

Thinking Beyond Vilnius

How Poland and Germany should enhance the EU Eastern Policy

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The EaP summit in Vilnius may mark a turning point in the EU's policy towards its Eastern neighbors. If the association agreement with Ukraine is signed and the agreements with Moldova and Georgia are initialed, this will be a major step towards bringing the Eastern partners closer to the EU, stabilizing the Eastern neighborhood and transforming these countries in line with the principles of rule of law, democracy and free market economies. If this process is delayed, it may result in negative consequences for the EU and its Eastern neighbors. Nevertheless, the summit in Vilnius will not mark the end of history. The need for a bolder approach by the EU to tackling the challenges emerging in its Eastern neighborhood will not diminish. On the contrary, the prospective developments necessitate new strategic thinking among the EU member states and its institutions. Today, the EU's Eastern policy is facing a decisive test.

Firstly, the political game in the Eastern neighborhood before the summit in Vilnius shows that Russia has now realized that the EU is serious about bringing the Eastern neighbors closer in terms of universal values, European norms and procedures as well as economic integration and political cooperation. Consequently, Moscow has been trying to prevent this by pressing these countries to join the Eurasian Economic Union that will be founded in January 2015, imposing trade barriers and openly threatening them with wide-ranging negative consequences (in the form of new trade wars) in case they decide to embark on the path of integration with the EU. This pressure is likely to be maintained if the summit in Vilnius is a success. Moscow will certainly try to exert influence on the ratification process. The EU therefore has to find a way to respond and show effective solidarity with its Eastern neighbors.

Secondly, the decision of the Armenian government to join the Russian-led customs union, the ambiguous position of Georgia (which is floating this idea) as well as the state of democratic transition in Ukraine show that the EU's Eastern policy has only had a limited impact on the processes going on in the Eastern neighborhood and that the success record of this policy has been limited. The deficits of the Eastern policy are well known: the lack of strategic interest, a largely bureaucratic approach, tensions between EU member states, weak incentives for meeting the EU expectations and demands. The insufficient progress in the democratization process in the EaP countries as well as the EU's lukewarm engagement has led to the stagnation of the Eastern Partnership. It is in the European Union's interest and responsibility to reverse this process now.

Most importantly, Germany and Poland should both play leading roles in this endeavor. Over recent years many voices have called for closer cooperation between both countries in order to conduct more effective and coordinated political action. However, although the Eastern policy is one of the most frequently discussed issues by Warsaw and Berlin, it has not translated into meaningful political initiatives. Part of the reason for this has been each country's diverging interests and perceptions regarding the EU's Eastern neighbors. However, German and Polish approaches have considerably changed in recent years. There is much less disagreement between Polish and German elites about the analysis of Russian foreign policy or the state of democracy in Ukraine. This better mutual understanding with regards to Eastern Europe has proved to be one of the main prerequisites for foundations of the new Polish-German "partnership for Europe." The necessity for strengthening the EU Eastern policy "beyond the summit of Vilnius" means that a closer Polish-German cooperation in this field is indispensable. There is a lot Poland and Germany can do together:

- First of all they should help the summit in Vilnius to be a success. The association agreement and DCFTA with Ukraine should be signed and the agreements with Moldova and Georgia initialed. The time is ripe despite the well-known deficits in the democratization process and enforcement of the rule of law in some of the countries.
- Secondly, Poland and Germany should insist that the establishment of the rule of law is given priority in the implementation process of the new agreements and in the run-up to their ratification. The goal and ambition of the EU is to support the democratization process in the EaP countries. However, the rule of law is the first, indispensable precondition of this transformation. It is also crucial for the successful implementation of the DCFTA with Ukraine. As a result, the ratification process (in the EP as well as in national parliaments) should focus on the enactment of the key structural reforms (judiciary). Furthermore, technical assistance programs in that area should be offered to the EaP countries. This is

the only way for the EU to preserve leverage on this country after it has signed the agreement.

- Thirdly, after the agreements have been signed, both sides—the Eastern partners and the EU—will bear the responsibility for making them work. While the association agreements will bring major and lasting benefits to both the associated partners and the EU, their implementation will involve some short-term, tough and sometimes socially-difficult adjustments. Poland and Germany should stress the need for solidarity with the Eastern neighbors. The likely on-going pressure from Russia may considerably impair their national economies and stir up domestic political unrest. The EU has to make sure that closer relations with the EU do not become detrimental to the national interests of the Eastern neighbors. If the association with the EU is a source of problems for the respective countries, it is the EU which will be blamed. Therefore we must offer them concrete assistance drawing upon EU's instruments and structures, especially in case of a continued campaign by Russia. Opening the EU markets to products which may be subject to new Russian import restrictions would be an important measure. The EU should also consider giving the associated partners access to existing financial instruments or developing a new EaP fund to support the economic transformation and liberalization process.
- Fourthly, Poland and Germany should initiate, strengthen and support EU's efforts to cooperate with the civil society in the EaP countries. The role of national public opinion, non-governmental organizations and the media in these countries will be instrumental for the implementation of the association agreements. Without domestic pressure on the political elite, the risk of delaying tactics is very high. This is also why the EU should promote the idea of association and launch an information campaign about the benefits of EU integration.
- Fifthly, signing the association agreements will advance the common European market and open up European economic integration towards the East. If and once this has been made, the next step could be a new partnership and cooperation agreement with Russia and talks about an EU-Russia free trade area.

Closer contractual relationships between the EU and its Eastern neighborhood and the EU's pursuit for closer cooperation with Russia are not contradictory. Poland and Germany would play an important role in this process.

- Sixthly, Poland and Germany should work together on a sustainable policy towards the Eastern neighbors by including the Visegrad and Nordic countries in their deliberations. The strengths of the Eastern foreign policy come from a comprehensive approach which involves all the stakeholders.

Due to their interests, geography and history Poland and Germany are two indispensable nations for the EU Eastern policy. After the EaP summit in Vilnius, the challenges in the Eastern neighborhood will by no means disappear. On the contrary—whether the summit proves to be a lasting success remains to be seen in the years to come, and will largely depend on the EU's ability to improve its performance in the region. It is time Warsaw and Berlin made the best of their new

“partnership for Europe” and take on their responsibility to offer new ideas for the EU's Eastern policy beyond Vilnius, motivated by a political philosophy of inclusiveness and cooperativeness.

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This text is part of a joint initiative of the German Council on Foreign Relations (DGAP) and the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR) in cooperation with Robert Bosch Stiftung and the Foundation for German-Polish Cooperation.

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