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1. Introduction¹

This report complements the earlier work presented in the EU-STRAT Working Paper Series analysing European Union (EU) engagement in the Eastern neighbourhood. These papers have focused primarily on studying interaction, integration, and interdependencies between the EU and the Eastern Partnership (EaP) countries within the framework of Association Agreements (AA), which include Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas (DCFTAs) (Dragneva et al. 2018; Wolczuk et al. 2017). The AAs are tools of very broad engagement, but there are still issues in EU relations with EaP countries that need further or different engagement of the EU and the partners. Given the emphasis of AAs on trade, other areas where cooperation needs to grow or develop based on changing circumstances are, among others, security, including cyber security and strategic communications, civil society, energy and climate change. The possibility to engage through different mechanisms and to a different degree with each partner is also an important conclusion of the review of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) from 2015. This report discusses forms of engagement beyond the AAs, with a special emphasis on the new '20 Deliverables for 2020' initiative that was approved in November 2017 at the latest EaP Summit in Brussels (European Commission 2017c). The first meeting under this new institutional architecture took place in March 2018.

The EU's engagement in the Eastern neighbourhood builds on a long history. Its roots can be found in the bilateral Partnership and Cooperation Agreements (PCA) developed in the 1990s. Past financial programmes have included the Technical Assistance for the CIS (TACIS) programme that ran until 2006, when it was replaced by the European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument (ENPI). This in turn was renamed the European Neighbourhood Instrument (ENI), which has been running since 2014 and is scheduled to end in 2020. In addition to providing concrete bilateral assistance to support the ENP, financial instruments also began to provide support for joint Cross-Border Cooperation (CBC) programmes and facilitated Twinning projects between institutions in neighbourhood countries and EU member states. Mobility and capacity building schemes were made available in higher education through the framework of Erasmus Mundus and Tempus, and in public administration through Technical Assistance and Information Exchange (TAIEX).

The official launch of the EaP initiative in 2009 offered a specific Eastern dimension within the wider ENP, distinct from the EU's engagement with the southern neighbours in the Middle East and North Africa. A goal was to accelerate political association and further economic integration with interested partner countries. Bilateral cooperation could develop into AAs with countries that so wished. The EaP also introduced a new multilateral framework to complement existing bilateral relations, and a number of thematic platforms were identified (European Commission 2009).

This report will provide an inside-out perspective on EU engagement beyond or in the absence of AAs. Since its inception in 2008, the EaP itself has undergone significant transformation in terms of how the EU engages with its eastern neighbours, as noted in the 2015 review of the ENP as a whole (EEAS 2015b). A policy of varying speeds has emerged within the EaP with some partners pursuing deeper association and approximation with the EU (Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine) and others looking for their own alternative forms of cooperation (Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Belarus). These two groups can be described as the 'AA countries' and the 'non-AA countries'

¹ The authors would like to thank Ina Ramasheuskaya, Tatsiana Chulitskaya and Natallia Ryabava for organizing the brainstorming session on 29 March 2018 in Minsk which provided input for this report.

respectively. Furthermore, all of these countries can be to varying degrees described as limited access orders (LAO), in which elites restrict access to political and economic resources in their own self-interest, as has been examined elsewhere in EU-STRAT (Ademmer et al. 2018).

To date local analysts have already compiled an expert review of EU engagement through the 20 Deliverables initiative in the context of Ukraine (UNP EaP CSF 2017). This report will therefore focus on providing a preliminary inside-out perspective from Moldova and Belarus to supplement this, offering an initial general and exploratory assessment of potential receptiveness to the 20 Deliverables initiative by a variety of actors in each country. For the AA countries, the report will focus on Moldova as an example of a country that has, at times, been held up as a potential star pupil in the EaP (Voronovici 2015). For the countries which do not have an AA with the EU and are not interested in developing one, the report will focus on Belarus, which lacks even a PCA. These two case studies reflect the diversity of the EaP region.

The structure of the report is as follows. It will begin with an overview of complementary modes of engagement that are available to EaP countries which have pursued an AA with the EU, as well as the issues around the alternative forms of engagement being pursued with those countries that have not. It will provide a brief summary of the initial assessments of the 20 Deliverables for 2020 initiative that have emerged since the initiative's inception. The next section will provide an expert assessment from Moldova. This will be followed by a focus on Belarus and present a Belarusian perspective, drawing on input from experts that participated in a brainstorming event held in Minsk on 29 March 2018. Finally, the report will discuss the similarities and differences across the two cases, and highlight any issues that the EU should be aware of in terms of their ongoing engagement and ambitions to achieve tangible results.

2. Beyond the Association Agreements: Complementary and alternative forms of cooperation

Originally envisaged as the 'enlargement-lite' project within the wider ENP (Popescu and Wilson 2009), the EaP experienced an idealistic period, which was dominated by the perception of the EaP as an instrument to Europeanize partners in the east without giving them the membership perspective. However, due to the growing assertiveness of Russia and the enlargement fatigue inside the EU, the EaP has moved towards a much more pragmatic policy with an emphasis on 'common interest' rather than 'common values' (Korosteleva 2017). Following the ENP review, the one-size-fits-all approach has been adjusted to changing realities to include the principles of more-for-more and diversification (European Commission 2017a).

Relations in the form of AAs, DCFTAs, and the dialogue on a free movement of people characterize the EU's cooperation with Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. Engagement with these countries through the EaP has not been limited to the AA, however. Additional forms of engagements have mostly aimed at socialization through process, rather than results, and have lacked any alternative legal framework. Complementing the bilateral cooperation within the EaP, this engagement has come through the multilateral sectoral platforms.

The multilateral sectoral platforms are structured in four priority areas. At the EaP's 2009 launch summit in Prague, these were identified as: democracy, good governance and stability; economic integration and convergence with EU sectoral policies; energy security; and contacts between people (European Commission

2009). Following the EaP's Riga Summit in 2015, they were revised to: strengthening institutions and good governance; economic development and market opportunities; connectivity, energy efficiency, environment and climate change; and mobility and people-to-people contacts (EEAS 2015a). Explicit references to democracy, integration, and convergence were no longer present. These platforms have been comprised of a dozen panels addressing a wide range of pertinent topics and themes, many of which would later form the basis of the 20 Deliverables for 2020 first proposed by the European Commission and the European External Action Service (EEAS) at the end of 2016.

In terms of institutional frameworks, engagement has not been limited to the government level alone. The EaP Civil Society Forum was launched in 2009. The EU-Neighbourhood East Parliamentary Assembly (EURONEST PA) was constituted in 2011. At the sub-national level, the Conference of Regional and Local Authorities for the Eastern Partnership (CORLEAP) was also created in 2011. In addition there have been occasional meetings through the EaP forums for business interests and youth organizations, as well as EaP Media Conferences. These multilateral sectoral platforms and complementary institutional frameworks have not been restricted to those countries that have been pursuing AAs – Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. They are also open to the other countries in the EaP – Armenia, Azerbaijan and Belarus.

