

Eastern Partnership celebrates 10 years of success taking on the challenge of deepening democratisation



The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) hosted a high-level conference on 5 September to celebrate the 10th anniversary of the Eastern Partnership.

The Eastern Partnership initiative is a specific dimension of the European Neighbourhood Policy aimed at strengthening relations between the EU, its Member States and the six partner countries in the area: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine.

All the conference participants agreed that the first ten years of the Eastern Partnership can be considered a success story and that this initiative has provided a solid framework for both bilateral and multilateral cooperation. Despite these achievements, participants shared the view that much more needs to be done in some partner countries in order to reach acceptable standards in terms of democratisation, the fight against corruption, the rule of law, freedom of expression and human rights.

As stated by **Dilyana Slavova**, president of the External Relations section of

the EESC and chair of the conference, *the Eastern Partnership is one of our top priorities, and we are convinced that our relation should be one of equal partnership in which each side is beneficial to the other. A strong, secure and prosperous neighbourhood means a strong, secure and prosperous European Union.* Ms Slavova also pointed out that *the participation of the EESC in the Eastern Partnership is visible, as we have helped civil society organisations (CSO) to build up their capacity to work and act together, and these are achievements we can be proud of.*

Jeroen Willems, DG Near, European Commission, shared this view and took stock of the achievements of the initiative over the last 10 years in the fields of visa liberalisation, democratic reforms, economic growth and the fight against climate change. On the other hand, he also stressed the need for a new approach regarding civil society, stating that *CSO have to take part in all steps of the decision making process, as we have to improve transparency and predictability.*

The participants also addressed the future evolution of the Eastern Partnership and its pending challenges. **Indrė Vareikytė**, rapporteur for the EESC opinion on 10 years of Eastern Partnership, argued that the future evolution of the Eastern Partnership must be led by the more active partner countries and not necessarily by the EU. *10 years should be enough to transmit EU values; the Eastern Partnership has to become a partners' policy, not a receivers' policy*, Ms Vareikytė said.

In the same vein, **Rikard Jozwiak**, reporter from Radio Free Europe, was in favour of a complete revamp of the Eastern Partnership. This reform would allow the most successful partner countries (Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia) to reach a new stage that would include a common free trade area, the end of roaming charges between them and with the EU and even the prospect of EU accession: *These are European countries, and we have to acknowledge that.*

The high-level conference also hosted representatives of some Eastern European and South Caucasus partner countries, who took stock of all the benefits of the Eastern Partnership initiative, which has made this area the tenth largest trade partner for the EU. The role of Russia as an alternative pole of attraction for these countries was also analysed, in particular the need to counteract potential acts of propaganda and digital threats.

At the most recent Eastern Partnership summit, held in Brussels in 2017, the partners agreed on achieving "20 deliverables for 2020" divided into four priority areas: stronger governance, stronger economy, greater connectivity and a stronger society, with the engagement with civil society at the top of the list. The EESC is preparing an own-initiative opinion analysing 10 years of the Eastern Partnership and outlining civil society's vision regarding this policy beyond 2020. The document will be presented at the September plenary session.