ON June 4, 1989, Poland enjoyed the first partially free parliamentary elections, which paved the way to the fall of Communism in what was then the Eastern Block. The elections were preceded by the Round Table Talks between the opposition and the government, which engaged representatives from two very different political camps. Nevertheless, many of the participants of those historic talks had something important in common—they shared experiences gained through academic exchange programs offered by Western countries, such as the Fulbright Program. Even during the coldest periods of the Cold War, these programs remained a lifeline for the exchange of ideas among young scholars. Although the direct influence of these experiences is hard to gauge, it is quite telling that many of the individuals involved in the profound political changes that swept through Central and Eastern Europe in 1989 and 1990 were alumni of such programs.

Twenty years later, Poland and other former countries of the Eastern Block are in a completely different political and economic setting. Poland, along with ten other countries, joined the European Union in 2004. Bulgaria and Romania followed suit in 2007. Programs providing opportunities for academic and scientific exchange, both transatlantic and within Europe, are stronger than ever. Every year some 1.5 million European students and scholars visit partner institutions across the EU.
and the United States. East of the EU, however, there are six countries—Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Moldova, Georgia, and Ukraine—that gained independence after the fall of the Soviet Union but did not join their western neighbors in participating in European integration. Also, until now, their intellectual elites, members of academic and research communities, have not become a part of the expanding European and transatlantic market of knowledge, skills, and ideas. At the same time some of those countries, most notably Belarus, have succumbed to authoritarian regimes and are becoming extremely difficult partners for political dialogue.

In many respects, history may repeat itself. Once again, communication in the form of scientific and academic exchange may facilitate otherwise difficult contacts and help grow grassroots efforts in civil societies. The virtues of such collaboration are manifold. By definition, scientific enquiry is based on a commonly accepted foundation of mutual trust and honest criticism, which is the essence of the peer review process. While this process is far removed from political connotations, it creates a climate for building open, democratic societies. Furthermore, many major scientific—but also socially important—issues, such as the loss of habitats and biodiversity, epidemiologic threats and others, do not respect national boundaries. Therefore, they can only be solved through international collaboration.

The idea of inviting Eastern neighbors of the EU to join in scientific and academic collaboration is not a new one, and from the very beginning it has been envisaged as a component of the EU initiative called the Eastern Partnership Program (EaP). In a nutshell, EaP aims to “advance the cause of democracy, [and] strengthen stability and prosperity, bringing lasting and palpable benefits to citizens of all participating states,” as stated in the Joint Declaration signed by representatives of the EU and six countries invited to join the EaP in spring 2009. The Declaration also states that the EaP would seek “to support political and socio-economic reforms, facilitating approximation and convergence towards the European Union.” Apart from political declarations, the EaP also offers new financial resources to the six EaP countries. The European Commission earmarked some €1.2 billion for the period 2011-2013 for cooperation between EU and the EaP countries. If partly allocated to programs related to science and academic policy, such resources will certainly be sufficient to establish strong science and technology and academic exchange collaboration.

The need for cooperation and policy dialogue under the EaP on education and research has been confirmed in September 2011 during the EaP Summit held in Warsaw, Poland. Broadening and opening European mobility programs for countries invited to the EaP will require additional funding in the upcoming EU budget for the period 2014-2020. In particular, it is extremely important to invite EaP countries to the flagship EU Program, Horizon 2020—the follow-up to the previous seven EU Framework Programs that fund research and innovation.

