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Czech Guidelines for the Eastern Partnership: Case of EU Integration

Context of the EU

Eleven years after its launch in Prague, the EU's Eastern Partnership policy (EaP) can be best characterized as a highly ambitious and dynamically developing multilateral platform for relations with the six partner countries, offering each¹ of them an opportunity to strengthen bilateral relations with the EU. The year of 2020 means an important milestone for the Policy not only because of the conclusion of the 20-point reform agenda for 2020, but also the recently concluded structured consultation organised by the DG NEAR² and ongoing process of revision. It is also because of the associated agenda of Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova with the EU that is by 2020 supposed to deliver a number of mutually agreed points and commitments.

These are particularly the outcomes of the public consultation that will show the way into the next decade and reveal the expectations and where the consensus lies among the EU institutions, EU Member States (MSs), EaP countries and other stakeholders when speaking about the future of EaP beyond 2020. The upcoming EaP summit organised by the Croat EU Presidency in May will serve as an opportunity to present the upgrade of the Partnership for the upcoming years. This will most certainly include also greening of the policy and a more ambitious approach to implementation of the SDG 2030 and Paris agreement.

The initial results of the consultation showed that while there is a whole number of potential ideas and policy proposals (such as so-called “*Trio Strategy 2030*”, “*EaP+*”, “*Four Unions*”

¹ Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine.

² https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/news_corner/news/european-union-opens-structured-consultation-future-eastern-partnership_en

and deeper sectoral integration or a complete institutional upgrade of the Partnership),³ the EaP largely suffers from the old problems inherited from its launch in 2009. It is most notably the issue of future membership in the EU or more generally a willingness of the EU MSs to allow for a stronger integration with the Eastern partners. For others, it might be simply a lack of interest (or even open “*EaP fatigue*”), prioritising the other neighbourhood to the south or relations with Russia. Therefore, it is the general lack of consensus on the future of EaP as well as internal problems inside of the EU itself that are crippling the possibility of future enlargement,⁴ or even any kind of comprehensive narrative for the future of EaP.

This, however, does not mean that the Eastern Partnership would simply cease to exist in the years to come or will become irrelevant. Just on the contrary. It seems as the most realistic that there will be more continuity than change and that the approach of small integration steps (versus big gestures and strong rhetoric) and more technical (new policy points for a period after 2020) agenda, such as in the field of youth, people-to-people contacts and academia, strategic communication and combating hybrid threats or resilience, will continue and might be even increased. The consultation brought many other interesting and ambitious ideas that can be implemented on the EU level, but it also showed that some of them will have to be done either on bilateral level by the MSs, or on a more regional basis, for example, by the Visegrad Group. The aim of this policy paper is to within the EU context illustrate and elaborate on how the Czech ideas on EU integration can help the EaP countries to move closer to the EU and its Single Market.

Czech contribution

The Czech historical experience with transformation into liberal democracy and market economy might be considered as one of the most successful ones among the post-communist and post-Soviet countries. Rapid political, economic and societal changes of the 1990s brought Czechia in NATO in 1999 and the European Union in 2004. Therefore, the EU accession process in fact heavily shaped conducting the necessary, and often painful, reforms and determined the strategic path of the Czech “*return back to Europe*” before 2004. The accession process, now built around 35 chapters of the EU’s *acquis communautaire*, keeps

³ <https://www.rferl.org/a/poland-proposes-closer-ties-for-eu-eastern-partnership-nations/29940556.html>

⁴ This can be best illustrated on the case of Albania and North Macedonia as well as the ongoing discussion about reform of the enlargement policy initiated by France but continued by a number of EU MSs:

<https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2019/11/18/seven-stages-of-eu-accession-this-is-how-france-would-reform-the-process/> and <https://www.politico.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Enlargement-nonpaper.pdf>

growing and developing, which makes the situation of new applicants increasingly difficult.⁵ The enlargement policy of the EU is now open for discussion among the EU Member States⁶⁷ and the European Commission, which presented several proposals to relaunch the dialogue with the Western Balkan countries, and other potential applicants in the future.⁸⁹

