

Future of EaP and Moldova following Brussels Declaration – between pragmatism and local realities, OP-ED



Op-Ed



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The Eastern Partnership (EaP) Summit of November 24, 2017 confirmed once again that both the Eastern European countries and the European States see value added in the development of cooperation. This derives also from the motto that dominated the summit “Stronger together” ([European Commission, November 24, 2017](#)). For the EU, it is important to stabilize its Eastern neighborhood, where corruption continuously erodes the democratic institutions, weakening the resistance of states. For now stabilization here necessitates fewer financial and political efforts than in the Southern neighborhood, which is powerfully unbalanced by the existence of dysfunctional or even failed states. On the other side, the EaP countries consider the EU is a huge source of economic opportunities and political legitimacy. At the same time, all these countries use the relationship with the EU, with a different intensity, to diminish or adjust the geopolitical influence that is actively exerted by Russia.

Drawing a general picture, we can say that the event in Brussels was held on a positive tone owing to a series

of political and diplomatic results achieved in the course of 2017. Thus, Brussels intensified its relations with Ukraine and Georgia through the liberalization of visas and the EU – Ukraine Association Agreement that took effect. On the other hand, the EU during the summit managed to sign a new agreement with Armenia – the Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement created on the foundation of the Association Agreement that was abandoned by Yerevan under the pressure of Russia in 2013. Also on the Caucasian dimension, the European side remarked that it achieved good results in the negotiation of a new bilateral framework with Azerbaijan. The EU also noted the progress made in the dialogue with Belarus by constituting the Coordination Group (functional since 2016), which is developed together with the Human Rights Dialogue and Trade Dialogue.

Unlike the other EaP countries, Moldova remained rather in the shadow as, besides the Association Agreement that took effect in 2016, the liberalization of visas three years ago (2014) or the Common Aviation Area Agreement of 2012, the EU included nothing new on Moldova in the Brussels Declaration of the Eastern Partnership. The confusion generated by the Memorandum of Understanding on EU macro-financial assistance signed on November 23 was the only moment by which Moldova made itself visible. Only the next day after the summit did the Government and the Ministry of Finance clarify the situation about the financial assistance, accusing partially the national media and not assuming responsibility for the defective communication on particular European files ([Gov.md, November 25, 2017, Ministry of Finance](#)). But not even these clarifications helped to definitely decode the fact that the macro-financial assistance depends on the results of the EU assessment of the fulfillment by Chisinau of the set of sector conditions and political pre-conditions that include the reviewed electoral legislation ([ZDG.md, November 24, 2017](#)).

Essence of Brussels Declaration

The Joint Declaration of the Eastern Partnership that was signed in Brussels is different by volume and structure from the previous declarations adopted in Prague, Warsaw, Vilnius and Riga. This contains 21 points and 2 annexes, one of which includes the list of priorities of the Eastern Partnership until 2020 ([IPN, June 5, 2017](#)). The tone of the declaration emanates pragmatism, while emphasis is placed on two crucial elements – consolidation of resilience and collective commitment to overcome common challenges (“Stronger together”). Also, the resilience, alongside the imperative of reforms, is mentioned in the Brussels declaration more often than in the previous declarations (*See Table below*).

Eastern Partnership Declarations of 2009-2017:

	Brussels, November 2017	Riga, May 2015	Vilnius, November 2013	Warsaw, September 2011	Prague, May 2009
Paragraphs	21	30	58	29	21
Pages	21	13	23	9	11
Annexes, declarations	2 annexes	0	0	1 declaration on Belarus	0
Number of references					
Resilience	7	2	1	0	0
Reforms	16	15	28	12	6

Democracy	5	8	13	9	3
Rule of law	2	4	4	5	1
Human rights	2	3	1	4	1

The aspects concerning reforms are due to the Association Agreements with Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova, which already have legal effects and imply serious obligations to the reform process. The objective to strengthen resilience comes to the forefront mainly owing to the EU Global Strategy ([IPN, July 25, 2016](#)), where special attention is devoted to the diminution of fragility of the states from the neighborhood. This necessity derives also from the security risks in Ukraine and the vulnerabilities shown by the Eastern European states amid the conspicuousness of the Russian factor.

