

UNION FOR THE MEDITERRANEAN AND EASTERN PARTNERSHIP GEOPOLITICAL INTERESTS OR COMPLEMENTARY CONCEPTS?

The article aims to elaborate on the European Union's policy towards the Mediterranean region by focusing specifically on the newly-designed concept of the Union for the Mediterranean, which is juxtaposed with Eastern Partnership, a fledgling project adopted by the EU in 2009. A comparative approach is adopted which evaluates the "political resources" being committed to the two dimensions of Europe's neighborhood policy. In the wide array of EU's foreign policy issues, the national interests of member states dominate. As long as the conflicting interests of the member states prevail in discussions on the neighborhood policy, it will not be possible to design neither a coherent and attractive offer for the EU's neighbors nor an effective instrument by which the EU could have real impact on its neighborhood.

Jakub Wodka*



* Jakub Wodka is Assistant Professor at the Polish Academy of Science, Institute of Political Studies, Warsaw.

The European Union spans from Eastern Europe to the Mediterranean, and includes neighboring countries of different cultural, religious, historical backgrounds. Thus the Union has to cope with various political and economic predicaments. This leaves the Community and its 27 member states with a formidable challenge of balancing its engagement with its eastern partners and establishing an active policy of strengthening relations with the southern peripheries, that is North African and Middle Eastern countries. Managing relations with these two distinct geopolitical areas does not only have implications for the external policy of the EU and its global standing, but has direct impact on the internal “balance of power” within the EU. Whereas the Mediterranean region has been the center of attention of the “old member states”, mainly France, Spain and Italy, the eastern dimension of the neighborhood policy has been promoted by the post-communist countries, such as Poland, which is the largest country among new member states and acts as the leader of within this group. This reveals the division within the European Union as far as the strategic priorities of its foreign policy are concerned. Can those conflicting geopolitical interests of the European countries be reconciled and are they capable of coming up with a coherent and comprehensive external policy? Or will EU’s neighborhood policy be dominated by national interests of the member states?

European Neighborhood Policy

The 2004 enlargement of the European Union dramatically transformed its foreign policy priorities. Until 2004, the major tenet of the relations between the EU and its eastern partners was the accession prospect of the latter. Not much attention was given at the European level to strengthening ties neither with countries on the eastern fringes nor with the Mediterranean partners. Although, since 1995, the EU engaged with what was named the Barcelona Process, this instrument was not satisfactory for Europe’s North African and Middle Eastern partners. It had limited impact on bringing them closer to Europe.

After 2004, the European Union expressed its determination to ensure that the “big bang” enlargement (the largest single enlargement by 10 new member states, out of which eight were post-communist countries and other future enlargements would not pose new divisions between the expanded Union and its neighbors. Paradoxically, and despite optimistic statements, the last two rounds of enlargement which ultimately ended the legacy of the Cold War in Europe led to new divisions within the continent and deepened the conflicting nature of geopolitical interests of the member states. Even before 2004, the then-candidate states located to the east demanded that the EU paid more attention to eastern partners such as Ukraine. Poland and other Eastern European countries also engaged in forging closer links between the European Union and Southern Caucasian states.

Simultaneously, Mediterranean member states lobbied for closer partnership with their southern neighbors as they share close historical, political, cultural and economic linkages. Countries like France, Spain, Italy and Portugal maintained that eastern enlargement of the Union has become a priority in EU's political agenda. They demanded that the pendulum should swing back in a more balanced rhythm, reflecting those countries' strategic interests as well.¹ On the eve of the EuroMediterranean Summit for celebrating the tenth anniversary of the Barcelona Process, President Jacques Chirac declared that "the Mediterranean must remain a strategic priority for Europe. This Summit is giving those who are concerned about the equilibrium of Europe's policies between East and South the opportunity to confirm our options: the pursuit of European commitments for the Mediterranean area must be ensured."²

Consequently, the EU took into consideration the requests of its member states and came up with a broader framework on cooperation with its neighbors – the European Neighborhood Policy, stretching from Marrakech to Baku and even to Donetsk.³ In order to create a "ring of stable, friendly and democratic friends" around its borders, which would share EU's basic values, such as the rule of law, democracy, human and minority rights, the EU envisaged the ENP as a "single, inclusive and coherent policy framework"⁴ applicable to all 16 neighboring states. The new policy was developed regardless of geographical considerations, although the European Commission stated that the "new EU approach cannot be a one-size-fits-all policy", underlining that "differentiation between countries would remain the basis for the new neighborhood policy."⁵ What

In order to create a "ring of stable, friendly and democratic friends" around its borders, which would share EU's basic values, such as the rule of law, democracy, human and minority rights, the EU envisaged the ENP as a "single, inclusive and coherent policy framework"

¹ Petr Kratochvil, "The European Neighbourhood Policy: A Clash of Incompatible Interpretations", in Petr Kratochvil (ed.), *The European Union and its Neighbourhood: Policies, Problems and Priorities* (Prague: Institute of International Relations, 2006)

² Geoffrey Edwards, "The Construction of Ambiguity and the Limits of Attraction: Europe and its Neighbourhood Policy", *European Integration*, Vol. 30, No. 1 (March 2008), p. 54.

