



Eight Years of the Eastern Partnership: Where have we come since Prague?

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On 24 November 2017, Brussels hosted the fifth summit of the Eastern Partnership (EaP) since its emergence in 2009 in Prague. Over the last eight years, the EU's eastern policy has gone through ups and downs and recently resulted in another high-level 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 of with high expectations, which were – for many – not met by the final declaration.¹ Despite that, the Eastern Partnership has made a considerable progress and it is far from being doomed, or forgotten in the years to come.

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 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 regular summits of heads of states held every two years.

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 Russian annexation 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 that persists 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.² 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 was further confirmed by the Brussels summit.

Current State of Play

The current state of the debate on the Eastern Partnership and its future can be best described based on the negotiations surrounding the Brussels summit and its final declaration. Even if the informal group of ‘friends of the Eastern Partnership’ –

¹ General Secretariat of the Council Delegations, “Joint Declaration of the Eastern Partnership Summit (Brussels, 24 November 2017),” <http://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/31758/final-statement-st14821en17.pdf>.

² The association agreement between EU and Ukraine came into force on 1 September 2017 and visa-free regimes for Ukraine and Georgia only in June of this year.



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 has the most ambitious position towards the Eastern Partnership. The reason for that is the general atmosphere in relations which expects the delivery of concrete measures especially from the associate countries that have concluded their AAs and DCFTAs requiring a number of reforms in political, economic and social spheres. In addition to that, we can observe an upward tendency to ‘EaP-fatigue’ accompanied by pro-Russian sentiments of some of the EU Member States, 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 case of the biggest and most significant, Ukraine, these include a never-ending struggle against corruption, pressure on civil society and journalists or 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 complicated domestic situation, selective justice and limited freedom of media. Finally, Moldova – the former EaP front-runner – faces a domestic state capture by one of its oligarchs, Vladimir Plahotniuc, and his ‘family’. 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,⁴ while Armenia suffers from widespread corruption, involving the political elite as well.

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 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 (EEU). Also, the next tranches of macro-financial support for Ukraine, Georgia and 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.

Brussels Declaration

Even if heavily criticised for its content,⁵ the final declaration from the 5th 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).⁶ 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 twenty Deliverables 2020 worked out by the European Commission

³ Andrew Rettman, “EU counter-propaganda ‘harms’ relations, Russia says,” <https://euobserver.com/foreign/139974>.

⁴ Steven Blockmans, “The EU’s half-hearted Ostpolitik,” <https://euobserver.com/opinion/139968>.

⁵ Ian Bond, “Eastern partners, eastern problems,” <https://euobserver.com/opinion/139990>.

⁶ Dionis Cenuşa, “Future of EaP and Moldova following Brussels Declaration – between pragmatism and local realities, OP-ED,” <http://ipn.md/en/integrare-europeana/87845>.



in advance in December 2016 as part of the review of European Neighbourhood Policy. Second, the summit and its final declaration did not primarily concentrate on big strategic goals, but rather on smaller pragmatic goals, which can be achieved. Possibly with the exception of the Comprehensive and Enhanced Agreement with Armenia (CEPA).⁷ The honest discussion – supposedly for the first time – was also commended by the Commission’s President Juncker as a move towards 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. 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 law”) to the future closer relations between the three associated partners (Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova) with the European Union (“the European aspirations and European choice”).⁸ 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.⁹

The EU’s Innovative Approach

The Council was not the only one to articulate its position on the future of Eastern Partnership. The European Parliament as well as the EaP Civil Society Forum clearly expressed their strategic visions too.¹⁰ As usual, the European Parliament suggested a more ambitious plan, especially for the associate countries, than was finally agreed 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 associate 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 stay with us as proposals for the future.

Therefore, it is not fair to say that the Eastern Partnership is doomed to failure, or even disappearance in the years to come, as claimed by some.¹¹ 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 flexible stance in the eastern neighbourhood, which might be – under certain conditions – complementary with Russia’s EEU. In the end, this can only advance the EU’s original goals of achieving a more secure, stable and prosperous neighbourhood and turning the current ‘Ring of Fire’ into true ‘Ring of Friends’.

⁷ Igor Merheim-Eyre and Katarzyna Sobieraj, “A low-key Eastern Partnership Summit,” <http://www.euractiv.com/section/europe-s-east/opinion/a-low-key-eastern-partnership-summit/>.

⁸ Nadija Koval, “Stijkist, stabilnist, stagnacija – tri “s” Schidnogo partnerstva,” <http://prismua.org/stability-stability-stagnation-three-s-eastern-partnership/>.

