

Eastern Partnership – breakthrough or continuation?

On 22nd June 2009 a discussion panel entitled “**Eastern Partnership – a new wrapping for old policy?**” organized by the Heinrich Böll Foundation was held at the Zielna Warsaw Conference Centre. Over forty people from Poland and abroad participated in the meeting and debated on the opportunities and dangers connected with the establishment of the Eastern Partnership.

Agnieszka Rochon, the director of the Heinrich Böll Foundation in Warsaw was the first person to take the floor. Ms. Rochon said she believed matters connected with the Eastern Partnership were a very current topic, as the project had finally entered its implementation stage. Moreover, the Eastern Partnership in Poland is believed to be a great success of our diplomacy, however, in other countries of the region criticism is much more common.

The panel discussion was opened by **Maria Przelomiec**, TVP Info’s journalist who specializes in the problems of Eastern Europe. She presented the Eastern Partnership and its beginnings to the participants. The initiators of the Partnership were Poland and Sweden, both very enthusiastic towards the project from the very beginning. The project includes the creation of common free trade zone between Eastern European countries participating in the Partnership, energy policy rapprochement and the simplification of visa policies of these countries with the EU. At the beginning only EUR 600,000,000 were allocated for the Partnership, but this amount may be just a starting point for further cooperation. Przelomiec believes that there is a very good chance that the Eastern Partnership will turn out to be a success, however, it may also become just a meaningless gesture. The speaker also said that the partners of the project should not be afraid of Russia’s opposition, all the more because cooperation between them will contribute to the stabilisation of relations in Europe.

Andrzej Cieszkowski, Plenipotentiary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for the Eastern Partnership reminded the participants that it had been only a month since the initiative’s approval and that it was worth waiting for its appraisal. Cieszkowski also added some new information complementing Ms. Przelomiec’s speech, describing the goals and the scope of the functioning of the Eastern Partnership in detail. The participants of the Partnership are the European Union and six Eastern European countries: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. In May of this year a declaration on the establishment of the Eastern Partnership was adopted in Prague. Cieszkowski believes that the fact that all interested countries were pleased to sign the cooperation agreement is especially significant. At the beginning there was a general consensus regarding the

Partnership in the European Union, as well. Cieszkowski says that it is possible to base the Eastern Partnership on European Union values and to make it one of the main aspects of the EU's foreign policy. The Partnership is to serve as a stabilising, modernising and political agent. The speaker agreed with Ms. Przelomiec that EUR 600,000,000 is not a significant amount, but he also stressed that these are supplementary means to the current EU funds allocated for EU's Eastern Europe policy. Some funds will be spent directly from the budgets of individual countries. The Eastern Partnership's goals include the development of bilateral relationships between countries, but also the development of multilateral cooperation consulted in thematic platforms – these will mainly concern democracy, economic integration, energy safety and human relations. There are also flag initiatives concerning, for example, border management. The Partnership will also deal with cultural and financial cooperation. Summits of all countries of the Eastern Partnership will be held every two years. The economic crisis may act as a limiting factor already hindering the implementation of individual projects.

Alaksandar Lahvinec, the advisor of Alaksandar Milinkevich, the leader of "For Freedom" Movement, took the floor next. At the beginning of his speech he declared he had a positive attitude to the Eastern Partnership. He said he believed that the sanction policy against Belarus was not working and the idea of Eastern Partnership came at the right time, at the time of economic crisis and the Russian – Georgian conflict. The dependence on Russia leads Belarus to an impasse and exposes it to being absorbed up by Russia. European Union sanctions resulted only in bringing Belarus closer to Russia. Lahvinec believes that Russia will keep on fighting for Belarus, especially on an economic level. In this situation the European Union should intensely seek contacts with Belarus, because only the EU can help modernise Belarus. It is true that such a policy is the legitimisation of Lukashenko's regime, but the European Union's interference may contribute to the economic development of Belarus, as well as spur it into political changes. Moreover, Lukashenko believes that the EU is essential for Belarus' development and this is where Milinkevich and Lukashenko agree. There are many negative phenomena in Belarus, but the country's opening to the integration with the European Union will only help the country. The Byelorussians also hope that the Eastern Partnership will also help in with doing away with visas or at least with reducing their prices – currently they are more expensive than for the Russians and Ukrainians.

Iryna Solonenko, the Head of the European Programme in the Kyiv Rebirth Foundation, took the floor next. She said she believed the Eastern Partnership was not a new thing but a continuation of the European Union's current foreign policy, however, she also said that regional alliances were a new phenomenon. In the last couple of months the situation in the region got worse and the new initiative is the European Union's reaction to

new challenges. At the same time it is a signal for Russia that the European Union wants to cooperate with countries from the region, which worries Russia. On the other hand Ukraine's cooperation with the European Union is more advanced than with other Eastern European countries participating in the Partnership. That is why some Ukrainian politicians feel that the Partnership is a step back, not forward when it comes to Ukraine's current position. According to Solonenko the Eastern Partnership may yet turn out to be advantageous for Ukraine with the effective implementation of projects, however at the moment, Ukraine does not want to fall into disfavour with Russia.

