

Więcej niż sąsiedztwo More than Neighbours

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Eastern Partnership – Commentary

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The need to strengthen EU policy as regards its Eastern neighbours is something wholly advisable. As a matter of fact there are no longer any internal voices within the EU which put into question such opinions. The question today is no longer whether or not to strengthen the policy but how to do so. The Polish-Swedish proposal concerning the Eastern Partnership of June 2008 (www.msz.gov.pl/Polish-Swedish,Proposal,19911.html) is a good basis for further discussion while simultaneously impelling to several thoughts in relation to the shape of EU policy towards its Eastern neighbours.

Eastern Partnership's Participants

According to the Polish-Swedish proposal countries co-operating in the new initiative should be all the Eastern partners (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine) but Ukraine should be first followed by the remaining countries "according to ambition and performance". It should not be taken for granted that Ukraine will be the leader although this is more than likely. This position, in some areas at least may be taken by other countries such as Moldova. There should be a constant and binding principle that if a country participating in the Eastern Partnership is further advanced in its co-operation with the EU than others then it should not be "held back" on account of the remaining countries. Certainly healthy competition may be of assistance to Eastern neighbours in implementing much needed internal reforms. Ukraine rightly regards itself as the leader among the countries which are to be encompassed by the Eastern Partnership. This does not necessarily mean that it will always retain this position regardless of its progress. The ability to use the possibilities offered by Eastern Partnership to a major extent are dependent on the situation in neighbouring countries. This is why of key importance is for example political stability and the economic situation in Ukraine or the carrying out of elections and their results in Moldova which are planned for March 2009.

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Forms of co-operation

The foundation of EU activity towards its neighbours should be bilateral relations. Experience to date supports this solution. Bilateral relations are simply the most effective. It is worth noting that bilateral activities may have a positive side effect based on the inspiration for multilateral co-operation between Eastern neighbours particularly in the areas where their relations with the EU are on a similar level, and where common pressure on the EU may help to resolve issues.

Certainly multilateral activities are required but are also extremely difficult in the context of the EU plus Eastern neighbours as well as regards co-operation among the group of Eastern neighbours themselves. Above all on account of the heterogeneity of the group consisting of six countries whose relations with the EU and domestic situations differ not infrequently outright diametrically. The Eastern neighbours cannot be forced to act together as this would to a large degree be simulated and even counter productive. Multilateral initiatives must stem from the neighbours themselves. This was the case in the instance of the Central European countries and three Baltic States (Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania) an example of which is the formation of the Visegrad Group, CEFTA and the joint activities of the Baltic republics. It must be borne in mind that in the case of the Central European countries and the Baltic States, multilateral initiatives were just an addition to the bilateral relations of each of them with the EU. Through the Eastern Partnership the EU could inspire, encourage multilateral activity but not demand this as one of the conditions to becoming closer to the Union.

Areas of co-operation

The Polish-Swedish proposal outlines five areas of co-operation in the following order: Political and Security, Borders and Trans-border Movement, Economic and Financial, Environment, Social.

It is characteristic that issues concerning society in such issues as: Cross-border co-operation,

people-to-people contacts or development of co-operation between NGOs, are mentioned last of all. This demonstrates a lack of understanding as to what form co-operation and gradual integration of Eastern countries with the EU should take. In the case of these countries deeper co-operation and gradual integration with the EU is strictly dependent on the support of society for these processes. It should be noted that Euro-integration of the Baltic States and Central European countries would not have been possible without the support of the society which from the 1990's in the majority supported the pro-European policy of their governments. After all it is societies not governments that integrate with the EU. That is also why the fundamental activity of the EU towards the European neighbours should be the strengthening of support for the societies of those countries for co-operation and integration with the EU. One of the key tools for the realization of this task is visa policy included in second area Borders and Trans-border Movement. The liberalization of the visa system and the rapid implementation of visa free movement would be the best solution supporting the pro-European stance of the societies of neighbouring countries. It should be borne in mind that the decision to introduce visa free movement for Central European countries and the Baltic States was of fundamental significance for their integration with the EU.

As regards the first area Political and Security we are faced with two groups of issues. The first concerns the strengthening or quite simply the building of democracy in neighbouring countries. The second is as regards the co-operation of neighbouring countries with the EU concerning international political issues and security. It appears that within the Eastern Partnership framework particular pressure should be placed on the first group as a fully democratic neighbouring country will be more willing to co-operate with the EU as regards international issues and security. Among the issues concerning the building and strengthening of democracy two appear to be of fundamental importance. The first is Rule of Law including the independence of the Judiciary system. Without this independence it is im-

possible to strengthen democracy. The second issue is the relation between central and local government. The reform of local administration based on the departure from the remnants of Soviet legacy is crucial. Without the involvement of local societies further reforms in other areas are impossible. Of course the shape of the reforms in the judiciary or local government depends on individual countries, but the EU should encourage its neighbours to implement thorough changes.

What's missing?

Among the issues outlined in the five areas Energy is missing. It is impossible to imagine relations with Eastern neighbours without cooperation in this area. This is why the matter of energy should be included in the Eastern Partnership. Particularly in two aspects:

- the inclusion of neighbouring countries to the EU common energy market. To this end membership of the Energy Community is required not only for Ukraine and Moldova but for others as well. Inclusion to the common energy market will most certainly help in the building of greater transparency of the energy sectors of those countries.
- support energy efficiency. The economies of neighbouring countries are still excessively energy consumptive which is the heritage of the Soviet era. The development of these countries is strictly related to the implementation of new technologies reducing energy consumption.

It can be attempted to cram the energy issue into already existing areas (III: economic and financial as well as IV: environment), but this matter is of such key importance that it could be considered separately.