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Towards 'EuroNest 2.0': What should the next European Parliament learn from its predecessor?

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Key points and Recommendations

The development and functioning of the EU-Eastern Partnership Parliamentary Assembly (EuroNest PA) is the topic of this brief. We argue that, despite organising a number of meetings and adopting several resolutions in the past two years, the Assembly is failing to reach its objectives of promoting economic and political integration between the EU and the Eastern Partners. Three main problems are considered here: i) the criticism of the European Parliament for being inconsistent about the conditions under which countries can send delegates ii) the fact that the parliamentary meetings are too short and infrequent, and iii) the observation that Eastern Partners focus too much on national and bilateral issues, thus failing to engage in multilateral dialogue.

We therefore recommend to the next European Parliament that it works on developing more concrete and measurable conditions for the representation of national parliaments; that it strives for longer and more frequent meetings of the different entities of the EuroNest PA; and that it ensures that plenary meetings are better synchronised with the other high-level multilateral meetings of the Eastern Partnership.

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Conception and goals of EuroNest

Besides the Eastern Partnership's (EaP) bilateral and multilateral framework and the Civil Society Forum, the European Union (EU) engages with the EaP countries – Belarus, Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan – through multilateral parliamentary cooperation, namely within the EuroNest Parliamentary Assembly (EuroNest PA).

Although the EuroNest PA only became operational in 2011, the idea to create the Assembly dates back to 2006 and was preceded by a series of conferences with representatives from the European Parliament (EP), Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan, as well as Belarusian opposition members. Discussions regarding the participation of Belarus were the main reason for the delay in launching the Assembly (Ćwiek-Karpowicz & Wojna, 2010). Prior to the adoption of rules for EP representation in its relations with third countries, the members of the EP (MEP) had to choose between three options: invite a delegation of the Belarusian Parliament, not involve Belarus at all, or include Belarus in the EuroNest PA while putting its active participation 'on hold' (Interview B, C). Eventually, the EP opted for the latter solution and suspended the Belarusian participation. It was decided that Belarus "will be welcomed once political requirements will have been fulfilled" (EuroNest PA). In order to meet the political requirements, the Belarusian Parliament should be elected according to its commitments made to the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and other international standards for democratic elections, and commit itself to promoting human rights and fundamental freedoms, pluralistic democracy and the rule of law (Buzek, 2011; EuroNest PA, 2011a, Art. 3).

The EuroNest PA hosts 60 MEPs and 10 members from each EaP countries'

Parliament (excluding Belarus). The EP therefore has a *de facto* majority as long as Belarus does not participate (60 out of a total of 110). Since the decisions are usually taken with a two-thirds majority, it does not translate into direct power over decision-making. However, the majority position of the EP could result *de facto* in a certain dominance of the EP in the Assembly.

The Assembly aims to serve a number of objectives. The overall aim is to accelerate the political and economic integration between the EU and the EaP. In addition, the EuroNest PA serves to enhance the EU-EaP cooperation in the four thematic areas, i.e. fundamental values, economic integration, energy, and culture and people-to-people contacts (EuroNest PA, 2013e, Art. 1). Below, we outline how the experiences of the past two years provide important lessons for improving the work of the EuroNest PA, especially for the upcoming EP from 2014 onwards.

How does it work?

The EuroNest PA consists of four main institutional components. First, the EuroNest PA elects a Bureau, both the EP and the EaP parliaments are represented as co-presidents and vice-presidents. The Bureau meets twice a year and plays a key coordinating role, both internally and externally. Internally, the Bureau drafts the agenda and procedures for plenary sessions of the EuroNest PA and authorises the thematic EuroNest PA Committees to draft, *inter alia*, reports, resolutions and recommendations. Externally, the Bureau is responsible for maintaining relations with other bodies and actors involved in the EaP, such as the EaP Summit, the ministerial conferences, the European Commission, the European External Action Service (EEAS), the officials in EaP multilateral platforms, ambassadors, and civil society organisations.

Second, the Bureau of the EuroNest PA decides on creating working groups for a certain period of time to deal with a specific aspect of the EaP or to send fact-finding missions to the EU or the EaP countries. The working groups continue functioning until the EuroNest PA decides otherwise (EuroNest PA, 2013e, Art. 27). A working group comprises ten members: one from each EaP country and five from the EP. Currently, the EuroNest PA has a working group on the Rules of Procedure and one focusing on Belarus (EuroNest PA, 2012a, p. 2). In the words of one EP official, the latter is a means to “compensate” for the absence of Belarusian delegation in the EuroNest PA (Interview B).

Third, for the purpose of examining important aspects related to the EaP, the EuroNest PA has set up four Standing Committees comprising a maximum of 30 members (15 members from the EP and 15 from partner countries) that thematically mirror the four platforms of the EaP multilateral framework: the Committee on Political Affairs, Human Rights and Democracy; the Committee on Economic Integration, Legal Approximation and Convergence with EU Policies; the Committee on Energy Security; and the Committee on Social Affairs, Education, Culture and Civil Society. The committees meet twice a year and take decisions by a two-thirds majority.

