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Ukraine, Moldova and Belarus on the Eastern Partnership

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The fifth Eastern Partnership (EaP) summit will take place in Brussels on 24 November. This programme, which has been running since 2009, is perceived differently today by each of the three participating countries (Belarus, Ukraine and Moldova) which border the EU. The various capitals also have differing expectations of the upcoming summit and the future of the EaP. Kiev is pushing for the formulation of new, ambitious targets of the programme, and above all aims to obtain clear guarantees for the prospect of membership, while Minsk, which does not aspire to join European structures, sees the EaP as a practical instrument for developing its relations with the EU. Meanwhile the government in Chişinău, which has been widely criticised by the EU and the member states for its lack of reform, and is fully subordinated to an oligarchic system, is primarily trying to use the summit in Brussels to improve its international image and strengthen those elements of cooperation with the EU that give Moldova (and its political elites) measurable financial benefits.

The position of Ukraine

Since the beginning of the EaP, Ukraine's attitude towards this initiative has been ambiguous. On the one hand, the project has been viewed as a new instrument for bilateral cooperation that would bring Kiev specific benefits: namely, the free trade agreement (DCFTA) and visa liberalisation (VLAP). On the other hand, however, many politicians in Kiev have criticised the EaP for not offering Ukraine the prospect of EU membership, and for placing Kiev in a group with states such as Belarus or Azerbaijan, whose ambitions regarding cooperation with the EU are much more modest.

The Revolution of Dignity, and Russia's subsequent annexation of Crimea and the war with that country in the Donbas, have radically changed social sentiments in Ukraine to the most pro-European in the country's history. This has been accompanied by a change in Kiev's foreign policy course. In June 2014 the new Ukrainian government signed the DCFTA (and ratified it that September), and it finally came into force at the beginning of 2016. By the middle of that year, in a laborious though eventually effective fashion, Ukraine succeeded in meeting the criteria for visa liberalisation, which finally came into force on 11 June 2017. This achievement of the hitherto most important objectives in relations with the EU has been accompanied by demands from Kiev for the formulation of a new, even more ambitious promise – the prospect of full EU membership.

The government and people of Ukraine still consider EU membership to be one of the country's most important foreign policy objectives. At the same time, however, the lack of a new, ambitious programme from Brussels for Ukraine has raised scepticism towards the EU

and reduced its credibility in Ukraine. This process had already begun in 2015, when the EU agreed to temporarily delay the implementation of the DCFTA due to the unfounded concerns of Russia. Another clear setback in EU-Ukrainian relations was noted in 2016, when Brussels delayed the implementation of its commitments because of the referendum in the Netherlands, as well as the need to introduce a so-called suspension mechanism before the abolition of visas, together with the ongoing discussions on maintaining sanctions against Russia. The EU's image in Ukraine has also been damaged by the crises which the EU itself is undergoing: migration, Brexit, etc. As a result, Ukraine is witnessing a kind of 'EU fatigue', an increase in criticism of and scepticism towards the EU, which leads to the desire to strengthen bilateral relations with individual EU member states, especially Germany, at the expense of relations with EU institutions.

Kiev has also been disappointed by the DCFTA's limited effects on trade in goods between Ukraine and the EU (mainly with regard to Ukrainian exports). In April 2014 Brussels introduced autonomous trade measures (ATM) for Ukraine; these reduce customs duties on Ukrainian goods in accordance with the DCFTA while maintaining Ukrainian customs duties on EU products. This move was intended as a form of support for Kiev during the worsening economic crisis. The ATMs and the DCFTA have led to the EU becoming Ukraine's biggest trading partner (the EU's share in exports has risen from 26% in 2013 to 37% in 2016, and in imports from 35% to 44%). However, in real terms total trade has fallen dramatically (from US$43.8 billion in 2013 to US$30.4 billion in 2016). In accordance with the DCFTA, duties on most goods have been reduced to zero, and in the case of the others transitional periods up to a maximum of seven years have been introduced. However, tariff rate quotas (TRQs) have been introduced for 36 commodity groups; after they expire, Ukraine can continue to export these goods but must pay the full amount of customs duty. The TRQs cover goods which are considered to be particularly sensitive in the EU. Not coincidentally, some of these include products where Ukraine is genuinely competitive (such as wheat and poultry meat). Kiev's attempts to extend the TRQs have so far had very limited results.

After the outbreak of the war with Russia, a phenomenon has been observed in Ukraine whereby the authorities overestimate their own importance to Europe, as a country that is fighting Russia in order to defend European values. This has made Ukraine more demanding, and disseminated the view that the EU has required too much of Ukraine in relation to the benefits it can offer. This increase in Ukraine's assertiveness towards the EU is also caused by the stabilisation of the macroeconomic situation in that country. In this context, the lack of prospects for Ukrainian membership in the EU, as recorded in the statement after the EaP summit, together with a lack of support from the EC for the so-called Marshall Plan (initiated by Lithuania), means that the summit will not be received in Ukraine as a success. Unofficial reports have emerged that Ukraine may even refuse to sign the declaration from the EaP summit, to be held in Brussels on 24 November, due to the lack of any statement about the prospects for the EU's enlargement eastwards.

