
Balkans Model To Underpin EU's 'Eastern Partnership'

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EUOBSERVER / BRUSSELS - EU policies applied to the Western Balkans - such as a regional free trade area - are inspiring the "Eastern Partnership" with Georgia, Ukraine, Moldova, Armenia, Azerbaijan and "hopefully" Belarus, participants at a conference organized Wednesday (17 September) by the German Konrad Adenauer think-tank learned.

Initially a Polish-Swedish proposal endorsed in June by all member states, the Eastern Partnership is designed to deepen ties with the "European neighbours" to the east, balancing the 'Mediterranean Union' with the southern "neighbours of Europe," as Polish MEP Jacek Saryusz-Wolski put it.

The Georgian conflict sped up the process of drafting the eastern policy by the European Commission, with president Jose Manuel Barroso scheduled to sketch out the main features already at the EU summit on 15 October.

"We might be inspired by the experience with the Western Balkans that countries which perhaps didn't work so well together in the past, will do so in specific areas like energy or transport. We should put forward the idea of creating a free trade area between these countries - something which worked quite well in the Balkans," Gunnar Wiegand, director for Eastern Europe, Southern Caucasus and Central Asia within the European Commission, explained.

The new policy will consist of a bilateral dimension and a multilateral one, the latter being "really new," in addition to existing cooperation mechanisms, he said.

"There would be something fundamentally new if we would create some form of regular political dialogue at the highest level between the 27 and the five, hopefully the six countries in a not too distant future," Mr Wiegand said, referring to Belarus as the potential sixth country.

Speeding up or initiating visa facilitation agreements was an idea championed by the Polish and Swedish speakers, who stressed that it is easier for South Ossetians and Abkhazians with a Russian passport to travel to Europe than it is for someone with a Georgian passport.

But the commission official mentioned the "substantial political resistance from some member countries" on a future visa liberalisation agreement with Ukraine, while underlining that EU-Ukraine negotiations on an "Association Agreement" was an important "example" to follow for the other countries of the Eastern Partnership.

Regarding the other EU co-operation platform in the region, the Black Sea Synergy, which includes Turkey and Russia, Mr Wiegand said that "there will have to be a choice whether one wants to establish a good form of this multilateral process or whether one wants to use existing mechanisms where also other players continue to have a role."

Mr Saryusz-Wolski, the chairman of the European Parliament's foreign affairs committee, warned that "the problem is not what to put in the Eastern Partnership, but how to implement the available instruments." He stressed the need for benchmarks, individual evaluation of each country and called for appropriate funding, the current envelope of €2 billion for the entire EU neighbourhood policy - which also includes the southern Mediterranean rim - being "insufficient."

Speaking of other frozen conflicts such as Transnistria and Nagorno Karabakh in the light of the events in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, Mr Wolski underlined the need for the EU to "anticipate," not just to "react," for instance by helping Ukraine's majority-Russian region of Crimea with better infrastructure and other "pragmatic" solutions.

Accession after 2020

With the perspective of EU membership for the partnership countries set out in "10-15 years," the focus should be on "doing something now" and helping the countries to establish strong institutions, rule of law and a functioning market economy, German MEP Elmar Brok said.

Mr Brok, who used to be Mr Wolski's predecessor as the chairman of the foreign affairs committee, was presented as a "forefather" of the Eastern Partnership, as he championed a similar idea three years ago, called the "Neighbourhood Policy Plus" for the same group of countries.

"We need to have a step by step approach. Visa facilitation is important, WTO, gradually passing from an association agreement to a free trade area. It means to go further as far as possible in terms of these countries adopting the *aquis communautaire*, rather than focusing on the membership perspective, which is too distant," he said.
