



EASTERN PARTNERSHIP
Civil Society Forum



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EVENT REPORT

Quo Vadis Eastern Partnership? A Retrospective look into the future

Thursday 23rd of November 2017
European Endowment for Democracy, Brussels

- **On 23 November 2017, the Think Visegrad platform co-organized the conference Quo Vadis Eastern Partnership? A Retrospective look into The Future in cooperation with Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum, Open Society European Policy Institute, Slovak Foreign Policy Association and the European Endowment for Democracy (EED), who hosted the event.**

On the eve of the 5th Eastern Partnership Summit, held for the first time in Brussels, the conference wanted to assess the achievements of the Eastern Partnership (EaP) so far. At the same time, the guest-speakers tried to look into the future and develop recommendations for bringing further change into the ground.

EED Executive director **Jerzy Pomianowski** opened the event and introduced the keynote speaker **Linus Linkevičius**, Lithuanian Minister of Foreign Affairs. The minister reminded participants that five out of the six EaP countries have frozen conflicts on their territories because of their European choice. The EU should therefore defend the common values shared by both sides and step up its engagement in

the region. Today's situation is more than a "geopolitical game"; it is a battle for the hearts and minds of citizens.

The Opening panel also included **Natalia Yerashevich**, Director of the Secretariat, Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum and **Zuzana Stuchlíková**, Head of Brussels Office, EUROPEUM Institute for European Policy/Think Visegrad platform.

Assessing policy performance: the Eastern Partnership on the eve of the Brussels summit

During the first panel, moderated by **Iskra Kirova**, Senior Policy Analyst at Open Society European Policy Institute, six experts working on



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or in the EaP countries had the opportunity to take stock of the current situation and formulate their expectations vis-à-vis the EU.

- **Ukraine:** Contrary to other EaP countries, society in Ukraine is very receptive to the EU message. In a country where there is no single stakeholder, the EU should behave as a stakeholder and push for more reforms, said **Dmytro Shulga** of International Renaissance Foundation.
- **Georgia:** 71% of the population supports EU integration, according to a recent poll. The Georgian government is open to dialogue with civil society, but a high level of corruption prevails. **Vano Chkhikvadze** from Open Society Georgia Foundation deplored the lack of vision from both sides about the future of the EaP policy and called for an EU-Georgia summit.
- **Belarus:** The country has produced visible output such as an increased dialogue on human rights. Media and civil society are *de facto* allowed to operate, however without legal guarantees. Belarus made some small steps, but the change is not there yet, criticised **Timur Onica**, EED programme officer for Belarus and Moldova.
- **Moldova:** Considered a "front-runner" among EaP countries, Moldova was the first to obtain visa-free travel to the EU and to sign the free-trade agreement (DCFTA). However, after conditionality was lifted, no significant reforms were implemented. Moreover, recent law initiatives had detrimental effects, such as the new media law that wiped out local and opposition media, and the new electoral

reform that hinders political pluralism, remarked **Mr Onica**.

- **Armenia:** The EU upheld its support to Armenia even after it joined the Eurasian Economic Union. After a short while, people saw the uselessness of the EEC and started to appreciate the EU more. A stimulating factor was the presentation of the EU integration index for EaP countries, as it added competitiveness for civil society organisations, said **Boris Navasardyan**, President of Yerevan Press Club.
- **Azerbaijan:** **Ziya Guliyev**, Chair of the Center for Legal Initiatives, urged politicians to solve regional problems first, such as the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. He also called on the EU to give more support to civil society organisations. *"Human rights and democracy cannot be discussed only at the Summits - they have to be a priority in the overall approach"*, Mr Guliyev said.

As regards expectations towards the EU, the experts agreed that every country is different, so the deliverables should be different too. In certain areas, a multilateral dimension could be applicable, for example in strategic communication. Therefore, they expressed the wish for a 'deep and comprehensive change' of the EaP policy.

The speakers also expressed disappointment that in the European Commission's White Paper on the future of Europe the EaP countries are not even mentioned, despite the fact that a European perspective is crucial for them. As Vano Chikhikvadze stated, *"no matter how much we discuss at Summits,*

only the perspective of EU accession can bring real change in EaP countries”.

Eastern Partnership Quo Vadis? Expectations and recommendations for the next steps

Experts of the second panel, which was moderated by **Adam Balcer** from Think Visegrad platform, examined the EU’s response to the emerging trends in the region.

Deputy Head of Unit from DG NEAR **Diana Jablonska** confirmed the renewed engagement of the European Commission in the EaP policy. The EC wants to increase its finances, improve its outreach in the region through intermediary organisations and give greater support to grassroots initiatives. Other experts reminded participants that the EaP policy is a very ambitious project, and that its architecture should be changed in order to fit the needs of the individual countries.

Rebecca Harms, MEP, noted that the EU must be more visible in EaP countries, especially in the local communities outside of the capitals. Furthermore, it is paramount that the EU remains credible in the eyes of the citizens. If their economic hardship keeps

growing, then they might lose their belief in the EU. *“A more urgent question than economic liberalisation is filling gaps in the social situation in EaP countries, through the fight against corruption and the unfair distribution of wealth”,* said Rebecca Harms.

Alexander Duleba, Director of the Research Centre at the Slovak Foreign Policy Association, called for a closer cooperation between the EU and EaP countries in the legislative process. In order to establish a real partnership, he claimed, EaP countries must have a say on the legislation, not just absorb it. **Zsuzsanna Vegh**, Researcher at Europa-Universität Viadrina, underlined the importance of addressing the local and rural communities in EaP countries, to ensure that the process of integration with the EU leads to a sustainable change.

Miriam Lexmann, EU Regional Programme Director at International Republican Institute concluded that politicians need to engage more with citizens and stop talking down to them. The Eastern Partnership should offer genuine support to civil society, democratic political parties and disadvantaged citizens.