



A Need for Credible EU Strategy for the Eastern Partnership

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Launched in 2009, the Eastern Partnership (EaP) has been instrumental in bringing the EU and the six partner countries (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Republic of Moldova and Ukraine) closer together. Despite significant external and internal challenges along the road, thus far the policy has demonstrated its ability to promote greater stability, prosperity and resilience at the EU's eastern frontier.

The partnership has sought to develop according to the interests, ambitions and progress of each partner, marked by Association Agreements (AA), including the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas (DCFTAs) as well as visa-free regimes with three partner countries (Georgia, Ukraine, Republic of Moldova—the EU Associated Trio) together with a Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement with Armenia and a tailor-made engagement with Azerbaijan and Belarus. The partnership has inclusively delivered for all: EU-EaP trade has nearly doubled, turning the partner countries as a group into the EU's tenth largest trading partner, creating or sustaining more than 250,000 jobs and enabling over 125,000 SMEs to benefit directly from EU funding.[1]

Crisis is the best test of friendship, and the EU has successfully passed this test by swiftly holding out a helping hand to its EaP partners during the coronavirus outbreak. The European Commission has mobilised an emergency support package for its EaP partners, comprising €80 million for immediate needs and up to €900 million in support for their short and medium term social and economic recovery.[2]

The EaP will eventually play much more significant role for the EU politically, economically and in terms of security, perhaps even a greater role than that of the Western Balkans. The success of transformation and democratisation in the EaP can offer up a positive example for other countries in the wider Eurasian continent, not to mention the fact that the EaP is key to the EU's access to Central Asia.

EU Joint Communication — New long-term policy objectives?

On March 18, 2020 the European Commission and the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy put forward a proposal outlining new policy objectives for the Eastern Partnership beyond 2020[3] that was later supported by the Council's conclusions.[4] At a meeting of the Eastern Partnership leaders held on 19 June 2020, heads of the EU and EaP states endorsed a new long-term policy framework to guide the EaP's next decade. Both the joint communication and the conclusions maintain the focus on the fields of the economy, good governance and society, while envisaging greater support vis-à-vis ecological and digital transformations.

While its priorities are very similar to those defined at the November 2017 EaP Summit, the new policy proposal outlines measures enabling a better response to the challenges in the area of governance. Notably, as the joint communication stresses, the EU's financial assistance for partners would be determined by their progress in reforms strengthening the rule of law.[5] The EU also commits itself to developing more robust monitoring mechanisms and verifiable benchmarks for evaluating progress in the EaP. This incentive-based approach in conjunction with the increased oversight could substantially boost the EaP's transformative power, something that the "20 deliverables for 2020" found difficult to achieve in the field of the rule of law.

Within the renewed agenda vis-à-vis economic cooperation, the EU is committing itself to support the efforts of partner countries to join the Single Euro Payment Area (SEPA), the benefits of which would include cheaper, safer and faster cross-border payments. More importantly, the new policy framework provides for the EU to step up its partnership with international financial institutions even further and to develop an innovative and smart financing programme for the EaP countries. The EU's readiness to help

partner countries safeguard macroeconomic stability and incentivise structural reforms through EU Macro-Financial Assistance is yet another commitment that supports the EaP's aims in the economic domain.

In the context of digital transformation, which is marked out as one of the policy priorities, the EU commits itself to the extension of secure and very high capacity Gigabit broadband infrastructures in the EaP area and to supporting intra-EaP roaming and spectrum agreements; however, still not embracing a roaming fees-free regime with them.

Despite its claim to be “new”, the proposed EaP policy framework contains little that can be regarded as genuinely novel: the only new initiative proposed relates to a “deal for youth”, which includes, among other things, the creation of a mobility and exchange programme for young professionals from the EaP countries. Overall, the policy objectives proposed lack a strategic and genuinely future-oriented vision that would make the EU-EaP cooperation and integration process a real priority in the context of the EU's own political, economic and security interests. In particular, the new policy framework falls short of supporting and promoting the process of deepening the partnership between the EU and three associated partners as well as among the Trio (Georgia, Ukraine, Republic of Moldova) and of taking this partnership to the next level.

Treat the regions equally

Currently, the EU's Eastern Partnership does not foresee the accession of the partner countries to the Union. A month before publishing the new EaP policy framework, the Commission brought out a similar communication regarding the Western Balkans,[6] in which it acknowledges the fact that a credible accession perspective is a key incentive and driver of democratic transformation in the Western Balkans. Yet the EU continues to ignore the importance of such a perspective in the case of the EaP. The new EaP policy framework can and should facilitate a process of gradual integration into the EU with a renewed commitment by the partners to undertake further comprehensive reforms. Without a clearly defined strategic goal, the EU risks jeopardising even the progress already achieved in the EaP. In this context, it is the European perspective that can successfully act as a catalyst for full-fledged democratisation and further reforms in the EaP region, as the European Parliament acknowledged in its latest recommendation to the Commission and the Council.[7]

The major takeaway of the Eastern Partnership leaders' video conference on 18 June 2020 was the decision to hold a physical summit in March 2021 at which they will again endorse five policy priorities in a joint declaration. However, the declaration to be made at this summit should go beyond these priorities. The EU should define strong objectives and identify milestones, as it did for the 2009–2017 period. These should provide for the continuous and effective implementation of the DCFTAs and compliance with legal, economic and technical regulations and standards leading to the gradual opening of the EU single market and the establishment of a common economic space, as well as sectoral integration in key areas of common interest such as transport, digitalisation or the environment. The European Parliament's recent resolution encourages the use of such an approach, recommending that the EU should embark on a process of deeper economic cooperation between EaP countries and the EU using the path trodden with the Western Balkan countries.

For their part, the EaP's associated partners should genuinely promote inclusive regional cooperation among themselves and deepen regional economic integration based on EU rules and standards, thereby bringing the region and its companies closer to the EU single market. This would not only bring benefits

to their citizens but also lead to a common regional positioning which will be stronger and more persuasive than the efforts on the part of individual countries to integrate with the EU.

The coming decade will see Russia and other rivals seeking to advance their illegitimate geopolitical interests further in the EaP region and elsewhere. As is widely recognised in the EU, the absence of a credible EU strategy towards the Western Balkans would reduce the EU's credibility and potentially fuel nationalist rhetoric in the region in question, whilst opening the door to the influence of third-country powers, in particular, Russia and China. This is even truer in the case of the EaP. Therefore, a strategic dialogue to be held with Russia, an idea that French President Macron entertained last year, should not provide the Kremlin with "guarantees on no further EU enlargement". Instead, the dialogue should serve and promote the EU's legitimate strategic interests in its neighbourhood. In short, the EU needs to develop a "new Ostpolitik", to use a term coined by German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas, one aimed at identifying new ways to cooperate with Russia in the interests of all European countries and at reaching out to EaP countries independent of the "Russian factor".

During her visit to Georgia in August 2018, the German chancellor Angela Merkel named Georgia and Ukraine as the next potential pair of states with which the EU may start talks following the accession of the Western Balkan countries.[8] During its EU presidency, Germany needs to back up this statement and introduce merit-based dynamism to the EaP. The EaP should not remain merely an offer but become a credible and full-fledged European policy, indispensable for the EU's credibility as well as its influence in the region and beyond.

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