

An Eastern Policy Update, but No Upgrade: The EU needs a more ambitious Eastern Partnership strategy

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DGAP POLICY BRIEF

An Eastern Policy Update, but No Upgrade

The EU needs a more ambitious Eastern Partnership strategy



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The EU is set to adopt a new Eastern Partnership (EaP) policy at a summit in June. This is strategically important for it and for its eastern neighborhood, where other powers like Russia and China pursue competing interests. As the policymaking process stands and given the tight deadline, however, the EU will only update and not upgrade the EaP framework due to EU states' diverging interests. Brussels and Berlin will need to keep the EaP on the agenda after the summit to safeguard the EU's transformative power in the region.

- The EU should further differentiate its approach to EaP countries 'most willing' to have closer ties with it (Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine) by deepening sectoral cooperation and allowing them to gradually integrate into the Single Market.
- The EU needs a smart, enhanced approach to security cooperation to strengthen the EaP states' capacity to counter hybrid threats. Deeper security and defense cooperation could be pursued bilaterally or by groups of willing member states.
- The tight process of drafting the new policy should not be an obstacle for the European Commission to propose a long-term partnership approach that helps EaP countries sustainably withstand the main economic, political, and security challenges they face.
- The new EaP policy has to represent a credible commitment. Germany should keep the EaP on the agenda in its EU presidency in the second half of 2020 to bring more substance to the framework that will be adopted in June.

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Introduction

In line with the European Council's decision of June 2019,¹ European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen has instructed Commissioner for Neighborhood and Enlargement Olivér Várhelyi to design a new set of long-term policy objectives for the six countries of the Eastern Partnership (EaP): Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine.² The new policy will be endorsed on June 18, 2020 at the long-overdue EaP summit in Brussels. While the 20 Deliverables for 2020 adopted in 2017 will soon be outdated, now is also the beginning of a new political cycle in Brussels with a European Commission that has set for itself a more ambitious geopolitical role. High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell has repeatedly emphasized that the EU's ambition to project power at the global level and to devise credible approaches to geostrategic actors such as China, Russia, or Turkey will only work if it is able to deal with its neighborhood.³ In this context, we are now at a new political juncture for the EU and its eastern neighbors to reset their partnership.

Under current circumstances, however, the EaP policy is hostage to internal and external challenges for the EU. Since the start of the new European Commission's mandate, the new policy has been prepared under a tight time schedule and below the political radar, having been overshadowed by the debate about enlargement and other external relations issues. The process, as a result, lacks sufficient transparency outside of Brussels. Most member states, moreover, have neither the time nor the capacity available to formulate a novel vision that would set new goals and deliverables for the next EaP policy. Expectations of a full revamp before the June summit are therefore low despite the region's strategic im-

portance for the EU. Most likely, the summit will set the tone for a new conversation on what comes next for the EaP, opening up the opportunity for Germany during its EU presidency in the second half of this year to contribute to the refining of the guiding priorities for the EU's eastern policy.

A strong EU commitment at the June summit is needed, however, as EaP countries are undergoing new political instability or stand at junctures where citizens' aspirations toward a European future are daily put to the test. Georgia is preparing for parliamentary elections in autumn whose processes and results experts expect will be contested. Ukraine has been punished by Russia since 2014 for its choice of the European geopolitical vector. Moldova is struggling with the influence of strong vested interests that impede its reform progress and democratic transformation. Armenia is in the middle of difficult systemic changes in which EU support can make the difference between the country backsliding or progressing on the promises of its Velvet Revolution. For nearly all the EaP countries Russia and Turkey put their reform path under pressure or offer alternative role models for political elites. There is a growing competition in the region between the EU and Russia, Turkey, and China, where even the 'most willing' EaP countries are not certain anymore about the EU as the 'only model' for further development. This all takes place against the background of the EU being affected by internal weaknesses. At this critical juncture, a weak EU that is unable to make a credible statement of its intentions towards the region and its interests there can significantly weaken political and social forces that are still fighting endemic corruption and vested interests to secure a democratic future of their countries.

¹ European Council, "European Council Conclusions on the MFF, Climate Change, Disinformation and Hybrid Threats, External Relations, Enlargement and the European Semester, 20 June 2019," June 20, 2019 <<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2019/06/20/european-council-conclusions-20-june-2019/>> (accessed February 21, 2020).

² European Commission, "President von der Leyen's Mission Letter to Olivér Várhelyi," November 7, 2019 <https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/president-elect_von_der_leyens_mission_letter_to_oliver_varhelyi.pdf> (accessed February 21, 2020).

