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Perceptions of,
and Attitudes towards,
the Eastern Partnership
amongst the Partner
Countries' Political Elites

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Abstract

The Eastern Partnership is widely viewed by the partner countries as an improvement over the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP). Yet, the EaP remains relatively unknown amongst the political elites: few members of the national elites base their perceptions of the EaP on familiarity with the Partnership's specific content and instruments. Rather their perceptions are influenced by a broader set of factors, including a geopolitical context of the partner countries, the pre-existing relations and initiatives (such as the ENP), as well as the actual design and implementation of the EaP itself. This paper aims to elucidate on these seeming paradoxes by exploring how these three factors shape the attitudes towards the Eastern Partnership.

While the EaP aims to accelerate the process of convergence using the *acquis* as a template for reforms, this objective does not resonate strongly with the political elites in the partner countries. Rather, their perceptions of, and attitudes towards, the Partnership are conditioned by geopolitical considerations, including any membership aspirations (or a lack of them). This results in a considerable mismatch between the agenda of the EU and that of the partner countries' elites. Nevertheless, even if only for the sake of maintaining EU's engagement with their countries, the elites continue to declare interest in the EaP and pursuing convergence. Therefore, the EU can and should exploit the geopolitical significance of the EaP amongst the eastern neighbours to push forward key domestic reforms. Progression to different stages of relations could be deployed in a strategic fashion to 'focus the minds' of the elites on domestic preconditions. This requires purposeful planning, single-mindedness and sufficient resources from the EU to be able nudge the eastern partners along the reform path.

Introduction

The Eastern Partnership (EaP) sets a framework within which closer integration of Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine with the European Union (EU) can be developed. The primary objective of the EaP is to expand and intensify the relations which at first developed through the overarching European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP). For that reason, the Partnership is widely viewed by the partner countries as an improvement over the ENP. By offering the eastern neighbours a step change in relations with the EU, the Partnership in effect supersedes the ENP.

Yet, the EaP remains relatively unknown amongst the political elites (top governmental officials and members of parliaments) in the partner countries. Unsurprisingly perhaps, few members of the national elites are aware of the Partnership's specific content and instruments. Yet, despite its importance, even broad brush discussions about, and implementation of, the EaP in the partner countries take place in relatively narrow governmental circles, often without parliamentary scrutiny or public discussion. At the same time, each country's national elite seem to speak with 'one voice', i.e. tend to be quite consistent and unified in its assessment of the Partnership. How can this paradox be explained? That is because, as it is argued in this paper, these perceptions are based on a wide array of factors, including, first, a geopolitical context of the partner countries, second, the pre-existing relations and initiatives (such as the ENP), and, only finally, the design and implementation of the EaP itself. This paper aims to elucidate on these seeming inconsistencies by exploring in more detail the role the three factors outlined above play in shaping perception of the EaP.

1. Geopolitical Context

From the EU perspective, the EaP is designed to 'accelerate political association and further economic integration between the Union and partner countries'.¹ Therefore, the EaP centres on supporting political and socio-economic reforms through facilitating approximation towards the EU in bilateral engagement and multilateral cooperation.

While the EU proposes functional integration, the post-Soviet elites' preferences for closer relations with the EU are often underpinned by geopolitical

motives.² Each of the partner states is afflicted by the insecurities which stem from weak statehood, concerns over territorial integrity and an overbearing Russia as a neighbour. Thus it is perhaps unsurprising that geopolitics is the prism through which these countries view their relations with the EU.

Crucially, the Partnership was adopted in the aftermath of the Russian-Georgian conflict in August 2008, which alarmed some partner states sufficiently to re-explore their attitudes towards the EU. Understandably, the war had the biggest impact on Georgia and prompted Georgia to regard the EU as a key guarantor of regional security. Georgia's predicament, as one EU official based in Tbilisi put it, is that 'Russia is too close, the US too far...'³ Georgia's engagement within the EaP is viewed as instrumental in achieving progress in conflict resolution and regaining territorial integrity. This is why, with hopes for NATO membership now all but dead, Georgia's interest in closer relations with the EU has taken on almost existential significance. This is more than evidenced in the continued stress the authorities in Tbilisi place on the EU's recognition of, and support for, Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity.