³ Kai-Olaf Lang, "European Neighbourhood Policy: Where do we stand – where are we heading", in Johannes Varwick, Kai-Olaf Lang (ed.), *European Neighbourhood Policy. Challenges for the EU-policy towards the new member states* (Opladen & Farmington Hills: Barbara Budrich, 2007), p. 15.

⁴ "Council of the European Union: Strengthening the European Neighbourhood Policy", *Presidency Progress Report*, No. 10874/07, General Secretariat, Brussels, 15 June 2007, p. 3.

⁵ "Wider Europe - Neighbourhood: A New Framework for Relations with our Eastern and Southern Neighbours", Communication from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament, Brussels, 11 March 2003 COM(2003) 104 final, pp. 6, 16.

was planned as an effective policy matching the global ambitions of Europe and new challenges in the neighborhood turned out to be a hollow compromise between the old and the new member states. Helen Wallace points out that “the ENP emerged as a catch-all approach instead of the more targeted strategy (notably *vis-à-vis* Ukraine) which some EU foreign policy officials had advocated.”⁶ In Edwards’ words, “the EU’s Neighborhood Policy was a response to competing demands that inevitably resulted in compromise and ambiguity.”⁷

“Due to the lack of an accession perspective, the ENP has also to a large extent failed to encourage countries to carry out intensive reforms in political, economic and legal fields.”

It is important to single out the main drawbacks of European Neighborhood Policy reflecting conflicting geo-strategic interests of the old and new member states. Many of these flaws have been carried over to the new neighborhood policies of the EU, i.e. Eastern Partnership and Union for the Mediterranean. Firstly, the new member states have been criticizing the European Neighborhood Policy for its lack of an accession perspective oriented towards eastern neighbors. The new Neighborhood Policy has actually been presented as an integration

scheme which aimed at postponing further enlargement. This lack of membership perspective was particularly criticized by Ukraine, the largest Eastern European country neighboring the EU, which, after the Orange Revolution, aspired to join the Euro-Atlantic community. Whereas the pro-enlargement group within the EU, which consisted mainly of the new member states maintained that only the “membership conditionality”, could really transform and democratize the post-Soviet space, the old member states, such as France, Spain, Italy as well as Benelux countries, were (and in fact, still are) against granting a clear accession perspective to the eastern neighbors (the accession of southern non-European countries was ruled out in the 1980s when the membership application of Morocco was rejected). This reluctance to further enlargement was mainly due to the “fatigue” suffered after the inclusion of a party of ten countries to the EU, which also coincided with the constitutional crisis within the European Union. Due to the lack of an accession perspective, the ENP has also to a large extent failed to encourage countries to carry out intensive reforms in political, economic and legal fields. This creates kind of a vicious circle: “the lack of membership perspective does not create

⁶ Helen Wallace, “The European Union and its Neighbourhood: Time for a Rethink”, *ELIAMEP* Thesis, May 2009, p. 3.

⁷ Edwards (2008), p. 45.

motivation to reform and the lack of reform inhibits more profound structural integration between the partner states and the EU.”⁸

Secondly, as already stated, the ENP did not differentiate between the countries covered by the policy. Consequently, this policy grouped countries such as Ukraine and Jordan, Georgia and Lebanon, which should be treated separately, within a single framework. This “geographical arbitrariness” reflecting foremost constellations of internal interest within the EU has seriously hindered the impact the ENP could have had on the social, economic and political reforms in countries both in the east and the Mediterranean.⁹

The flaws of the European Neighborhood Policy necessitated the development of two new concepts of neighborhood relations, envisaging further differentiation between the South Mediterranean and East European regions. As Dimitry Kochenov has rightly pointed out, “the Union for the Mediterranean and the Eastern Partnership created in 2008 can thus both be viewed as attempts to remedy this foundational drawback of the ENP by ‘re-splitting’ the neighborhood.”¹⁰ Still many of those drawbacks of the ENP have not been eliminated in new policies.

