

OPEX MEMORANDUM No. 125*/2009

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SUBJECT: THE EASTERN PARTNERSHIP AND THE REGIONAL DYNAMICS WITHIN THE EU; WHAT CONSEQUENCES FOR SPAIN?

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CONTEXT

On May 26 2008 during the General Affairs and External Relations Council, the Polish Foreign Minister presented, with Sweden's support and assistance, a proposal to establish an Eastern Partnership. The Eastern partnership was officially welcomed by the Spring European Council, which gave it a sound support. It is aimed at promoting stability, good governance and economic development and prosperity between the EU and its Eastern neighbours as well as to deepen the existing bilateral commitments, and to establish a multilateral framework for cooperation between EU countries and Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. On 7 May, the inaugural summit for the Eastern partnership will take place in Prague. From a strategic point of view the Eastern Partnership is a key challenge for the EU, especially in light of the Georgian crisis from 2008, and the late gas supply crisis. As regards Spain, the full implications and concrete impact of the new proposal concerning its strategic interests remain a challenge.

¿What are the countries that will benefit more from the Eastern Partnership?

While the ENP operated at a more technical level, the Eastern Partnership implies a political message of solidarity and support from the EU to the countries belonging to the former Soviet Republics. As regards some of those countries, the Eastern Partnership opens the door to the adoption of Association Agreements following the path paved by Ukraine. The proposal sets out a new instrument the CIB, (Comprehensive Institution Building) at bilateral level so that the new partners will be able to accept the EU offer for upgraded relations. The proposal also foresees concrete procedures as for the establishment of a large free-trade area and further opening of the EU labour market. In this regard the Eastern countries of the EU are placed in a privileged position to maximise the benefits of the new synergy. Poland has taken the lead of the proposal while the three Baltic republics are also playing an important role.

¿What are the main new points proposed in the Eastern Partnership?

The Eastern Partnership should provide the foundation for new Association Agreements between the EU and those partners who have made sufficient progress towards the principles and values set out in the proposal (stability, good governance and economic development and prosperity). Compared to the ENP, the multilateral and regional dimensions of the Eastern Partnership will be more political in nature as it proposes regular meetings at a high level, also including heads of government and States linked to bold political issues.

It will become an institutional forum for discussing visa agreements, free-trade agreements and strategic association agreements against the background of the energetic confrontation and the regional dynamics of power within the EU, as well as the question of the external relations lead. It will also be useful to get around the controversial issue of EU enlargement.

This would include the conclusion of "mobility and security pacts", allowing for easier legitimate travel to the EU while at the same time stepping up efforts to combat corruption, organized crime and illegal migration. These pacts would also cover the upgrading asylum systems to EU standards and the establishment of integrated border management structures. The ultimate long term goal would be visa-free travel with all cooperating partners involving 76 million people, albeit the process has been conceived to apply in the long term and in a case by case basis.

The Commission has committed itself to studying possibilities for labour mobility with the aim of further opening of the EU labour market; in the field of energy, enhanced energy security in the partner countries themselves and with the European Union is called to have a central role in the Eastern Partnership.

¿Why these 6 countries?

European Commission's president Barroso acknowledged the fact that the Georgian crisis had confronted the EU with the need for sound action as regards its Eastern border. In his view, it is not about dropping new division lines but rather to support the necessary modernizing reforms which are being undertaken by the former Soviet Republics. That is the reason why according to the European Commission there should not be opposed spheres of interest but rather a combination of interests. Eastern neighbours are immersed in transition politics. In practice there are diverging foreign policies, latent or explicit conflicts, for instance as regards the energy field, and very low levels of inter-State cooperation, which do fragment and polarise the region.

¿What is Russia position towards the Eastern Partnership?

Russia position stresses that the proposal to establish an Eastern Partnership epitomizes the European willingness to broaden its sphere of influence over the East in the context of the struggle to control energetic resources. It has also accused the EU of pushing Belarus not to follow Russia in recognising the independence of the Georgian republics of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Russia wants to continue playing its hegemonic role in the region, and perceives the growing European implication in the area as a direct threat to its strategic interests. In this regard, the controversial expansion of NATO to the East has not helped to dispel Russia's fears.

The European Commission has made it clear that the events happened in Georgia last summer show the weakness of the Eastern countries and those from the South Caucasus. Not in vain, successive enlargement rounds have placed these countries in a position where EU interests as regards security, stability and economy are at stake. The EU has stressed that its proposal is not anti-Russian as it is responding to a desire expressed by the countries in our Eastern neighbourhood.

