

EASTERN PARTNERSHIP: FIRST YEAR

Dzianis Melyantsou

Summary

On May 7, 2010, it was a year since the European Union formally launched its Eastern Partnership program. In this year, the EaP has been almost completely shaped institutionally, with the vademecum on financing determined and first projects beginning to be implemented. Belarus, however, is far from full-scale participation in the EaP, as it has neither made much progress in political dialog nor met the EU standards considering democratization within the country.

The Eastern Partnership was technically adopted by the European Council in March 2009. At the same time Belarus was invited to join in as a full-fledged partner, rather than in a 5+1 format, as it had been planned before. The European leaders took a positive decision on Belarus, thus making overtures to the Belarusian regime in response to slight liberalization attempts within the country in 2009. There was also geopolitical reasoning in Belarus being granted membership in the EaP, since official Minsk did not recognize the sovereignty of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and continued drifting away from Moscow politically. Besides, the whole idea of a partnership program with the EU's eastern neighbors would have lost ground if such a geographically and geopolitically important state as Belarus had been excluded.

Long-term and Short-term Goals

The main goal of the Eastern Partnership initiative was to bring the six post-Soviet countries within the orbit of the European Union, which is in line with the EU strategic aim of creating a zone of good neighborhood and prosperity along its borders. The EaP foresees agreements on association, creating a free-trade zone and gradually establishing common market with the six states in the next few years, modeled on the one the EU has with such countries as Norway, Iceland and Lichtenstein. The EU proposes to gradually reduce the visa prices and simplify the visa application procedures, with a view to introducing visa-free travel with the partner countries in the long term.

In the short run, the Eastern Partnership initiative aims at facilitating the economic reform and transformation of political systems in the partner countries; helping them to achieve a greater energy efficiency, to establish good government and co-operation between themselves.

Formalization of the Initiative

On May 7, 2009 Prague saw an inaugural summit, which officially launched the Eastern Partnership initiative. From the very beginning it included four multilateral platforms for co-operation, namely democracy, good government and stability; economic integration and convergence towards the EU policies; energy security and contacts between people. Within the platforms, the following areas of work were agreed on:

Multilateral Platforms	Areas of Work in 2010-2011
Democracy, good government and stability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Improved functioning of the Judiciary; ▪ Public administration reform and fight against corruption; ▪ Launching and fulfilling the Integrated Border Management flagship initiative; ▪ Launching and fulfilling a flagship initiative on prevention of, preparedness for and response to natural and man-made disasters.
Economic integration and convergence towards the EU policies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Trade and trade related regulatory approximation; ▪ Convergence towards the EU environmental legislation and combating climate change; ▪ Preparation for launching the Small and Medium-size Enterprise (SME) Facility flagship project; ▪ Enhanced co-operation in the field of taxation and public finance; ▪ Increasing employment levels; ▪ Strengthened co-operation in questions of monetary, exchange rate and financial stability; ▪ Regional economic co-operation.
Energy security	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Development and implementation of mutual energy support and security mechanisms; ▪ Support for infrastructure development, interconnection and diversification of supply; ▪ Promotion of increased energy efficiency and use of renewable resources; ▪ approximation of energy policies; ▪ Development of a flagship initiative on Regional Energy Markets and Energy Efficiency.
Contacts between people	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Education and training; ▪ International higher education co-operation programs (Tempus and Erasmus Mundus); ▪ E-twinning program; ▪ Education and research mobility; ▪ A project in networking European Studies centers; ▪ The Jean Monnet program; ▪ Co-operation in youth policies; ▪ Co-operation in culture; ▪ Development of information society; ▪ Greater integration of the Eastern partners into the 7th Framework Program for Research and Technological Development (FP7)

It was also determined that the EaP should have a two-tier structure, consisting of bilateral and multilateral dimensions. Institutionally the Eastern Partnership includes biannual summits, annual meetings of Foreign Ministers, the Euronest inter-parliamentary assembly and the Civil Society Forum. The latter was introduced for the purpose of representing the partner countries' NGOs. The EaP institutional model also presupposed high level meetings for solving current issues. For the past year, this structure has been gradually taking shape and enhancing its functioning mechanisms. For example, there were meetings on the minister level with the EaP functioning and project funding on the agenda. November 2009 saw the [Civil Society Forum](#), and the Euronest draft regulations were drawn up.

In the Summer and Fall of 2009, project proposals to be funded within the EaP framework were prepared, with Belarus being the first to submit its projects, just as the case was within the Euronest framework. In December 2009, the European Commission presented the Vademecum on Financing in the Frame of the Eastern Partnership. The € 600 million of EaP financing will cover a four year period with a growing profile, i.e. € 85 million in 2010; € 110 million in 2011; € 175 million in 2012; and € 230 million in 2013. These resources will be used for three main purposes: support for partner country reforms through the implementation of Comprehensive Institution Building programmes (CIB) (approximately € 175 million); Pilot regional development programmes (approximately € 75 million) and Implementation of the Eastern Partnership Multilateral dimension (approximately € 350 million).