Meanwhile, however, the only major EU exchange program that is being considered for opening to participants from EaP countries is the Erasmus scheme.
Since its initiation in 1987, almost 2.2 million students have participated in this program, engaging more than four thousand higher education institutions from thirty-three countries (the twenty-seven EU Member States, Croatia, Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway, and Turkey. Switzerland became the thirty-third country to join Erasmus in 2011). The European Commission expects the number of students to increase to 3 million by 2013. This would include five hundred additional slots in the Erasmus Mundus program for students from the Eastern Partnership, which is currently under consideration. “We should all admit that contacts established amongst students influence the implementation of our policies,” noted Jan Truszczyński, Director-General of the European Commission’s Directorate-General for Education and Culture, during the conference Go East Erasmus recently held in Białystok, Poland, located just twenty-five miles west of Polish-Belarusian border. The Białystok conference, organized under the auspices of the Polish Presidency of the EU Council, attracted representatives from Austria, the Czech Republic, Lithuania, Latvia, Denmark, Ireland, Holland, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Moldova. “I am convinced the time has come to launch a discussion on the more extensive inclusion of the Eastern Partnership countries in the European Union’s mobility programs,” noted Barbara Kudrycka, Polish Minister of Science and Higher Education, in her opening remarks. These sentiments resonated throughout discussions held later during the 2011 EaP Summit in Warsaw.

For the time being, however, the concrete possibilities of international scientific and academic exchange available to EaP countries still remain largely unused. For geographical, social, and historical reasons, most of them engage Polish institutions of research and higher education. Poland shares a long border with Belarus and Ukraine, which is now also an eastern EU border. However, until World War II, large western parts of both countries belonged to the Polish state. After World War II, borders moved considerably westwards, but there are still strong Belarusian and Ukrainian minorities living in Poland and serving as a bridge between the states.

All this predisposes Poland to become a natural driver of promotion of science policy towards its eastern neighbors. Perhaps there is no better location than the small town of Bialowieża, where the need and potential for cooperation can be seen first-hand. Bialowieża is in the heart of the Bialowieża Primeval Forest—the remaining 200-square-kilometer patch of untouched woodlands, which centuries ago covered central Europe. Protected by Polish kings as their hunting ground, it escaped logging and replanting and boasts the wealth of old tree stands and hundreds of animal species rarely seen elsewhere. The most famous species is the European bison, brought from the brink of extinction in Bialowieża in the 1930s from a herd of just a dozen bison collected from zoological parks.

Despite the turbulent history of the region, restoration of European bison has become one of the greatest success stories of animal conservation. After World War II, the Bialowieża Primeval Forest remained separated by the political border,
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with two-thirds of the area on the Belarusian side. Furthermore, in 1981, a year marked by the introduction of martial law in Poland, the Soviet Union reinforced the border with a high, impenetrable fence. The fence was meant to fend off any human intrusion, but it also separated free-ranging Polish and Belarusian bison populations. Under such difficult circumstances, survival of European bison totally hinged on a close collaboration between Polish and Belarusian researchers, and remains such to this day, despite otherwise uneasy political relations between two countries.

The need for protection of a “flagship” species, such as European bison, has attracted a lot of public attention and has repeatedly proved an effective facilitator of trans-border collaboration. It has been well appreciated and funded under successive EU framework programs, which allowed for continuous training, exchange of staff, and trans-border application of research techniques, such as tracking bison fitted with radio transmitters. Research projects carried out at the Mammal Research Institute, Polish Academy of Sciences in Bialowieża (MRI PAS), have catalyzed collaboration not only between Polish and Belarusian researchers but through a wide network involving European and American partners, thus exposing institutions from EaP countries to a truly international scientific environment. Conservation research has also greatly facilitated collaboration reaching far beyond scientific issues. For example, the EU-funded project Land of the Bison, spearheaded by MRI PAS, covers not only matters related to management of wild European bison herds, but also development and implementation of the best environmentally-relevant governmental practices at the local level.

MRI PAS is a prominent example of a research institution heavily involved in a solid, trans-border collaboration with EaP countries. It is important to note, however, that along both sides of the eastern EU border there are many more academic and scientific centers located in major cities, such as Białystok, Grodno, Brest, Minsk, Lublin, and Lviv, that present still largely unused potential for effective academic and scientific collaboration. Some Polish institutions, most notably the University of Białystok and the University of Marie Skłodowska-Curie in Lublin, have already undertaken the effort to create specialized institutes of Eastern studies, focused on Eastern European countries, particularly Belarus and Ukraine. The institutes are intended to be multi-disciplinary hubs of international collaboration between scholars from EaP countries and elsewhere, particularly the EU and the United States. For students from EaP countries, they will offer programs on trans-border relations and orientation training, predisposing them to venture to other collaborating institutions.

