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THE EVOLUTION OF EU'S NEIGHBOURHOOD POLICY TOWARDS EASTERN EUROPE

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Abstract

This article analyses the EU's evolving relations with its eastern neighbourhood since the early 2000s, focusing on the diverging geographical preferences among the member states vis-à-vis the neighbourhood. In the past decade, the eastern shift of the EU borders in 2004 and 2007 paved the way for a significant increase in the political and financial commitments of the EU to its eastern neighbours. An EU level debate was launched regarding the need to enhance security and stability in the eastern neighbourhood in view of the then forthcoming enlargement. In 2004, the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) was put forward as a new foreign policy tool that integrated EU policies towards its eastern and southern neighbourhood under a single framework. However, the launch of the Eastern Partnership policy in 2009 demonstrated that a consensus has been developed among the member states with respect to enhanced bilateral and multilateral cooperation with the region. The article also evaluates the success of the Eastern Partnership policy regarding transformation of the relations between the EU and its eastern neighbours.

Keywords: EU external relations, European Neighbourhood Policy, Eastern Partnership, Eastern Europe

DOĞU AVRUPA İSTİKAMETİNDE AB'NİN KOMŞULUK POLİTİKASININ GELİŞİMİ

Özet

Bu makale, 2000'li yılların başlarından itibaren Avrupa Birliği (AB)'nin doğu komşuları ile geliştirdiği ilişkileri, üye ülkeler arasındaki coğrafi öncelik farklılıklarına odaklanarak analiz etmeyi amaçlamaktadır. Son on yılda, AB sınırlarının 2004 ve 2007 genişlemeleri sonrasında doğuya kayması ile birlikte, AB'nin doğu komşuları ile siyasi ve mali ilişkileri artmıştır. AB genişlemesi öncesinde, AB'nin doğu komşularında güvenlik ve istikrarı geliştirmek için AB düzeyinde bir müzakere başlatıldı. 2004 yılında, Avrupa Komşuluk Politikası, AB'nin doğu ve güney komşularına yönelik politikalarını bütünleştiren yeni bir dış politika aracı olarak ortaya atıldı. Fakat 2009 yılında Doğu Ortaklığı politikasının başlatılması, Doğu Avrupa ülkeleri ile ikili ve çok taraflı geliştirilmiş işbirliği için

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AB üye ülkeleri arasında fikir birliğine varıldığını göstermiştir. Makale, ayrıca Doğu Ortaklığı politikasının AB ve doğu komşuları arasındaki ilişkileri dönüştürme konusundaki başarısını da değerlendirmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: AB dış politikası, Avrupa Komşuluk Politikası, Doğu Partnerliği, Doğu Avrupa

Introduction

In the aftermath of the Cold War, the EU had a weak form of engagement with the Western Newly Independent States (WNIS) following their independence.¹ In the past decade, the eastern shift of the EU borders paved the way for a significant increase in the political and financial commitment of the EU to its new immediate neighbourhood. An EU level debate was launched prior to the 2004 enlargement regarding the need to enhance security and stability in the then forthcoming eastern neighbours. At the Copenhagen European Council in 2002 the member states avowed their commitment to reinforcing cooperation with the new immediate neighbours 'to avoid new dividing lines in Europe and to promote stability and prosperity within and beyond the new borders of the Union' (Council of the EU, 2003a). Although the discussion regarding the EU's new neighbourhood policy arose out of the need for restructuring the EU policy towards the new eastern neighbours, it was clear that a consensus among the member states depended upon having a balanced approach towards both the southern and eastern neighbourhoods. In March 2003, the European Commission presented the 'Wider Europe-Neighbourhood: A New Framework for Relations with our Eastern and Southern Neighbours' document (European Commission, 2003). The European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) was put forward as a new foreign policy tool that integrated EU policies towards the EU's broader eastern and southern neighbourhood under a single framework. The scope of the policy elicited questions regarding the degree to which the ENP as a foreign policy tool could be successful in externalising the EU's policies and norms without the promise of enlargement. The scepticism was particularly relevant concerning the countries in the eastern neighbourhood that are eligible to apply for full accession to the EU under Article 49 of the Treaty on European Union. The ENP has gradually adopted a geographically 'differentiated approach', initiated with the launch of the Union for the Mediterranean in 2008 (European Commission, 2008). The endorsement of the Eastern Partnership policy followed the introduction of the Union for the