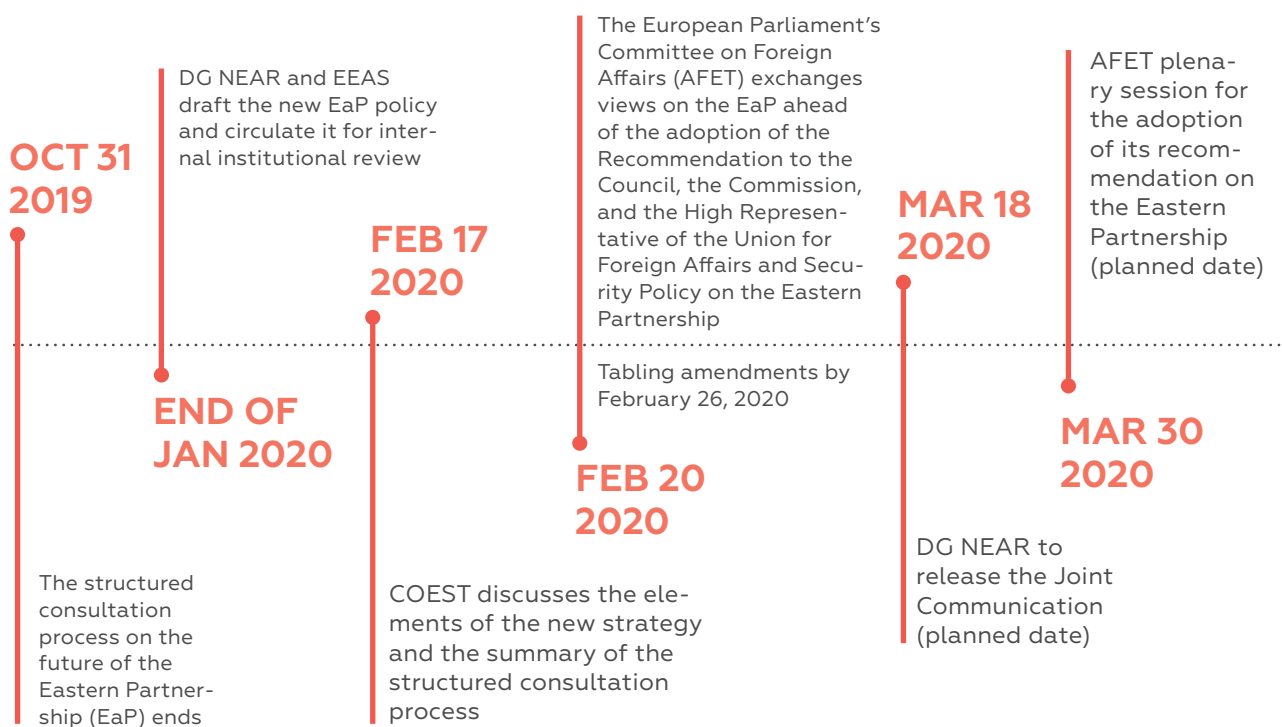
³ Jacopo Barigazzi, "Borrell Urges EU to Be Foreign Policy Player, Not the Playground," Politico, September 12, 2019 <<https://www.politico.eu/article/on-foreign-policy-josep-borrell-urges-eu-to-be-a-player-not-the-playground-balkans/>> (accessed March 9, 2020).

1. A TIGHT DEADLINE

The new European Commission under the leadership of its Directorate-General for European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations (DG NEAR) and the European External Action Service (EEAS) have only few weeks left to propose, consult around, and finalize a new Eastern Partnership policy as well as have it endorsed by the European Council ahead of the June summit. In December and January, DG NEAR and the EEAS evaluated the outcomes of the structured consultation process on the future of the EaP that the European Commission conducted in the second half of 2019 at the request of the European Council. They then presented the elements of the new policy at the Council working group (COEST). The next step is for the European Commission to release the draft new EaP policy at the end of March. It will then be presented to member states for endorsement at the Foreign Affairs Council meeting in April or May. The EaP countries also have to be consulted so that they are on board before the summit (see Figure 1). So far it remains unclear what role High Representative Borrell will play in this policy process.

While a parallel informal consultation process with EU capitals continues, the time for negotiations and forming a sound, lasting consensus around the future EaP policy has been almost exhausted. The tight timeframe significantly reduces the space for policy discussions on matters that could define the credibility of the EU's commitment in the region. It is up to DG NEAR to look for consensus on a policy that is still divisive among member states while it carefully navigates between their different priorities and sensitivities.

