
Eastern Partnership Will Help Member-States Making Reforms and Integrating Into European Community

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An Interview with research fellow at the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR) Nicu Popescu

The European Union has approved the Eastern Partnership project. What will this initiative bring to the countries involved?

Eastern Partnership project will help the countries involved in it make reforms to improve statehood. The eastern neighbors of the European Union are subject to crises and instability as they suffer from wars, territorial conflicts, political crises for poor democracy and problems with supply of power resources. Eastern Partnership will help them overcome some of those crises. For instance, integration into European gas market will make it possible for Ukraine to increase energy safety and settle many problems that arouse also Russia's concern. When EU is involved into conflict settlement this may also help stabilizing conflict situations.

Some analysts say the Eastern Partnership project becomes an obstacle on the quick way to European Union for the countries involved. Do you share this opinion?

is not a "quick way" to European integration. It is not an easy process. For instance, such countries as Hungary and Czech Republic need about 20 years to fully integrate in European Union. They launched this process in 1991.

Later they established a free trade zone and customs unions with the EU.

They joined the European Union in 2004 and then Schengen zone in 2007. They will probably join eurozone in 2011-2013. This is a very long process with many stages. The progress of any state chiefly depends on local reforms but not on promises of European Union. The Eastern Partnership even theoretically cannot delay the process of European integration. This project may just accelerate the process helping the countries involved fulfill reforms and gradually integrate into European community. The integration level depends on how serious the neighbors of the European Union are ready to reform.

Do you agree with the opinion that Eastern Partnership is anti-Russian and affects Russia's interests and the spheres of its influence?

Eastern Partnership project does not have an anti-Russian dimension since it does not much differ from the European Neighborhood Policy adopted in 2003.

Eastern Partnership is just trying to repeat and accelerate the process, which in any case would pass within the frames of the European Neighborhood Policy. Thus, Russian complaints regarding Eastern Partnership are rhetorical statements and are not based on aspiration to understand the core of the project. European Union wants to see stable, democratic and prosperous neighbors, and there is nothing anti-Russian in these aspirations since Russia successfully cooperates with the EU as well. Look at the foreign trade data: over 50 percent of Russian commodity turnover is with EU states. All the post- Soviet states except Moldova trade with the EU

less than Russia. They have still much to do to reach the level of Russia's cooperation with the EU.

Will the global financial crisis affect the implementation of Eastern partnership project?

Global financial crisis may create some problems for implementation of Eastern Partnership project. The procedures of establishing a free trade zone and facilitating visa regime may slacken. In many EU member-states and their neighbors protectionism is gathering pace. Ukraine has recently raised import tariffs by 13% in average, which hinders EU-Ukraine negotiations for establishment of a deep free trade zone.

Nevertheless, it should not affect Eastern Partnership. Anyway, establishment of free trade zone between the EU and neighbors is a mid-term project. It is hardly possible within the coming 3-4 years for many of the EU neighbor-states since the negotiations take several years. The EU has launched negotiations with Ukraine so far. The crisis will slow down the negotiations to some extent. Anyway, irrespective of the crisis, they will not be over soon.

The economic crisis may also increase the EU's role in the post-Soviet area. Over the last years the EU financial aid to its neighbors was not so essential for them. These states had rather impressive economic growth (often 10%), high inflow of money transfers from migrants and possible support by Russia in case of necessity. EU neighbor-states often did not need the support by such institutions as the International Monetary Fund. Those times have passed. Since the EU neighbors are experiencing hard time, the financial aid they receive from the EU is becoming more and more important. The budget of the European Neighborhood Policy is sustainable and will increase due to the Eastern Partnership project. In addition, the EU's vote at the IMF is becoming significant. The EU has already supported the IMF credits to Ukraine and Belarus. The current crisis makes the cooperation of the EU and its neighbors important as never before.

Do you think it possible for Eastern Partnership member-states to sign an agreement for EU associated membership for the nearest future?

It is possible but it may take several years since negotiations will take rather long time.

May involvement of Armenia and Azerbaijan in the Eastern Partnership project influence settlement of the Karabakh conflict?

If we compare the EU's involvement in settlement of the Nagorny Karabakh conflict and the Transdniestrian conflict in Moldova, we will see that the EU is more involved in the last one. It mostly depends on Moldova's desire to involve the EU in the settlement of the given conflict. In the meanwhile both Armenia and Azerbaijan have not tried to seriously involve the EU in the settlement of Karabakh conflict.

Eastern Partnership will change something in this process only if Armenia and Azerbaijan are ready to increase the EU's role in the process. EU has never forced up its services to partners.

Thank you for interview