The fourth institutional component of EuroNest is the plenary assembly. The EuroNest PA conducts discussions and consultations, and adopts resolutions and recommendations concerning the EaP in general or on specific themes, according to its own rules of procedure (EuroNest PA, 2013e). Decisions are made by a two-thirds majority of the present members (EuroNest PA, 2013e). The EuroNest PA holds plenary sessions once a year with the location decided on the basis of rotation. Up to now, there have been three plenary meetings (see

below), with the fourth meeting scheduled to take place in Yerevan in November 2014.

The EuroNest PA has a scrutiny role over the EU ‘executive’, e.g. the EEAS and the Commission. This forum is therefore one of the main tools available to the EP and EaP countries’ parliaments to influence EU decision-making *vis-à-vis* the EaP (Kostanyan & Orbie, 2013). The members of the Assembly can submit written questions to the Council, the European Commission, the ministerial bodies of the EaP, and the rotating Presidency of the Council of the EU in charge of hosting the EaP Summit. The Bureau arranges public hearings with representatives from the relevant ‘executives’, and members of the EuroNest PA can put questions orally. Both written and oral questions are subject to the Bureau’s ruling on their admissibility. At the request of 20 members of the EuroNest PA, answers to oral questions may be followed by a debate (EuroNest PA, 2013e, Art. 22).

The setup of the EuroNest PA is comparable to other parliamentary assemblies of the EP with third countries’ parliaments, such as the Euro-Mediterranean Parliamentary Assembly (EMPA) and the EU-African, Caribbean and Pacific Countries (ACP) Joint Parliamentary Assembly. The main difference between the EMPA and the EuroNest PA is that EU member states’ national parliamentarians participate in the former but not in the latter. The structures and procedures of the EuroNest PA show a certain degree of norm transfer from the EP to the EaP countries’ parliaments: they reflect a ‘template’ of EU cooperation with third countries, impose a ‘way of doing things’ on the other parliaments, and familiarise these parliaments with European standards for multilateral cooperation. This does not mean that the EuroNest PA mirrors the institutional setup of the EP exactly: the EuroNest PA is much more limited in its structure and in the frequency of meetings, and the discussions are mostly ‘nationally’, not ideologically inspired, (see below).

The institutional setup and rules of procedure are not the only way in which the EP transfers its norms and values. When deciding which EaP countries are allowed to send a delegation, the EP has also managed to push through its point of view in the EuroNest PA. The EP maintained a strict stance when it refused an official delegation from Belarus to take part in the Assembly. This did not result in direct influence over Belarus, but it was an important signal to the countries that do participate. However, the application of this strategy does not remain without criticism – notably of its coherence and double standards (see recommendations; also Kostanyan & Vandecasteele, 2013). With this inclusion and exclusion technique, the EP tries to compensate for its lack of formal instruments to exert direct pressure on the EaP countries in the format of the EuroNest PA. Indeed, the EP does not have *carrots* (such as funds granted on the basis of conditionality) or *sticks* (such as the power to impose visa bans or economic sanctions). It applies the only reward/punishment strategy it has at its disposal; it confers status and legitimacy by allowing or refusing EaP parliaments the right to participate in the EuroNest PA.

EuroNest in action

Three plenary sessions of the EuroNest PA have taken place so far. After a difficult kick-off, the participants of the EuroNest PA were able to adopt a number of resolutions.

The first ordinary plenary session took place on 14-15 September 2011, in Strasbourg. The outcomes of this session were essentially only related internal procedures and appointments. Members of the EuroNest PA also discussed a number of draft resolutions, but the meeting was marred by a tense atmosphere and none of the planned resolutions were adopted (EuroNest PA, 2011b). There were disagreements between the EP and EaP representatives, but also

between the EaP countries, notably Armenia and Azerbaijan (Donskis, 2011; Tarasyuk, 2011). The main stumbling block was the difference in positions between the Azerbaijani and Armenian delegations on references to “right to self-determination” and “territorial integrity” with regard to Nagorno-Karabakh in the final statement. In addition, as a result of delays due to recounts, discussions and voting confusion, most MEPs left the meeting room in a hurry at the end of the two-day session since they had to attend a regular EP plenary (RFERL, 2011, 16 September).

In the early stages of the EuroNest cooperation, there was little indication that its members were moving toward their commonly stated goal, i.e. increasing dialogue and cooperation. The EP representatives could not convince their counterparts from the EaP to agree on a joint statement, and the delegations of the different parliaments did not consider themselves as belonging to one region, contrary to how the EP views the EaP initiative.

The problems experienced by the EuroNest PA at its constitutive meeting carried over to the second plenary on 4-5 April 2012. Since the session took place in Baku, Azerbaijan, the conflict between Armenian and Azerbaijani members of the Assembly were even more in evidence than in the first plenary. Moreover, the Azerbaijani government used the opportunity to promote its agenda and harangue Armenia, notably in statements made by Azerbaijan’s President (President of Azerbaijan, 2012). An EU official shared his frustration over the proceedings, which ran counter to a prior agreement:

“President Aliyev appeared at the plenary session of this EuroNest Parliamentary Assembly and used that forum for one-third of the time to criticise Armenia and the Government of Armenia on the issue of Nagorno-Karabakh. It was totally outside of the agenda. I mean, we

have to face those realities. [But] it was outside of the context." (Interview A).

