

ANALYSIS: THE 2020 EU EUROPEAN COMMISSION AND HIGH REPRESENTATIVE JOINT COMMUNICATION AND THE 2020 EU COUNCIL CONCLUSIONS LAY FOUNDATION FOR THE EU EASTERN PARTNERSHIP FUTURE

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May 2020

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

European Commission and High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy published on 18 March 2020 a Joint Communication „Eastern Partnership policy beyond 2020. Reinforcing Resilience - an Eastern Partnership that delivers for all“. 11 May 2020 Council adopted conclusions on Eastern Partnership policy beyond 2020 which support the Communication.

In general, the text of the Communication follows existing ambition line of the EaP, but in the area of external security, there is certain fall-back. The new Conclusions are more direct and operational than Communication. The Council reaffirms the strategic importance it attaches to the Eastern Partnership, as a specific regional dimension of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), supporting sustainable reform processes and offering close political association as well as economic integration with the EU and tangible impact on people's lives.

Some Partner countries, in particular, the three Associated countries want more. In December 2019 the Foreign Ministers of Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine declared that their countries would consider applying for the EU membership.

New Communication text misses the issue of European aspirations. But the Conclusions point out about the European ambitions of the three countries: “the Council recalls the 2017 Eastern Partnership Summit declaration which acknowledges the European aspirations and European choice of the Eastern partners concerned, as stated in the Association

Agreements. The agreements provide for accelerating political association and economic integration with the European Union.” Both in Council and European Parliament, the issue of EU enlargement to the Eastern Partnership countries is today a dividing issue. We can say that the text of the Conclusions to keep existing commitments is a good result in present circumstances.

Communication and the Conclusions do not envisage any changes in Partnership governance, as it works.

Maybe the most visible change in the new Communication is strengthening Resilience as an overriding policy framework as the Partnership countries face today serious challenges, both outside and inside. Council Conclusions welcome the approach. At the same time, the texts of both Communication and Conclusions remain vague about the practical content of this approach. It will be very much about the actual implementation, as the strengthening of the Resilience would be crucial for the security of the EaP countries if rightly applied.

During the structured consultation last autumn, maybe the most remarkable debate has been around the issue of differentiation. Communication and Conclusions are more focused on differentiation, incentive- and conditionality-based approach than previous documents. Foreign Ministers of Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine in their December 2019 Joint Statement invited the EU “to consider establishing the Three Associated partners+ EU dialogue in the areas including, but not limited to, transport, energy, justice and digital economy”. Communication and Conclusions stop short before explicitly accepting the three Ministers proposal. Informally it is explained that such a decision would draw unnecessary dividing lines between the six countries. But 3 Associated Countries+ EU format is used in the Trade area already.

One of the key messages during the structured consultations was the development of sectoral cooperation. The Joint Statement of the three Foreign Ministers mentioned the areas of energy, transport, digital economy, customs cooperation, trade facilitation and justice and home affairs. Communication promises EU targeted sectoral assistance. The Conclusions mention the issue only once: “deeper sectoral cooperation and gradual economic integration in accordance with the level of commitment as enshrined in the bilateral agreements.” For the issue so prominent during the consultations, it is too minimalist.

Communication remains very general in the issues of financial support to the Partnership countries, that reflects the current situation with the preparations of the new MFF. European Commission 2018 MFF package includes establishing the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument. Eastern Partnership Associated countries and Member States supporting dynamic EaP are not happy with the inclusion of the EaP funding into such a very complex instrument.

Last Eastern Partnership Summit in 2017 during the Estonian EU Presidency approved the document “20 deliverables for 2020 “. It has added more focus to the Partnership. During

the structured consultation, participants considered that this approach has to be continued during the next years. The Partnership has made a difference in 3 out of 4 priority areas, namely economy, connectivity and society. The results in the governance area are not so convincing.

Communication proposes as long-term Eastern Partnership policy objectives beyond 2020:

- together for resilient, sustainable and integrated economies;
- together for accountable institutions, the rule of law and security;
- together towards environmental and climate Resilience;
- together for a resilient digital transformation; and
- together for resilient, fair and inclusive societies.

In the area of trade, the Communication proposes to deepen further the economic integration with and among the partner countries. Especially it concerns the three associated countries with whom the Communication aims the full implementation of the current DCFTAs, also for them phased market access liberalisation continues. The document points out that “selective and gradual economic integration of these countries into the EU’s internal market is envisaged in the DCFTAs.” In general, the trade part of the Communication is without significant steps forward, but sectoral trade facilitation agreements may give the trade cooperation new impulses.

Investments part of the Communication stresses the need for structural reforms and other measures to improve the business climate. We can see stagnation in EU companies investments to Partnership countries during the last years due to disappointments among companies with their projects in the Region.

New economic issues are work towards broader use of the euro in Partnership countries, support to partner countries’ efforts to meet the criteria to join the Single Euro Payment Area (SEPA), the extension of the coverage of the European Geostationary Navigation Overlay Service (Galileo).

Transport and energy infrastructure network of the Partnership countries still reflects past Soviet-era geopolitical reality. It needs an extensive overhaul. On transport, the EU focus will be on the long-term priority investments outlined in the Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T) Indicative Investment Action Plan until 2030.

Education reforms continue to be a strategic priority, and the popular among the Youth in EaP countries Erasmus+ programme also continues.

According to the Communication, the EU’s continues to support for resilient institutions, the rule of law and security will include: proposing ways to measure better the impact of judicial reforms; consider progress in the rule of law reforms, when deciding on assistance; reinvigorating EU support for fighting corruption and economic crime; stepping up support for security dialogues and cooperation. Conclusions also call EU institutions to reinforce

capacity and Resilience of partner countries in enhancing civil protection, fighting against organised crime, strengthening cybersecurity frameworks and countering hybrid threats. In general, the treatment of the governance and internal security issues in the Communication and Conclusions is quite thorough and reflects existing problems and the lack of progress.

Communication expresses the EU commitment to promoting the peaceful settlement of unresolved conflicts in the Eastern neighbourhood. It stresses the need to continue to uphold security dialogues and capacity building in the security field. Conclusions also emphasize that the resolution of conflicts is essential and call for renewed efforts and fully support conflict prevention, confidence building, and the facilitation of negotiated peaceful conflict settlement under the agreed negotiating formats.

For Eastern Partners, the unresolved conflicts are the main issue hindering their development as successful democracies. Therefore, this issue should have merited separate treatment in a separate section in Communication, as it is in Conclusions. Detailed presentation of ideas, what the EU could do to help to solve those crises beyond “agreed negotiating formats and processes”, should have been necessary. The countering of hybrid and cyber threats would also have merited more comprehensive treatment.

The climate and environment issues part of the Communication is long and detailed. A compelling text about urgent action and EU support is in the Conclusions: „The EU supports an intensification of the efforts by Eastern partner countries in this respect and notes their support for the European Commission’s initiative “European Green Deal”. Structured dialogue with EaP countries is needed to find out relevant to each partner country realities climate and environment cooperation priorities and forms.

Peoples health and wellbeing includes many issues which concern the citizens of the partner countries. In the area of public health, the before the COVID-crisis written Communication is rather general, but in the crisis-era Conclusions, the focused text confirms EU support to the Partners during the COVID-19 outbreak on human lives, employment and economies. Hopefully, health is added to the deliverables list for the period beyond 2020.

The digital issues part of the Conclusions does not offer new elements, maybe because the existing ambitious and solid base in the Communication and ministerial documents. This area already benefits from advanced sectoral cooperation. There have been already three ministers meetings between the EU and Eastern partnership countries. EU will support the implementation of roaming and spectrum agreements among the partner countries and, where appropriate, with the EU. The primary interest of the Partnership countries is a roaming area with the EU.

Both Communication and Conclusions emphasise in a very similar way the importance of resilient, fair and inclusive societies- professional, depoliticised, people-centred and accountable public administrations, human rights, civil society and youth participation. The documents repetition of the calls reflects the well-publicised problems with democratic development, media and human rights in Partnership countries.

The Communication notes that citizens of Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine enjoy visa-free movement with EU. With three other countries, there are agreements about visa facilitation, the one with Belarus not yet in force. The possibility to launch new visa liberalisation dialogues with the remaining states, whose citizens require visas to travel to the EU, will be considered. Conclusions mostly just repeat these statements. Legal workers and seasonal employees from Ukraine and other EaP countries have contributed to the functioning of the economies of the EU Member States. But some EU Member States have problems with numerous asylum seekers from Associated countries, and in the Conclusions, there is a clear indication of these worries.

Communication and Conclusions stress that the strategic communication should remain a key task, in order to promote the visibility and benefits of the cooperation between the EU and the Eastern Partnership countries, not least in the wake of growing disinformation. The Council states the importance to strengthen capacity and Resilience of Eastern partner countries against disinformation. It also recalls the role of the East StratCom Task Force to this end and reiterates Council support for it.

Communication and Conclusions are essential for the incoming political level contacts with Partnership countries and finally, the next Eastern Partnership Summit. Eastern Partnership needs renewed vision and new political impulse for its second decade.

INTRODUCTION

European Commission and High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy published on 18 March 2020 a Joint Communication to the European Parliament, the European Council, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions Eastern Partnership policy beyond 2020. Reinforcing Resilience - an Eastern Partnership that delivers for all¹. Previous similar Communication in 2015 covered in one document the full European Neighbourhood Policy, both EaP and Union of the Mediterranean².

Also was issued Joint Staff Working Document, which includes an overview of the 2020 autumn structured consultations about the future of the Eastern Partnership (EaP or Partnership) and opinion about the implementation of the 2017 document “20 Deliverables for 2020”³.