The above projects, and any other initiatives for successful engagement of EaP countries in scientific and academic collaboration, clearly hinge on the creation of an easily accessible and transparent system of funding. Even though declarations for a substantial increase of funding within EU programs look very promising, for the time being, there are few solid offers. It is difficult for EaP countries to participate
directly in EU grants due to extremely formalized rules and often difficult-to-meet fixed schemes concerning the distribution of funds. To be effective towards EaP partners, EU programs must become less bureaucratic and more flexible. Perhaps the way to go is to create smaller funding instruments, customized to the needs of the recipient communities from EaP countries. The EU may be already on the right track in this regard by establishing a European Endowment for Democracy, a new initiative endorsed by EU member states in June 2011.

Meanwhile, however, scholars and students from EaP countries can only count on a few available funding schemes. Applicants from EaP countries are eligible for the Lane Kirkland Scholarship Program funded by the Polish-American Freedom Foundation and administered by the Polish-U.S. Fulbright Commission. This program includes two semesters of study at Polish universities and two- to four-week professional internships in public and private institutions. It is mainly provided to those interested in administration, management, or social studies. Similar Polish schemes of a scale of up to twenty participants are offered by the Mianowski Funds, sponsored through the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The Kalinowski Fund, created by the Polish government in 2006, supports the largest number of students, sixty to seventy a year, mostly from Belarus. There are similar programs facilitating foreign study in Estonia, Ukraine, and the Czech Republic.

Undoubtedly, larger involvement of the United States would be a very positive development. It could start with an extension of the Edmund S. Muskie Fellowship and by extending the highly successful Fulbright Program to undergraduates and graduates from the most needy EaP countries, particularly Belarus. There is also a great potential for multilateral Polish-U.S.-EaP academic and research programs that could engage American institutions specializing in Eastern European studies. Likewise, there is ample opportunity for collaboration in research, for example on environmental and energy security issues, which would attract attention from U.S. partners. Perhaps the network of European Union Centers of Excellence, located at ten prominent U.S. universities and founded by the Delegation of the European Union to the United States, is best suited for engagement in activities with EaP countries.

It must be kept in mind, however, that insufficient availability of exchange programs is not the only obstacle slowing the pace of the development of collaboration with EaP countries. The critical condition for the success of any collaboration is the existence of a genuine, common interest. This must still be reinvigorated, as exemplified by the difficulties with using all the resources allocated by the Polish Academy of Sciences towards collaboration with EaP partners. For understandable reasons, Polish researchers primarily seek collaboration with the strongest EU and American counterparts, which, despite financial incentives, leaves little interest in seeking collaboration east of Poland. On the other hand, many researchers from EaP countries remain discouraged by the demands of the peer review process or expensive and protracted procedures to acquire a visa to enter the EU or the United
States. Thus, the prospect of collaborating with Western partners is not always as obvious to them as one might think. At the same time, many research institutions in EaP countries keep close ties with their Russian counterparts, which—unlike collaboration with the West—does not pose cultural and formal barriers. For all these reasons, invitation to collaboration must start with expression of interest on the part of the EU and the United States rather than EaP partners.

In summary, the need for integration of EaP countries into an international system of academic and research collaboration has already received a lot of recognition at the political level. This recognition must be translated into concrete offers of attractive and easily accessible exchange programs, which help to bring research and higher education of the EaP countries into line with EU standards. However, the success of this endeavor depends on effective identification of areas of common interest and capable institutions. The concerted international initiatives by the EU and the United States can create professional relationships that could play a vital role not only bolstering the academic systems of EaP countries, but also helping guide them toward a more prosperous, democratic future.