In this context, the situation of Eastern Partnership countries is, indeed, very much different from their counterparts in Western Balkans. And even if the EaP6 have substantial support for their Euro-Atlantic orientation and future accession to the EU among the MSs from Central and Eastern Europe and other like-minded countries, including Czechia, there is still a long way before they even get considered for their own application. Despite that, the “*accelerated political association and further economic integration*” have been in the core of the Eastern Partnership agenda since the Prague Summit of 2009¹⁰ as well as constituting the core of association agreements (and DCFTAs) with the three associated countries, and CEPA agreement with Armenia. Over the last couple of years, different ways how to promote and accelerate a closer integration within the EU and its Single Market has been presented. While some of them got more traction than others, the EU MSs came up with their own ideas where to go with the EU integration beyond 2020.

The Czech diplomacy has been looking for opportunities (and building wider political consensus among those) for closer integration of the EaP countries in the EU. It has put both core principles of differentiation (especially for the three associated countries) and inclusivity on equal footing, as confirmed in its priorities of the V4 Presidency of 2019/20.¹¹ In this context, a gradual sectoral integration among the EaP countries and the EU on bilateral, multilateral and so-called “*cluster*” approach stands in the core of bolstering both key principles when approaching the EU’s eastern policy. The Czech foreign policy is paying particular attention to the multilateral track of EU-EaP relations in the period after 2020.

⁵ While before 2004, there were 26 policy chapters, there are now 35 of them.

⁶ <https://www.politico.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Enlargement-nonpaper.pdf>

⁷ <https://euobserver.com/enlargement/146624>

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https://euobserver.com/enlargement/147375?utm_source=euobs&utm_medium=email&fbclid=IwAR0TxgiD9UoReCxMlnLIT2wDdunUZuUSXA0-cP0uSWWNUy8D9Xi3AN2_ck4

⁹ <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/committees/en/afet/home.html>

¹⁰ https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/31797/2009_eap_declaration.pdf

¹¹ https://www.mzv.cz/file/3572188/programme_CZ_V4_PRES_2019_2020.pdf

During the EU´s public consultation the Czech diplomacy also presented its idea of “*Common Partnership Spaces*” as one of its concrete inputs to the topic.¹² The idea actually comes from the early 2000s, when the EU offered a similar strategic framework of cooperation to the Russian Federation, in order to differentiate from the European Neighbourhood Policy. If Russia eventually decided not to make use of it, this might be a new opportunity for the EaP countries to establish a “*new conditional horizons for more ambitious countries*” and a deeper sectoral integration within the EU without essentially applying for membership, which has little political support among the EU27 at this point. Thanks to a successful implementation of reforms and associated agenda and its benchmarking, sector by sector integration (e.g. in the environment, transport or digital market) might actually go beyond the fully-fledged joining of the Single Market, as promised by the AA/DCFTA. Delivering practical benefits to the EaP countries and their citizens is clearly a win-win strategy for both the EU and its eastern partners. This kind of approach might, at some point, even lead to the opening of the enlargement process and membership in the EU one day. However, for that, it is first essential to revive and potentially structuralism the EU´s enlargement policy, mobilise the internal EU´s capacity, goodwill and ambition in the foreign policy domain as well as support the EaP countries both politically and economically, including by creating new incentives for delivering on the structural reforms.