FIGURE 1: TIMELINE OF POLICY MAKING RELATED TO THE EASTERN PARTNERSHIP IN THE RUN-UP TO THE JUNE SUMMIT



2. AN UPDATE RATHER THAN AN UPGRADE

The current framework of the 20 Deliverables for 2020, which was adopted at the previous Eastern Partnership summit in 2017, is coming to its endpoint with implementation mostly lagging (see Figure 2). This could be either upgraded (significant deepening or extension of goals and deliverables, with the EU formulating a novel vision for engagement) or updated (revision of the deliverables under a new, slightly modified package). All the evidence to date suggest the new EaP policy that will be put for adoption at the June summit will only be an update on the existing one rather than an upgrade. Three factors are required for an upgrade: consensus among member states, political leadership and prioritization of this policy dossier in Brussels, and significant progress by EaP countries in domestic reforms. At the moment, none of these three factors are sufficiently strong.

As explained below, the EU’s divisions over how to engage with the neighborhood, the internal and external challenges that pushed the EaP down the EU’s list of priorities, and the lack of consolidated progress on key democratic reforms in the EaP countries

all make an update of the EaP policy rather than an upgrade the most likely outcome.

2.1. The EU is Disunited

The EU and its member states currently face deep internal and external challenges that trump their capacity to act not only globally, but also in the eastern neighborhood. The most divisive issues vision-wise when it comes to upgrading the Eastern Partnership are the policy’s end-goal (that is, there is no consensus on further eastern enlargement) and the Russia factor. A strong consensus on both is needed for the EU to be able to formulate a vision for its eastern neighborhood. Since the EU shifted its borders further to the east, these issues have always been on the table, but member states have not reached a common position on them so far.

More recently, both issues have become even more divisive in the context of President Emmanuel Macron’s initiatives to overhaul the EU accession process and to pursue a policy of outreach to Russia. His veto in October 2019 on opening accession talks with Albania and North Macedonia was a reminder that the member states, rather than the EU institutions, are in the driver’s seat when it comes to enlargement.

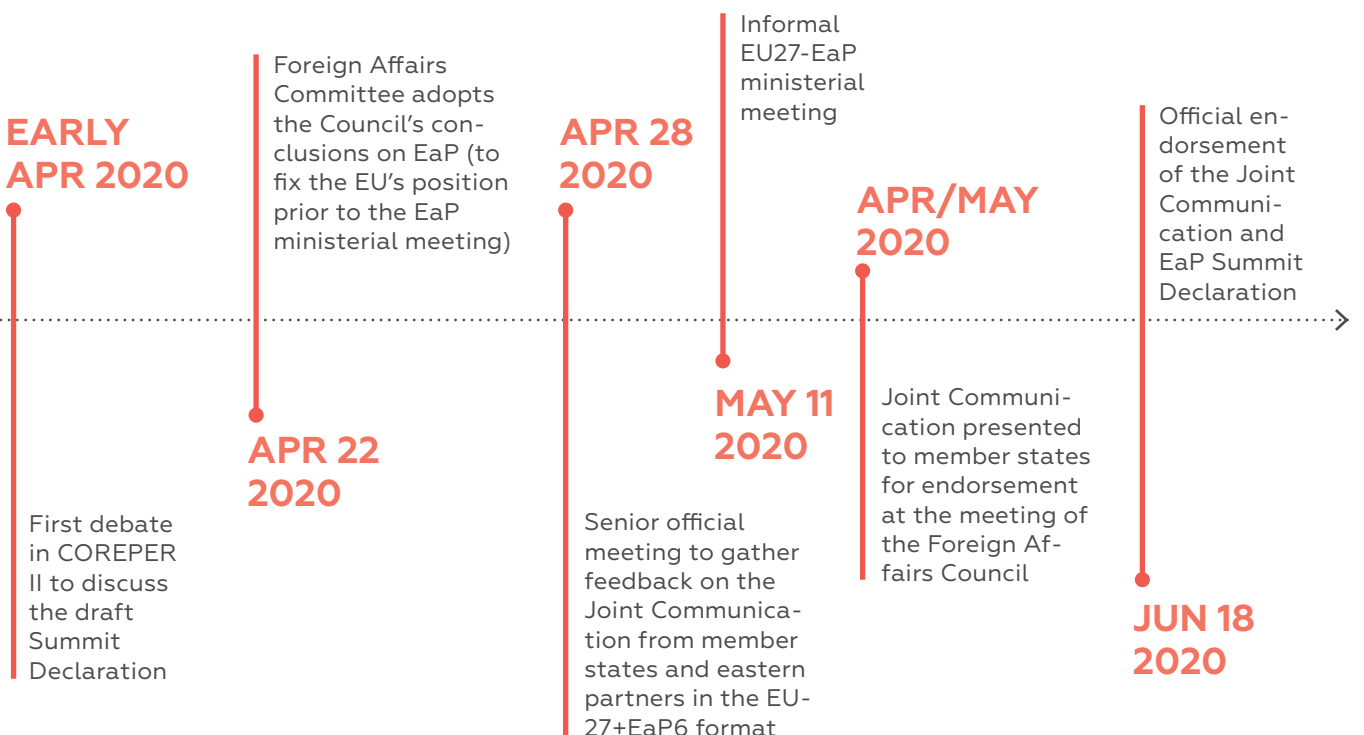
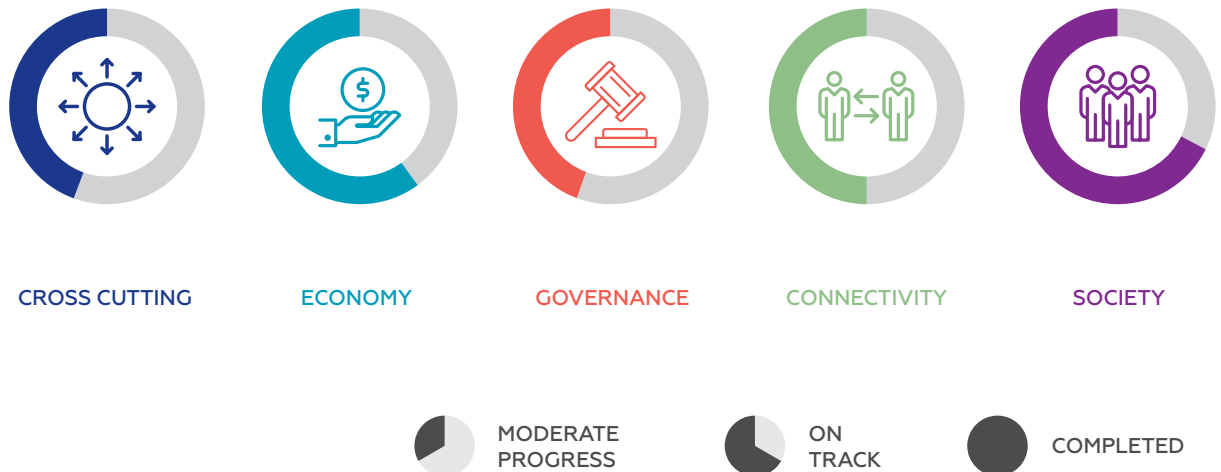


