

EVENT REPORT

EU candidate status to Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova? Assessing options through the results of the Eastern Partnership Index

European Parliament – 14 June 2022 – 13.30 – 15.30 CET

SUMMARY

The European Parliament and the European Commission have expressed their opinion of support towards giving Ukraine, Moldova candidate status and to work towards granting EU candidate status to Georgia by giving it European perspective. Waiting on the final opinion of the European Council on 23-24 June 2022, Member of the European Parliament **Petras Auštrevičius** and **Tania Marocchi**, EaP Index Manager at the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum, discussed with **Kerry Longhurst**, EaP Index Editor and Professor at Collegium Civitas, **Sergiy Gerasymchuk**, Deputy Executive Director at the Foreign Policy Council “Ukrainian Prism”, **Boris Navasardian**, President of the Yerevan Press Club, and **Ana Furtună**, Director at the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum, whether the Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia – the so-called AA trio – should be granted EU candidate status, implications for the wider neighbourhood and the Eastern Partnership (EaP) policy.

The results of the [Eastern Partnership Index](#) show that the AA trio has progressed towards the Copenhagen Criteria which should be fulfilled to obtain membership, although problems persist particularly in the areas of corruption and judicial independence. Nevertheless, speakers agreed that granting EU candidate status holds a strong political and symbolical component and would offer a stronger anchor to ensure stable democratic reform. While finalising the decision, EU institutions should consider carefully implications for the EU’s wider Eastern Neighbourhood, for the EaP policy, and for the countries that are indirectly but very directly influenced by developments regarding the AA trio: Belarus, Armenia and Azerbaijan. Speakers agreed that the EaP policy should be preserved as a platform for regional cooperation which supports civil society engagement and democratic forces within Azerbaijan and Belarus in particular. The policy can facilitate common solutions, offering a coherent approach to the EU neighbourhood, and further prevent Russian-pushed fragmentation.

FULL REPORT

MEP Petras Auštrevičius, Renew Europe, Lithuania, and Tania Marocchi, EaP Index Manager, Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum, opened the event highlighting that these are decisive weeks for Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia and that the decision on whether or not to grant EU candidate status has to be made assessing implication for the AA trio, the EaP policy overall and for the remaining trio – Armenia, Belarus and Azerbaijan.

Kerry Longhurst, EaP Index Editor and Professor, Collegium Civitas, argued that [EaP Index](#) results show that the EaP region is divided in two sections, with the Associated Trio plus Armenia on the one hand, and Belarus and Azerbaijan on the other. The distance between

the top four and the bottom two grew substantially across all areas. Over the years, the AA trio set itself on a positive progression, with the distance between the EU and the Associated Trio dynamically narrowing in the areas of trade, climate, freedom, security, justice. Assessing how the AA trio measures up with the Copenhagen Criteria - stable institutions guaranteeing democracy, human rights, rule of law; a functioning market economy; ability to take on the obligation of the membership – EaP Index results show that notwithstanding positive improvements in some areas, the AA trio’s rule of law performance has been patchy, prone to backsliding, with the pandemic exacerbating some problems. Systemic problems persist with the rule of law, especially judicial independence, persisting diminished democratic oversight and transparency, as well as enduring corruption. On the other hand, EaP Index results show that the implementation of DCFTAs have transformed trade relations and reinforced market reforms; alignment with EU regulations is strong and that the EaP has already transformed and created new institutional capacities in the AA trio. Ms. Longhurst concluded her intervention stressing that EaP Index findings confirm the imperative of giving candidate status and affirm the relevance of EaP as a regional framework for all six states.

Sergiy Gerasymchuk, Deputy Executive Director, Foreign Policy Council “Ukrainian Prism”, explained how important is for Ukraine to obtain the candidate status going through “*five Fs*”. The first F stands for *fighting*: Ukraine’s fight against Russia needs to be sustained by motivation and European integration works as a strong pull factor. Ukrainians are not only fighting for survival, but also for a different future. The second F is for *freedom* – the freedom of choice that Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia exercised and were punished for by Russia. Granting EU candidate status would reward the exercise of this freedom. Not doing so would send a very demotivating message to democratic civil society in Armenia, Belarus and Azerbaijan, as it would show that Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia’s fight was not sufficient. *Figure* is the third F: Gerasymchuk acknowledged that the figures show persisting sustained need for key reform in several areas. However, as EaP Index results show, progress since 2017 has been substantial and the war has markedly raised the support for democratic reform. Fourth is *Fatigue*, intended as European fatigue vis-à-vis repeated and only partially effective attempts to promote reforms in Ukraine. He noted that the war has kickstarted new processes of reform and the speed with which Ukraine filled the EU questionnaire is the proof that it is ready to do more to get closer to the European Union. While Ukraine is turning around its reform fatigue, the EU should deal with its own. The last F stands for *future*: the decision on EU candidate status affects the future of Ukraine, the EaP, Central and Eastern Europe – whose countries are advocating for EU candidate status showing they can be a strong driving force of EU foreign policy – and of the European Union – whether it wants to expand or focus on deeper integration, reform the treaties, or wait. The decision is also about the future role of the European Commission and the Parliament who can now show that they are talking and working on behalf of the EU.