While prioritising rule-based convergence, the EU is side-stepping the issue of security. Thus, the EaP does not provide for direct involvement in the resolution of the 'frozen' territorial conflicts, such as that of Transnistria in Moldova or Nagorno-Karabakh involving Armenia and Azerbaijan. Indeed, the term 'conflicts' appears in the 2009 Declaration on the EaP only in a general context of 'the need for their earliest peaceful settlement on the basis of principles and norms of international law (...)'.⁴ Notwithstanding a longer treatment of the conflicts in the 2011 Warsaw Declaration, the Partnership enshrines the EU's preference for addressing security problems facing the post-Soviet states through the promotion of 'good governance' and 'human security'.⁵ Nevertheless, for Georgia and Moldova, this type of engagement is sufficiently important to merit their strong support for the EaP, not least

1 The Council of the European Union (2009) *Declaration on the Eastern Partnership* (Annex to the EU Presidency Conclusions), European Council summit, 19-20 March.

2 For a detailed discussion of Ukraine's long-standing policy towards the EU against the backdrop of relations with Russia see Wolczuk, K. (2004) 'Integration without Europeanisation: Ukraine and Its Policy towards the European Union', *EUI RSCAS Working Papers*, No. 2004/15, RSCA, European University Institute, Florence.

3 Author's interview with an EU official, Tbilisi, November 2011.

4 The Council of the European Union (2009).

5 See Delcour, L. (2010) 'The European Union, a security provider in the eastern neighbourhood?', *European Security*, 19: 4, pp. 535-49.

because Russia demonstrates its well developed knack of remaining involved in the conflict regions in Transnistria, South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

Armenia's interest in the EU has grown since the launch of the EaP in 2009. In contrast to some other countries, Armenian authorities, opposition and civil society are optimistic about the EaP's potential to generate substantial benefits for their country.⁶ The conflict with Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh, the closed border with Turkey and the negative economic effects of Georgia's conflicts have put Armenia in a particularly difficult geopolitical situation. The country seeks closer ties with the EU as a way of overcoming its isolation and the resulting geopolitical vulnerability.

However, for Azerbaijan, the attraction of the EU has not improved as a result of the EaP (or indeed, the ENP). On the contrary, for Azerbaijan, the EU's response to the events of August 2008 undermined their support for the EU's initiatives in the region. The conflict underscored both the impotence of the EU as an international actor and the hegemonic role of Russia in the post-Soviet space. The pull of the EU as a normative power, already weak, lessened further. Azerbaijani elites are rather sceptical about EU policy towards the post-Soviet space and prospects for economic integration with the EU. Within Azerbaijan, support for the EaP is difficult to secure because of the perceived lack of EU support for the country's territorial integrity. Therefore, the EaP is predominantly seen as a means of asserting the country's role as a major regional and international energy player and obtaining the EU's support for the development of its strategic energy infrastructure.

For Belarus, the attractiveness of the EaP stems from its geopolitical symbolism, i.e. as a counterbalance to its dependency on Russia. In itself, the EaP does not offer sufficient financial incentives to Belarus embark upon political and economic reforms.⁷ On the contrary, the debacle of Belarus' representation in the Euronest and, especially, during the Summit in Warsaw in September 2011 made Belarus' status within the EaP a politically sensitive

issue.⁸ (The Belarusian delegation withdrew from the summit and Belarus did not sign the Summit declaration.) Nevertheless, despite contradictory reports and remaining tensions, Belarus remains a member of the EaP and continues to take part in its activities, i.e. multilateral platforms. Belarus is unlikely to withdraw from the Partnership. Russia has just too great a presence in Belarus to cut all its ties with the EU.

In sum, there is a mismatch of the agenda between the EU and the partner countries. The desire to escape (or weaken) Russia's domination and restore (or secure) territorial integrity are a strong motivation for post-Soviet states to seek closer ties with the EU. This at least partially explains why the respective political elites in partner countries (with the partial exception of Moldova) subordinate rule-based convergence with the EU to EaP's presumed geopolitical significance. In contrast, from the EU perspective, rule-based convergence is the *sine qua non* for progress in relations. But this fact appears rarely appreciated amongst the political elites in the eastern neighbouring countries.