1 – Joint Communication to the European Parliament, the European Council, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions Eastern Partnership Policy Beyond 2020. Reinforcing Resilience - an Eastern Partnership that delivers for all. Brussels, 18.3.2020. Referred further in this text as: Communication. Subsequent In-Text Citations in the form (C-X), when X is page number from: https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/1_en_act_part1_v6.pdf

2 – Joint Communication to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions Review of the European Neighbourhood Policy. Brussels, 18.11.2015 JOIN(2015) 50 final http://eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/enp/documents/2015/151118_joint-communication_review-of-the-enp_en.pdf

3 – Joint Staff Working Document. Structured Consultation on the future of the Eastern Partnership. Brussels, 18.3.2020 SWD(2020) 56 final/2 https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/jswd_structured_consultation_on_the_future_of_the_eastern_partnership.pdf

11 May 2020 Council conclusions on Eastern Partnership policy beyond 2020⁴ support the Communication, the text is more direct and operational than in the Communication. Previous Council Conclusions were adopted in 2016⁵ and were in general at a similar ambition level as the new document. Conclusions welcome the Communication: “The Council notes with appreciation the Joint Communication...”

AMBITION OF THE PARTNERSHIP

Conclusions present the ambition of the Partnership as follows: “The Council reaffirms the strategic importance it attaches to the Eastern Partnership, as a specific regional dimension of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), supporting sustainable reform processes and offering close political association as well as economic integration with the EU and tangible impact on people’s lives.” In 2016 Conclusions the text was very similar: “The Council reaffirms the high importance it attaches to the Eastern Partnership, as a specific dimension of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), offering close political association and economic integration with the EU and tangible results to citizens.”⁶ Instead of the “high importance”, the text includes now “strategic importance”, it is more forceful language. Maybe the principal statements in both documents are “close political association” and “economic integration” with the EU. Addition of “supporting sustainable reform processes” in new Conclusions reflects the worries about instability and several cases of backsliding in Partner countries reform processes. In general, both texts are more about the process, not the goal.

Some Partner countries, in particular, the Associated countries want more. In December 2019 the Foreign Ministers of Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine issued a Joint Statement, the first in such a format, about the EaP. They declared that “as the European States respecting the founding values of the European Union, upon implementation of the Association Agreements and taking into consideration the will of our people, we will consider applying for the EU membership in accordance with the article 49 of the Treaty on European Union”⁷.

New Communication text misses the issue of European aspirations. But the Conclusions point out about the European ambitions of the three countries: “The Council welcomes the progress achieved and calls for the full implementation of the Association Agreements

4 – Council Conclusions on Eastern Partnership policy beyond 2020. Brussels, 11 May 2020 7510/1/20REV 1. Referred further in this text as Conclusions. Referred further in this text as Conclusions. Subsequent In-Text Citations from: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/43905/st07510-re01-en20.pdfm>

5 – Eastern Partnership- Council conclusions. Brussels, 14 November 2016 14244/16 <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/22461/ep-st14244en16.pdf>

6 – Eastern Partnership - Council conclusions. Brussels, 14 November 2016 14244/16 <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/22461/ep-st14244en16.pdf>

7 – Joint Statement by the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of Georgia, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine on the Future of Eastern Partnership. Bratislava, 5 December 2019 <https://mfa.gov.ua/en/news/76418-ministri-zakordonnih-sprav-ukrajini-gruziji-ta-moldovi-vistupajuty-za-diferencijovanij-pidkhid-u-ramkah-iniciativi-jes-skhidne-partnerstvo>

and Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas with Georgia, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine... In this context, the Council recalls the 2017 Eastern Partnership Summit declaration which acknowledges the European aspirations and European choice of the Eastern partners concerned, as stated in the Association Agreements. The agreements provide for accelerating political association and economic integration with the European Union.“ In the same paragraph, there is also text about other three countries: „The Council encourages the implementation of the Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement between the EU and Armenia which is provisionally applied since 1 June 2018 and looks forward to its entry into force. The Council welcomes the progress in the ongoing negotiations between the EU and Azerbaijan for a new framework agreement. The Council appreciates that the Unions critical engagement with Belarus has become more comprehensive, as recently confirmed by the signing and ratification of visa facilitation and readmission agreements.“ In 2016 Conclusions the text about Associated countries was: “The Council welcomes progress in the implementation of the Association Agreements/Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas (AA/DCFTAs) with Georgia, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine, providing for accelerating political association and economic integration with the EU.”⁸

Both in Council and European Parliament, the issue of EU enlargement to the Eastern Partnership countries is today a dividing issue. It is not realistic, in the current situation, to expect agreements over more ambitious, than previously wordings, about fulfilling the European aspirations of the EaP countries, in particular the three Associated countries. We can say that the text of the Conclusions is a good result in present circumstances.

GENERAL RESULTS OF THE PARTNERSHIP

Conclusions text about the progress in the **implementation of the Partnership** is more encouraging than in 2016. The new Conclusions state: “The Council welcomes the significant achievements of the Eastern Partnership to date.” In 2016 Conclusions the wording was: “The Council welcomes progress in implementing commitments agreed at the Riga summit in both the bilateral and multilateral dimensions of the Eastern Partnership.”⁹

About the „**20 Deliverables for 2020**“, the Council, in its Conclusions, welcomes “the implementation of deliverables achieved to date and encourages Eastern partner countries to increase efforts for additional progress in all fields”. The general evaluation about the implementation of the “20 Deliverables for 2020” in the Joint Staff Working Document is in general positive¹⁰. The progress from 2016 gets in fourteen areas mark “on track”, and five areas mark “limited progress”. There is still only one full implementation- the creation of the

8 – Eastern Partnership - Council conclusions. Brussels, 14 November 2016 14244/16
<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/22461/ep-st14244en16.pdf>

9 – Eastern Partnership - Council conclusions. Brussels, 14 November 2016 14244/16
<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/22461/ep-st14244en16.pdf>

10 – Joint Staff Working Document. Structured Consultation on the future of the Eastern Partnership. Brussels, 18.3.2020 SWD(2020) 56 final/2 https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/jswd_structured_consultation_on_the_future_of_the_eastern_partnership.pdf

European School in Georgia.

GOVERNANCE AND GENERAL ISSUES

Communication is positive about the general state of the **Partnership governance**: “the current EaP policy framework is robust and delivers tangible results for people“(C-2) ¹¹. The Conclusions are on the same line, pointing out that “the current policy framework, including the set of ‘20 deliverables for 2020’ is robust, valid, brings tangible results and benefits for people“. Communication does not offer any substantial changes into governance structure but proposes some new cross-cutting issues and clearer focusing of some existing principles. The relationship between the bilateral- and multilateral cooperation remains, in general, the same. The Conclusions also do not envisage any governance changes.

Maybe the most visible change in the new Communication is strengthening **Resilience** as an overriding policy framework(C-4). It is as a cross-cutting issue reflected in all areas – economy, governance, environment and climate, digital development and societal development. Stressing Resilience is a welcome development as the Partnership countries face today serious challenges, both outside and inside. The Resilience issue was promoted by a large number of EU Member States during the consultations period, so it is not surprising to see it in the prominent position in the Communication.

Council Conclusions welcome the approach, stating that “strengthening Resilience as an overriding policy framework will be one of the key goals for the Eastern Partnership during the next years... Resilience building will be strengthened through the implementation of practical activities for the benefit of the partner countries, their societies and the regional stability of the EU’s neighbourhood, in order to foster sustainable development and deliver tangible results for people.“ At the same time, the texts of both Communication and Conclusions remain vague about the practical content of this approach. Maybe Resilience in some places of the document is a new way to cover the broader security issues. It will be very much about the practical implementation, as the strengthening of the Resilience would be crucial for the security of the EaP countries if rightly applied.

Communication is unfortunately rather general in addressing **security** issues, especially the unresolved conflicts in the Eastern Partnership area and support to the development of security structures in EaP states. Conclusions are more advanced in this area.

In 2015 Communication, the basic principles were increased differentiation, greater ownership, enhanced focus and greater flexibility. They all remain relevant for the Partnership beyond 2020, as offered by the Communication, but without a dedicated paragraph.

During the structured consultation last autumn, maybe the most remarkable debate has been around the issue of **differentiation**. Communication has more clear wording about

¹¹ - Look to the footnote 1 on page 1

it than previously, in particular, when reflecting EU funding. More than until now, the document promises EU financial support to the successful reforms and to give less in the case of stagnation or falling back, except for the civil society support (C-4). But it would also be right to avoid cutting funding to the municipalities which implement successful reforms on their level, even when the less principle is applied because of a lack of progress on the country level. Communication language is still vague. CEPS commentary on 14 April 2020 rightly points out: “There is continued invocation of the more-for more principle, without operational guidelines over what ‘more’ the EU might contribute in relation to what ‘more’ policy reform measures it seeks from the EaP states. Matters of detailed conditionality are of course something for bilateral negotiations, but a more credible operational framing of the principle is still needed for it to be seen as more than a slogan.”¹²

New Conclusions also include more focused text about differentiation: “The Council reiterates its incentive- and conditionality-based approach, as a principle of the European Neighbourhood Policy as established in the EU Council Conclusions of December 2015, as a means to encourage Eastern partner countries to engage in reform and to continue to increase efforts in this regard, in order to benefit accordingly from the support of the EU. The Council highlights the ownership of the reforms by the Eastern partner countries and the importance of establishing clearer guidance on specific reform priorities, with objective, precise, detailed, verifiable benchmarks, and joint monitoring of the reform progress. The EU remains committed to supporting all implementation efforts, including via adequate financial and expert assistance.” The text in 2016 Conclusions was not so straightforward and detailed. The Council then welcomed “the implementation of the reviewed ENP which enables more differentiated and tailored bilateral relations based on the partners’ needs and shared interests of the EU and partner countries”. It also reaffirmed its “support to the reform agenda by partners, in line with the EU incentive-based approach.”¹³

Foreign Ministers of Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine stressed in their December 2019 Joint Statement that “the principles of differentiation, including the “more for more” approach, has been key to the success of EaP giving the Partnership a framework within each partner can engage with the EU in accordance with its own capabilities, ambitions and interests.”¹⁴ Later in the same document, three countries invited the EU “to consider establishing the Three Associated partners+ EU dialogue in the areas including, but not limited to, transport, energy, justice and digital economy”.¹⁵ In EU capitals, traditionally supporting more ambitious