For the past year the EU and the partner countries have developed and started implementing so-called [flagship initiatives](#), aimed at advancing the multilateral track of the Eastern Partnership. At present there are five flagship initiatives:

Flagship Initiative	Main Areas of Work
Integrated Border Management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Exchange of best practices; ▪ Training and capacity building; ▪ Pilot projects on Pan-European Corridors and TRACECA
Prevention of, Preparedness for and Response to Natural and Man-made Disasters	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review of existing civil protection/disaster management capacities; ▪ Review of the current legislative frameworks; ▪ Preparation of regional Risk Atlas; ▪ Capacity building for prevention, preparedness and response activities; ▪ Increased co-operation with the EU Civil protection mechanism and conclusion of administrative arrangements with interested partner countries.
Environmental Governance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Development of a Shared Environmental Information System (SEIS); ▪ Strengthening of capacities to ensure stakeholder involvement, environmental assessments and reporting, on the basis of EU experience and legislation, and in line with relevant Environment Agreements, such as the Aarhus and Espoo Conventions.

SME Facility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Training and exchange of best practices; ▪ Direct Technical Assistance (TA) to SMEs; ▪ Establishment, together with EBRD and EIB, of a joint SME facility open to participation of other financial institutions.
Regional Energy Markets and Energy Efficiency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ TA for studies/expertises in matters of regulatory and policy framework; ▪ Feasibility studies and other activities to improve access to available financing sources for investment in the energy sector; ▪ Support the establishment and implementation of <i>'sustainable energy action plans'</i>; ▪ Promote the participation of the EaP countries in the Intelligent Energy Europe Programme.

Failed Expectations

In entering the Eastern Partnership program, the official Minsk was mainly interested in getting financial support and investment, as well as implementing joint infrastructural projects. The EaP political dimension was viewed as an irritating makeweight to the dialog with Brussels, which just could not be avoided. The Belarusian regime viewed its turnaround in Belarus – EU relations as an exchange of geopolitical loyalty for financial support exclusively, which had no room for the EU intervening in the Belarusian internal affairs. Shocked by Russia's actions, the West was prepared to accept these terms in the late 2008 and early 2009. However, things have changed since then.

The world economic crisis, 'reloaded' relations with Russia and cooling down after the Russia – Georgia war have brought back more caution in European politicians' attitude towards the Belarusian regime. The EU's concessions have given way to attempts to reintroduce conditionality concerning the Lukashenka government. This was particularly reflected in the issue of Euronest membership.

According to the Prague Declaration, being an inter-parliamentary assembly, the Euronest should include representatives of the partner countries' legislative institutions. However, this requirement contradicts the EU's refusal to recognize Belarusian parliament as a legitimate representative body. For this reason, the European Parliament suggested that it is the representatives of the Belarusian opposition and civil society that should be invited to the Euronest, which official Minsk unconditionally rejects. There are also certain reservations concerning the representation of the civil society, which is already represented in a separate institution, namely the Civil Society Forum.

Thus, the initial lack of moral ground and consistency in the EU policy towards Belarus has resulted in a diplomatic dead end. In order to find a way out, the EU should clearly outline its objectives in pursuing dialog with Belarus. If the strategic goal is long-term engagement, it is difficult to make sense of this inconsistency. If the purpose is regime change or its political isolation, Brussels' actions are not sufficient or efficient enough. The European Union might consider freezing the Belarusian seats in the Euronest until the next parliamentary election as a possible way out of the dead end. Such a solution may satisfy both the parties, releasing tension in order to continue co-operation in those areas where it is possible.

Expectations and Reality

Apart from the institutional issues, there are also certain difficulties concerning financing Belarusian projects in the frame of the Eastern Partnership. It has already been mentioned that Belarus was the first to finish up its draft projects within the EaP. All the projects submitted by Belarus have not yet been made public, but there is reliable information about some of them, including

- A project to build a Berlin – Moscow autobahn via Belarus;
- An extension of the Odessa – Brody pipeline to Gdansk with sidelines to Belarusian oil refineries;
- Electricity transit project from Ukraine to Lithuania, which presupposes construction of extra electric power lines;
- Co-operation in renewable energy sources, such as biogas, wind energy and water power plants;
- Construction of Klaipeda – Vilnius – Minsk – Kiev highway;
- *Viking* railway transportation project from Odessa to Klaipeda;
- Modernizing the customs infrastructure and professional development for customs officers;
- Celebration of the 600th anniversary of the battle of Grunwald, etc.