2. Continuities and Change in the EU Policy Framework towards the Eastern Neighbours

Although the EaP builds on and expands the ENP, in fact it supersedes it: by 2011, all partner countries uniformly refer to the EaP rather than the ENP as the key framework for conducting their relations with the EU. At the same time, however, the perceptions of the EaP are strongly conditioned by the pre-existing relations and EU policies and initiatives, the ENP being the most important one. In particular, the issues of differentiation and 'value added' shape the divergent perceptions of the EaP amongst the partner countries.

'Value Added'

The major novelty of the Partnership is that the path of integration that was initially offered under the ENP only to the regional 'frontrunners', namely Ukraine and Moldova, has also been opened up to other eastern neighbours. All of them are offered

6 Babayan, N. and Shapovalova, N. (2011) 'Armenia: the Eastern Partnership's unrequited suitor', FRIDE Policy Brief (September).

7 Melyantsou D. (2011) 'Eastern Partnership Summit and Belarus: Nothing For Nothing', Biss Blitz Bb04/2011en, 11 October.

8 On the Belarus' representation in the Euronest please see Delcour, L. (2011) 'The Institutional Functioning of the Eastern Partnership: An Early Assessment', Eastern Partnership Review, No.1 and on the Warsaw Summit see Marin, A. (2011) 'Saving What Can Be: What the Eastern Partnership Could (Still) Bring to Belarus', Eastern Partnership Review, No.3.

the prospects of 'political cooperation and economic integration' without *a priori* differentiation in terms of objectives and instruments. The six partner states have been offered Association Agreements, Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas, Visa Facilitation Agreements and full visa-free regimes in the long term, based on their progress in bilateral relations.

The EaP brought different things to each of the eastern neighbours. The Partnership appears to add most value to relations with the South Caucasus states, as acknowledged by Georgia and Armenia. In contrast, for Ukraine the EaP may seem to add little value. In fact it is even perceived as a retrogressive step. Under the ENP, Ukraine's elites were able to offset their disappointment with a lack of the membership perspective with becoming the only country negotiating an Association Agreement with the EU, thereby enjoying a clear 'front-runner' status. So the EaP actually spells an end to Ukraine's perceived (and sought after) distinctiveness in the post-Soviet space. By offering the same prospects to all eastern neighbours, the EaP dilutes Ukraine's standing vis-a-vis the EU.⁹

No doubt Ukraine's assertiveness reflects its sheer sense of importance in the region, as enunciated by a Ukrainian official as a 'cornerstone, tectonic plate, from which strength, status and stability affects the whole region'.¹⁰ Needless to say, this sense is something that other eastern neighbours lack. Incidentally, however, Ukraine's assertive stance vis-à-vis the EU is not seen as a hindrance by partner countries. It is noted that Ukraine's quest for distinctiveness means that the country acts as a 'groundbreaker' for the post-Soviet countries' relations with the EU. For example, as pointed above, Ukraine was the first to obtain a concession on an Association Agreement in the aftermath of the Orange Revolution. For Moldova the EU's offer was by and large modelled on that for Ukraine but the process was accelerated: if, after the Orange Revolution, Ukraine waited two years to start negotiations on the AA; in the case of Moldova it took 4 months after a change of government in 2009. Thus, Moldova smoothly follows in Ukraine's footsteps.¹¹

Nevertheless, at least for the time being, the EU's relations with Ukraine have the potential for role setting for other Partnership countries.¹² The new EU-Ukraine Agreement demonstrates what is achievable in relations with the EU and may stimulate the less advanced states to emulate Ukraine's progression path of integration with the EU.

Differentiation

All the partner countries, especially those with the greatest ambitions vis-a-vis the EU, welcomed the differentiation between the eastern and southern neighbours that the EaP introduced. However, a corollary of this was that it spawned a demand from the EaP partner states for greater differentiation between them.

