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EASTERN PARTNERSHIP BEYOND 2020 - RESULTS ACHIEVED AND NOVELTIES

TAMTA LOMTADZE

142

EXPERT OPINION





საქართველოს სტრატეგიისა და საერთაშორისო ურთიერთობათა კვლევის ფონდი
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On June 18, 2020 Eastern Partnership leaders' summit was held via video conference. Considering the ongoing global pandemics and current situation, the leaders of the European Union and the six partner countries – Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine – discussed not only the current crisis and its consequences, but also the strategic partnership and the future of cooperation within the frames of the Eastern Partnership.¹ Besides, the major decision taken during the summit, is that the next leaders' summit– non- virtual this time – will be held in March 2021.

The summit was important event not only because it was held online, accompanied by the global pandemics, but because it should have provided the floor to discuss the further cooperation formats within the frames of the Partnership – discuss policy priorities beyond 2020.

Several months prior to the summit, on 18 March, 2020, the European Union released the landmark document – Joint Communication “Eastern Partnership Beyond 2020”. The document outlines the long-term strategy of the policy and covers the specific components that should be achieved in accordance with five policy objectives identified in the strategy.²

Release of the document coincided with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemics and somehow didn't attract much attention until now. Since Eastern Partnership is the most prominent format of cooperation between the EU and Georgia, it is of utmost importance to discuss policy priorities set for the first 10 years since its initiation and compare to the priorities for the next decade – what will change. That is why, the article aims to review Eastern Partnership policy priorities for the first 10 years since its initiation and compare those priorities to the new ones – in what terms are they different and what are the new priorities as set by the Joint Communication “Eastern Partnership policy beyond 2020,” published in March 2020.

Last year marked 10 years since launch of the Eastern Partnership initiative that is relevant timeframe to assess and analyse the results achieved in accordance with the policy objectives set by the initiative. Such an evaluation is important to more effectively implement the policy and use opportunities provided by the policy to further advance European integration process of the country.

Eastern Partnership Since 2009 to date – policy priorities and achieved outcomes

Relation between the EU and Georgia is truly multi –faceted and complex process, that can be discussed through the prisms of various social, political and economic aspects. In its terms, formation and dynamics of Georgian foreign policy towards the EU includes several interesting components as well. Relation and cooperation between Georgia have been steadily expanding – starting from Partnership and Cooperation Agreement signed in 1996 to the Association Agreement.

Integration into European Union is Georgia’s key foreign policy priority. According to Georgia’s Foreign Policy Strategy for 2019 – 2022, European integration is the “strategic objective of Georgian foreign policy”³ while “advancing cooperation within the frames of Eastern Partnership”⁴ is one of the key tasks to achieve this key objective.

At the same time, on the one hand, around 82% of the public supports European integration, as key foreign policy priority.⁵ On the other hand, as an annual survey for 2019 displays, around 77% of the public trusts the EU⁶ that makes the EU the most trusted institution among the international institutions and organisations in Georgia.⁷ Furthermore, like the survey results for the last year, 2020 results also reveal that around 70% of Georgian public thinks that European integration will increase country’s security and stability.⁸

In the context of deepening and strengthening EU-Georgia relations, Eastern Partnership serves as an important cooperation platform. Launched in 2009 through the proposal of Poland and Sweden, the Eastern Partnership aimed / aims to create necessary conditions for interested parties for their “political association and economic integration” in the EU.⁹

As for the policy priorities of the Eastern Partnership, currently the policy framework for Eastern Partnership is the agenda adopted during EaP Brussels Summit in 2017 - “20 Deliverables for 2020.”¹⁰ Beyond the 3 cross-cutting deliverables, namely, more engagement with civil society, increase gender equality and non-discrimination, and strengthening strategic communications and supporting plurality and independence of media¹¹, the policy entails 20 specific deliverables covered under the 4 main policy areas:

- Stronger Economy – economic development and market opportunities;
- Stronger Connectivity - Connectivity, energy efficiency, environment and climate change;
- Stronger Governance - Strengthening institutions and good governance;
- Stronger Society - Mobility and people-to-people contacts.¹²

While discussing achieved results for Georgia, within the frames of EaP, first of all, we take into consideration the main instrument of EU-Georgia relations - Association Agreement between the EU and Georgia, as well as Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA), that set the agenda for reforms in the multiple policy areas,¹³ visa liberalisation and the Association Agreement are the important components of Georgia's European Integration process, that can be credited for bringing Georgia closer to the EU.