The non-AA countries are pursuing their own paths and alternative forms of cooperation. Usually, these forms reflect the peculiarities of each country's priorities and are determined by the ambition of the leadership in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Belarus. The EU has been trying to cope with differences in the form and depth of cooperation in relations to these 'laggards' of the EaP (Youngs 2017). Despite attempts to adapt to changing conditions, the EU has been accused of 'functional hubris and political myopia' (Lavenex 2017; Marciacq and Flessenkemper 2018). A perception that the EU is unable to decide what exactly both it and the member states want to achieve through the EaP – democracy, stability, or sovereignty – can also undermine the EU's credibility (Börzel et al. 2015; Hansbury 2017). Nevertheless, the three non-AA countries each have a genuine pragmatic – though limited and instrumental – interest in maintaining and strengthening relations with the EU. In Belarus, the EU is seen as a tool for the authorities to strengthen Belarusian sovereignty in relations with Russia (Titarenko 2018). Azerbaijan has an interest in developing energy cooperation (Simão 2018). Armenia sees the EU both as an alternative to Russia and a source of financial and technical support (Poghosyan 2018).

The three non-AA countries each differ in their ability and willingness to cooperate with the EU. For example, in some cases Armenia performs even better than the AA countries in terms of approximation with the EU, while Belarus falls far short (EaP CSF 2017: 26-27; Dragneva et al. 2017). In addition, these non-AA countries differ in terms of what areas and to what extent they are dependent on external actors (Caľus et al. 2018). For example, while Armenia is doing comparatively well in adaptation of the EU *acquis*, it is totally reliant on Russian support for its security (Minasyan 2013). In Belarus, the country's state-dominated economy survives mainly on the supply of cheap oil and gas from Russia. In contrast, Azerbaijan is the most independent from external influences due to an abundance of energy resources.

Eastern partners that do not have an AA also differ in terms of how deeply institutionalized their relations are with the EU. Armenia is the most advanced in institutionalizing relations due to the signature of the Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA) in February 2017. So far this agreement might be considered as a successful substitution to an AA and could potentially serve as a template to be tailored for use

elsewhere (Kostanyan and Giragosian 2017). At the other end of the spectrum, although a PCA was agreed between Belarus and the EU in 1995, it has never been ratified by the EU. Meanwhile Azerbaijan only started negotiations on a Strategic Partnership Agreement in 2017 (European Commission 2017b). Additionally Belarus and Armenia are members of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), which implies additional obstacles for full-fledged cooperation (Dragneva et al. 2017). Belarus is also a member of the Union State with Russia, which makes Minsk the most integrated with Russia and the least associated with the EU. On its part, Azerbaijan remains outside of Russia-initiated organizational frameworks in the region, with the exception of the CIS.

Other forms of cooperation that have been established by the EU, such as the European Endowment for Democracy (EED) and the Eastern Europe Energy Efficiency and Environment Partnership (E5P), do not necessarily represent a viable alternative framework for cooperation with non-AA countries that do not have highly institutionalized relations with the EU. For example, a simple comparison of the number of projects funded by the EED in Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Belarus suggests that those partners that are most advanced in institutionalizing their relations with the EU also have a better record of securing EED funding. Since its establishment in 2012, the EED has funded 28 projects in Armenia, 4 projects in Azerbaijan and none at all in Belarus (EED 2018). The E5P demonstrates a similar tendency: Armenia has four cooperation projects, Belarus has one, and Azerbaijan has no formal cooperation at all (E5P 2018).

In summary, almost ten years after the launch of the Eastern Partnership in 2009, the EU faces a different and far more differentiated political and institutional landscape across the Eastern neighbourhood, both internally and externally (Marciacq and Flessenkemper 2018). As international indicators have demonstrated (see Appendix), the record of transformation has varied from country to country both among the AA and non-AA partners. Therefore, this report does not presume that the mode of engagement the EU has with an EaP country is the only factor in any transformational success. Other factors – geopolitical shifts, financial instability, the outbreak of violent conflicts (Lavenex 2017) – as well as individual priorities of each partner have to be taken into account.

2.1 20 Deliverables for 2020

The EU first introduced ‘more-for-more’ and differentiation principles to the EaP in 2015 in response to the changing landscape in the Eastern neighbourhood (EEAS 2015a). The most recent iteration of this can be seen in the so-called ‘20 Deliverables for 2020’ initiative (European Commission 2017c). This initiative emerged from the sectoral platforms and panels that made up the multilateral dimension of the EaP initiative outlined above. This section provides a brief initial assessment of the initiative, based on expert input and some initial analyses.

The first interesting feature to note about 20 Deliverables for 2020 is that it is quite pragmatic and results-oriented. Unlike previous forms of engagement (besides the AA) that aimed at socialization through process, these deliverables are meant to produce results that bring about tangible benefits. The EU also strives to streamline the multilateral architecture of the EaP, encourage more in-depth discussion of issues, and improve synergies with EURONEST PA, CORLEAP, and the Civil Society Forum.

The goal of the policy is to help build a common framework for all EaP countries, albeit not a legal one, and to offer them all differentiated paths based on partners’ ambitions and interests. The new policy is not so much

about the transfer of EU rules as previous instruments have been (e.g. Lavenex and Schimmelfennig 2009; Dimitrova and Dragneva 2009). Instead it is about deepening interdependences and increasing the resilience of these countries to ‘hybrid threats’ (European Commission 2017c: 32-33). As such it appears to favour stability over democratic change and convergence with the EU’s values and norms.

The 20 Deliverables policy aims at fostering domestic change through differentiated engagement and specific rewards offered in terms of better connectivity via transport and energy links, more intensive and easier mobility (and socialization), assistance to the governance and other types of reforms (European Commission 2017a: 3). The four key priority areas promise a stronger economy (five deliverables), stronger governance (four deliverables), stronger connectivity (four deliverables), stronger society (four deliverables) and are buttressed by three cross-cutting deliverables on engagement with civil society, general equality and non-discrimination, and strategic communication. These are all coordinated with smaller thematic programmes such as EU4Business, EU4Digital, EU4Energy, EU4Innovation and EU4Youth. A summary of all 20 deliverables is provided in Box 1.

Previous research has demonstrated that the potential impact of such kinds of incentives is often limited, unless they are both based on specific conditionality, and also resonate with both domestic attitudes and interests (Delcour 2017). The rest of this section will briefly examine the potential for all four areas of further cooperation, namely the economy with its emphasis on digital investments, society with its emphasis on youth mobility, connectivity with its emphasis on transport and energy efficiency, and governance with its emphasis on civil society and the rules of law for different countries.

The existing analyses of the 20 Deliverables initiative have tended to focus on their feasibility rather than on establishing whether the proposed rewards would be sufficient to induce domestic change. This is understandable, as the balance of costs and benefits for domestic audiences will only become clear with time and through empirical exploration. The targets of the initiative have been described as too ambitious and unrealistic by some (EaP CSF 2017a), while in contrast others have instead noted lack of vision and ambition (UNP EaP CSF 2017). Prior to the EaP Summit in 2017, the European Parliament had advocated an EaP+ approach aimed at separating out the more ambitious group of associated countries from the rest (European Parliament 2017). The final 20 deliverables are proof that this view did not prevail. Other reports have noted a renewed emphasis on stability and resilience over reforms (Cenuşa 2018). Civil society organizations, quite naturally, favoured a bigger role for civil society organizations and their specific advocacy concerns over human rights and gender equality.

