the region. Russia was thus from the very beginning not considered as a possible recipient of this policy, in contrast to the Finnish initiative in the Baltic Sea. Without Russian involvement, however, the EU cannot create a serious eastern policy.

Sweden's Role

It is thanks to the Swedish Foreign Minister Carl Bildt that the Polish concept has received much attention in the EU and been widely discussed. When the German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier dismissed the Polish Foreign Minister Radosław Sikorski's call for a Polish-German initiative over the lack of planned cooperation with Russia, the Swedish foreign minister seized the chance to work with Poland to give a fresh impulse to the EU's new eastern neighborhood policy. The absence of a Russian component was in fact an attraction for Carl Bildt, who has distinguished himself for years as a critic of Russia. This attitude is further strengthened by Sweden's objection to the planned Nord Stream pipeline, due in part to security concerns and fears of environmental damage, and its criticism of the human rights situation in Vladimir Putin's Russia. Even if the democratic and human rights situation in Russia has worsened over the past few years, anti-Russian phobias and a policy of isolation have little chance to reverse this trend.

Nevertheless, the Eastern Partnership is practically absent from the agenda of the Swedish presidency in the second half of 2009, which is dominated by issues such as the economy and the environment. This demonstrates a lack of support for this project within the Swedish leadership. This may be due to a split between the foreign ministry, which co-initiated the Eastern Partnership, and the prime minister, who was not much involved in the process. This has the effect of weakening the necessary further development of the initiative.

Russia's Reaction

If the Russian leadership previously paid little attention to the ENP, this changed entirely with the development of the EaP. The Russian Foreign Minister

Sergey Lavrov on multiple occasions condemned the establishment of the Eastern Partnership without Russia's participation and equated it to the establishment of an "EU zone of interest in Eastern Europe." On the one hand, Russia's leadership reacted for tactical reasons more critically than was warranted. On the other hand, Moscow has indeed shown increased nervousness in relation to EU initiatives on post-Soviet territory. Moscow's excessive response to the Georgian attack in South Ossetia resulted in significant damage to Russia's reputation throughout all post-Soviet states. None of these countries has recognized South Ossetia and Abkhazia as independent states. In fact, the Russian aggression has made these countries seeking to bind themselves more directly to the West, especially to the EU.

Similarly, the Russian-Ukrainian gas conflict in January 2009 led in the EU to a loss of trust in Russia. The EU, by far the largest consumer of Russian gas, has taken a number of serious steps in the past months to develop a common EU energy policy that would reduce dependence on Russia. The expansion of energy cooperation between the EU and its eastern neighbors—an important component of the EaP—could have direct consequences for Russian projects. Moscow is also concerned by the rapprochement between the EU and Belarus, Russia's traditionally most loyal ally. While there was once only limited contact between EU countries and Belarus, now Belarus is part of the EaP and is expanding its economic ties to the EU.

The Russian criticism against the EaP has not arisen because Moscow takes the EaP particularly seriously, but because it perceives the EU as an increasingly important player in the post-Soviet space. As such, the EU is beginning to be understood in Russian foreign policy as a competitor in Moscow's traditional sphere of influence.

Ukraine and the "eastern partners"

While the majority of the countries targeted by the EaP welcomed the Swedish-Polish initiative from the beginning, first Moldova and then later Ukraine reacted

negatively. The Moldovan President Vladimir Voronin, who has since resigned, saw in the initiative a new, anti-Russian CIS under the leadership of the EU. Ukraine's leaders based their increasingly critical stance towards the EaP primarily on the fact that the partnership grouped Ukraine together with other states that are far less advanced in their integration with the EU. Kiev fashions itself as a regional power in terms of relations with the EU and accordingly seeks special treatment. The Ukrainian President Viktor Yushchenko had already criticized the ENP for lacking a path to EU membership for his country. For Yushchenko, this is a fundamental omission that the EaP only repeats. Even though bilateral negotiations are enshrined in the EaP, Kiev does not want to lose the advantage it has over other EaP members in the association negotiations.

