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## Caucasus : EU seeks broader ties w/Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia in 2009

By Lili Di Puppo  
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Brussels wants to enhance the European Union's relations with Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia in the coming year. In the absence of solid membership prospects, the question remains, however, whether the EU's ideas about enhanced relations will meet the expectations of leaders of the three Caucasus states, as well as create a framework that can improve Brussels' capabilities to address regional issues.

The EU's vision for expanded cooperation was contained in a blueprint document distributed in early December by the European Commission. The report deals with the three Caucasus states, along with Ukraine, Belarus and Moldova. The so-called Eastern Partnership Proposal is expected to be formally adopted during a summit meeting of the EU and the partner countries in March 2009.

The blueprint envisions expanded free trade and visa arrangements. Whether these will satisfy all the Caucasus states remains an open question. This question is particularly relevant for Georgia after the Georgian-Russian conflict in the summer of 2008. Georgia is the most keen to integrate with Western institutions, while Russia is steadfastly opposed to such a Westward drift. [For background see the Eurasia Insight archive].

The Georgian-Russian crisis served as a catalyst for the partnership proposal, which was initially presented by Poland and Sweden last May. Pawel Swieboda, director of the demosEuropa think-tank in Warsaw, believes that the initiative is "partly aimed to accommodate Georgia's expectations, which cannot be realized by quick NATO accession. The EU's engagement is meant to fill the gap."

While Tbilisi is sure to welcome stronger economic ties, Georgian leaders are anxious to bolster security cooperation. Georgian State Minister for Euro-Atlantic Integration, Giorgi Baramidze, says that "it is important not to overlook the security issues, because without durable security and stability, it will be extremely difficult to reach the goals that the Eastern partnership has."

The challenge of promoting stability and security in Georgia through soft power instruments has long posed a dilemma for the EU. "What you need if you want to help Georgia is to de-securitize the Eastern European agenda. Because the more security is on the agenda, the fewer opportunities for the EU to work with soft power," says Alexander Duleba, director of the Research Center of the Slovak Foreign Policy Association.

Another question is whether the partnership will prove an efficient tool for enhancing EU influence in the region. Duleba explains that the partnership offer is "a reflection of the very fact that the EU's interests in Eastern Europe are of a regional nature." These interests include energy supplies, developing a trans-European transport network, protecting the environment and dealing with illegal migration.

In this light, Russia's exclusion from the Eastern partnership appears problematic, Duleba suggested, adding that it will be impossible to "develop an efficient regional policy framework if Russia is not in it. Baramidze also remarked that "it is very important that the Eastern

partnership includes issues of conflict resolution, such as the conflict between Russia and Georgia."

Swieboda said the partnership plan is "mainly about strengthening the EU's presence in the neighborhood" -- a geopolitical development that will not be welcomed by Russia. "We have already heard from the Foreign Ministry that Russia examines with due attention what the Eastern partnership constitutes. And this is a signal of possible tension to come," he said.

During a news conference following the release of the proposal, European Commission president JosÃ© Manuel Barroso told journalists that the EU's intention is not to build a sphere of influence. "We don't want a Cold War, but cool heads," Barroso said.

With the Czech Republic assuming the EU presidency for the first half of 2009, to be followed by Sweden, "this will be the year of the Eastern partnership", says Swieboda. Beyond the signal that the EU wants to reinforce its presence in the Caucasus and Black Sea regions, the success of the initiative depends on concrete achievements. "The ground is prepared, but a lot depends on what happens in tangible terms," Swieboda said.

Editor's Note: Lili Di Puppo is the editor-in-chief of the online magazine Caucaz.com and a PhD candidate at the European Viadrina University (Frankfurt/Oder) in Germany.

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