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Where's the Eastern Partnership in Germany's EU Presidency?

Eastern Europe seems to not be a priority. Meanwhile, it will have to navigate the changing US-EU and EU-Sino relationships

Read this article in Russian.

Germany is still the European Union's economic powerhouse and its Presidency of the Council of the European Union, particularly when it comes to the agreement on the next seven-year budget, will significantly impact medium-term priorities for Europe's future development. This was something the Eastern Partnership countries had more or less anticipated. Assuming that Germany's Presidency would coincide with the Eastern Partnership Summit, the member states had pinned their hopes on Berlin playing an active part in the discussion about the future of the project.

The events of the last few months have of course required certain adjustments. Nevertheless, the Eastern Partnership Summit still took place in June (during Croatia's Presidency), in the form of a video conference.The participating leaders decided that the Partnership's long-term goals would not be approved until early 2021 at the physical summit in Brussels.

Moreover, the fight to contain the spread of Covid-19 along with economic recovery in the wake of the pandemic had now become priorities on every domestic and international agenda. These issues overshadowed any questions about the EU's relationship with its neighbours.

But is there any room left for the Eastern Partnership on the German EU Presidency agenda?

At first glance, it seems that the Eastern European dimension is not a priority for Germany's Presidency Programme. The document mentions the EU's Eastern neighbours along with the Western Balkans, the

Southern neighbours and the African continent. The Eastern Partnership itself, however, is only referred to in the context of the need to implement the decisions made at the summit. Ukraine only features alongside Syria, Libya and the Sahel region.

The German Presidency's agenda

If we look at the text more closely, however, it becomes clear that the programme is not entirely indifferent towards Eastern Europe in general and Ukraine in particular. The section that deals with Russia states: 'Germany supports the High Representative, who is committed to actively shaping EU-Russia relations on the basis of the five principles of the EU and the progress report on their implementation'.

This refers to a decision adopted by the EU Ministers of Foreign Affairs and the High Representative for Foreign Affairs, Federica Mogherini at the Council Meeting on 14 March 2016. Three of these five principles are of particular relevance for the countries of Eastern Europe. First, the EU insists that Russia fully implement the Minsk agreements: This is a key prerequisite for the lifting of sanctions. Second, the EU is endeavouring to develop and strengthen ties with the former Soviet republics, including Ukraine. Third, Europe intends to strengthen its resilience to Russian threats in the areas of energy security, hybrid threats and disinformation.

One particularly important issue on the agenda is transatlantic dialogue. It is no secret that the relationship between German Chancellor Angela Merkel and US President Donald Trump is virtually non-existent.

To strengthen the presence of the counties of Eastern Europe during the German Presidency, Germany's other priorities also need to be taken into account. This brings us to one of the key issues of the Presidency – climate change. To remain on the German government's agenda, the Eastern Partnership must take a more proactive position in this area.

The same applies to digitalisation and general security policy. The more the Eastern Partnership countries can offer and prove their worth to Europe, the more effort they put into pursuing a European agenda and remaining strategically minded, ambitious, flexible and inclusive, the more attractive these countries will be as partners for the EU.

Moreover, the Eastern Partnership countries should take heed of

relations between the EU and important global players. After all, the next six months will be crucial when it comes to laying the foundations for the EU's development in the coming decade.

The transatlantic dialogue

One particularly important issue on the agenda is transatlantic dialogue. It is no secret that the relationship between German Chancellor Angela Merkel and US President Donald Trump is virtually non-existent. And the problem is not just personal differences of opinion. With Trump's 'Make America Great Again' campaign slogan, the US showed a certain degree of contempt towards many of its traditional European partners. Trump's tenacious attempts to stop European partners from increasing their weapons spending, symbolic demands that Germany shoulder the costs 'for its own defence' and, lastly, the decision to withdraw American troops from bases in Germany all signalled that US foreign policy is changing.

Of course, the American elections scheduled to take place during the German EU Presidency might, once again, completely change the situation. However, the German government seems to have acknowledged that relations with Washington are never going to be the same. Europe is better off depending on itself.

Although Europe has relied on its partnership with the PRC in the past, Berlin and Brussels now both recognise that China is a complex partner whose growing influence can only be challenged if there is cohesion within the EU.

The Eastern Partnership countries that have signed an association agreement with the EU have to take this factor into account. For them, cooperation with Washington when it comes to security issues is fundamental, but transatlantic disagreements have presented particularly tough challenges. In this context, it is essential that transatlantic cooperation on security issues is continued and strengthened (and here we can count on Central European countries which share this position). However, security cooperation also needs to be developed between the EU and Eastern Partnership – but, to date, this component of security policy has not been effective.

The China factor

It is also worth pointing out that Germany's EU Presidency has coincided with a decline in relations with the People's Republic of China. Germany had been expecting the EU-China summit,scheduled to take

place in Leipzig in autumn this year, to be one of the most important events of its Presidency. But the summit has now been postponed and similarly negotiations on mutual investment appear to have reached a stalemate. Changes in Chinese legislation strengthening Beijing's influence over Hong Kong put the issue of human rights in China back in the spotlight.

Although Europe has relied on its partnership with the PRC in the past, Berlin and Brussels now both recognise that China is a complex partner whose growing influence can only be challenged if there is cohesion within the EU. For the Eastern Partnership countries, particularly Georgia which signed a Free Trade Agreement with China in 2017 and Ukraine which is currently developing a new policy on relations with Asia, it is especially important to bear this dynamic in mind. If EU-Sino relations deteriorate further, for the countries of this region it may be a case of preventing losses rather than being encumbered by competition with China.

Lastly, there is the relationship with Russia, which is also far from simple. On the eve of Germany's EU Presidency, Angela Merkel has toughened her stance towards Moscow. She is not ruling out imposing sanctions in response to the Russian hacker attack on the Bundestag and the German Federal Public Prosecutor has brought charges against the Russian government for the contract killing of the former Chechen military commander Zelimkhan Khangoshvili. Although dialogue between Berlin and Moscow continues, Europe as a whole needs to strengthen its position in this dialogue: the time for a naïve faith in bilateral relations is past. For the Eastern Partnership countries that have already signed an association agreement with the EU, this sends a positive signal. Armenia and Belarus, on the other hand, need to consider whether they can really continue to 'have it both ways'.

In light of all this, the situation for the Eastern Partnership countries is not entirely hopeless. They have not been forgotten and there is a clear European intention to contain Russia's assertiveness.



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