Some analysts had argued that a renounce by the Eastern countries to join NATO would appease Russia; however the rough criticism expressed by Moscow regarding the Eastern Partnership seems to refute that possibility.

¿How is the Eastern Partnership perceived by political elites and citizenship in the partner countries?

The perception varies considerably across the different countries. In general, the proposal remains unknown for the average citizen and a subject for elite's debate. Politicians are well aware of the benefits represented by the proposal but the severity of the financial crisis has generally overshadowed the social debate around it.

In Ukraine, the importance of the Russian ethnic minority, and its opposition to the European and Atlantic mainstreams, could end up in a deadlock, especially amidst the rough economic and political crisis which Ukraine is enduring. However, the strategic aspiration of Ukraine continues to be full EU membership, an option that in their view is free from the negative connotations that could be attributed to NATO.

As regards civil society organisations, the idea of an Eastern Partnership with the EU, even if perceived as remote and vague, recalls the method followed during the EU enlargement to the East. They know that even though the project does not imply future EU membership, it does not preclude it either.

The ENP has proven that the development and involvement of the civil society is a key factor for the success of the democratic and market-oriented reforms. Therefore, the Commission proposes to support civil society actors and to engage them in the initiative through the establishment of an Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum. The forum will promote contacts between civil society actors as well as facilitate their dialogue with public authorities. Hopefully this will enhanced the ownership of the new initiative among the new partners.

¿What will be the institutional architecture?

Unlike the Union for the Mediterranean, the Eastern Partnership will not have its own secretariat and it will be managed directly by the European Commission.

The Foreign Polish minister has proposed several times to appoint a special coordinator for the Eastern Partnership; however the proposal did not get debated by the Council. Some suggested the names of Tony Blair or Goran Persson as possible coordinators as they thought that the project deserved to have a first level interlocutor to address the European leaders directly. The European Commission is reluctant to the establishment of external structures that could undermine its leadership. Taking into account past experiences, the European Commission should remain responsible for the Eastern partnership on the EU side, avoiding the existence of structures that could influence the implementing authority.

95 % of the institutional activities of the Eastern partnership, i.e. eight annual meetings in Brussels, as well as the bilateral negotiations regarding the Association Agreements, free trade areas, and visa regime will be directly managed by the Commission. The Commission is keen to appoint a high level internal manager who would be in charge of communicating with partner countries. Hughes Mingarelli is likely to take the job.

The Project will be led by DG Relex but it will also build on the work of DG Energy, DG Education, DG Justice and DG Home Affairs, to chair the eight specific committees that will be set out to develop the work of the Eastern Partnership.

The proposed structure is very loose. Biannual meetings of Heads of States or Governments involving the 27 EU Member States and the partner countries of the Eastern Partnership would provide direction and profile to the Partnership. Annual spring meetings of Ministers of Foreign Affairs would review progress and provide more detailed political guidance. Senior officials engaged in reform work in the relevant policy areas would meet at least twice a year. These meetings, prepared and chaired by the Commission, would take place within the framework of four thematic platforms (Democracy, good governance and stability; Economic integration and convergence with EU policies, Energy security; and Contacts between people). Panels to support the work of each of the platforms would meet as often as appropriate and in the format according to need. Bilateral cooperation will continue through the structures of the European Neighbourhood Policy.

¿How will be the Eastern Partnership Funded?

According to the Commission the total assistance for the six Eastern neighbours will gradually grow from € 450 million in 2008 to € 785 million in 2013, an increase of nearly 75%. This will mean allocating a supplementary envelope of € 350 million in addition to the planned resources for the period 2010-2013. Moreover, €250 million, which was already allocated to the ENP regional east programme to initiatives relevant for the implementation of the Eastern Partnership, will be refocused.

In practice, part of the ENP funds will be removed to feed the Eastern Partnership budget. Albeit the European Commission claims that these funds will be taken from the ENP regional East programme, the final impact into the budgeting of the Union for the Mediterranean and the southern dimension of the ENP remains uncertain. The European Commission underlines that any additional resource for the Eastern Partnership would not come at the expense of the Southern neighbours who would also see their financial envelopes increased overtime, as planned. As for Spain, whose main interests are focused precisely on those dimensions, the new structure of the budget poses problems of political nature.

