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Commissioner for External Relations and European Neighbourhood Policy  
Eastern Partnership  
Plenary Debate, European Parliament  
Strasbourg, 12 March 2009

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Honourable Members,

I am glad to have this opportunity for a timely debate on the Eastern Partnership; a flagship of the Union's foreign policy.

Its strategic rationale is clear: more security, stability and prosperity in our Eastern neighbourhood.

The conflict in Georgia and the gas crisis in Ukraine are just two examples of the periodic crises and instability affecting this region. These have had a direct impact on the Union and its citizens.

To these two crises we now have to add the financial crisis which hits our Eastern neighbourhood particularly hard. While each crisis requires its own immediate response, we also have to provide medium- and long term action to prevent new problems from arising.

In addition to these immediate issues, our Eastern neighbours all want stronger links with the EU, albeit to varying degrees.

And they also need reinforced help to consolidate their democratic institutions, statehood and the rule of law.

Honourable Members,

The EU can and must respond to these challenges!

The EaP is our political answer. Increasing our support for reforms and helping our partners to align with the EU acquis will help stabilise our Eastern neighbours.

On 3 December, the Commission put forward an ambitious Communication on the EaP. It built on prior ideas by our Czech, Polish and Swedish friends. And it built on many of the European Parliament's suggestions; including deep free trade agreements, more mobility of people and greater funding.

As part of the EaP, we also proposed upgrading our political relationships through Association Agreements with each partner - once they fulfil the relevant political reform criteria.

We proposed measures to enhance cooperation on energy security, and, importantly, increased support for economic and social development, to address the imbalances within countries that are so often a de-stabilising force.

We also recommended setting up a multilateral framework for EaP with four thematic cooperation platforms (democracy, good governance and stability; economic integration and convergence with EU policies; energy security; and contacts between people).

We suggested making the European Parliament's 'EuroNest' initiative an integral part of the EaP, and setting up an EaP "Parliamentary Troika" for the EP, OSCE and Council of Europe.

To implement all of these proposals and step up support for internal reforms, the Commission asked for €350 million additional funds over four years.

That is only 3.1% of the total ENPI envelope and, for example, much less than the additional allocations to the Occupied Palestinian Territories in 2007-2009 alone.

In short: This is not an excessive sum. It is a necessary investment in our long-term security.

I know some of you would like to do even more for our Eastern partners. You have said that the Commission proposals do not go far enough or fast enough, particularly for the mobility of people.

But other voices have said the opposite.

We need to strike the right balance between ambition and realism. And we need to move fast.

I am glad that we all share the goal of bringing our Eastern partners gradually closer to the Union and tackling the threats to their stability.

The Eastern Partnership is a key tool to accomplish that.

I hope today's debate sends a strong signal to the 27 Member States in the run-up to next week's European Council, and in preparation for the Eastern Partnership Summit on 7 May.

The EaP goes to the very heart of the challenges we face today. It is in the EU's direct strategic interest. A new security crisis in our Eastern neighbourhood would have implications not only for our neighbours but for the whole EU and its citizens.

I am therefore grateful for your support to the EaP and look forward to working with you in its implementation.