¹ Ukraine, Moldova and Belarus are also known as the Western Newly Independent States (WNIS). The European Union official documents occasionally use this category to refer to these three countries as a group.

Mediterranean to enhance both bilateral and regional cooperation with the six eastern neighbours from Eastern Europe and the Southern Caucasus in 2009.²

This article aims to analyse the EU's evolving relations with its eastern neighbourhood since the early 2000s focusing on the diverging geographical preferences among the member states vis-à-vis the neighbourhood. It demonstrates how the eastern European countries have become a priority region for the EU which has paved the way for the development of a specific policy for the east (i.e. the Eastern Partnership). It also questions the success of Eastern Partnership policy, despite its exclusive focus on the East, regarding transformation of the relations between the EU and its eastern neighbours. The first section presents an overview of the relations with the region since the end of the Cold War. The second section focuses on the diverging regional priorities among the member states regarding the wider neighbourhood of the EU. The final section maps out the evolution of a specific policy for the Eastern neighbourhood in view of the increased interest in the region and also evaluates its success as a foreign policy tool regarding transformation of the relations between the EU and its eastern neighbours.

1. Relations with the Region after the Cold War

1.1. Background

After their independence following the Cold War, the bilateral relations with Ukraine, Belarus and Moldova were not a priority for the EU member states (Smith, 2005: 758). As opposed to relations with the central European states, there was not an EU level shared commitment to bringing the Western Newly Independent States (WNIS) closer to the (then) European Community (Gänzle, 2008: 196). In 1994, the EU concluded the Partnership and Cooperation Agreements (PCAs) with the Russian Federation, Ukraine and Moldova and these agreements entered into force in December 1997, March 1998 and July 1998 respectively. In comparison to the Association (European) Agreements that were negotiated with the central European states starting in the early 1990s,³ the PCAs were relatively weak forms of cooperation (Petrov, 2002: 178). Although the PCAs lacked strong policy instruments and commitments in relation to integration to the EU, the objective was to set the ground for further cooperation between the EU and these countries based on political proximity and increasing economic relations. In 1999 the EU adopted 'common strategies' on Russia and Ukraine in the framework of the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) (European Council, 1999; Council of the EU, 1999). Introduced by the Amsterdam Treaty, 'common strategies' are policy tools

² The Eastern Partnership is offered to: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine.

³ For a comprehensive analysis of the Association Agreements between the EU and the accession countries from central Europe, See: Mayhew, A., (1998), *Recreating Europe: The European Union's policy towards Central and Eastern Europe*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge.

for the member states to 'set out their objectives, duration and the means to be made available' in the matters that they have shared interests in the European Council (Treaty of the EU, 1997). Germany in particular supported the adoption of these policy instruments to enhance EU policy towards the region (Gänzle, 2008: 201). However, these second pillar policy tools, despite demonstrating an increased interest, were largely considered as ineffective (Eeckhout, 2004: 406; Gänzle, 2008: 201).