12 – Michael Emerson, Steven Blockmans, Denis Cenuşa, Tamara Kovziridze, Veronika Movchan. Eastern Partnership policy beyond 2020 Advances and omissions in a vast agenda. CEPS 14 April 2020 <https://www.ceps.eu/download/publication/?id=27043&pdf=Eastern-Partnership-policy-beyond-2020.pdf>

13 – Eastern Partnership - Council conclusions. Brussels, 14 November 2016 14244/16 <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/22461/ep-st14244en16.pdf>

14 – Joint Statement by the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of Georgia, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine on the Future of Eastern Partnership. Bratislava, 5 December 2019 <https://mfa.gov.ua/en/news/76418-ministri-zakordonnih-sprav-ukrajini-gruziji-ta-moldovi-vistupajuty-za-diferencijovanij-pidkhd-u-ramkah-inicijati-jes-skhidne-partnerstvo>

15 – Joint Statement by the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of Georgia, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine on the Future of Eastern Partnership. Bratislava, 5 December 2019 <https://mfa.gov.ua/en/news/76418-ministri-zakordonnih-sprav-ukrajini>

EaP, the call was met in general positively. Communication stops short before explicitly accepting the three Ministers proposal. Informally it is explained that such a decision would draw unnecessary dividing lines between the six countries. But 3 Associated Countries+ EU format is used in the Trade area already, so it would not be a radical change after all¹⁶. As possible issues for Three associated countries+ EU format, CEPS 14 April 2020 commentary mentions how revisions of major EU policies (like those on energy, climate and competition) may affect the associated states, strategic orientations for overarching aspects of the association relationship. Conclusions also do not mention such a format. The European Parliament prepares a resolution about the Partnership, and it may support 3 Associated Countries+ EU format, as there is such a text in the 4 February 2020 draft. If the 3 Associated countries + EU format is open and transparent for other Partnership countries, the seeming controversy between organisational differentiation and inclusiveness will not be a problem but even a stimulus for other countries.

One of the key messages during the structured consultations was the development of **sectoral cooperation**. Sectoral cooperation stressed in part about bilateral relations of the Communication: "The implementation of bilateral agreements will be sped up and complemented with deeper sectoral cooperation and exchange between interested partner countries. The EU will continue to provide support in bilateral, regional and multi-country fora, including targeted sectoral assistance, in line with the principles of inclusiveness and differentiation." (C-4) The need to advance sectoral cooperation was also one of the points of the Joint Statement of the Foreign Ministers in December 2019. They reiterated readiness "to expand the scope of our cooperation with the EU aiming at a more sector-specific integration; in particular in the area of energy, transport, digital economy, customs cooperation, trade facilitation and justice and home affairs..."¹⁷. All areas mentioned in the Joint Statement of three ministers in some form are present in the Communication. But the issue of sector-specific cooperation is somehow spread all over the text. There is no individual part of the paper, and there is a lack of real operational support. As a positive sign, there is a reference to targeted sectoral assistance. Partner countries and the EU may conduct Sectoral political level meetings, and official level meetings anyway. The Conclusions mention the issue only once: "deeper sectoral cooperation and gradual economic integration in accordance with the level of commitment as enshrined in the bilateral agreements." For the issue so prominent during the consultations this is too general approach.

New Communication is precise and ambitious in the areas of **gender equality and youth issues**.

[gruziji-ta-moldovi-vistupajuty-za-diferencijovanij-pidkhid-u-ramkah-iniciativi-jes-skhidne-partnerstvo](#)

16 – For example Commissioner level meetings <https://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/press/index.cfm?id=1910&title=EU-Trade-Commissioner-and-Members-of-the-Governments-of-Georgia-Moldova-and-Ukraine-met-in-Brussels> and https://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/docs/2019/may/tradoc_157890.pdf

17 – Joint Statement by the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of Georgia, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine on the Future of Eastern Partnership. Bratislava, 5 December 2019 <https://mfa.gov.ua/en/news/76418-ministri-zakordonnih-sprav-ukrajini-gruziji-ta-moldovi-vistupajuty-za-diferencijovanij-pidkhid-u-ramkah-iniciativi-jes-skhidne-partnerstvo>

FINANCIAL SUPPORT TO THE PARTNER COUNTRIES

Communication remains very general in the issues of **financial support** to the Partnership countries. It reflects the current situation with the preparations of the new MFF. But it is also evident that many people in the Partnership countries ask about the level of the EU political ambition in the Eastern neighbourhood. European Commission 2018 MFF package includes “Proposal for a REGULATION OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND OF THE COUNCIL establishing the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument”¹⁸. Eastern Partnership Associated countries and Member States supporting dynamic EaP are not happy with the inclusion of the EaP funding into such a very complex instrument. In their December 2019 Joint Statement, the three Associated countries Foreign Ministers mentioned, that the objectives of the Association Agreements require “an upgraded and more tailored funding response from both sides of the Agreements and necessitate a specific EU financial instrument to support them “. In February 2020 the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova signed a joint letter to the Members of the European Commission regarding the importance of relevant financial support for the Eastern Partnership in the next EU Multiannual Financial Framework for 2021-2027¹⁹. The proportion of EU funding in the Southern and Eastern Neighbourhood has been 2:1, and the EaP countries are interested not to have less favourable solution during the next years.

30 March the European Commission announced financial support to the EaP countries in their fight against the COVID-19 virus and deep economic crisis. Eighty million euros is for immediate needs and up to €883 million for the short and medium-term to support the social and economic recovery of the Region²⁰. EU decision established it as a major assistance provider to the six countries. 18 May EU Council made additional decisions, to provide up to 3 billion euros of macro-financial assistance to ten enlargement and neighbourhood partners to help them cope with the economic fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic. Financial assistance will be provided in the form of loans on highly favourable terms and allocated among others to three EaP countries:

Georgia: €150 million, Moldova: €100 million, Ukraine: €1200 million. EU assistance will help these countries cover their immediate financing needs.²¹ Aid from China and in some cases

18 – Proposal for a regulation. Multiannual Financial Framework: Proposal for the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument EU Commission 2018 <https://ec.europa.eu/info/law/better-regulation/have-your-say/initiatives/1821-Multiannual-Financial-Framework-Proposal-for-the-Neighbourhood-Development-and-International-Cooperation-Instrument>

19 – Joint Statement by the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of Georgia, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine on the Future of Eastern Partnership. Bratislava, 5 December 2019 <https://mfa.gov.ua/en/news/ministers-foreign-affairs-ukraine-georgia-and-moldova-jointly-addressed-european-union-importance-ambitious-support-eastern-partnership>

20 – The EU’s response to the coronavirus pandemic in the Eastern Partnership. European Commission April 2020 https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/coronavirus_support_eap.pdf

21 – Decision of the European parliament and of the Council on providing macro-financial assistance to enlargement and neighbourhood partners in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Brussels, 18 May 2020 PE-CONS 11/20 <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/PE-11-2020-INIT/en/pdf>

also Russia arrived earlier and created public perception about their role. It is essential now to communicate the real extent of the Union big support to the people in Partnership countries.

FUTURE

Talking about the future of the Partnership the Conclusions state: “The Council stresses the importance that the Eastern Partnership remains ambitious, flexible and inclusive framework for cooperation, allowing Member States and Eastern partner countries to tackle common and global challenges jointly in a wide range of areas. This includes exchanges and alliance building in various multilateral fora, deeper sectoral cooperation and gradual economic integration in accordance with the level of commitment as enshrined in the bilateral agreements.”

The Council recalls, that “the Eastern Partnership aims at building a common area of shared democracy, prosperity and increased cooperation and is not directed against anyone”. Such a statement reflects a geopolitical reality, where Russia considers the developments of the Partnership countries as something in its exclusive sphere of interests. The Union aims towards “shared” development with Partner countries, it means progress has to be in their interests, and they are free to choose their cooperation partners and formats.

Last Eastern Partnership Summit in 2017 during the Estonian EU Presidency approved the document “20 deliverables for 2020 “. It has played an essential role, adding more focus to the Partnership. During the structured consultation, this document had strong support. Participants considered that this approach has to be continued during the next years.

The Partnership has made a difference in 3 out of 4 priority areas, namely economy, connectivity and society. The results in the governance area are not so convincing.

Building on the current long-term priorities of the “20 deliverables for 2020 “the Communication proposes the following **long-term Eastern Partnership policy objectives beyond 2020:**

- **together for resilient, sustainable and integrated economies;**
- **together for accountable institutions, the rule of law and security;**
- **together towards environmental and climate Resilience;**
- **together for a resilient digital transformation; and**
- **together for resilient, fair and inclusive societies. (C-4)**

This list of objectives reflects both continuity and new challenges of the Union and EaP countries. It is an excellent set of priorities and measures, but it does not formulate clear goals to achieve or what happens when it is implemented.

Council Conclusions pay attention to cross-cutting issues of support to “the green

transformation, the digital transformation and to deliver on economies that work for all, in particular more job opportunities for youth and to promote gender equality". The Council fully supports that these issues are mainstreamed in all the areas of work and invites the High Representative and the Commission to devise innovative and efficient tools to do so.

The Council confirms the multilateral framework "20 Deliverables for 2020 " adopted at the 2017 Summit as a valid and useful. It had broad support during the consultation. The Council calls for the Eastern Partnership to be more strategic, ambitious, effective and flexible, aligned with the new policy approach and in particular underlines the importance of mainstreaming the abovementioned cross-cutting elements. So the Council supports the building of the work beyond 2020 on the "20 Deliverables for 2020 "framework.

Communication does not establish a clear timeframe. The formula "beyond 2020 "leaves room for interpretation- is it until a next EaP Summit after the 2020 Summit, following EaP review, a new decade? Conclusions also do not clarify these issues.