Boris Navasardian, President, Yerevan Press Club, analysed how EU candidate status prospects to the AA trio are affecting Armenia. According to [Caucasus Barometer figures](#), for first time, Russia is not Armenia’s most trusted external player, while the EU, which was never on the list, is now in third position. According to EaP Index results, Armenia ranks far behind the AA trio in the areas of political convergence, but it is above all three in the areas of democratic rights and elections, freedom of opinion and expression, independent judiciary, fight against corruption, and independent media. Analysis show that Armenia’s leadership in

these areas is not due to CEPA – whose provisions have been implemented only for about 10% - but rather to civil society's demands for progress on democratic freedoms, which are forcing the government to be consistent in the reform process. Ongoing processes of redistribution of influences in the media sphere and the judiciary are leading to a more balanced situation, but progress can be easily undone and civil society must continue holding authorities to account. The question of EU candidate status for the AA trio is not broadly debated in Armenia, but the country is generally in support for processes that lead towards further approximation and closeness to the EU.

Ana Furtună, Director, Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum, stressed that granting EU candidate status to Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia should happen within the existing EaP framework, which should be considered complementary to a new status. Since the EaP is a regional policy, and EU candidate status implies a change in bilateral relations, a new status for Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia would be compatible with the EaP multilateral track. Furtună argued that in the current circumstances, the EaP must be absolutely preserved, and also given its importance for civil society actors across the region, it is more needed than ever before for several reasons. First, the EaP has delivered results and can continue supporting EaP countries, as they have common problems that require common solutions. Such an approach saves time and resources as mistakes are not repeated. Secondly, the multilateral EaP framework offers a mediated space for ongoing dialogue among EaP stakeholders at all levels, increasing chances for conciliation and negotiation and supporting the internalising of European values such as solidarity, which are essential for future membership. Thirdly, ensuring the continuity of the EaP policy would send an important message to stakeholders Belarus and Azerbaijan particularly, but also Armenia about the opportunity that exists for their countries within EU integration. Finally, maintaining EaP as a regional approach prevents Russian-pushed fragmentation.

Closing the panel discussion, **Auštrevičius** and **Furtună** reaffirmed that the EaP is a partnership with both governments and civil society, with the latter advocating for a European path even within authoritarian regimes. This path should be maintained and further strengthened. The EaP policy should be preserved, even if Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia obtain EU candidate status.

Q&A

During the discussion, the AA trio's level of approximation to the first Copenhagen Criteria – stable institutions guaranteeing democracy, human rights, rule of law – was rediscussed, as it is deemed as the most important of all three and the one where they are found the most lacking. Speakers agreed that although problems persist in key areas, the overall reform trend has been an upward one. **Auštrevičius** argued that at this point in time, what matters most is the countries' commitment towards reform, which can be further supported by stronger European assistance.

Present in the audience, **MEP Ramona Strugariu** agreed that in the current circumstances we need more Eastern Partnership, not less. Civil society and the EaP CSF should be ready to contribute to renewed reform processes in all three countries, under EU candidate status and/or the Eastern Partnership umbrella. **Furtună** added that the EaP CSF has been

advocating for years on behalf of civil society in the region and if the AA trio will obtain EU candidate status, civil society organisations will be at the forefront of the process.

Lastly, a point was made about the need to manage expectations among Ukrainian, Moldova and Georgian societies. Obtaining EU candidate status is only the beginning of a long process, and not obtaining the status is not the end of history. European Institutions, AA trio governments and organised civil society should convey this message.

The event was co-organised by the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum and Member of the European Parliament Petras Auštrevičius, Renew Europe, Lithuania.

About EaP CSF

The Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum (EaP CSF) is a unique multi-layered regional civil society platform aimed at promoting European integration, facilitating reforms and democratic transformations in the six Eastern Partnership countries - Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. Serving as the civil society and people-to-people dimension of the Eastern Partnership, the EaP CSF strives to strengthen civil society in the region, boost pluralism in public discourse and policy making by promoting participatory democracy and fundamental freedoms. For more information, please visit the EaP CSF website at www.eap-csf.eu.