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Polish Guidelines for the Eastern Partnership:

Securing common interests in times of Russian and Chinese influence in the region

European Union has recently encountered many unprecedented problems that derive both from the internal and external threats to its functioning. Among a growing number of questions the EU has to respond to in order to convince its own citizens once more that European integration is a necessity, there comes a question about the EU's attractiveness for its possible future members. Since the recent elections to the European Parliament, the Von der Leyen's Commission has been vocal about naming one of the EU's main tasks as reinventing the Union as a global actor.¹ Still, the EU's new stance towards its regional partners is about to be reshaped too. In fact, regionally speaking, it is the growing pressure from Russia and China that results in a visible need to answer the question about the EU's ability to attract states to get involved in projects such as the Eastern Partnership. Even if the alternatives are not as attractive economically (Eurasian Economic Union) or they are not oriented on common values, such as respect of personal freedoms (as in example of Chinese influence).

Current state of the Eastern Partnership

Nevertheless, the Eastern Partnership is still one of the best examples of the EU's ability to shape a complex foreign policy. Proposed by Sweden and Poland back in 2009, it emerged in times when the EU was considered – despite the last financial crisis – as an undoubtedly alluring role model of economic success. After 10 years of its existence, the EaP is still widely considered in Poland to be one of the biggest achievements of Polish European foreign policy. Both in terms of the ability of the state to project its own interest in the region, as well as an example of how a new member state was able to make use of the EU's internal mechanisms for the sake of both its own and Union's interests. Despite the role of the founder, throughout last

¹ [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2020/646148/EPRS_BRI\(2020\)646148_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2020/646148/EPRS_BRI(2020)646148_EN.pdf)

10 years Poland has actively participated in the debate over evolution of the project, and acted to amend its shape. In 2011, during its Presidency of the Council, Poland not only put the Eastern Partnership back on the top of the list of the EU's priorities, but also came up with some detailed proposals, such as: Eastern Partnership Academy of Public Administration, EuroNest Parliamentary Assembly, CORLEAP Conference of the Regional and Local Authorities for the Eastern Partnership, *inter alia*.² Therefore, in the heart of Polish activity around the EaP there has always been the idea to care about the so-called 'European aspirations' of the partner states, having in mind that partnership is only a point on the route to full membership in the EU for those willing to integrate.

While examining the core of the concept of the EaP, one has to claim that its main objective was not only to bring the partner states closer to Union via economic incentives, but also through the promotion of the basic European values, such as: respect for the human rights, rule of law and democracy.³ Not without the significance was the fact, that despite the similar history of the last decades (and what follows – common experience of command economy), each partner state has its own unique specifics. Therefore, their final aspirations, as to their relationship with the EU, may also differ.

Undoubtedly, one of the most recognized problems of the EaP – and probably one of the key obstacles on the route to its success – is the lack of concrete incentives that may answer the growing aspirations of the Eastern partners to form even a closer relationship with the European Union. The vague and distant promise of membership had been considered illusionary long before the recent Franco-German diplomatic clash over the shape of European integration in the Western Balkans, that revealed internal disagreements in Union. In fact, as the European Union, we are now far from being ready even to start such a discussion in regards to the EaP members. In the meantime, the mechanism of mostly economic incentives has been designed to serve as an European answer to the partners actions that are in line with Union's requirements. The result of this mechanism is now visible in the internal division within the EaP: with Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine having adopted DCFTAs, Armenia being in progress of reforms, and Belarus, Azerbaijan showing lack of willingness for structural reforms. However, in a situation such as this, when the EU has an internal problem with tensions among its members over the speed of integration, it is very hard to be positive over a tangible perspective of anything more than just an ultimate economic rapprochement embodied in trade agreements.

² <https://www.rpo.gov.pl/sites/default/files/5%20-%20MSZ%20PW%20PL.pdf>

³ <https://www.gov.pl/web/dyplomacja/partnerstwo-wschodnie>

In fact, as President Macron has recently admitted in his lecture in Cracow, most of the Western members of the EU have not yet digested the fact of the ‘Big Bang’ Eastern enlargement of 2004.⁴

Polish Perspective

That enlargement of 2004 included members of the Visegrad Group, that have a similar, yet successful story of the route from the post-communist economy and society to the EU membership. As such, they may serve as a good point of reference for the Eastern partners. This was true back then in 2009 when Poland alongside with Sweden came up with the Eastern Partnership proposal. At that time Poland was regarded as a champion that - despite a short membership in Union - fully understands mechanisms of its foreign policy. This is true even now after 10 years, when Poland – still economically successful – descended to a position of a member that does not accept some core European values. The same values that are actually a point of reference for the Eastern Partnership states in terms of what the EU stands for. Unfortunately, this is now true for the rest of the V4 countries, with their governments being listed by their Western allies as an example of the growing populism wave and euroscepticisms. This constitutes one extremely impactful suggestion for Polish policy-makers. If Polish diplomacy still considers the Eastern Partnership as one of its priorities, the government has to understand that an obvious result of its weakening position in the EU might be – at most – an attitude of indifference from other members as an answer to any Polish proposals regarding the EaP. Especially, taking into account that this happens alongside the change in the EU’s concept of what the European integration really stands for, and what are the main directions of the EU’s interests.

