

REPORT

A hard reset for EU-Africa relations? Visegrád perspectives for a post-pandemic era

Tuesday 26th of May 2020
Online stream

- **The panel discussion titled “A hard reset for EU-Africa relations? Visegrád perspectives for a post-pandemic era” was organised by the Think Visegrád Platform and took place on Tuesday, May 26th 2020. The debate was held on the online platform Zoom and broadcasted on the Facebook Page of EUROPEUM Institute for European Policy. The four panellists discussed the new Strategy for Africa that was presented by the European Commission at the beginning of March, addressing the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic on the Partnership and reflecting on the specific role of the Visegrád countries in Africa.**

The introductory remarks of the event were delivered by Zuzana Stuchlíková (Head of Brussels Office, EUROPEUM, Institute for European Policy) who also moderated the discussion. The panel featured Nicole Gerlis Bleier (International Aid/Cooperation Officer, DG DEVCO at the European Commission), Ondřej Horký Hlucháň (Senior Research Fellow, Institute of International Relations Prague), István Tarrósy (Associate Professor, University of Pécs; Associate Research Fellow, Institute for Foreign Affairs and Trade), Jędrzej Czerep (Analyst, Polish Institute of International Affairs). More than 70 people followed the live stream.

Mr Ms Gerlis opened the discussion by presenting the “Joint Communication towards a Comprehensive Strategy with Africa” that the European Commission unveiled at the beginning of March, 2020. The document marks the launch of a new EU-Africa Partnership in view of the EU-African Union Summit that will take place next October in Brussels. This renewed approach also results from the reaffirmed commitment of the Von der Leyen’s Commission to change the narration of the relation: Africa is indeed Europe’s closest neighbour as well as a continent that is experiencing a booming growth. According to Ms Gerlis, the coronavirus crisis has represented the first test for the Partnership. The EU has responded with a “Team Europe” package of 20 million euros destined to African countries in order to both mitigate the effects of the crisis, and also to put the basis for a long-term engagement in the continent.

After Ms Gerlis's presentation, the other panellists took the word to comment on the proposal. Mr Horký-Hlucháň believed that the new Commission's strategy doesn't break with the past approaches towards Africa. This Joint Communication has to be evaluated critically as it still doesn't address fundamental issues such as the treatment of the middle class or the topic of food security. Mr Tarrósy agreed with Mr Horký-Hlucháň's assessment and called for an update of the content of the proposal, as again it lacks of mentioning for example the theme of human security. From his point of view, the coronavirus crisis can be regarded as the occasion to address the imperfections of the Communication and to find more tangible solutions for the EU's Partnership with Africa. Mr Czerep judged the proposal more positively, even though he also noted it needs changes, but the document according to him represents a positive beginning for the definition of this relation. In response to these comments, Ms Belier highlighted how the Communication is only the Commission's first proposal and should serve as a basis for a further discussion with other parts (for example, the African states or the stakeholders).

The moderator, Ms Stuchlíková then shifted the discussion to a reflexion on the role of the Visegrad countries in the African continent. Even though Africa is not the priority for the V4 Group, all panellists agreed that recently more strategies have been developed by the Visegrad countries with regards to Africa. For instance, Mr Czerep explained that Poland started to be invested in the continent about ten years ago, especially contributing to the agricultural sector. The same applies to the case of Hungary: from the Hungarian perspective, Mr Tarrósy referred to the Strategy that was launched in April 2019 calling for a "Back to Africa engagement". He also

emphasised the importance of knowledge transfer, one of the main terrains for cooperation between Africa and the V4. Mr Horký-Hlucháň added to this last point that Czech Republic is active in supporting African universities.

The final section of the debate consisted of a Q&A session where new themes emerged. First of all, the presence of other powers in Africa (the US, Turkey, China) was one of the main topics discussed by the panellists. The general opinion was that the EU should focus on its role in Africa, yet it should also always consider the actions implemented by the other powers aiming to bring their influence in Africa. Consequently, the panellists agreed that the EU should act being aware of the geopolitical competition that exists in the African continent. Another topic of discussion was the conditionality in the Partnership. According to Mr Horký-Hlucháň and Mr Tarrósy the word conditionality should be replaced by flexibility: a part from the respect of human rights, every other matter of discussion between the EU and Africa should be dealt in a flexible manner (including migration). Finally, the theme of knowledge transfer was again addressed in response to a question by the audience concerning the Erasmus+ Programs in Africa. In this respect, Mr Tarrósy once again emphasised the fundamental role of sharing knowledge with Africa.

To sum up, the proposal of the European Commission towards a new Strategy with Africa needs to be further discussed and updated. Nevertheless, the commitment showed by the European Union towards its Partnership with Africa has been welcomed positively: in order to improve the Strategy, the Union should work on communication exchange of knowledge and information with its African partners.