Box 1: Summary of 20 Deliverables for 2020 for the EaP Countries

Cross Cutting

1. More engagement with civil society organizations
2. Increase gender equality and non-discrimination
3. Strengthen strategic communications and supporting plurality and independence of media

Stronger Economy

4. Improve the investment and business environment and unlock SMEs growth potential
5. Address gaps in access to finance and financial infrastructure
6. Create new job opportunities at the local and regional level
7. Harmonize digital markets
8. Support intra-regional trade among partner countries and the EU

Stronger Governance

9. Strengthen the rule of law and anti-corruption mechanisms
10. Support the implementation of key judicial reforms
11. Support the implementation of public administration reform
12. Stronger security cooperation

Stronger Connectivity

13. Extend the TEN-T core networks, transport
14. Increase energy supply security
15. Enhance energy efficiency and the use of renewable energy; reduce Greenhouse Gas emissions
16. Support the environment and adaptation to climate change

Stronger Society

17. Progress on Visa Liberalization Dialogues and Mobility Partnerships
18. Strengthen investment in young people's skills, entrepreneurship and employability
19. Establish an Eastern Partnership European school

The question of whether the envisaged incentives and potential rewards will be able to induce domestic change requires an analysis at the micro and mezzo level of specific sectors that is not available at this time and is beyond the scope of this particular report. However, several overarching observations that could serve as a subject of further research can be made at this point.

First, it appears that the measures proposed could further widen the gap between the AA countries (Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine) and the non-AA countries (Armenia, Azerbaijan and Belarus) instead of providing a common ground for all, as intended. The more authoritarian regimes in Belarus and Azerbaijan seem to be mostly interested in initiatives aimed at supporting a stronger economy and connectivity with the EU. They might see this as a further enhancement of their strategy of balancing mostly Russia's power, although it should be noted that providing a counter balance to the influence of Russia is a common interest in all of the EaP countries. Better trade opportunities and connectivity could strengthen the potential role of Belarus as a production facility aimed at exporting to the EU, and could also be important for Belarus with respect to their strategic partnership with China (Całus et al. 2018). The focus on digital economy could provide an additional incentive due to recent emphasis on the IT sector in an economic policy of Belarus (Klysiński 2018). For Azerbaijan, support for a stronger economy and connectivity with the EU means better ways to further diversify its energy exports.

The non-AA countries do not seem likely to engage as deeply within the governance and society themes, since these two priority areas reflect the original EaP emphasis on the promotion of European values and norms. As in the case of previous enlargement into Central Europe, there is an emphasis on the checks and balances of the system of governance and on the liberal democracy more broadly. This is mostly about strengthening the role of non-majoritarian institutions such as the judiciary, meritocratic and autonomous public administration, media, and civil society organizations. The governance and society priority areas could be regarded as a legacy of previous EaP enlargement-lite policy, and as a common ground between the EU's policy towards the Western Balkans and the EaP countries.

Second, the 20 deliverables tend to represent a supply rather than a demand-driven agenda. The emphasis is on what the EU is prepared to provide rather than what the EaP countries themselves necessarily have on their agendas. The deliverables reflect the EU's current agenda and initiatives related to the digital Europe, research and innovation and climate change for example. Amongst the deliverables there is less about the key developmental demands that might originate from the EaP countries themselves related to basic economic and social infrastructure, skills, and technological modernization. While in part this is related to a lack of funds, that does not provide the entire answer.

Economic cooperation is mostly about supporting small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) through better access to finance, making roaming and internet cheaper and more reliable, and more investment into digital economy in general. While this is all important, the funds available are hardly proportionate to the needs of the economies of the EaP countries, Ukraine in particular. An idea such as the European Plan for Ukraine, modelled on the EU's strategic investment fund, might have the potential to make this more proportionate (Gayevsky 2017). At the moment this plan is limited to Ukraine and there is no consensus on how to implement it in practice (Herszenhorn 2017).

Apart from the scarcity of the financial resources available for the private sector development, these countries desperately need foreign direct investment (FDI), which will then facilitate a technological upgrade. While Belarus relies on the state-led development, increasingly through facilitating investments from China, other countries would need private investors from the EU. Deliverables do not promise much on this point.

The deliverables within the connectivity priority area would also be seen as an important benefit for most of EaP countries. The focus on the development of transportation networks, secure energy supply and energy efficiency are attractive areas for cooperation for the EaP countries. The resources allocated for these projects, however, seem rather scarce. China has become a more important player in developing transport infrastructure in Georgia than the EU. Energy supply projects, such as interconnectors, are important means to change the nature of interdependencies in the region (Całus et al. 2018), but the EU is losing its significance in this sphere in several EaP countries. A future promise of cross-border supply of services in sectors such as finance or electronic communications could provide an additional motivation for connectedness, but currently this perspective is only mentioned in the AA with Ukraine (van der Loo 2017: 11-13).

The society priority area is mostly about mobility, of youth in particular, and research and innovation. An increased number of student exchanges will bring limited change in the short term. Another way through which the EU promotes mobility is visa liberalization dialogue. It can be a powerful incentive for change, as shown by its success in the case of the Western Balkans (Delcour 2017). The three EaP countries with AAs have already secured a liberalized visa regime, but it remains to be seen to what extent this has contributed to ensuring a stronger commitment from the authorities in these countries to the reform process. Meanwhile the governments of the other three non-AA countries might be reluctant themselves to pursue deeper dialogue in this area. In Armenia, after popular discontent and a peaceful change of the government in May 2018, there might be a window of opportunity.

Finally, the priority area of governance is about reforms few EaP countries' governments currently want. The fight against corruption, rule of law, and public administration reforms are all about establishing a system of checks and balances, which would curtail the power of these current governments. These reforms are likely to be perceived as the price regimes have to pay in order to benefit from certain other deliverables rather than as incentives themselves. Even so, they may not be realistic as goals given the previous recalcitrance of these governments.

In seeking to achieve tangible results through the 20 deliverables, the EU has to avoid trying to impose its internal model of functional integration on the EaP partners without paying sufficient attention to the adverse socio-economic and political contexts on the ground, as has often been the case in the past (Lavenex 2017: 67). Any concern from partners that unwelcome models were being imposed by the EU has the potential to significantly hinder cooperation by making the reform process a formal 'box-ticking' without proper implementation and sustainability, as in the case of anti-corruption reforms under the visa suspension mechanism (European Commission 2017d). The EU will have to be prepared to find ways to deal with situations where partner countries formally adopt but practically sabotage reforms while still receiving funding (Alaiba 2018).

It appears that the EU cannot achieve everything it wants (promotion of values, increasing stability, opening access and guaranteeing sovereignty) under the existing conditions. Finding mutual interests, increasing

interdependence, and maintaining equal partnerships sounds like a recipe for successful continuation of the EaP initiative in non-AA countries in particular, but it might also be seen as abandoning of the promotion of European values and norms. Brussels may be faced with a choice to either remain engaged and sacrifice something of its values and principles, or to push harder on governance or corruption, but risk a complete loss of influence.

3. The view from Chişinău: Engagement in the Republic of Moldova beyond the AA

The EU's engagement with Moldova has been on a fairly solid footing since the mid-1990s (Bosse 2010; Delcour 2018: 10-14; Hagemann 2013; Wolczuk et al. 2017: 21-30). A PCA was signed in 1994, and an agreement on an ENP Action Plan reached in 2005. Moldova was held up at times as the success story of the EaP initiative. In 2009 a governing coalition with the highly symbolic name of the 'Alliance for European Integration' formed a government and adopted an ambitious reform agenda. In 2009-2013, Moldova had very good dialogue with the EU, and an AA was initialled at the Vilnius Summit in 2013.

