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Transport and Mobility: A New Agenda for the Eastern Partnership

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The Eastern Partnership has exploited its potential, so a new offer for upgrades in transport and mobility is required for Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine. In their relations with the EU, those policy areas are characterized by a lack of uniform standards and slow advancement of cooperation on projects. To improve this situation, the EU might consider bilateral agreements with Association Agreement countries aimed at full integration with its transport market, funding more infrastructure projects, increasing opportunities for legal work in the Union for temporary migrants and ensuring better absorption in education, research and culture programmes.

The Eastern Partnership (EaP) has practically fulfilled the assumed goals proposed in 2009 in relation to Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. EU Association Agreements (AA) were signed, Moldova joined the visa-free regime, and Ukraine and Georgia may follow it in short order. Therefore, a discussion about the future shape of the Partnership was launched at the annual meeting of EU and EaP ministers of foreign affairs in May this year. Some countries have called for new initiatives in such areas as transport, energy, IT and health, as well as fostering social contacts with the EU and proceeding with the visa-liberalisation process.

Among the proposals, the most important is to deepen EU cooperation with AA countries on transport and mobility because there are still many barriers related to a lack of uniform standards and slow advancement in cooperation on projects. From an EU perspective, the integration of these countries into the bloc's transport market would better connect the region to the Union and facilitate trade. Increasing the scale of legal migration would allow interested Member States facing a demographic crunch in its labour market to attract skilled workers. Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine are keen to participate in these areas and their interest allows the EU to exert pressure on them to implement sectoral reforms and to include EU policy in their decisions on internal affairs. More importantly, improved infrastructure and the free movement of people are of interest to their publics and, therefore, stronger EU involvement in these areas would improve the now-poor visibility of the Partnership in the region. Last but not least, in the long term, these steps would move them towards full integration with the EU's internal market, which remains a goal of European Neighbourhood Policy.

Obstacles. Although the new generation of AAs assumes a model with deepened economic relations with the EU, in terms of land and rail transport, it includes only partial integration with the Union's market. Although the agreements provide for the implementation of about 50 EU directives in this area, many barriers still exist when it comes to differences in practical standards, such as railway gauge, or in restricting access to the EU market through transport licenses and quotas. The scale of potential is significant. In 2014, the 25 Member States that have bilateral transport agreements with Ukraine issued 560,680 permits to Ukrainian carriers.

In terms of project cooperation, the EU allocates relatively few resources to support building and modernisation of infrastructure networks and when it does they primarily come through the Neighbourhood Investment Facility (NIF) and cross-border cooperation programmes. In 2008–2014, the Union provided NIF grants totalling €78.98 million for seven projects in Georgia and Moldova. Ukraine did not receive a grant for any project. Meanwhile, transport infrastructure in the EaP region is in poor condition. In 2015, of the 12,000 km of national and European roads in all six of the EaP countries, about two-thirds had speed limits of only up to 90 km/h and 27% were in such a poor state that speed was restricted to even 30 km/h. In addition, the number of border crossings with EU countries is insufficient.

For example, along the Ukraine-Poland border (approx. 535 km), there are only four road crossings with no restrictions on weight for cargo vehicles out of eight crossings total. Meanwhile, along the Ukraine-Romania border (approx. 650 km), there are only three total road crossings and one has weight restrictions.

When it comes to free movement of people, EaP citizens have greatly restricted access to the EU labour market, the same as for other third countries. Although the Union has signed mobility partnerships with Moldova (2008) and Georgia (2009), allowing such work as operational cooperation on the legal migration of temporary workers, in practice there is very limited progress on this issue. In 2009–2014, the partnership with Georgia enabled only the conclusion of one agreement on circular migration—with France—allowing 650 citizens of Georgia to undertake work there. Only two of 18 projects addressed the issue of establishing institutional cooperation on legal migration—with Germany and Greece—while 16 Member States signed a mobility partnership with Georgia. This situation is the result in part on the greater emphasis in EU migration programmes on border security than on facilitating mobility.

