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**Eastern Partnership:  
What Role for the Czech Presidency  
in Pursuing the Eastern Partnership?**

Zuzana Zelenická

**Faculty of International Relations  
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## **Eastern Partnership: What Role for the Czech Presidency in Pursuing the Eastern Partnership?**

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### **Summary:**

The European Neighbourhood Policy has been an attempt by the Union to cope with EU enlargement, and to manage relations with its direct neighbours. The Eastern Partnership initiative represents an enhancement of the existing ENP platform, while paying more attention to the specific needs of the EU's Eastern neighbours. The current Czech Presidency made the launch of the EP one of its priorities. The Visegrád Group, due to its geographic, historic and cultural proximity to the region, should play a crucial role in the shaping, and future implementation, of this policy. This article aims to analyse the comparative advantages enjoyed by the V4, and especially the Czech Republic during its Presidency, in pursuing the Eastern Partnership.

**Key words:** European Neighbourhood Policy, Eastern Partnership, European Union, Czech Presidency of the Council, Priorities of CZ PRES, Visegrád Group

## **Východní partnerství: Role českého předsednictví v prosazování Východního partnerství**

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### **Abstrakt:**

Evropská politika sousedství je výrazem snahy Unie vypořádat se s rozšířením EU a o řešení vzájemného vztahu se sousedy. Iniciativa Východní partnerství představuje doplnění existující platformy EPS tím, že klade větší pozornost na specifické potřeby východních partnerů. Současné české předsednictví v Radě EU zvolilo spuštění iniciativy za jednu ze svých priorit. Visegrádská skupina, díky své geografické, historické a kulturní blízkosti k regionu, by mohla hrát významnou roli v utváření a budoucím prosazování této politiky. Příspěvek si klade za cíl analyzovat komparativní výhodu V4 a zvláště České republiky během předsednictví v prosazování Východního Partnerství.

**Klíčová slova:** Evropská politika sousedství, Východní partnerství, Evropská unie, české předsednictví v Radě EU, priority CZ PRES, V4

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## Introduction

The initiative of the Eastern Partnership can be viewed as an attempt to differentiate the process of the European Neighbourhood Policy due to significant geographic and political differences in its Southern and Eastern dimension. This ambitious plan thus reflects the new situation which emerged after the last waves of enlargement (2004 and 2007), which moved the borders of the Union further to the East. This provoked a new round of discussions about the finality, and final shape, of the European Union. It has also raised the need to find answers to two sets of questions: accommodation of mutual relations; Old Member States vis-à-vis New (post communist) Members; and the Member States vis-à-vis the EU's neighbours, especially its Eastern ones. Suddenly, the European Union has started sharing its Eastern borders with regions often described as unstable, volatile, with a democratic deficit and where there is a potential threat of the outbreak of conflict. However, the EU, aware of this new situation, has launched dialogue with the countries neighbouring it to the South and East, within the framework of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP).

*The Eastern Partnership (EP)* initiative, arising from Finnish and German proposals to move the ENP towards a more regional and sectoral approach (Duleba et al. 2008: 13–18); the French initiative to differentiate and upgrade the Southern dimension in the Union for the Mediterranean region; and, most importantly, the Polish-Swedish proposal to launch this Partnership is still being formed into its final likeness. Acknowledging the Polish-Swedish proposal (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Poland 2008); the European Council called upon the European Commission to prepare the draft for the Eastern Partnership. Due to the military events in Georgia last summer [2008], the European Commission speeded up its preparatory work and submitted the final draft of the EP (European Commission 2008a). This paper serves as the basis for the political declaration which should be approved at the Eastern Partnership Summit to be held in May in Prague to officially launch the policy.

The Czech Republic holds the *Presidency of the Council (CZ PRES)* in the first half 2009. Among its three main priority packages, so called *the three "E" – Economy, Energy & Europe in the world*, the foreign policy issues of the Union can be discerned in all of them, especially in the last "E" – Europe in the world. The Eastern Partnership has become one of the priorities of the CZ PRES. Although the Czech representatives have worked on this initiative from its very beginning, the first public acknowledgement appeared as late as in the Autumn of 2008. The officials say they had not wanted to jeopardize the French initiative of the Union of the Mediterranean by publicizing the EP at the same time.



There are several particularities concerning the Czech role in pursuing the EP. Firstly, during the CZ PRES a fundamentally new policy will be officially launched at the Spring Council summit. Secondly, as a New Member State coming from the more Eastern part of Europe, the Czech Republic could become active on the European stage as the advocate of the Eastern region. Thirdly, the Czech Republic, along with the other three Visegrád members, possesses the necessary preconditions for becoming involved in the forming, shaping and implementation of this policy.

The main aim of this article is to analyze the factors that constitute a comparative advantage in pursuing the EP initiative on the part of the Visegrád countries with a special emphasis on the Czech Republic's currently holding the Presidency. We argue that the Visegrád countries have good preconditions for evolving activities within this policy that can give an additional impetus to the cooperation inside the framework of the V4 group on one hand, and on the other hand, can upgrade the status of these countries in the eyes of other EU Member States.

