# The EU's Eastern Neighbourhood Policy after Lisbon

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Before 1989 the world was much simpler. Belonging to the Western camp and projecting decent democratic credentials guaranteed that a country would sooner or later be welcomed into the fold of European and Euro-Atlantic organisations. Today, the relationship between the European Union (EU) and its Eastern neighbours is much more complicated, as the ultimate question of 'Europe's borders' continues to haunt the EU and its members. Following the 'big bang' accession of 12 new members in 2004/2007, EU enlargement has become the victim of its own success. In many corners of the Union one can witness symptoms of exhaustion and indigestion. And this fatigue has negative effects on the relationship between the EU and its Eastern neighbours. But political and economic changes in the region and beyond, as well as developments brought about by the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty could affect the future relationship between the EU and its Eastern partners.

## Changing environment

The EU's neighbourhood policy needs to adapt to a changing environment, and the Union's overall foreign policy could develop along three different lines: One, the Union remains faithful to its global ambitions, which were expressed most thoroughly in the 'politics of persuasion' in the run-up to the Copenhagen climate summit in December 2009. Two, the EU becomes introverted and preoccupied with navel-gazing, concentrating predominantly on its own internal affairs. Three, the European Union aims to achieve regional consolidation by (further) strengthening its position in Eastern Europe.

If the EU follows the third intermediate scenario, new goalposts need to be found if Eastern Europe is to advance on the EU's agenda. In the past, the policy towards its Eastern neighbours was based on a defensive approach, aiming to guard the Union against unwanted turbulence outside of its borders. In the future, the EU's policy towards its neighbourhood will have to follow a different paradigm, that of a 'global Europe'. The key message to be communicated is that a European Union, which lives up to its regional responsibilities, will be able to play a more powerful role in a less Eurocentric world, in which the 'old continent' is no longer the centre of gravity and history but rather struggling to defy the danger of gradual marginalization.

In more concrete terms, three key factors are bound to affect the future relationship between the EU and its Eastern neighbours: energy, democratisation and the relationship between the EU and Russia.

- *Increasing energy independence:* The Union's climate policy, investment in energy efficiency, renewable energy, clean coal, gasification of coal, and the shale gas exploration could successively translate into greater energy

independence for Europe and hence reduced sensitivity of this issue in relations with Russia and the transit countries.

- *Effects of democratisation:* The process of democratisation is beginning to bear fruit as evidenced by the transformation in Moldova. One can no longer argue that the region is structurally incapable of democratic consolidation. This is not only an important argument in the European debate for the proponents of an active approach to Eastern Europe, but also a key factor with regard to future political developments in Russia.
- *More realism in EU-Russian relations:* The Union's policy towards Eastern Europe has been strongly influenced by either an over-optimistic or over-pessimistic vision of strategic relations with Russia. Concerns about potential negative Russian reactions prevented a more ambitious policy towards countries in the Union's neighbourhood. Today, Russia is in a state of crisis, and the assessments in the EU of Russian intentions are much more realistic than in the recent past. Awareness is growing that the weight of Russia was exaggerated in the European political debate. The 2008 conflict between Russia and Georgia highlights the balance that the EU must strike. It raised questions about whether Russia is committed to the security framework that has benefited the Union and its members. It also challenges EU members to ensure that while legitimate Russian interests can be accommodated, Moscow does not have a right to veto policy made in Brussels or the national capitals.

**Neighbourhood policy after Lisbon**

Europe went through almost ten years of agony before the Treaty of Lisbon (finally) entered into force on 1 December 2009. Even though the Union's new primary law is by no means perfect, it is better than the Nice Treaties as it offers advantages with respect to a further parlamentarisation, personalisation and politicisation of the enlarged Union. However, the implementation of the Treaty is no easy exercise. The new provisions are in many cases not very specific, and this vagueness has become a source of confusion – both inside and outside the Union – and a source of fierce bureaucratic and political turf wars in Brussels, between EU institutions and member states, and among EU capitals. As a consequence, it will take the 'new EU' some time to set up novel institutions and to reach a new institutional equilibrium.

Concerning the EU's Eastern policy, the Treaty of Lisbon has a double significance. It brings about both institutional changes in the area of external relations and contains explicit provisions concerning neighbourhood and enlargement policy.