FIGURE 2: 20 DELIVERABLES FOR 2020 – PROGRESS ACHIEVED IN 2018

Source: The Eastern Partnership 20 Deliverables for 2020: State of Play in 2018
<https://www.euneighbours.eu/en/east/eu-in-action/eap10> (accessed March 11, 2020)

This has been reinforced by the European Commission's proposed new methodology for the accession process, which was published in February.⁴ The proposal comes, to an extent, in response to France's demands by providing a stronger political role to member states.⁵ It offers them also to be involved more systematically in monitoring and reviewing the accession process. More broadly, there is little appetite for further enlargement and no consensus on whether providing a membership perspective, however distant, for the 'most willing' states of the EaP is a credible promise that could be made this year.

EU member states also differ in their views on how to deal with Russia when it comes to their common neighborhood, as it was also the case in 2009 when the EaP policy was established. The region has now become much more contested, in particular after Russia's annexation of Crimea and the start of the armed conflict in the Donbas region of eastern Ukraine since 2014. Russia's assertiveness in the

region, its hybrid warfare against the West, and its clear signals about not tolerating further expansion of the EU and NATO to the east have achieved the desired effect in many European capitals, where there is a strong hesitation about any kind of confrontation with Moscow as well as a fatigue with the status quo in EU-Russia relations. Moreover, Macron advocates resetting Europe's relations with Russia in its quest for strategic autonomy and a new European security architecture.⁶ At the same, in the United Kingdom the EU has now lost one of its most critical members towards Russia. The EU needs to clarify its common position vis-à-vis Russia, regardless of the EaP, so as not to undermine its aspiration to become a geopolitical power, but this is unlikely to happen before the EaP summit in June. Macron's wish for rapprochement with Russia and the criticism this has drawn from many member states suggests more division than unity around the Russia question in the months to come.

⁴ European Commission, „A More Credible, Dynamic, Predictable and Political EU Accession Process – Commission Lays Out Its Proposals,” February 5, 2020 <https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_20_181> (accessed February 21, 2020)

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, “Speech of the President of the Republic Emmanuel Macron on the Defense and Deterrence Strategy,” February 7, 2020 <<https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/french-foreign-policy/security-disarmament-and-non-proliferation/news/news-about-defence-and-security/article/speech-of-the-president-of-the-republic-emmanuel-macron-on-the-defense-and->> (accessed February 21, 2020).