While offering much which is new, the EaP is a continuation of the ENP insofar as it promotes convergence with the EU without an explicit *finalité*, especially in regard to prospective membership. The 2009 Declaration stated that the Partnership 'will be developed without prejudice to individual partner countries' aspirations for their future relations with the European Union'.¹³ The September 2011 Warsaw declaration went further, and, following the June 2011 Council communication on the ENP, did 'acknowledge the European aspirations and European choice of some partners'.¹⁴ None of the few post-Soviet countries that actually aspire to membership, is (or can be) offered a membership perspective in the foreseeable future.

The partner countries note that any differentiation in the EU's policies takes place within the limits unilaterally drawn by the EU. So while 'joint ownership' has been emphasised both in the ENP and the EaP, this 'co-ownership' does not extend to defining the policy objectives, instruments and the scope of differentiation. The EaP is perceived still as an EU policy **towards** the post-Soviet region, rather than a joint initiative.¹⁵ Thus, Ukraine points out that there is no explicit link between the EaP institutional framework and the particular aspirations of the individual partner countries vis-à-vis the EU. While the Partnership does increase the EU's

9 Author's interviews with Ukrainian officials, Brussels, September 2010 and October 2011.

10 Yeliseev, K. (2009), 'Ukraina i ES: Partnerstvo – Asotsiatsiya – Chlenstvo', *Dzerkalo Tyzhnia* 16 (744), April 30–May 15, 2009.

11 Raik, K. (2011) 'From Attraction to Europeanisation – Moldova's Slow movement towards the EU', *Eastern Partnership Review*, No. 2, p.7.

12 Mkrtchyan, T., Huseynov, T. and Gogolashvili, K. (2009) 'The European Union and the South Caucasus', *Europe in Dialogue*, 2009/01.

13 The Council of the European Union (2009)

14 The Council of the European Union (2011) Joint Declaration of the Eastern Partnership Summit, Warsaw, 29-30 September.

15 Author's interview with a Moldovan official, Brussels, October 2011.

influence on the post-Soviet region by intensifying engagement, Ukraine's actual prospects remain much as they were defined by the ENP.¹⁶ This conditions a strong sense of continuity between the two policies: the ENP set up the broad parameters while the EaP provides more support and substance. As one Moldovan official put it 'the EaP reinforced the ENP; it provides more instruments to achieve *this same aim*' [emphasis added].¹⁷ However, it is clear that for the partner countries aspiring to membership, the *finalité* remains an important, missing aspect of the EaP. The Moldovan perspective is that 'the Eastern Partnership is an instrument to an end – which is for us a clear vision on our future with European Union but definitely should not be an end in itself. In the longer run the Eastern Partnership will be *relevant if* it becomes a political vehicle for the Republic of Moldova to reach its destination – EU' [emphasis added].¹⁸

This demand for differentiation is articulated in different ways. While hoping for membership, Moldova is most keen to embrace the EaP as a vehicle for advancing its ties with the EU, and emphasises a strong interest in convergence with the *acquis*. In contrast, Ukrainian elites articulate bold demands for the 'European perspective'. While they objected to being grouped with Morocco under the ENP, within the Partnership they complain about being treated on a par with Azerbaijan, a country with no aspirations to EU membership. In turn, Azerbaijan's elites play up their non-aspiring status. They demand to be treated more like a self-reliant 'partner' rather than a mere recipient of EU guidance and assistance. They stress that, in contrast to Moldova and Ukraine, Azerbaijan does not seek 'integration' but rather cooperation in selected areas of mutual interest in its relations with the EU. It is evident that the ongoing **demands for intra-regional differentiation** conditions the attitudes towards the EaP amongst the partner countries.

3. The Design and Implementation of the Eastern Partnership

In bilateral relations, the EaP offers the chance of momentous change by offering partner countries the opportunity to form Association Agreements with the EU. This process immediately provided a strong focus on bilateral relations both within the EU and partner countries. But, in addition to the bilateral format, the EaP introduced the multilateral track, which gives it a more ambitious, flexible and efficient appearance in comparison with the ENP. But in practice the key challenge lies in working out a multilateral agenda that ensures sufficient synergies and linkages with the distinct bilateral tracks.

