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EU and Conflicts in the Eastern Partnership: Lessons for Ukraine

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The Ukrainian National Platform of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum (<http://eap-csf.org.ua/>) is a network of more than 140 non-governmental organizations in Ukraine that advocates Ukrainian interests within the framework of the Eastern Partnership. The platform is part of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum (EaP CSF).

The Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum is 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. The EaP CSF is a non-partisan bona fide non-governmental organisation.

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1. THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE COMMON SECURITY AND DEFENSE POLICY INSTRUMENTS

The European Union takes a keen interest in strengthening its presence in the region as a mediator and partner in conflict resolution since the launch of the European Neighborhood policy and subsequent reformatting of relations with the Eastern European and South Caucasian states into the Eastern Partnership policy.

The development of the Common Security and Defense Policy instruments, in parallel with the Eastern Partnership, as well as the strengthening of the strategic vision of the EU global role in international security build-up made it possible to diversify approaches to participation in crises and conflicts management. Depending on the phase of conflicts in which the EU is involved in the settlement process, as well as the nature of the emergence and dynamics of the crisis development processes, official Brussels demonstrated a wide range of initiatives aimed at prevention, de-escalation, and post-conflict stabilization. In the European Union itself, institutions and mechanisms were created for early detection and response to crisis manifestations

and planning of military and civilian missions.

Important elements of the EU engagement include:

- Political statements and appeals to the conflict parties, calls for a peaceful settlement of the situation;
- Policy of non-recognition of annexation or self-proclaimed independence of territories;
- Political support for the peace-keeping efforts of the UN, OSCE, as well as taking part in current and new conflicts resolving initiatives of these international organizations in the region;
- Direct participation in the formal and informal negotiation process

at the stages of conflict prevention, de-escalation, transformation, transit to post-conflict stabilization (involving some senior EU officials, appointing of an EU special representative to take part in the conflict settlement);

- Influencing the parties of the conflict, forcing them to a peaceful resolution of the conflict by the political and diplomatic means (freezing bilateral official contacts between the EU and the aggressor, imposing sanctions against the aggressor, embargo on the supply of weapons, dual-use products to the belligerent parties, etc.);
- Initiation of the EU assessment missions to study the situation in the conflict zone, as well as the EU monitoring and advisory missions within the framework of the Joint Security and Defense Policy;
- Restoring work of the state authorities, local self-government, law enforcement bodies and social services in the territories affected by the conflict;
- Humanitarian support to the population affected by the conflict, assistance in the restoration of infrastructure, special programs for temporarily displaced persons;
- Development of the programs to restore confidence between the parties of the conflict;

- Supporting dialogue between the parties of the conflict at the level of civil society.

This non-exhaustive list of forms of the EU involvement in the conflict resolution indicates the seriousness of the official Brussels' intentions to promote peace, inclusive of the area covered by the Eastern Partnership policy. However, in practice, the Eastern European and South Caucasian region becomes the test confirming or refuting the EU's ability to bring its peacekeeping ambitions to life. Transnistria in Moldova, Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Georgia, Nagorno-Karabakh in Azerbaijan, as well as the

Russia's interest in preserving the conflict zones as Kremlin's instrument for influencing the foreign policy is a common important component of the conflicts in the Eastern Partnership region

Crimea and part of Donbas in Ukraine pose a huge challenge to international security.

Given all the other differences in emerging and existence of these conflicts, the common important component is one and the same: Russia's interest in preserving these conflict zones as a Kremlin's instrument for influencing the foreign policy of the states of the region. Russia's hybrid tools range from attempts of illegal territories annexation, open hostilities, and invasion, to imitation of peacekeeping and mediation initiatives that are not aimed at final settlement of the conflicts.

Against the background of the crisis of traditional international organizations, whose mandate covers conflict prevention and resolution, it is not surprising that, at the moment, the wide range of the EU instruments is not supported by the political will of the member states for deeper involvement in the regional affairs and political confrontation with Russia. All of the above circumstances lead to periodic "unfreezing" in the conflict zones, as well as the complication of the nature and dynamics of their course. The resumption of full-scale hostilities in the Nagorno-Karabakh region, the creeping occupation of the territory of Georgia, the ongoing Russian-Ukrainian war in Donbas region, the absolute default with the observance of the Ukrainian citizens' rights by the Russian occupation administration in the Crimea indicate the need to revise the security component in the EU relations with the Eastern Partnership countries and a more systematic approach to defining the Brussels role in the conflicts resolution.