People and governments in the Partnership countries look for the signals from the Union. The messages from the EU may be encouraging, but they may also be unconvincing, raising doubts about the real perspectives of their relations with the Union and reasoning of many reforms. In some aspects the message in the Communication is less ambitious than 2015, it concerns especially the areas of political relations with EU and security. We may say the same about the Conclusions; however, in some parts, this document goes further than Communication.

The general vagueness of the Communication and in some degree Conclusions is not only the message to the EaP countries but also the other players on the International arena. They ask- is Union serious in the neighbouring Region East of it, how much political capital, money and other resources it is ready to mobilise. Answers to these questions in Washington, Moscow, Beijing, Ankara and other world capitals will influence their policies towards the Region. EaP countries see today political rivalry among their big international partners.

EASTERN PARTNERSHIP POLICY OBJECTIVES BEYOND 2020

A. ECONOMY - together for resilient, sustainable and integrated economies

In the area of the economy the main objectives are listed in the Communication as increased trade and further regional and bilateral integration of the economies of partner countries and the EU, together with cooperation for progressive decarbonisation towards climate neutrality, embracing the opportunities from the twin ecological and digital transformation. (C-5) Document pays a lot of attention to the European Green Deal. Communication text refers to deepening economic integration through “full implementation of the current Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreements (DCFTAs)”, and “selective and gradual economic integration into the EU’s internal market”. (C-5)

Conclusions text follows a similar path: “Increased trade, where possible, continued regulatory approximation, establishing conditions for associated countries’ continued alignment with the EU internal market and gradual economic integration as provided for in the association agreements, improved access to finance and where applicable further integration of the economies of Eastern partner countries and the EU are of key importance. These steps will be accompanied by the removal of identified trade barriers, and the improvement of food safety and SPS measures, together with cooperation on transitioning to climate neutral, clean and circular economies, as well as embracing opportunities from digital transformation.” In 2016 Conclusions the remark about integration was more direct, not through association agreements: “The Council reiterates that strengthening the economic and trade dimension of the Eastern Partnership will assist in the further deepening of economic integration with the EU.”²²

There are some new practical elements in the text of the Communication, but they are a little bit lost in the general overview of substantial themes. For the partners, the essential item that is missing is financial figures for different cooperation measures. It reflects the situation with MFF. More sectorial documents are needed with a more detailed approach, at first with the Associated countries.

In the area of trade, the Communication proposes to deepen further the economic integration with and among the partner countries. Especially it concerns the three associated countries with whom the Communication aims “the full implementation of the current DCFTAs”, for them phased market access liberalisation continues. (C-5) The document points out that “selective and gradual economic integration of these countries into the EU’s internal market is envisaged in the DCFTAs. It demands regulatory convergence with, and effective implementation by these countries of, the EU acquis in specified areas (public procurement, technical barriers to trade, market surveillance, sanitary and phytosanitary measures, customs services, and tax good governance standards).” (C-5-6) Conclusions do not include

²² – Eastern Partnership - Council conclusions. Brussels, 14 November 2016 14244/16
<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/22461/ep-st14244en16.pdf>

the issues of the last sentence about regulatory convergence and implementation of EU aqis in specified areas, and it lowers the level of ambition.

Communication states that sectoral trade facilitation arrangements are possible with all partner countries. (C-5) The EU will continue to work with the partner countries, where possible, towards agreements on mutual recognition of Authorised Economic Operators. (C-5) But other measures, such as Agreements for Conformity Analysis and Assessment for technical standards, are not mentioned in the document. The document does not mention increasing existing quotas for EaP countries export to the EU in some sensitive areas like agricultural products.

In general, the trade part of the Communication is constructive, but without significant steps forward, but sectoral agreements may give the cooperation new impulses. (C-5)

The Communication states that during the last decade, EU-EaP trade has nearly doubled, turning the partner countries into the EU's 10th largest trading partner. (C-6) The UK leaving the Union means a significant change in the statistics, as it is one of the big partners for the EaP countries. The largest trade partner of the EU-27 is Ukraine. It was Unions (EU27) 17th trade partner in 2019. Azerbaijan was 41st and Belarus 42nd partner.

Partner country	EU Export	EU Import
Armenia	0.8	0.4
Azerbaijan	1.8	10.6
Belarus	6.7	4.2
Georgia	2.0	0.6
Moldova	2.9	1.8
Ukraine	24.2	19.1

Table 1 EU-27 trade with EaP countries, 2019, billion euros, data: European Commission, DG Trade

Part of the Communication about **investment and access to finance** includes information that EU activities led to 11 billion euros investments in EaP countries during the decade. (C-6) The document repeats well-known postulates about the importance of the structural reforms: "The business and investment environment must be simple, transparent and reliable. This requires efforts to ensure a level playing field, improve the labour market and reduce informal work, improve economic governance, and build on rule of law reforms, including prevention of corruption. Economic operators must be given a clear perspective of the ecological transition underway." (C-6)

Conclusions are relatively modest in the investments matters: "Investment activity is also an important contribution to the economic prosperity. Its more efficient promotion and support

should be further reflected. The Council stresses that supporting sustainable, rules-based, open and secure connectivity, in terms of transport, energy and digital, including through promoting quality infrastructure is key for the economic development, regional integration, trade and mobility, both for the EU and Eastern partner countries. The Council underlines the importance of a level playing field in these areas.” The remark about the level playing field reflects numerous challenges related to the general business climate and openness towards foreign investments. But it also covers the activities of non-EU foreign investors, who sometimes use political connections to improve their positions vis a vis EU companies.

We can see stagnation in EU companies investments to Partnership countries during the last years due to lack of progress with structural reforms there and disappointments among companies with their projects in the Region. Communication promises that the EU will continue to strengthen the partner countries’ key reforms, including through the External Investment Plan and notably the Structural Reform Facility. (C-6) The External Investment Plan (EIP) was adopted in September 2017 to help boost investment in partner countries in Africa and the European Neighbourhood²³. It aims to contribute to the UN’s sustainable development goals (SDG) while tackling some of the root causes of migration, mobilise and leverage sustainable public and private investments to improve economic and social development with a particular focus on decent job creation. Partnership countries would like to have more targeted funds which take into account their regions situation. Structural Reform Facility supports reforms, strengthening of the administrative capabilities, but it is a small amount of money²⁴.

	To EU27	From EU27
Armenia	0.4	2.0
Azerbaijan	0.4	2.1
Belarus	0.4	3.8
Georgia	0.1	1.9
Moldova	0.1	1.1
Ukraine	0.7	19.4

Table 2 EU-27 FDI stock with EaP countries, 2018, billion euros, Data: European Commission, DG Trade

23 – What is the EU’s External Investment Plan? European Commission. September 2017
https://ec.europa.eu/commission/eu-external-investment-plan/what-eus-external-investment-plan_en

24 – Action Document for Structural Reform Facility: ENI East. European Commission 2017-2019
https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/eni_2017_040613_structural_reform_facility.pdf

Communication continues the line to support the **SMEs**. During the first decade of the EaP, 125 thousand SME-s got EU financial support. The EU will continue to support access to finance through guarantee schemes, interest rate subsidies and investment incentives. (C-6) It will also expand this support through its stronger Partnership with IFIs, as well as the European Fund for Sustainable Development (EFSD+) within the proposed Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI) and the External Action Guarantee²⁵. It is still not clear, how much of the total NDICI funding out of the proposals 68 billion euros go to the EFSD+. Civil society organisations also pay attention to the risk of subsidies going to international companies under the guise of contributing to the implementation of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and Green Deal. They point out that big multinational firms have the experience to prepare the project proposals.

A new and welcome element is a promise to support **start-ups** in EaP countries. (C-6) EaP countries are home to many successful start-ups and IT companies, especially Ukraine and Belarus. They plan internationalisation most often through the US, not Europe, where the business and financial environment is often less inviting. The EU, together with IFIs, will develop an innovative and smart financing programme (including equity, venture capital, business angel and crowdfunding). As in many other aspects of economic cooperation, Communication involves here the role of the International Financial Institutions. It is not clear how much of its resources EU is ready to contribute.

Communication pays attention to a need to work towards broader use of the **euro** in Partnership countries foreign economic relations. The document stresses that it “will further reduce foreign exchange risk faced by the partner countries, including by ensuring that the foreign currency mix in external borrowings, reserve management and international dealings are better correlated with the currencies of their main trading and investment partners, while supporting a stronger international role of the euro.” (C-6) Today, Partner countries use US dollars as the dominant foreign currency relative to the part of the EU in their external economic relations.

One of the exciting promises in Communication is that the EU will “continue to support partner countries’ efforts to meet the criteria to join the Single Euro Payment Area (SEPA)”. (C-6) The **single euro payments area (SEPA)** harmonises cashless euro payments modalities across Europe. It allows European consumers, businesses and public administrations to make and receive under the same basic conditions credit transfers, direct debit payments and card payments. SEPA makes all cross-border electronic payments in euro as easy as domestic payments. The area covers the whole of the EU-27 and also Andorra, Iceland, Norway, Switzerland, Liechtenstein, Monaco, San Marino, UK and Vatican City State. Technical accession criteria for joining SEPA are high²⁶. There is a need for designated EU technical support. Belonging to the SEPA would have a significant influence on the partner countries economies and everyday life of their citizens.

25 – Council Regulation (EC, EURATOM) No 480/2009 of 25 May 2009 establishing a Guarantee Fund for external actions
<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex:32009R0480>

26 – Guide for Adherence to the SEPA Credit Transfer Scheme, the SEPA Instant Credit Transfer Scheme and the SEPA Direct Debit Schemes. European Payments Council. EPC012-17 Version 4.08 October 2019
<https://www.europeanpaymentscouncil.eu/sites/default/files/kb/file/2020-03/EPC012-17%20Guide%20to%20the%20SEPA%20Schemes%20Adherence%20Process%20v4.0.pdf>

Strengthening interconnectivity is one of the priorities of the Eastern Partnership from the very beginning. Transport infrastructure network of the Partnership countries still reflects past Soviet-era geopolitical reality. It needs an extensive overhaul to serve modern needs, including interconnectivity with the EU. This area projects take long to implement and are very expensive.

