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Eastern Partnership after Vilnius: A Mission Accomplished, Mounting Tasks Ahead

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Vilnius Summit: More Hope, Less Hype

Disregard what will happen at the EU's Eastern Partnership Summit at the end of November, Vilnius is about to bring both an achievement and important lessons to learn. The Vilnius Summit will accomplish the original mission - to give a European perspective to the region. Part of this achievement is due to the rapidly changed paradigm of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP): the South, one time priority of the French Presidency of the EU, is now burning in the aftermath of the Arab Spring. But there is too much hype instead of the hope that Vilnius should bring.

It is, however, important to remember the historical context. The EaP was announced in 2009 after a long soul-searching on how to answer Ukraine's Orange Revolution, right after the EU's historical enlargement in 2004. Among the reactions, wider Europe as a policy was vague and the ENP was too wide and technical. The Association Agreement, including the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA) and visa facilitation, has the necessary technical/legislative element, the facilities and programs provide engagement with wider parts of society, while the association is bold enough as a vision

to become a "middle-man" in an integration process. But for those in the region assuming that the EU is the solution for all woes, please consider -- it took nine years to find this answer.

Although the interest of political elites as well as of the people in the region is there, Eastern Europeans lack clarity about what is at stake, the benefits this process may bring and the sacrifice (aka reforms) it will take. Therefore, greater understanding, some fixing, and upgrading combine to outline just some of the mounting tasks ahead.

This paper frames the post-Vilnius planning from this historical perspective; arguing that the policy needs a boost in technical implementation and capacity of both the EC and partner countries and some necessary fixing, "minding the gap,"² between the EU and Eastern partners. It also brings forward ideas toward upgrading the policy's strategic appeal for "associated partners to be" in order to keep the momentum going.

Focusing on implementation will certainly be key, but the political will in the region could evaporate amidst the upcoming elections (Moldova 2014, Ukraine 2015). Ukraine and other countries in the region should realise

¹ We would like to express our gratitude to analyst Simonas Klimanskis for his help during the preparation of the paper.

² See Laure Delcour and Katarzyna Woleczuk, Beyond the Vilnius Summit: challenges for deeper EU integration with Eastern Europe, European Policy Center, Policy brief, October 21, 2013, http://www.epc.eu/documents/uploads/pub_3889_beyond_the_vilnius_summit.pdf

that the full benefit from the Association Agreement will come only if the way these countries are managed (governance) change. Until the political will grows to the necessary level there is a high risk that the Association Agreements will not necessarily be implemented or may not bring the desired outcome. Both sides need to stick to commitments and agreements as well as making sure the other side interprets those in the same way.

At the same time the EU needs to understand that the association process is costly for partners. As we learned in the Baltic States and in Central Europe, transition is painful and there are no quick fixes. It requires support and sacrifices from the people, which would be possible with more incentives. Conditionality and solidarity should form a healthy balance to become a hearty incentive given that there is no hope of quick integration for the region. The EU and its Eastern partners should work in tandem to mitigate the risks and the costs of transition. However, a lot more understanding of the realities on the ground, communication, and engagement between the EU and Eastern societies is needed for that.

The bumps of the past should not be forgotten either. The alternative integration space – Eurasian Economic Union – has been under development since 2009. This development can be taken as a reaction to the Eastern Partnership, but the EU (most importantly some member states) should realise that the current zero sum thinking – on both sides – has been reducing much needed conditionality (particularly toward Ukraine), putting the EaP implementation into jeopardy and Russia in to the corner. If the region moves closer to the EU Moscow will do what it does best: resist and contain the EU's growing influence in the region. How Moscow's options are limited could be viewed through the statements of Minsk: it does not see the EaP as Moscow does. However, all countries are (and will remain) dependent on Russia, and in the security dimension, in particular, Moscow is indispensable in the region. The region suspects, though, that Moscow can adopt Western models (the ECU is, after all, based on the EU model) but it can't adapt to Western standards. But can they?

