

International Institute for Middle East and Balkan Studies IFIMES from Ljubljana, Slovenia, regularly analyses developments in the Middle East and the Balkans.

Eugene Matos de Lara and Audrey Beaulieu, both from University of Ottawa, Canada prepared a text entitled “New constructivism needed towards Europe's East”.

It is a short transcript of what EU Commissioner for European Neighbourhood and Enlargement Olivér Várhelyi has said opening the Vienna Process event - the second consecutive summit in Vienna, Austria. This leg of the Vienna Process event titled:

“Europe – Future – Neighbourhood at 75: Disruptions Recalibration Continuity”.



Eugene Matos de Lara & Audrey Beaulieu

## **New constructivism needed towards Europe's East**

On the historic date of 0March 08th – International Women’s Day, a large number of international affairs specialists gathered for the second consecutive summit in Vienna, Austria. This leg of the Vienna Process event titled: “*Europe – Future – Neighbourhood at 75: Disruptions Recalibration Continuity*”. The conference, jointly organised by four different entities (the International Institute for Middle East and Balkan Studies IFIMES, Media Platform Modern Diplomacy, International Scientific Journal European Perspectives, and Action Platform Culture for Peace) with the support of the Diplomatic Academy of Vienna, was aimed at discussing the future of Europe and its neighbourhood in the wake of its old and new challenges.

This highly anticipated conference gathered over twenty high ranking speakers from three continents, and the viewers from Australia to Canada and from Chile to Far East. The day was filled by three panels focusing on the rethinking and revisiting Europe and its three equally important neighbourhoods: Euro-Med, Eastern and trans-Atlantic (or as the Romano Prodi's EU Commission coined it back in 2000s – “from Morocco to Russia – everything but the institutions”); the socio-political and economic greening; as well as the legacy of WWII, Nuremberg Trials, the European Human Rights Charter and their relevance in the 21st century.

The event was probably the largest gathering since the beginning of 2021 for this part of Europe.

Along with the two acting State Presidents, the event was endorsed by the keynote of the EU Commissioner for European Neighbourhood and Enlargement, Excellency **Olivér Várhelyi**. The following lines are short transcript of what he has said opening the Vienna Process event:

The COVID-19 (C-19) has brought numerous challenges to the table in terms of cooperation, adaptation but, mostly, resilience. As the crisis may be considered as a breaking point by some, European Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement, Excellency Várhelyi, insisted on the opportunity emerging from it for the European Union (EU) and Eastern Europe to reinforce their collaboration to build a more stable area of “shared democracy, prosperity, stability and peace”.

Throughout the crisis, the European Union has been a key actor for Eastern Europe and its response to the virus, providing the region efficient economic and physical support, which has allowed thousands of lives to be saved. However, despite the necessity of this help, the European Union has more significant projects and ambitions regarding its relation with Eastern Europe states.

In 2020, the EU issued a proposal on the Eastern partnership mostly focused on resilience which unfolds in five pillars. The first pillar is addressed to the reinforcement of investments in the economy and connectivity. It, notably, aims to “further enhance support to small and medium enterprises”. These are EU's backbone, accounting for over 90% of the business activities; the EU hosts 24 million small businesses. This economic machine together generates more than half of the EU's GDP. The EU has great interest to keep them afloat during the C-19 crisis.

The EU parliament in December 2020 reported on the need for the Commission to reevaluate their support to these medium and small enterprises. They need more resources to overcome bureaucratic requirements that will exponentially burden their ability to thrive during and past C-19. Small businesses are recognised as indispensable to achieve innovative and sustainable goals. Examples of this are initiatives to incentivise companies to take up e-commerce, yet only 17% of the small businesses in the EU have digitised commerce.

*The second pillar is related to investments in the green transition. While Western Europe has demonstrated a positive approach regarding Paris Agreement goals, Eastern Europe seemed more reluctant. This attitude could be explained by their staple-based economy and by more significant matters on their plate, such as corruption and the reinforcement of the rule of law. Thus, the second pillar bridges with the first pillar since environmental issues should influence the investments and the development of small and medium enterprises and the development of the economic sphere.*

*The third pillar is about investing in digital transformation. The digital world is continually evolving, and states need to adapt to this reality, especially considering it could be a pivotal instrument to get the economy back on track. The pandemic has been a great opportunity for countries to develop their digital sector. Enterprises have had to be ingenious and proactive in adapting their activities to this new reality, which could be a game-changer for the future. Countries will have to grasp this opportunity and make the best out of it. Investing in technologies could also be profitable to other goals that have been set, such as investments that need to be done in the reinforcement of the rule of law, credible justice reforms and efficient public administration (fourth pillar). Indeed, digitisation of information combined with robust cybersecurity platforms is the key to more opened and more transparent administrations. In parallel, other strategies will need to be*

*elaborated in order to enhance respect of the rule of law and reach democratic standards, in fact, a key point to the enlargement of the EU.*

*Finally, the fifth pillar is about investing in fair and inclusive societies. Eastern Europe countries are real mosaics in terms of ethnicities, religions and languages. Inequalities and social cleavages between these groups are still omnipresent in most Eastern Europe societies, and they need to be addressed to build a more united Europe. Several Eastern European states have elevated policies that bridge social ethical and cultural differences in the first place both in their national and EU integration political agenda. Indeed, bridging social gaps is a fundamental action in managing differences and for the upbringing of a healthy democracy.*

*The next reunion regarding the partnership will take place next fall and focus on three critical matters: recovery, resilience and reform. Although the COVID-19 crisis cannot forever guide interstates initiatives, its consequences have forced the world to adapt to several new realities. Consequently, European countries will need strong measures to recover, and those should be translated by measures addressing the creation of employment and economic growth to stay competitive in international markets. As the EU Commissioner Várhelyi mentioned, «socio-economic recovery is the absolute priority», so we should also be expecting opportunities to reform social and political norms to face not only new issues but also trends that were very present in the past that are now simply accelerating.*

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