After the parliamentary elections in autumn 2014, it emerged that the Moldovan financial-banking system had been defrauded by about one billion dollars, with state institutions failing to actively intervene to stop it. This led to a collapse of the pro-European parties in Moldova. Subsequent governments have been slow to implement the provisions of the AA. The Democratic Party of Moldova that formed a new government in 2016 expresses pro-European ambitions, but does not always adhere to European democratic practices. For example, changes were made to the electoral system that ignored the recommendations of the Council of Europe's Venice Commission and Moldova risked becoming a 'captured state' (Gherasimov 2017). While the EU has attempted to impose conditionality before releasing macro-financial assistance to the country, the Moldovan government has invoked the spectre of a more pro-Russian party coming into power and disrupting the pro-European course of the country even more seriously.

The 20 Deliverables for 2020 have the potential to become a catalyst for Moldova to effectively implement the provisions of the AA. The present government however, while declaring itself to be pro-European, has been often acting in only a pseudo-European manner. In doing so it has only mimicked the process of implementing the AA. This section offers an inside-out perspective on the context in which the 20 Deliverables initiative will have to be implemented based on local expertise from our partners in Moldova (see Box 1 for a summary of deliverables). It will also discuss options for the EU to engage effectively with Moldova through this initiative.

3.1 *An inside-out expert perspective: the view from Moldova*

Moldovan experts highlight a number of issues that relate to the majority of the 20 deliverables. Only two deliverables did not warrant a specific mention in the analysis: *support to intra-regional trade among partner countries and the EU* and the *establishment of an Eastern Partnership European school*. This section will begin with comments on the three large cross cutting deliverables, before moving on to address deliverables in the four priority areas of stronger economy, governance, connectivity and society.

In pursuing the first cross cutting deliverable of *structured engagement with civil society*, the EU needs to be aware that the Moldovan civil society faces several problems: bureaucratic obstacles to its work; the dependence of NGOs on donors; a fragmented approach to projects that limit their impact; a concentration in larger cities,

while often disconnected from the wider population; a lack of participatory civic culture; and the presence of highly politicized NGOs in Transnistria that are *de facto* controlled by the separatist authorities in the region.

The Development Strategy of the Civil Society of Moldova 2012-2015 demonstrated a greater receptiveness to civil society initiatives by the then government. A National Council for Participation was instituted as a platform for dialogue with civil society. In recent years however, relations between government and civil society have worsened. Civil society organizations opposing the government on issues such as changes to the electoral system or the law on NGOs have been harshly criticized by the ruling party. At the same time, attempts have been made to establish public associations loyal to the government, presenting them to the public as representatives of civil society.

At the moment, the dialogue between the Moldovan government and civil society is difficult. After a period of suspension, the National Council for Participation was re-launched in 2017. However, civil society activists have indicated that the composition of the council cannot be considered as fully representative.

Regarding the cross-cutting deliverable on *gender equality and non-discrimination*, the Moldovan government has approved the Strategy for ensuring equality between women and men for 2017-2021. While there is a fairly well-developed legal framework on gender equality in line with international commitments, its implementation has been limited. Women's representation in politics and decision-making is below the international standard. Women from particular groups, such as Roma women and women with disabilities, are virtually excluded from public life. There are persistent patriarchal attitudes and stereotypes around roles and responsibilities of women and men in the family and society, which are reflected in the educational choices and employment choices made available. Women face specific labour market barriers that include discriminatory practices such as the massive pay gap between women and men and occupational segregation in worse paid sectors of work.

In terms of the final cross cutting deliverable, *strategic communications*, the experts, as well as previous work in EU-STRAT (Toshkov et al. 2018; Dimitrova et al. 2017) note that on the level of communications as well as on the level of social support, the EU faces competition from an alternative Russian integration model. The two integration models currently have about the same percentage of supporters in the Moldovan society. However, cooperation with the EU in the area of strategic communications is hindered by the fact that the Moldovan authorities do not have a clear communication strategy on the European course of the country. Communication is sporadic and irregular and is not coordinated between institutions. Certain political actors in the country, including the current ruling party, appear to sometimes resort to misinformation and manipulation of internal news domestically.

Domestic Moldovan media has to deal with a number of challenges in communicating about the EU and generally in its efforts to present objective and independent news: a lack of interest from the authorities in building an information space conducive to the consolidation of democracy; an absence of coherent media policies; the existence of a legal framework that does not ensure honest competition or eliminate monopolistic practices. To address these challenges, there have been calls for profound systemic reforms in all areas of the media landscape. While new anti-propaganda laws were introduced at the end of 2017 that were in effect targeted at Russian interference and misinformation, critics claimed that it did not solve the problems of misinformation originating within Moldova itself.

Assessing the deliverables addressing **economic development and market opportunities** with a view to their current development, the experts note that:

- The Moldova 2020 National Development Strategy was adopted in 2012 and updated in 2014. The AA provides a major opportunity for Moldova to accelerate economic growth and the DCFTA creates significant opportunities for the business environment. The *regulatory environment and SMEs' development* in Moldova is non-transparent and the unpredictable actions of bureaucracy are a major problem. The implementation of reforms in the economy has stalled due to private interests and political deadlock. Businesses have to comply with multiple and overlapping requirements on licenses, permits, authorizations and inspections. Steps introduced in 2017 to simplify the regulatory permissive framework have been insufficient to date.
- *Access to finance and financial infrastructure* (credit, loans, leasing) is relatively low in Moldova and constraints business development in all economic sectors, and agriculture in particular. The main problems with access to finance are: a banking sector that dominates the financial system; a microfinance sector that is not a viable alternative to lending by banks to businesses; and a leasing market that is limited and focused primarily on car sales. The banking system still lacks transparency, being concentrated in the hands of a small number of people. The financial sector in Moldova is regulated by the National Bank of Moldova and the National Commission of the Financial Market but they have not always applied the law to effectively supervise banking transactions. Communication between the National Bank of Moldova and the National Commission of the Financial Market is minimal and their regulations have not always been applied effectively.
- The deliverable on new *job opportunities at the local and regional level* has to contend with increasing external migration in recent years. Moreover, half of the population of Moldova lives in rural areas, and one quarter of the employed population works in the agricultural sector, where productivity is low. Informal employment is widespread. At the end of 2016, the government approved the National Employment Strategy for 2017-2021 and its main objectives are to increase the level of formal employment based on economic competitiveness, and to tackle insufficient skills and qualifications.
- The government approved the National Strategy for the development of the information society 'Moldova Digital 2020' in 2013, which has the potential to create favourable conditions for *harmonizing digital markets*. The government will have to demonstrate a robust political commitment to translate this into practice and provide genuine access to citizens.

Turning to the deliverables on **strengthening institutions and good governance**:

- *Strengthening the rule of law and anti-corruption measures* is seen as vital for Moldova. Corruption is viewed as an endemic and systemic phenomenon by Moldovan citizens, rooted in all governmental institutions and at all levels, involving the control of key institutions in order to create personal benefits. The Corruption Perception Index has ranked Moldova 122nd out of 180 countries in 2017. The implementation of laws adopted in 2017 to combat high-level corruption and money laundering has been delayed by the government. The functionality of the National Integrity Authority and the Agency for the Recovery of Criminal Goods has not been ensured. There have been concerns about the decriminalization of economic crimes.
- In terms of *support for the implementation of key judicial reforms*, past experience had demonstrated that due to the influence of the political environment on the judiciary, reforms can be torpedoed or distorted. The lack of a firm commitment to reform the justice sector by the Moldovan authorities has

already led the EU to block a €8 million financial transfer under reform programmes. At the beginning of 2018, the Ministry of Justice presented the Concept Paper on strategic directions and priority actions in judicial reform.