The reality on the ground should be taken into consideration much more seriously after Vilnius, both in terms of real ambitions of the region as well as the follow up: a multi-speed process may be emerging. Two blocks can be distinguished within the EaP: Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine could be called "advanced" as they are progressing towards becoming "associated partners". However, out of these three countries only Ukraine fully controls its territory, a major hindrance for these countries' European aspirations. The other bloc is formed by countries which are either not interested in what the EU offers or their interest in closer association has been limited by external factors. Minsk has shown little enthusiasm for the EaP from the very beginning; while Azerbaijan expects separate, "strategic" relations; and Armenia, which only recently concluded negotiations on Association Agreement, has made a U-turn to join the Russia-led Customs Union. However, despite the lack of enthusiasm for the EU in the latter bloc, it would be wrong to ignore them

as it is clear that the EaP works best where the EU has invested the most in building good relations.

Brussels should not forget that the implementation is costly for partners and that the current policy does not offer any kind of involvement in EU decision-making processes. The Association Agreements should not simply be implemented, but rather to strengthen the motivation/incentives for change they should also be further enhanced. Considering other existing EU external relation models, most notably the European Economic Area (EEA), may provide food for thought. Adding a policy-shaping dimension to "associated partners" would increase the "co-ownership" of the policy and strengthen the trust of the Eastern partners in the policy. Following the EFTA model, "associated partners" reaching the same or at least similar levels of adaptation of EU norms could form a free trade space, the Eastern European Free Trade Agreement (EEFTA). Co-operation on such a level within the EEFTA framework would help EaP countries become closer and enhance adoption of best practices from each other.

An EU investment fund, open to all the interested countries, may also be considered to mitigate costs of association. Modernisation and adaptation processes bring political and financial costs, and such a fund could help to limit the financial burden based on the principles of investing and cost sharing. Such an approach would allow greater transfer management, know-how, and new technologies in to the countries; and would serve as a stimulus for transformation, raising understanding, and would also mobilise existing local resources. The Neighbourhood Investment Facility is the step in the right direction.

Upgrades in the policy architecture may provide further incentives for both the political elites and create better conditions for the development of civil society. In addition to strengthening the Civil Society Forum, Erasmus programme, and other people-to-people contact; the fundamentals of how they operate should also be clarified. More "Europe" needs to be brought to these projects (with regards to management and other aspects) as opposed to only supporting pro-Europeans from the region to spend even more time in the EU. Brussels seems to lack either the capacity or the willingness to learn from the work of previous donors, and seems to be rushing the process instead of fine tuning and investing in existing successful ones. Civil society should not be "used" for partisan politics (like in Belarus) but, rather, for as much broad engagement as possible. Central Europe and the Baltics could be particularly useful in bringing in the relevant transition experience and especially storytelling. What Eastern Europe needs is not fairy tale success stories but real (sometimes painful) ones.

Sectoral integration providing access to individual EU structures and policies should be considered by beefing up twinning mechanisms with the officials of hosting partners in relevant EC structures and member states. Such sectoral partnerships may be based on two principles: adoption of EU sector-specific legislation and in exchange gaining access to programmes and institutions

of the sector. To measure the results of the policy a Connectivity Index (based on hard data regarding upgrades in energy, roads, transport, infrastructure, telecommunications, etc.) may be developed. It would help to find the most needed spheres where integration would be the most beneficial for both sides. The Connecting Europe Facility (CEF) should be considered to expand to the EaP region then.

Finally, the EU should introduce more “intermediate stops,” completion of which would bring benefits and serve as further motivation to partner countries as well as provide better assessment. This would provide a similar framework to the roadmap the EU has given to candidate countries to be integrated to the single market.

Bigger demands should come with a bolder vision. Until there is no clear membership perspective political expectations from the Eastern partners should be based on realities on the ground. At the same time deeper integration should come with higher conditionality given that the association process should be treated as a step towards the integration process. An accomplished mission may bring sustainable results when it is accompanied by a realistic, but intensive, follow up.