The Union for the Mediterranean and the Eastern Partnership

The invigoration of the southern dimension of EU’s neighborhood policy, which was stalemated by the conflicts between Algeria and Morocco, and Israeli and Palestinian, was enabled with President Nicolas Sarkozy’s Union for the Mediterranean project, designed as an amendment to the shortcomings of the Barcelona Process. The project also served to reflect the global ambitions of the French president.

The Union comprises of all 27 member states as well as the 21 countries, either located on the Mediterranean rim or participating in the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership. Libya is the only Mediterranean country that did not join the new initiative. On the other hand, although not a country bordering the Mediterranean or, unlike Jordan, politically belonging either to northern Africa or the Middle East, Mauritania was included into the Union for the Mediterranean. Nevertheless, it has close relations with France.

⁸ Rokas Grajauskas and Vytautas Sirijos Gira, “Is the Eastern Partnership a significant improvement of the ENP?”, *Eastern Pulse*, 5(20), Centre for Eastern Geopolitical Studies, 4 June 2009, p. 1.

⁹ Barbara Lippert, “The EU Neighbourhood Policy – Profile, Potential, Perspective”, *Intereconomics*, Vol. 42, No. 4 (July/August 2007), p. 182.

¹⁰ Dimitry Kochenov, “The Eastern Partnership, The Union for the Mediterranean and the remaining need to do something with the ENP”, *CRCEES Working Papers*, WP2009/01, p. 10.

In the beginning, Nicolas Sarkozy, then a presidential candidate, vaguely presented an idea of creating what he first called the Mediterranean Union, which would encompass only the countries bordering the Mediterranean Sea. This would mean in fact that the new French initiative envisaging the participation only of the Mediterranean member states would replace or “by-pass” the existing EU mechanisms, i.e. the Barcelona Process covering all the member countries. Richard Gillespie rightly enumerates the motives which stood behind Sarkozy’s plan. According to him, it was viewed as:

A stratagem to reassure France’s population of North African descent that the French state was still committed to addressing the problems faced by Mediterranean peoples; a plan to renew French influence in an area that it had dominated during colonial times; an initiative to rebalance French-German relations and acquire a more influential role in the EU by playing the initiating role in reshaping the Union’s Southern dimension, to offset the preeminence of Germany in relation to the East; as part of a commercially-oriented drive to make France the main provider of a nuclear energy infrastructure in the Southern Mediterranean.¹¹

Additionally, Sarkozy, a fierce opponent of Turkey’s accession to the EU, designed the Mediterranean Union as an alternative to Turkey’s membership ambitions. Thus, if we look closely at the rationale behind the Mediterranean Union, we can easily see that Sarkozy’s motives were driven by domestic strategic and political interests, which do not run parallel to the geostrategic interests of the EU as a whole.

Many of the European leaders, including Chancellor Angela Merkel, expressed criticism over the initial project presented by Sarkozy, fearing that Mediterranean Union would compete with the existing EU institutions. Angela Merkel emphasized that the future stability of the Mediterranean region affected the European Union as a whole and added that all “27 member states should be involved in the engagement process... She insisted the region’s stability was as vital for those EU Member States bordering the Baltic Sea as for those facing the Mediterranean.”¹² Further according to the German Chancellor, “a situation could be created where Germany would be drawn to Central and Eastern Europe and France to the Mediterranean. This would create tension that I would not like.”¹³ Spain, on the other hand, raised its concern about the linkages between the Mediterranean Union and the existing Barcelona Process. The Spanish argued that all member states

¹¹ Richard Gillespie, “‘A ‘Union for the Mediterranean’ ... or for the EU?”, *Mediterranean Politics*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (July 2008), p. 278.

¹² John Thornhill and Bertrand Benoit, “Merkel rebuffs Sarkozy on Mediterranean Union plan”, *Financial Times*, 31 January 2008.

¹³ Michael Emerson, “Making sense of Sarkozy’s Union for the Mediterranean”, *CEPS Policy Brief*, No. 155, March 2008, p. 2.

should take part in the new policy towards the Mediterranean not only because of the funding of the new scheme but also because so much effort had been put into convincing them that the Mediterranean was a European challenge, and not merely an area of special interest for Southern Europeans.¹⁴ Italy also feared that the Mediterranean Union would become dominated by French interests.