- In October 2015, an evaluation of Moldovan public administration was launched in the framework of the SIGMA (Support for Improvement in Governance and Management) initiative of the EU and OECD. Based on this document, in 2016 the Moldovan government approved the Public Administration Reform Strategy for 2016-2020. The document focuses on five important components of *public administration reform*: empowering public administration; developing public policies; modernizing public services; public finance management; and human resources management. In the current political context in Moldova it is difficult to achieve the reform of the public administration because of political interference. As a result, public administration reform is not transparent and lacks indicators or impact assessments.
- *Stronger security cooperation* is of particular relevance in the Moldovan context. The threats that the country faces are multiple and diverse: traditional military threats from the Russian army deployed in the Transnistrian region; political and territorial separatism; attempts at stoking ethnic cleavage; economic vulnerability; demographic depopulation; and a poor environmental situation. Internal political struggles and an emphasis on party interests rather than national interests mean that a revised National Security Strategy will not be approved before the parliamentary elections scheduled for autumn 2018.

The next set of deliverables addresses **stronger connectivity** in a variety of areas:

- When it comes to the potential *extension of the TEN-T core networks*, the Moldovan transport network faces issues such as: inappropriate planning and prioritization of investments; insufficient institutional capacity to implement the programme for local roads; insufficient funds to cover maintenance and investment costs; lack of adequate technical standards and management procedures for local roads; lack of a coordinated transport and trade strategy; and the existence of monopolies. The railway sector needs to be restructured and is not commercially viable. Chişinău International Airport is at the limit of its capacities and will require considerable investment to meet demand in the future.
- Moldova has a limited capacity for generating energy and is highly dependent on Russian energy imports. Disruptions in gas supplies from Russia underline Moldova's desire to *increase energy supply security*. The Iasi-Ungheni pipeline, operational since 2014, connects Moldova to the European gas network via Romania and an extension of the pipeline to Chişinău is expected to become operational in 2019.
- *Use of renewable energy* is already actively promoted in Moldova as a means to diversify supplies, and the government is initiating relevant policies. Energy efficiency is also seen as a tool to tackle reliance on imports, rising energy prices, and the negative effects of climate change. In 2017 a new Law on Energy established rules aimed at creating the conditions for limiting monopolistic activity, liberalizing energy markets, and promoting competition. However, there are concerns about the functional independence of the National Agency for Energy Regulation and the performance of this institution.
- In terms of the potential to provide *support for the environment*, Moldova currently has an insufficiently developed legal framework, obsolete norms and standards, inefficient management, and outdated models of environmental governance.

The final range of deliverables offer **mobility and people-to-people contacts** as part of a stronger society:

- Moldova was the first eastern neighbour to benefit from *visa liberalization* with the EU. As of 28 April 2014, citizens of the Republic of Moldova have been granted the right to enter and travel to the European Union without visas. Four years later about 1.5 million Moldovans have crossed the border destined for European countries. However, it was noted that this had not yet automatically led to the Moldovan authorities being more willing to follow through on their promise of domestic reform, for example in terms of dealing with corruption (European Commission 2017d: 8-11).
- When it comes to *strengthening investment in young people's skills, entrepreneurship and employability*, the view from Moldova is that there is an urgent need to align the education system with the labour market needs. *EU programmes* for cooperation in higher education have already contributed to reform in the education sector. Teachers and students are very active in the international mobility projects open to the EaP countries, exceeding the numbers planned for Moldova.

Building on this expert assessment, at first glance it appears that the 20 Deliverables for 2020 policy does have the potential to be become a catalyst for Moldova to effectively implement the provisions of the AA – if they are actually applied in practice. On paper there is a wide range of new laws, strategies and action plans that have been announced across the four priority areas of economy, governance, connectivity and society, which would suggest a receptiveness to the deliverables. However, time and again concerns are raised about their implementation.

In the event that political actors in the government are only mimicking the process of fulfilling the 20 deliverables, rather than realizing them in practice, it would be advisable for the EU to diversify and intensify its direct dialogue platforms with other actors in Moldova. Our partners in Moldova make the following **recommendations**:

- For civil society to serve as a cross cutting deliverable that can contribute to fulfilling the other deliverables, it must be supported against attacks and pressures from governmental political actors. Civil society needs to be strengthened to become a strong civic actor that is able to mount a challenge in anti-democratic skirmishes with the government, no matter what its political colour is.
- Local government authorities have an unequal relationship with the central authorities. With more autonomy there would be possibilities to interact directly with the EU on the delivery of programmes and projects. The EU could contribute to debates about administrative-territorial reform in the Moldovan context.
- Entrepreneurs can be vulnerable to the regulatory institutions in Moldova. The EU can create opportunities to support Moldovan entrepreneurs through local initiatives.
- The EU needs to be aware of the political and civic culture of the Moldovan population. Many young people do not see their future in Moldova and there are high levels of migration. Mechanisms are needed within mobility programmes to encourage young people to return to Moldova after studies in foreign countries as well as to stimulate them to take up opportunities on offer inside Moldova through other deliverables.

4. The view from Minsk: Engagement in Belarus, a case without an AA

In contrast to Moldova, EU engagement with Belarus has had a far more chequered history (Bosse 2012; Korosteleva 2016b; Moshes 2015; Titarenko 2018: 20-28; Vieira and Vasilyan 2018: 10-13). Belarus is unique

amongst EaP countries in that although a PCA was agreed with the EU in 1995, it has never been ratified by Brussels due to the lack of democratic reforms in Belarus and human rights violations. In the absence of a PCA Belarus was effectively excluded from the ENP when it was launched in 2004. In 2006 the European Commission published a non-paper addressed to the people of Belarus, which outlined how the country could benefit from closer cooperation with the EU once the authorities took serious steps towards democratization (European Commission 2006).

The Belarusian authorities released the last of their political prisoners in summer 2008 and made some tentative, limited steps towards more transparency in the conduct of the parliamentary elections that autumn. The EU temporarily lifted targeted sanctions it had imposed and in 2009 Belarus was invited to participate in the launch of the EaP. The lack of a PCA still meant that the EU's engagement with Belarus was limited. Belarus was unable to participate in the bilateral track of the EaP and was restricted to multilateral regional cooperation. Moreover, political disagreements mean that Belarus is currently the only EaP country that does not participate in the EURONEST PA. At the same time, Minsk has been an active participant in Eurasian integration projects led by Russia, albeit as a fair-weather friend on many occasions (Frear 2013).

The phase of EU-Belarus rapprochement came to end in the aftermath of the crackdown on protesters following the 2010 presidential election and the incarceration of a new batch of political prisoners. Travel restrictions were re-introduced by the EU and extended to a wider circle of officials, alongside an asset freeze. Belarus was not suspended from the EaP altogether however. Following the release of all political prisoners again in the summer of 2015 most of the EU's sanctions against the Belarusian authorities were lifted at the beginning of 2016. President Lukashenka was formally invited to the EaP summit in Brussels in November 2017, although ultimately he did not attend.