1.2. The Development of the EU's Neighbourhood Policy

The proposals for the EU's new neighbourhood initiative at the outset focused exclusively on the east. In the first half of 2002, an EU level dialogue concerning Ukraine, Moldova and Belarus was spurred by British foreign secretary Jack Straw's letter to the Spanish EU Presidency (cited in Comelli, 2004: 99). In his letter, Straw pointed out the potential security risks to the EU originating from the future eastern neighbours that were both economically and politically in poor condition. The letter emphasized the need for improved security measures between the EU and new imminent eastern neighbourhood due to the security risks including irregular immigration and trafficking. This view was by and large shared in the EU. There were several preventive measures (such as the border management support to the accession countries or their delayed inclusion to the Schengen zone) introduced ahead of the enlargement to secure the upcoming eastern borders. Straw's letter specifically underlined the need for developing closer cooperation with Ukraine, Moldova and Belarus. The letter proposed to recognise these three countries in the region as 'special neighbours' without tabling the prospect of future accession to the EU (cited in Comelli, 2004: 99). The so-called big bang enlargement was already considered a challenge for the EU integrity. Also, in view of the accession talks with Turkey and the Western Balkans, there were strong reservations in the EU with respect to making further enlargement commitments.

In April 2002, the Council asked the Commission and the High Representative for the CFSP to propose suggestions regarding plans to improve the relations with the eastern neighbours after the 2004 enlargement (Council of the EU, 2002). The Commissioner for External Relations, Chris Patten, and the High Representative for the CFSP, Javier Solana, presented a framework for an overarching neighbourhood policy in August 2002 (Patten and Solana, 2002). They wrote a joint letter identifying five priority measures for the EU: reinforced political dialogue, economic cooperation and closer trade links, cooperation on justice and home affairs including border management and migration, financial assistance and integration to the EU policies (Patten and Solana, 2002). In December 2002, the European Council Presidency Conclusions underlined that there was a 'need for the EU to formulate an ambitious, long-term and integrated approach towards each of these countries, with the objective of promoting democratic and economic reforms,

sustainable development and trade, thus helping to ensure greater stability and prosperity at and beyond the new borders of the Union.’ (Council of the EU, 2003a).

The President of the Commission, Romano Prodi, stressed the importance of integrating neighbours to the EU in his speech ‘A Wider Europe - A Proximity Policy as the key to stability’ in December 2002. Prodi proposed the main framework of the model for the Union to operate with respect to its neighbourhood that includes inclusion to the EU common market as well as further cooperation on the fronts of illegal migration, crime, security threats, environmental issues and regional conflicts. He confirmed that the model was taken from the enlargement practice without an explicit ‘accession’ prospect for the future neighbours (Prodi, 2002). Different from the former policy frameworks that were built under the CFSP, the ENP strategy paper opened up the possibility for partner country participation in the community programmes (European Commission, 2004, 2006). In the interview conducted for this research, the former German Ambassador to the EU underlined that ‘When the first discussions came up, we asked the question what we should do and it was never a CFSP question’ (Interview A). With the ENP, the responsibilities of the Commission with respect to the preparation of the so-called Action Plans and the running of the project have increased.

1.3. Formulation of the ENP and Its Instruments

The instruments that are applied by the ENP resemble the EU’s pre-accession instruments. As the case for the accession process, the ENP aims for reform via internalisation of EU norms and *acquis* by the neighbouring countries as well (Smith, 2005: 763). Although the partner countries are not given an accession prospect, they are expected to gradually incorporate the legal framework of the EU. As enlargement, the ENP comprises a wide range of matters aiming to facilitate cooperation between the EU and the neighbouring countries. The cooperation with the partner countries includes following areas of importance: ‘political dialogue and reform; trade and measures preparing partners for gradually obtaining a stake in the EU’s internal market; justice and home affairs; energy, transport, information society, environment and research and innovation; and social policy and people-to-people contacts’ (European Commission, 2004: 3). The bilateral Action Plans for reforms have been prepared with each neighbouring country to evaluate the implementation of policies by the neighbours. Although the ENP stresses ‘joint ownership’ between the EU and a partner country, the EU predictably has a strong hand in determining the policy priorities for bilateral partnerships.