Meanwhile, we are witnessing some powerful contestants in a race to win hearts and minds of the Eastern partners. As a result of an ongoing geopolitical struggle, the EU’s position has been recently contested either by a concept of a no strings attached economic rapprochement with China, or Russia-style integration. The latter is entangled in a set of values opposite to those embodied in the European Project and often imposed through military threats.

For that reason, involvement of partners in the Eastern Partnership far exceeds the up-to-date EU view on purely economic incentive of this project. It is rather a striking choice of European

⁴ <https://www.elysee.fr/en/emmanuel-macron/2020/02/05/president-emmanuel-macrons-speech-at-jaguellonne-university-krakow>

values that countries such as Ukraine or Georgia would like to be identified with. Everything set in times of an existential fear caused by event such as occupation of Crimea.

Poland for a long time has been trying to convince the EU to take into account this point of view, trying to spread awareness about the Eastern European partners' needs among the Western allies. As an advocate for regional initiatives of the EU oriented on its Eastern borders, Polish diplomacy has always tried to consolidate the region around common experience of the past, both in its economic and historic dimension. In fact, those policies - addressed at establishment of regional initiatives which Poland co-founded (such as Visegrad Group, CEFTA or Eastern Partnership itself) - are among the brightest examples of some successful actions conducted by Polish diplomacy after 1989.

Conclusions and recommendations

Therefore, any guidelines delivered to the Eastern Partnership countries from the V4, shall take into account not only needs but also expectations of our Eastern partners. Expectations based not only on the perception of the EU as a merely strong economic partner, but also as a counterweight to the Russian and Chinese influence in the region.

This means that we have to take into account the listed circumstances:

- ❖ Membership of the Eastern Partnership states in the EU is currently politically impossible, due to the internal dynamics of Union and its necessity to reinvent the concept of what the European integration stands for;
- ❖ There is a necessity to sustain interest of the Eastern partners with the EU, that requires a mechanism promoting those of the EaP countries that are successful in implementation of the EU's guidelines;
- ❖ Growing pressure from both China and Russia in the Eastern Europe threatens both the existing potential of the EU's influence in the region and the Eastern partners ability to conduct the necessary reforms.

For the aforementioned reasons, the Eastern Partnership countries should follow the similar format to the one used by Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary while Visegrad Group was established. This should lead to forming a group of common interests in relations with the EU.⁵

⁵ A similar recommendation was also present in PISM recent report on the 10th anniversary of the EaP, with which I strongly agree in this matter.

It is actually worth noticing that recently Polish government has proposed – as a part of the 10th anniversary - some amendments to the Eastern Partnership that aim at reinvigorating the project in times of its current stagnation. Unfortunately, Polish idea how to reinvent the EaP for both members of the EU and its partners from the East seems to be very much concentrated on procedures (that include establishment of the EaP secretariat in Brussels or a mechanism similar to a presidency of the Council). However, one of those proposals was also connected to the idea of an internal integration of the Eastern Partnership countries within a concept similar to CEFTA, that was once one of the cornerstones of Visegrad.⁶

Visegrad Group has proven to be an effective mechanism of a common lobbying for regional interests. Common history and so-called ‘European aspirations’ of the involved countries, resulted in treating membership in the EU as one of the ultimate goals of the group’s existence. However, the mechanism such as this has the potential to serve not only as an effective tool for lobbying for the EaP countries interests in the EU. It is a visible sign of internal solidarity of the Eastern partners, that should also act as a factor catalysing establishment of the common identity of these states. Moreover, it is also a possibility for those states – with the strong support from the EU - to learn what integration really stands for, and where lines should be drawn between their own national and regional interests. It also constitutes a big advantage for the EU itself: to treat those of the EaP countries that are ready to act as a group, in a more complex manner, and to monitor the readiness of those partners to integrate more with Union.

This group-building experience may also serve as a possibility to highlight the essence of the region’s interests in external relations with non-EU countries. This also enables the EaP to understand that common threats, such as disinformation, hybrid warfare, military pressure from Russia, can and should be addressed on a regional level rather than by isolated countries. Group similar to Visegrad, with the EU support, may very well help our Eastern partners to build common resilience in their relations with Russia and China. But above all, the achievements from this regional integration will be fruitful, even if the queue for the EU membership will have to wait for a longer time than it was expected in 2009.

⁶ <https://www.euractiv.pl/section/polityka-zagraniczna-ue/opinion/czaputowicz-jaka-przyszlosc-partnerstwa-wschodniego/>