Bilateral Track

At a first glance, the EaP does not bring much novelty in institutional terms to bilateral relations between the EU and partner countries. These take place in the context of the established institutional frameworks, i.e. the Partnership and Cooperation Agreements (PCAs).¹⁹ The pivotal innovation of the EaP from the point of view of the partner countries is development of **new ambitious legal frameworks**: the Association Agreements (AAs) which are currently being negotiated with the EU by most of the partner countries.

The negotiations of the AA instil a stronger sense of purpose, focus and dynamism into bilateral relations. Unlike the ENP instruments, such as the Action Plans, which consisted of 'soft-law', the new Agreement will contain 'hard', legally-binding commitments, the renegotiation of which could have legal implications for both sides. If the ENP Action Plans offer a wide-ranging but vague blueprint for domestic political and economic reforms, the negotiations of the AA introduce a much greater degree of specificity and commitment into partners' relations with the EU. In particular, the agreements on Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas (DCFTA), which are an integral part of the AA, include a very detailed set of policy prescriptions, that require extensive approximation to the *acquis*. But, once again, the political elites in the partner states view the negotiating process through its geopolitical symbolism. They often feel frustrated by EU's insistence on 'meeting key recommenda-

16 Wolczuk, K. 'Convergence without Finalité: EU strategy towards post-Soviet states', in K. Handerson and C. Weaver (eds.), *The Black Sea Region and EU Policy: the challenge of divergent agendas* (Ashgate 2010), pp.45-62.

17 Author's interview with a Moldovan official, Brussels, October 2011.

18 'Proposals of the Republic of Moldova on the future development of the Eastern Partnership' (2011), Non-paper, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Moldova, May.

19 See Delcour, L. (2011) 'The Institutional Functioning of the Eastern Partnership: An Early Assessment', The Estonian Centre for Eastern Partnership, No 1

tions', 'fulfilling pre-conditions', 'making sufficient progress', etc. This was the case with Georgia as the country leadership hoped to be given a date for start negotiations on DCFTA at the Warsaw Summit in September 2011.²⁰

Notwithstanding the divergent expectations, the launch of negotiations on AAs by 5 out of 6 partner countries gave a strong impetus to focus on the bilateral track within the EaP (with the exception of Belarus which participates only in the multilateral platforms). Among all the developments in EU's relations with the post-Soviet states since the collapse of the USSR, the new Agreement is the most important one in terms of consequences and, as such, provides a powerful incentive to focus on the bilateral interactions. However, the fact that the partner countries are in different stages of bilateral negotiations and implementation results in particular challenges for the implementation of the multilateral track of the Partnership.

The Multilateral Track

The EaP initiated a multilateral format in interactions with the post-Soviet states, which share many common legacies but also some essential differences, not least their geography, preferences vis-à-vis the EU and progress of their bilateral relations with the Union. As a result, the multilateral platforms generate different expectations and, accordingly, attract diverse assessments.

In particular, the multilateral track faces the challenge of accommodating different starting points, not least quite different economic backgrounds, and aspirations vis-a-vis the EU. Feasibility studies on DCFTAs in most cases came to the conclusion that the partner countries would not be ready for trade liberalisation in the immediate future. For example, for Azerbaijan the feasibility of closer economic integration with the EU is at present limited due to the absolute dominance of energy in the Azerbaijan export profile and the fact that Azerbaijan is yet to secure membership of the World Trade Organisation (which is a precondition to negotiations of DCFTA). Even though all of the partner countries need to build their capacities to undertake the necessary structural reforms and adapt their regulatory frameworks to EU standards, their readiness, aspirations and progress vary considerably, even with regard to specific policy fields.

Nevertheless, through bandwagoning the mul-

tilateral track appears to bring the biggest benefits to the post-Soviet states that have weakest relations with the EU, such as Azerbaijan and Belarus. Under the EaP, these countries are involved in multilateral discussions with the EU as well as more advanced EaP states. Even though at the political level Belarus and Azerbaijan assert their preference for truly partner-like relations and a lack of interest in convergence in the EU, at the sub-political level, in thematic panels their representatives fully and actively engage in dialogue and exchanges of information.