As part of the EU-STRAT project, a brainstorming event was held in Minsk on 29 March 2018 to discuss the current state of EU engagement with Belarus. Organized by the School of Young Managers in Public Administration (SYMPA), the event was attended by a variety of local Belarusian experts from academia, civil society, journalism, and political activism. It was agreed with participants that the brainstorming session would remain confidential in order to allow an open and frank discussion.

In keeping with the goals of the EU-STRAT project, the aim of the event was to gain an inside-out perspective from the Belarusian interlocutors themselves. The event had an open character and left the floor open to domestic expert views, in order to find out what elements of EU engagement emerged as priorities for the participants themselves. To begin with, participants were invited to discuss a) what functioned well in EU relations with Belarus, b) what could be abandoned as it was not working or undesirable and c) what could be adjusted in the existing approaches or what needed to be introduced that was not already part of the EU's engagement with Belarus. EU-STRAT team members then facilitated a wider debate.

4.1 An inside-out perspective from Belarusian experts

This section begins by highlighting what participants saw as successful forms of engagement and cooperation with the EU, while also stressing the ongoing dilemmas such cooperation faces from the Belarusian side. Next it will focus on the perceived gaps or deficiencies in the current relationship, as identified by the experts on the

EU's part. It will then present the ideas that participants proposed that could be taken on board by the EU to ensure a meaningful engagement with Belarus.

The local experts agreed that the EU should continue to cooperate with the authorities at the national level, particularly where projects promoted the sovereignty and independence of Belarus. While this did entail working with state institutions and government-organized NGOs (GONGOs), some form of **cooperation** was necessary to make any threat of sanctions credible.

- Participants argued that EU-Belarus cooperation had been shown to work well in areas of common interest. These tended to be technical and depoliticized, such as infrastructure projects, border control, environmental matters, and general humanitarian projects.
- The authorities in Minsk can be supportive of and willing to fulfil their obligations towards any projects that are perceived as bringing a concrete benefit or gain for the country.
- EU projects which supported local authorities were also highlighted as useful.

Nevertheless the participants also underlined a number of **dilemmas** that even successful cooperation projects could face, which the EU had to be aware of.

- In their eagerness to have a presence in Belarus, EU initiatives risk going too far in taking on board the discourses of the Belarusian regime itself or adapting too far to meet the domestic rules of the game in order to get things done. Taking up the discourse of 'integration of integration' between the EU and the Russia-initiated EAEU or emphasizing security at the expense of democratic principles and values risked playing into the authorities' hands and potentially discrediting the EU in the eyes of the pro-European constituency in Belarus.
- Not all experts present were totally negative about the discourse of 'integration of integration', however. It was suggested that the EU could start engaging in discussions with Belarus about the compatibility of technical regulations between the EU and the EAEU. Minsk would be open to dialogue with Brussels in order to avoid potential domination by Russia, where standards were perceived as lower than those in Belarus in some areas.
- Depoliticizing initiatives could help convince national and local officials that projects were not dangerous or designed to bring about revolutionary changes to the regime, but while this could ensure that the EU can retain a presence in Belarus it also meant the existing hierarchical power relations are replicated in many cases.
- Local administrations exist at the regional level, but they exercise very limited self-governance. They are not necessarily more open to opportunities for cooperation than the central authorities and sometimes are even more willing to restrict access to new players than the authorities at the national level.
- The EU was advised to keep in mind that the gap between the authorities and society is very large in Belarus. While the authorities view cooperation with the EU as just a formality and a balance for Russian influence, Belarusian society has broader expectations, according to the experts. A stable section of society – around 20 % – is consistently pro-EU according to participants.

Furthermore the experts cautioned the EU to be aware of the issue of the **informal rules** of the game and risks of the illusion of liberalization.

- Local government authorities can be afraid of demonstrating any initiative in engagement with the EU, without ensuring the permission of the central government first.

- It was suggested that the central authorities often consider funding for cooperation with the EU as substitute for central funding to regions, which might discourage local authorities from pursuing it.
- The Belarusian authorities can back many environmental movements in their pursuit of cooperation with the EU. However, while the number of such projects is increasing, certain issues which the authorities view as 'undesirable' (such as anti-nuclear) are excluded as far as possible. Participants warned against cooperation being restricted to state-sanctioned civil society.
- Furthermore, while recent official decrees have created the image that the authorities are open to creating a more liberalized business environment, experts warned that in practice the authorities have a lot of possibilities to control and suppress private enterprise.

The brainstorming session also revealed some **problems in the EU's approach** to engagement with the Belarusian authorities and society according to the experts present.

- The EU was often perceived as lacking a clearly defined strategy and goals in its relations with Belarus and did not articulate its interests and preferences clearly.
- On the one hand, the authorities remain sceptical about the EU's approach and complain of double standards in comparison to Azerbaijan, which is also authoritarian but receives less criticism or punishment from Brussels.
- On the other hand, opponents of the regime can be concerned that Brussels might abandon support for democratization in pursuit of the normalization of bilateral relations with Minsk.
- The absence of a legal basis for EU-Belarus relations has meant that cooperation has often been on an *ad hoc* basis and relations can be personalized instead of impartial. *De facto* structures for dialogue have emerged, such as the EU-Belarus Coordination Group that has met regularly since 2016.²
- Some participants argued that a new legal framework of cooperation could facilitate better relations, but others suggested that the signing of any documents establishing the legal basis of bilateral relations by the current Belarusian leadership would not be a sign of a commitment to further serious engagement. They should rather be seen as a tool for pressuring Russia into making concessions to Belarus.
- Some experts expressed the opinion that the EU Delegation in Belarus is more supportive and attentive to the position of Belarusian authorities rather than to opinions of independent national or international experts when it comes to cooperation.
- European support for independent media was felt to be diminishing, while the media environment in Belarus was deteriorating. The media sector in Belarus has already seen some steps to limit Russian propaganda according to experts, with Moscow's intervention in Ukraine providing the catalyst. However, some experts expressed the perception that there was insufficient EU support in that particular area compared to other EaP countries.
- A key issue which participants raised was the question of visas to enter the EU. While some acknowledged that the situation has been improving, others emphasized the high prices for single-entry visas. Lack of mobility or experience of EU countries for Belarusian citizens was a problem.
- Some participants argued that within Belarusian society itself there was a pragmatic openness to EU-funded projects and programmes that offer opportunities for mobility, economic development, and

² The most recent meeting took place in Minsk on 26-27 April 2018:
https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/belarus/43689/eu-belarus-coordination-group-met-fifth-time_en.

education.³ However, a big obstacle remained a lack of useful information about what the EU was actually doing in Belarus.

- A point which was reiterated by the participants was that clear benchmarks were needed to evaluate any change. It was felt that currently they are absent. It remained a question how to actually measure the effectiveness of the EU input.

Participants acknowledged that the EU faces a dilemma in its dealings with Minsk. On the one hand, it might struggle to promote its agenda by just employing the same principles, policy tools and practices that it has used in other countries, which are not really suitable for the Belarusian context. On the other hand, it cannot simply resort to supporting and accepting the existing power relations in Belarus and avoid introducing any new practices altogether. In spite of these challenges, the participants were able to suggest **opportunities for meaningful engagement** that had the potential to encourage changes in Belarus.