The ENP strategy paper also underlined the importance of sharing ‘common values’ concerning ‘rule of law, good governance, the respect for human rights, including minority rights, the promotion of good neighbourly relations, and the

principles of market economy and sustainable development', including commitments to 'fight against terrorism, proliferation of weapons of mass destruction as well as abidance by international law and efforts to achieve conflict resolution' (European Commission, 2004: 3). The integration of the neighbouring countries to the EU would be based on the incorporation of EU legislation, carrying out essential political, economic and institutional reforms as well as a commitment to these common values (European Commission, 2004). The progress of the partner countries with respect to integrating the EU legislation and reforms would be evaluated by the European Commission. Successful integration of EU legislation could enable the neighbours to be a part of the EU common market and to participate in 'the free movement of persons, goods, services and capital (four freedoms)' without full accession to the Union (European Commission, 2003).

2. Diverging Regional Priorities of the Member States

2.1. Eastern Europe vs. the Mediterranean

The EU member states have diverging regional priorities in the EU's neighbourhood. The EU member states are inclined to support the enhancement of the EU's commitment to the regions that they have established ties (Wodka, 2010). In the early 2000s, it was expected that the accession of the central European countries to the EU would lead to further interest in the east. The member states that were geographically closer to the EU's eastern borders, in particular Germany, Austria and the northern member states were in favour of furthering the relations with the upcoming eastern neighbours due to their proximity and closer relations with Eastern Europe (Carbone, 2008: 162). The EU was also subject to demands from the (then) candidate countries concerning enhancing relations with the eastern neighbours (Kempe, 2006: 26). Already in 1998, Poland reflected its support to further EU enlargement to the east at the opening of the EU accession negotiations (Buras and Pomorska, 2006: 35). On the other hand, the southern member states were worried that a policy focusing exclusively on the east would have a negative effect on the EU's relations with the southern neighbours. France, Spain, Italy, Greece and Portugal shared the concern that the existing eastern focus of the Union, due to the enlargement process, would be further accelerated (Carbone, 2008: 162). France in particular reflected its objections in relation to the shift of financial assistance towards the eastern neighbours and pressured the European Commission not to decrease the share of the southern neighbours concerning the financial support proportion between the southern and eastern neighbours (Lefebvre, 2006: 22).

The 'Wider Europe- Neighbourhood: A New Framework for Relations with our Eastern and Southern Neighbours' document of the European Commission referred both to Russia, the WNIS, the southern neighbours including Algeria, Egypt, Israel,

Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, the Palestinian Authority, Syria, and Tunisia. The framework did not include countries that already had membership prospects such as the Western Balkan countries and Turkey (European Commission, 2003). Although it is not hard to point at the resemblances, the proposal did not endorse accession. It entailed elements regarding the partnership and increased integration between the EU and its neighbourhood through gradually opening up the EU's internal markets to these countries, as well as promoting the free movement of goods, services, capital and persons. The European Commission's Wider Europe-Neighbourhood document was accepted by the General Affairs and External Relations Council in June 2003 (Council of the EU, 2003b). The Council also pointed at the possibility of including the 'Southern Caucasian' neighbours into the process (Council of the EU, 2003c). The decision with respect to the inclusion of the Southern Caucasian countries (Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan) into the ENP was taken in June 2004 (European Commission, 2004). Despite the interest from the EU side, Russia wanted to keep its relations with the EU at the bilateral level as a 'strategic partner' rather than being included into the ENP arguing that the policy did not signal an equal relationship between the EU and the neighbouring countries (Mayhew and Copesey, 2005).

2.2. From the 'All in One Basket' to 'Differentiated' Regional Approach

Although the ENP did not have a strong regional focus at first, the regional differentiation gradually came to the surface. The southern dimension of the ENP – the Union for the Mediterranean- was built on the former Barcelona Process cooperation with the initiative of the French Presidency in 2008. For the eastern neighbourhood, a new policy – the Eastern Partnership - was launched in May 2009 based on a Polish-Swedish proposal.

