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From: General Secretariat of the Council
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To: Delegations

Subject: Council Conclusions on Eastern Partnership policy beyond 2020

Delegations will find attached in the Annex the Council conclusions on Eastern Partnership policy beyond 2020 approved on 11 May 2020.

Council conclusions on Eastern Partnership policy beyond 2020

1. The Council recalls the conclusions of the European Council on 20 June 2019 on the occasion of the 10th anniversary of the Eastern Partnership, which invited the High Representative and the Commission to evaluate existing instruments and measures and, on the basis of appropriate consultations, to present, with a view to the next Eastern Partnership Summit, a further set of long-term policy objectives.
2. The Council reaffirms the strategic importance it attaches to the Eastern Partnership, as a specific regional dimension of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), supporting sustainable reform processes and offering close political association as well as economic integration with the EU and tangible impact on people's lives. The Council reaffirms the joint commitment to building a common area of shared democracy, prosperity and stability. It is anchored in our shared commitment to a rules based international order, international law, including territorial integrity, independence, and sovereignty, as also stated in the principles of the Helsinki Final Act and the OSCE Charter of Paris, as well as fundamental values, respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms of all individuals, including rights of persons belonging to minorities, democracy, the rule of law, good governance, and gender equality, as well as in sustainable development and market economy. The Council also highlights that in the current unprecedented situation caused by the COVID-19 outbreak, solidarity and cooperation with international partners, including in the Eastern Partnership is essential.
3. The Council welcomes the significant achievements of the Eastern Partnership to date. In line with the principles of inclusiveness and differentiation, the Council welcomes the strengthening and deepening of bilateral relations between the EU and each of the Eastern partner countries and underlines the importance of the multilateral dimension of the EaP to advance the agreed joint objectives in the next years. The Eastern Partnership continues to engage in more tailored bilateral relations. The scope and depth of cooperation is determined by the EU's and Eastern partners' common priorities and needs, as well as the pace, progress and quality of reforms implemented.

4. The Council reiterates its incentive- and conditionality-based approach, as a principle of the European Neighbourhood Policy as established in the EU Council Conclusions of December 2015, as a means to encourage Eastern partner countries to engage in reform and to continue to increase efforts in this regard, in order to benefit accordingly from the support of the EU. The Council highlights the ownership of the reforms by the Eastern partner countries and the importance of establishing clearer guidance on specific reform priorities, with objective, precise, detailed, verifiable benchmarks, and joint monitoring of the reform progress. The EU remains committed to supporting all implementation efforts, including via adequate financial and expert assistance.

5. The Council welcomes the progress achieved and calls for the full implementation of the Association Agreements and Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas with Georgia, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine, the latter entering fully into force in 2017 following the December 2016 decision by the EU Heads of States or Government. In this context, the Council recalls the 2017 Eastern Partnership Summit declaration which acknowledges the European aspirations and European choice of the Eastern partners concerned, as stated in the Association Agreements. The agreements provide for accelerating political association and economic integration with the European Union. The Council encourages the implementation of the Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement between the EU and Armenia which is provisionally applied since 1 June 2018 and looks forward to its entry into force. The Council welcomes the progress in the ongoing negotiations between the EU and Azerbaijan for a new framework agreement. The Council appreciates that the EU's critical engagement with Belarus has become more comprehensive, as recently confirmed by the signing and ratification of visa facilitation and readmission agreements.

6. The Council stresses the importance that the Eastern Partnership remains ambitious, flexible and inclusive framework for cooperation, allowing Member States and Eastern partner countries to tackle common and global challenges jointly in a wide range of areas. This includes exchanges and alliance building in various multilateral fora, deeper sectoral cooperation and gradual economic integration in accordance with the level of commitment as enshrined in the bilateral agreements. The Council highlights the importance of the Eastern Partnership in supporting the delivery on global policy objectives, including the Paris Agreement on Climate Change and the UN 2030 Agenda and its Sustainable Development Goals. With the aim to strengthen cooperation at the regional level, the Council draws attention to the importance of creating synergies with other relevant EU policies and strategies. The Council recalls that the Eastern Partnership aims at building a common area of shared democracy, prosperity and increased cooperation and is not directed against anyone. Cooperation on a case-by-case basis may be open to third countries and international institutions and organisations, provided that their involvement would contribute to the Eastern Partnership objectives.
7. The Council welcomes the broad and inclusive structured consultation process on the future of the Eastern Partnership. It confirms that the current policy framework, including the set of '20 deliverables for 2020' is robust, valid, brings tangible results and benefits for people. In this context, the Council welcomes the implementation of deliverables achieved to date and encourages Eastern partner countries to increase efforts for additional progress in all fields, including outstanding challenges on justice and anti-corruption, as well as on gender equality, the enabling environment for civil society and non-discrimination as well as freedom of association, assembly, speech, and on hate speech.

