

Priorities of Eastern Partnership until 2020 and how Moldova can benefit from these, OP-ED

Op-Ed



Dionis Cenușa



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The European Union intends to develop more distinct relations with the countries that form part of the Eastern Partnership (EaP). Criticized earlier for not perceiving the subtleties of the region and for omitting security-related aspects, the EU suggested a complex plan of action that is aimed at stabilizing and increasing the resilience of the region. This precisely reflects the EU's objectives incorporated into the Global Strategy ([IPN, July 2016](#)) and into the Reviewed European Neighborhood Policy ([IPN, November 2015](#)).

Published at the end of [2016](#), the plan of action for the EaP until 2020 shows how much the Eastern Partnership concept advanced since its launch in 2009. The content of the document reflects the challenges faced now by the countries of the region, their geopolitical diversity and a clear set of priorities pursued by the EU in its Eastern neighborhood. Thus, until 2020, it is planned to achieve 20 major results in different areas of the state policies of the Eastern Partnership countries, including Moldova.

The key priorities of the document include the economic development, strengthening of institutions and good governance, connection, energy efficiency and climate change and mobility and inter-human contacts. Moreover, the document aims to increase the involvement of civil society and the women's capacity. Moldova is directly engaged through the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement, energy interconnection with Romania and liberalization of visas. To maximally benefit from the plan of action for the Eastern Partnership, Moldova, as other states, should follow precisely the defined steps.

EU wants economic performance and good governance

The EU's objectives for the Eastern Partnership are multiple, often ambitious and very important for ensuring the more uniform and sustainable development of the countries of the region.

Among the [20 key areas](#) on which Brussels focuses is the resuscitation of the economy, with emphasis on the development of small and medium-sized enterprises, mainly in the countries that created Free Trade Areas with the EU (Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia). Special attention is devoted to the development of the economies of all the EaP countries through the launch of local projects and empowerment of farmers' associations, including promotion of farmers' access to export markets and creation of new jobs. The economic sector priorities also include the harmonization of digital markets by digitizing the public services (customs service, trade, health and others) and development of digital ecosystems able to generate IT knowledge and jobs. Also, the EU pledges to support the implementation of the DCFTA with the aim of increasing the volume of exports from the countries that signed the DCFTA (Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia),

to validate the food safety measures in these countries and to intensify direct investments.

The consolidation of institutions and good governance represent the second important chapter referring to the region on which the EU focuses. This includes the implementation of anticorruption policies such as creation of electronic public registers on the property of civil servants, efficient confiscation mechanisms, improvement of the legislation on party funding. It is also envisioned the continuation of the justice sector reform, with measures to ensure the traceability of the performance of judges, merit-based selection of prosecutors and judges, improvement of access to justice and justice itself. The public administration reform is not less important. This includes the de-politicization of public institutions and greater openness and accountability towards the people as well as simplification of public services through the agency of digitization and merger of services through the one-stop shops.

Resilience and more interconnection in Eastern Partnership

Centered on civil security, the resilience component is for the first time detailed in an operational document of the EU intended for the EaP countries. Consequently, Brussels aims to support projects designed to empower the countries to prevent and more efficiently deal with crisis and conflict situations. The list of objectives contains the fighting of cybercrime, cooperation in preventing trafficking in firearms, participation in the EU peacekeeping missions, mapping of regional disaster risks and intense cooperation with the EU Civil Protection Mechanism. Nevertheless, the EU's participation in the settlement of frozen conflicts in the region is not mentioned, even if the latter considerably erode the resilience of countries.

The connection, energy efficiency and environment represent liaison elements for the sustainable development of the region. That's why the projects to reconstruct the road transport arteries and the integration into the European airspace are essential. The transparency and efficiency of energy markets, alongside the implementation of energy interconnection projects in the region and between the regions and member states of the EU, are decisive for ensuring the region's energy security. Indirectly, this will lead to the diminution of dependence on Russia. By ensuring energy efficiency and the use of renewable energy, the pressure exerted by climate change will be diminished. The environmental rehabilitation policies in the region will be improved for the same purpose.

