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Eastern Partnership: much work to be done

On November 24th the Eastern Partnership Summit was held in Brussels, EU leaders met with their six Eastern partners (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, the Republic of Moldova, and Ukraine) to agree on the future priorities of their partnership. Together they discussed how to strengthen cooperation and achieve stronger economy, governance, connectivity and society. They acknowledged the European aspirations and European choice of partners who signed association agreements with the EU, namely Georgia, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine; while recognising the right for other partners to choose the level of ambition they aspire to in their relations with the EU, as stated by the President of the European Council, Donald Tusk [Remarks by President Donald Tusk after the 5th Eastern Partnership summit, European Council, 24 November 2017].

Much work to be done and most rapidly as possible, as well as made clear by the statements of the European commissioner for home affairs, Dimitris Avramopoulos, singled out Ukraine and Moldova in particular as countries that need to speed up reforms. He said all the countries concerned need to "step up their efforts to address irregular migration and fight organized crime and corruption in particular." Avramopoulos spoke as the European Commission published a report on how Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Georgia, Macedonia, Moldova, Montenegro, Serbia, and Ukraine implement their visa-free regimes with the EU as well as rule-of-law reforms [Rikard Jozwiak, Interview: EU Urges Western Balkans, Eastern Partnership Countries To Speed Up Reforms, RadioFreeEurope Radio Liberty, 20 December 2017].

There is a continuous and strong public support for European integration in Ukraine and Georgia. Even Moldova's public opinion has bounced back despite the country's previous pro-EU governments' poor governance, large-scale corruption and a pro-Russian challenger in current President Dodon. Pro-EU feelings have risen even in Azerbaijan, in Armenia and in Belarus, the last two, members of the Eurasian Economic Union. It would be misleading to assume that the Eastern Partnership policy alone has brought these results. The real game changer was Russia's reaction to Ukraine's Euromaidan revolution. Moscow's annexation of Crimea and the war in Donbas has consolidated support in the region for the EU, mainly in a hope for protection. The associated partners are trying to push the EU for more concessions, while the EU for more reforms in the region to achieve the "20 deliverables for 2020" in key priority areas. The EU's policy in the Eastern Partnership region can achieve more only if Brussels and the EU member states take more responsibility for the region. The EU needs to take into account that reforms in the region, as shown by the best reformer, Georgia, require more time and more resources. The EU's macro-financial assistance, together with the International Monetary Fund (IMF), have been particularly effective in restoring macro-financial stability in Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia. However, there is a growing realisation that the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade

Agreement (DCFTA), the most important and binding part of the Association Agreements, cannot trigger the necessary economic growth alone. [Balázs Jarábik, Dovilė Šukytė, Eight Years of Eastern Partnership: Hidden in the Trenches, Carnegie, 23 November 2017].

The EU's efforts will, therefore, have to demonstrate to be capable to overcome the impasse which has hit Eastern European countries in the process of accession to Community structures in recent years. This kind of path, however, is weakened by problems that could potentially trigger new conflicts with Russia. The EU must be able to find alternative solutions to solve the issues that make the accession of Eastern European countries unworkable, such as the conflict with Russian enclaves present in all these states. For this reason, the EU reaffirmed its commitment to support the territorial integrity, independence and sovereignty of all its partners and furthermore Summit participants called for renewed efforts to promote the peaceful settlement of unresolved conflicts in the region on the basis of international law. To get back to attracting the attention and the involvement of the European peoples, it will be necessary to implement concrete policies and targeted interventions that will be realized already from the beginning of the new year.

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