



Report

Eastern Partnership at the Turn of a New Decade: Continuing with Uncertainty or Ideal Conditions?

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The panel discussion titled “Eastern Partnership at the Turn of a New Decade: Continuing with Uncertainty or Ideal Conditions?” was organised by the Think Visegrad Platform in Brussels and Asociace pro mezinárodní otázky/Association for International Affairs. The debate took place on Monday, June 22nd 2020 and was held on the online platform Zoom while being broadcasted live on the Facebook page of EUROPEUM Institute for European Policy. As the event represented a follow up to discussions started in December 2019, the four panellists focused on the recent developments of the European Union’s cooperation with Eastern Partnership countries and the role of the Visegrad countries, while they also addressed the possible effects of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The welcome words were delivered by Věra Řiháčková Pachta (Advocacy Manager, Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum and Associate Fellow, EUROPEUM) who also moderated the event. The event started with a Key-note speech of Lawrence Meredith (Director for Neighbourhood East, DG NEAR, European Commission), which was further discussed on a panel discussion featured Wojciech Kononczuk (Deputy Director, OSW), Alisa Muzergues (Research Fellow, GLOBSEC), Sandor Seremet (Associated Fellow, IFAT) and Pavel Havlíček (Research Fellow, AMO). At the end of the discussion, Mr Jaroslav Kurfürst (Special Envoy for the Eastern Partnership, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Czech Republic) gave final remarks. More than 60 people followed the live stream continuously and overall the video recorded over 2,000 views.

Mr Meredith opened the event with a key-note speech on the recent developments of the Eastern Partnership Summit, mentioning the Joint Communication that was published by the European Commission on the 18th of March, 2020 with the title of “the “Eastern Partnership policy beyond 2020: Reinforcing Resilience – an Eastern Partnership that delivers for all”. He underlined the five long-term policy objectives set by the Commission (including economic development, environmental and climate resilience and the digital transformation) which were

agreed on after negotiations between the Institutions, the EU Member States and the civil society (think tanks, business community, academia). Moreover, he confirmed the importance of the EaP for the EU, which indeed considers the partnership as a priority and has showed his commitment and investment towards the area also during the Covid-19 pandemic. Moreover, Mr Meredith emphasised the motto behind the new Communication: “evolution and not revolution”. The future Summit in March 2021 will start from such premises to build a stronger partnership.

After Mr Meredith’s introductory speech, Ms Řiháčková Pachta started with the first round of questions to the panellists. The four agreed on highlighting some weak points that were not mentioned in the Commission’s document. For instance, Ms Muzergues underlined that the civil society and the European Parliament expected something more from the new Communication, notably a “revolution rather than an evolution”. Furthermore, she affirmed that the term ‘resilience’ that was put in the title of the strategy still needs to be clarified. Mr Kononczuk agreed with this interpretation, and further stressed how a concrete dimension still needs to be given to the EaP, meaning that a specific agenda needs to be created and implemented in the next few years. In addition, Mr Seremet highlighted the need for the Partnership to focus on objectives that would impact on the citizens’ life. For example, he mentioned issues such as the rate of unemployment in the EaP countries, or the existing cleavage between the rural versus the capital in those countries, where the Union must be more present. Lastly, Mr Havlíček showed his concerns over the disagreement between the EU’s Member States on the future of the Partnership, thus emphasising the theme of solidarity.

In response to these comments, Mr Meredith stated again that the Partnership plays a significant role for the European Institutions and stressed two focal points. First of all, the meaning of the word “resilience” is linked to an idea of solidarity, of collaboration, of sharing the resources, of working together. An approach based on this resilience was specifically requested by the President of the European Commission, Ms Von der Leyen. Second



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of all, he mentioned the Coronavirus crisis as the example of the importance of global solidarity in today's context; this concept is very much needed in the contemporary world, and indeed it lies at the basis of the EU-EaP.

