

Report

Eastern Partnership Summit 2021
as a new chapter of the EU-EaP
relations: Time for diversification?



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The expert roundtable discussion titled "*Eastern Partnership Summit 2021 as a new chapter of the EU-EaP relations: Time for diversification?*" took place online on December 14, 2021 from 17:00. The event was organized by the Brussels Office of EUROPEUM Institute for European Policy in cooperation with the Association for International Affairs (AMO). The event was organized on the eve of the upcoming EU-Eastern Partnership Summit, which took place on 15th December in Brussels after almost 4 years from the last time that the representatives of EU member states met their colleagues from Eastern Partnership countries except for Belarus, whose membership in EaP is currently on hold due to its tense political situation. The EU-EaP Summit was held in a difficult situation not only due to the political crisis in Belarus, but also due to the challenging context of the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russian military build-up at the Ukraine border.

The opening words were delivered by Žiga Faktor, Head of EUROPEUM's Brussels office who then passed the floor to Petra Gombalová Kyslingerová, the Head of Division for Regional Eastern Partnership, Regional Cooperation, and OSCE at EEAS, who was a keynote speaker at the event. In the beginning, Ms. Gombalová spoke about the current difficulties connected to geopolitical struggles between the EU and Russia, still open wounds between Armenia and Azerbaijan, the crisis in Moldova, and internal political challenges in Georgia, all of these issues impacting the atmosphere of the Eastern Partnership Summit. According to her words, Summit's main objective is to deliver a clear message of solidarity, unity, and support from the EU and reaffirm its commitment to the region and its future. The additional objective of the Summit is to recreate the agenda for upcoming years which would be built on three pillars – reform, recovery, resilience. With a clear message towards Belarus, she stated that Summit must remain open and inclusive to allow all interested partners to join. This was amplified by the policy of an empty chair for Belarus during the official meetings of political representatives. Even though Belarus has not been invited to the Summit, representatives of the EU hosted a meeting with Belarus's representatives of the opposition and civil society.

After the speech of Ms. Gombalova, the event continued with a panel discussion, which consisted of three speakers – Alena Kudzko (Director, GLOBSEC Policy Institute), Pavel Havlíček (Research Fellow, AMO), and Denis Cenusă (Associate Fellow, Expert Grup). The discussion was moderated by Žiga Faktor.

The speakers agreed that in a certain aspect, both the EU and the EaP countries share the same challenges – hybrids, disinformation, cyber threats. Apart from that, the EU will also need to work on enhancing the cooperation in the security among the EaP countries. According to Pavel Havlíček, although the EU is acting rather slow, it genuinely tries to accommodate and respond to the demands of its partners. In governance, the EU will support the partners in concrete actions – addressing the rule of law, functioning of the free market, making the public administration more transparent, and working together in a fight against organized crime.

As Alena Kudzko stated, there are different perceptions of resilience, but it is essential to understand that the priorities of every country may differ. For example, the members of the EU might perceive resilience in the same manner, but this term can be understood differently in the EaP countries. She also reacted to rather limited progress in the cooperation and stated, that it might be decades before the EaP countries transform and align themselves

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with the standards of the EU. The ambitions were great when Eastern Partnership was designed, but it is not the case anymore, also due to external actors abotaging the EU's efforts.

Denis Cenușa commented on the expectations from the Summit on behalf of Moldova, saying that the goal is to connect the country better with the EU (infrastructure, digital interconnection), especially with neighboring Romania. Additionally, the fundamental expectations are functional and dynamic relationship with the EU and the support of positive developments in regard to the rule of law. As Cenușa mentioned, Moldova is currently positioned very well; the government is pro-European and is committed to implementing reforms. Hence, Moldova rather faces problems with the absorption of external assistance and lacks the institutions' capacity. He also pointed at the long-term demographic decrease caused by emigration, which Moldova is facing. Therefore, making the fruits of progress in the integration more visible and tangible could slow down the emigration wave.

Speakers also touched upon other areas of integration, such as security cooperation, but also smaller aspects of everyday life, specifically mentioning lifting roaming fees. Active diplomacy and promotion of regional initiatives should also attract resources and upscale the policies currently promoted in the region by the EU. Unfortunately, some countries are reluctant to cooperate with the EU further due to its proximity to Russia. This as a result puts more pressure on the EU to engage in security matters. Regarding the Donbas conflict, the EU is committed to supporting the resilience of the Ukrainian army, allowing individual Member States to get involved intensively, and cooperating with NATO – promoting the common agenda, stability, and building capacity of Ukraine to resist this pressure.

During the closing statements, Ms. Kudzko stated, that the EU still has the transformative power, but there is a need for stronger commitment coming from both the EU and its EaP partners. The EU needs should find a reasonable way to strengthen the support of EaP countries and this should be done not only through dialogues in EU-EaP format but also bilaterally – and to have a clear vision of what it wants to do with a region.

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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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