In analyzing the position of the Visegrád countries especially that of the Czech Republic, we were mainly working from the historical, geographical and cultural knowledge and observations. The process of the EP's evolution was analyzed on the European, as well as national, level. We tried to follow all meetings and other events relevant to the Eastern Partnership initiative, as well as other statements from European and national elites active in the diplomatic sphere. Considering all relevant documents and sources from the point of view of the descriptive analysis, we looked for evidence that would confirm, or refute, our argument on the special status of the V4 countries vis-à-vis EP. We do not aim at analyzing the policy itself, but rather, try to show the implications of the EP for the Czech Republic, as well as the V4. This paper tries to point out the potential of the EP for the Visegrád countries, with special attention being paid to the Czech Republic in terms of potential opportunities, as well as potential challenges.

## **1. The Role of the Visegrád Group in the Eastern Partnership**

The Czech Republic can use the established Visegrád cooperation as a wider platform for shaping the EP. One obvious reason for using the Visegrád group is the fact that after the Czech Presidency, Hungary and Poland will shortly assume this post (in the first and second halves of 2011, respectively); Slovakia being the last one, in the second half of 2016. This gives the countries a further impetus for their closer cooperation in this matter on an already established platform. Furthermore, Poland has already shown its ambition to play a leading role in this policy when releasing their joint Polish-Swedish proposal. Moreover,

the other three members have their own interests, and reasons, for pursuing such initiative.

Arising from the knowledge of the group's performance, its goals and achievements, the Visegrád group, as an established platform for discussions on the multilateral level, has great potential for developing activities within the Eastern Partnership framework. These activities might include the following functions: 1) intermediary West/East dialogue; 2) the mediator, interpreter, and/or spokesman for the interests and demands of the Eastern Neighbours; 3) the initiator of new elements, instruments and policies within the agenda of the EP; 4) active co-maker of the policy; 5) the assistance provider and/or donor; 6) the implementer of sector-specific policies, as well as policies within the JHA field.

The idea of the ENP, and, later on, the EP is not a new one for the Visegrád members, because as countries directly sharing borders with the Eastern Neighbours (except the Czech Republic), they have always had to deal with these countries – either individually or on a bilateral level – prior to their EU accession, or as a part of the enlarged Union within the framework of EU external relations, and later, of the Schengen area.

When trying to analyze the position of the Visegrád group countries, we can look at it from the point of view of their geographical, historical, cultural, and economic characteristics. To name the factors that constitute the comparative advantage of Visegrád group countries as regards the Eastern Partnership we can state following:

1. *historical experience* with their inclusion in the Soviet Bloc similar to the Eastern Partners;
2. *geographic proximity*;
3. *ethnic, cultural, linguistic and mental proximity* – that results in better understanding of the problems and issues in countries of EP; moreover, greater acceptability of assistance and help offered from the Eastern Partners side;
4. *direct border* – the necessity of dealing with bilateral issues connected with sharing a common border;
5. *experience with transformation*, reforms and the *association process*;
6. daily practical problems (border crossing), *people to people contacts*;
7. the role of an *advocate* for the *European ambitions* of the Eastern Partners due to better understanding of their problems and their subsequent interpretation and explanation;
8. the possibility of significantly influencing the evolution of the EP as the Partners, to a great extent, constitute the near border region, thus the nearest neighbourhood – *traditional foreign policy priority of V4 states*;

9. the considerable *dependency on imports of natural gas and oil* from the East (e.g. Slovakia is 100% dependent on the gas imports from Russia, the Czech Republic around 80%, Poland and Hungary around 50%), and thus the need to initiate dialogue with the Eastern Partners and Russia on securing the energy supply, as well as its continued security;
10. the *nearest trading partners* – interest in deepening mutual trade and transport links;
11. Polish aspirations to become a regional leader, and advocate of Eastern ambitions, as well as its coming closer to the Union;
12. experience with regional political and economic integration (CEFTA, V4, CEI, ...);
13. the International Visegrád Fund and expansion of its offers towards the Eastern Neighbours in co-financing projects, supporting NGOs, civil activities, student exchanges, people to people contacts; among others.

Moreover, we can also find individual incentives of Visegrád members, complementary to the joint ones that could foster the activities within the EP.

Poland for example, for geographic, historical or political reasons, often puts itself into the position of regional leader in the area of Central, as well as Eastern, Europe. A clear manifestation of this tendency was the joint Polish-Swedish proposal of the Eastern Partnership in May 2008, which influenced significantly the final shape of this initiative. From the solely geographic point of view, Poland borders on Russia, Belarus and Ukraine, that is approximately 1244 km. This fact is reflected in the high priority placed on good neighbourly relations with the East. What is more, the Polish public – very well informed and engaged – is very keen to support the democratization of Ukraine and Belarus. This was visible, for example in May 2006, in support of elections in Belarus, not only from the national politicians and MEP's, but also from the public at large. Polish politicians use every occasion to appeal for political and practical support for Belarusian students expelled from their home schools for political reasons. Another example of this deep interest was the financing of radio broadcasting in Belarusian language from Poland (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty 2006). Moreover, as has already been mentioned, Hungary and Poland will hold the Presidency soon, which could give them additional opportunities to promote the EP.

