

This interview is a part of the
EU-STRAT
research project

EU-STRAT is an international research project that studies the relationship between the European Union and the countries in the European Eastern neighborhood. The project started on **1 May 2016** and will continue until the end of April 2019.

The main ambition of EU-STRAT is to provide an **inside-out analysis and strategic assessment** of the links between the EU and Eastern Partnership countries.

EU-STRAT will address **two main questions**:

First, why has the EU fallen short of creating peace, prosperity and stability in its Eastern neighbourhood?

And second, what can be done to strengthen the EU's transformative power in supporting political and economic change in the six Eastern Partnership (EaP) countries?

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INTERVIEW

“Working together on ‘medium caliber’ goals”: a conversation with MEP Michał Boni assessing the Eastern Partnership

by [Kamil Calus \(OSW\)](#)



This interview was conducted on 29 August 2017.

Mr. Boni, what is your assessment of the eight years of the Eastern Partnership (EaP)? Has this project met its key goals or has it failed?

The main goal of the EaP in 2009 was to strengthen relations and cooperation with eastern neighbors of the EU. This is basically one of the EU's key ideas: building a neighborhood through an export of development and peace so that we don't have to import tension and threats. And implementation of that idea, however not perfect, is going well. For example, let's take a look at how the DCFTA has been applied and how the indicators of foreign trade in different EaP countries have changed lately in a positive way. Despite the bad political climate (caused by Russian actions) we can say: We have succeeded! For example, in Ukraine: There is external support, but it is mainly due to the power of the national spirit and the efficiency of governance that this country has managed (despite the ongoing war!) to increase its economic growth rate from -7 % to almost +3 %. What's more, in 2017 thanks to great effort in both Brussels and the EaP capitals, a visa-free regime was granted for Georgia and Ukraine (Moldova implemented the visa-free regime already in 2014), the Association Agreement with Ukraine was signed and signing of a new agreement between EU and Armenia was initiated.

Also, the negotiations on cooperation with Azerbaijan started quite successfully.

Over the past eight years, many things have changed in the world: political tensions have grown, new problems have arisen, and Russia has become an open aggressor. Looking at these changes, I want to say that without the EaP, the situation would be far more dangerous. Maybe some of the EaP countries, not only parts of them (like Crimea and eastern Ukraine), would be annexed.

In your opinion, are the greatest challenges faced by EaP countries internal or external in kind?

The EaP prepares countries that are not members of the EU to cooperate within the framework of European-wide accepted standards and procedures. Internal factors influence its shape, for example the actions of Ukrainian citizens who – during the Maidan Revolution – firmly expressed their wish to join the EU, and to live in a free democratic country. Now the task of the state and its government is to fulfill this dream. Every country has had similar breakthroughs in its history – let us recall Georgia during the Rose Revolution in 2003. The partnership policy supports the democratic and developmental aspirations of these countries.

Now, if we talk about the eastern policy of the EU, the "more for more" approach seems most suitable to me – the more we see progress in implementation of reforms in the EaP countries, the more support we should offer these countries on their way to the EU and their social and economic development. I think that the elites in each EaP country have realized the developmental potential offered by the cooperation with the EU and possible membership in this organization.

This, however, does not change the fact that the Russia factor makes it difficult to achieve EaP goals. Conflict continues, and Russia skillfully supports and exploits the weaknesses of these countries: in government, in economy, in the deficit of pro-democratic attitudes.

Now that the DCFTA and visa liberalization – important stimuli for domestic reforms – have been or are close to being accomplished, what can the EU offer to the EaP countries to uphold the reform momentum?

This is why we are now working together on new, “medium caliber” goals. The autumnal summit will be dedicated to this issue, among others. It is clear that the more the EaP countries progress on their path towards development, the more flexible and comprehensive the neighborhood policy framework must be. This is necessary if we want to help our EaP partners to address their key problems, and these problems differ in each case. In Ukraine, the crucial issues are reforms, development, and above all, safety. In Moldova, we need to avoid destabilization and neutralize the threat to democracy. In the case of Georgia, the key focus is on the further increase of economic opportunities and utilization of existing ones. In Belarus, it is important to conduct a policy of economic support in order to avoid an extreme economic crisis. At the same time, we have to offer backing for the civic movements in this country – support the foundations of future democracy. For Armenia, it is necessary to keep an

eye on the progress of advancing democratic reforms, and also to relieve tensions resulting from history and geography. And finally, Azerbaijan, where it's crucial to support open trade and future development, but also to remind this EU partner about European standards for justice and democracy.

