

EU The Eastern Partnership

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Launched officially in 2009, the Eastern Partnership involves six countries on the eastern edge of the European Union : Belarus, Ukraine, Moldavia, Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan. What are the aims of this EU policy and what do the partner countries have in common ? Florent Parmentier offers some precise answers and an early progress report. He then sheds some light on the competition between eastern and southern regions of the EU. The interview ends with a look eastwards from the EU to other big-hitters : Russia, the USA and China.

As part of its interdisciplinary approach to geopolitical analysis, *Diploweb.com* is delighted to bring you an extract from the new work by Pierre Verluise, *Géopolitique des frontières européennes. Elargir, jusqu'où ? (The Geopolitics of the European Union Borders, Where should expansion stop ?)*, illustrated by 20 color maps, published in France by Argos, 2013, and distributed by Puf. The selected extract is in fact the sixth chapter, published under the title : Quel partenariat oriental ?

[Version en français](#)

Pierre Verluise : To what extent is the Eastern Partnership the result of specifically Central European initiatives, notably by Poland ?

Florent Parmentier : The Eastern Partnership originated in a joint initiative by Poland and Sweden, the aim being to develop a more coherent, targeted – if not truly original – policy for the East. The Czech presidency, the first held by a Central European nation, championed the project and, in May 1990, succeeded in organizing a European Summit to launch the [Eastern Partnership](#). The political context has since been deeply affected by the conflict between Russia and Georgia in August 2008. The European nations had not seen this damage to the security environment coming and now accept the idea of paying closer attention to these countries.

The role of Poland in the process was obviously essential. Warsaw can claim seniority as a player in the region ; as long ago as the 16th century, the Polish-Lithuanian empire encompassed the two westernmost thirds of present-day Ukraine. The desire to play a role in Eastern Europe is therefore nothing new. Though Poland appeared to have only a bit part in the European power plays, General Józef Piłsudski, back in the 1930s, underlined the original role played by his country and how : “this little Poland that should have just remained a satellite in the orbit of the major powers pointed Central European politics in a new direction” [1]. History aside, Poland has a number of think tanks that have already been contributing for a number of years to debate in Europe on the eastern dimension of the EU. The interests of civil society and various economic players complete the picture.

Pierre Verluise, “The Geopolitics of the European Union Borders, Where should expansion stop ?” Eska, 2014.

Pierre Verluise delivers a master stroke with this work that operates on two levels : as a

manual of geopolitics and an essay on the Eastern and Southern borders of the European Union. Thorough and informative, it steps outside the box of back-slapping political correction.



Director of the geopolitical Web site Diploweb.com. [Pierre Verluise](#) closely monitors the development of the European Union and its borders. He is a lecturer in geopolitics at the Sorbonne. He founded the seminar on European geopolitics at the French “War College”. He is Distinguished Professor of Geopolitics at GEM.

This work offers clear, precise answers to the following questions :

- . How far does the European Union still plan to expand ?
- . What relations does the EU now entertain with the Eastern countries that were so recently perceived as enemies ?
- . How is the EU organizing its relations with the South ?

It would, however, be an exaggeration, to portray [the Eastern Partnership](#) as a Polish idea dressed in European clothes [2]. True, Poland has a strong preference for the development of deeper relations with eastern neighbors, linked to its geopolitical location, political tradition, and perception of its security and economic interests. However, the administrative capacity of the Polish state in the European context and the diverging preferences of the other European countries have hampered Polish ambitions. Under the leadership of the Kaczynski brothers (2005-2007) Poland had difficulty in attempting to build European coalitions, but appears more

comfortable in this exercise under Donald Tusk : relations have become more constructive with Germany, the Visegrad group (Hungary, Czech Republic, Slovakia and Poland), the Scandinavian countries, the Baltic States and the UK.

Ultimately, it is fair to say that though it played a leading role, Poland would not have been capable of bringing together all the European countries around an Eastern Partnership Secretariat with a joint Polish-Ukrainian presidency (based on the French blueprint for the Union for the Mediterranean), notably in the event of German opposition.

P. V : The Eastern Partnership involves six countries : Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldavia and Ukraine. What are their characteristics ?