¿What enlargement perspectives to the countries of the Eastern Partnership?

The European Commission's Communication stresses that the participation in the Eastern Partnership does not contain an accession perspective but at the same time it does not prejudge the nature of the future relations between the EU and each of the partner countries. However, the Commission has used the shade of meaning of the *eurocratic* language to choose the name Eastern Partnership and not that of Association of the European East, to differentiate this project from the European Association Agreements, which in the past had paved the path to the enlargement of the Eastern countries and that contained an explicit perspective for EU membership.

¿Who will put in practice the principle of conditionality? Will the European Commission follow the system applied to the Mediterranean countries in this regard?

According to the European Commission this principle of the European Neighbourhood Policy will be maintained: how far the EU goes in its relations with each country will continue to depend on the progress made by the partners in their reform and modernization efforts. From this perspective the Eastern Partnership is about both – common interests and shared values.

However, the inclusion of Belarus in the project makes one wonder whether geopolitics pragmatism rather than shared values will prevail. In any case it does not seem that Alexander Lukashenko has made sufficient merits as to see his country fully involved in the initiative nor to be invited to the Eastern Partnership Summit. Brussels may fear that excluding Belarus from the process will only leave the country at the mercy of the ever growing Russia influence.

Furthermore, not only Belarus raises problems. Other countries like Armenia, where the armed forces have been accused of the extrajudicial killing of 10 demonstrators last year, have bad human rights and democratic records. As in the past, the approach followed by the European Commission when applying the principle of conditionality will certainly remain basically a question of political convenience and not a matter of unyielding principles.

¿Why there have not been too much opposition to the initiative among member States? ¿Is this due to the lack of definition of the project?

The initiative has been generally supported by the EU and the Czech Presidency has given impetus to a project that considers a priority. However, the idea of an Eastern Partnership has raised concerns in Bulgaria and Romania, which fear that community undertakings around the Black Sea could be curtailed. France and Germany are worried that the Eastern Partnership could be perceived as a waiting room for enlargement, especially as Ukraine is concerned. On the contrary, Nordic countries and most of the Eastern countries, and remarkably Poland are keen on this possibility.

As regards Spain, the proposal does not constitute in principle a direct threat to its regional and strategic interests in the context of the relations between the EU and the countries of its vicinity. That being said, it is obvious that the Eastern partnership is the expression of a stream of regional influence, which is aimed at competing with the Mediterranean stream for the hegemony and centrality of the EU external relations.

¿Is it possible to bear a fragmented ENP? Could there be a competition between the Southern neighbours and the Eastern neighbours for gaining limited resources?

According to the European Commission, the Eastern Partnership aims at strengthening the relations of the EU with its Eastern neighbours completing the so-called Nordic Dimension, and the Union for the Mediterranean to give the full picture of the EU relations with its vicinity. However, beyond complementary, some critical voices think that the proposal has in fact been conceived to correct the weaknesses of the ENP.

According to the Polish, the Eastern Partnership benefits all countries of the EU. In its view, the main weakness of the previous EU policy towards its closer neighbours was that it responded to the particular spheres of interest of some member states only. The new project would serve to enhance ideologically and pragmatically the existing ENP and could help to neutralise the current enlargement fatigue. Poland has stressed the need to differentiate the Eastern Partnership where there is a horizon for enlargement and the Union for the Mediterranean, where this position is discarded. Its foreign ministry said recently that while towards the East, we have European neighbours; to the South we have neighbours of Europe.

In sum, the new plan seldom hides the balances of power within the EU. As last year was Mediterranean thanks to the impetus and determination of the French Prime Minister, this is the time for the East.

Conclusion:

Hopefully, the Southern ENP partners will not be forgotten. After all, it is true that at the same time as the EU is implementing the Eastern Partnership it is also intensifying relations with its neighbours to the South: both bilaterally, based on their commitment to reform and multilaterally, with the renewed Euro-Mediterranean Partnership i.e. Union for the Mediterranean. Spain should be actively involved in the new process to ensure a threefold objective: i) to guarantee that the Eastern Partnership will not compete with the Union for the Mediterranean (e.g. economic resources), ii) to guarantee that the Eastern Partnership will not jeopardize the relationship with Russia and specially regarding the negotiations on a new EU-Russia agreement and iii) to use the momentum and support to the Eastern Partnership in order to, in turn, foster the strategic partnership with Latin America.

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