

European Neighborhood

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

THE ONLY WAY TO BENEFIT FROM THE ASSOCIATION AGREEMENT IS TO ENSURE ITS SUCCESSFUL IMPLEMENTATION	3
<i>Interview with Amb. Kostiantyn Yelisieiev, Deputy Head of the Administration of the President of Ukraine</i>	
THE EASTERN PARTNERSHIP AT THE TURN OF ITS TENTH ANNIVERSARY: WHERE HAVE WE COME SINCE PRAGUE, AND WHERE TO GO NEXT?	7
<i>Pavel Havlicek</i>	
TEN-POINT MEMO ON THE REVISED EASTERN PARTNERSHIP MULTILATERAL ARCHITECTURE	14
<i>Hennadiy Maksak</i>	
EASTERN PARTNERSHIP: WHAT OPTIONS OF DEVELOPMENT ARE NEXT FOR UKRAINE?.....	19
<i>Oksana Dobrzhanska</i>	
EAP-EU ECONOMIC INTEGRATION: WHAT IS NEXT?	25
<i>Yurii Vdovenko</i>	
ADVANCING THE REFORM AGENDA WITHIN THE EU ASSOCIATION AGREEMENTS: COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF MOLDOVA, GEORGIA, AND UKRAINE ON THE ROLE OF CIVIL SOCIETY	33
<i>Andrei Iovu</i>	
THE EU TOWARDS RUSSIA IN THE EASTERN NEIGHBOURHOOD - MISSING THE STRATEGIC VISION.....	41
<i>Loredana Maria Simionov</i>	
WHY BELARUS HAS A DISTINCTIVE POSITION IN THE ENP.....	46
<i>Fatih Ekinici</i>	
EU-NATO COOPERATION: IS PESCO THE ANSWER TO THE BALANCE OF EU'S REGIONAL PRIORITIES?	55
<i>Alexandru C. Apetroe and Daniel Gheorghe</i>	

THE EASTERN PARTNERSHIP AT THE TURN OF ITS TENTH ANNIVERSARY: WHERE HAVE WE COME SINCE PRAGUE, AND WHERE TO GO NEXT?

Pavel Havlicek

Association for International Affairs in Prague

In November 2017, Brussels hosted the fifth summit of the Eastern Partnership (EaP) since its emergence in 2009 in Prague. Over the last nine years, the EU's Eastern policy has gone through ups and downs and recently resulted in another meeting of heads of states from the EU and EaP countries in the Belgian capital. The Brussels summit, as well as the policy itself, set off with high expectations, which were – for many – not met by the final declaration. Despite that, the Eastern Partnership has made a considerable progress and it is far from being doomed or forgotten at the turn of its tenth anniversary.

From Prague to Brussels

In May 2009, it was the then Czech EU presidency that together with Poland and Sweden as well as a coalition of like-minded EU member states brought the initiative for Eastern Europe to life after a similar French initiative for the Mediterranean region. The then Eastern Partnership emerged as a counterweight to the Union for the Mediterranean with the aim of differentiating between 'European neighbours' and 'neighbours of Europe', as famously delineated by the former Polish foreign minister Radek Sikorski. This push against the 'one-size-fits-all' approach represented by the European Neighbourhood Policy was strongly advocated by the EU member states from Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), which naturally have closer connections with their neighbours to the east. This informal group of 'friends of the Eastern Partnership' argued in favour of closer bilateral relations between the EU and EaP

countries, embodied in the Association Agreements (AAs), including the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreements (DCFTAs), and visa-free regimes that stood at the core of the policy since its beginning together with the multilateral framework of cooperation symbolised by biannual summits of heads of states.

The 2013 Vilnius Summit represented a breakthrough for the EU's Eastern policy, when Georgia and Moldova initiated their AAs, despite Ukraine refusing to sign the document, which later led to the turbulent events known as EuroMaidan (or the 'Revolution of Dignity' in the Ukrainian context). Due to the consequent illegal annexation by Russia of Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula and the City of Sevastopol and aggression in the east of Ukraine, Eastern Europe was dragged into chaos and instability which persist until today. However, in the meantime, Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova were able

to successfully conclude their AAs, DCFTAs, and visa-free regimes, which came into force only recently.¹ Therefore, the six countries of the Eastern Partnership were effectively divided into smaller groups of associated states (Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova), members of the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union (Belarus and Armenia), and Azerbaijan pursuing its own path of special relations with the EU (and Russia as well). This multispeed character of the EaP and principle of differentiation were further confirmed by the Brussels summit.²



an upward tendency to 'EaP-fatigue' accompanied by pro-Russian sentiments of some of the EU member states can be observed, which does not help to move the mutual relations forward