The Lisbon Treaty creates a novel institutional setting in the area of external relations with new actors and adapted functions of existing players. Besides the introduction of an elected semi-permanent President of the European Council, there is one key innovation which is particularly significant with respect to the EU's relationship with its Eastern neighbours: the establishment of an European External Action Service (EEAS) under the authority of the multi-hatted EU foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton. The EEAS has the potential to (eventually) lead to a more coherent, consistent and better-coordinated policy *vis-à-vis* the EU's neighbouring

countries in Eastern Europe. However, many questions surrounding the set-up and functioning of the EEAS are still unclear, and it will take years before the new Service will be running at full steam.

There is another institutional innovation that deserves attention. In the Barroso Commission, the Czech Commissioner Štefan Füle combines the responsibility for enlargement and neighbourhood. This move has been a strong political gesture from President Barroso, which can be interpreted as a sign that the EU's borders must not end at the borders of those countries who are already (potential) candidates for EU accession. In the course of his hearing in the European Parliament on 12 January, Commissioner Füle spoke in favour of a politicisation of the enlargement process by means of an active engagement of national politicians in the debate. He also signalled that he would attach more importance to substance rather than procedures when it comes to both enlargement and neighbourhood policy.

Finally, the EU Treaty for the first time contains a direct reference to the Union developing a "special relationship" with neighbouring countries (Art. 8 TEU). To this end, the EU may conclude special agreements with interested countries. These are meant to be agreements based on a political contract given that the treaty speaks of joint rights and obligations as well as joint actions. Such legal measures are a strong foundation for deepening relations with the neighbours and should be used actively in Eastern policy initiatives.

The Lisbon Treaty provides a new legal and institutional framework for EU foreign policy. However, this does not prejudge the Union's political orientation, which is a reflection of many internal and external tendencies. In the years to come, centrifugal and centripetal forces will collide in the EU. According to polls, a majority of Europeans believe that the Union has enlarged too fast. This shows that the mandate for an assertive neighbourhood and enlargement policy remains weak. Eastern European neighbouring countries will thus have to fight to promote the message that their offer to the European Union is attractive and constitutes a real added value. Further EU enlargements will not be driven by a historic momentum like the one that motivated widening after the fall of the Iron Curtain. Compared to the latest rounds of enlargement, the countries now aspiring to join the Union will have to provide even more convincing arguments that their accession is not only in their own but also in the political and economic interest of the EU and its member states. This increases the pressure on every aspirant to demonstrate a high level of preparedness and willingness to join the 'club'. The individual success of internal economic, political and social reforms will be the most decisive factor for 'persuading' the Union and its members to deepen cooperation and eventually to enlarge further. At the same time, political attitudes in the EU towards Eastern Europe will also have to gradually change. The Union and its members will have to see Europe's Eastern neighbourhood as part of the concept of its own development – and not merely as a one-way street from which the EU itself has nothing to gain.

**The way forward**

Eastern Partnership has and will continue to follow a pragmatic approach, which does not include the features of a 'grand project'. Its objective is more to link a

political signal with organic work, for which an appropriate institutional infrastructure with thematic platforms and multiannual programmes has been created. However, this new framework still needs to be filled with life.

More attention should be given to the most important problems of the region rather than to a broad, unspecific range of policy areas, as in the initial model of the European Neighbourhood Policy. Modernisation of the energy systems and enhancement of energy efficiency, liberalisation of the visa system, introduction of free trade agreements and the fight against corruption rank increasingly higher on the EU's agenda. This trend will continue in the years to come, and it is in the interest of both sides to exploit the potential for concrete cooperation.

The strategic dimension of Eastern Partnership may gain from a stronger involvement of Turkey, a regional actor with significant political and economic potential. It is not unthinkable that the attitude of Russia would change significantly as a result of a closer engagement of Turkey. Russia would quickly become aware of the high political costs of remaining outside of the framework, which includes both the EU and key regional actors.

One of the unspoken objectives of Eastern Partnership is to maintain interest in Eastern Europe in the countries of the European Union. Critical mass inside the EU requires the engagement of Germany and France, and the renewed engagement of the United Kingdom. There is thus need for a strategic review of the Union's relationship with its Eastern neighbourhood, including the most critical and contentious issues related to the question of future rounds of EU enlargement.

The EU and its Eastern neighbours should aim for the highest possible level of cross-border and intra-regional cooperation. Intense political, economic, social and cultural interaction will over time improve knowledge of each side about the other, increase the understanding of the problems the other side is facing, and reduce the level of mutual distrust and prejudice – both sides would benefit form closer ties independent of the ultimate finality of the EU's policy towards its Eastern neighbourhood.