2.2. The EaP is not an EU Geopolitical Priority

Lack of unity on how to drive forward relations with the Eastern Partnership countries confirms the deep differences in how member states perceive the EU's borders and relations with neighboring powers. It leaves the EU, as a result, without political leadership and fragmented commitment towards the eastern neighborhood among other competing challenges.

The EaP is not a priority for the EU and its member states currently, despite the rhetoric in Brussels. During a visit to Ukraine in February, Commissioner for Neighborhood and Enlargement Várhelyi said: 'This Commission is a geopolitical Commission and geopolitical priorities cannot be credibly represented globally if we cannot do it effectively in our neighborhood.'⁷ Yet, amid other priorities for the EU, the EaP is low on the new European Commission's agenda. Brexit and its repercussions, the negotiations for the next Multiannual Financial Framework, improving defense and security coordination, the difficult relations with the United States as a result of President Donald Trump's protectionist policies, and China's growing influence – to name only a few – all rank above the EaP among EU's priorities. Looking for consensus on an eastern policy that divides more than it unites the member states is not what the EU currently needs. In parallel, there is a lack of leadership by Germany on this issue that will last at least until the country's next elections due to domestic political constraints. Germany was initially expected to hold the EaP summit during its coming EU presidency, but it chose to prioritize other portfolios such as hosting the EU-China and the EU-Africa summits. As a result, the EaP summit was passed to Croatia, which will host it just at the end of its EU presidency. This lack of leadership and prioritization greatly reduces the likelihood that a novel vision for the EaP will be formulated and agreed upon within the remaining timeframe.

2.3. Political Instability and Lagging Fundamentals in the EaP Countries

The Eastern Partnership countries are not in a good shape and cannot contribute to providing an impe-

tus for the EU to prioritize the partnership. Due to its own internal and external pressures, the region has not become a place of stability and prosperity, despite some significant but fragile transformations. The three EaP countries that would like to see an upgrade of their partnership with the EU this June – Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine – are experiencing increased political instability that jeopardizes the speed or quality of their domestic reforms.

Ukraine's domestic reform agenda has been overshadowed by President Volodymyr Zelenskyi's efforts to end the fighting in Donbas. This has made him accept concessions that are difficult for Ukrainian society, such as agreeing to the Steinmeier formula last October or releasing controversial figures in the prisoner exchanges with Russia. As a result, this deepens the existing polarization in the country and diminishes Zelenskyi's popular support. The latter development has led to a government reshuffle on March 4 that experts predict it will diminish the pace and depth of key reforms in Ukraine.⁸

Moldova experienced much political turbulence last year and is set ahead for further challenges. After the short-lived reformist government led by Prime Minister Maia Sandu, the new government in place since last November seemingly works on the old principles of clientelism and patronage. It has issued statements that it would continue the difficult reform agenda that was set by the previous government, but has not showed so far any signs of doing so.⁹

Georgia has also faced serious challenges when it comes to democracy, good governance, and rule of law in the last few years.¹⁰ In particular, since last summer protests have erupted over dissatisfaction with how the ruling elites deal with Russia and the slowing down of domestic reforms. These keep society polarized ahead of this year's parliamentary elections, when the support and legitimacy of the ruling Georgian Dream party will be tested.

As for Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Belarus, the situation there does not provide enough reason or motivation

⁷ European Commission, „Remarks by Commissioner Várhelyi at a Press Conference with Prime Minister of Ukraine, Oleksiy Honcharuk,” February 11, 2020 <https://ec.europa.eu/commission/commissioners/2019-2024/varhelyi/announcements/remarks-commissioner-varhelyi-press-conference-prime-minister-ukraine-oleksiy-honcharuk_en> (accessed February 21, 2020).

⁸ Roman Olearchuk, “Ukraine Shake-Up Throws Future of Reforms Into Doubt,” *Financial Times*, March 8, 2020 <<https://www.ft.com/content/75583754-5fab-11ea-b0ab-339c2307bcd4>> (accessed March 9, 2020).

⁹ Dominik Istrate, “The First 100 Days of Ion Chicu: Pressure Mounts on Moldova to Deliver Reforms,” *Emerging Europe*, February 26, 2020 <<https://emerging-europe.com/news/the-first-100-days-of-ion-chicu-pressure-mounts-on-moldova-to-deliver-reforms/>> (accessed March 9, 2020).