On **transport**, the EU focus will be on the long-term priority investments outlined in the Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T) Indicative Investment Action Plan²⁷, which envisages total investments from different sources 12,8 billion euros until 2030. The Plan includes upgrading critical physical infrastructure in road, rail, port, inland waterway and airport facilities, and logistics centres. Neighbourhood Investment Platform (NIP) will support this work. EIB, EBRD and other European financial institutions play a significant role in the work of the NIP. (C-7)

On **energy** connectivity, the EU will continue to work with the partner countries to reinforce cross-border and inter-regional interconnections. The EU will also help the partner countries to increase energy security by diversifying from oil or gas imports through investments in renewable energy and enhanced energy efficiency and by encouraging energy market integration based on sound legislation. (C-7) The most remarkable project on the Region is the Southern Gas Corridor. The Azerbaijan gas reaches Italy according to the current plans before the end of 2020. The cost of the whole nearly four thousand kilometres long pipeline system is around 40 billion euros²⁸. EU4Energy initiative continues; it covers 6 Eastern Partnership countries and five Central Asian countries. The initiative supports a good quality of energy data, knowledge sharing and dialogue on energy-related issues, improving legislation and governance in the energy sector, communication²⁹. Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine are participants of the Energy Community.

A new element in the Communication is a cooperation with the partner countries to extend the coverage of the European Geostationary Navigation Overlay Service (**Galileo**)³⁰. (C-7) Competition between the world four satellite navigation systems- American GPS, European Galileo, Chinese Beidou and Russian Glonass over the services markets continues. Galileo went live in 2016, but it still needs some efforts to be fully capable. Hopefully, it happens in 2020, but because of the virus-crisis, the situation is not clear.

Investing in people has been one of the priorities, and the cooperation in this area was thriving. Unfortunately, this part of the communication is very condensed text, without details. Communication proposes a new deal for youth. It includes bridging the gap between the labour market and the education sector; increasing support for the employability of young people and youth entrepreneurship; active labour market measures, such as the Youth Guarantee, to be adapted to the partner countries' labour markets. Maybe the most detailed part of the deal is building on a pilot young EaP civil servants job-shadowing scheme,

27 – Indicative TEN-T Investment Action Plan. European Commission.

https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/ten-t_iap_web-dec13.pdf

28 –Georgi Gotev. Europe's Southern Gas Corridor 'almost ready', says Azerbaijan's SOCAR. EURACTIV.com 13. veebr 2020

<https://www.euractiv.com/section/azerbaijan/news/europes-southern-gas-corridor-almost-ready-says-azebajians-socar/>

29 –EU4Energy Programme 2016-2020 <https://euneighbours.eu/en/east/stay-informed/projects/eu4energy-programme>

30 – Galileo and EGNOS. European Space Agency https://www.esa.int/Applications/Navigation/Galileo_and_EGNOS

setting up a mobility and exchange programme for the EaP directed at young professionals. (C-8)

Education reforms continue to be a strategic priority, and existing cooperation areas remain essential. (C-8) The popular Erasmus+ programme also continues, providing greater mobility and capacity building opportunities³¹. The open issue here is a scale of designated EU resources during the next years. European School in Georgia will become a full secondary school in new premises.³²

The EU will continue to support and strengthen the **smart specialisation, technology transfer and innovative capacities** of the partner countries as well as their increased participation in EU programmes such as Horizon Europe and COSME. The partner countries are encouraged to identify relevant Green Deal related priorities. (C-8) It is one of the examples how in some parts of the Communication important EU initiatives are included but without outlining clear measures. Green Deal area needs Union dialogue in bilateral, with three Associated countries and with all six partners formats.

The EU will support EaP countries **culture** and creative industries, cultural heritage and creative industries, including the audio-visual sector. (C-8)

B. GOVERNANCE AND SECURITY- together for accountable institutions, the rule of law and security

One of the important spheres where Resilience is to be built includes accountable institutions, the rule of law and security, which comprise issues of the internal and the external security of the Eastern Partners societies. (C-4)

Communication notes that '20 Deliverables for 2020' is producing tangible results for partner countries. It has made a difference in 3 out of 4 priority areas, the exception being the good governance. The EU Member States, most partner countries and civil society stressed the need a call in a new framework document beyond 2020, to significantly improve results in **the governance area**, notably the rule of law, the fight against corruption and organised crime, and the role of an independent media and civil society (C-3). The word "most" in the text shows that some EaP countries do not share this position. On governance, initial achievements include 'one-stop-shops' delivering efficient and accessible public services, and e-assets declarations systems in most partner countries. Progress in governance opens the way and is a precondition to new achievements in other areas.

Conclusions point out Council's opinion that the progress on the rule of law "continues to lag behind". The Council, therefore, invites the EEAS and the Commission, in close coordination with the Member States to better monitor reforms in strengthening the rule of law and expand its support for crucial fundamentals, at the same time stressing the responsibility of the Eastern partner countries to implement reforms in these sectors.

The Communication states that good governance and democratic institutions, the rule of

31 – Erasmus+ Programme Guide 2020. European Commission
https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/resources/documents/erasmus-programme-guide-2020_en

32 – European School: The First CIS Accredited in Georgia Online Registration <https://europeanschool.ge/en/>

law, successful anti-corruption policies, fight against organised crime, respect of human rights and security, including support to populations affected by conflict, are the backbone of strong and resilient states and societies. Such a framework is also a precondition for a functioning market economy and sustainable growth. In particular, the rule of law is a critical factor in ensuring a favourable business climate and an important consideration in attracting foreign direct investment (C-8-9)

According to the Communication, the EU's support for resilient institutions, the rule of law and security will include:

1. proposing ways to measure better the impact of judicial reforms;
2. consider progress in the rule of law reforms, when deciding on assistance;
3. reinvigorating EU support for fighting corruption and economic crime;
4. improving cross-border cooperation to better protect people against organised crime;
5. stepping up support for security dialogues and cooperation. (C-9)

Regarding **the judicial reforms**, the Communication states that they should be based on the alignment of Eastern partners' reforms with European standards and should be based on high-quality reform strategies. The independence and accountability of the judiciary and prosecution are considered essential, in a system of checks and balances, to ensure that all state institutions abide by the law and that citizens have access to justice and can exercise their rights fully. The EU should encourage the active role of international institutions and experts to support and legitimise reform processes and will look to its expertise on the rule of law issues. There is a need for better measurement of the real results of reforms. The EU will support increase the capacity of the relevant national institutions to deliver judicial training for judges and prosecutors. EU will also promote a rule of law culture through close involvement of civil society and the business community. (C-9)

Regarding **the fighting corruption**, the Communication states that the new level of rigorousness is needed to improve investigation, prosecution and sanction of economic crime, thereby demonstrating that the anti-corruption and law enforcement bodies are independent and deliver results. The EU should support a results-driven legislative and institutional framework, with a focus on high-level corruption, and will pay particular attention to the area of public procurement. Partner countries need to step up their efforts to establish a robust and effective framework to fight economic crimes. In this regard, registries of beneficial ownership are essential to combat money laundering. The Eastern partners need to put in place robust asset recovery frameworks, including by setting up functioning asset recovery offices that are in a position to trace and identify criminal wealth (C-8-9).

Regarding the fight against **organised crime**, the Communication notes that the EU will continue to support: increased cooperation with EU justice and home affairs agencies; security sector reform; the fight against trafficking of human beings and illicit goods (drugs and firearms); and to prevent former the building of integrated border management.

The EU will continue cooperation on cyber Resilience and building an enforceable framework to fight **cybercrime** based on the Council of Europe's Budapest Convention. (C-10)

Regarding the **civil protection**, the Communication declares that cooperation between the partner countries and the EU Civil Protection Mechanism will be strengthened, as well as

among partner countries, as it will be essential to enhance prevention of, preparedness for, and response to natural and human-made disasters. (C-10)

The Conclusion's text shares the approach of the Communication in the civil protection and security issues: "Cooperation with Eastern partners in the area of security and disaster risk management needs special attention for the stability of the whole Region. The Council also duly notes the proposal to consider, where appropriate, reinforcing capacity and Resilience of Eastern partner countries as regards enhancing civil protection, fighting against organised crime and other illicit activities, countering terrorist threats and preventing radicalisation, hybrid threats, malicious cyber activities, promoting the application of the existing international law in cyberspace and the development of robust legal and policy cybersecurity frameworks based on EU legislation and best practices."³³

In general, the treatment of the **justice, the rule of law and internal security issues** in the document is quite thorough and includes evaluation of work done so far and stresses, in general, the right priorities for developing further cooperation with Eastern Partners. The rule of law as a prerequisite for societies economic and political development, fighting (especially high level) corruption and influence of organised crime are areas, where EU's and partner countries cooperation should be improved. The EU should concentrate there its resources for developing Eastern Partners societies.

The main focus for the EU future policy direction as presented in Communication is in strengthening the **internal security** of the Eastern Partnership countries. But it should be remembered, that strengthening of their **overall Resilience** and solving of **internal problems** also improves their ability to counter **foreign interference**, like security sector reform, building integrated border management and developing cyber Resilience.

Regarding **external security**, Communication expresses the EU commitment to promote the peaceful settlement of unresolved conflicts in the Eastern neighbourhood. In particular, the EU will pursue efforts to support conflict prevention, confidence building and the facilitation of negotiated peaceful conflict settlements. The EU will also continue to provide assistance to populations affected by conflicts to enhance their Resilience. (C-10) The EU should continue to uphold security dialogues with Eastern Partnership countries. Practical Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) cooperation will also be strengthened to support contributions by partner countries to the European civil and military missions and operations. (C-10) EU's security architecture structures should actively help the exchange of best practices, cooperation on shared objectives, and capacity building in the security field with Eastern Partnership countries. The EU should pursue providing training opportunities and capacity-building, to Eastern partner countries. Also, the role of women and young people in peacebuilding will be strengthened. (C-10)

However, in totality, it could be said that the Communication provisions in the field of external security as merely an update of the previous Eastern Partnership commitments. Communication fails to take account of the weaknesses of the policy's current design, and the **changed geopolitical context** in the neighbourhood. Some experts even suggest that the EU's efforts have failed to lay down the fundamental planks of reform, which are the rule of law and genuine

33 – Council Conclusions on Eastern Partnership policy beyond 2020. Brussels, 11 May 2020 7510/1/20REV 1.
<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/43905/st07510-re01-en20.pdfm>

external security in Eastern Partnership countries.³⁴

In Conclusions, the Council values the importance of enhancing, where appropriate, security dialogues and the cooperation in the area of CSDP and welcomes in this regard the Eastern partners' valuable contribution to EU missions and operations. Also, this text is less ambitious and much shorter than in the 2016 Conclusions.