Road to Vilnius: Two Scenarios

Regardless of the exact outcome of the Vilnius Summit the EU should consider updating (fixing) and upgrading the Eastern Partnership for a number of reasons:

- With or without the signature of Ukraine on the Association Agreement, including the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA), the European Union managed to find an answer to the demand of the Ukrainian people from the Orange Revolution. Given how minuscule the trade of EaP countries is with the EU, the DCFTA should be taken as a political decision. It took the EU nine years to find a formula that enshrines gradual technical integrations via the Association Agreement even though it lacks a membership perspective. It has proved – with a little help from Russia – that normative power can work in the region.
- The debate on whether Ukraine (and other EaP countries) is a European country is over: the Association Agreement states that Ukraine is “a European country with European identity”. The focus should now shift to implementation by adding the necessary capacity, measuring actual performance, as well as mitigating the costs. No matter what will happen in Vilnius an upgrade will be necessary, however. Even in the case of Ukraine not signing the EaP is likely to become the biggest campaign topic toward the 2015 presidential elections. Thus, the EU leverage would remain high in Kyiv.
- The birth of the EaP in 2009 managed to mobilise both the neighbourhood and Russia. This external factor indicates the policy’s perceived seriousness.

Russia also introduced its Customs Union in 2009 (to be a fully-fledged Eurasian Union in 2015) prompting the EU into a zero sum game over the neighbourhood. Now, two competing integration spaces are “fighting” for their role in the region which is likely to reduce the conditionality so much needed to achieve reforming the region’s governance. Lack of reform, in the long run, would benefit Russia by keeping the region’s dependency on Russia as high as possible.

Thus, the original mission of the EaP – to give a European perspective to the region in the wake of the Orange Revolution – is accomplished. However, the actual outcome of the Vilnius summit may put forward two possible scenarios.

The positive scenario, or what many would call a watershed, would evolve if the Association Agreement with Ukraine were signed in Vilnius, as this would kick off the technical implementation process and would prompt the EU to concentrate greater resources toward the EaP. In the event of signature, implementation of the agreement, as well as mitigation of incurred costs, will be the most important focus. At the same time the EU should not forget to add sufficient incentives in terms of further integration and deepening its regulatory framework in the partner countries. This paper presents those incentives via a “bank of ideas” on what could contribute to the post-Vilnius cycle of the Eastern Partnership development.

A different scenario would evolve if the agreement were not signed. This would be interpreted as a critical point for the Eastern Partnership, prompting many to conclude that “integration without membership” does not offer sufficient incentives for expanding the EU regulatory framework without expanding the Union. This may be interpreted as the inability of the policy to compete with the Eurasian Economic Union. Certainly this would put into question the power and authority of the EU in the region. Nevertheless, those critical of the EU should not forget two important dimensions: the overall conditions of Eastern partners and particularly that the Eastern Partnership has had attractive enough elements for both the elites and crowds in the street in the region – as well as the Kremlin.

Either way the Eastern Partnership Summit in Vilnius is an opportunity to review and supplement the goals of implementing this policy. So far the EaP has been understood as the disseminator of European values and norms in the neighbourhood. However, the alternative integration project does not rely on the principle of formal conditionality and offers partner countries a stimulus package, adoption of which may further reduce the EU’s abilities to “tie” the neighbouring states to European rules and standards. At the same time “informal” and often harsh conditionality from Russia toward partner countries helps to raise solidarity in the EU – often over agreed conditionality. Further strategic planning for the Eastern Partnership policy should more deeply assume the geopolitical situation as well as the realities on the ground.

The six partner countries have different views and capacities for adopting European rules of

ENP and EaP – what is the difference?

- There is no fundamental difference between the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) and Eastern Partnership (EaP) program. The first was born in the break of the biggest EU enlargement in 2004, while the second was developed as a more specific and detailed tool to govern transition in the Eastern Partners:
- EaP distinguished European Eastern neighbors from the non-European south and created economic/trade and free movement association tools. It developed more specific goal-based agendas differentiated up to the countries.
- ENP was based on bilateral cooperation, while EaP established wider formats covering various layers of society (Summits, Euronest, Foreign ministers' meetings, CS Forum, Business Forum, etc.)
- Programme financing remained the same as ENP, however, more detailed programmes were established for adoption of EU norms (flagship initiatives, facilities, programs)
- Integration into the EU common market was suggested as a “substitution” to membership
- Conditionality was initiated as a tool to measure progress in the EaP countries (ENP lacked measurement tool)

the game and choosing the EU as their main geopolitical direction. Therefore, two blocks of EaP countries have emerged as a result of their differing levels of implementing the programme provisions. The “advanced,” or simply potential “associated partners,” are Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia. Meanwhile Azerbaijan “does not want”, Armenia “cannot”, and Belarus “does not want to and cannot” chose a rapprochement with the EU as offered by the Eastern Partnership.

