

Eastern Partnership: Progress in Turbulent Times

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The title of the conference is “The Future of the Eastern Partnership in Turbulent Times”, and it should be stressed that the Eastern Partnership (EaP) was established and always existed in the turbulent times.

The Eastern Partnership was launched just few months after the Russia-Georgia war; the EaP has been developing at the background of crisis in the North Africa and Middle East, and since 2014 against the backdrop of the Russian-Ukraine war. Five of six EaP countries suffer from the territorial conflicts; two of six live under the authoritarian regimes; all lack enough strong and effective democratic institutions.

Despite these difficult conditions, the European Union’s EaP policy managed to show a significant progress. The Association and Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas agreements (AA/DCFTA) as well as visa-free regimes entered into force with Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine. Despite the shortcomings, these countries showed considerable progress in reforms. The EU also signed the Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA) with Armenia; and during the events of April-May 2018, the Armenian people proved that democracy is their choice.

Less progress has been achieved in the EU’s relations with Azerbaijan and Belarus. Nevertheless, in 2017, the negotiations for a new comprehensive EU-Azerbaijan agreement started. Meetings of the EU-Belarus Coordination Group, Human Rights Dialogue, and Dialogue on Trade take place.

Now, the EU is the first export and import market for Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova and Azerbaijan, the second biggest market for Armenia and Belarus, and a major investor in each of the countries.

So, despite the turbulent times and complicated conditions, the glass is rather half-full than half-empty; and the Eastern Partnership even can be considered as the most successful dimension of the European Neighbourhood Policy.

A Key to Success

Fair play, comprehensiveness and conditionality – are among the most important advantages and a key to success in cooperation with the European Union.

When speaking about the **fair play**, one should admit that negotiations with the EU could be difficult as the EU protects its own interests (and it is normal). EU officials are not easy counterparts for negotiations; they are not inclined to respond with unrealistic promises to excessive expectations of the partners. On the other hand, if the promise has been given, then it will be fulfilled.

The vivid example is from the sphere of people's mobility as one of the EaP priorities. When the EU promised visa-free regimes to Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine (conditioned by the lists of reforms), it could not predict the painful refugee crisis to begin soon due to the tragic developments in the Middle East and North Africa. Flows of migrants and speculations of the populists shaped extremely inconvenient conditions for fulfilling the promise of granting visa-free regimes. However, the EU fulfilled its promise given to the Moldovan, Georgian and Ukrainian people.

Comprehensiveness and **conditionality** mean that cooperation with the European Union, including within the EaP policy, is not only about the business and trade, but not less about the reforms, democracy, good governance, rule of law and human rights. It is about the comprehensive package of cooperative measures that stimulates reforms and proposes more benefits and possibilities to those who do more in implementing the reforming agenda.

Association and partnership agreements signed between the European Union and Moldova, Georgia, Ukraine, and Armenia respectively, can be considered as roadmaps for reforms. Since signing the AA/DCFTA, Ukraine has been demonstrating a significant progress in implementing reforms in many spheres, including the public service, government procurements, energy, medical and education reforms, etc. Surely, many problems remain, but European politicians and experts agree that the number and the scope of reforms implemented in Ukraine in recent years exceed those implemented in the previous two decades.

The EU has become Ukraine's major trade partner with more than 40% share of the country's foreign trade (compared to about 10% Russia's share). Apprehensions that free trade area would be more beneficial for the EU than for Ukraine turned out to be exaggerated – Ukraine's trade balance with the EU demonstrates positive dynamic and the gap between import and export decreases (-\$3.2 billion in 2017, compared to -\$3.7 billion in 2016). It should be noted that Ukraine's export increases not only to the neighbouring EU countries, but also to Belgium, Germany, the Netherlands and other West European countries.

How to achieve more

Although the mutual benefits of the rapprochement between the EU and the EaP countries are obvious for the impartial experts, but the question arises as to whether the interested sides could achieve more, and what should be done for that aim?

Firstly, a more differentiated multi-speed approach is needed. Six EaP countries have different levels of ambitions in their relations with the EU, various geopolitical orientations, as well as different pace of reforms, situation with democracy and rule of law. Three of six EaP countries, namely Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine, signed the AA/DCFTA agreements, and clearly declared the EU membership aspirations. Armenia signed less ambitious but still very promising Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement with the EU. At the same time, the levels of aspirations of Azerbaijan and Belarus are still unclear; while the situation with democracy and freedoms in these countries cause serious concerns.

Given the abovementioned differences, the search for compromise solutions acceptable for all of them often results in the adoption of the lowest common denominator, which cannot satisfy the most ambitious EaP participants. Therefore, it is not a good idea to continue with attempts of proposing the common agenda for all the EaP countries. A special "3+" format dedicated to further deepening of cooperation with the AA/DCFTA partners is needed. The Joint Declaration of the Brussels Eastern Partnership Summit of 2017 instils optimism that this issue might be considered in the near future.

Secondly, a dialogue on visa-free regimes for Armenia, Azerbaijan and Belarus is of vital importance. The example of Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine has proved that there is no real threat for the European Union from people of the EaP countries. To the contrary, visits to the EU and people-to-people contacts contribute to improving the mutual understanding and inspire citizens of the EaP countries to be more dedicated to reforms.

Thirdly, we expect a more active role of the European Union in strengthening the resilience of the Eastern Partnership countries including through further engaging them to cooperation within the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), as well as more EU involvement to the conflict resolution in the EaP region.

We expect the policy aimed at strengthening the common European energy security, instead of supporting the new “Nord” pipelines, which pose a threat not only to Ukraine’s security, but also to the EU member states, not to speak about the contradiction with the EU’s objective to diversify energy sources and suppliers.

It is in our common interest to cooperate more in tackling hybrid threats and countering disinformation. In this regard, more resources are needed to facilitate the work of the East StratCom Task Force, including for the more effective explaining the EU policy in EaP countries.

It should be stressed that the abovementioned objectives are envisaged in the EU documents, such as *Joint Communication on the Review of the European Neighbourhood Policy* (2015), *Global Strategy for the European Union’s Foreign and Security Policy* (2016), *Council conclusions on Eastern Partnership* (of 14 November 2016), *Joint Staff Working Document “Eastern Partnership – 20 Deliverables for 2020”* (2017) and etc. So, they just should be implemented.

Fourthly, the EaP countries should more effectively take advantage of the current opportunities, provided by the existing agreements and frameworks. Full and proper implementation of the AA/DCFTA and CEPA agreements is a good way to achieve the EU standards and thus to become closer to the European Union, including to the membership for those who aspire the respective prospects.

Fifthly, a closer cooperation among the EaP countries, both at state and at civil society levels, might be mutually beneficial. We can achieve more economic cooperation, coordination of efforts in combating crime, protecting environment and many other spheres of common interest. Our countries can benefit from sharing experience and best practices in implementing reforms, from the intensification of cooperation among experts and researchers as well as from more active people-to-people contacts. We lack fair news about each other, so more exchange of truthful information among our countries is needed.

Although a lot has been done within the EU’s Eastern Partnership policy, but even more is possible. A new, more structured architecture for the multilateral cooperation can help the Eastern Partnership to become more effective in practical terms. New initiatives for closer engagement of the regional and local authorities, business, civil societies, youth and media – are promising and worth further developing.