The EU cooperation with its southern neighbours was initiated with the launch of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership in 1995. The Partnership aimed to promote cooperation between the EU member states and twelve Mediterranean neighbours of the Union (Algeria, Cyprus, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Malta, Morocco, the Palestinian Authority, Syria, Tunisia and Turkey) in several areas including security, economy and socio-cultural exchanges.⁴ It offered bilateral and regional cooperation with, and among the southern neighbours to foster peace, stability and cooperation with and among the southern neighbours. With the introduction of the ENP, it was agreed to enhance bilateral assistance to the neighbouring states through Action Plans. These Action Plans would be based on existing Association

⁴ For further information on Barcelona Declaration and the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership: Barcelona Declaration and the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership http://europa.eu/legislation_summaries/external_relations/relations_with_third_countries/mediterranean_partner_countries/r15001_en.htm.

Agreements with the Mediterranean neighbours (excluding the case of Libya and Syria). The country-based approach from the ENP aimed to promote and reward reform processes from individual neighbours to advance relations and integration with the EU. This was in contrast to the regional approach of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (Johansson-Nogues, 2004: 240-247). On the other hand, the regional approach that was promoted by the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership is still considered significant to increase the cooperation and dialogue among the southern neighbours of the EU. The recent initiative from France launched during the French Presidency in June 2008, 'the Union for the Mediterranean', aimed to further boost the relations with the region as well (Council of the EU, 2008).

Concerning the relations with the eastern neighbours, the ENP proposal did not receive high support from the member states that have been in favour of further enlargement towards Eastern Europe. The ENP does not have a clause or clearly state that the partner countries will necessarily achieve membership status or be considered for accession. The lack of this commitment has been viewed as a matter of concern by the proponents for the future membership of eastern neighbouring countries, in particular Ukraine. Although the supporters of further eastern enlargements, such as Poland, favoured a policy particularly for the eastern neighbourhood, the ENP put the eastern neighbours in the same category with the southern neighbours. The distinction between 'European neighbours' and 'Neighbours of Europe' was needed to be made according to Poland (Goldirova, 2008). The difference between 'European Neighbours' referring to the Eastern European neighbours and 'Neighbours of Europe' referring to the southern neighbours of the EU was underlined by the Foreign Minister of Poland in line with the Eastern Partnership proposal in May 2008.

3. A Specific Policy towards the East: The Eastern Partnership

3.1. The Success of Poland's Eastern Policy?

The Eastern Partnership was put forward as a joint Polish-Swedish initiative pointing at the necessity to have deeper integration with the Eastern neighbours of the Union. This Partnership was offered to six eastern partners, including Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine.⁵ The Eastern Partnership aimed at furthering both economic and political relations with the Eastern neighbours through enhancing free trade cooperation, increased mobility, and cooperation in energy security as well as offering economic and social support to Eastern neighbours. This partnership was presented as an initiative to be rooted in

⁵ Among these six partner countries, Belarus only takes part only in the multilateral dimension of the Eastern Partnership.

the original ENP structure administered by the European Commission (Hillion and Mayhew, 2009).

The EU's relations with the eastern neighbourhood have been an important item in Polish foreign policy pursued by subsequent Polish governments. There has been agreement among different political parties with respect to the need for an active eastern policy. In 1998, the Polish Foreign Minister Geremek proposed at the opening of Poland's negotiations on membership to develop an eastern policy at the EU level with countries remaining outside of the enlarged EU (Tulmets, 2006). The first concrete Polish policy with respect to the eastern neighbourhood is the non-paper presented at the Copenhagen Summit in December 2002 (Szczzerbiak, 2012). The non-paper highlighted the Polish perspective concerning cooperation with the eastern neighbours based on three pillars (Community, Governmental/Bilateral and Non-Governmental). In February 2003, the succeeding Polish Foreign Minister Cimoszewicz further stressed Poland's will and knowledge concerning shaping the EU's eastern policy and the importance of the eastern dimension for the EU, highlighting the enhancement of relations with Ukraine, Belarus and Moldova and Russia (Cimoszewicz, 2003). Poland's contribution to decision-making with its expertise in the region was considered an asset.