A common Eastern Partnership model did not satisfy the interests of all six countries and, although *de facto*, the implementation of the programme continued at a different pace. **Adaptation of the programme to a multi-speed integration process, therefore, is a reality.** It is important to provide conditions for the three guiding principles – individual progress, catching up, and differentiation – to further serve as driving motives behind the Eastern Partnership. The dilemma is whether it should, and if yes, what the EU can offer to the “advanced partners” to enforce the implementation and move the process forward. Another, none the less important question, is the type of relationship the EU should apply to the rest of the EaP countries, that cannot (Belarus) or do not seek (Azerbaijan and Armenia) to sign the Association Agreement with the EU. Obviously, differentiation trends in modelling the future of the Eastern Partnership prompts one to apply more flexible, and thus, dissimilar instruments to the countries that have made progress.

Riga and Beyond: Six Ideas to Upgrade

The current policy content consists of two main pillars: (a) the Association Agreement and integration into the EU domestic market through an enhanced free trade agreement and (b) gradual movement towards a visa-free regime beyond the various facilities and programs to enhance people-to-people contacts as well as sectoral

development. Visa liberalisation is considered the most urgent issue for ordinary citizens. In order to retain less advanced countries in the field of EU interests, the prospect of visa-free travel should not be denied. This could stimulate public opinion on European integration and bottom-up support for transition.³

Although the EaP can ensure partner countries their participation in the EU domestic market, **it does not offer any kind of involvement in the EU decision-making or shaping processes.** The post-Vilnius phase may find a tool on how to involve EaP countries to feel more like co-owners of the association process. The new phase in the policy could be directed towards the provisions entrenched in the deepest “integration without membership” model – the European Economic Area (EEA), a free trade area encompassing all members of the EU and three European Free Trade Association (EFTA) countries, Norway, Iceland and Liechtenstein. According to the EEA Agreement signed in 1992, the EU and EFTA countries form a common market where the “four freedoms” – free movement of goods, services, capital and persons – are ensured, while the countries have also harmonised their technical regulations and standards. The EEA Agreement does not cover the Customs Union, Common Agriculture and Fisheries Policy (although *the EEA Agreement* contains various provisions on trade in agricultural and fish products), Common Foreign and Security Policy, Economic and Monetary Union, and Justice and Home Affairs.⁴

One of the strongest elements of the EEA model is that its transfer to the Eastern Partnership framework would

3 Rafal Sadowski, “Partnership in Times of Crisis. Challenges for the Eastern European countries’ integration with Europe”, *Point of View*, No. 36, July, 2013, 38. <http://www.osw.waw.pl/sites/default/files/pw_36_en_partnership_net.pdf>

4 EFTA, “The European Economic Area (EEA)”, Factsheet. November, 2007. http://www.efta.int/~media/Files/Publications/Fact%20sheets/EEA%20factsheets/FS_EEA.pdf. Iceland, Norway and Liechtenstein are members of the Schengen Area.

mean strengthening trade ties and allow the introduction of two other freedoms – services and capital – in relations between the EU and EaP countries. The transfer would guarantee that trade would become the essential axis for the integration of partner countries in the EU. But the costs of compliance should also be taken into account while debating over the further development of the EaP. The allure of the EaP is from a mix of factors - such as the EU's popularity among voters, the attractiveness of the EaP's elements leading toward compliance - but it is not irreversible leaving a room for manoeuvre for the elites as well as external (Russia) factors.