Through signing the Association Agreement, that recognizes Georgia as an "Eastern European" country,¹⁴ Georgia took international obligation to implement reforms in various policy areas. For these reforms, the Association Agreement and the Association Agenda are the guideline frameworks.

Considering the abovementioned priorities of Eastern Partnership, it can be stated that despite still existing challenges, Eastern Partnership played important role in the region, contributed that the European Union is more present in the region, institutional ties are increased and deepened,¹⁵ visible results in terms of good governance and increasing intra-regional cooperation can also be observed,¹⁶ and in certain cases, it has brought some geopolitical results as well.¹⁷

Speaking in numbers, in case of Georgia, Eastern Partnership has certainly brought tangible results for citizens. For instance, in the field of higher education, within the frames of ERASMUS + program, around 7500 students and academic personnel participated in exchange programs, more than 9300 young people participated in joint trainings, exchange or volunteer programs.¹⁸ In 2018, European School was opened in Tbilisi.¹⁹

Cooperation in agriculture is also noteworthy to mention. Through the ENPARD programme²⁰, European Union supported modernisation process of agriculture through technical and financial assistance, since 2009, 40,000 SMEs, microenterprises and farmers have received loans, overall,

amounting to around €130 millions,²¹ EU support has also helped establish 59 information and consultation centres around the country, which have trained over 250,000 farmers.²²

“20 Deliverables for 2020” framework is expiring at the end of 2020. That is why, after 10 years of its launch, it appeared necessary to determine how the policy advances beyond 2020, what should its priorities be and how should it further develop in order to correspond with the mutual interests of the EU and the partner countries.

As early as in 2017, during the EaP summit (through its declaration) the necessity of strengthened differentiation in bilateral relations with the partner countries was underscored, as well as The scope and depth of cooperation are determined by the EU’s and partners’ ambitions and needs, as well as the pace and quality of reforms.²³

Later, Ministers of Foreign Affairs of Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine released joint statement in which the parties highlighted the importance of differentiation and “more for more” principle for the success of EaP, that will give each partner opportunity to navigate European integration process through their own capabilities, interests and ambitions.²⁴

Updated priorities of Eastern Partnership beyond 2020: what’s new?

on 18 March, 2020, European Union released its Joint Communication – “Eastern Partnership policy beyond 2020 Reinforcing Resilience - an Eastern Partnership that delivers for all,” the 18-page- document that outlines policy framework for the next decade. Publication of the document was preceded by lengthy and structured consultations between the parties.²⁵ Accordingly, the document was much awaited and anticipated.

As for the communication and the priorities set out in the document,²⁶ the overarching goal of the cooperation within the frames of EaP, between the EU and six partner countries – Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine –is to increase resilience, foster sustainable development and deliver tangible results for citizens.²⁷

The Communication entails a wide array of areas of cooperation, while there are 5 long-term objectives set in order to achieve large-scale and general goals. These 5 objectives are:

1. A partnership that creates – the objective entails cooperation between the EU and partner countries for “Resilient, sustainable and integrated economies”²⁸ This goal, together with other components, include increasing the trade, focuses on full implementation of Association Agreements and DCFTA, strengthening infrastructure and creating better energy or transport connectivity.²⁹
2. Partnership that protects – according to the document, this objective mainly includes responsibilities / cooperation in terms of various components³⁰ including accountable institution, ensuring rule of law and security³¹
3. Partnership that protects environment (Partnership that Greens) – envisages cooperation between the EU and EaP countries in terms of environment protection and climate resilience.³² Among the components of the objective, there are topics related to green transition, circular economy, people’s health and well-being.³³
4. Partnership that connects – as the objective entails, the EU will continue to invest in digital transformation and access to digital single market, that, more specifically, includes strengthening E-governance and increasing support to digital start-up,s³⁴ further assisting digital innovation programmes and strengthening cyber resilience.³⁵ Naming digital transformation as one of the key priorities is one of the main novelties compared to the existing policy priorities.
5. Partnership that empowers – the objective includes cooperation for resilient, fair and inclusive societies³⁶ as it consists of the specific components, like ensuring that citizens are involved in decision-making, participation of civil society and the youth, fostering a well-functioning media environment, human rights, mobility, people-to-people contacts etc.³⁷