The recent document¹ created by the European Commission and the European External Action Service provides implementation of very practical goals (with specific deadlines) and formulates 20 specific tasks addressing real problems at hand.

I do not think that the governments of EaP countries are less motivated to achieve these tasks. This is due to the fact that the main goal – whether it be membership of the EU or development of economic cooperation – also requires the implementation of these 20 points. This in turn means the implementation of concrete reforms in these countries, such as reform of the judicial system or real implementation of the institutional fight against corruption. Only once these issues have been addressed would it be possible for Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia to start talks about membership.

Russia increasingly acts as a soft power, for instance through Russian TV channels. How can the EU better communicate its goals and values and win the hearts and minds of the people in Ukraine, Belarus and Moldova, for instance?

I don't think this is a proper question. Brussels' task is to support the development of EaP countries, but responsibility for the process lies with their national governments.

The EaP is more than the framework policy of the EU: it's a bilateral cooperation plan with its closest neighbors, with the goal of mutual understanding and support. This cooperation involves primarily the development of economic and trade relations, implementation of common energy policy, and of course, the development of people-to-people contacts – undoubtedly the liberalization of visas has helped in this regard. How can we win the hearts of the EaP citizens? With the prospect of joining a group of countries linked by common democratic values and that are economically strong through their unity.

To what extent do Brexit or the refugee crisis, to name a few internal problems of the EU, affect its policy towards the EaP countries?

The EU has its problems, but it solves them step-by-step. The economic crisis is already behind us. The issue of refugees lies in its management. Actually, with regard to the refugee crisis, I perceive it as a window of opportunity for closer cooperation between the member states and EaP countries in such fields as border security, implementation of biometric control, supplementation of data in international databases, cyber security, etc. Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia have experience that we need to appreciate and skillfully utilize.

One should remember that in 2014 the economic situation in Ukraine was tragic. Firstly, because of the legacy of Yanukovich, and second, because

¹ In December 2016, the European External Action Service and the European Commission launched a paper that identifies 20 deliverables for 2020 in order to contribute to cooperation between the EU and EaP countries.

Michał Boni is a Member of the European Parliament as well as a member of EU-STRAT's Advisory Board.



of Russian aggression. And not only military but also economic aggression, such as blockade of Ukrainian exports. Therefore it was unavoidable for Ukraine to suffer a very deep recession. But despite that, Kiev managed to radically reduce the budget deficit, helping to avoid hyperinflation. This deficit was reduced from above 10% to less than 3%. At the same time, they have massively increased their military spending – a tremendous and unbelievable achievement! Inflation has been reduced from over 40% to around 12% in 2016-17 and the banking system avoided a total collapse by the very thoughtful and well-structured activity of the Ukrainian central bank. And this should be emphasized much more. Speaking about structural reforms, some of them were very well advanced, especially in the gas sector, which is very important. They've managed to begin streamlining of the court system, the eradication of corruption, and creation of new institutions. On some other reforms, more progress is needed. Especially in terms of deregulation, demonopolization and privatization of the economy. At the same time, what Ukrainians managed to achieve in some other fields is a world record! Therefore, we should support and praise Ukraine, but at the same time keep focus on what needs to be completed.

Do you share the fear among many in Poland that, for instance, the EU may lose its principled stance towards Russia, as it struggles with Brexit and the refugee crisis?

Fortunately, the Union consists of 27 Member States, some of which have historical experience of dependency on the Russian Empire or the Soviet Union. This experience clearly affects their current perception of Russia, therefore, I do not see such risk. On the other hand, the problems are still there. In my view, Russia is indeed interested in expanding and strengthening control over the situation in the EaP countries. The important difference between Russia and the EU is that the latter accepts and respects diversity. Unfortunately, this cannot be said about Russian politics. Therefore, if one is thinking carefully about the development of the EaP, he or she must be unbending in relations with Russia.

Azerbaijan, Armenia, Belarus, Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia – these are countries that have not only declared their willingness to either join or cooperate with the EU, but that are already pursuing reforms and creating opportunities for economic cooperation. Europe does not enforce its rules by force. These rules of partnership were fully accepted by both parties.