2. BETWEEN STRATEGY AND REALITY

Despite the ambitions of strengthening the EU global role in the world, these ambitions have not come to life in the conflict resolution in the Eastern Partnership.

First and foremost, we are talking here about the EU's compliance with the status quo in the OSCE and the UN primacy regarding the existing conflict resolution mechanisms, as well as the existing balance of the global and regional international actors' (France, Germany, USA, Russia) interests.

For example, the **Joint Declaration of the Eastern Partnership Summit** (as of November 2017) calls for the active EU involvement in the efforts to restore confidence in the conflict zones, existing negotiation formats, including via the European Union direct presence. However, the practical dimension of the declaration, a particular roadmap “20 EaP deliverables for 2020”, contains no direct tasks and goals related to the conflict settlement in the Eastern Partnership countries. Against this background, it is not surprising that the results of structured consultations on the future of the EaP beyond 2020 clearly show the partner countries' request for closer attention from the EU to the topic of frozen and active conflicts in the region.

In the **Joint Communication on the Eastern Partnership** (as of March 2020), the European Commission and the European External Action Service, while echoing the 2017 declarations, declare the EU's readiness to promote the peaceful conflicts resolution in the existing formats. Continued support for the population of the affected regions to strengthen their resilience is also mentioned. The **European Council Conclusions** (as of May 2020) on the conflicts in the territory of the Eastern Partnership partner countries express nearly the same spirit and terms.

In a new document describing the budget for the next seven years, a 30% increase in spending on an EU global role build-up was proposed.

Considering the fact that the next Eastern Partnership summit is scheduled for March 2021, it also makes sense to refer to the policy documents and **priorities of the Presidency of the Council of the EU in 2020-2021 of the states trio** (Germany, Portugal and Slovenia). The joint program states that the presidency, in cooperation with the High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and the European Commission, will promote an ambitious neighborhood policy, as well as the conflicts resolving efforts, including those in

Eastern Ukraine. An important point is the mention of the need to comply with the five fundamental principles of building the current relationship between the EU and Russia. The program also declares an intensification of the EU's cooperation with the OSCE, taking into account the institutional ramifications and the network of current operations and missions of the organization. Strengthening of the EU's Joint Security and Defense Policy instruments is another priority area for the "trio" leadership efforts.

3. FROM STRATEGY TO PLANS IMPLEMENTATION

One can rest hopes on the coincidence of these requests with the new strategic agenda of the new European institutions' leadership. For example, in 2019, the new President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, in her electoral program, proposed to reform the voting model for the foreign policy decisions in the EU. This could speed up the decision-making process itself and strengthen the EU's image as a global partner.

Among the promises, she also declared the EC President personal involvement in the coordination of all foreign policy instruments, from the programs development to the Joint Security and Defense Policy. In a document describing the budget for the next seven years, a 30% increase in spending on an EU global role build-up was put. Needless to say, the coronavirus pandemic made its own adjustments to the plans, given the need to respond to pressing economic and social problems, both in the EU countries, and on a global and regional scale. Perhaps it was through the prioritization of the fight against COVID-19 that Ursula von der Leyen did not dwell on the topic of international conflicts in the Eastern Partnership region during her 100-day report as the President of the EC. However, we can only hope

that the strategic vision of the European Commission's head did not come through fundamental changes.

Some EU initiatives aimed at strengthening instruments of cooperation and solidarity in the field of foreign policy and international security also set for positive. For example, in early November 2020, it was finally decided on the form of the third countries accession to defense cooperation within the PESCO framework. Besides, forming a new EU Global Sanctions Regime for violations of human rights is actively underway. Against the background of the long-term adoption of sanctions against the A. Lukashenko regime, Belarus actively discusses the

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need to move from unanimous decision-making to a qualified majority of votes. However, putting off the specific tasks for resolving conflicts in the region into the new EU Medium-Term Plan for the Eastern Partnership will be a real litmus test for the EU's readiness to play a global actor role. If such a new plan or roadmap is being prepared for submission at the

Eastern Partnership Summit in March 2021, then the partner states should take all possible political and diplomatic actions to push the EU out of the comfort zone of empty phrases wandering from document to document, and propose a coherent detailed position on strengthening its role in the region.