Having these in mind the following directions may bring an upgrade to the Eastern Partnership:

Policy-shaping: the Eastern Partnership programme declares that it is co-owned by the EU and partner countries. However, partner countries do not have influence in shaping the EU *acquis* and proposals made in the Eastern Partnership in general, therefore they “have no way to realise the benefits that these offer”⁵ and are slower and more cautious in transposing the norms required in the Association Agreement into national law. The EEA model envisages an opportunity for the EFTA countries to influence EEA policy shaping, i.e. at the initial level of proposals. EFTA countries, therefore, can participate in shaping EU legislation (regulations, directives and decisions). EFTA countries also participate in committees which assist the Commission in discharging its obligations related to the implementation of EU legislation prior to its adoption through committees.⁶ Such policy shaping, albeit without being able to participate in the final decision-making, allows EFTA countries to be proactive in shaping decisions affecting them.⁷ Application of such mechanisms to the “advanced partners” would increase “co-ownership” and strengthen their trust in the programme.

Joint economic space with “associated partners”: following the EFTA model, EaP countries, which reach the same or at least similar levels of adaptation of EU norms, could form a free trade space – the Eastern European Free Trade Agreement (EEFTA).⁸ Regional co-operation would allow the “advanced partners” to adopt European standards not only in their interaction with the EU, but also in their relationship with each other. The institutional arrangements under the EEA Agreement are laid down in a two-pillar structure with EFTA institutions

matching those on the EU side⁹ and could also serve to strengthen joint development.

EU investment fund for EaP countries: adaptation to EU rules comes at a substantial financial and political price. Adaptation to EU rules is costly and involves significant convergence costs for the partner countries, the co-financing mechanism of which, other than through the ENPI, is absent from the current EaP “tool kit”. Due to the dependence on Russia, without sufficient investment from the EU, Eastern Partnership countries may opt to avoid politically risky reforms. As an example, under pressure from Russia, Moldova has postponed implementing the third energy package under the Energy Community.¹⁰ EEA countries (Norway, Iceland and Liechtenstein) were of similar or even higher level of development as other EU countries, therefore adoption of European standards was not a significant burden. The modernisation costs of the EaP countries, thus becomes a barrier to faster integration. Financial support, including support to businesses, would not only reduce the cost but would also form more positive attitudes towards EU integration.¹¹ Small and medium sized businesses should be prioritised to strengthen the middle class and civil society. The Fund should be based on loans not grants and should invest in formidable local ideas and solutions. This would provide more certainty to investors and together with the finance and management know-how, new technologies would be transferred to EaP countries. Stimulating institutional and legal adaptation in the partnership countries in the longer term would reduce the cost of EU financial assistance.¹² The Fund could be financed from EU financial institutions, member budgets, and private equity and could include both micro-projects and large modernisation projects and also be available to third countries that support the Eastern Partnership policy and modernisation of partner countries. For example Japan has underscored its support and willingness to contribute to the successful development of the Eastern Partnership programme.¹³

More “bottom up”: Increasing measures in the EU Eastern Partnership policy that create better conditions for the development of civil society are equally important. Civil society structures are fragmented and are in a rather weak position to hold governments accountable. The EU should not necessarily find more vehicles to help transform civil societies into driving forces of Europeani-

5 Sadowski, 29.

6 EFTA, “EEE Decision-shaping and Comitology”, Factsheet. November, 2007. http://www.efta.int/~media/Files/Publications/Fact%20sheets/EEA%20factsheets/FS_DecShaping.pdf

7 Rita Kieber-Beck, “The Importance of Decision Shaping for the EFTA States”, EFTA Bulletin, 1, November, 2009, 8-9. <http://www.efta.int/media/files/publications/Bulletins/eeadecisionshaping-bulletin.pdf>

8 Hrant Kostanyan, “The Vilnius Summit on course for success: but the real work on the Eastern Partnership is yet to come”, European Neighbourhood Watch, Issue 96, August-September, 2013, 2. <http://www.ceps.eu/system/files/simplenews/2011/05/NWatch96.pdf>

9 EFTA, “The European Economic Area (EEA)”, Factsheet. November, 2007, 2–3. http://www.efta.int/~media/Files/Publications/Fact%20sheets/EEA%20factsheets/FS_EEA.pdf

10 Witold Rodkiewicz, “Moldova signals that it may withdraw from implementing the Third Energy Package”, Eastweek, 11 July 2012. <http://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/eastweek/2012-07-11/moldova-signals-it-may-withdraw-implementing-third-energy-package>

11 Sadowski, 51.

12 Ibid., 53.

13 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, “Visegrad Group plus Japan Joint Statement: Partnership based on common values for the 21st century”, 16 June 2013. <http://www.mofa.go.jp/files/00006466.pdf>

sation but should look into existing lessons learnt from the region.