Current State of Play

The current state of the debate on the Eastern Partnership and its future can be best described with reference to negotiations surrounding the Brussels summit and its final declaration. Even if the informal group of 'friends of the Eastern Partnership' – including the Visegrad states – still exists, it is now less actively advocating closer relations between the EU and partner countries, unlike the European Parliament, which holds the most ambitious position towards the

Eastern Partnership. The reason for that is the expectation of concrete measures especially from the associated countries that have concluded their AAs and DCFTAs requiring a number of reforms in political, economic, and social spheres. In addition to that, an upward tendency to 'EaP-fatigue' accompanied by pro-Russian sentiments of some of the EU member states can be observed, which does not help to move the mutual relations forward. The Netherlands can be considered as a vivid example of a state seriously complicating the EU-Ukraine relations after the non-binding referendum in April 2015, in which Dutch voters by a small margin refused the AA with Ukraine.³

Furthermore, the situation is even more complicated in the partner countries themselves. The three associated countries have their own deep structural problems stemming from the character of their regimes and ruling elites as well as complicated domestic transformations into fully-fledged liberal democracies with established rule of law and free markets. In the most significant case of Ukraine, these include a never-ending struggle against corruption, pressure on civil society and journalists, and the tightening grip of the ruling clan of President Poroshenko at the expense of democracy and the rule of law.

Georgia, as the most advanced country of the region in terms of its reform process, suffers from a power consolidation by the Georgian Dream led by Bidzina Ivanishvili and partisanship, problems with the rule of law, and limited freedom of media. Finally, Moldova – the former EaP front-

¹ The association agreement between the EU and Ukraine came into force on 01 September 2017 and visa-free regimes for Ukraine and Georgia only in June 2017.

² *Joint Declaration of the Eastern Partnership Summit*, General Secretariat of the Council Delegations, 2017 [<http://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/31758/final-statementst14821en17.pdf> access: 30 November 2017].

³ A. Rettman, *EU Counter-propaganda 'Harms' Relations, Russia Says*, "EU Observer", 22 November 2017, [<https://euobserver.com/foreign/139974> access: 30 November 2017].

runner – faces a domestic state capture by Vladimir Plahotniuc and his ‘family’, and, stemming from that, a serious problem with the rule of law and principles of democracy.⁴ The three other partner countries have their own limitations in relations with the EU given by their (geo) political choices. In any case, both Belarus and Azerbaijan have serious issues with democracy, rule of law, freedom of speech, or civil society, which are under pressure from the state authorities,⁵ while Armenia is currently going through turbulent post-revolutionary developments and transition of power to the new government led by Nikol Pashinyan.

Based on all of this, some of the EU member states feel tired of the complicated situation in Eastern Europe, including Russian aggression in the shared neighbourhood and troublesome domestic situations in most of the partner countries. Therefore, these states refused to explicitly recognise the European perspective for the associated countries, while others pushed for recognition of specific Russian interests in Eastern Europe and promoted stronger cooperation with Russia and its Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). Also, the next tranches of macro-financial support for Moldova are now put on hold due to unfulfilled EU requirements. Due to these facts, the Brussels declaration is less ambitious in its wording than the previous final document from the EaP conference in Riga two years ago.

The Brussels Declaration

Even if heavily criticised for its content,⁶ the final declaration from the fifth summit of the EaP can be assessed as innovative in several aspects. First of all, it is shorter and more consistent in its content than some of the previous EaP declarations (e.g. from Vilnius 2013).⁷ One could even use the word ‘realistic’ in that it seeks to deliver concrete outcomes for the citizens of the EU’s Eastern neighbourhood, symbolised by 20 Deliverables 2020 worked out by the European Commission in advance in December 2016 as part of the review of the European Neighbourhood Policy. Second, the summit and its final declaration did not primarily concentrate on big strategic goals, but rather on smaller, achievable pragmatic goals, possibly with the exception of the Comprehensive and Enhanced Agreement with Armenia (CEPA).⁸ The honest discussion – supposedly for the first time – was also commended by the Commission’s President Juncker as a move towards a more sincere dialogue between the EU and its Eastern partners.

