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Where Is the EU Heading with the EaP and What Does the JSWD Tell Us?

Since the Eastern Partnership (EaP) policy was initiated in 2009, the EU has established goals and targets for its cooperation with the EaP countries, recently framed by the 20 Deliverables for 2020. On July 2, 2021 the EU published a Joint Staff Working Document (JSWD) titled “Recovery, resilience and reform: post 2020 Eastern Partnership priorities,” which lists its goals and commitments with regard to contributing to reforms and economic recovery in the six countries concerned. The JSWD details comprehensive targets set out to deal with the current challenges faced in the EaP within a broad variety of thematic fields. In particular, it offers a proactive, growth-oriented approach with a series of ambitious objectives and measurable targets that have been set to support the development of small and medium-sized enterprises as well as investment in green and digital transformation. Through dedicated flagship initiatives, the JSWD also considers the contextual difficulties and priorities in each of the six countries.

The JSWD could, however, be strengthened in several ways. Here the focus is on a few of the key ones. The analysis is based on the recent [position paper](#) of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum on the JSWD, which I recommend for further details.

The JSWD makes clear where the priority lies for the EU in the EaP region. The priority “Together for resilient, sustainable and integrated economy” is detailed to an extent that completely overshadows the other parts of the document more focused on democratic development. The green and digital transformations play an inevitable role in the economic development of the EaP region and are identified as the foundation of the new resilience framework, while other policy objectives play supporting roles. However, resilience must be linked to core values. It is thus vital that the fundamental aspects of human rights, the rule of law, and democratic accountability are approached as the basis for building resilient societies in the six countries. Thus, the EU’s new agenda needs a more comprehensive approach in its governance part and more clearly defined benchmarks and indicators that could facilitate monitoring the delivery of the targets.

It is very welcomed that the EU plans to continue to promote an enabling environment for civil society through favorable regulatory frameworks in line with international standards. So is the announcement that the EU will double its support to grassroots organizations, which is particularly important amid the Covid-19 pandemic and the

ongoing challenge of shrinking civic space for the region. However, there needs to be more accountability for delivering on the objective of supporting civil society. It would be more effective for achieving this part of the agenda if the economic benefits offered in it were linked to progress the countries make in enabling civil society to operate.

When it comes to the target “Together for accountable institutions, the rule of law and security,” the JSWD focuses on centrally led, top-down policies and programs. However, these policies alone cannot address the complexities of governance, the rule of law, and security in a successful manner in the EaP region, especially as the JSWD also emphasizes the need for evidence-based and inclusive policymaking. Including civil society in the process would boost democratic accountability at the local and national level. The agenda would benefit from also addressing the important role that civil society plays in monitoring and measuring the independence and fairness of the justice system.

Compared to the 20 Deliverables for 2020, some elements are included in a more thorough manner in the JSWD. One is the youth perspective. Although this focus is welcomed, expected and needed, the JSWD would benefit from having a more comprehensive approach on inclusivity. The greater focus on youth should also include those with disabilities, LGBTQI groups, and young people in rural areas. More broadly, the JSWD touches upon inclusivity but fails to address vulnerable groups in a systematic manner. It is alarming that it does not put more emphasis on, for instance, internally displaced people, the elderly, sexual and ethnic minorities, and people with mental and physical disabilities in its approach for inclusive societies.

To achieve inclusive societies, it is vital to ensure that the needs and aspirations of all citizens are included and reflected in the decision-making process. As well as the broader aspect of inclusivity of vulnerable groups, gender equality is of high importance here. Ensuring equal representation of women in the public service is one of the most important steps to restore confidence and trust in public institutions and enhance the sustainability and responsiveness of public policies. This is why it is important that EU support to the EaP countries should be in line with the EU Gender Action Plan 2021-2025 and should mainstream gender equality not only in economic sectors but in all parts of society.

Two further elements are insufficiently addressed in the JSWD and would be beneficial for the EaP region. One is measures to increase good governance at the local level, with local authorities needing support to enhance their capacity. It is important that the EU promote the role of local authorities as decision-makers as this would help to increase transparency and accountability in policymaking and service delivery at the local level. Also needed is the modernization of education systems, including research and innovation. This would have a clear effect on the youth of EaP countries as well

as on the connection between the labor market and the academic sector. It would also link to the greater attention on youth in the JSWD.

Having civil society organizations involved in a regular, meaningful, and structured dialogue at the national and regional level is the only way to guarantee that the implementation of the agenda is sustainable and inclusive. It is thus vital that the new roadmap for the EaP focuses on enforcing that civil society is meaningfully included in the decision-making process as well as the implementation and monitoring.

To conclude, the JSWD is the third comprehensive attempt by the EU to set clear and time-specific targets and benchmarks for its EaP policy. This time, the roadmap includes a new policy approach and a revised architecture with the goal to address challenges, such as the consequence of the Covid-19 pandemic and bringing democratic transformation to the region. However, the post-2020 priorities deserve further reflection by the EU if they are to be convincing, definite, and ambitious enough to enable actions to meet the needs for recovery and to deliver on the political promises on the joint initiative. Instead of using economic development to leverage the development of the rule of law and democratic governance, and linking economic benefits to tangible improvements in governance, the JSWD promotes economic development as the main objective, which risks losing the value-based approach.

The EaP countries today face challenges and unpredictable changes, including political crisis and shrinking civic space. Because of this, there is a clear risk that the targets in the JSWD will not meet the expectations and needs in the region, and that the lack of balance between supporting economic recovery and democratic development will result in an even further regression of democracy and human rights. This is why the hopes are high that the EaP summit will send a clear and strong message on the transformational ambitions in the new agenda, and that the agenda itself will be based on core values and an inclusive approach in which civil society is included at every step and where democratic governance is at the heart of strengthening resilience in all parts of society and for all citizens in the region.