



## Question mark on the substance of the Eastern Partnership – Whose interests matter?

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The Hungarian public was recently shocked by the postponement of the Eastern Partnership summit, originally planned for May, 2011 during the Hungarian EU Presidency. For Hungary to lose what is perhaps the most significant EU Presidency event of its term is indeed regrettable. But it may not be a bad piece of news for the six, affected East European partner countries<sup>1</sup> since the EU Eastern Partnership (EaP) initiative launched in May 2009 still lacks clear visions about its final goals and seems buried by Brussels well-known bureaucratic, 'one fits all' approach. It is more than probable this situation could not have been reversed by May 2011.

According to major documents on the Eastern Partnership, the European Union aims to create closer relations with the partner countries both politically, through the set of Association Agreements (AAs) under negotiations or to be further negotiated, and economically by concluding, as core parts of AAs, 'deep and comprehensive free trade agreements'. The European Union's 'europeanization' method supports reform processes in the partner countries by reinforcing 'European values'. Concretely, this means a kind of approximation to European legal norms. But this policy is far more a policy of 'making them similar to us' than a real development policy, something badly needed in the six countries in question. Eastern partners almost feel as if they were in the midst of adopting the *acquis*: with the only major difference separating them from states negotiating EU-accession being the lack of a membership promise. The European Union wants too much in far too detailed structure, but at the same time ignores this very important fact. Insistence on detailed and 'deep' approximation slows the process down and evidently does not benefit the partner countries. Target country enthusiasm for fulfilling EU requirements differs significantly. As is common in the EU 'block-building' practice, the EU, by

treating countries similarly, has created a very mixed group of countries. A major dividing line between the seemingly similar countries is caused by the final goal of their relations with the European Union. Three countries (Ukraine, Moldova and then Georgia) have clearly declared their willingness to become EU-members and thus require a membership perspective. The agenda in the other three countries however is less ambitious. They are simply attempting to develop closer relations with the EU, though for very different reasons. Originally the EU wanted to gain time before answering the very crucial question raised by the first three countries. As a result, for the time-being at least, the Eastern Partnership reflects a flexible framework: it does not offer a membership perspective, but at the same time, it does not exclude it for the future. Thus hope for a membership perspective can persist, both in the target countries and in those EU member states who support the idea.

For precisely this reason however, some partner countries have lost their enthusiasm for the EaP. Ukraine, for years a pioneer Eastern neighbor ever since her "orange revolution", has grown disappointed because, in launching the EaP, the EU has offered to the other five countries (with the partial exception of Belarus) what Ukraine had reached only through very difficult negotiations over a period of several years. Without the promise of membership, the EaP should provide its partners with something else attractive in the short and medium term. The visa issue is certainly in first place on side of the partner countries. Although a visa dialogue has been launched with Ukraine and Moldova, visa facilitation and readmission agreements have been concluded with Georgia and negotiations have been initiated with the other three countries. The visa liberalization process is very slow and the EU is itself very reluctant. This undermines the credibility of the EaP project.

The reason for the necessary postponing of some crucial answers lies in close connection with the strongly diverging member state approaches and interests. And in some cases the problem is likewise connected to the well-known 'Russia issue'. One dividing line can be characterized as geographic:

<sup>1</sup> They are: Azerbaijan, Armenia, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. EU relations with Russia have a separate framework basically due to the former Russian reluctance to be in the same 'box' as other, internationally less important post-Soviet countries.

southern member states (like Italy, Spain or France) have strong interests in the EU's southern neighborhood and only marginal interests in the Eastern neighbors. For others the situation is just the opposite. Russia-policies create other important differences in country approaches towards the Eastern Partnership. For several member states, including the so-called big ones (France, Germany or Italy), Russia is a strategic partner not only in energy deals but also regarding general commercial interests. These member states generally try to avoid any steps from the EU side that might irritate Moscow. The Eastern Partnership initiative certainly belongs to this sphere, since it is precisely the matter of common European neighbors that till now has created a major impediment to the further development of EU-Russian relations. (Though not clearly spoken, the EU and Russia have been competing with each other over determining the future orientation of their common European post-Soviet neighbors.)

Beyond this, the EU promotes the conclusion of deep and comprehensive free trade agreements for which the economies of the partner countries are not really mature. Contrary to the short term interest of EU member states, due to the opening of new markets, the advantages for the Eastern partners, mostly structural, can only be expected in the long-term while the price must be paid immediately.

Cooperation on energy, another major sphere of EaP activities, has so far not produced significant results. Though here partner countries interests are more prominent, in particular by decreasing dependence on Russian supplies and supply routes, European projects move ahead only very slowly.

Another dilemma is caused by the multilateral track initiated by the EaP strategy. The EU cannot reasonably or efficiently support links between the partner countries if it does not wish to take a stand on their old, frozen conflicts. On the other hand, more active EU involvement in conflict resolution is expected on the part of affected partner countries, like Azerbaijan.

The Hungarian EU Presidency date for the next EaP summit (27 May, 2011) and the French G8-G20 Presidency date for the 2011 G8 summit (26-27 May, 2011) were in competition. It was evident that both events could not be organized at the originally planned high level on the originally planned day(s). It is not by chance that France, belonging to the group of member states without any special interest in the EaP (for both of the reasons noted above), cared little about the date problem. Thus the Hungarian EU Presidency organizers had little alternative. The event had to be postponed until the Polish Presidency and Hungary has been blamed for forfeiting its major EU Presidency event. But there are other winners of this decision. Apart from Poland, the principal supporter

of the EaP, the partner countries themselves may also benefit. Let's explore the reasons why.

All-in-all, there are still too many open questions and uncertainties associated with the EU Eastern Partnership initiative and it is more than probable that an EaP summit in May 2011 would not be able to provide the necessary answers, particularly in view of the diverging member state approaches and interests. Although elaborating the content of the EaP in principle is the job of Brussels, Poland, as a large member state with more influence potential than Hungary, may be able to bring consensus on some crucial issues by autumn 2011. As a result, the EU offer to the six partner countries may grow even more substantial. A major potential sphere to push forward is the process of visa liberalization, a number one priority on the partner side.

But it is highly questionable whether Poland will be able to change the logic of the EaP: at the moment Brussels dictates the agenda, sometimes even ignoring the partner countries' wishes and interests. Documents from the latest Eastern Partnership Foreign Ministers Meeting (13 December, 2010) reflect this point. But this logic may ultimately be dangerous: the EU is no the only group with interests in the region. There are other international players as well. Besides the obvious Russian interests, the EU should also consider those of Turkey. China has likewise shown interest in the post-Soviet space, and not only in Central-Asia. Offers coming from these countries may seem more attractive since they do not involve the same high level of conditionality. Moreover, these competing offers may ultimately be more generous as well. Also, recent domestic political developments have resulted in the decreasing attractiveness of the EU offer for some partner countries, for example Ukraine. All these factors should be taken into consideration when formulating the content of the EU EaP policy!

In the post-crisis period, the EU is more reluctant to let new, less developed countries into the club and the question regarding the Eastern voluntary candidates is now much more about future promises than a real accession agenda within a foreseeable time-period. But the above mentioned differences in member state approaches are still of major significance regarding the general development of the Eastern Partnership initiative. This is particularly true when budgetary issues are on the table. This has resulted in a situation where highly ambitious programs have been launched on the basis of very modest financial sources. Though the EU should re-think its goals in this region for many reasons, perhaps the principal one is that slow movement on the EaP initiative has thus far left only one enthusiastic fan, Georgia.

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