In a rush to strengthen civil society the EU, not only largely neglected to learn from existing international donors but also local actors in this field. Civil society structures often promote partisan goals, Belarus is a prime example, and yet the EaP has paid little attention to support co-operation between non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and government structures what would bring forward sectoral agenda.¹⁴ Therefore the EU should ensure support not only to NGOs, but also to joint NGO-government and public-private partnership projects that naturally promote co-operation and dialogue.

The Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum may play a more important role in this. A large network of civil society organisations has been developed over the past five years with national platforms in each of the EaP countries and also the Executive Committee and the Secretariat in Brussels. It has the potential to become a strong information, advocacy and lobbying tool; unfortunately, so far the forum has focused more on its own issues and has not used this potential. The decreasing interest of the EU civil society organisations in the Forum's activities also reduces its potential to have any influence on decision making in the corridors of power in Brussels, EU capitals, and EaP countries. To jump start the process, the Forum needs to be much more ready to include all kinds of civic initiatives not only formal NGOs supported by Western donors, its activities should become more transparent, accountable, and attractive to ordinary citizens. It is time for the EU to grasp that civil society does not equal what it pays for.

Successful citizen mobility and communication tools, such as the Erasmus student exchange programme, could be useful in helping to inform EaP citizens. Education in the EaP countries should be made a priority though increasing partner opportunities to participate in the Erasmus for All mobility programme as well as providing support for viable civic education and professional internship initiatives.

Transition experience from the Baltic States or Central Europe where European Studies faculties have been developed in the universities could serve as model structure to support higher education i.e. in the universities, which both structurally, and in their activities, nurture the best European educational practices. With the help of such faculties, new courses focusing on European topics have been introduced and provided with the necessary literature, and they have also had visiting lecturer programmes from other European universities. This could ensure even higher "accessibility of Europe" in EaP countries.

It is particularly important for the EU to focus not only on supporting short-term projects but long-term programmes. Investment instead of institutional funding, looking for local contributions from businesses and individuals is cumbersome for bureaucratic donors and the only way to go. Local sustainability, i.e. projects that

could grow from EU financing and become independent should be prioritised. Bringing in the diaspora as well as Western educated young professional should be also a new focus for EU funding; there are plenty of good examples for such small-scale projects even in Belarus.

Sectoral integration providing access to EU structures and policies: This model was prepared back in 2006 as an "ENP Plus": sectoral partnership is developed on grounds of an agreement and based on two principles – mandatory adoption of EU sector-specific legislation and in exchange gaining access to programmes and institutions of the sector. The most successful example, from which we can learn and after assessment apply it to broader sectors, is the participation of Ukraine and Moldova in the European Energy Community. Sectoral integration could help gain the interest of countries with limited integration although they do not seek an Association Agreement, for example, Azerbaijan, whose financial dependence on the EU manifests not through direct support, but through trade (99.5% of EU imports from Azerbaijan consist of fuels and mining products¹⁵). Sectoral co-operation could also possibly help in uncovering entrepreneurs in partner countries who are interested in accessing the EU market and therefore ready to adopt European standards. Such entrepreneurs could become advocates of integration processes and form pressure groups in governments.

Greater integration of the EU instruments in the EaP, primarily in energy and transport policies, would be possible to make a lasting impact given these are key sectors.