Given its 'frontrunner' position, for Ukraine the multilateral dimension is relatively less important than the bilateral ties with the EU. Even though Ukraine actively participates in the multilateral platforms, the country's elites regard them as mere fora 'for conferences, seminars, round tables and dialogue', which add little to what has already worked at a bilateral level.²¹ They do however enable Ukraine's to 'showcase' its advanced status.²² Moldova is more positive about the multilateral track seeing it as a networking opportunity providing regular contacts between its experts and the Commission. Nevertheless, Moldova also is keen to align the multilateral platforms more closely with the progress in its own bilateral relations with the EU. In particular, it is claimed that the re-shaping of the working programmes of the EaP Platforms is needed to ensure a closer correlation between the multilateral track and Moldova's priorities in bilateral cooperation.²³

For the frontrunners, the multilateral track appears to bring benefits mainly insofar it facilitates progress in bilateral relations. Indeed, this 'subordinate' role was given an explicit recognition in the Warsaw Declaration of 2011:

'The multilateral Platforms will further help advance partner countries' legislative and regulatory approximation to the EU *acquis* by allowing exchanges of experiences and best practices. The work programme of the platforms and panels will be reviewed to allow flexibility in responding to the needs of partner countries and to take into account new areas of cooperation.'

21 Author's interview with a Ukrainian official, Brussels October 2011.

22 Yeliseev, K. (2009), 'Ukraina i ES: Partnerstvo – Asotsiatsiya – Chlenstvo', *Dzerkalo Tyzhnia* 16 (744), April 30–May 15.

23 'Proposals of the Republic of Moldova on the future development of the Eastern Partnership' (2011), Non-paper, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Moldova, May.

20 Author's interviews with Georgian and EU officials, Tbilisi, November 2011.

Nevertheless, the multilateral track benefits the participating countries in multiple ways. For example, it has facilitated stronger cooperation in bilateral relations between Ukraine and Moldova in fields such as, energy, transport and Transnistria.²⁴ Georgia started conducting regular, informal consultations with Moldova, expanding previously very limited ties between the two countries. Furthermore, multilateral meetings in various configurations have taken place. For example, EaP foreign ministers attended an informal meeting in Sopot, Poland in May 2010. Within a year and half of launching the Partnership, three informal meetings of the foreign ministers of Lithuania, Belarus, and Ukraine took place to discuss the implementation of the EaP.²⁵ The EaP spawned new formats of cooperation: the introduction of the multilateral approach encourages and enables at least some of the partner states to learn from each other and to seek cooperation to address their common problems.

But ultimately **geography and geopolitics** impose strong limits on the effectiveness of the multilateral platforms. The six countries do not form a contiguous geographical area with three of them being located in Eastern Europe and a further three in the south Caucasus. This makes it, for example, difficult to agree and implement the EaP Flagship Initiatives as acknowledged in the Warsaw Declaration.²⁶ Especially in the case of Armenia and Azerbaijan, their direct implication in the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh puts a major block on their effective cooperation in the multilateral context. However, it is important to stress that while the highest political level is most affected by the nature of bilateral relations between Armenia and Azerbaijan, at the technical level fruitful cooperation takes place, thereby contributing to confidence building between the two countries. Nevertheless, even though the EaP encourages multilateral cooperation by various means, progress within the multilateral framework has proved particularly arduous to achieve.

24 Author's interview with a Moldovan official, Brussels, October 2011.

25 Solonenko, I. (2011) 'Added Value? Eastern Partnership and EU-Ukraine Bilateral Relations' available at http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/ipg/2011-3/11_solonenko.pdf (downloaded 18 Nov 2011).

26 The Council of the European Union (2011).

The Summits

The biannual Summits at the highest political level provide political visibility and assert a common sense of purpose. So far only one summit – Warsaw 2011 – took place, apart from the opening one in Prague in May 2009, giving some preliminary insight into the perceptions of its role in the partner countries.