In general, compared to earlier EU approach, for example, **the EU's Global Strategy** and the **2015 ENP Review**³⁵, the current Communication's text, while stressing Resilience, provides less concrete proposals how to deal with main external security issues in Eastern Neighbourhood, especially unresolved conflicts.

The document does not include evaluation of the progress, nor does it offer many concrete proposals on how the EU could help to develop partner countries security structures. In contrast in 2016 Conclusions was a designated point about the issue: "The Council calls for renewed efforts to promote the peaceful settlement of conflicts in the Region on the basis of the principles and norms of international law. The resolution of conflicts, building trust and good neighbourly relations are essential to economic and social development and cooperation. The EU remains committed in its support to the territorial integrity, independence and sovereignty of all its partners. The Council recalls the EU's role in conflict resolution and confidence building efforts in support of the existing agreed formats and processes."³⁶

The unresolved conflicts that Russia incited and sustained through financial and political means also present a convenient way for the country to fuel inter-ethnic insecurities and anti-Western sentiment. The bulk of EU security assistance goes towards public security, such as national police forces, with only modest contributions to cybersecurity and stratcom activities. It means that Eastern Partnership states are not as well protected as they should be against Russian influence operations and other security threats. Moldova, Georgia, and Ukraine are in particularly great need of strengthened military capabilities and Resilience against hybrid threats.³⁷

Communication recognises, that unresolved conflicts continue to **hamper political and economic development** in the Eastern Neighborhood. Regrettably, the issue of solving unresolved conflicts (and in the case of Ukraine, an active military conflict) is in one paragraph with and after the strengthening Civil Protection Mechanism.

2020 Conclusions move further than Communication in this area, but still, the approach is less ambitious than in 2016. The Conclusions state: "The resolution of conflicts, building trust and

34 – Dumitru Minzarari and Vadim Pistrinciuc. A Problem Shared: Russia and the Transformation of Europe's Eastern Neighbourhood. ECFR April 2020. https://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/a_problem_shared_russia_and_transformation_of_europe_eastern_neighbourhood

35 – Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe A Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign And Security Policy June 2016 http://eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/top_stories/pdf/eugs_review_web.pdf and Joint Communication to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions. Review of the European Neighbourhood Policy. Brussels, 18.11.2015 JOIN(2015) 50 final pp.12-15.

36 – Eastern Partnership - Council conclusions. Brussels, 14 November 2016 14244/16 <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/22461/ep-st14244en16.pdf>

37 – Dumitru Minzarari and Vadim Pistrinciuc. A Problem Shared: Russia and the Transformation of Europe's Eastern Neighbourhood. ECFR April 2020. https://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/a_problem_shared_russia_and_transformation_of_europe_eastern_neighbourhood

good neighbourly relations are essential to economic and social development and cooperation. The Council remains deeply concerned about the continued violations of international law in certain countries of the Region. The Council calls for renewed efforts and fully supports conflict prevention, confidence building and the facilitation of negotiated peaceful conflict settlement under the agreed negotiating formats and processes and recall the EU's role in these.³⁸ This text does not reflect any possible change of mechanisms pointing to the “agreed negotiating formats and processes”.

However, for almost all Eastern Partners, the unresolved conflicts are the main issue hindering their development as successful democracies. Therefore, this issue should have merited separate treatment in separate paragraph/section in Communication and more detailed presentation, what the EU could do help Eastern Partners for solving those crises. Also, existing formats of diplomacy for dealing with the conflicts affecting EaP states exclude the EU as such, and more innovative approach could be applied in future. Eastern Partners expect more from the EU.

For example, the CEPS experts have proposed to improve the ‘Normandy format’ for the Donbas involving France and Germany by using the feature form ‘Iran model’ where there was leading EU participation alongside three member states.³⁹ In line with the EU's comprehensive approach to external conflict and crises, EU should consider using all instruments in its disposal, including – where necessary, CSDP missions, operations or the EU Special Representatives and cooperation with UN and OSCE.

Also, in contrast to Communication, **the EU Strategic Approach to Resilience** offers more detailed solutions on how to improve society's Resilience under the heading “Resilience and the Prevention of Violent Conflict”. For example, it is pointed out, that there is more scope to enhance the contribution of the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) partnerships to strengthening Resilience, in line with the May 2017 Council Conclusions on Security and Defence. It could include training and capacity building, and work under the Capacity Building in support of Security and Development initiative.⁴⁰

The EU's possible actions **regarding preventing and solving conflicts** are in general strategy document also presented in more detail. The EU should strengthen its work on conflict prevention and peacebuilding through introducing a Resilience dimension that puts a stronger emphasis on a more complete, shared analysis, engagement at community and state level, and, where appropriate, the rolling out of the integrated approach to conflict and crisis set out in the EU global strategy. The EU should give higher weight in its conflict assessment methodology to local capacities to deal with risks, and the positive factors of Resilience within a community, alongside an analysis of the power relationships and external pressures that can lead to societal breakdown. The EU should also use this strengthened analysis to inform and enhance political

38 – Council Conclusions on Eastern Partnership policy beyond 2020. Brussels, 11 May 2020 7510/1/20REV 1. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/43905/st07510-re01-en20.pdf>

39 – Michael Emerson, Steven Blockmans, Denis Cenuša, Tamara Kovziridze, Veronika Movchan. Eastern Partnership Policy Beyond 2020: Advances and Omissions in a Vast Agenda. CEPS 14.04. 2020. <https://www.ceps.eu/ceps-publications/eastern-partnership-policy-beyond-2020/>

40 – Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council. A Strategic Approach to Resilience in the EU's external action. Brussels, 7.6.2017 JOIN(2017) 21 final, pp. 8-9. https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/join_2017_21_f1_communication_from_commission_to_inst_en_v7_p1_916039.pdf

efforts by the EU and its Member States to prevent conflict, through political dialogue, a collective diplomatic response, and engagement with partners.⁴¹

Some dimensions of security are more thoroughly presented in the Communication under **different headings**.

Regarding **cyber Resilience**, the Communication states EU further support and assistance to the partner countries, by supporting the development of robust legal, policy and operational cybersecurity frameworks in the partner countries based on EU legislation and best practices, including the EU's cybersecurity certification framework (C14). Unfortunately, the discussion of strategic communication issues in Communication (C-16) is separate from the text on the hybrid threats. It could have been more productive to address those issues together under the security heading.

C. ENVIRONMENT AND CLIMATE - together towards environmental and climate Resilience

The climate and environment issues part of the Communication is long and detailed. There is talk about "urgent action". EU promises to "help partner countries fulfil their nationally determined contributions to the Paris Agreement and modernise their economies, reducing their carbon footprint and moving towards climate neutrality, while acknowledging the investment challenges". (C-11) Union supports increasing partner countries environmental and climate Resilience.

A very similar text is in the Conclusions: „Environmental, climate and energy challenges require urgent action from all sides. The EU supports an intensification of the efforts by Eastern partner countries in this respect and notes their support for the European Commission's initiative "European Green Deal". The EU will help Eastern partner countries, where appropriate, fulfil and enhance their nationally determined contributions to the Paris Agreement on Climate Change and modernise their economies, reducing their carbon footprint and moving towards climate neutrality." Furthermore, the Council stresses that adherence to the highest international standards of nuclear safety and environmental protection must be duly respected. This text is far more advanced than in 2016 Conclusions: "The Council considers the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the 2015 Paris Agreement on Climate Change as additional relevant elements in the context of engagement with the EaP partners."⁴²

Several partner countries have adopted their national green economy and climate issues long-term strategies and action plans. The resources at the disposal of the EaP countries differ. Opportunities of poorer EaP countries are at this moment comparable with many developing countries, which are not able to pledge carbon neutrality in the similar timeframe as Union. From the other side, the Azerbaijan economy is highly dependent on the production and export of the oil and especially gas. So a structured dialogue with EaP countries is needed to find out relevant to each partner country realities climate and environment cooperation priorities and forms.

41 – Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council. A Strategic Approach to Resilience in the EU's external action. Brussels, 7.6.2017 JOIN(2017) 21 final, pp. 8-9.

https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/join_2017_21_f1_communication_from_commission_to_inst_en_v7_p1_916039.pdf

42 – Eastern Partnership - Council conclusions. Brussels, 14 November 2016 14244/16

<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/22461/ep-st14244en16.pdf>

Communication pays attention to the issue of carbon leakage (“Modernising economies and trade patterns will help reducing the risk of carbon leakage.”) (C-11) It is an issue which worries European Union, which discusses carbon taxation on its borders. Estonia has raised the issue of carbon leakage in the area of electricity trade over the EU borders. To avoid surprises and trade conflicts, the question of carbon leakage measures has to be part of the dialogue with EaP countries over climate and environment cooperation.

Peoples **health and wellbeing** includes many issues which concern the citizens of the partner countries. The Communication reflects the existing fruitful cooperation in many matters as environment-related quality of life, including the environmental services (such as water supply and sanitation, waste management, green areas and urban mobility), preventing and reducing pollution, increasing the energy efficiency of buildings. (C-12) As all EaP countries have ageing and energy-wasting Soviet-era housing challenge the promise of innovative financing instruments to achieve higher building renovation rates is a welcome element of the Communication.