This opposition was also voiced by the Southern European countries, and eventually led to the reconceptualization of Sarkozy's idea and "Europeanization" or the "communitization" of the project,¹⁵ Sarkozy agreed to open the doors of the Union for the the Mediterranean (the change of the naming, that "Mediterranean Union" became "Union for the Mediterranean", also implies a new approach) to all EU members and not to limit it only to the Mediterranean states in order to appease Angela Merkel and avoid a split in the Franco-German alliance. In addition, it was decided that the Union for the Mediterranean would be based upon the existing Barcelona Process. Thus, the original French project, in response to pressure from Berlin, was watered-down to meet the interests and expectations of the member states.

"The Eastern Partnership and the Union for the Mediterranean should not be viewed as entirely new concepts but rather as upgrades on the existing mechanisms."

The new member states, particularly Poland, snubbed at the French initiative, fearing that the project, promoted by the large and influential countries of the EU, would eventually lead to a deterioration of the eastern bloc's interest in the Neighborhood Policy. It is worth reminding that the post-communist countries, which became members only in 2004, did not have much experience with the EU, and were, in many instances, criticized by old members. Thus attitude was exemplified in the words of the former French President, Jacques Chirac, who referring to the Eastern countries' support for the American operation in Iraq, said that the new countries "missed a good opportunity to keep quiet."¹⁶

¹⁴ Gillespie (2008), p. 279.

¹⁵ Michal Naturski, "Explaining Spanish and Polish Approaches to the European Neighbourhood Policy", *European Political Economy Review*, No. 7 (Summer 2007), p. 71; Frédéric Allemand, "Union for the Mediterranean, or Nicolas Sarkozy's voluntarism", in Constantine Arvanitopoulos and Konstantina E. Botsiou (ed.), *The Constantinos Karamanlis Institute for Democracy Yearbook 2009*, (Berlin: Springer Verlag, 2009), p. 50.

¹⁶ "Conférence de presse de M. Jacques Chirac (17 février 2003)" [Press conference of Mr Jacques Chirac 17 February 2003], *Le Monde diplomatique*, <http://www.monde-diplomatique.fr/cahier/europe/conf-chirac>.

In spite of those “weaknesses” of the eastern member states and as a counterbalance to the EU’s engagement with its southern neighbors, soon after the launch of the Union for the Mediterranean, Poland, with the support of Sweden came up with the idea of strengthening EU’s ties with the eastern peripheries by tabling the initiative of Eastern Partnership. Some analysts named it a mirror image of the French-inspired proposal.¹⁷ Paradoxically, thanks to the French president’s proposal, it was easier for Poland and Sweden to persuade southern countries to endorse a policy proposal particularly designed for the eastern partners. The reason France approved the Eastern Partnership was to a large extent tactical and helped Paris get support from Poland and other Central European countries for the Union for the Mediterranean project.

The joint Polish-Swedish proposal of Eastern Partnership was presented at the General Affairs and External Relations Council on 26 May 2008, followed by a Communication from the European Commission to the European Parliament and the Council. The tug-of-war between Sarkozy and other European leaders which took place when the French came up with the concept of the Mediterranean Union was reenacted once again when Eastern Partnership initiative was presented. The draft text of the Eastern Partnership referred to the 27 EU states plus Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia as “European countries”. It also spoke of “visa-liberalization”. The final document adopted on 7 May 2009 in Brussels categorized these six neighboring countries as “Eastern European Partners” and “partner countries”. It added, however, that the visa move would be a “long-term goal”. This renaming imposed by Germany and the Netherlands concerned that calling the Eastern partners “European countries” would promote further enlargement, meant in fact downgrading and watering-down the proposal, just as was the case with the Union for the Mediterranean. The new approach to the issue of visa liberalization is also much more cautious than the previous proposals, which spoke of “visa-free” travel. It is also quite symptomatic that neither Nicolas Sarkozy nor Jose Luis Zapatero attended the Summit in May 2009, which marked the initiation of the Eastern Partnership.

The Eastern Partnership targets six countries: Belarus, Moldova and the Ukraine to the east and Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia in the Caucasus. The initiative by some analysts has been described as the “boldest outreach” of the EU since the accessions of 2004 and 2007.¹⁸ Eastern Partnership was designed as *de facto*

¹⁷ Paweł Świeboda and Maria Sadowska, “Wschodnie Partnerstwo – dobry początek, sukces dopiero będzie” [Eastern Partnership – a good start,], *demosEUROPA*, 9 December 2008, http://www.demoseuropa.eu/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=254%3Awschodnie-partnerstwo--dobry-poczek-sukces-dopiero-bdzie&Itemid=95&lang=pl.