8. The Council acknowledges the need to address global challenges affecting both the EU and the Eastern partners as a whole. The Council notes with appreciation the Joint Communication on the Eastern Partnership beyond 2020: Reinforcing resilience – an Eastern Partnership that delivers for all, which identifies new challenges and opportunities in the Eastern Partnership region. In this context, strengthening resilience as an overriding policy framework will be one of the key goals for the Eastern Partnership during the next years, in particular resilience in the areas of democracy, society, economy, energy, security, cyber, media, environment, health, notably in the context of the current COVID-19 pandemic, and human security as outlined in the Joint Communication. Resilience building will be strengthened through the implementation of practical activities for the benefit of the partner countries, their societies and the regional stability of the EU's neighbourhood, in order to foster sustainable development and deliver tangible results for people.

9. The Council strongly calls for a renewed and strengthened commitment to the fundamentals of the Eastern Partnership. It should guide the joint work in all priority areas, as progress on rule of law continues to lag behind. Ensuring democracy, human rights, rule of law, good governance, non-discrimination, gender equality, inclusion, an independent, efficient and accountable judiciary, successful anti-corruption policies, the fight against organised crime, and democratic institutions and processes are cornerstones of stable and resilient states and societies, and key conditions for developments in other fields. The Council therefore invites the EEAS and the Commission, in close coordination with Member States to better monitor reforms in strengthening the rule of law and strengthen its support for key fundamentals, at the same time stressing the responsibility of the Eastern partner countries to implement reforms in these sectors. The Council stresses the indispensable value of engaged civil society in protecting democracy, values and principles jointly shared in the Eastern Partnership and expresses its support for the work of the Civil Society Forum, the European Endowment for Democracy and other organisations working in this area.

10. Strategic communication should remain a key task, in order to promote the visibility and benefits of the cooperation between the EU and the Eastern Partnership countries, not least in the wake of growing disinformation. The Council calls for the EU, the Member States and Eastern partner countries to work together to develop a common narrative based on shared values, adherence to the rules based international order, including respect for human rights, and the benefits of cooperation to the lives of people and the positive impact of EU policies. The Council recalls the importance to strengthen capacity and resilience of Eastern partner countries against disinformation. The Council recalls the key role of the East StratCom Task Force to this end and reiterates its support for it. Improved visibility through, inter alia, education programmes and exchanges and cultural diplomacy is crucial for the public support for the Eastern Partnership in both the EU and Eastern partner countries.
11. Cooperation with Eastern partners in the area of security and disaster risk management need special attention for the stability of the whole region. The Council also duly notes the proposal to consider, where appropriate, reinforcing capacity and resilience of Eastern partner countries as regards enhancing civil protection, fighting against organised crime and other illicit activities, countering terrorist threats and preventing radicalisation, hybrid threats, malicious cyber activities, promoting the application of the existing international law in cyberspace and the development of robust legal and policy cybersecurity frameworks based on EU legislation and best practices. The Council values the importance of enhancing, where appropriate, security dialogues and the cooperation in the area of CSDP and welcomes in this regard the Eastern partners' valuable contribution to EU missions and operations.

12. The Council highlights that promoting human capital development, better integrated economies that are inclusive, sustainable and that ensure social justice, creating decent work and economic opportunities, and prosperity for all people living in the Eastern partner countries should remain a top priority. Targeted youth education and training, including by dual education schemes, will be crucial in this respect and reduce labour emigration and brain drain. Increased trade, where possible, continued regulatory approximation, establishing conditions for associated countries' continued alignment with the EU internal market and gradual economic integration as provided for in the association agreements, improved access to finance and where applicable further integration of the economies of Eastern partner countries and the EU are of key importance. These steps will be accompanied by the removal of identified trade barriers, and the improvement of food safety and SPS measures, together with cooperation on transitioning to climate neutral, clean and circular economies, as well as embracing opportunities from digital transformation. Investment activity is also an important contribution to the economic prosperity. Its more efficient promotion and support should be further reflected. The Council stresses that supporting sustainable, rules-based, open and secure connectivity, in terms of transport, energy and digital, including through promoting quality infrastructure is key for the economic development, regional integration, trade and mobility, both for the EU and Eastern partner countries. The Council underlines the importance of a level playing field in these areas.

13. Environmental, climate and energy challenges require urgent action from all sides. The EU supports an intensification of the efforts by Eastern partner countries in this respect and notes their support for the European Commission's initiative "European Green Deal". The EU will help Eastern partner countries, where appropriate, fulfil and enhance their nationally determined contributions to the Paris Agreement on Climate Change and modernise their economies, reducing their carbon footprint and moving towards climate neutrality. Increasing climate and environmental resilience, including through the development of energy security, more energy efficient and sustainable use of natural resources and the decarbonisation of the energy systems should guide our work together to transform the region into fair and prosperous societies, with modern, resource-efficient, low-emission, circular and competitive economies. Increasing the environmental awareness and education represents an indispensable part of the effort. Furthermore, the Council stresses that adherence to the highest international standards of nuclear safety and environmental protection must be duly respected.
14. The Council welcomes the proposed new emphasis on wellbeing and public health in Eastern partner countries, notably as regards COVID-19. The pandemic is an unprecedented challenge for the healthcare systems and economies of both Member States and Eastern partner countries. The Council appreciates the European approach of Team Europe putting forward a support package to help the partner countries tackle the crisis, particularly in mitigating the impact of the COVID-19 outbreak on human lives, employment and economies. Increased cooperation with Eastern partner countries is required in fighting the pandemic, preserving healthcare systems and supporting the work of government and civil society actors, effective civil protection, easier access to finance and support to SMEs and the provision of timely and accurate information to citizens. Increased cooperation is also required to take measures to prevent domestic violence and to ensure solidarity and support to persons in vulnerable situations.

