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From: General Secretariat of the Council

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To: Delegations

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Subject: EASTERN PARTNERSHIP

– Council conclusions

1. Delegations will find attached in the Annex the Council conclusions on Eastern Partnership, as adopted by the Council (Foreign Affairs) on 14 November 2016.

Council conclusions on Eastern Partnership

Foreign Affairs Council, 14 November 2016

1. The Council reaffirms the high importance it attaches to the Eastern Partnership, as a specific dimension of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), offering close political association and economic integration with the EU and tangible results to citizens. The Council recalls that the Eastern Partnership is based on a shared commitment to international law and fundamental values, including democracy, the rule of law, respect for human rights, fundamental freedoms and gender equality, as well as to market economy, sustainable development and good governance.
2. The Council welcomes progress in implementing commitments agreed at the Riga summit in both the bilateral and multilateral dimensions of the Eastern Partnership. It welcomes the implementation of the reviewed ENP which enables more differentiated and tailored bilateral relations based on the partners' needs and shared interests of the EU and partner countries. The Council also welcomes the emphasis on the EU neighbourhood in the Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy.

3. Acknowledging the progress achieved by the partner countries, the Council underlines the importance of a continued commitment to pursue the reform process, notably in the judiciary, the fight against corruption and public administration. The Council reaffirms its support to the reform agenda by partners, in line with the EU incentive-based approach. Implementation of reforms is key for the continued success of the Eastern Partnership, and an essential part of strengthening the state and societal resilience of the partner countries as stated in the EU Global Strategy.
4. The Council welcomes progress in the implementation of the Association Agreements/Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas (AA/DCFTAs) with Georgia, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine, providing for accelerating political association and economic integration with the EU. The Council welcomes progress in negotiations of a new framework agreement with Armenia and recalls its decision to authorize the opening of negotiations on a new comprehensive agreement with Azerbaijan, both of which should provide a solid basis for long-term relations with these countries. The Council recalls the improvement in EU-Belarus relations as set out in its Conclusions of February 2016 and welcomes the opportunity for EU-Belarus relations to develop further, in line with concrete steps to be taken by Belarus, including in the field of human rights and democracy.
5. The Council reiterates that strengthening the economic and trade dimension of the Eastern Partnership will assist in the further deepening of economic integration with the EU. Elaborating sound economic policy frameworks, including through leveraging efforts of the EU and international financial institutions will help create a conducive environment for modern, green economies, attracting investment, and promoting sustainable development and business exchanges. The Council notes that the IMF and the EU macro financial assistance is of paramount importance for those partner countries facing a particularly difficult economic and financial situation, pursuing structural reforms and when conditions are met. The Council encourages further progress towards full implementation of the DCFTAs to create new trade and investment opportunities. Under the EU4Business initiative, the DCFTA Facility will provide additional support to SMEs to this end.

6. In recalling the importance of digital economy, the Council welcomes the discussions at the recent Eastern Partnership ministerial level meeting on the Digital Community and expects that further regulatory convergence will lead to the harmonisation of digital markets, and reduce obstacles and barriers to reaping the full benefits of a digital economy.
7. The Council recognises that mobility and people to people contacts bring the societies in the EU Member States and partner countries closer. The Council recalls that enhanced mobility of citizens in a secure and well managed environment remains a core objective of the Eastern Partnership. The Council underlines the importance of a timely finalisation of the decision making processes required for visa liberalisation for both Georgia and Ukraine. The Council looks forward to consideration in due course of the possible opening of a visa dialogue with Armenia and welcomes steps made in implementation of the Mobility Partnership with Azerbaijan. The Council also welcomes the recent signature of the Mobility Partnership with Belarus and looks forward to conclusion of the negotiations of the Visa Facilitation Agreement and Readmission Agreement.
8. Cooperation in education, science, research, culture, training, youth and innovation is crucial for deepening mutual understanding, strengthening institutions, and promoting modernisation and sustainable development. The Council recognises that people to people contacts, including capacity building measures in these areas, contribute to job creation, increased entrepreneurship, mobility and a stronger engagement with society.
9. The Council reaffirms the importance of engaging civil society organisations, youth and local authorities, including in the implementation of Association Agendas and Partnership Priorities, in a way that contributes to the democratic and economic transformation of the Partner countries. The innovation potential of civil society actors will help partner governments to better pursue inclusive modernisation processes and reforms. Civil Society Fellowships under the EU4Youth initiative are expected to further develop the potential in this area. The Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum is also important in this regard.

10. The Council reaffirms that interconnectivity is a key area of EU engagement within the EaP. Energy interconnections, uninterrupted supply of gas and the sustainable use of energy resources, including through exploring the untapped potential of energy efficiency, play an important role in diversifying energy sources and bolstering the resilience of partner countries. In this regard, the Council calls for well-functioning energy markets with a stable, transparent and investment-friendly regulatory framework, and encourages further enhancement of gas and electricity interconnectivity between the partner countries and the EU, as well as increased investment in renewable energy. Adherence to the highest international standards of nuclear safety and environmental protection must be duly respected.
11. The Council considers the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the 2015 Paris Agreement on Climate Change as additional relevant elements in the context of engagement with the EaP partners. The Council welcomes the recent first Eastern Partnership ministerial meeting on Environment and Climate Change as recognition of the importance of continued cooperation on environmental issues and calls for the implementation of the ministerial declaration.
12. The Council notes that the improvement of connections by road, rail, sea or air between the EU and the partner countries, as well as between the partners themselves, is needed for increasing mobility and economic development. A set of targeted reforms in the transport area is equally important to achieve such objective. The Council notes that the recently agreed extension of the core Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T) supported by a long term action plan and adequate financial mechanisms will contribute to economic prosperity and stability in the Eastern Partnership area.
13. Recalling its Conclusions of December 2015 on the review of the European Neighbourhood Policy, the Council underlines the importance of a stronger cooperation between the EU and the EaP partners in the field of security, including security sector reform, hybrid threats, border management, fighting cybercrime. The Council values the importance of cooperation in Common Security and Defence Policy related issues and welcomes the important contribution of the partner countries to the EU's CSDP Operations and Missions.

14. The Council calls for renewed efforts to promote the peaceful settlement of conflicts in the region on the basis of the principles and norms of international law. The resolution of conflicts, building trust and good neighbourly relations are essential to economic and social development and cooperation. The EU remains committed in its support to the territorial integrity, independence and sovereignty of all its partners. The Council recalls the EU's role in conflict resolution and confidence building efforts in support of the existing agreed formats and processes.
15. The Council calls for continued efforts of enhanced strategic communication of the EaP and on ensuring better visibility and outreach for the policy and its outcomes. This should include related support to partners and support to independent media in the neighbourhood and work to improve public awareness of, and capacity to respond to disinformation by external actors. In this regard, the Council welcomes the work of the EEAS East Stratcom Task Force.
16. The Council looks forward to the next Eastern Partnership Summit to be held in November 2017 in Brussels, and will revert to this matter before the summer. The Summit will review the results delivered by the Eastern Partnership since Riga and will discuss the way forward in further strengthening cooperation between the partner countries and the EU as well as among the partners. The Council encourages the High Representative and the European Commission in cooperation with Member States and partner countries to pursue preparatory work for the Summit, encompassing a range of deliverables, including on the four priority areas of cooperation agreed in Riga.