By supporting mobility projects and inter-human contacts, the EU wants to invest in educational projects, the empowerment of young people, research and innovation. The development of the human capital in the region is addressed in close connection with the improvement of working conditions and adjustment of education to the set of abilities required on the labor market. Among other goals are to encourage entrepreneurship among the young people and to create new educational and research opportunities for these. At school level, the quality of studies will be improved and these will be combined with the studying of the basic rights, principles of tolerance and better understanding of the EU's role in the region by launching the Eastern Partnership European School. Also, the countries of the region should ensure the meeting of the requirements of the visa-free regime with the EU (Moldova, Georgia, Ukraine) or should advance the dialogue on the facilitation of visas so as to ensure a high mobility level.

Civic society, empowerment of women and strategic communication as key priorities

The measures intended for civil society, gender equality and strategic communication on the EU's actions in the region occupy a special place in the EU's plan of action for the EaP.

The partnership with civil society is essential for the EU in implementing reforms and monitoring governments and in spreading the European values and, respectively, promoting an objective image of the EU. For this reason, the EU decided to focus on strengthening the capacities of civil society by increasing the level of expertise and ensuring the better interconnection of its representatives at regional level.

The reduction in the economic and social discrepancies between women and men is highlighted as a key priority of the EU. Consequently, this proposes developing gender policies, continuously combating discrimination and domestic violence and economically empowering women.

Least but not last, the EU wants to allocate resources for increasing its visibility and credibility among the citizens in Eastern Europe. Though the EU is among the main donors in the region, the EU's contribution is

poorly known, neglected or erroneously interpreted. At the same time, the EU is interested in fighting anti-European misinformation and attracting the attention of Russian speakers.

Benefits for Moldova

The plan of action for the Eastern Partnership proposed by the EU is comprehensive and covers practically all the areas needed by Moldova to ensure a qualitative jump and restore the social contact with its own people.

First of all, the EU promises to support the putting into practice of the DCFTA which, if it is correctly implemented, can ensure higher exports to the EU, can generate new jobs and stimulate the modernization of the economic system. Besides approximation with the EU legislation and requirements, the Moldovan side should also increase the competitiveness of its products and services. Only in such conditions can this secure effective access to the European consumers. This implies investments, financial assistance and openness of the part of the EU.

The facilitation of the construction of the Ungheni-Chisinau gas pipeline by the provision by the European financial institutions - EBRD and EIB - of €92 million in addition to the €10 million offered by the EU is the second evident benefit for Moldova. Consequently, the supplies of natural gas from Romania to Chisinau could be ensured until 2020. The diminution of dependence on Russian natural gas will contribute to strengthening the country's energy security, diminishing the economic pressure on the part of Russia and breaking the vicious circle around the natural gas debt generated by the Transnistrian region, which amounted to almost US\$7 billion.

Also, Moldova will be helped to fulfill the commitments that derive from the liberalization of the visa regime with the EU, which implies the better management of borders and modernization of the border crossing points. Evidently, the commitments are also related to the ensuring of public order and documents safety and the observance of the basic human rights.

In reality, the whole plan of action for the Eastern Partnership is valid for Moldova, which can use it to implement a functional civil protection mechanism, to invest in rural areas or in juvenile entrepreneurship, to protect the environment and restore physical infrastructure, to combat the information war and improve the situation of women, etc. All these can be obtained with the European assistance, expertise and know-how if the government of Moldova implements reforms and stops discrediting the country's modernization through the European integration one way or another.

Instead of conclusion...

The Eastern Partnership is revitalized and gains more congruency with the challenges faced by the countries of the region. The pragmatism inspired by the plan of action until 2020 is vital for a region that has been powerfully destabilized during the last few years. The causes usually derive from Russian intervention and/or corrupt, incompetent and, respectively, inefficient domestic governments.

At the same time, the plan of action does make reference to the conditionality and monitoring mechanisms used to measure the progress. These aspects create gaps in the document because many opportunities are promised, but these are not balanced with particular forms of punishment for those that fail. Also, the document avoids mentioning the Russian factor, revealing a clear distance from the geopolitical dimension of the Eastern Partnership as the EU tends to show on each occasion that the Partnership hasn't been designed as a form of competition against Russia for having influence in the region.

Moldova should make use of the opportunities provided by the EaP, but the importance of making the government disciplined and compliant with the public interest should not be ignored. The Eastern Partnership, as the Association Agreement, should not be used as a screen that actually hides the ossification of the political class, erosion of democratic institutions or segregation of civil society and the mass media according to political principles. On the contrary, the EaP should serve as a common platform through which the governments and civil society cooperate to maximize the wellbeing of the people.

Dionis Cenuşa

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