Last but not least, even if the final wording was for many not so ambitious due to opposition from certain member states (e.g. the Netherlands), the most important aspects describing the current situation in Eastern Europe were captured starting with the conflict in eastern Ukraine (“continued violations of principles of international

⁴ *Moldovan Court Annuls Chisinau Mayoral Election Results*, “RFE/RL”, 20 June 2018, [https://www.rferl.org/a/moldovan-court-annuls-chisinau-mayoral-election-results/29305971.html access: 01 July 2018].

⁵ S. Blockmans, *The EU’s Half-hearted Ostpolitik*, “EU Observer”, 22 November 2017, [https://euobserver.com/opinion/139968 access: 02 December 2017].

⁶ I. Bond, *Eastern Partners, Eastern Problems*, “EU Observer”, 23 November 2017, [https://euobserver.com/opinion/139990 access: 01 December 2017].

⁷ D. Cenușa, *Future of EaP and Moldova Following Brussels Declaration – Between Pragmatism and Local Realities*, “IPN”, 27 November 2017, [http://ipn.md/en/integrare-europeana/87845 access: 05 December 2017].

⁸ I. Merheim-Eyre, K. Sobieraj, *A Low-key Eastern Partnership Summit*, “Euractiv”, 23 November 2017, [http://www.euractiv.com/section/europe-s-east/opinion/a-low-key-eastern-partnership-summit/ access: 07 December 2017].



Czech diplomacy sometimes lacks time and energy to consolidate its strategic position on the Eastern Partnership

law”) and on to the future closer relations among the three associated partners (Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova) with the European Union (“the European aspirations and European choice”).⁹ In addition, the commentary of the European Council’s president Donald Tusk during the final press conference illustrated the position of those who are well aware of the Russian aggression against Ukraine and could imagine a more ambitious text.¹⁰

The EU’s Innovative Approach

The Council was not the only one to articulate its position on the future of the Eastern Partnership. The European Parliament as well as the EaP Civil Society Forum clearly expressed their strategic visions too.¹¹ As usual, the European Parliament suggested a more ambitious plan, especially for the associated countries, than was finally agreed upon by the heads of states of the EU and EaP. However, this does not mean that the parliament’s main ideas – the concept of ‘EaP+’ for associated countries, a European investment plan for Ukraine (Georgia and Moldova, respectively), further integration of

associated countries into the Single Market and Schengen Zone, or cancelling roaming for EaP countries – would be forgotten. On the contrary, these ideas are going to remain as proposals for the future.

Therefore, it is incorrect to say that the Eastern Partnership is doomed to failure, or even disappearance in the years to come, as claimed by some.¹² In fact, it is more justifiable to claim that the policy as of today needs stronger political impetus to further promote closer cooperation and create momentum for the EaP countries and their reform processes based on their AAs and DCFTAs. This can be illustrated by the EU’s approach to Armenia, showing political will and a relatively flexible stance in the Eastern neighbourhood, which might be – under certain conditions – complementary with Russia’s EAEU. In the end, this can advance the EU’s original goal and turn the ‘Ring of Friends on Fire’ into a more secure, stable, and prosperous neighbourhood.

Roles of Czechia and Visegrad

The Czech position in this year’s negotiations can be generally described as pragmatic. Unlike that of some of the ‘friends of the Eastern Partnership’ (e.g. Sweden), Czech diplomacy did not focus on one specific issue, which it would push through the negotiating process. Rather, it concentrated on minimizing the harm caused by more ‘EaP-hesitant’ member states. Moreover, some EU

⁹ N. Koval, *Стійкість, стабільність, стагнація – три “с” Східного партнерства (Stability, Stability, Stagnation – Three “S” of the Eastern Partnership)*, “Ukrainian Prism – Foreign Policy Council”, 02 December 2017, [<http://prismua.org/stability-stability-stagnation-three-s-eastern-partnership/> access: 06 December 2017].

¹⁰ D. M. Herszenhorn, J. Barigazzi, *Russia Casts Shadow over EU’s Eastern Summit*, “Politico Europe”, 28 November 2017, [<https://www.politico.eu/article/russia-casts-shadow-over-eus-eastern-summit-donald-tusk-crimea-ukraine/> access: 07 December 2017].

¹¹ *Tangible Results for People: Envisioning the Eastern Partnership in 2020 and Beyond*, Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum, 2017 [http://eap-csf.eu/wp-content/uploads/Civil-SocietyDeclaration_EN-1.pdf access: 04 December 2017].

