Moving on from the Eastern Partnership

The EaP is at risk of repeating past mistakes, trapped in a repeat play of passive complacency.

On 15 December 2021, the sixth Eastern Partnership (EaP) Summit adopted a declaration that promised a range of tightened cooperation. Five of the six Eastern partner states participated, with Belarus absent. The EU offered useful policy updates for its Eastern partners but no major strategic upgrade.

It failed to move forward decisively on the two important issues of security and differentiation. While it belatedly acknowledged the ‘Association Trio’ of Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine, it did not offer these states much in the way of tangible political advances.
The summit declaration lists the areas of EaP cooperation that already exists and promises an effort to strengthen such work. It evinces a tone of continuity, that the EaP is on the right track and needs incremental improvement to the structures it has already put in place.

The statement gives little sense of any major political problems complicating this ongoing cooperation. EU governments did not accept President Zelensky’s call for pre-emptive sanctions to head-off possible Russian military incursion into eastern Ukraine.

A ‘recovery, resilience and reform’ agenda focused on issues of economic modernisation, trade and business cooperation, climate policy, digital transformation and gender-equivalent societies.

The main deliverable is an economic and investment plan worth 2.3 billion euros and a mooted mobilisation of 17 billion euros in private investment. In all these areas, the EU holds out the prospect of higher levels of support and in some cases a greater degree of sectoral integration into Union policies and rules.

While this progress is undoubtedly welcome if the commitments are fulfilled, the summit’s focus on such sectoral cooperation is out of tune with the severity of geopolitical challenges and trends in the region. Russian troops mass on Ukraine’s borders. Tensions between Armenia and Azerbaijan rumble on, with Russia mediating and the EU taking a back seat.

Repression worsens in Belarus, raising the prospect of more spill-over instability. Georgia’s polarisation is becoming even more vicious and much of its democratic progress is starting to unravel. Even in Moldova, with its new reformist and pro-European administration, a gas crisis has sharpened uncomfortable strategic risks.

**A Trio — With Conditions**
The EU has talked much of differentiation in recent years, as the EU’s incentive and conditionality-driven agenda has gained traction in only three of the EaP countries. Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine have formalized their partnership as an Association Trio and pushed for a separate EU+3 format.

The European Parliament has backed their call, but member states diverge on how far to take differentiation; France has been concerned in particular not to discourage Armenia by relegating it to a lower status than the Trio.

The EU should be open to extending differentiation further. The current EaP structure is outdated and does not correspond with states’ demands in the region — like many EU initiatives, it endures out of bureaucratic inertia more than strategic logic. The EU needs to show flexibility and respond to geopolitical developments and the reshaped needs of its partners.

However, the quid pro quo is that the EU needs to ensure that such differentiation accords with strict political conditionality. It can play with the Trio’s demand for an upgrade to underscore that this needs to come with higher democratic standards.

While the Trio complains that the EU has been unresponsive, their own democratic progress has been at best extremely mixed and variable. Their plea for ‘more for more’ has also to entail ‘less for less’ in response to some governments’ current democratic backsliding.

While some in the EU argue that privileging Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine would discourage the other three EaP members, the opposite may very well be true. If it is demonstrated that cooperation with the EU can clearly be rewarding, this might prompt the other three EaP countries to also engage more constructively.
Besides, such a move could be a strategic necessity, not to lose the most benign and pro-European partners within the EaP and balance Russia’s political designs in the shared neighbourhood.

**Repeat Play**

The summit was designed to set the contours for the EaP’s post-2020 agenda and the EU’s vision for its foreign policy in the east. The event was low-key and focused on areas of useful sectoral cooperation but declined to address high-level geostrategy.

In the years after Crimea’s annexation, the EU promised to make the EaP more of a security partnership. Its whole narrative in the last three years has been about developing a hardened ‘geopolitical’ identity and willingness to act with ‘strategic autonomy’ in defence of its own interests. Yet none of these vows was evident in the EU’s positions at this week’s EaP summit.

In practice, the EaP has slipped back into what many in the EU still insist the Union does best — low-politics cooperation aimed at functional integration and regulatory harmonisation, along with help for eastern partners in building their long-term institutional and economic capacities.

The EU needs a more directly political and qualitative shift of gears, not incremental additions to its existing programmes of cooperation. Although low-politics policy ideas and practical deliverables have an essential role, they can’t be attained without a clear political vision and leadership.

It seems astonishing that the EU may be treading the same path as in 2013 when Russia effectively sabotaged much of its cooperation in the EaP partners.
As the events of that tumultuous moment threaten to replay themselves, the EU shows signs of being back to square one, offering sectoral harmonisation but no political commitment or presence to resolve first-order strategic dilemmas.

If tensions worsen in 2022, the EU cannot this time suggest surprise as an explanation for its under-reaction.

European governments need full-spectrum geopolitical engagement and commitment to the eastern region, not merely the kind of EaP incrementalism seen at this week’s summit.

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