PISM POLSKI INSTYTUT SPRAW MIĘDZYNARODOWYCH
THE POLISH INSTITUTE OF INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

NO. 128 (1558), 16 JUNE 2020 © PISM

BULLETIN

Eastern Partnership Policy Beyond 2020

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In March, the European Commission presented the Eastern Partnership policy beyond 2020. It maintains the current direction of the European Union's actions towards its eastern neighbourhood. The vagueness of the document indicates a lack of unanimity within the EU regarding the development of the initiative and raises concerns about a lack of further strengthening of cooperation between EaP and EU countries. The EaP conference in June will set the course of action for the coming years. It will be a challenge for Poland in this period to promote the greater involvement of EaP countries through the "more for more" principle that rewards the leaders in cooperation.

Last year, 10 years had passed since the Eastern Partnership (EaP) was initiated by the governments of Poland and Sweden. It was an opportunity to evaluate the effects and draw conclusions for the future. In May 2019, the European Commission (EC) initiated a consultation process to develop a political vision of the partnership after 2020. On 18 March, the joint communication "Eastern Partnership policy beyond 2020[:] Reinforcing resilience—an Eastern Partnership that delivers for all" was published. It covers five areas of cooperation related to the economy, rule of law and security, environmental protection and climate change, the digital transformation, and social issues. The EaP videoconference planned for 18 June is to help develop policy measures and the expected results of cooperation within the EaP after 2020.

Assumptions of the New Concept. The general vision of the EaP after 2020 reflects the current EU position aimed at deepening political and economic relations with EaP countries. Guided by the conclusions of the 2015 European Neighbourhood Policy review, the EC maintained that cooperation under the EaP contributes to strengthening resilience (increasing the ability to prevent crises, and adapt and transform when they occur) in its eastern neighbourhood.

Economic issues remain the most important area of interest within the initiative. The EC maintained its stance on the need to increase trade exchange, as well as to integrate the EaP and EU economies in bilateral and regional terms. To this end, it pointed to the necessity to improve infrastructure (including transport networks) and energy connections (opening the gas pipeline from Azerbaijan planned for 2020). The Commission also declared assistance in maintaining macroeconomic stability in case of an economic crisis in the EaP countries. In addition, it announced an improvement in the situation of employees from EaP countries, for example, by creating a mobility programme for young professionals. However, the document did not contain any proposal to meet the expectations that Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine formulated jointly in December 2019 concerning support for the implementation of free trade zones, full integration of their economies with the EU common market, as well as a special dialogue between the EU and the three associated countries on transport, energy, justice, and the digital economy, among others. Instruments of interest to three states less advanced in cooperation—Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Belarus—were not included either. Flexibility in the selection of instruments would be conducive to better tailoring the offer to the needs of individual EaP countries to increase the effectiveness of cooperation with the EU.

Separate focus areas in the document related to environmental protection and climate change, as well as the digital transformation is a reflection of the priorities of the new EC. Therefore, it refers to the issue of reducing pollution, saving natural resources, or the expansion of broadband internet and online services. In the field of public health, which was included in the environment and climate area, the EC pointed to the importance of improving the quality and increasing the availability of healthcare. As part of the extension of the digital single market, the implementation plan for roaming agreements between the EaP countries was repeated (the Regional Roaming Agreement is to be signed by the end of this

year), and the possibility of signing similar agreements with the EU has also been indicated.

The EC devoted little attention to areas related to the rule of law and security, as well as social issues. It maintained positively evaluated initiatives, including the Academy of Public Administration and the Civil Society Forum, which are a source of good practices for the EaP countries and the consultation forum with the EU. Moreover, it pointed out the need for reforms in public administration and the judiciary and made assistance decisions conditional on the assessment of progress in these areas. However, the document did not include any references to Russian aggression in the region, which expresses a lack of consistency within the EU regarding the development prospects of the EaP and the vision of EU-Russia relations. The EU's commitment to peaceful conflict resolution in the region is to take place within the framework of existing civil missions and the sanctions system.

Challenges. The main factor that may distract the EU from deepening cooperation with the EaP countries in the near future will be the forecasted economic crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, the EU's priorities will be to adapt the new budgetary framework to the economic situation, work out a position towards the UK in light of Brexit, and coordinate actions in case of a new wave of migration from North Africa and the Middle East. Therefore, there is a risk of stunting reforms in all EaP countries, mainly because of a decrease in interest in the process on the EU side, as well as the need to incur high financial outlays and greater involvement on the part of EaP countries. A factor that increases the attractiveness of cooperation with the EU is the financial assistance initiated since the outbreak of the pandemic (e.g., €30 million for the supply of equipment and training of medical personnel and €11.3 million for assistance to the most affected population groups). As part of deepening economic cooperation, migration from EaP countries to the EU will be important. Facilitating those wanting to cross the EU border amid pandemic restrictions can lead to a preference for employees from EaP countries.

The development of cooperation with the EaP countries can also be harmed by the fear of some EU countries (e.g., France or Italy) of worsening relations with Russia. This is particularly important in view of ongoing conflicts in all EaP countries except Belarus. In some of them, the EU is involved (through civil missions in Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine, as well as sanctions imposed on Russia). Threats from Russia, including hybrid operations and disinformation, can destabilise the situation, not only in the region but also within the EU. It is therefore necessary to improve the digital skills of society and to promote the EU in the EaP countries (also in the Russian language), which serves to build a positive image of reforms supported by the EU in EaP countries.

Conclusions and Perspectives. The forecasted economic crisis and political situation in the region caused by aggravating EU-Russia relations will hamper the development of the EU position on the future of the EaP. The upcoming EaP conference will probably fit into the presented vision. More important will be the specific tasks for the coming years, which should be developed during the German presidency of the EU Council in the second half of this year.

An asset is the strengthening of economic cooperation between the EU and EaP countries. However, for cooperation to bring mutual benefits, it is necessary to develop instruments that respond to the current needs of specific EaP countries, such as sectoral dialogue or additional financial support for reform implementation. Environmental and digital issues are likely to remain unfulfilled because of the wide scope they cover, as well as the high costs.

A factor hindering the development of cooperation within the EaP will remain security. The policy adopted by the EU is an expression of the lack of a coherent position towards the eastern neighbourhood and relations with Russia. In the long term, this approach will have a negative outcome in the region, favouring Russian aggression in the EaP countries, and even shifting threats towards the EU itself.

It is in Poland's interest to further develop EaP cooperation. In the near future, also important will be efforts to increase interest in the initiative among EU countries (with the assistance of the German presidency), as well as to allocate adequate funding in the negotiated new budget framework. Given the pandemic, cooperation at common borders will be important to ensure the smooth and safe movement of people. Proposals to give the EaP a more multilateral character will also be of great value, for example, by creating a rotating presidency of EaP countries.

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