¹² A. Aslund, *Does the EU Even Care about Eastern Europe Anymore?*, “Atlantic Council”, 27 November 2017 [<http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/does-the-eu-even-care-about-eastern-europe-anymore> access: 08 December 2017].

members pushed their own foreign policy priorities and national interests regardless of the context of Russian behaviour, or the political and/or socio-economic situation in the partner countries. Instead, Czechia kept a low profile and sometimes opted for mediating among various camps. From a critical perspective, this approach can be seen as lacking its own strategic vision, or simply unable to articulate its priorities in the negotiations.¹³ It seems clear that Czech diplomacy sometimes lacks time and energy to consolidate its strategic position on the Eastern Partnership. Therefore, it often restricts itself to support of the status quo and damage control – vis-à-vis EU member states promoting stronger cooperation between the EaP and Russia/EAEU. This way, Czechia is slowly but surely losing diplomatic visibility in its traditional domain and declared foreign policy priority, unlike Poland and Sweden, who before the Brussels Summit advocated the importance of the policy on which Czechia largely resigned.

The Visegrad Group's state of play on the Eastern Partnership today lies in dissonance and differing views of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict, especially as seen from Budapest, Bratislava, and Prague. For a long time, Poland had the leading position in the pro-EaP camp; however, this situation has changed due to bilateral conflicts with Ukraine, which started after the Polish government of Law and Justice came to power in October 2015 and opened painful historical debates with Kyiv.

The current Hungarian diplomatic offensive against Ukraine related to educational law, including promotion of the Ukrainian

language in the educational system, is another case in point. Nevertheless, in the past, these were the Visegrad Group countries that successfully negotiated the launching of the Eastern Partnership and significantly contributed to its development not only through keeping the policy high on the EU's agenda during their EU presidencies but in several other ways as well.

In 2011, for example, V4 launched a programme called 'V4EaP' that aims at supporting contacts within academia, civil society, but also with democracy and human rights advocates in the partner countries. The Visegrad Group also played an important role in political, economic, and social transformations of the EaP and engaged in the region through their development and humanitarian programmes. Moreover, the yearly meetings between V4 and EaP foreign ministers contribute to information sharing and policy coordination as well as keeping a high visibility of the policy by inviting EU officials involved in the EaP agenda. Finally, after 2015, the 'V4 Road Show' has supported Ukraine's transformation and reform process in sectoral agendas.

However, other initiatives stayed mostly on paper due to a general lack of political will and the diverging position of Visegrad on the Russo-Ukrainian conflict, which led to a paralysis of real action and tensions in regional cooperation. This is highly surprising taking into consideration that Ukraine borders three out of the four Visegrad members, whose national and security interests were violated by the Russian aggressive behaviour in Crimea as well as in eastern Ukraine.

¹³ R. Kot, #Зрада или #Перемогa: итоги саммита Восточного партнерства для Украины (*Betrayal or Victory: Outcomes of the Summit of the Eastern Partnership for Ukraine*), "Crimean News Agency", 30 November 2017, [http://qha.com.ua/ru/analitika/zrada-ili-peremoga-itogi-sammitya-vostochnogo-partnerstva-dlyaukraini/183296/ access: 08 December 2017].

¹⁴ M. Wallstroem, W. Waszczykowski, *EU's Eastern Partnership Needs Revival*, "EU Observer", 14 November 2017, [https://euobserver.com/opinion/139856 access: 18 November 2017].

What Can Be Done?

Due to the EU's pragmatic approach towards the partner countries, their citizens are finally in the core of the policy focused more on people-to-people contacts or enhancing living standards in the Eastern neighbourhood.¹⁵ Pragmatism and honest discussion delivering concrete and new solutions should be welcomed and encouraged within the Eastern Partnership in the future. This is especially true for the implementation of the AA agenda with the three associated countries of the European Union – Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova. However, this flexibility and pragmatism cannot come at the expense of EU values and basic principles,



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such as democracy, human rights, or rule of law, as was previously condemned by the EaP Civil Society Forum,¹⁶ because no explicit goal aiming at human rights or promotion of democracy was included in the Commission's plan for Deliverables 2020. Putting less emphasis on the EU values would only mean losing guidance for the EU's behaviour in its Eastern neighbourhood, which could harm the Union's reputation, as has already happened in Moldova, where a rhetorically pro-European government was after 2009 well-known for its corruption and misuse of power.