The question of the EU's communication vis-à-vis the citizens subjected to the Partnership was further addressed in some questions from the audience. The panellists affirmed that the Union must implement actions in a more visible way in order to be accepted and thus maintain a high level of support in these countries. Mr Meredith responded saying that the EU can operate in this manner, meaning in a transparent and accountable way. As an example, he cited the Coronavirus crisis as a demonstration that the EU is fully committed in this area, and that it represents a strategic and long-term partner for the EaP.

The second part of the discussion was dedicated to the position of the Visegrad Group on the Eastern Partnership. More particularly, the moderator asked the experts to share their thoughts on V4's attitudes towards the Eastern partners. In commenting this position, the panellists all agreed in saying that the Eastern Partnership represents a priority for the V4's foreign policies. As for Poland, Mr Kononczuk confirmed the Polish commitment towards the area, based on the conviction that a stable democracy for the Eastern partners would also be beneficial for the region of Central Europe. Mr Seremet observed a similar position in Hungary's attitude. Indeed, although some tensions exist between Hungary and Ukraine, the Hungarian researcher revealed a shifting in the position of Hungary which now gives much more importance to the EaP. Mr Havlíček then commented on Czech Republic's approach, also referring to the fact that Czechia is now concluding its Presidency in the V4 Group. With regards to the EaP, the Czech approach is strongly value-based and ambitious, but also limited in the capacity and highly personalised. Nevertheless, Mr Havlíček eventually observed positively the cooperation with the Eastern partners. As for the Slovakian perspective, Ms Muzergues clarified the position and stated that the new government has a clear priority in working with the Eastern Partners, especially with Ukraine (Slovakia's biggest neighbour).

A further comment on the V4's attitude towards the EaP was given by the Czech Ambassador, Mr Kurfürst. The latter commented on the future of the EaP in light of the Czech Presidency of the Council of the EU in 2022. He underlined that it is likely that the Czech government will organise a EaP Summit during its Presidency, the intention is now there but of course 2022 is still far ahead.

Afterwards, the panellists were asked questions by the audience. The issue of democratisation in certain Eastern partners such as Azerbaijan was addressed, and the question of Ukraine's ambition for a full membership in the EU was mentioned. In the end, the panellists all confirmed how the European Union has a well-established commitment towards the region, yet it needs to implement very specific roadmaps for each of the Eastern partners, improving cooperation and coordination. In most recent times, the rule of law has become a priority that should also be dealt with more.

The discussion was concluded with closing remarks of the Ambassador, Mr Kurfürst. In summarising the central points of the event, he once again highlighted the significant role that the Eastern Partnership carries for the European Union to this day. According to him, what is necessary now is to implement actions whose results are visible, such as working on these countries' infrastructures or promoting the rule of law. Nevertheless, the overall feeling of all the panellists that participated in the debate is that the EU must continue to give much importance to the Partnership, but in view of next year's Summit it must also come up with new initiatives leading to a "revolution" rather than an "evolution".



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EUROPEUM Institute for European Policy is a non-profit, non-partisan, and independent think-tank focusing on European integration and cohesion. EUROPEUM contributes to democracy, security, stability, freedom, and solidarity across Europe as well as to active engagement of the Czech Republic in the European Union. EUROPEUM undertakes original research, organizes public events and educational activities, and formulates new ideas and recommendations to improve European and Czech policy making.

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About EUROPEUM in Brussels

Building on a long history of EUROPEUM in Prague, we opened our office in Brussels in January 2016. EUROPEUM has been the first think-tank from the Central Europe to branch out to the heart of the European Union. Our motivation has been to follow the debates on EU policies and politics from close and to contribute to them by strengthening the voice of the Czech Republic and other central and east European countries. At the same time, we would like to use our Brussels presence to boost discussions on the EU back in the region, through introducing research by Brussels-based experts, offering their perspective at local events, cooperating with the media, etc.

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Contact

Web: europeum.org

Prague Office address: Staroměstské náměstí 4/1, 110 00, Praha 1

Tel.: +420 212 246 552

E-mail: europeum@europeum.org

Brussels Office address: 77, Avenue de la Toison d'Or. B-1060 Brusel, Belgie

Tel: +32 484 14 06 97

E-mail: brussels@europeum.org

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