The EU needs a new eastern policy

The EaP is a positive development, since it would give special treatment to the EU's eastern neighbors. Events on the EU's eastern border affect the EU more directly than is the case with many other countries involved in the ENP, such as Libya or Jordan. This became clear, for instance, during the gas conflict in January 2009. The EU must therefore more clearly articulate its political and economic interests in regard to the EaP countries and involve these partners in an open dialogue. Merely hiding behind the classic EU formula of "we support stability and prosperity" is not sufficient for the development of these countries as the EU would like to see it. The crises in Ukraine and Georgia and the rapprochement with Belarus demonstrate the need for a discussion about the political goals of the EU in Eastern Europe. For the first time in years there is the possibility of directly involving Belarus in an EU project. The demonstrations in Moldova and the subsequent resignation of the Moldovan President Voronin could set Moldova on a pro-European path.

A two-step approach is called for: firstly, relations to the target countries should be developed on an individual basis, and secondly multilateral projects should be pursued that integrate Russia. Furthermore, a concrete system of incentives must be created within the frame-

work of the new eastern policy that would promote reforms with additional financial assistance. The idea of a civil society forum developed in the EaP concept signals a strong and important emphasis on social elements. The EU can successfully influence neighboring states only when it combines a civil society exchange with eased restrictions on visas and more travel freedoms. Additionally, the dissemination of knowledge about the EU and the European idea throughout the Eastern neighbor countries should be facilitated through an offensive information campaign.

The EU's new eastern policy can only be successful if the split is repaired between those EU states that favor friendly relations with Russia (Germany, France, Italy) and those with more critical viewpoints (Poland, Latvia, Estonia). Russia is of course an important factor in the political decisions of the EU regarding its East European neighbors. At the same time, the EU states should not allow the development of policy towards their eastern neighbors to be dominated by Moscow, but should rather take Kiev, Minsk, and Tiflis more seriously. The EU must develop policies and joint projects that can begin to address the problems found in the region. The EU's eastern policy should not be used primarily to placate the domestic public under the mantra that "no prospect for membership is being offered." In this respect, the development of EU policy towards its eastern neighbors begins within the EU itself.

Doing one's homework

The eastern neighbors, and especially Ukraine, should abandon their fixation on EU membership, understanding that this is not a panacea for all of their country's ills and that it can only come as the result of tough negotiations. It is much more important for the elites in the neighboring eastern countries to understand that EU policies target above all the domestic, and not foreign policy of a country, and that the only way to EU membership is through internal reform. They must themselves create precedent and so sustainably demonstrate their desire for membership. For this, these countries are in great need of stimuli and

pressure from Brussels to begin the reform process. The long-overdue loosening of visa restrictions for countries like Ukraine and Moldova could be used by the EU as a negotiating tool to support important domestic reforms. The self-conception of Kiev would be helped by a clear statement by the EU on Ukraine's membership in Europe. The target countries should not be offered a prospect for EU membership, but rather a political, economic, and social linkage to the EU in the framework of a wide-reaching association agreement.

The EU and Russia

The EU and its member states must recognize that Russian politics do not follow the same logic as European politics do. Moscow does not view the increasing influence of the EU in its immediate proximity as a win-win situation, because it brings stability and democracy, but rather as a loss of power and influence. It is of no use to repeat continuously the empty claim that Russia benefits from this development. It is much more important to integrate Russia into concrete projects in the region in areas such as energy security, economic cooperation and environment protection.

On the other hand, it must be made clear to Moscow that the EU has interests in this region and does not recognize the exclusive spheres of influence that Russia has claimed for itself. Russia's attempts to influence and build alliances in its "near abroad" have failed in the past ten years. No country in the post-Soviet realm wishes to find itself under Moscow's sphere of influence at least since the war between Georgia and Russia in the summer of 2008. The Russian political and

economic model is not sufficiently attractive for these countries. While Moscow in the coming years will not be able to overcome this mentality, it must recognize the EU as an attractive competitor in the post-Soviet area that can also play a central role in modernizing Russia.

The EaP could serve as an important instrument in beginning the process that will lead to more straightforward and goal-oriented policies. It should be made clear to all participants that the EaP is the beginning of a process that can lead to a new eastern policy if all the important players are actively incorporated, but that this is by no means inevitable. The EaP could fail, for example, if the eastern neighboring countries do not take the offer seriously and use it instead as a mere tool to gain an advantage over Russia, or again if the EU member states out of self-interest do not further develop and promote the critical aspects of the EaP. Germany should strengthen its engagement and act as an important motor for a new EU eastern policy in the framework of the EaP. With its close contact to Moscow, Germany could be an important negotiator with Russia and send a clear signal to the EaP countries.



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