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The EU's Eastern Partnership

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Background

During discussions of the proposed Union for the Mediterranean during 2008, Poland and Sweden suggested that a similar development of the EU's neighbourhood policy should be applied to the countries on the EU's eastern border. The result was the development of the Eastern Partnership, which was launched in May 2009. This short paper gives the history of the Partnership idea, explains its intended purpose and assesses what contribution it might make to improved EU relations with its eastern neighbours.

The Concept of an Eastern Partnership

The EU adopted its European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) in 2004 as a framework for its relationship with the countries on its eastern and southern borders, combining into a single framework the Mediterranean agreements under the Barcelona Process of 1995 with the agreements and policies developed to the East after the break-up of the Soviet bloc and the accession of a number of former communist countries to the EU (see the separate paper on European Neighbourhood Policy for further information).

In 2007, President Sarkozy proposed that during the French Presidency the following year, the EU should launch a "Mediterranean Union" which would be a development of the ENP involving those EU Members and other countries which border the Mediterranean Sea. The idea progressed in a somewhat different form as the Union for the Mediterranean to which all EU Member States now belong, along with several Mediterranean countries.

Poland and Sweden proposed in May 2008 that an Eastern Partnership should be established to provide a forum in which the EU and six countries on its eastern border could discuss issues such as free trade, visa access and energy security. It would do so without committing the EU to offering membership to the six very different countries involved – Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine.

The proposal was endorsed by the June 2008 European Council which asked the Commission to bring forward detailed proposals to be presented at the March 2009 meeting of the Council.

The Commission's proposals were published in December 2008 and agreed to by the March 2009 European Council. The Member States committed the EU to "a deeper bilateral engagement and to a new multilateral framework" with the six eastern European countries, aimed at "accelerating reforms, legislative approximation and further economic integration". Unlike the Union for the Mediterranean, there will be no separate secretariat for the Eastern Partnership; it will be administered by the Commission in Brussels. The Partnership was formally launched on May 7th 2009.

The Partnership's Purpose & Content

A Declaration attached to the Conclusions of the March 2009 European Council set out the purpose of the Eastern Partnership and how it was intended to operate.

It said that "promoting stability, good governance and economic development in its Eastern neighbourhood" was of strategic importance to the European Union. The EU therefore had, "a strong interest in developing an increasingly close relationship with its Eastern partners".

The Eastern Partnership would strengthen EU policy with the eastern countries "by seeking to create the necessary conditions for political association and further economic integration between the European Union and its Eastern partners". The Eastern Partnership's purpose was to "support political and socio-economic reforms, facilitating approximation and convergence towards the European Union" and also to build trust and better relationships amongst the six eastern countries themselves.

The Declaration reaffirmed that the work of the Eastern Partnership was without prejudice to the question of any of the six countries becoming members of the EU in the future. But it declared that the Eastern Partnership would have the "shared values" of "democracy, the rule of law, and respect for human rights" at its core, "as well as the principles of market economy, sustainable development and good governance". An aspiration shared by EU countries but not necessarily shared by the six but all of those values and principles are of course expected in countries that aspire to join the EU.

In terms of finance and management, the Eastern Partnership would be supported by an increase in the financial support already allocated to working with these countries "in line with the Commission's proposal of €600m for the period to 2013" but within previously agreed budget limits for that period. There will be roughly biennial meetings of the Partnership at the level of heads of state or government and annually at foreign minister level.

This new endeavour would be complementary to existing regional initiatives in the eastern and southern borders of the EU, including the Black Sea Synergy, which exists to strengthen co-operation in the Black Sea region.

The intention is that bilateral cooperation between the EU and the six countries should lead to Association Agreements between the EU and those of the six countries who "have made sufficient progress towards the principles and values" referred to above and who wish to commit to a "deep and comprehensive free trade area" with the EU. The EU would support the six countries to improve their administrative capacity to meet those aims and would work towards "full visa liberalisation as a long term goal for individual partner countries and on a case by case basis provided that conditions for well-managed and secure mobility are in place". The Declaration also referred to working together on issues of energy security.

Finally, the Declaration left open the possibility of third countries (notably Russia but it was not mentioned by name) being involved in aspects of the Partnership's work on a case-by-case basis.

Assessment

The Eastern Partnership, like the Union for the Mediterranean, provides the EU and a group of its neighbours the opportunity to develop a stronger relationship over time. But the value of such groupings depends on the commitment displayed by the participants – and that may be dependent on external factors.

The Eastern Partnership will be greatly influenced by the fact that all six of the partner countries are neighbours of Russia and are greatly affected, in one way or the other, by Russia's economic and foreign policies and in particular by the Russian desire to keep these former Soviet countries in its own sphere of influence, a concept rejected by the EU as well as by the US. Russia has made no secret of its lack of enthusiasm for the Partnership and its Ambassador to the EU, Vladimir Chizhov, was quoted in February 2009 as suggesting that it did not have much of a future. Referring to both the Union for the Mediterranean and the Partnership he said: "They have one common problem – they don't have dedicated finances and support. Whatever isn't supported by a line in the budget usually doesn't fly very high". Mr Chizhov's scepticism about the Partnership may not be justified but his comment on the budget is not without relevance. The ambitions for the Partnership could well exceed the capacity of the budget to fulfil them. In addition, the economic crisis could lead to the curtailment of the existing bilateral aid programmes of EU Member States to the six countries.

The six partner countries are not a homogenous group. They are at different stages of economic, political and social development and in some cases, in dispute with one another. Belarus's participation is of concern to the UK and other Member States because of its lack of democracy and poor record on human rights. Georgia is also irritated by Belarus's recognition of the breakaway Georgian provinces of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states. Armenia and Azerbaijan are in dispute over the future of Nagorno-Karabakh and the Trans-Dniester region of Moldova (which has large Russian and Ukrainian populations) remains occupied by Russian troops and outside the day-to-day control of the Moldovan Government. The political situation in Ukraine continues to be tense and difficult.

Although the Eastern Partnership is accession neutral, several of the six countries aspire to EU membership and may regard the Partnership as an insufficient substitute for it. With no explicit assurance that that it is a stepping stone towards eventual membership, they may withhold their co-operation accordingly.

Despite these difficulties the Partnership provides a forum in which important issues of common interest can be debated, in which the benefits of access to the EU market can be negotiated and it is a public demonstration of support for the EU's belief in democracy, free markets and the rule of law when those values are not strongly established in all the partner countries (and may be further undermined by the global economic crisis).

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Senior European Experts

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