The Summit was accompanied by high (and rather exaggerated) hopes for new initiatives and incentives, attached to the Polish EU Presidency (in the second half of 2011). As one of the initiators of the EaP, it was anticipated that Poland would make new ambitious proposals with a view to facilitating deeper integration processes in the region. In particular, a simplified roadmap for a visa free regime and a substantial increase in financial assistance were expected to be announced. Some pinned considerable hopes to 'upgrading' their progress in relations. In the case of Georgia, much effort went into lobbying in the member states to secure a green light to open negotiations on DCFTA.²⁷ However, such hopes stemmed from a limited understanding of the fact that such decisions were beyond the scope of the Presidency, especially in its post-Lisbon format. In the absence of ground-breaking proposals, the focus shifted from substance to symbolism. The level of representation of the big EU member states, such as Germany, the UK and France, turned into a litmus test of the EU interest in, and support for, the Partnership during the 2011 Summit. Somewhat paradoxically the Warsaw summit implicitly asserted an unusual sense of solidarity amongst the partner countries by re-addressing asymmetries vis-à-vis the EU. Despite considerable pressure from the EU, the partner countries refused to sign a declaration, condemning the deterioration of human rights, democracy and the rule of law in Belarus. But overall, the elites remain uncertain of the purpose of the summit. The absence of a clear purpose and substantive agenda for the summits results in exaggerated and dashed expectations.

Post-Lisbon Adjustments

The launch of the EaP in 2009 was soon followed by the coming into force of the Lisbon Treaty. The Treaty enhanced foreign policy by granting the EU

27 Yet according to the Summit Declaration, this remained a subject to 'sufficient progress has been made in fulfilling a number of remaining key recommendations'. The Council of the European Union (2011).

a role in international relations.²⁸ One of the means to achieve this has been the creation of the European External Action Service (EEAS). The EEAS combines the weight of the Council with the international experience and technical expertise of the Commission through personnel and competencies. Therefore, the formation of the EEAS carried a promise of greater coherence and enhanced coordination of external policies in general and the EaP in particular.

Yet the implementation of the EaP was detrimentally affected by, first, the institutional uncertainty related to the prolonged formation of the EEAS, and, second, insufficient human resources dedicated to the EaP within the EEAS.²⁹ The handling of EaP implementation is complex, involving the EEAS, DG Enlargement and DG DEVCO as well as other directorates. The principal responsibility for planning, organisation and dissemination of information falls into the remit of the EEAS. Yet the understaffing of the unit responsible for the EaP makes the implementation of the multilateral platforms difficult, making them less responsive to the needs of the partner countries. The same was noted about the EU Delegations in partner countries, where the implementation of the Lisbon Treaty led to confusion and uncertainty about management structures and responsibilities of staff.

The creation of the EEAS affected the ability of the EU to respond to changing situation in the region in a prompt and strategic way. It was felt, for example, that the EU missed a window of opportunity vis-a-vis Belarus in 2009-10, when the Belarussian authorities seemed more open to cooperation, when they joined the EaP and made some concessions (i.e. release of political prisoners). Yet at that very time the EU was too pre-occupied with the implementation of the Lisbon Treaty, especially with the creation of the EEAS, to exploit this opening. The crack-down on the opposition in the aftermath of the presidential elections in December 2010, however, led to (yet another round of) worsening relations. Subsequently, the issue of Belarus' representation in the Euronest and at the Warsaw Summit had a detrimental effect on these two important institutions of the EaP.

Conclusion

From the EU perspective, the role of the EaP is to promote domestic political and socio-economic reforms through facilitating convergence towards the EU. The EaP expands the intensity and depth of EU's engagement in the eastern neighbourhood to accelerate the process of convergence using the *acquis* as a template for reforms. This objective does not resonate strongly with the political elites in the region. Rather, their perceptions of, and attitudes towards, the Partnership are conditioned by the countries' geopolitical considerations and a broader context of membership aspirations (or a lack of them). The elites perceive the design and implementation of the EaP not in terms of their effectiveness in promoting convergence but rather seek to use the Partnership for the country's own, distinct geopolitical priorities and interests. So there remains a considerable mismatch between the EU's emphasis on rule-based convergence in political, economic and governance dimensions, on the one hand, and the political and economic realities as well as geopolitical aspirations of these countries, on the other.³⁰