F. P : These States were created in the wake of [the dissolution of the Soviet Union \(1991\)](#) : they consequently share a history that is more or less old, economic cultural, social and political legacies, and varying levels of affinity or enmity towards each other. Yet these countries have tended to follow separate development paths from unequal home bases.

Physical, economic, demographic and political indicators provide eloquent insights into the characteristics shared by these Eastern doorstep countries.

At first sight, these countries do not form a homogeneous group in terms of physical and human geography : areas differ by a factor of 1 to 20 ; the difference in population ranges from 1 to 15 (between Ukraine and Armenia) ; and density ranges from 1 to 3 (between Belarus and Moldavia). Ukraine alone accounts for three fifths of the area and the total population of the six Eastern partners. Also, there are geographical distinctions between the countries of Eastern Europe (Belarus, Moldavia and Ukraine), located between the EU and Russia, and those of Southern Caucasia (Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia), trapped between the Russian and Turkish areas of influence. This situation leads to different geopolitical orientations : Iran and Turkey, for example, carry weight in Caucasia but have less potential to influence the countries of Eastern Europe.

However, this diversity of area and population is on a far greater scale if we look at Europe as a whole [3]. With the exception of Ukraine, and to a lesser extent Belarus, the Eastern Partnership countries are of modest size and population. In Eastern Europe they have a direct frontier with the EU. In Southern Caucasia they are close to the Black Sea.

On the economic level too, there are divergences. Compared with the standard of living in Belarus – the equivalent of 41.5% of European GDP per capita in purchasing power standards – that of Moldavia attains just 7.6%. Belarus in fact bests Romania on this count, and equals Bulgaria, these being the two poorest EU member States. In terms of competitiveness index and infrastructure quality these countries lie in the middle of the world rankings as a result of lack of extended investment. These relatively disappointing economic results are explained by multiple factors, though a trend towards a reduction of the gap was observed before the economic crisis.

The energy issue, while essential in all the countries concerned, takes different forms. These

countries, with the exception of Georgia, are globally marked by low energy efficiency, and the importance of gas in their energy mix. This latter point is important if we bear in mind the specificities of the gas market, which operates on a regional scale and requires substantial investment. Their position varies from one country to another : Azerbaijan is a major gas-producing country and, while Ukraine and Belarus are essential transit nations for the EU, Georgia is less so. Georgia in fact has the particularity of having turned away from Russian gas since 2006, redirecting its foreign policy towards Azerbaijan, which is self-sufficient for energy resources, and intends to take advantage of this in its foreign policy with both Russia and the EU.

Demographic indicators also show these countries to be relatively homogeneous. With the exception of Azerbaijan, with just over two live births per woman, the fertility rate is sluggish, even lower than that of Europe. Azerbaijan is characterized, in addition to its birth rate, by a relatively low life expectancy and a high infant mortality. By contrast, Belarus has the characteristics of the developed countries, with the highest human development index (HDI) among the neighboring countries, yet an infant mortality rate comparable to the average for the EU. While Georgia has a life expectancy at birth that is by one and a half years below the European average, the shortfall in the other countries ranges from 5 to 11 years. In other words, despite some clear similarities, demographic situations vary.

Political indicators show the emergence of two distinct groups of countries. On one hand are those with European ambitions that provide a barrier against a slide into authoritarianism. These are Georgia, Ukraine and Moldavia. Moreover, this process remains remote in countries where power is more centralized, namely Azerbaijan, Belarus and, to a lesser degree, Armenia. Among the star pupils, Georgia has made a big effort in the fight against “small-scale corruption”, and achieved tangible results. Most of these results have, however, been achieved since the arrival of Mikheil Saakashvili, even before the ENP was introduced. We will need more time before we can assess the results of the fall 2012 legislative elections in Georgia. Moldavia appears to be a country with a relatively free press, ranking higher than Italy (61st). Kiev has also been on the radar of the EU and the USA since the “Orange Revolution”, though the mood has become more blasé since 2008-2009, a tendency accentuated since the victory of Viktor Yanukovich in January 2010.

Rankings aside, trends in terms of democratization do not look positive, as only Moldavia stands out as a State that has been moving towards a pluralist democracy in recent years, while the other countries are ultimately, at best, standing still.