¹⁰ Freedom House, “Freedom in the World 2019 Georgia,” 2020 <<https://freedomhouse.org/country/georgia/freedom-world/2019>> (accessed February 21, 2020).

for the EU to prioritize the EaP. The challenges of protracted transition processes, such as entrenched vested interests and weak institutions, and an aggressive Russia that has deepened the security deficit in the region through use of force, hybrid warfare, and disinformation have made it difficult for the EaP states to make any sustainable breakthroughs in the last decade.

3. THE EAP'S STRATEGIC IMPORTANCE

Despite the EU's short timeframe for developing the new Eastern Partnership policy, the lack of political leadership and commitment, and the diverging views on the future of the EaP, the eastern neighborhood remains of strategic importance and is worth prioritizing.

In the context of increasing multipolarity and geopolitical competition, its eastern neighbors are natural allies for the EU. Leaving them as a buffer zone between Russia and the EU, with no clarity on their membership perspective, will alienate their citizens at a time when the EU is still striving for building a ring of friends while Russia attempts to reassert itself as a global power by violating the international order on the EU's doorstep. Moreover, leaving the EaP countries as a buffer zone is no panacea for the EU's lack of a coherent and coordinated policy towards Russia, and it will not eliminate the risk of a conflict with Russia in the future.

In the last decade, the EU has invested a lot of efforts in the EaP countries and this has produced tangible long-term results. Modernizing societies, stronger civil society groups that act as watchdogs to keep governments accountable, and better functioning, more diversified market economies are all the result of EU's transformative power in the region. It is only a matter of time before generational change and political conjuncture lead to changing governance patterns as well.

The EU needs functioning rather than hybrid states in its eastern neighborhood for its own security and stability. As an aspiring geopolitical power, it needs to see itself as a long-term player in the region, with investments that do not necessarily yield results immediately. The EU needs to assess its efforts in the EaP countries through the lens of state-building and sustainability. Citizens in the EaP countries perceive themselves to be European. They strive to achieve European living standards despite the challenges of transition and democratization. The EU is their pole

of attraction, not Russia. By treating the region as its privileged zone of influence Russia pushes these countries away in search of alternatives that would strengthen their threatened statehood and sovereignty. The EU and the EaP countries face similar challenges to a certain degree, such as demographic decline, populism, or hybrid threats, cybercrime, and disinformation. These need to be solved together to enhance the EU's credibility, reputation, and reliability, which are currently at stake across its entire neighborhood.

4. PERSPECTIVES ON THE FUTURE OF THE EAP

The European Commission has received submissions on the future of the Eastern Partnership from 25 member states, all the Eastern Partnership countries, EU institutions, international organizations, and civil society stakeholders. It received nearly 200 written submissions through the online platform of the structured consultation process alone. It also got feedback through consultation events, joint position papers, and reports from bodies in the current EaP architecture. The common and differing positions on key objectives and priorities for cooperation among the member states and the EaP countries are analyzed below. This shows the potential areas of disagreement that might arise ahead of the summit or be swept under the carpet.

4.1. The EU Member States

Based on the tangible benefits already delivered for citizens of the Eastern Partnership countries – such as visa-free regimes and enhanced trade opportunities – there is a wide consensus among member states that the EaP is an appropriate policy framework to continue collaboration. While some call for restructuring and reorganizing the procedures under the EaP umbrella, member states broadly agree that the next set of objectives needs to build upon rather than replace the 20 Deliverables for 2020 and that new, additional structures are not needed.

As a result of the structured consultation process, supporting sustainable economic development is likely to be a key priority for further collaboration. This includes strengthening the investment and business climate; supporting growth and infrastructure development; providing assistance to small and medium-size enterprises; investing in young people's skills, education, and economic potential; and empowering regional and local actors at a larger scale.

There is also broad agreement on other equally important priorities such as the need to continue strengthening the fundamentals of good governance and the rule of law, to further enhance efforts in strategic communication by the EU, and to continue building people-to-people contacts and strengthening societal resilience. Enhanced cooperation on climate and environmental actions and policies is another strongly favored goal, which clearly reflects the priorities of the new European Commission.

In parallel, there is strong agreement on the tools that the EU should employ. It should make better use of smart conditionality by employing the principles of “more for more” and “less for less.” It should also better monitor progress on the 20 Deliverables and the implementation of reforms related to Association Agreement (AAs) and Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreements (DCFTAs).

Member states disagree upon the degree of engagement with EaP countries on defense and security issues, as well as the balance between inclusiveness and differentiation within the EaP framework.

