

The Fifth Eastern Partnership Summit: More for Georgia

Editorial | Zurab Iashvili

Besides advancing sectoral cooperation on a broader scale, a differentiated approach to encourage frontrunners of the EaP with a “more for more” approach seems to be the most likely agenda of the 5th Eastern Partnership Summit.

One of the most important Foreign political event for Georgia in the remaining year – the 5th Eastern Partnership (EaP) Summit will take place on November 24th in Brussels. Summits in general sum up developments in the existing policies and set the tone and agenda for the coming years. The upcoming 5th EaP summit will bring together Heads of state or government from the EU member states and the six Eastern partnership countries – namely Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine.

The summit will discuss how to further strengthen cooperation in the four priority areas agreed upon in 2015 in Riga:

- Stronger economy: economic development and better market opportunities
- Stronger governance: strengthening of institutions and good governance
- stronger connectivity: enhancing interconnections, notably in the areas of transport and energy
- Stronger society: increasing mobility and contacts between people.

Focusing on the tangible benefits delivered to the citizens of the six Eastern Partnership countries (Inc. Visa free travel for citizens of Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine) and reflecting on the challenges faced throughout the previous period, the summit might not be able to maintain a one-size-fits-all approach towards EaP countries and rather switch to an incentive-based approach (“more for more”), thus more formally differentiating between the six EaP countries and distinguishing Georgia among others who deserve more.

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Road to Brussels Summit

With the enlargements of the EU towards the east in the first decade of the 21st century and the acquisition of new neighbors, the need to upgrade relations with the new Eastern Neighborhood from the existing Partnership and Cooperation Agreements (PCAs) had become inevitable. After the 2008 Russia-Georgia war, the launching of the Eastern Partnership was announced and its First Summit held in 2009 in Prague.

In a nutshell, the Eastern Partnership has promoted legal cohesion using EU acquis as a template, the possibility of Visa-free travel to Schengen, intensification of trade and better market opportunities together with institutional building assistance and a wide range of benefits for Youth, Civil society, and SME. Nevertheless, the six members of the Eastern Partnership have diverged a great deal in their approaches to EU integration, the degree of involvement in the EaP formats, as well as in their strategic goals and depth of cooperation with the EU. The Association Agreement, including the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreements (DCFTA) was initiated in 2010 in regards to Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine and signed in 2014. AAs took the bilateral cooperation with the EU to a level nonexistent with any third country before. Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Belarus are either not willing to move in that path or are unable to do so because of their binding participation in the Russian led Eurasian Customs Union.

The overall path to the Brussels summit has been far from rosy. Russia has maintained a firm strategy of torpedoing it, even to the extent it has demonstrated in Ukraine. All three - Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine are facing grave security challenges in the face of secessionist conflicts, involving Russia as a common denominator. Armenia and Azerbaijan (having previously fought with each other over Nagorno-Karabakh) have quite a unique external and domestic political agenda and Belarus, with its notorious president Lukashenko invited for the Summit, is only just awakening from the EU sanctions. Facing all these variations, the EU will most likely find it difficult to maintain an existing one-size-fits-all approach to EaP and should listen to loud calls to differentiate between the EaP countries, among those with and without DCFTA and come up with more tailor-made strategies as suggested by recent European parliament hearings and resulting recommendations to the Council, the Commission, and the EEAS issued on November 15.

More for Georgia

The perception of the eventual goal of AAs/DCFTAs among the respective countries and some members of the EU are indeed divergent. Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine see AAs/DCFTAs as an important stage of their eventual membership in the EU. In Summer, they issued a joint statement on the forthcoming 5th EaP summit, calling for explicit recognition of their EU membership aspirations and that the path they are undertaking is leading to EU membership. Among the EU member states, group of countries – namely the Netherlands, Germany, France, Italy, and Spain are opposing the language of explicit membership perspective for Eastern Neighbors, in contrast to the Baltic States and Visegrad four who lobby proposing membership path for Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine. Thus, on the one hand the 5th EaP summit should strike a delicate balance between praising and encouraging successful reformers and on the other hand add new dynamics and impetus to the EaP, even at the cost of differentiating among its participants.

In more practical terms, increased support for economic reforms and upgrading the current partnership as a way of rewarding progress on EU-related reforms should be expected as a result of the summit. This upgrade could provide Georgia with the access to the EU's customs or energy union and digital union for example. This would definitely be a step forward, although with regards to a customs union, Georgia would have to accept the EU's international free trade agreements, without participating in their deliberations.

In Addition, the establishment of a trust fund for Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova is foreseen. The trust fund is a development tool for quick and flexible EU response to crisis and post-crisis situations. It would pool resources from public and private donors for investment in projects aiming to improve socioeconomic structures. Georgia will most likely gain access to additional European banking resources for its SME, will participate in the Ten-T transport investment plan and creation of the Think Tank Forum. Energy efficiency will be an integral part of the cooperation agenda, as well as youth and civil society support, the elimination of roaming tariffs etc. All this as an overall takeaway of the summit, in addition to the already achieved tangible results should encourage Georgia to further advance on its European Path, which by a lucky chance is simultaneously the only EU enlargement model existing under the article 49 of the TEU.