In the area of public health, the Communication just lists such cooperation areas as the modernisation of medical facilities, e-health, training of medical staff, providing affordable medical care to people across society, better addressing communicable and non-communicable diseases as the coronavirus disease. (C-12) Health issues are essential to the citizens of the partner countries, and there is a definite need to have sectoral dialogue in this area. Discussing the use of EU COVID-19 related assistance is maybe an excellent way to start developing more complex cooperation in the public health area, which until now was not among the Partnership priorities. In 2015 Communication the issue of health was mentioned five times, but it was not a separate priority. In the Conclusions, the text about COVID-19 is firm: “The Council welcomes the proposed new emphasis on wellbeing and public health in Eastern partner countries, notably as regards COVID-19. “The document confirms EU support to the Partners: “The Council appreciates the European approach of Team Europe putting forward a support package to help the partner countries tackle the crisis, particularly in mitigating the impact of the COVID-19 outbreak on human lives, employment and economies. “Societal effects of the virus-crisis also get attention in the Conclusions: “Increased cooperation is also required to take measures to prevent domestic violence and to ensure solidarity and support to persons in vulnerable situations.”

The **circular economy** is a new cooperation issue. Work will continue on the promotion of sustainable product policies, eco-innovation, extended producer responsibility, other ways to prevent and reduce waste, waste management, green public procurement and better consumer information. The EU will engage with the partner countries towards reforming resource-intensive sectors such as plastics, textiles or construction. Once again, there is a reason to mention the need for sectoral dialogue, as the current text is just pointing out the themes and must lead to agreed actions. (C-12)

In the area of environmental governance, there is an idea of the support to the issue-specific leadership roles of the Member States and partner countries in specific areas. (C-13) It demands a lot of devotion and resources, especially for smaller countries, it would be a challenge, and they may be able to do that in only limited areas.

To strengthen **energy security**, diversification of the energy mix is necessary, notably via renewable energy sources, states the Communication. It is also essential to add new energy connections, and this goal is reflected in the part of the document about interconnections.

Partner countries are competent in deciding on their energy mix, and some may choose nuclear. Communication promises that the EU will continue to contribute to strengthening international nuclear safety. (C-13) There are working nuclear power stations in Ukraine (4) and Armenia. Astravets station in Belarus is near to completion. This project led to the debate over nuclear safety with neighbouring Lithuania.

D. DIGITAL DEVELOPMENT- together for a resilient digital transformation

Digital area has a prominent place in Communication, and it is a constructive text. In the 2015 document, it was represented only just in one very general paragraph. During the last years, digital issues were high on the practical cooperation agenda with EaP countries as the 7th Deliverable in the document “20 Deliverables for 2020 “. In general, the digital area is valued as “on track “ in the Joint Staff Document⁴³. Now there is a long term priority “Together for a resilient digital transformation “. This area already benefits from advanced sectoral cooperation.

There have been already three ministerial meetings between the EU and Eastern partnership countries, the last one in Bucharest, Romania, on 28 February 2019 ⁴⁴.

The digital issues part of the Conclusions does not offer new elements, maybe because the existing ambitious and solid base in the Communication and ministerial documents. The Council states: “Building on achievements so far, work in this area should aim to extend the benefits of the Digital Single Market and support the full implementation of current and future commitments. Strengthening eGovernance, supporting innovative digital start-ups, addressing the digital skills gap and in general increasing efficiency, transparency and accountability are key to facilitate the digital transition of economies and societies.” The text in 2016 Conclusions was minimal and vague, so the new Conclusions are a good step forwards.

The progress in the digital area is dependent on the development of high-quality **electronic communications infrastructure** and services at affordable prices. The EU will also continue to support, notably through technical assistance and exchange of best practices, the extension of secure and very high capacity Gigabit broadband infrastructures in partner countries. Communication states that “the EU will support the implementation of roaming and spectrum agreements among the partner countries and, where appropriate, with the EU”. (C-13) The primary interest of the Partnership countries is a roaming area with the EU, because of the large number of people working in EU countries and also tourism. In their 2019 Declaration, the digital issues ministers reaffirmed “their commitment to sign by the end of 2020 a Regional Roaming Agreement, in order to reduce the roaming tariffs”⁴⁵. There is no timetable for roaming agreements with the EU in Communication.

43 – Joint Staff Working Document. Structured Consultation on the Future of the Eastern Partnership. Brussels, 18.3.2020 SWD(2020) 56 final/2
https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/jswd_structured_consultation_on_the_future_of_the_eastern_partnership.pdf

44 – Eastern Partnership: Promoting Stronger Digital Economies for the EU's Six Eastern Partners. European Commission. Bucharest, 28 February 2019 <https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/news/eastern-partnership-promoting-stronger-digital-economies-eus-six-eastern-partners>

45 – Eastern Partnership: Promoting Stronger Digital Economies for the EU's Six Eastern Partners. European Commission. Bucharest, 28 February 2019 <https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/news/eastern-partnership-promoting-stronger-digital-economies-eus-six-eastern-partners>

Work will build on the success of operational programmes launched under the Project EU4Digital: supporting digital economy and society in the Eastern Partnership ⁴⁶. 2019-22 this project receives 11 million euros EU funding. It helps EaP countries in reducing roaming tariffs, developing high-speed broadband, expanding e-services, harmonising digital frameworks in areas ranging from logistics to health, building cybersecurity, developing skills, and creating more jobs in the digital industry. The EU4Digital programme also supports efforts to achieve a common roaming space among EaP countries by 2020, to strengthen the independence of National Regulatory Authorities, and to develop coordinated strategies for frequency distribution.

Communication states that the EU will support further the strengthening of **eGovernance** in the EaP Region, to increase efficiency, transparency and accountability for public administrations and facilitate reforms. In this respect, the EU will support the adoption of legal frameworks for electronic identification schemes and electronic trust services in the EaP, in line with EU legislation and best practices, to pave the way for mutual recognition agreements among the partner countries and with the EU. (C-13) The eGovernance part of the Communication is an ambitious basis for further work and expects active interest from all participants. Estonia was very active in promoting these goals for EaP and has been one of the most energetic Member States in practical cooperation. EU4Digital activities also include the support to the development of trust services in the digital economy, and cyber-security for improved Resilience of critical infrastructure, as essential building blocks for interoperable cross-border eServices in the Eastern Partnership Region.

The programme supports digital trade facilitation and harmonisation among Eastern Partner countries and with the EU, by promoting common frameworks for eCommerce, eCustoms and eLogistics, and working towards Digital Transport Corridors. EU4Digital also supports reforms and actions to favour the development of ICT research, start-ups & innovation ecosystems across the Eastern Partnership Region. The programme supports the development of harmonised national frameworks for eHealth, both among EaP partner countries and with the EU.

The EU will further support and assist the cyber Resilience of the partner countries, declares Communication.

E. SOCIETIES - together for resilient, fair and inclusive societies

The presentation of the issues of societal development in Communication and Conclusions repeats well-known main principles and norms. Communication states: "Transparent, citizen-centred and accountable public administrations, and free and fair elections, are essential for democracy. Together with an engaged civil society, free, plural and independent media and the protection of citizens' rights, these are key ingredients for resilient, fair, inclusive, and democratic societies". (C-14)

Conclusions emphasise in a very similar way: "The Council underlines the crucial importance for resilient, fair and inclusive societies of professional, depoliticised, people-centred and accountable public administrations, including local and regional authorities. The EU will help in building strong democratic institutions and functioning public administrations implementing structural reforms, also through Twinning and TAIEX instruments. The Council highlights the importance of free, fair and credible elections, preserving civil society space and for support of an engaged civil society, including think-tanks, protection of human rights defenders, as well

46 – The EU4 Digital Initiative. European Commission <http://www.eufordigital.eu>

as free, plural and independent media, journalists and media literacy. The Council stresses the critical cooperation in the area of protection and promotion of human rights and of combatting discrimination on any grounds as well as the protection of people in vulnerable situations including rights of persons belonging to minorities, and underlines that cooperation in these areas will remain a key priority for the EU. “

This text reflects the well-publicised problems with democratic development in Partnership countries. There is a real problem of repressions against human rights defenders and independent media in some EaP countries⁴⁷. Monitoring the implementation of reforms remains crucial, and civil society should play a more influential role in it.

The EU will support inclusive and evidence-based policy development, as well as sound public financial management, to improve services to people and businesses. It is crucial to ensure that authorities involve citizens in decision-making. The partner countries need to professionalise their civil service and increase accountability at all levels of government. Public administration reform, including issues related to transparency, is also a key driver of economic growth and can reduce corruption risks, for example, through e-government solutions. (C-14)

Furthermore, the EU and the partner countries will consider intensifying peer-to-peer learning, including through an EaP School of Public Administration. For example, the Eastern Partnership Academy of Public Administration (EPAPA)⁴⁸ came into existence during the Polish presidency of the EU Council. The Academy aims at strengthening government administration in the Eastern Partnership countries by organising specialised training for civil servants. Throughout 2011 – 2018, altogether they held 28 training modules for 504 officials from the countries of the Eastern Partnership⁴⁹. Peer-to-peer learning is a useful tool. This goal needs practical measures, for example, in the area of twinning or long-time apprenticeship.

Communication pays a lot of attention to the development of civil society and youth participation. Building on innovative actions and engagement to date, the EU will further support the capacity of civil society organisations, particularly grass-root organisations, to meaningfully engage in policy-making processes and policy dialogue, and promote reforms and public accountability. It will develop further strategic partnerships with key organisations to strengthen cooperation, build up the leadership skills of civil society activists, and engage with social partners (trades unions and employers' organisations). Working with partner countries to promote an enabling environment for civil society will be key. The EaP Civil Society Forum will continue to be a key partner in advancing the role of civil society in policy dialogue. (C-14) This part of the document reflects many contributions from the civil society representatives during the structured consultations. The issue of civil society is now more complicated. There are also civil society organisations with opposite views to the “traditional” pro-democracy and liberal values civil society organisations, and some have a religious background, some have close relations with populist movements in the West.