For a few member states, such as France, defense and security clearly does not fall within the scope of the EaP. There is concern that any collaboration in this field, including on preventing cyber and hybrid threats, would work against the framework’s non-confrontational approach and be counterproductive. For others, such as Sweden and Poland, strengthening security cooperation with EaP countries represents a key component for the next partnership policy to succeed. It would help develop a sustainable security environment for these countries and make them more resilient. Germany speaks with multiple domestic voices on whether security should be a priority for the future EaP policy. Those who call for more security cooperation are not steering the political narrative, however, and Germany is among the member states that are hesitant about more joint efforts in this field. Lastly, the United Kingdom’s departure from the EU makes the likelihood of upgrading security cooperation within the EaP framework even slimmer.

For a few member states it is important to send a strong message that engagement with the EaP countries has no geopolitical aims. It is an inclusive partnership offer to all six states based on individual preferences and ambitions. Any further differentiation among them beyond the already existing differences (Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine have signed AAs/DCFTAs) should be avoided so as not to give

countries reasons to believe that the EaP is a ‘waiting room’ for EU membership. For other member states, such as the Visegrad countries, the EaP has to remain a policy for EU integration for those states that aspire to one day become EU members, and are ready to implement the reforms that would transform them into consolidated democracies and functional market economies. These member states do not perceive a multi-speed EaP a risk but rather as an open door for targeted sectoral integration in key areas of common interest such as trade, transport, digitalization, or environment, to keep EaP states interested in this multilateral framework and committed to achieving the milestones that each has agreed to. For Germany EaP engagement needs to remain inclusive, but it also needs to go beyond that by offering new possibilities of cooperation (including in areas such as education, environment, digitalization, and connectivity) for those states that are close to full implementation of their AA/DCFTAs and aspire to closer cooperation via tailored individual offers.

There is also disagreement among member states regarding the depth of sectoral cooperation and integration, which is in line with the lack of consensus on the end goal of the EaP policy.

Summarizing the perspectives above, it is clear that there are strong limitations to member states agreeing upon any novelties in the next EaP strategy. First, expectations of major changes among them are low. The existing structure of platforms and deliverables will most probably be preserved with an additional strong focus on climate and environmental action as a reflection of the new European Commission’s priorities. At the same time, the current focus on building strong economies, institutions, and societies is likely to be preserved.

Because of the limited time before the June summit and the low appetite for debate on sensitive issues, the European Commission and the EEAS are likely to follow a strategy of anticipating potential concerns of those member states that are against any security cooperation by not including controversial proposals on security and defense in the new framework they will propose. Considering, however, that a security dimension is key to the sustainability of regional stability, the European Commission is likely to search for a smart EaP framework and a carefully tailored narrative to scale up the new policy while at the same time avoid a potential conflict over explicit security engagement. This could equally mean no concerted security cooperation under the EaP

framework. For any member states and EaP countries that are willing to engage more on specific security issues, this will have to happen bilaterally or in 'coalitions of the willing'.

Due to the limited time and leadership, it is also likely that the EaP policy proposed at the June summit will include a timeframe no longer than a few years as well as be only the start of discussions on the next EaP objectives. There is also very limited time to specify refined measurement indicators for the implementation of the future EaP priorities; therefore the indicators' definition will most probably be left for only after the summit. With its EU presidency, Germany could be expected by other member states to play an increased role in this regard.

Lastly, while there is no membership perspective in sight for the three associated countries in the near future, the jury is still out on whether the new policy will embed further differentiation for them. Under such uncertainty up until the finish line, 'coalitions of the willing' such as the Visegrad group can have a critical role to play in advocating for more differentiation in the context of lack of clear leadership on this policy unlike in 2009 when Poland and Sweden assumed strong advocacy roles.

4.2. The EaP Countries

While the six Eastern Partnership countries have individually contributed to the structured consultation process, the three associated countries (Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine) have also issued two joint statements on the future of the Eastern Partnership in recent months. The December 2019 statement delineates their expectation for differentiation among the EaP countries. The three countries strongly conveyed their expectation that the EU will come up with a 'long-term, strategic, forward-looking agenda with political objectives and new benchmarks for the Partnership that will open the way for building ever closer relations.'¹¹ They also expect new ambitious targets, more broadly, such as gradual integration into the Single Market and the establishment of a common economic space. They call for further sectoral integration in the areas of energy, transport, digitalization, customs cooperation, trade facilitation, and justice and home affairs.

The associated countries call strongly for the EU to increase its engagement in peaceful conflict resolution by strengthening its presence in the conflict-affected areas – an aspect of security cooperation that is unlikely to appeal to several member states. All three are also interested in enhanced cooperation with the EU and its member states on cyber security and countering hybrid threats, as well as countering disinformation and propaganda. Unexpectedly perhaps, even Azerbaijan and Belarus have expressed interest in collaborating with the EU on soft security matters, including migration management and border and human security. This reinforces the argument that the EU should expand security cooperation with the EaP states.