The non-paper was developed parallel to EU level discussions concerning the EU's new neighbourhood policy initiative towards Ukraine, Moldova and Belarus spurred by the inputs from the UK and Sweden during the Spanish and Danish Presidencies in 2002 (Royal Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2002). Although Poland did not have formal decision making powers until its full accession to the EU, there was a considerable degree of overlap with the policy instruments proposed by Poland and discussed at the EU level concerning the new neighbourhood. The Polish position mainly differed from the other actors involved in this process with its argument regarding the 'long term accession membership' for the neighbours.

Parallel to the ENP's geographical divisions, initiated with the Union for the Mediterranean proposal of France, Poland put more emphasis on the need for a specialized policy for the east and presented the Eastern Partnership proposal with the support and input from Sweden. In response to the Union for the Mediterranean which called for closer cooperation with the Southern neighbours of the Union, the Eastern Partnership proposal aimed at furthering both economic and political relations with the eastern neighbours.

3.2. The Involvement of Sweden

The collaboration between Sweden and Poland with respect to the common concerns in the eastern neighbourhood dates back to the 'Sweden-Poland: Baltic Sea neighbours in the new Europe initiative' in 1999 (Government Offices of

Sweden, 1999). Sweden was one of the main supporters of the EU's eastern enlargement, including the accession of Poland not solely due to its broad support to the central European countries but also on account of the common concerns in the shared neighbourhood.

The cooperation regarding the Eastern Partnership between Sweden and Poland developed due to the leadership of the Swedish and Polish foreign ministers, Sikorski and Bildt (Interview B). The Eastern Partnership initiative mainly evolved based on the preceding discussions with respect to developing a specific policy for the eastern neighbours. It aimed to alter and reform the existing ENP framework, which was not welcomed by the eastern neighbours with EU membership inspirations and their proponents within the EU. This cooperation was successful due to several factors. As opposed to the scepticism in the EU towards the new member states' interest in the eastern neighbourhood, Sweden's support for a specific policy on the eastern dimension of the ENP as a member state that has a broader geographical involvement was perceived as a more credible standpoint with respect to the region. Sweden's contribution to the Eastern Partnership proposal also underlined a common European approach rather than reflecting the interests of a certain group of member states. This approach was essential to convince the member states that were lukewarm towards further emphasis on the eastern dimension.

The Eastern Partnership was also considered as a way to signal the commitment of the EU in the eastern neighbourhood, particularly for the neighbours that were sceptical towards the existing ENP framework. Sweden's involvement in the Eastern Partnership initiative along with Poland as a member state that supports a 'European perspective' particularly for the WNIS helped to convince the neighbours to agree to a policy evolved within the broader framework of the ENP. In addition, the then approaching Swedish Presidency in the second half of the 2009 was also considered as an asset to keep the relations with the Eastern neighbours on the EU agenda.

3.3. Reaching a Consensus on the Eastern Partnership Initiative

In June 2008, Poland and Sweden managed to convince the European Council that there was a need to have a specific eastern dimension within the ENP. Although there were concerns in relation to geographical separation within the ENP framework, the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) initiative of French President Sarkozy during the French Presidency justified a particular policy for the eastern neighbours. As put by an EU official, 'The Eastern Partnership is almost a direct result of the Union for the Mediterranean. If there were no Union for the Mediterranean, there would not be definitely an Eastern Partnership' (Interview C). After the presentation of the joint initiative, the European Council asked the

European Commission to prepare the policy proposal for Spring 2009 (Hillion and Mayhew, 2009). The proposal development process was accelerated due to the Georgian conflict during August 2008. The European Commission was then asked to bring forward the Eastern Partnership proposal date to December 2008. The events in the Caucasus in Summer 2008 were quite significant for the EU's role at the international scene as well. It was realised that the frozen conflicts in the eastern neighbourhood of the EU required more involvement as well as commitment from the EU side.