Upon its release, the policy framework received some critical evaluations as well, with the argument, that the communication and the future vision of EaP lacks “geopolitical ambition,”³⁸ moreover, critical arguments also stated that in order the countries who have signed Association Agreements to succeed, the EU should “invest policy-wise by formulating smart and effective EU strategy towards the EaP countries.”³⁹ Criticism regarding the lack of geopolitical ambitions is partially caused by the fact that while highlighting the 2019-2024 priorities of the Commission, it has been underscored that there will be a “geopolitical Commission”⁴⁰

According to this critical views, defining new approaches / visions of EaP for the next decade, novel instruments and updated “more for more” principles, will “re-charge and consolidate political will for pro-European reforms in the EaP countries.”⁴¹ On the other hand, another critical argument towards the communication states that it lacks specific, tangible timeframe and strategic goals – “what’s next?”⁴²

Comparison and review of priorities

As already noted, Eastern Partnership is prominent format of cooperation between the EU and Georgia in terms of strengthening and deepening EU-Georgia relations. Despite still existing challenges, the EaP has certainly brought tangible results for the first 10 years since its launch, that have had positive impact on citizens’ lives. First of all, under this we mean Association Agreement and DCFTA, visa – free regimes, cooperation in higher education field etc.⁴³

When compared to the policy priorities set for 2020, the majority of policy priorities envisaged in the joint communication coincide with the previous priority areas. Though, there are some new priorities envisaged as well. To sum up, the major novelties stipulated by the communication are: particular focus on environment protection- related issues and cooperation in this policy domain (which is truly complex area with significant impact on energy, environment protection and climate). At the same time, another novel / updated priority is focus on cooperation in terms of digital transformation, as it is one of the most rapidly developing and expanding fields.⁴⁴

On 11 May, 2020 the Council approved the priorities envisaged in the document and reaffirmed the “strategic importance” of Eastern Partnership.⁴⁵

European Union is fairly considered as prominent supporter of reforms in Georgia. Currently, it can be clearly stated that relations between the EU and Georgia are robust and based on close cooperation. For instance, during the global pandemics, the EU’s support was important as the EU mobilized around 980 million Euros for 6 partner countries to eliminate the immediate adverse results of the COVID-19 pandemics.⁴⁶ Out of this assistance, more than 183 million Euros grant is aimed for Georgia,⁴⁷ that clearly indicates and confirms EU’s political support.

Considering the existing challenges, it is of utmost importance to have clear and specific objectives and deliverables for the future vision of the EaP. On the one hand, as the Association implementation report states, 2020 will be an important turn⁴⁸ meaning that Georgia should fulfill its obligations / responsibilities under Association Agreement and Association Agenda in a timely and effective manner.

On the other hand, it is no less important that the EU has clear vision and strategy, how should EaP further develop. Except for the priorities set for the policy beyond 2020, as well as general frameworks and cooperation format, it is necessary to have strategic vision of the specific results of the EaP to be brought for the parties.⁴⁹

Accordingly, there can be observed several conditions / aspects of this process. Effective and consistent implementation of the planned reforms as envisaged in Association Agreement should be prioritized. that will contribute to advance European integration process of the country to the next stages. Besides, not only the provisions stipulated by the Association Agreement should be implemented, but also improving the general circumstances in various policy domains should also be taken into account.⁵⁰ Ensuring that the opportunities provided by the DCFTA are exercised will also support further economic integration and political association. Even though, the updated policy framework might not contain specific provision of the EU membership or specific strategic objective, in medium and long-term perspective, it provides outstanding opportunities to Georgia to develop a number of priority policy areas and will significantly contribute to the country's European aspirations.

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