One option is expansion of the new integrated measure – Connecting Europe Facility (CEF) – for investment in the EU transport, energy, and telecommunications infrastructure priorities in the EaP field of action. Expansion of the EU CEF measure to include the EaP countries of the Energy Community could be considered in the nearest EU financial perspective and fully developed in 2021-2027. The EU financial support from this fund could be allocated for investment in energy infrastructure, its upgrade and modernisation. Priority could be given to projects addressing EU energy safety objectives, whose implementation would contribute to the finalisation of integration of the EU domestic market and diversification of the EU energy sources (security of supply and competitiveness criteria). Another field which is being expanded is transportation: in October 2013, EU and Eastern partners signed a declaration inviting the European Commission to extend the trans-European network (TEN-T) to the EaP countries.¹⁶ This would allow the EU to participate

14 Alexander Duleba et al, "Visegrad 4 the Eastern Partnership: Towards the Vilnius Summit", 2013, 34. <http://www.sfpa.sk/dokumenty/pozvanky/952>

15 European Commission, "Implementation of the European Neighborhood Policy in Azerbaijan. Progress in 2011 and recommendations for action", Brussels, 15 May 2012. http://ec.europa.eu/world/enp/docs/2012_enp_pack/progress_report_azerbaijan_en.pdf

16 EU Neighbourhood Info, "EU and Eastern partners move closer to creating transport network", 10 October 2013. http://www.enpi-info.eu/maineast.php?id_type=1&id=34775&lang_id=450&utm_source=Oempro&utm_medium=Email&utm_content=Subscriber%232288&utm_campaign=EU%20and%20Eastern%20partners%20move%20closer%20to%20creating%20common%20transport%20network

directly in the development of the energy and transport infrastructure of partner countries,¹⁷ both of which have a significant effect on the geopolitical gravity and political development model of these countries.¹⁸

More for More, Measuring Progress: To measure the “more for more” principle the EU may consider developing a Connectivity Index (energy, roads, transport, infrastructure, etc) toward infrastructural connectivity progress. Beyond putting hard data on decision makers’ desk, such an Index may serve as an indicator for policy planners as well. While discussing the visa liberalisation process, fulfilment of the operational plan should bring tangible benefits, “such as abolishing visa charges or considerably simplifying visa issuance procedures”.¹⁹ A positive move would be for the EU “to reward” Moldova, which has made the greatest advances in implementing EU requirements. It has fulfilled nearly all the EU criteria and as soon as it finally achieves this, the EU could lift visas for short-term travel for Moldovan citizens with biometric passports. This gesture would be a very strong signal demonstrating that a visa-free regime with the EU is a real possibility and would encourage other EaP countries to speed up reforms.

The **EU should introduce more “intermediate stops” whose completion would bring certain benefits, serve as further motivation to partner countries, and provide for better assessment of reforms.** Last but not least the “Russia first” principle must not occur in the visa-free regime debates because of the pragmatic reasons in the EU’s relations to Russia. The EU would find it difficult to prove the advantages of EaP to partner countries, if Russia, which does not suit the criteria, were to receive the benefits ahead of the partners.

Reality Check: Fixing Expectations

Bigger demands should come with a bolder vision. Until there is no prospect of membership, political expectations should be based firmly on the realities on the ground. Partner countries will essentially pass through the same adaptive barrier as in the case of membership, but this process will take more time, while conditionality and solidarity should form a healthy balance.

17 One positive outcome is the two meetings of ministers in “28+6” format already held during Lithuania’s Presidency (Justice and Home Affairs ministerial meeting on 7-8 October and Transport ministerial meeting on 9 October). This kind of meeting should be held regularly and could include more spheres.

18 A good example is Iasi-Ungheni gas interconnection between Romania and Moldova, which could help to lower Moldova’s dependence on Russia in the gas sector, with the latter losing its ability to use this as a tool of influence (i.e. postponing the implementation of the 3rd Energy Package. Read more: Anita Sobjak, “The Romania-Moldova Gas Pipeline: Does a Connection to the EU Mean a Disconnect from Russia?”, Bulletin PISM, No 93 (546), 9 September 2013. <http://www.pism.pl/Publications/Bulletin/no-93-546>

19 Sadowski, 50.

The Vilnius Summit provides an opportunity to move away from the membership debate by focusing on the association process while **the EU has a chance to add strengthening interconnectivity through infrastructural and greater economic convergence of Eastern partners with its single market.** Previous integration experience shows that the economic “convergence” was the most attractive in the enlargement process and one that echoes a better life in Eastern Partnership countries. Economic convergence has the potential of “spilling-over” into the political level. This is particularly important due to the fact that the EU Eastern Partnership policy is not the only player in town, so the set of incentives and conditions offered by the EU to partner countries should be seen in the geopolitical context. “Deeper integration – higher conditionality” with more intermediate stops may be used in this case.