On a positive note, the AA countries have wide access to EU mobility programmes in education, culture and research, and their options have gradually increased since the EaP's establishment. However, awareness among students and academic staff about grants is still low and is one of the reasons for their limited participation in such programmes. The most popular student exchange program, Erasmus Mundus (which in 2014 was replaced by Erasmus+), had only a few participants (3,589 in total) from Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine between 2004 and 2013, although since 2014 the number of participants has been increasing. Moreover, obtaining EU research grants is difficult because bids from highly developed countries are very competitive. In the scope of the EU's 7th Framework Programme for 2007–2013, entities from Ukraine signed 132 agreements, from Moldova, 35, and from Georgia–48, compared to (rounded) Switzerland, 4,000, Norway, 2000, and Israel, 1800.

Recommendations on Transport Policy. The EU may propose that AA countries sign bilateral, legally binding agreements that assume gradual but full integration with the EU road and rail transport market. This would open the way in the future to the negotiation of a regional agreement on a transport community, following the example of the Western Balkans, which are covered by enlargement policy. The conclusion of such bilateral agreements might be the start of the process as they would be easier to negotiate and could be used to profile the conditions in a particular country and put national association institutions in charge of monitoring their implementation. Mechanisms for updating national regulations with changed EU legislation also might be included, drawing on the latest solutions for services found in DCFTAs.

They may also entice the adoption of EU legislation through incentives that take the form of promises of funding more infrastructure projects (including the construction of new border crossings). A list of priority projects was agreed in 2013 during the EaP transport ministerial meeting, but their implementation requires considerable financing. To reach the goal, unused funds might be absorbed first, for instance, 25% of planned European Neighbourhood Instrument funding for EaP countries in 2014 has not been spent. Second, the coordination of financial assistance (with financial institutions and third countries such as China) and activities promoting priority projects might be enhanced. To do so, the EU might consider the establishment of a permanent secretariat to the EaP transport panel and made responsible for establishing contacts, sussing out financing for projects and developing local capacity for implementation. A model to follow might be the South East Europe Transport Observatory (SEETO), which operates in the Western Balkans. Moreover, joint grant and lending mechanisms might be launched similar to the Western Balkans Investment Framework because they would facilitate combining resources from various stakeholders.

Mobility Cooperation. The EU could open projects on its territory to legal work by temporary migrants (circular migration, seasonal work) from the AA countries and revise the partnerships to be more favourable to this form of mobility. To this end, the EU could support the institutional capacity of a respective country's administration through advisory missions to help it effectively establish cooperation with the Member States. Moreover, EU migration programmes could take legal migration into greater account at the mid-term review of the EU budget (such as the thematic programme "Cooperation with Third Countries in the areas of Migration and Asylum" or through the European Neighbourhood Instrument). It is important to fund actions related to informing people about the possibilities of legal work in the EU and developing cooperation with businesses in order to provide the requisite infrastructure. For Ukraine, the EU may offer a cooperation agreement in this area within the framework of the mobility partnership or a separate deal altogether.

When it comes to developing people-to-people contacts, the EU may consider increasing the use of mobility programmes with AA countries. Permanent cooperation with universities as well as cultural and research institutions in the partner countries might be established with the aim to disseminate information on a regular basis. So far, the EU's actions in this area have mostly consisted of organising conferences, seminars and information days but on an ad hoc basis. In the sphere of education, the EU may grant the countries the status of a programme country within Erasmus+, enabling them full participation in this programme. Also, the participation of AA countries in pursuing and obtaining EU research grants might be increased through the launch of advisory services to entities from those countries and consisting of EU experts advising organisations on how to apply and working with them for several months. A model for this might be the German development aid agency's (GIZ) work in Ukraine. All of these actions could revitalise EaP and make it highly effective for the EU in the future.