¹⁸ Michael L. Nash, “ ‘The boldest outreach’: the Eastern Partnership Initiative of the European Union”, *Contemporary Review*, Vol. 291, No. 1694 (Autumn 2009), p. 301.

an interim step towards the membership of the Eastern European countries, yet ended up with these countries not receiving a clear accession perspective. The promise of accession would be the only move capable of really acknowledging their different position compared with the Mediterranean partners. What is important, the Eastern European countries and the countries of the Mediterranean have principally different expectations of their enhanced relations with the EU, since European partner states make it absolutely clear that their ultimate ambition is to join the EU as fully-fledged member states. As the Polish Minister of Foreign Affairs Radek Sikorski underlined:

We in Poland make a distinction between the Southern dimension and the Eastern dimension of the ENP and it consists in this: to the South, we have neighbors of Europe, to the East we have European neighbors. These are countries - Belarus, Ukraine and Moldova - whose entire territories lie in Europe, and by the provisions of the EU's founding Treaty of Rome they all have the right one day to apply, to fulfill the criteria for EU membership, and, perhaps, to become members.¹⁹

Conclusion

The new initiatives of France-led South Europe Coalition and the Poland-led group are unfortunately doomed to failure and will meet neither the expectations of member states, nor that of the partner countries. This is due to the fact that the southern and eastern member states have differentiating geopolitical and geostrategic interests. Although the French foreign minister once indicated that it is no sin to go south and east at the same time,²⁰ it is quite obvious that the inadequacy of financial and political resources limits the scope of EU's activism in external relations.

Firstly, the Eastern Partnership and the Union for the Mediterranean should not be viewed as entirely new concepts but rather as upgrades on the existing mechanisms. The main problem is the lack of a "new substance" whereas both initiatives continue to duplicate the intentions of the European Neighborhood Policy. On the other hand though, with these two initiatives in place, the Europe Union has started to make a distinction between eastern and southern neighbors, which is a positive sign. However, this shift, from EU's perspective is not driven by the "common sense" on the European level, but rather by the interests of the particular member states.

¹⁹ Ahto Lobjakas, "EU: Poland, Sweden Breathe New Life Into Eastern Neighborhood", *Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty*, 26 May 2008, <http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1144495.html>

²⁰ "Poland Pushes for New 'Eastern Partnership'", *The Warsaw Voice*, 11 June 2008, <http://www.warsawvoice.pl/WVpage/pages/article.php/18068/article>.

Secondly, the idea of cooperation with EU's neighbors is diluted in the internal rivalry of the member states. Rosa Balfour is right to note that the Union for the Mediterranean is motivated by domestic (i.e. French) politics and rooted in national foreign policy priorities.²¹ The first reason for which Sarkozy came up with the concept of the Union for the Mediterranean is advancing the "Gaullist notions of grandeur and international rank, rather than contributing to a solution of regional problems". The second reason is enhancing French national security in a unilateral way.²² At this point, it would prove useful to remember that more than ten years ago, Zbigniew Brzezinski noted that "France not only seeks a central political role in a unified Europe but also sees itself as the nucleus of a Mediterranean-North African cluster of states that share common concerns."²³

The same goes for the Eastern Partnership, which should be interpreted as a reaction of Poland (supported by Sweden and other Eastern European countries) to French activism in the Mediterranean. Thus, both initiatives have been devised as geopolitical instruments of particular member states or group of countries to enhance their influence in the EU and not as actual policies of the EU towards its neighbors. As Michal Natonski succinctly puts it, "member states perceive European Foreign Policy realm as an additional arena where their national interests and preferences are pursued". In this sense, European Foreign Policy serves as a "resonance box" for national foreign policies and as a point of reference to deal with issues that are difficult to solve through unilateral policies."²⁴

In the wide array of EU's foreign policy issues, the national interests of member states dominate. As long as the conflicting interests of the member states prevail in discussions on the neighborhood policy, it will not be possible to design neither a coherent and attractive offer for the EU's neighbors nor an effective instrument by which the EU could have real impact on its neighborhood. Overcoming national interests in favor of European-level consensus seems, for the time being, a hurdle impossible to overcome no matter how often we hear of Europe as a united entity based on the solidarity of the Member States; an entity with a global vocation. The reality in place is quite different – the "renationalization" by the member states of the European policies is a fact which cannot be denied.

²¹ Rosa Balfour, "The Transformation of the Union for the Mediterranean", *Mediterranean Politics*, Vol. 14, No. 1 (March 2009), p. 99.

²² Timo Behr and Ruth Hanau Santini, "Comment: Sarkozy's Mediterranean Union plans should worry Brussels", *EU Observer*, 12 November 2007.

²³ Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and Its Geostrategic Imperatives*, (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1997), p. 42.

²⁴ Natonski (2007), p. 65.