To move **faster towards Association Agreement implementation the EU could temporarily apply certain DCFTA trade concessions after signing or initialling the agreement.** The European Commission could implement this with respect to Georgia and Moldova through unilateral cancellation of export quotas on wine, textiles and agricultural products. It is estimated that such a move would not have any material impact on the EU domestic market, because both states account for only 0.1 per cent of EU imports.²⁰ This would, however, be a great tool to flex while reacting to the geopolitical processes in the region. The group of ratification friends is already on the way with the Baltic countries parliaments working with its Nordic partners, while others from Central Europe could chip in as well.

Association process should be treated as a step toward integration. Consequently, the EU should not only state that the door for membership of the Eastern Partnerships remains open, but should also clearly articulate that depending on domestic reforms and the development direction of partner countries, the EU is really willing to start the membership negotiation process. Considering adopting Article 49 into the Association Agreement with Moldova was a good start. Thus, for EaP countries the EU enlargement process would consist of more than two stages (association agreement with the EU and accession negotiations), while additional transitional periods would be introduced between these two stages as safeguards allowing to defer/suspend accession of candidates. This would ensure a longer and more thorough process enabling sceptical EU countries to assert the control over the process. On the other hand, this would create conditions for countries participating in the Eastern Partnership to feel that there is a possibility, depending on the results of implementation of EU terms and conditions, to move to a higher EU integration league.

The Association Agreements are not the end but the very start of an integration process. The prospect of membership was the key motivating integration factor

20 Iana Dreyer and Nicu Popescu, “A solidarity package for the eastern partners”, Alerts, No 32, 19 September 2013. http://www.iss.europa.eu/uploads/media/Alert_DCFTA.pdf

to post-Soviet Central European countries, which in 2004 or in 2007 became fully-fledged EU members. It is asserted that the biggest incentive for Ukraine and other countries participating in the Eastern Partnership to continue along the path of European integration is precisely the prospect of EU membership²¹. Of course, there are many potential risks regarding selective or non-implementation of the provisions of the Association Agreement. The experience of Ukraine's membership in

the World Trade Organisation (WTO) strengthens such risks. "Cherry picking" is a likely scenario as the region gets used to much more rhetorical (i.e. symbolic) policy-making than actual steps. Russia's engagement works toward reducing the conditionality where it is much needed for the EU to have sufficient leverage during the implementation phase.

The *ex-ante* application of the provisions of the extended free-trade agreement (starting from the date of signing) would also allow the EU, while still maintaining all the safeguards (the ratification process may take a while), to assess whether Ukraine is going to implement the principles of the agreement as a matter of form. The EU would gain more leverage to control Ukraine's adaptation to EU rules, if Kyiv and other Eastern Partnership countries were offered a bolder vision pointing toward integration. Signing the Association Agreement may not be seen as a reward but also as the start of the real journey. However, this is dependent on it being signed in Vilnius.

21 Read more: Irina Solonenko, "External democracy promotion in Ukraine: the role of the European Union", *Democratization*, Vol. 16, No. 4, August 2009, 709–731. Antoaneta Dimitrova and Rilka Dragneva, "Constraining external governance: interdependence with Russia and the CIS as limits to the EU's rule transfer in the Ukraine", *Journal of European Public Policy* 16:6 September 2009, 853–872. Katarzyna Wolczuk, "Implementation without Coordination: The Impact of EU Conditionality on Ukraine under the European Neighbourhood Policy", *EUROPE-ASIA STUDIES*, Vol. 61, No. 2, March 2009, 187–211.

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