⁹ David M. Herszenhorn and Jacopo Barigazzi, “Russia casts shadow over EU’s eastern summit,” https://www.politico.eu/article/russia-casts-shadow-over-eus-eastern-summit-donald-tusk-crimea-ukraine/?utm_content=buffer4f5fo&utm_medium=social&utm_source=twitter.com&utm_campaign=buffer.

¹⁰ Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum, “Tangible Results for People: Envisioning the Eastern Partnership in 2020 and Beyond,” http://eap-csf.eu/wp-content/uploads/Civil-Society-Declaration_EN-1.pdf.

¹¹ Anders Aslund, “Does the EU Even Care about Eastern Europe Anymore?,” <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/does-the-eu-even-care-about-eastern-europe-anymore>. Roman Kot, “#Zrada ili #Peremoga: itogi sammita Vostochnogo partnerstva dlja Ukrainy,” <http://qha.com.ua/ru/analitika/zrada-ili-peremoga-itogi-sammita-vostochnogo-partnerstva-dlya-ukraini/183296/>.



Roles of Czechia and Visegrad

The Czech position in this year's negotiations can be generally described as pragmatic. Unlike some of the 'friends of the Eastern Partnership' (e.g. Sweden), Czech diplomacy didn't focus on one specific issue, which it would push through the negotiating process. Rather, it spent its foreign policy energy on minimizing the harm caused by more 'EaP-hesitant' member states. Moreover, some EU 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, the Czech Republic 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. It seems clear that Czech diplomacy sometimes lacks time and energy to consolidate its position on the Eastern Partnership. Therefore, it often restricts itself to a support of the status quo and damage control – vis-à-vis EU Member States promoting stronger cooperation between the EaP and Russia/EEU. 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,¹² 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 position of leader of 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 its eastern neighbour. The current Hungarian diplomatic offensive against Ukraine related to educational law, including promotion of 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 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 through inviting EU officials involved in the EaP agenda. Finally, the "V₄ Road Show" since 2015 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 four Visegrad members, whose national and security interests were violated by the Russian aggressive behaviour in Crimea as well as Eastern Ukraine.

¹² Margot Wallstroem and Witold Waszczykowski, "EU's eastern partnership needs revival," <https://euobserver.com/opinion/139856>.



What Lies Ahead of Us?

Thanks 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.¹³ Pragmatism and honest discussion delivering concrete and new solutions should be welcomed and encouraged within the Eastern Partnership in future. However, this approach cannot come at the expense of EU values and basic principles, such as democracy, human rights or rule of law, as was previously condemned by the EaP Civil Society Forum,¹⁴ 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 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. This way, the EU can hope to combine its pragmatic approach to the Eastern Partnership whilst 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.

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 advocacy of Euro-Atlantic integration in the EU and NATO, which has been chosen in several countries of the neighbourhood – most notably Ukraine and Georgia – as their vector of foreign policy orientation. 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 play 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.¹⁵

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 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 support of Euro-Atlantic integration of the EaP countries, which might be beneficial not only for its more positive label of 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 Visegrad Group must first avoid its own further fragmentation, caused by pursuing unilateral national decisions and megaphone diplomacy, instead of stronger coordination and mutual cooperation. Otherwise, it can open the doors to more pro-Russian EU Member States following 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 new foreign policy energy in the Eastern Partnership,

¹³ Balász Jarábik and Dovilė Šukytė, "Eight years of Eastern Partnership: Hidden in the trenches," <http://neweasterneurope.eu/2017/11/23/eight-years-eastern-partnership-hidden-trenches/>.

¹⁴ Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum, Joint Staff Working Document EaP – Focusing on key priorities and deliverables – Assessment and recommendations by the civil society," http://eap-csf.eu/wp-content/uploads/EaP-CSF-Policy-Brief_2020-deliverables.pdf.

¹⁵ Svitlana Kobzar and Amanda Paul, "Eastern Partnership summit and Ukraine's 'return to Europe' at times of uncertainty," http://www.epc.eu/documents/uploads/pub_8086_eapsmtukr.pdf.





or just to continue with the rhetorical support to this declared priority of Czech foreign policy.





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Briefing paper was prepared within the projects "The NATO Brussels summit and beyond: Anchoring Czech debate on defense and security policy to the transatlantic agenda" supported by the NATO Public Diplomacy Division and "Eastern Partnership countries and their place in the foreign policy of the President Trump administration" supported by the U.S. Embassy Prague.