The Eastern Partnership beyond 2020

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On the occasion of the upcoming 2020 Eastern Partnership Summit, the European Movement International takes stock of progress made on set deliverables adopted during the last Summit in 2017 to reflect upon policy objectives that should underpin the future Eastern Partnership.

The European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) is designed to help the EU support and foster stability, security, sustainable development and cooperation with some of its closest neighbours while relying on a basis of shared values and principles. As part of the ENP, the Eastern Partnership (EaP) is a joint initiative set up in 2009, involving the EU and six Eastern European Partners - Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine. Although participating countries have indeed undergone both political and economic reform in recent years, some of the challenges that the EaP aims to address remain. Moreover, the partnership must accommodate the situations of the different EaP countries, respecting their distinctive challenges and aspirations.

A future-proof and citizens-oriented partnership

The Eastern Partnership must be an inclusive project that promotes open dialogue between all stakeholders as well as one which engages and benefits citizens as much as possible. Concurrently, EU leaders must be ready for an honest, internal and bottom-up dialogue about the membership aspirations and perspectives of some of the EaP countries, on the basis of strict conditionality and sound irreversibility of necessary reforms. In this context, the Conference on the Future of Europe can present a useful opportunity and platform to address the regions’ European aspirations and future. Moreover, the conditionality approach should thus also persist in financial support, with further support in case of proven tangible progress but also a reduction of support in case of a reversion of reforms.

At the same time, new challenges arising from the current global pandemic call for enhanced solidarity and cooperation between the EU and its neighbourhood. By joining forces with international partners, while making use of the multiannual financial framework, the EU should dedicate sufficient funding and support to the region to help address immediate needs and recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Strengthening democracy

The protection of democratic institutions and the rule of law, successful anti-corruption policies and the respect of human rights lay the foundation for strong and resilient societies and economies and also serve to promote cooperation under the Eastern Partnership. Genuine reforms will be key to democratic transformation and must serve to enhance the region’s security against external threats. Financial support for the region should be conditional to reforms undertaken and adopted.

Moreover, the Eastern Partnership should strengthen strategic communication and support media plurality and independence for a positive impact on the quality of journalism and freedom of expression in Eastern Partnership countries, and thus, democracy in the region. The promotion of gender equality and inclusion, the protection of minorities, the fight against hate-speech and discrimination are crucial for the development of the region.
Enhancing civil society cooperation
Citizens’ engagement and civil society cooperation remain a vital part of Eastern Partnership today and tomorrow, as civil society can serve as a driver for domestic reforms in the areas of democracy, accountability and advancement of human rights. More effort should therefore be put into facilitating common projects, building networks that involve regional partners, and providing capacity-building support. Moreover, enhanced support through the EU’s long term budget will be decisive for civil society in the region, both for established NGOs and grassroots initiatives, including initiatives at local level and with a particular emphasis on youth organisations.

For a more inclusive policy that engages and positively affects a large spectrum of citizens and stakeholders, organised civil society, businesses and institutions of local governments must be structurally involved in the agenda-setting processes and policy-making of the EaP. Beyond the implementation of the Eastern Partnership framework, the EU should insist on quality and timely involvement of civil society in national policy making. By ensuring a genuine partnership and respect for the different concerns of the citizens organisations, the EU can help create a more favourable environment for development and progress.

Building strong and sustainable economies
In order to produce tangible results for citizens across the region, the Eastern Partnership must also continue to strengthen sustainable development and economic cooperation between the EU and its Eastern countries as well as gradual integration of the six countries into the EU’s energy union, transport community, and digital single market. While enhanced intra-regional trade and investment in businesses in the EaP countries can help unemployment in the region, the region will benefit most from support in resource-efficient, clean, circular and competitive economies. By joining forces in reducing greenhouse gas emissions, increasing the use of renewable energy and protecting, the EaP can boost environmental and climate resilience. Moreover, the EaP should focus on investing in young people’s skills, entrepreneurship and employability. Education plays a key role in EaP and a stronger focus should be put on improving the quality of education, strengthening competences needed for the coming decades and facilitating the exchange of learning practices.

Improving mobility and connectivity
The EU’s economic recovery will be a gradual one. With this in mind, a well-designed EU recovery, embedded in the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF), offers a much-needed European response to a health crisis that will have an impact in the years to come. The EU can play a key role in promoting and coordinating fiscal stimulus to overcome the crisis by creating a fully-fledged investment plan, with sufficient room for manoeuvre to adapt to unforeseen health crises in future. A comprehensive recovery fund within the MFF must embody the principles of cohesion, solidarity and up-ward convergence, and should refrain from reducing the funding of both existing and prospective EU programmes. Moving forward, both the expenditure and revenue sides of the EU budget must be optimised, to include a new scheme for own resources.