Nevertheless, even if only for the sake of ensuring EU's engagement, the country elites continue to declare an interest in closer cooperation. Clearly, this type of motivation makes it rather difficult for the EU to turn the EaP into a success story. With elites' elusive interest in domestic political and economic reforms, the question of 'political will' is, and will remain, at the pinnacle of the convergence process. At least for the time being, the EU can and ought to capitalise on the geopolitical significance of the EaP amongst the eastern neighbours to push forward domestic reforms. The unfolding rivalry between them in progression to different stages of relations could be deployed in a strategic fashion to 'focus the minds' of the elites on domestic pre-conditions. This requires a more strategic approach, purposeful coordination and planning and sufficient resources from the EU to nudge the eastern partners along the reform path.

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28 For detailed analysis of the impact of the creation of EEAS for EU's foreign relations see P. Cardwell (ed.) (2011) *EU External Relations Law and Policy in the Post-Lisbon Era*, TMC Asser Press.

29 See Delcour (2011).

30 Wallace, H. 2009. The European Union and its Neighbourhood: Time for a Rethink. *ELIAMEP Thesis*, 4/2009, Athens.

List of interviews, by institution

European External Actions Service, Brussels
 DG Enlargement and European Neighbourhood Policy, Brussels
 Representation of Poland to the EU, Brussels
 EU Delegation to Ukraine
 EU Delegation to Armenia
 EU Delegation to Georgia
 Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Ukraine
 Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Belarus
 Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Armenia
 Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Azerbaijan
 State Ministry for European and Euroatlantic Integration, Georgia
 Members of the Parliament of Ukraine

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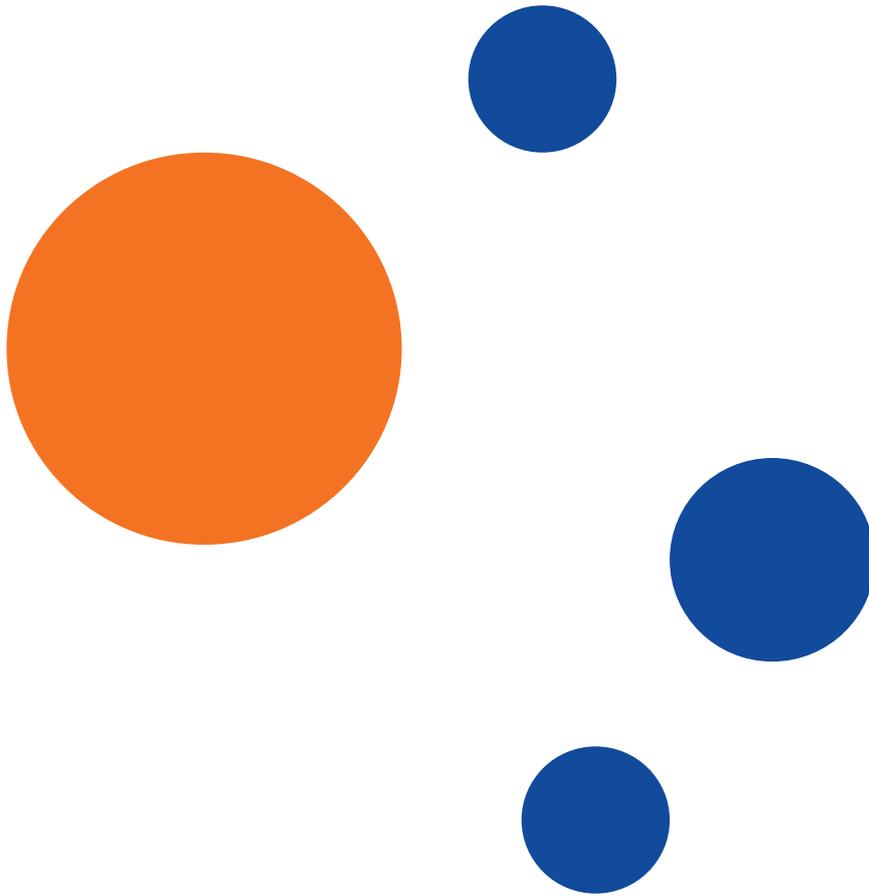


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