P. V : How do you assess the achievements of the Eastern Partnership after these first few years ? Does it have the means, notably the budget, to fulfill its ambitions and address expectancies ?

F. P : The Eastern Partnership is still a fledgling policy, as it has only been operational for three years : it is still largely a work in progress. There is not much to celebrate and we cannot single out any great achievements. However its potential remains intact.

The Partnership has several aims : the conclusion of agreements with each country ; the preparation of a complete, in-depth free trade agreement, visa-free travel, and energy or

sectoral cooperation [4]. The program also aims to consolidate the rule of law, democratic institutions and civil society. However, most of its assigned missions will only be effective in the long term. Moldavia and Ukraine's accession to the European energy Community will not have a rapid impact on the energy mix of the countries concerned, nor will it diminish the opposition forces or local resistance to change. Integrating the EU heritage is a long and complex process insofar as it does not always sit comfortably with the interests and perceptions of local stakeholders.

While the EU did not initially intend to cut back its contribution to neighborhood policy, budgetary negotiation is of particular importance [5]. The European Commission has put forward a number of key initiatives to showcase the results of this policy : integrated management of external borders (€44.5 million), facilities for SME (€57 million), regional electricity markets, renewable energy sources and energy efficiency (€41 million), environmental governance (€12 million) and natural disaster prevention and preparedness (€12 million). None of these endowments should be significantly reduced despite the euro zone crisis that cools the ambitions entertained by European countries beyond their borders.

Debate as to whether accession is a prerequisite to transformation is ultimately less essential than may appear. The Eastern Partnership potentially provides for attachment to the EU economy via comprehensive, in-depth agreements (ALEAC), access to European energy via the European Energy Community, and visa-free European travel. The ALEAC implementation assumes that the beneficiary countries broadly take on board the community legacy, because the EU requirements in terms of standards and technology, for example in the phytosanitary and sanitary fields, are those of developed economies. The expected benefits of enlargement are already on the table. Also, the political stagnation of the South-East European countries, in spite of the promise of accession, shows that reform does not follow on automatically from accession. Though Armenia has received no promises of accession, it has made great progress in cooperation with the EU since 2008-2009.

P. V : Should the European stakeholders maintain a common approach to neighborhood as a whole by prioritizing European neighborhood policy, or pursue a regionalized policy like the Eastern Partnership ?

Europe is indeed on the horns of a dilemma...

F. P : Europe is indeed on the horns of a dilemma : if it wishes to maintain a single, all-encompassing framework for both Eastern and Southern neighbors, it takes the risk of leading a policy that will be too general to be truly efficient ; if it opts for a specific policy, the Member States are likely to find themselves head to head on priorities that ought to be those of the EU.

This tension has been present since the 1990s, a decade during which French diplomacy feared that enlargement would jeopardize preferential relations with the Southern Mediterranean. The 1995 Barcelona process was thus the direct result of the formation of enlargement policies that were at the time relatively recent. The same phenomenon occurred

at the inception of the European neighborhood policy : the initial approach targeted the geographically intermediary states (Belarus, Moldavia, Ukraine) and Russia, but French and Italian diplomats pushed for inclusion of their Southern neighbors in the policy, an initiative that was welcomed by the Commission. However, attempts at regionalization were soon to appear : in 2007 with the launch of the Black Sea Synergy ; in 2008 with the Union for the Mediterranean ; and in 2009 with the Eastern Partnership. The Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) has grown significantly from the idea of a Mediterranean Union that was only to involve the States of the Mediterranean rim, but Germany was stoutly opposed, and the Commission scarcely appreciated being sidelined in the process. The Eastern Partnership, intent on differentiating between the treatment of “European neighbors” and that of “Europe’s neighbors”, has been presented more pragmatically with regard to the institutions, and has secured a manner of concession enabling Poland to join the UfM.

Faced with a risk of dispersal, [the Commission](#) remains watchful and is working to produce a consistent framework for the neighborhood as a whole, with scope to keep as many options as possible open. After all, Germany is one of the big investors in the Mediterranean countries, with a special interest in all things economic. More surprisingly, countries like Italy, Spain and Portugal have seen a growing influx of nationals from the former Soviet countries, notably Moldavians and Ukrainians. These developments do not affect the specific characteristics of the different countries, but do tend to eliminate the option of considering them as natural monopolies.