In line with its policy towards the eastern neighbours, Poland built coalitions with other EU member states that shared its concerns with respect to the region. Intergovernmental consultation among the member states was significant with respect to the Eastern Partnership initiative. Concerning the development of policy, the dialogue predominantly was between capitals through discussions at the ministerial level (Interview D). High level meetings also included contacts with the United Kingdom and Germany concerning the proposal development process. The support of Germany for the policy was particularly significant concerning the Eastern neighbourhood. The partnership with Germany was particularly underlined by the Foreign Minister Sikorski (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Poland 2009).

The timing of the Eastern Partnership was also significant taking into consideration the upcoming Czech Republic EU Presidency in the first half of 2009. Signed between the EU and its eastern partner countries in May 2009 in the course of the Czech Republic's EU Presidency, the Eastern Partnership has constituted the 'specific eastern dimension of the European Neighbourhood Policy' (Council of the EU, 2009). The Czech Presidency supported and put forward the Eastern Partnership proposal in favour of further EU involvement in the Eastern neighbourhood. The need for an increased emphasis on the relations with the eastern neighbours has been shared among the Visegrad countries.⁶ The Visegrad partners have supported the development and improvement of the Eastern Partnership (The Visegrad Group and Germany Foreign Ministers Statement on the Eastern Partnership, 2011).

3.4. Reflection on the Achievements and Shortcomings of the Eastern Partnership

Since the adoption of the Eastern Partnership in May 2009, the aim has been to transform the eastern neighbours in line with the EU norms and their integration with the EU. Despite its success concerning persuading the rest of the member

⁶ Visegrad Group is formed to enhance cooperation among four countries in Central Europe region, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia.

states, the Polish-Swedish initiative did not significantly alter the former ENP framework (Hillion and Mayhew, 2009). With the launch of the Eastern Partnership, the existing bilateral cooperation between the EU and its neighbours (based on ENP Action Plans) has been combined with a multilateral dimension which created a platform for the partner countries to cooperate (Emerson, 2011). Along with the gradual advancement of the relations, the financial commitment of the EU to its eastern neighbourhood has also increased. Regarding the scope of the assistance available under the European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument (ENPI) to fund ENP Action Plans with the neighbouring countries, 12 billion EUR in funds were allocated for the 2007-2013 budgetary period, which marked a considerable increase in funding compared to previous budgetary periods (ENPI Funding 2007-2013). In addition to the funding under the ENPI, the neighbouring countries have also been offered financial assistance under additional programmes that target specific issues such as institution-building and support for meeting the governance targets outlined in the Action Plans.

With the introduction of the ENP and the Eastern Partnership, the EU's visa policy towards the eastern neighbourhood has been on the EU agenda and of its partner countries. The facilitation of mobility for the citizens of the eastern neighbours is also of high importance to the new EU member states, taking into account their historical ties and geographical proximity. However, the extension of the Schengen borders towards east triggered concerns amongst the old member states with respect to the management of cross-border movements along the EU's eastern border. Due to the lack of a consensus among the member states concerning how the EU should facilitate mobility with respect to its eastern neighbourhood, the commitments that were made during the Eastern Partnership agreement could be considered as limited. The joint declaration of the Prague Summit on the Eastern Partnership used an open-ended language. It was asserted that 'gradual steps towards full visa liberalisation as a long term goal for individual partner countries on a case-by-case basis provided that conditions for well-managed and secure mobility are in place' will be taken, without giving a clear prospect to its partners about visa liberalisations (Council of the EU, 2009: 7). Visa liberalisation dialogues have been launched with three partner countries (Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine). However, limited progress in the area of visa-free travel for the citizens of the partner countries remains an issue.⁷ Among the three partners, only Moldova has

⁷ For further information on cooperation in the area of visa facilitation and liberalisation process in the framework of the Eastern Partnership: European Commission, (2013b), "Mobility partnerships, visa facilitation and readmission agreements" http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/home-affairs/what-we-do/policies/international-affairs/eastern-partnership/mobility-partnerships-visa-facilitation-and-readmission-agreements/index_en.htm; European Commission, (2013c), "Moving towards visa liberalisation with Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia" <http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/home-affairs/what-we-do/policies/international-affairs/easternpartnership/visa-liberalisation-moldova-ukraine-and>

met all the necessary 'benchmarks' in the framework of visa-free travel negotiations (European Commission, 2013a).