- Brussels could identify programmes which require only political will on the part of the EU itself and do not require permission from the Belarusian authorities (for instance, internships, education exchange).
- Technical cooperation is a way to progress EU-Belarus relations, so there should be more technical platforms for cooperation that could promote changes. In addition, there should be programmes of education for public servants, representatives of civil society, and the media. This could also include providing mobility for practitioners from EU member states spending time with their counterparts in Belarus, not just for Belarusians to go to the EU.
- The participants argued that there should be a political agenda and democratization should not be abandoned completely at the expense of technical issues – even if an overnight change is unlikely.
- The EU should continue the policy of engaging with the authorities in Minsk on the programmes within which their interests coincide and/or do not contradict each other (border cooperation, security, etc.).
- The experts emphasized that democratization and support for the development of civil society should not be fully excluded from any such cooperation agenda, even if it bothers the Belarusian authorities. For instance, the EU could insist that civil society in Belarus is involved in a certain percentage of all the projects or that the authorities have to consult with other national actors as a precondition; this might have to start modestly but could lead to bigger progress.
- If a basic legal framework/PCA is not practical, it might be useful to divide this treaty into several parts following through with those aspects which seem to be possible. Nevertheless, the prospect of a PCA was not completely impossible to rule out according to some experts. The Enhanced PCA that the EU and Kazakhstan, also a member of the EAEU, agreed in 2015 was held up as an example that Minsk might be able to follow, and one that might be more realistic than trying to emulate Armenia's CEPA.
- EU projects which exist to counter Russian propaganda and misinformation tended to be focused on Georgia or Ukraine, so experts argued that Belarus should not be overlooked or neglected in this context.
- While visa facilitation is a long-term process, steps could already be taken to make it easier to get multi-entry visas rather than always having to apply for single-entry visas.
- The presence of the EU in Belarus should not only be at the national level but as well on the regional/local level. Local authorities are much less involved in international cooperation than national

³ National surveys have suggested that Belarusian citizens are still more likely to look towards Russian and EAEU in terms of collaboration however (Korosteleva 2016a).

ones, with the exception of engagement with Russia, which is very active in developing cooperation and had a head start in the Belarusian regions over the EU.

- More could be done to raise awareness about the EU and the EaP, as well as the projects that have been undertaken in Belarus, and to make it easier for citizens to get access to information. For instance, a set of positive experiences of cooperation with the EU should be accumulated that are easily accessible by citizens or proactively used in a well-formulated manner to promote the EU.

When asked specifically about the **20 Deliverables for 2020** initiative, some experts suggested that the Belarusian authorities evaluated them as too broad and that it was not clear for them whose interests they were actually supposed to serve. Belarus, in their opinion, has a minimal interest in this framework and would be happy to continue pursuing their own sectoral dialogue. Nevertheless during the discussion, a number of the topics covered by the deliverables (see Box 1) did come up unprompted:

- Regarding the cross-cutting deliverables, a lot of time was dedicated to issues that pertained to *engagement with civil society and strengthening communication. Increasing gender equality and non-discrimination* did not emerge as a topic during the event.⁴
- In terms of a stronger economy, the interest in tangible financial benefits on the part of the regime means that the authorities would likely be receptive to *improvements to the investment and business climate* and *addressing gaps in access to finance*. The compatibility of technical regulations in the EAEU might be put forward as an example of seeking *support for intra-regional trade amongst partner countries and the EU*.
- With regard to stronger connectivity, *support for the environment* came up in the discussion as an area where EU-Belarus cooperation was already very active. *Energy* was only actually mentioned in terms of the country's interdependencies with Russia.
- When it comes to a stronger society, *progress on Visa Liberalization Dialogues and Mobility Partnerships* was seen as a priority for both citizens and the authorities as well. Projects that tied in with the idea of *investment in young people's skills* and *integrating EaP and EU research and innovation systems* were mentioned on multiple occasions. Non-state actors could be very receptive to these in particular, as they were seen as programmes that did not require input from the authorities.

5. Conclusion

This report has shown that the EU has had a long history of engagement with the EaP countries, which pre-dates the EaP itself and extends beyond its most well-known policy, the AA. The 20 Deliverables for 2020 initiative has emerged from this past experience. In recent years two different groups have emerged in the EaP region: AA countries and non-AA countries. The challenge for the EU is to find ways to exploit the available opportunities for pragmatic cooperation with these two different groups of countries, and to increase partners' interdependence with the EU while encouraging the opening of their social order. The development of mutual interests is not a completely unrealistic strategy despite the context of the current unfavourable structural environment (Simão 2018: 201).

⁴ There was only one female representative amongst the Belarusian experts in attendance.

This report has taken an inside-out perspective drawing on local expertise from Moldova, as an AA country – and Belarus, as a non-AA country. In both cases the findings suggest that there is certain receptiveness to EU engagement via the 20 Deliverables initiative on the part of the ruling authorities, the wider society, or both. However, the EU needs to understand the circumstances on the ground in both countries if they hoped to employ any conditionality effectively. The findings from this preliminary, exploratory research suggest that, while at first glance Moldova and Belarus might appear to be very different regimes, in broad terms there are a number of issues that the EU needs to be aware of that are applicable in both countries, albeit in their own local context.

Experts from both countries highlighted the need for the EU to recognise that the regimes are limited access orders in their own way. In the case of Belarus this can be found in authoritarianism and business capture, while in Moldova there is corruption and state capture. It was acknowledged that the EU still has to find ways to work with the authorities in both countries, but experts also emphasized the need to engage with other actors in Moldova and Belarus in order actually implement programmes such as the 20 Deliverables initiative.

Experts and activists underlined the importance of civil society, and the potential for resistance from the authorities to their inclusion in programmes was noted not just in Belarus, but also Moldova. While the EU may have to work with GONGOs sometimes, it needs to be aware when it is doing that. In terms of encouraging the regime to really work with and listen to independent civil society organizations, it may be necessary to accept an incremental approach. Only talking to civil society and ignoring the ruling authorities completely was not encouraged.

Local government authorities were also mentioned as potentially important partners by the experts in the Moldovan and Belarusian contexts. They can often be overlooked in debates, as civil society usually gets more attention or is more vocal. Civil society is included as a cross cutting deliverable in the 20 Deliverable initiative, but engagement with local or regional government is not. It was noted that engaging with local actors in both Belarus and Moldova is important, but can be difficult. This dimension appears to be an area that warrants further research and analysis.

The Belarusian and Moldovan experts agreed that technical assistance was good and provided a practical form of engagement, but it should not come at the expense of talking about democratization. While it was impractical to not engage with the regimes at all until democracy is established, the EU should not be afraid of including some conditionality on its part, even if it has to start small. In the case of Belarus, some participants in the brainstorming session were worried that the EU would be too willing to make concessions to the incumbent authorities, because the EU valued stability and having a foothold in the country over everything else.

Unsurprisingly, the feedback from Belarus was that visa liberalization was a high priority for both the authorities and society. While this would be good for the Belarusian people, so far the experience from Moldova suggests that granting it does not guarantee that the government will engage in more reform in return.

Both the Moldovan and Belarusian perspectives include the importance of employing multiple platforms for engagement. This raises the question of what in practice is already happening with the EURONEST PA, CORLEAP, etc., outside of meetings and conferences in Brussels. How these fora account for what is actually taking place in EaP countries is another area in which further research would be welcome.