The position of Moldova

At the official level, the nominally pro-European government of Prime Minister Pavel Filip (which is under the total control of Vlad Plahotniuc, an oligarch and the leader of the Democratic Party, the biggest grouping in parliament) has stressed its full commitment to

the Eastern Partnership. The Moldovan government has expressed an interest in expanding the programme in all its aspects, and in obtaining a perspective for EU membership. At the same time, within the framework of its cooperation within the EaP, Moldova regularly draws attention to security issues (including the case of Transnistria and the presence of Russian troops on the territory of that breakaway region) and the development of trading links (including within the DCFTA). Moldova has no specific expectations for the summit, although along with Ukraine and Georgia it has called for an acknowledgement of the prospects for these countries' membership. However, Moldova is not as categorical as Kiev in this respect.

Despite official declarations, the government in Chişinău is primarily interested not so much in implementing the reforms as it is in the financial (including trading) and image dimensions of the Eastern Partnership. Real reforms, especially those which could affect the situation of the business and political elites (structural reforms) are not in the interest of the present authorities. Their implementation has thus been limited and delayed to the greatest possible degree. At the same time political support from the EU member states and Brussels is essential for the present authorities in Chişinău, as this legitimises the parliamentary majority and government, which is formally pro-European (but has been compromised by numerous corruption scandals), in the eyes of the electorate. This is particularly important in the context of the political rivalry between these forces and the pro-Russian camp, focused around President Igor Dodon and his Party of Socialists (the second biggest force in Moldova's parliament). The criticism of the Moldovan government (which is fully justified) by its Western partners has been regularly used as propaganda fuel to attack the current government by both the pro-Russian forces and the pro-European (but anti-government) opposition.

The authorities regularly publish optimistic reports on the implementation of the reforms associated with the Association Agreement which Moldova has signed with the EU (as well as the DCFTA, which is part of the AA). However, the methodology of those reports, and hence their credibility, has been called into doubt by the country's Western partners, who see serious shortcomings in them, especially with regard to the reform of the judicial system, the construction of the rule of law, and the fight against corruption. However, the government and the parliamentary majority which supports it have, for domestic propaganda reasons, presented its cooperation with the EU (including its presence in the Eastern Partnership) as a huge success for the ruling elite, and have played down criticism of it from outside (or placed their blame for any possible shortcomings on the opposition and their former coalition partners, including Prime Minister Vlad Filat, who was arrested in 2015 and sentenced a year later on charges of complicity in the theft of $1 billion from the Moldovan financial sector). The government, which dominates the media space (thanks to the media conglomerate of Vlad Plahotniuc and his influence on the public media), also often stoops to using the media for manipulation aimed at moderating or concealing the EU representatives' negative opinions about the state of the reform process in Moldova.

The position of Belarus

Since the beginning of the Eastern Partnership, the Belarusian authorities have consistently emphasised their interest in economic, infrastructure, investment and customs cooperation,

and on obtaining financial support. At the same time Minsk has clearly played down or even completely avoided any discussion of human rights, democratic values and electoral law. This pattern of emphases testifies to Minsk's instrumental approach towards the EaP.

The rhetoric from Belarus regularly includes requests to expand the Eastern Partnership with concrete projects for cooperation based on the so-called economic dimension. In addition, Minsk expects equal treatment for all the partner states, and has highlighted the example of Azerbaijan; despite widely reported allegations of breaches of civil liberties, their delegation was granted leave to participation in the Euronest EaP Parliamentary Assembly, unlike that of Belarus.

In terms of the ongoing thaw in relations with the EU, Minsk is working to extend the format of its cooperation with Brussels, and intends to proceed with talks on a comprehensive cooperation agreement with the EU, similar to the one signed this year between the EU and Armenia. Belarus has highlighted this example because both Minsk and Yerevan have participated in Russian integration projects and do not aspire to join European structures. Currently the EaP is an important instrument for Belarus to develop its relations with the EU.

Belarus's significant dependence on Russia in the spheres of energy, trade, financial support and the close political-military alliance linking both countries has forced Minsk to take the interests of Moscow into account; the Kremlin perceives the EaP as an attempt by the EU to interfere in its zone of exclusive influence. In view of this, the Belarusian authorities have continuously asserted that they are not interested in any kind of cooperation with the EU which would force them to change the country's geopolitical orientation.

The unprecedented personal invitation to President Aleksandr Lukashenko to attend the EaP summit in Brussels represented a potential opportunity for a symbolic break with the isolation of the Belarusian leader within the EU, which has *de facto* continued despite the abolition in February 2016 of the formal obstacles in the form of visa sanctions. It could also have been useful proof for domestic propaganda of the authoritarian regime's effectiveness in defending its own developmental model against pressure from the EU. In addition, the invitation could have strengthened Minsk's position on the international stage. But the Belarusian president chose not to participate in the summit, and minister Makiey will head the country's official delegation. The deciding factor was probably fear of Russia's reaction. As a result, Belarus has decided not to make full use of the opportunities to expand its dialogue with the EU.

Conclusions

It does not seem that the summit in Brussels will produce any breakthrough decisions for the three neighbouring states. It is also almost certain that its conclusions will not satisfy the expectations of Belarus, Ukraine or Moldova. Kiev will no doubt be disappointed at the failure to offer the prospect of EU membership, as well as the lack of support from the EC for the Lithuanian 'Marshall Plan' for Ukraine. Belarus will also probably emphasise the absence of any tangible economic benefits from its participation in the programme, while stressing the need to begin negotiations on the agreement regulating the country's overall relations with the EU. Meanwhile, Moldova will most likely be very restrained in evaluating the results of the summit, in order not to expose itself to even more criticism from the EU and its member states of its domestic situation and its simulation of reform. Regardless, all

three countries' governments will use the summit for their domestic agendas to highlight their importance in the international arena.