The EaP countries have expressed a much more modest interest in an enhanced climate and environment agenda than the member states. Considering that there are member states that strongly advocate a 'green agenda' in line with the priorities of the new European Commission, a clash over the extent of 'green action' on the next EaP agenda is likely unavoidable.

The EaP countries seem to have priorities in mind that clearly converge with those of the member states. There is most convergence on the need to support economic development as a means to build stronger states and societies. This requires significant resources, however, which is first a matter for further negotiation among the member states. There is least convergence on the need and extent of differentiation, security cooperation, and environment and climate action.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

The year 2020 is an opportunity for the EU to prove in its eastern neighborhood that it is a global actor able and willing to project power and influence. Though it has not put time on its side by scheduling the Eastern Partnership summit within half a year of the start of a new European Commission that has more immediate priorities to deal with, the EU needs to take the EaP to the next level to safeguard its strategic interests and to elevate the union itself to the next level.

¹¹ 3 DCFAs, "Joint Statement by the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of Georgia, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine on the Future of Eastern Partnership," December 5, 2019 <<https://3dcftas.eu/library/documents/joint-statement-by-the-ministers-of-foreign-affairs-of-georgia,-the-republic-of-moldova-and-ukraine-on-the-future-of-eastern-partnership>> (accessed March 9, 2020).

On the substance of the EaP policy

1. The June summit will most likely not see bold proposals for the EU's new EaP policy – not least because the EU lacks a common vision for how to engage with the region. Considering the strategic importance of the region for the EU's security, the investments that it has made through its EaP policy, and the strong ties that it has developed with those segments of societies in the region that work to build more sustainable and resilient democracies, the EU's renewed set of long-term priorities for the eastern neighborhood needs to ensure the maintenance of EU's transformative power there, which would enable the EaP states to tackle the challenges ahead. This could be done by:

a. Refocusing policy in the EaP countries on democratization by concentrating on institution-building, with the public administration, judiciary, prosecution services, and anti-corruption as key areas for reform.

b. Proposing a sustainable and credible new framework for long-term engagement with the EaP countries that suits their different levels of demand and aspirations for closer ties with the EU.

2. To sustain the political impetus for difficult domestic transformation processes, the EU should pursue a differentiated approach towards the 'most willing' of the EaP countries (Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine) by deepening existing relations via targeted sectoral cooperation in more key areas of common interest. Strengthened cooperation and subsequent gradual full integration into the Single Market need to be conditional on reforms and significant progress in good governance, rule of law, and the fight against corruption. The principle of conditionality should not be sacrificed for economic benefits for individual countries as this will damage the credibility and reputation of the EU among the reformist segments of EaP societies.

3. While the EU acknowledges the strategic importance of the eastern neighborhood, it is not prepared for the comprehensive security challenges it faces in the region and its member states are divided on how to approach them. The EU should include a smart security cooperation approach in the new framework to strengthen the capacity of EaP states to counteract hybrid threats, disinformation and propaganda. More, en-

hanced security and defense cooperation should be pursued bilaterally or by groups of states willing to further assist EaP states in decreasing their vulnerability to security and cyber threats.

4. Under Germany's EU presidency, a new set of instruments should be adopted to ensure the effective implementation and monitoring of progress on AA/DCFTA reforms, as well as broader reform-assessment mechanisms for the next set of EaP deliverables. In this regard:

a. The EU needs to back up the next EaP framework with an adequate level of financing that should be sustainably embedded in the Multiannual Financial Framework for 2021-2027. Regardless of whether the European Neighborhood Instrument is preserved or not as a separate tool in the new financial architecture, the resources to be allotted should match the newly set priorities.

b. Germany should use the opportunity of its EU presidency to call a ministerial meeting between the member states and the EaP countries to adopt an inclusive operationalization mechanism of the new priorities that will be adopted at the June summit.

On the policymaking process

5. It is key that the next EaP policy represents a credible partnership commitment for both the EU and the EaP states. To do that, the EU needs to have a policymaking with regard to the EaP process that is transparent, includes civil society organizations, and provides enough time for meaningful political dialogue and consensus building. This will help increase trust among the diverse parties that are part in this process.

6. The rapprochement with Russia that is increasingly sought by France and other member states as well as the time pressure of the June summit deadline should not take place at the expense of strengthening the resilience of the EaP states and the EU's strategic interests in this region. Germany should use the EU presidency to prioritize the EaP by bringing more substance to the core of the framework that will be adopted at the June summit.

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