Minsk has not yet received an answer from the European Commission about financing the projects within the EaP framework, which has caused the Belarusian leader's disappointment with the Belarus – EU co-operation.

Absence of the EU – Belarus agreement on partnership and co-operation closes the door to the EaP bilateral dimension for Belarus, limiting access to funding from the EIB, EBRD and other European financial institutions. The EaP budget to finance multilateral projects is not enough to meet official Minsk's expectations.

Furthermore, European officials have stressed more than once that the Eastern Partnership is not an infrastructural project or assistance program, thus suggesting that the EU is not going to finance its neighboring countries, particularly if they are unwilling to extend their political relations with the EU. The fact that financing in the EaP frame is to be distributed between the six partner countries depending on the reform success is also an unpleasant development for Belarus. It means that Minsk will have to search funding outside the Eastern Partnership, which definitely makes it look less attractive in the eyes of the Belarusian leadership.

From the perspective of the Belarusian authorities, the country now finds itself in a particularly complicated geopolitical situation. On the one hand, its relations with Russia are in all probability hopelessly spoilt, as there will be no return to the previous subsidies. On the other hand, Belarus has failed to drive a hard bargain in trading its geopolitical loyalty to the West, which does not hasten to subsidize the Belarusian regime without its undergoing a profound reform. Under such circumstances, it will probably have to resort to the meridian dimension, making an attempt to build up a strategic alliance with Ukraine and Lithuania by binding them with transit projects with a view to stabilizing its position for some time.

Who Benefited?

Since the EU pursued long-term goals in launching the Eastern Partnership initiative, it would be wrong to assess it as unsuccessful after its first year only. On the contrary, the EaP was prepared and launched in the shortest possible time, which is not characteristic of the EU. The initiative was also quickly formalized institutionally. It would have been unrealistic to expect more. For this reason, Minsk's disappointment could probably be attributed to lack of understanding as to how the EU works and excessively high initial expectations.

It is necessary to differentiate between the assessment of the EaP and Belarus's engagement in it on the one hand and the EU – Belarus dialog on the other. Despite being closely interconnected, these two things are still different. It may be too early to assess the feasibility of Belarus's engagement in the EaP for the EU long-term goals, but it can already be argued that the political dialog has come to a standstill. The EU has not been able to achieve true liberalization and democratization of the political regime in Belarus, nor have the parties made any progress towards reviewing and ratifying the Agreement on Partnership and Co-operation. There is still no legal framework for their relations and the visa ban so far has not been withdrawn but only temporarily frozen.

The general public in Belarus has not yet felt a beneficial influence of the EaP, the price of Schengen visas still being € 60 and the application procedure remaining quite complicated. Jobs in the EU are out of the question, too.

Official Minsk did not benefit greatly from its participation in the Eastern Partnership, either. True, it put an end to the country's political isolation and ridded it of its label as 'the last dictatorship in Europe'. However, it did not provide much longed-for subsidies, as IMF loans to Belarus are linked to successful use of the dialog rather than the EaP membership.

Judging by the outcome of the first year, Belarusian civil society seems the only one to have benefited from the EaP. It now has its representation in the Civil Society Forum, having achieved an attractive format of co-operation in the frame of the Eastern Partnership. Siarhiej Mackievic, head of the NGO Assembly working group was elected the Forum speaker and at the April meeting the Forum members ensured their participation in other projects within the EaP framework. Belarusian NGOs do not only make their voice heard on the EU level owing to the Civil Society Forum, but they have also started to act much more actively in Belarus, consolidating their work on recommendations on the Belarusian projects in the frame of the Eastern Partnership. Whereas the Belarus – EU dialog and the launch of the EaP have resulted in the further marginalization of the political opposition, which has lost its monopoly on contacts with the West, NGOs have obtained a new international forum, their activities now gaining momentum.

Conclusions

1. Compared to the previous EU projects and policies, the Eastern Partnership is a rapidly developing initiative. The Belarusian leadership's complaints about the EaP losing impetus arise from their lack of experience of co-operation with the EU and an urgent need for investment.
2. The Eastern Partnership is a long-term initiative to bring the partner countries closer to the EU. It does not aim at dramatic political and economic change in the partner countries. Nor is it an infrastructural project to provide financial and technical assistance, as official Minsk would want it to be. However, the EaP could be an excellent tool to gradually introduce European standards and attract investment from sources outside the EaP budget.
3. The only actor to have benefited from its participation in the EaP seems to be Belarusian civil society. Neither the Belarusian government nor the EU has so far achieved their objectives in the frame of the Eastern Partnership.
4. In order to strengthen the EaP impact as a policy of engagement the EU should refrain from institutional restrictions concerning Belarus in the issue of representation in the Euronest. It would be advisable instead to concentrate on restoring political conditionality towards official Minsk, linked to further economic integration with the EU and extra funding for Belarus from European and international financial institutions.