15. Digital transformation and investing in people are equally vital elements in building economies and labour markets fit for the future, and to enable growth and sustainable development of Eastern partner countries. Building on achievements so far, work in this area should aim to extend the benefits of the Digital Single Market and support the full implementation of current and future commitments. Strengthening eGovernance, supporting innovative digital start-ups, addressing the digital skills gap and in general increasing efficiency, transparency and accountability are key to facilitate the digital transition of economies and societies.
16. The Council underlines the crucial importance for resilient, fair and inclusive societies of professional, depoliticised, people-centred and accountable public administrations, including local and regional authorities. The EU will help in building strong democratic institutions and functioning public administrations implementing structural reforms, also through Twinning and TAIEX instruments. The Council highlights the importance of free, fair and credible elections, preserving civil society space and for support of an engaged civil society, including think-tanks, protection of human rights defenders, as well as free, plural and independent media, journalists and media literacy. The Council stresses the critical cooperation in the area of protection and promotion of human rights and of combatting discrimination on any grounds as well as the protection of people in vulnerable situations including rights of persons belonging to minorities, and underlines that cooperation in these areas will remain a key priority for the EU. The Council reiterates the crucial role of cross-border cooperation and people-to-people contacts especially between the younger generation for the development of Eastern partner countries' societies and underlines the need to put support for youth at the centre of the Eastern Partnership beyond 2020.

17. The resolution of conflicts, building trust and good neighbourly relations are essential to economic and social development and cooperation. The Council remains deeply concerned about the continued violations of international law in certain countries of the region. The Council calls for renewed efforts and fully supports conflict prevention, confidence building and the facilitation of negotiated peaceful conflict settlement under the agreed negotiating formats and processes and recall the EU's role in these. The Council underlines the important role of women in prevention and resolution of conflicts and in peacebuilding, in line with the United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 and its follow-up resolutions. Acknowledging the impact this can have on economic and social developments, the Council also welcomes the strengthened role of women and young people in peacebuilding, and calls for continued support to populations affected by conflicts.
18. The Council underlines that in order to ensure mobility in a secure and well-managed environment, the successful implementation of existing visa liberalisation action plans through continuous fulfilment of relevant benchmarks, and of the visa facilitation and readmission agreements is essential. The possibility to launch new visa liberalisation dialogues with the remaining countries, whose citizens require visas to travel to the EU, will be considered, in due course, if conditions allow, provided that well-managed and secure mobility conditions are in place, including through the satisfactory implementation of the visa facilitation and readmission agreements. The Council recalls the mutual benefits and responsibilities from the visa suspension mechanism and notes that the high number of unfounded asylum applications by some Eastern partner countries nationals in the EU Member States raises concerns. The Commission is monitoring the situation, especially in the context of the reporting under the visa suspension mechanism.

19. The Council stresses the collective responsibility to reinforce the cooperation and work hand in hand on new policy priorities in the future to support the green transformation, the digital transformation and to deliver on economies that work for all, in particular more job opportunities for youth and to promote gender equality. Stronger support to the realisation of women's and girls' human rights, empowerment and gender balance will allow Eastern partner countries to take full advantage of the economic and social potential within their societies. The Council fully supports that these issues are mainstreamed in all the areas of work and invites the High Representative and the Commission to devise innovative and efficient tools to do so.
20. The Council welcomes the productive partnership between the EU, its Member States and the Eastern partner countries and confirms the multilateral framework adopted at the 2017 Summit as a valid and useful framework for exchanges and cooperation, as largely confirmed in the consultation. The Council calls for the Eastern Partnership to be more strategic, ambitious, effective and flexible, aligned with the new policy approach and in particular underlines the importance of mainstreaming the abovementioned cross-cutting elements. It encourages an even stronger focus on tangible and visible projects that have real impact on people's lives. In addition to strengthened joint ownership and partnerships among EU Member States and Eastern partner countries, the Council welcomes that partnership with civil society with the think-tank community, International Financial Institutions and the Council of Europe will be reinforced.
21. The Council looks forward to the next Eastern Partnership Summit which is expected to review the results delivered since the last Summit and set out the direction and the way forward in further strengthening and deepening cooperation between the Eastern partner countries and the EU as well as among the Eastern partners. The Summit is also expected to endorse long-term policy objectives on the basis of the Joint Communication on the EaP beyond 2020, the present Council Conclusions and input of Member States and Eastern partner countries, as well as to give a mandate to pursue preparatory work for the next generation of post 2020 deliverables.