During their own accession process, the Czech Republic, as well as the other current EU MSs from CEE and southern Europe, had an ideal time and conditions for joining the EU, including political and economic support from the EU and US and their financial tools and mechanisms (e.g. PHARE, FDI, etc.), political consensus from the EU´s side, and even Russia did not manage to stop them from joining Europe once again. While the current situation is much different for the Eastern Partnership, the logic remains the same to support the Eastern partners along the same lines. This is also relevant when speaking about the absorption capacity of the government and state apparatus to adopt the EU´s *acquis* and successfully implement the reform agenda, for which professionalisation of public servants is absolutely key. Here, the EU, V4 and Czechia can offer TAIEX and twinning programmes, job shadowing or bilateral exchanges with EaP experts, public officials as well as civil society experts. At least on the V4 and Czech levels, there is a positive experience with the V4EaP and V4Ukraine type of activities, which delivered good results in the past. The plan to

¹² Except for that, Czechia also developed and negotiated “The Package on Resilience for the Eastern Partnership”. Czech contribution to the structured consultation on the future of Eastern Partnership of the DG NEAR (not public).

establish an academy for public officials from the EaP modelled on the success of EaP School in Tbilisi also goes in that direction.

Policy recommendations

- ❖ A new financial instrument, the so-called *Marshall Plan for EaP*, should be developed in order to support particularly associated countries of the EU, and facilitate/incentivise implementation of the associated agenda. The principle of more for more (or less for less) should be sustained in the logic of differentiation, a key pillar of the EaP since the beginning, while keeping the Eastern Partnership an inclusive and open policy framework.
- ❖ The EU should come up with a new policy document (e.g. new Deliverables for post-2020) beyond 2020 in order to better incentivise and monitor progress made on the association agenda and to motivate partner countries in working together for a better and more sustainable future.
- ❖ A deeper sectoral integration, following the Czech policy proposal of *Common Partnership Spaces*, between the EaP countries and the EU should be promoted, and the Eastern partners put closer to the core of multispeed Europe.
- ❖ The EU, V4 and Czechia, in particular, should provide their know-how, financial resources and political support for conducting (often painful) domestic reforms and explaining/selling the necessary steps to the domestic audience. The rule of law and reform of the judiciary should play a prominent role in this regard since they constitute a solid basis for economic development as well as foreign direct investment from the West.
- ❖ Building on the capacity and professional bureaucratic apparatus, the EU could add value by establishing a specialised academy for EaP officials modelled on the Eastern Partnership School in Tbilisi. The socialisation of EaP elites, including public officials, experts and civil society representatives, should be promoted, for example, by TAIEX and twinning programmes and shadowing as well as cooperation with sectoral ministries of individual EU Member States.
- ❖ In order to intensify the multilateral framework of the EaP, the EU should provide more substantial benefits and stronger incentives for partner countries to build trust and promote cooperation among themselves as well as with the EU. In that regard, the EU Member States could more efficiently divide the labour and get involved in the

multilateral dimension where they see their added value (modelled on NATO's framework leading nations).

- ❖ Stronger empowerment of EaP countries to come up with their own initiatives and work for a common good should be encouraged. This means also to make better use of the existing tools and instruments (working groups, platforms and flagship initiatives) as well as their more appropriate adjustment to the needs of EaP countries.
- ❖ The V4 should again prioritise the Eastern Partnership and return to its previous positive role played in the region. It should become a credible defender of the EaP countries in the EU decision-making process and their Euro-Atlantic orientation, including gradual (sectoral) integration within the EU. Multiplication with the other EU Member States as part of the V4+ logic, e.g with the Baltic states, can be mutually beneficial.
- ❖ Restoration of the “V4Ukraine” type of activities in Eastern Europe, active involvement in the region and providing know-how on political, social and economic transformation can add value from the point of view of Central Europe. “V4EaP” programmes and activities should be intensified, including high-level meetings of foreign and prime ministers.
- ❖ During 2019/20, Czechia should make proper use of its presidency of the Visegrad Group and work toward restoring the previously positive image of V4 in Eastern Europe, including by devoting special attention to the policy as well as reconciling views between Hungary and Ukraine under the motto of the presidency “V4 Reasonable Europe”. The Czech EU Presidency of 2022 should be seen as an opportunity to put the EaP on the table and deliver on its fundamental goals of political association and further economic integration within the EU and its Single Market.