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BACKGROUND NOTE

Session III – Interparliamentary Cooperation with the Eastern Partnership Countries

The purpose and goals of the Eastern Partnership

Inaugurated on 7 May 2009 in Prague during the Czech Presidency of the EU Council, the Eastern Partnership (EaP) includes six eastern EU neighbours: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. Stability, democratic development and economic prosperity in the EaP region is in the strategic interest of the Union. The EaP policy as such demonstrates the Union's solidarity and long-term commitment to the region's success.

The EaP is based on a shared commitment to international law and fundamental values as enshrined in the EU Treaties, while the stated aims of the EaP are:

- to promote democracy and good governance
- to strengthen energy security
- to promote public sector reform and environment protection
- to encourage people-to-people contacts
- to support economic and social development
- to provide additional funding for projects to reduce social inequality and increase stability.

The overarching intention is to draw the EaP countries closer to the EU and to provide a framework within which closer political ties and deeper economic integration with these countries can be developed. The main vehicle to drive such cooperation forward is the new generation Association Agreements (AAs), which include Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreements (DCFTAs). The AAs are not a goal in themselves but an instrument to promote deep structural reforms in these countries, thus ensuring their closer political alignment with the EU as well as gradual economic integration in the EU's internal market.

Table 1. State of play of AA/DCFTA negotiations with the Eastern Partners

Partner country	Description
Armenia	<i>Negotiations have been concluded. However, in September 2013 Armenia announced its intention to join the Customs Union of Russia,</i>

	<i>Belarus and Kazakhstan. Since the AA/DCFTA is incompatible with membership in the Customs Union, the agreement with Armenia is put on hold.</i>
Azerbaijan	<i>Association negotiations have been ongoing since 2010, some progress was noted in the Vilnius EaP Summit in November 2013. No DCFTA provisions are to be negotiated with Azerbaijan before it becomes a member of the World Trade Organisation.</i>
Belarus	<i>Formal cooperation with Belarus has been frozen since 1997 due to the undemocratic conduct of its presidential and parliamentary elections, the crackdown on civil society, political opposition and independent media.</i>
Georgia	<i>Negotiations have been successfully concluded, the AA/DCFTA was initialled during the Vilnius EaP Summit in November 2013. It is planned that the signature would take place no later than June 2014.</i>
Moldova	<i>Negotiations have been successfully concluded, the AA/DCFTA was initialled during the Vilnius EaP Summit in November 2013. It is planned that the signature would take place no later than June 2014.</i>
Ukraine	<i>Negotiations have been successfully concluded, the agreement was initialled in 2012. The political part of the AA was signed on 21 March 2014 in Brussels. The DCFTA component is expected to be signed after Ukraine's presidential elections to be held on 25 May 2014.</i>

Table 1 suggests that each partner country has a different level of engagement with the EU. Furthermore, cooperation in the EaP is increasingly based on the incentive based approach, the so-called "more-for-more" principle. In other words, the pace of reforms will continue to determine the intensity of cooperation and those partners most engaged in reforms will benefit most from their relationship with the EU.

One of the most important areas of cooperation with the EaP countries is enhancing people-to-people contacts. Such contacts are fostered through student exchange, closer scientific cooperation and business contacts (e.g. through the Civil Society Forum, the Business Forum or the Eastern Partnership Youth Forum). Visa facilitation has probably the biggest potential to actually bring the EaP societies closer to the EU. As the table below shows, progress in the area of visa facilitation is mixed.

Table 2. Progress on visa facilitation/liberalisation with the Eastern Partners

Partner country	VFA	VLAP	Visa-free	Description
Armenia	✓	–	–	VFA entered into force on 1 January 2014.
Azerbaijan	✓*	–	–	VFA signed, not ratified yet.
Belarus	–	–	–	Negotiations on Visa Facilitation and Readmission Agreements between the EU and Belarus were launched in Brussels in January

				2014.
Georgia	✓	✓	–	Good progress on implementing the first phase of the VLAP. Several laws are pending adoption in Georgia, which would allow it to enter the second phase of the VLAP.
Moldova	✓	✓	✓*	Moldova completed the VLAP just before the Vilnius EaP Summit. The three EU institutions – the Commission, the Council and the European Parliament – have already endorsed the granting of the visa-free access for Moldova, which should take effect as early as May 2014.
Ukraine	✓	✓	–	Good progress on implementing the first phase of the VLAP. Several laws are pending adoption in Ukraine, which would allow it to enter the second phase of the VLAP.