However, unlike the first plenary that failed to pass any resolution and despite the tensions between Azerbaijani and Armenian deputies, the members of the EuroNest PA managed to pass five resolutions. Although the contents of the resolutions have been watered down in order to bring the largest possible number of deputies on board, they are important as the first substantive result that the EuroNest members produced together. The resolutions are on the future of democracy (EuroNest PA, 2012b); on trade agreements between the EU and the Eastern European Partners (EuroNest PA, 2012f); on energy security and renewables (EuroNest PA, 2012c); on strengthening civil society (EuroNest PA, 2012d); and on the situation of Yulia Tymoshenko (EuroNest PA, 2012e). The adoption of resolutions by the EuroNest PA indicates some progress in EU-EaP parliamentary cooperation.

The third ordinary session adopted resolutions on a number of other policy areas: regional security challenges (EuroNest PA, 2013d), approximation of national legislation in EaP countries with EU legislation in the economic field (EuroNest PA, 2013a), EU-EaP energy interconnections and harmonisation of the energy market (EuroNest PA, 2013c), and combating poverty and social exclusion in the EaP (EuroNest PA, 2013b).

Although four resolutions were adopted, the tense atmosphere and the divisions between EaP countries (Armenia and Azerbaijan)¹

¹ Armenia and Azerbaijan have been in conflict for more than two decades over Nagorno-Karabakh. More recently, the *Safarov case* added to the tension between the countries. Safarov is an Azeri soldier who killed an Armenian colleague by axe during NATO training in Budapest. Upon extradition to Azerbaijan, he was pardoned by the president and lauded as a national hero.

and between political parties in Ukraine² and Georgia³ were also prominent during the third plenary in Brussels. The MEP Gerben Jan Gebrandy (Democrats 66, the Netherlands, a member of ALDE in the EP) tweeted: "In bureau of #Euronest parliamentary [*sic*] assembly. Sensitive issues: Nagorno [*sic*], Tymoshenko, Merabishvili, Safarov, Abkhazia, South Ossetia" (<https://twitter.com/search?q=%23Euronest>).

Concluding remarks

Since the EuroNest's has been set up, some alignment of the EaP countries' parliaments with the EP's position can be detected. However, it was also clear that the real issues of concern for the EaP countries' delegates were related to their national and/or party agenda rather than to finding common ground with the EP or with each other. There are no indications that their agreement with the EP position reflects their genuine point of view. At best, it is a result of the Eastern partners' engaging in strategic calculation when participating in the EuroNest PA. They obtain a higher status by participating in this multilateral setting and, perhaps more importantly, they are provided with a forum for expressing their positions, which they otherwise would not have. In exchange, they endorse resolutions that promote values and norms usually held by the EP. Since these resolutions do not involve strong commitments to

² The imprisonment of Tymoshenko and other former ministers in Ukraine has led to fierce disagreements among different political parties in Ukraine.

³ In addition to the already strong tensions between the parties of Georgian President Saakashvili and of Prime Minister Ivanishvili, the arrest of Merabishvili, an ally of Saakashvili and former minister and MP, has sparked even more criticism. It was viewed by some as a political persecution of a representative of the previous government.

implementation, the costs for the EaP parliaments of supporting these values are rather low. Therefore, we argue that, up until now, a genuine dialogue between the EP and EaP countries' parliaments has not taken place.

Recommendations

1. The EP's application of inclusion and exclusion techniques as leverage on the EaP parliaments has been perceived as inconsistent and based on double standards. An EP official admits that many members of the EuroNest PA question the current arrangement, suggesting that democracy is not the only criterion for allowing/refusing delegations: "If Belarus is not in, why is Azerbaijan there? Are Azerbaijan's democratic credentials better than [those of] Belarus?" (Interview B). The EP therefore should aim to establish more concrete and transparent conditions under which national parliaments can be represented. Otherwise, the existing incoherence will continue to harm the legitimacy of the process.

2. The EP should organise larger meetings more frequently for the Committees that do most of the substantive work. Currently, there are only two one-day meetings per year. This could be increased to three sessions lasting two days, allowing for more frequent and sustained contacts, which may increase the likelihood of constructive dialogue. The EuroNest Bureau, which has a central role in finding consensus among the members of the Assembly, could also increase the number of its meetings from two to four.

3. In order to increase the visibility and possible impact on EuroNest, the Assembly's plenary meetings could be matched with the planning of the EaP summits every other year and to the ministerial meetings the following year. In the current setup, the resolutions produced by the EuroNest PA could be outdated by

the time of the subsequent summit and/or the ministerial meeting. Better planning of the meeting dates would allow the EuroNest PA to make up-to-date recommendations to the high-level intergovernmental bodies of the EaP, thus becoming more policy relevant.

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