The realistic character of the Declaration is seen in the fact that Brussels didn't change its position on the approach, this time a common one, of Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia, concerning the offering of a clear European perspective. The Riga Declaration's provision that the EU recognizes the European aspirations and choice of the partner states, as it is stipulated in the Association Agreements, is kept. Moreover, the Declaration keeps the nature of multiple speeds inside the Partnership, which results from the distinct ambitions of the states and the quality and speeds of reforms done by these.

Besides concrete actions in the economic, social, transport or energy sectors, the Brussels Declaration also highlights the importance of stronger civil society and media. At the same time, corruption fighting, justice and good governance are emphasized as essential conditions for strengthening the people's confidence in the own governments, which will contribute to enhanced resilience of the states.

Ultimately, the [Recommendations of the European Parliament](#) and of the [Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum](#), adopted in November and, respectively, October 2017, were ignored in Brussels. On the one hand, these are more ambitious as regards the opportunities provided to the Eastern European states. On the other hand, they are more critical to the national governments. So, the Brussels Declaration excludes any perspective for joining the EU Customs Union, the Schengen Area or even for reducing roaming charges in the EU. Also, the Declaration makes no reference to the role of oligarchs in the decision-making process.

Russia again between the lines

As in the case of the previous declarations, the Brussels Declaration does not mention Russia directly. However, the allusion to Russia can be read between the lines at least two times.

The first time the allusion resides in the "continuous violation" of the international law in the region and the request to renew the platforms to settle the unsolved conflicts. Evidently, these refer to Russia's involvement in promoting the armed separatism in Donbas region and the frozen conflicts in the ex-Soviet states.

The second aspect stems from fact that the EaP is a platform designed to strengthen the cooperation between the EU and the Eastern European states and is directed against no one. Thus, the signatories of the DE clarion repeatedly tried to refute the traditional accusations of Russia against the EaP, which is described as an unfriendly initiative.

What are the advantages for Moldova

The main advantage for Moldova results from the EU's commitment to extend reforms. At the same time, the Declaration reiterates the fact that the access to financial assistance will depend on concrete reforms done. So, the principle of conditionality will dominate the reform process, without deviations.

New financial resources appeared from the economic perspective, such as the European Fund for Sustainable

Development that will finance different infrastructure, transport and other kinds of projects. At the same time, to diminish the financial burden and economic risks of companies in Moldova and other EaP countries, the EU will provide loans in the national currency to these. Also, the European side intends to increase the commercial capacities of the countries with Association Agreements so that these benefit more from access to the EU market. New opportunities appear in the energy efficiency, transport and digital market sectors. A lot will depend on the governments' level of interest and on the involvement of the private sector so as to fully benefit from the advantages created inside the Eastern Partnership.

A crucial role will be played by the communication that the EU will have to ensure to promote correct informing about the assistance provided to the EaP countries. Efficient communication about what the European integration actually is will count as much.

Last but not least, the EU wants to support civil society, including by involving this into the process of monitoring reforms and by improving its technical knowledge. This way it aims to improve the quality of decisions taken by the authorities. The youth and the media are other components that will be the focus of attention and will have to generate positive synergy around reforms.

Instead of conclusion...

The success of the Eastern Partnership is directly related to the implementation of reforms. At the same time, the European values – rule of law, democracy or human rights, together with the respect for international law – are placed in the center of the EaP. Therefore, there is a permanent risk that the Partnership will be in uncertainty and vulnerable. At internal level, the local ruling elites of the Eastern European countries are not very interested in exactly implementing these principles. At foreign level, Russia interprets the international law principles as it is suitable for it.

Even if Ukraine or other EaP countries would have liked Russia to be mentioned directly in Brussels, the EU and the member states kept the text of the Declaration far from any evident anti-Russia tone. Surely, between the lines of the Declaration Russia can read a series of concerns and dissatisfaction. But this is the most that the EU accepted for not irritating Moscow. In exchange for unnecessary geopolitical rhetoric, the EU shows a clear interest in focusing the EaP on qualitative changes and in building viable states at its Eastern borders.

Though the EU opens up a series of positive perspectives for Moldova and other states of the region, the risks deriving from these prevail for now. Therefore, the EU should ensure maximal precision in the synchronization of efforts and prioritization of actions to prevent evident threats related to corruption and poor governance. The EU's hesitations will cost a lot and will result in the loss of the public support needed to exert down-up high-quality pressure on the authorities and to ensure irreversible positive changes in Moldova and the region.

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