P. V : Is the competition between South and East for accessing and using European resources the only key to understanding the confrontations within the EU ?

F. P : In the wake of the “Arab Spring” in 2011, bringing hope but also anxiety, the Europeans have had to rethink their neighborhood policy [6]. Hope has been raised insofar as the democratic ideal has at last been forcibly expressed in the South after decades of authoritarianism. Anxiety because of the possible outcomes of jeopardized stability, with the twofold risks of migrations and Islamist politics

Moreover, this major movement has not failed to cause concern of another order to the East of the EU. The Eastern Partnership capitals fear – and they sometimes admit it – that they may lose their geopolitical importance to the benefit of the South, this being apparent in unfavorable arbitration with a view to the renegotiation of the European budget for 2013-2020. Despite the reassurances given by European Commissioner Stefan Füle as to the EU’s ongoing commitment to the East, even while the Arab Spring was in full swing, there is real concern [7]. There is no escaping the fact that an Egyptian or a Tunisian received less than two euros per year per capita of EU assistance, way below the norm in the East.

Notwithstanding, the EU’s role is not just limited to the distribution of economic aid against a backdrop of interregional rivalry. Firstly, it should not be forgotten that the South and the East are regions with marked internal diversity, and this also creates rivalry. European policy is fully aware of this situation insofar as relations with the countries concerned are bilateral and not regional. There may even be potentially opposed policies for the same region. Thus, the advocates of the Black Sea Synergy led by the Romanians and the Bulgarians, have cast a concerned eye over the development of the Eastern Partnership, aware of the risks of duplicating agendas and political goals liable to reduce their influence over the definition of

the EU's eastern policy.

European power consists notably of exporting standards, of shaping political and socio-economic environments in the neighborhood countries. Confrontations and rivalries are often stronger between the countries of the South and the East, rather than between the two regions. In other words, progress achieved in negotiating a complete, consolidated free trade agreement in Moldavia is irrelevant to a country like Morocco. Conversely, a visa-free travel agreement between the EU and Georgia is likely to receive much closer attention from Ukrainian diplomacy.

If we are to believe the 2011 Review of Neighbourhood Policy [8] there will be no let-up in the Eastern Partnership, and no escalation in competition between East and South, for the simple reason that the principle of differentiation does not discriminate between regions. The UfM, however, takes more flak from the Commission, still unconvinced by this very inter-governmental policy. The UfM's tendency to turn a blind eye to political regimes goes against the EU mantra of "shared values" in a "Partnership for democracy and shared prosperity".

P. V : Russia is not a member of the Eastern Partnership. It had rejected the European neighborhood policy (2004). Was it offered the Eastern Partnership option ? Is there friction, competition or cooperation between Russia and the EU on these six countries ? More generally, what are the political paths available to EU-Russian relations ?

F. P : When the European Neighbourhood Policy was launched, [Russia](#) eschewed the opportunity on the grounds that it was a "power" and not a "neighbor", thus deserving special attention. However Moscow, already a member of the Black Sea Synergy, was not offered the chance to become an Eastern partner, unlike Turkey, which refused to join in February 2009.

The Eastern Partnership, which casts an envious eye over the Russian "foreigner on its doorstep", was initially criticized by the Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Sergey Lavrov, who queried whether its role was not an opportunity for the EU to "extend its sphere of influence". Thus, the Kremlin used an argument often directed against itself. When the EU leaned heavily on Belarus, persuading it to refuse to acknowledge the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia – a practice debatably somewhat remote from the Partnership's avowed high ground of democratic principle – Moscow saw a clear-cut case of double standards.