The EU cannot afford to gamble with its basic values and principles, as all its steps are carefully being observed from the autocratic regimes around Eurasia, desperately waiting for compromises in the above-mentioned areas, which would be immediately abused in the domestic realms. The EU can hope to combine its pragmatic approach to the Eastern Partnership with maintaining its own credibility and requiring partner countries to deliver on reform actions, thus giving the policy a new impetus in the years to come.

Therefore, what is really needed is not only the goal-driven agenda but also real and measurable progress on the ground going beyond rhetoric and 'shiny' infographics. In concrete terms, clear timetables of reform steps, setting ambitious targets, and adjusting the agenda to concrete reality on the ground should be applied to Deliverables 2020 to maximise the impact of this reform agenda. The negotiations between the European Commission and individual EaP countries should be also made as transparent as possible to involve public oversight and avoid compromises on EU values and principles, especially in association with the current EU talks with Azerbaijan on the 'Strategic Modernisation Partnership Agreement'.

The Visegrad countries can play an important role in this process and keep the policy high on the EU's agenda, promoting new initiatives in favour of closer cooperation with the partner countries to achieve stability, security, and prosperity in the Eastern neighbourhood. The best way to achieve that is through the support

¹⁵ B. Jarábik, D. Šukyté, *Eight Years of Eastern Partnership: Hidden in the Trenches*, "New Eastern Europe", 23 November 2017, [<http://neweasterneurope.eu/2017/11/23/eight-years-eastern-partnership-hidden-trenches/> access: 30 November 2017].

¹⁶ *Joint Staff Working Document EaP – Focusing on Key Priorities and Deliverables – Assessment and Recommendations by the Civil Society*, Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum, 2017 [http://eapcsf.eu/wp-content/uploads/EaP-CSF-Policy-Brief_2020-deliverables.pdf access: 01 November 2017].

of like-minded civil society groups as well as advocacy of Euro-Atlantic integration, which has been chosen in several countries of the neighbourhood – respectively Ukraine and Georgia – as the vector of their foreign policy orientation. The EU membership perspective – particularly for the associated countries of the EU – should be never completely off the table, even if it represents the light at the end of the tunnel.

In addition, the ‘friends of the Eastern Partnership’ should actively engage in the partner countries and explain their complex situation of political, economic, and social transitions to the rest of the EU. Ukraine is the best example where the CEE states can have a positive role following the case of Lithuania and the investment plan for Ukraine originally proposed by Lithuanian politicians and later endorsed by the European Parliament.¹⁷

In order to do so, the V4 should return to its traditional role of supporter of the Eastern Partnership policy as well as democratisation and human rights that are slipping away from the EU’s attention as well as being focused on delivering concrete results, no matter how difficult this might look today. The Visegrad Group should again become a major player in this field and not back off from the support of Euro-Atlantic integration of the EaP countries, which might be beneficial not only for its more positive label of a constructive actor within EU decision-making but also for V4’s national and security interests. The European Parliament can be a valuable ally in this effort.

Nonetheless, the V4 must first stop its own ongoing fragmentation, caused by pursuing unilateral national decisions and

megaphone diplomacy, instead of stronger coordination and mutual cooperation. Otherwise, it can open the door to more pro-Russian EU member states that follow the line of cooperation and ‘normalisation’ of relations with Russia at any expense.

The same is true for the new Czech government, which has to decide if it wants to invest in the Eastern Partnership or just continue with the rhetorical support to this declared priority of Czech foreign policy. This question is even more relevant since the EU’s Eastern policy is going to celebrate its ten-year anniversary. Therefore, the Czech diplomacy should pay closer political attention to the agenda and aspire to become the leader in this policy field again. One way to do that is to have the ambition to conduct the future summit of the Eastern Partnership in Prague in 2022 during the next Czech presidency of the European Council. What will also be necessary is to come up with concrete recommendations as to where to move the relations with Eastern partners after 2020. Here again, Czechia can play an important role in the strategic thinking about the development of the Eastern Partnership in the future.

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¹⁷ S. Kobzar; A. Paul, *Eastern Partnership Summit and Ukraine’s ‘Return to Europe’ at Times of Uncertainty*, “European Policy Centre”, 23 November 2017, [http://www.epc.eu/documents/uploads/pub_8086_eapsmtukr.pdf access: 29 November 2017].