Among the six partner countries, further integration of Ukraine to the EU (and also its eventual accession) in particular has been very important for Poland. In line with the emphasis on Ukraine, the most integrated form of cooperation in the framework of a 'deep and comprehensive free trade agreement' has been negotiated between the EU and Ukraine (Delcour and Wolczuk, 2013). With the ultimate aim of integrating neighbouring countries to the EU single market, the neighbouring countries are expected to incorporate a high proportion of EU legislation in the area of trade. The lengthy negotiation processes have, thus far with Ukraine, shown that it is very challenging to convince partner countries to commit to EU integration without offering substantial incentives in return (Delcour and Wolczuk, 2013; Emerson, 2011).

In spite of EU membership aspirations among the partner countries, the EU member states have been very cautious concerning not giving an accession perspective within the framework of the Eastern Partnership. Further eastern enlargement, despite its ardent proponents among the member states, is not realistic in view of the recent internal problems faced in the EU. On the other hand, although the objectives of the Eastern Partnership are broadly shared by all the member states, it is clear that the external relations of the EU depend on the regional/geographical priorities of the member states. Further cooperation with the eastern neighbours has been mainly supported by the member states that have stronger ties with the region. Conversely, the member states that have been traditionally close to the Mediterranean neighbourhood aim to ensure that the relations with the eastern neighbours do not undermine the relations with the southern neighbours. This division weakens the role and influence of both the ENP (as the umbrella policy) as well as the regional external policies of the EU.

Conclusions

The article presented the evolution of EU policy with respect to the WNIS since the early 2000s. Despite the reluctance in the EU to develop strong bilateral links with the region after the end of the Cold War, the eastern enlargement of the EU paved the way for an increased EU involvement in the WNIS region. Although the EU had established a certain level of bilateral relations with the region with the introduction of the PCAs, the eastern enlargement of the EU has increased the importance of the WNIS for the EU. The ENP was introduced as an umbrella policy for the EU to enhance its bilateral cooperation with the countries in its broader neighbourhood. This policy was offered both to the eastern and southern neighbours

bearing in mind diverging geographical priorities among the Member States. In 2008 an agreement was reached at the EU level with respect to launching a specific regional policy towards the east. The launch of the Eastern Partnership in 2009 has demonstrated that there is a consensus in the EU with respect to further enhanced relations with the region. There are a number of factors that enabled the agreement on the Eastern Partnership in the Council. Primarily, the introduction of the Union for the Mediterranean justified the development of a specific policy for the Eastern neighbourhood. The Eastern Partnership was needed to indicate the EU's commitment in the East in view of the scepticism of the eastern neighbours, particularly Ukraine, towards the ENP. As demonstrated in the final section of the article, the cooperation between Poland and Sweden was very effective in persuading the rest of the member states regarding the development of the Eastern Partnership. Yet the principle question regarding its achievement is whether the Eastern Partnership as a foreign policy tool could be successful in externalising the EU's policies and norms without the promise of enlargement. This question is valid when bearing in mind that there is a lot of financial and political costs for the neighbouring countries to integrate with the EU. The uncertainty regarding the commitment of the EU as a whole particularly diminishes the impact of the EU's leverage in its immediate neighbourhood.

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List of Interviews

Interview A: Interview with Wilhelm Schoenfelder, Former German Permanent Representative to the EU, May 2010, Brussels.

Interview B: Interview with Former official from Polish MFA, May 2010, Brussels.

Interview C: Interview with EU official, March 2009, Brussels.

Interview D: Interview with Member State official, May 2009, Brussels.