Finally, experts cautioned that there is always the risk that deliverables may appear to be delivered, but the regimes might still find ways to limit citizens' access to politics and business. The EU needs to manage expectations, beware of backsliding, and make sure that in practice programmes do not just allow deliverables to be delivered to those who are supporters of the regime, be it oligarchs tied to the ruling party in Moldova or elites around the personalist regime of Lukashenka in Belarus.

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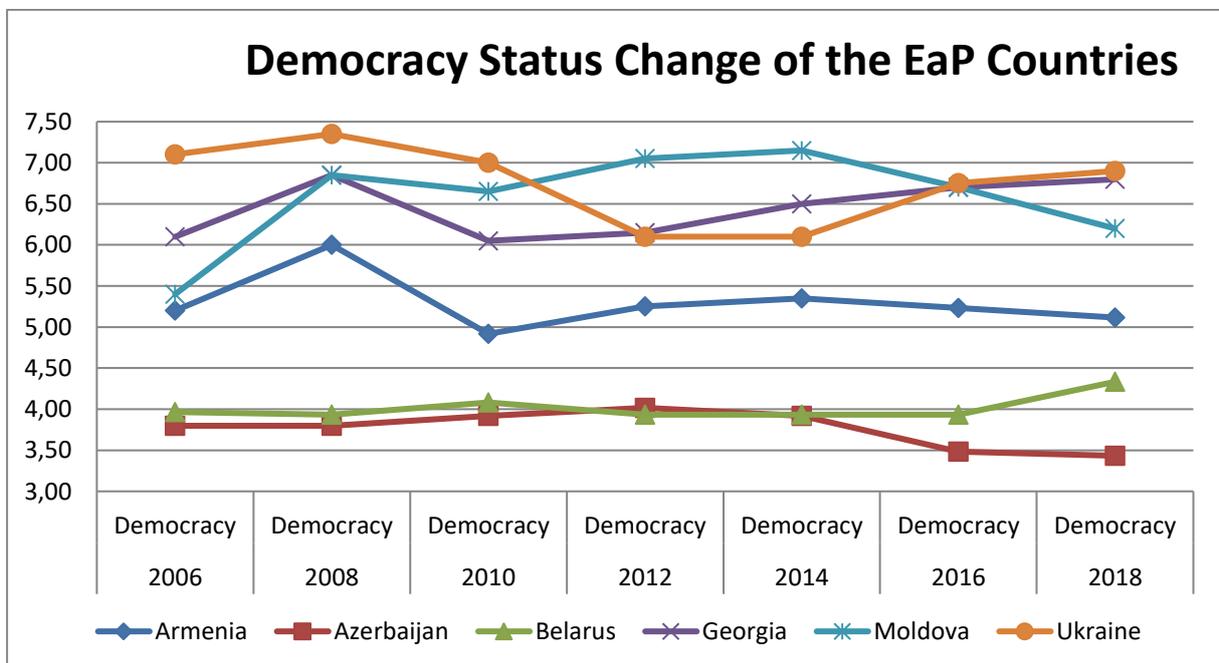
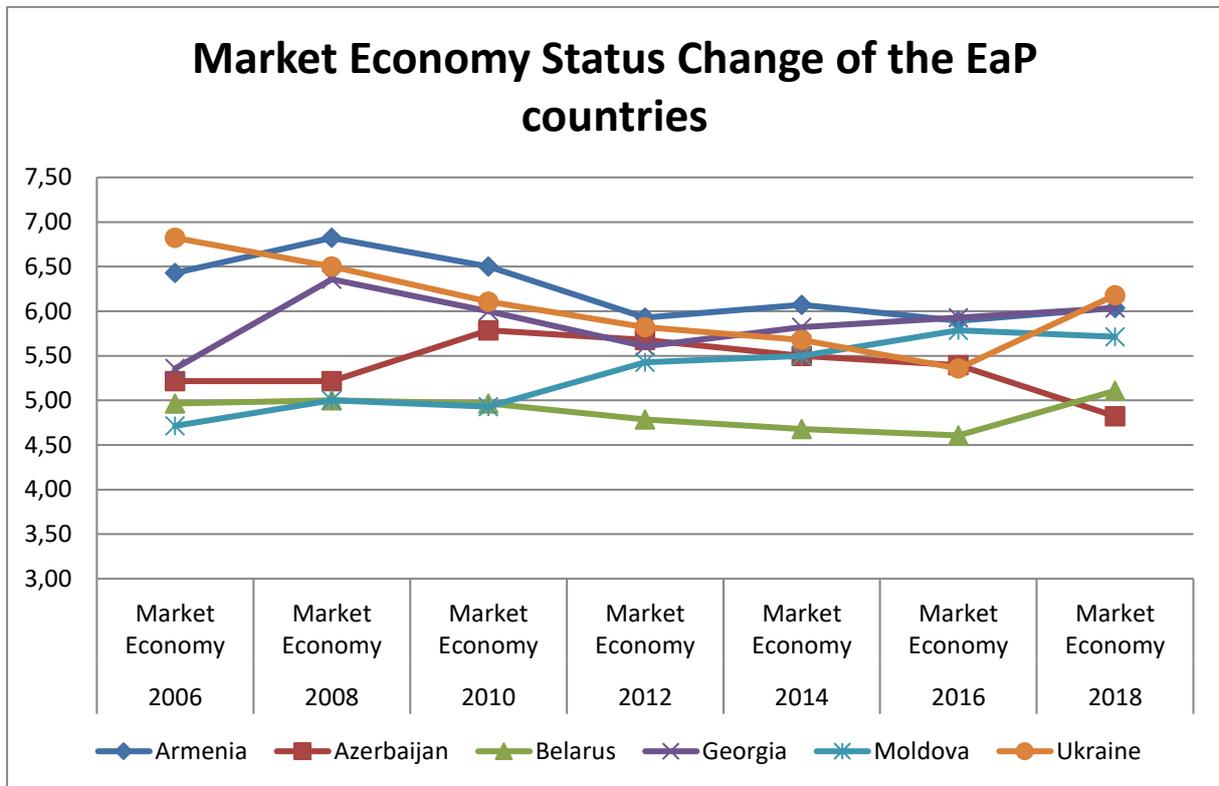
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7. Appendix: Democracy and market economy status indices of the EaP countries



Source: Bertelsmann Transformation Index (2018)⁵

⁵ The Democracy and Market Economy Status Indices identify where each of the countries stand on their path toward democracy under the rule of law and a social market economy. The higher the number, the greater the progress.



The EU and Eastern Partnership Countries An Inside-Out Analysis and Strategic Assessment

Against the background of the war in Ukraine and the rising tensions with Russia, a reassessment of the European Neighborhood Policy has become both more urgent and more challenging. Adopting an inside-out perspective on the challenges of transformation the Eastern Partnership (EaP) countries and the European Union face, the research project EU-STRAT seeks to understand varieties of social orders in EaP countries and to explain the propensity of domestic actors to engage in change. EU-STRAT also investigates how bilateral, regional and global interdependencies shape domestic actors' preferences and scope of action. Featuring an eleven-partner consortium of academic, policy, and management excellence, EU-STRAT creates new and strengthens existing links within and between the academic and the policy world on matters relating to current and future relations with EaP countries.