Note: VFA – Visa Facilitation Agreement, VLAP – Visa Liberalisation Action Plan

In terms of financial assistance, the EU allocated €2.5 billion for the EaP in 2010-2013. These funds have contributed to furthering democratic development, institution building and contributing to the economic growth of the Eastern Partners. It must be noted, however, that if the EU wants to have a more significant impact on the development of the EaP countries, more resources will have to be found. Another question the EU will have to answer is whether the AAs will suffice to ensure substantive reforms in the EaP countries. Judging from the varied track record of reforms in the Central and Eastern European countries, already members of the EU, and the EaP countries, it is fair to assume that the prospect of membership has been the defining factor that accelerated reforms in the Central and Eastern European countries. Article 49 of the Treaty on European Union foresees the prospect of membership for any European state which respects the core European values enshrined in the Treaties.

Looking to the future, key themes for the Partnership in the coming years should be: further progress on negotiating and finally implementing the AA provisions, approximating to EU norms and standards, strengthening democracy and rule of law through the pursuit of judicial reform, further steps in economic integration, gradual steps towards visa-free regimes, energy security and strengthening the EaP's multilateral dimension. There can be no doubt that since AAs come with far-reaching objectives of comprehensive political, economic and social modernisation, they will require significant political will in the partner countries to follow through on the necessary reforms.

What role for interparliamentary cooperation?

Currently the main form of interparliamentary cooperation in the context of the EaP is the Euronest Parliamentary Assembly (Euronest PA). Constituted on 3 May 2011 in Brussels, the Euronest PA consists of delegations of the European Parliament and Parliaments of the Eastern Partners (60 delegates from the European Parliament and 10 from each of the Eastern Partners, except Belarus). The Euronest PA meets once a year, alternately in an EaP country and on the European Parliament premises.

A good example of parliamentary engagement in the agenda of the EaP is the European Parliament Monitoring mission to Ukraine led by Mr Pat COX, former President of the European Parliament and Mr Alexander KWASNIEWSKI, former President of the Republic of Poland. During their 27 visits to Ukraine in the period from June 2012 to November 2013, the mission made a strong contribution to resolving selective justice problems and facilitating the necessary judiciary reforms in Ukraine.

National Parliaments on their part may initiate interparliamentary meetings in the context of the parliamentary dimension of the Presidency of the Council of the EU and invite not only members from national Parliaments and the European Parliament but also the Eastern Partners. Such examples include the Interparliamentary Conference for the Common Foreign and Security Policy and the Common Security and Defence Policy held on 4-6 September 2013 in Vilnius which dedicated one of its workshops to the EaP and its strategic importance to the European Union. A Meeting of the Chairpersons of the Committees on Foreign Affairs of EU Parliaments and members of parliament from the Parliamentary Forum for Democracy was also organised by the Seimas of the Republic of Lithuania during the Lithuanian Presidency on 27-28 November in Vilnius on the eve of the 3rd EaP Summit. National Parliaments can also initiate various forms of interparliamentary dialogue with the EaP Parliaments in smaller groups. Parliaments from the Nordic and Baltic countries (NB8) have been particularly active in this regard, recently organising high-level parliamentary visits to countries including Georgia and Moldova.

After AA/DCFTA agreements are signed with the first group of Eastern Partners, EU Parliaments will have a special role to play in ratifying these agreements. To send a strong message of support to the Eastern Partners, EU Parliaments are expected to complete the ratification procedure as quickly as possible. Parliaments also play a significant role in engaging civil society of partner countries. This is especially relevant for those EaP countries where governing bodies are not elected democratically and therefore contacts with civil society remains the only channel of political engagement with the country. An example where such cooperation is crucially important is Belarus. On the other hand, EU Parliaments are also expected to engage their own respective societies by informing them about the strategic importance of the EaP countries to the EU itself.

Questions for debate

1. Should national Parliaments be included in the Euronest PA? What are the other possible formats of interparliamentary cooperation in the context of the EaP?
2. What can the EU do to provide more incentives to encourage EaP countries to embark on the reform path and seek closer ties with the EU?
3. What can the EU do to secure the pro-European course of the post-Maidan Ukraine? Should Ukraine and other EaP countries be offered EU membership perspective?
4. Should the Parliaments create an informal 'Friends of Ratification' group to accelerate the AA/DCFTA ratification process in the EU, once these agreements are signed?