

What do Belarus and Azerbaijan have in common? In spring 2011, both countries hit the headlines in the Western media, albeit for very different reasons. In May, in the Belarusian capital Minsk several members of the opposition, including former presidential candidate Andrei Sannikov, were sentenced to several years in prison at show trials because they had protested against the bogus presidential election of December 19, 2010. Also in May the Azerbaijani pop duo Ell and Nikki won the 56th Eurovision Song Contest and thus made the small country in the Caucasus known to a wider European public. However, they do have other things in common: both countries are ruled by authoritarian regimes which repress the opposition and manipulate elections. Nevertheless – and this is something else they share – both countries are part of the EU's »Eastern Partnership« (EaP), along with Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, and Armenia.

The Eastern Partnership is the focal theme of this issue. It was launched in May 2009 at a summit meeting in Prague and, for the time being, forms the last part of the complicated structure of the European Neighbourhood Policy. This began in 1995 with the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP, also known as the Barcelona Process) and was extended in 1999 with the Stability Pact for South-Eastern Europe. In 2004, the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) was launched, aimed at regulating relations with Europe's neighbor regions by means of and alongside the existing instruments. Later on, the Mediterranean Union (2008) and the EaP were also attached to it.

The variety of partly overlapping geographic and technical instruments has a logic of its own, namely: no more enlargement! After the failure of the European Constitutional Treaty in the French and Dutch referendums in 2005, the compromise of the Lisbon Treaty, and most recently with the premature accession of Romania and Bulgaria in 2007, it has become clear that any enlargement of the EU must be preceded by a deepening: in other words, institutional consolidation. In any case, regardless of these structural and long-term considerations, given the current debt crisis in Euroland and the debate on the future of the euro, persuading EU citizens to accept new members is pretty much out of the question.

What does that mean for the EU's Neighbourhood Policy? Hitherto, the received wisdom has been that the prospect of EU membership constitutes a strong incentive to implement democratic, rule of law, and economic reforms. Three out of the six eastern EaP states, however, are

not even making an effort in that direction. Belarus, Azerbaijan, and Armenia have thrown in their lot with Russia. Among the other three countries, this prospect depends on changing political constellations, and in any case even they lag far behind EU requirements, as the contributions to this issue make clear.

In his introductory piece *Grzegorz Gromadzki* explains that, with the exception of Moldova, the EaP's eastern partner countries have little interest in more far-reaching cooperation with the EU in the areas of democratization and the rule of law, which after all are two of the cornerstones of the EaP. On the other hand, all six states are interested in economic cooperation, understood in the narrow sense as technological modernization and EU financial aid for infrastructure projects. Without democratic reforms, however, even partial EU integration is impossible. *Rosa Balfour* confirms this diagnosis from the EU's perspective. In terms of democracy and the rule of law the EaP has so far achieved little, allowing the partner countries to choose what they want »à la carte,« which basically means financial aid. This is also possible because the EU does not wish to have the EaP perceived as a rival to Russia and therefore »hard« security problems have been left out. As *Andrei Zagorski* makes clear in his contribution, the pre-eminent point of criticism from a Russian perspective is the fear that the EaP could be an obstacle for Moscow's cooperation with the eastern partner countries.

These three introductory articles are followed by six country studies which provide a detailed overview of the effects of the EaP in each country. In the case of Armenia, the EaP has undoubtedly led to a strengthening of relations with the EU, as *Boris Navasardian* points out. This is primarily because the EaP has institutionalized parliamentary and civil society contacts, for example, in the Civil Society Forum (CSF). However, doubts remain concerning how much the EaP can really contribute to far-reaching democratization, which in the case of Armenia is a critical problem. This applies even more to Azerbaijan, where corruption, nepotism, absence of the rule of law, and social insecurity are features of a repressive regime, as described by *Rashard Shirinov*. Belarus is certainly the EU's most problematic EaP partner. Perceptions of the process differ sharply on the two sides and this hinders cooperation, as *Vladimir Ulakhovich* explains.

To the extent that these three countries are interested in pragmatic cooperation with the EU without wider prospects Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine are pursuing a stronger European orientation, but with

different emphases in each instance. Since the »Five Day War« in August 2008, when the Russian army backed the separatists in Ossetia, Georgia has regarded the EU – and also NATO – as the sole alternative for its security and territorial integrity, as *Tamar Khidasheli* writes. However, this pro-European stance is not reflected in internal democratic reforms, on which further rapprochement depends. Moldova has gone furthest along this path, having had a decidedly pro-European government in power since 2009. This government has enthusiastically taken up the new possibilities of the EaP, as *Victor Chirila* explains. If only because of its size and population Ukraine is undoubtedly the most important EaP country. In her contribution, *Iryna Solonenko* sets out why for Ukraine the EaP does not provide much that wasn't already in the ENP, although the latter has been strengthened in some ways.

Finally, *Alexandra Dobra* deals with the issue of microfinance. She emphasizes that while this has had positive effects on development overall, it has not done so much for women. She makes a number of concrete proposals to overcome these deficiencies.

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