In 2012, the Eastern Partnership worries Russia less, as it is no longer perceived as a policy for cramping Russian influence. Maybe the Eastern Partnership simply does not have the wherewithal. As Vladimir Chizhov, Russian Ambassador to the EU, put it with his typically biting irony and spikiness, "if it is not supported by a budget line it cannot go very far". The most fervent backers of the Eastern Partnership are also among the Member States that are the most critical of Moscow (primarily Poland, Sweden, and the UK). Russia, however, is no longer scared to take on the EU on its own ground, that of standards, including in economics, where the proposed deep and comprehensive free trade agreement is increasingly rivaled by the Russian-led Customs Union project. As for visas, it is unquestionably easier for a Ukrainian citizen to travel to Saint Petersburg than to Brussels. The opportunities for cooperation, in terms of migratory, energy or security policy, have not yet yielded tangible and durable results.

Even though Russian and community interests diverge, this relationship should not be seen as a zero-sum game : the Kharkiv agreements signed between Presidents Viktor Yanukovich and Dmitry Medvedev in 2010, while highly controversial, are testimony to this [9]. This is because, by signing an agreement on the delineation of the Russia-Ukraine border, Moscow makes it easier for Kiev to renegotiate a simpler visa agreement with the EU.

P. V : Do the six Eastern Partnership countries have rival programs championed by other countries (USA, China) ?

F. P : The Eastern Partnership has not generated any particular political response from the other powers : it is not the first European incursion in the region. At most, the other powers have looked for ways to adapt to the new European policy.

Hence [the USA](#) is setting out to maintain a strong trans-Atlantic line on this issue : over and above the so-called “reset” policy with Russia, and the new policy orientations towards the Middle East, Washington intends to preserve close links with a number of European Member States. The Eastern Partnership could sit nicely with the Americans’ declared goal of democratizing the post-Soviet area, even of ultimately including it in the Atlantic Alliance. At the same time, the USA, despite its undeniable economic and cultural influence, is not alone in taking an interest in the region along with the EU Member States.

[China](#) is indeed shaping up as an emerging power in the region, notably because of its financial clout in countries severely affected by the crisis. Hence, Belarus has not just been content to develop joint-ventures with Chinese partners or to open the door to Chinese businesses when it has privatized ; it has also accepted Chinese loans. Likewise, Chinese demand is pulling Ukrainian exports in a number of fields. This is true notably in the iron and steel industry, active in Eastern Ukraine, and now dependent on Chinese imports. The same applies to agriculture. The change in Chinese eating habits has, for example, created a new market for Ukrainian corn exports. For the countries concerned, this fresh interest is obviously positive. Ultimately we can legitimately say that, for the neighborhood countries, it is good to be back on the map again.

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Notes

[1] Yvon, Bizardel, “La politique étrangère de la Pologne”, *Politique étrangère*, n°5, 1937, p. 431 (our translation).

[2] Nathaniel Copsey, Karolina Pomorska, "Poland's power and influence in the European Union : The case of its eastern policy", *Comparative European Politics*, Vol. 8, n°3, pp. 304-326.

[3] The population of Germany is around 160 times that of Luxembourg, while France, including its overseas territories has a population around 260 times greater than that of Luxembourg.

[4] David Cadier, Florent Parmentier, "UE Partenariat Oriental : quelles perspectives ?", www.diploweb.com, December 12 2009.

[5] Nicolas Bizel, "Le cadre financier pluriannuel 2014-2020 : un budget à la hauteur des ambitions européennes ?" www.euro-power.eu, May 2012.

[6] Florent Parmentier, "The Clash of Neighbourhoods ? The Impact of the 'Arab Spring' on the EU's Neighbourhood Policy", in Edmund Ratka, Olga Spaiser, *Understanding European Neighbourhood Policies. Concepts, Actors, Perceptions*, Baden Baden, Nomos, 2012.

[7] "Stefan Füle : EU won't allow Arab revolutions to be 'stolen'", Euractiv, April 13 2011, euractiv.com/en/global-europe/tefan-le-eu-wont-allow-arab-revolutions-stolen-interview-504001,

[8] SEAE / European Commission, "A new response to a Changing Neighbourhood. A review of European Neighbourhood Policy", May 25 2011, ec.europa.eu/world/enp/pdf/com_11_303_en.pdf

[9] Richard Connolly, Nathaniel Copsey, "The Great Slump of 2008-9 and Ukraine's Integration with the European Union", *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics*, Vol.27, n°3-4, September-December 2011, pp.541-565.