47 – Look for example at country reports in Human Rights Watch 2020 Annual Report
https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/world_report_download/hrw_world_report_2020_0.pdf

48 – Eastern Partnership Academy of Public Administration
<https://www.polskapomoc.gov.pl/Eastern,Partnership,Academy,of,Public,Administration,1942.html>

49 – Eastern Partnership Academy of Public Administration
<https://www.polskapomoc.gov.pl/Eastern,Partnership,Academy,of,Public,Administration,1942.html>

The EU will also increasingly focus on youth participation and leadership. Conclusions state: “The Council reiterates the crucial role of cross-border cooperation and people-to-people contacts especially between the younger generation for the development of Eastern partner countries’ societies and underlines the need to put support for youth at the centre of the Eastern Partnership beyond 2020 “. Communication confirms that the Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps programmes will empower the young generation by contributing to the establishment of inclusive and evidence-based youth policy, developing skills, supporting volunteering and cooperation projects. The Civil Society Fellowships scheme and the Young European Ambassadors initiative will continue. The EaP Youth Forum will play become better integrated into structured youth policy dialogue within a network of EaP youth councils, modelled on the EU-internal youth structured dialogue. (C-14-15)

Active and engaged youth is crucial to the future. But today one of the challenges remains the position and difficulties of the older generation people in EaP countries. For example, in the labour market, the big problem is over 50 years old employment, not youth employment as in the many EU Member States.

The EU will support **independent media** outlets that produce high quality and diverse content. (C-15) To counter threats inside and outside the EU adopted in December 2018 the Action Plan against disinformation⁵⁰. Looking ahead, all relevant actors, including EU institutions, EU Member States, partner countries, industry and civil society should continue to play a role in scaling up independent fact-checking services and promoting media literacy.

The EU will continue to support the partner countries in advancing **human rights**, including ensuring that everyone can fully enjoy civil and political, as well as economic, social and cultural rights. To ensure a high level of protection of the fundamental rights to privacy and data protection, the EU will continue to engage with Eastern partner countries to promote further converge with EU and international data protection standards. (C-15) It is necessary for the facilitation of commercial exchanges and law enforcement cooperation. Human rights issues in EaP countries continue to need serious EU efforts, sometimes also pressure, as some situations are object for EU conclusions, statements.

Addressing **migration** challenges is also a joint priority, even it is less prominently visible in the texts. The word “migration “was present in 2015 ENP Communication 26 times, in 2020 document three times.

The Communication notes that citizens of Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine enjoy visa-free movement with EU. With three other countries, there are agreements about visa facilitation, the one with Belarus not yet in force. The Communication states: “To ensure mobility and people-to-people contacts in a secure and well-managed environment the successful implementation of existing agreements on visa facilitation and readmission, as well as the continuous fulfilment of relevant visa liberalisation benchmarks, are essential. The possibility to launch new visa liberalisation dialogues with the remaining countries, whose citizens require visas to travel to the EU, will be considered, provided that well-managed and secure mobility conditions are in place, including through the satisfactory implementation of the visa facilitation and readmission

50 – European Commission and High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. Joint Communication to the European Parliament, the European Council, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions: Action Plan against Disinformation. Brussels, 5.12.2018 JOIN(2018) 36 final
https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/action_plan_against_disinformation.pdf

agreements. Complementing this, balanced and mutually beneficial mobility partnerships will ensure sustainable engagement.” (C-15)

Conclusions mostly just repeat these statements: “The Council underlines that in order to ensure mobility in a secure and well-managed environment, the successful implementation of existing visa liberalisation action plans through continuous fulfilment of relevant benchmarks, and of the visa facilitation and readmission agreements is essential. The possibility to launch new visa liberalisation dialogues with the remaining countries, whose citizens require visas to travel to the EU, will be considered, in due course, if conditions allow, provided that well-managed and secure mobility conditions are in place, including through the satisfactory implementation of the visa facilitation and readmission agreements.”

Some EU Member States have problems with numerous asylum seekers from Associated countries. According to the data from Eurostat database in 2019 the number of asylum applicants in EU-27 from EaP countries was: Armenia- 4315, Azerbaijan- 4315, Belarus-1040, Georgia- 21555, Moldova- 5615 and Ukraine- 9415. In Conclusions there is a clear indication of the worries: “The Council recalls the mutual benefits and responsibilities from the visa suspension mechanism and notes that the high number of unfounded asylum applications by some Eastern partner countries nationals in the EU Member States raises concerns. The Commission is monitoring the situation, especially in the context of the reporting under the visa suspension mechanism.” Some politicians in the EU Members States even propose to turn back visa suspension with countries with numerous unfounded asylum applications, they also pay attention to the issues of organised crime using the opportunities of the freedom of the movement.

Communication mentions: “Labour migration initiatives amongst the partner countries as well as between EaP and EU countries will be considered which aim to establish partnerships to foster legal migration and mobility, enhancing cooperation and cross fertilisation of skills and competencies while taking account of the impact of brain drain on partner countries’ human capital. To help people and goods move across borders, technical and administrative cooperation in integrated border management will be strengthened.” (C-15) We have seen efforts of several EU Member States during the virus-crisis to bring back legal workers and seasonal employees from Ukraine and other EaP countries, who have been during last years part of the functioning of their economies.

STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION, GOVERNANCE AND IMPLEMENTATION

In the EaP, a need for an energetic and more strategic approach to communication has gained political attention in recent years, also in the wake of growing disinformation against EU values. Communication states that strategic communication is crucial for building Resilience. It calls to use clear, story-based, tailor-made messaging. The EU works for raising awareness of the positive impact of its policies and actions with the overarching message ‘Stronger Together’. Union also moves from a project-based to country-specific, more thematic, campaign-based communication. (C-16)

This strengthened and coordinated Union approach has led to a better understanding of and increased credibility for the EU among citizens across the EaP. Communication reflects annual Opinion polls carried out by European Commission’s “EU Neighbours East”. They show a steady

increase in the positive perception of the EU by citizens from across the partner countries, with 52% of citizens (up 7 percentage points since 2016) having a positive image of the EU in 2019. 52% level leaves a lot of room for improvement. 67% of the population (up 4%) believe that relations between their country and the EU are positive. The EU remains the most trusted foreign institution for 58% of citizens. (C-16)

The message of the Conclusions about the strategic communication issues is also more focused than before: "Strategic communication should remain a key task, in order to promote the visibility and benefits of the cooperation between the EU and the Eastern Partnership countries, not least in the wake of growing disinformation. The Council calls for the EU, the Member States and Eastern partner countries to work together to develop a common narrative based on shared values, adherence to the rules based international order, including respect for human rights, and the benefits of cooperation to the lives of people and the positive impact of EU policies." The statement about "a common narrative based on shared values" is easy to implement in some EaP countries and challenging in some others with the complicated situation in the area of human rights.

Communication does not directly connect the stratcom issues, which are mentioned in the Communication only once. ("The EU will consider providing training opportunities and capacity building to the partner countries, including on countering hybrid threats, where appropriate"). (C-10) Although the document recognises the growing threat from disinformation, it does not attribute it to specific sources. Current virus-crisis has led to the confrontation of different narratives and interpretations also in the Partnership countries, EU's message has to compete with views from different influential countries, both official and unofficial channels, especially in the social media. The valuable contribution of the EEAS East StratCom task force⁵¹ needs further support, and this work is part of the text of the Communication about achievements of the EaP. (C-3) But the task force is not mentioned in the strategic communication part of the document even it has a significant role in the Region⁵². Communication talks about disinformation against the EU values, but we can see a lot of activities in the social media which aim to weaken EU as a global player. Communication lacks operational aspects in this area- it does not say much about how to organise countering the false statements and attacks against European values.

Conclusions have much more focused message: "The Council recalls the importance to strengthen capacity and Resilience of Eastern partner countries against disinformation. The Council recalls the key role of the East StratCom Task Force to this end and reiterates its support for it. Improved visibility through, among other things, education programmes and exchanges and cultural diplomacy is crucial for the public support for the Eastern Partnership in both the EU and Eastern partner countries."

51 – EU vs Disinfo Database. East Stratcom Task Force <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/>

52 – Questions and Answers about the East StratCom Task Force. EEAS 05/12/2018 https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/2116/-questions-and-answers-about-the-east-stratcom-task-force_en

NEXT ACTIONS

The European Council, the European Parliament and the Council are in Communication invited to endorse Joint Communication that will also be presented to the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions. The EU discusses it with partner countries preparing the EaP Summit scheduled initially in June 2020 but which will because of the COVID-19 crisis happen later. Conclusions text about the Summit: “The Council looks forward to the next Eastern Partnership Summit which is expected to review the results delivered since the last Summit and set out the direction and the way forward in further strengthening and deepening cooperation between the Eastern partner countries and the EU as well as among the Eastern partners. The Summit is also expected to endorse long-term policy objectives on the basis of the Joint Communication on the EaP beyond 2020, the present Council Conclusions and input of Member States and Eastern partner countries, as well as to give a mandate to pursue preparatory work for the next generation of post 2020 deliverables.”

European Parliament started to work with the European Parliament recommendation to the Council, the Commission and the Vice-President of the Commission / High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy on the Eastern Partnership, in the run-up to the June 2020 Summit. The Rapporteur is MEP Petras Auštrevičius. AFET Committee of the EP adopted the draft report⁵³ with numerous amendments on 19 May 2020.

Shaping the future deliverables for beyond 2020 will, therefore, be a task for the next period.

The Estonian Center for Eastern Partnership (ECEAP) does not take collective positions. This analytic paper, like all publications of the ECEAP, represents only the views of its authors.

53 – Draft Report on a European Parliament Recommendation to the Council, the Commission and the Vice-President of the Commission / High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy on the Eastern Partnership, in the run-up to the June 2020 Summit (2019/2209(INI)) Committee on Foreign Affairs. Rapporteur: Petras Auštrevičius
https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/AFET-PR-646863_EN.pdf