Rainer Steenblock, a Green Party member of the German Bundestag was the last panellist to take the floor. He said that he believed that the Eastern Partnership was not a new initiative. Many cooperation institutions between the countries of the region existed before. The novelty here is the opening to Belarus, which gained the second strong partner, apart from Russia, which should contribute to Belarus' stability and democratisation. It is important to introduce a new visa policy for all countries included in the agreement. The Eastern Partnership is a step forward, but, so far, there is no comprehensive vision of the development of Eastern Europe. We should support pro-European aspirations of all the countries of the region, however, at the moment there are no perspectives for their accession to the EU.

The gradual widening of cooperation and the strengthening of relations between the UE and the Eastern allies of the Partnership is a realistic policy for the coming years. Moreover, there are many conflicts in the region, which the European Union is avoiding, for fear of falling into Russia's disfavour.

After Steenblock's speech a series of questions followed, thanks to which the panellists had a chance to elaborate on their speeches.

Most of the doubts expressed were directed at Mr. Cieszkowski. When asked about Russia's attitude to the Partnership he answered that Russia is an important partner for Poland and the EU encourages Russia to cooperate with the Eastern Partnership. He also said that he believed that the rhetoric of struggle for power is not right here, because the Eastern Partnership countries are independent and the cooperation with the UE is their chance for stability and development. When asked about the role of non-government organisations in the Partnership, Cieszkowski answered that the possibility of their participation in the project exists and that the Polish government supports this participation by dividing projects connected with Eastern Europe into Eastern Partnership projects and other projects. He also referred to the accusations concerning the worsening situation of visas for Ukrainians. In Mr. Cieszkowski's opinion this might have been caused by the division of visas into national visas and Schengen visas. He also stressed that new

consulates granting visas are being established in Ukraine. Poland is Ukraine's friend and will do its best to limit the visa regime and the Eastern Partnership may significantly improve the current situation. Another question concerned Belarus' accession to the free trade zone, together with other countries of the Partnership and the fact that it closely cooperates with Russia at the moment. Cieszkowski said that the offer of economic cooperation had also been made to Russia and it could also access economic initiatives of the Eastern Partnership. As to the institutional form of the Partnership, Cieszkowski declared support for the small but transparent institutions based on intense cooperation. The main coordinators act in the European Commission because most of the projects will be managed by the Commission, which possesses the proper competences. Cieszkowski also repeated his positive opinion of the involvement of individual countries in the partnership. He emphasised the will of cooperation of all parties of the Partnership, especially in relation to strengthening the bilateral relations between the individual countries. In a summary, he rejected Steenblock's conviction that the Partnership has few new elements. In Cieszkowski's opinion there are many new elements, such as the diversification of the EU policy concerning strategies towards its neighbours, new forms of multilateral cooperation and new programmes for Ukraine, as well as the involvement of financial institutions.

Latvinec repeated his positive opinion on the Eastern Partnership and said that the development of cooperation between countries of the Partnership was already noticeable. He believes that the strengthening of cooperation of the countries of the region will have a positive influence on internal situation in Belarus. He also expressed hope that, as a result of the partnership, a new quality would appear in Belarus and at least some European Union regulations would be adopted there.

Solonenko referred to the question concerning the balancing between the Commonwealth of Independent States and the European Union. In her opinion since 2005 Ukraine has pursued a pro-European Union policy, it has signed more agreements with the EU, it has become less active in the Commonwealth and now belongs to the WTO. Solonenko also expressed her scepticism about the role of the Eastern Partnership, because countries included in the Partnership are very diversified and it makes no sense for them to cooperate with the European Union on the same rules. According to Solonenko it is a reasonable initiative, but it is still difficult to assess as it involves many problems, especially connected with Russia.

Steenblock said that Russia has always had imperialistic claims. Currently, the Russians are afraid of losing their influence in Belarus and Ukraine but they understand that they cannot act alone and they are more and more aware of the fact that they need to cooperate both with the countries of the region, as well as the European Union. Russia

needs to learn to treat its neighbours as partners on account on its own business. Steenblock is not afraid of military cooperation between Belarus and Russia, all the more that the Russian army is dispersed. He paid attention to the pessimistic perspectives of Russia when it came to the quality of life, economy or demography. Steenblock also referred to a question about the reluctance of Germany towards Ukraine's membership in the EU. In his opinion the point of reference for many Germans is Turkey, to which many promises have been made and it started implementing accession conditions and in spite of that the dispute concerning its accession is still ongoing. However, most of the important parties support Turkey's accession. Ukraine and Georgia are far east, exotic countries for the Germans, which do not have many common experiences with the western countries. After the Orange Revolution the Germans' liking of Ukraine increased, however, some time later the support for its accession to the EU fell. That is why now we should wait for changes in the international situation, thanks to which European Union societies, including the German one, will be more supportive of the European Union's expansion. Moreover, countries aspiring to the Union have to learn to adjust to EU standards. It may take many years, but the Eastern Partnership is an important step forward.

Ms. Połomiec summed up the meeting by saying that at least one country treats the Eastern Partnership seriously and this country is Russia.

Piotr Szumlewicz