The Slovak Republic shares its eastern border with Ukraine and that has caused, especially after Slovakia's entry to Schengen, separation of families, disruption of family or trade relations due to the introduction of visa requirements. Ukraine, as the closest Eastern neighbour, has traditionally belonged among the priority regions of Slovak foreign policy. Moreover, the Slovak eastern regions and the Ukrainian western regions belong amongst the poorest regions in Europe – a fact that demands joint solution and regional dialogue. Slovakia also

has problems connected with the illegal migration, or immigration, of Ukrainians. Slovakia also benefits from the tangible results of such partnership, which would create mutual trust among the citizens of partner countries; as well as towards the EU, as visa liberalization would increase mobility and facilitate free trade. To top it all, Slovakia is 100% dependent on gas imports from Russia through Ukraine. Therefore, solving such bilateral, as well as regional, issues should be more effective when dealing with it in a complex manner within one comprehensive approach of the EP. It is in Slovakia's best interest to support such an initiative.

Hungary, similarly to Poland, but more visibly than Slovakia and the Czech Republic, has always balanced its foreign policy orientation between the West (EU membership) and the East (its immediate vicinity). A clear sign of this schizophrenia has been the introduction of an asymmetric visa policy towards Ukraine; the only Member State to do so before entry to Schengen (Kazmierkiewicz 2005: 3). Hungary borders only Ukraine, however one of the traditional priorities of Hungarian foreign policy is the support of Hungarians living abroad – as is the case of Ukraine and the Balkan countries of course. Moreover, in light of the recent gas disputes the questions of energy dependency, security and diversity have become very important issues.

The Czech Republic has a specific position among the Visegrád states for several reasons. The region of Eastern Europe has not been a priority area for a long time (the Balkan region was). On the contrary, a tendency to turn away from the East and to orient towards the West could be discerned. Moreover, the citizens seem to view Russia rather in a negative light as “the East” was often misidentified with Russia only. The Czech Republic is the only Visegrád country which does not share a direct border with any of the Eastern Neighbours. This probably implies a weaker engagement on the CR's part in issues directly connected with borders. However, solidarity with other Visegrád countries and the trend towards globalization lowers the significance of this factor. Such a specific position does not necessarily need to be an obstacle for Czech commitment to the EP. Its current Presidency of the EU opens new doors for the Czech Republic. It offers new opportunities to come up with its own proposals or to moderate discussions on the already presented initiative of the EP. To give an example, the Czech Republic is known for its achievements, and efforts, in the promotion of human rights. On the other hand, the field of human rights protection is often listed among the rather weak points of the Eastern Partners. So, the Czech contribution could be in the form of assistance in the area of human rights improvement in the Eastern region.

## 2. The Czech Presidency of the Council and its Ability to Shape the Eastern Partnership

The final set of priorities of the CZ PRES results from a long term process of evaluation, or, in other words, making compromises between national priorities, the course of European legislation and integration and current events on the international stage. In the framework document – the so called *18-month plan of TRIO presidencies* – we can trace the regional differentiation of each presidency stemming from the obvious geographic and cultural characteristics: the French presidency stressed the Union for the Mediterranean<sup>1</sup>; the Czech one gives preference to the Eastern Partnership; while the Swedes emphasize the Baltic Sea Strategy<sup>2</sup> (Czech Presidency of the Council 2008a). Such regional preferences belong among the legitimate expressions of the agenda-setting powers of each Presidency. As J. Tallberg argues, each Presidency may raise awareness of problems, regions, or countries neglected by previous presidencies, and initiate debate on issues of great importance to them (Tallberg 2003). Calling attention to regional issues is logical due to geographic, cultural, and/or ethnic proximity, economic interconnection and pressing neighbourhood issues. Such regional initiatives, deliberately included in the Presidency programme may – with the contribution of the Presidency as the agenda-setter and agenda-shaper – result in the adoption of a concrete policy, thus, as Tallberg put it: “*in institutionalising these concerns in EU policy-making*” (Tallberg 2003: 7). Similarly, the Eastern Partnership can be found in the foreign relations section of the Work Programme of the CZ PRES (Czech Presidency of the Council 2008b). However, there is only a brief description with the main goal to organize the introductory summit. We think, though, that more attention should have been given to this priority in the document due to the positive factors mentioned above.

To stay on a realistic note, the CZ PRESS does not have any big ambitions nor the possibilities to come up with revolutionary ideas or amendments to existing texts. Simply said, the main task for the CZ PRES is to organize the summit and to ensure that the question of the EP launch will be raised. This was already secured by the conclusions of the spring European Council 19.–20. 3. 2009 in Brussels where the heads of state and government reached a consensus on the EP (Czech Presidency 2009c). A Declaration of the European Council on the Eastern Partnership (Council of the EU 2009a) has been adopted as a basis for the upcoming summit. The Declaration (Council of the EU 2009b) basically corresponds to the EC Communication of 3<sup>rd</sup> December 2008 in the basic goals, principles and propositions. On this occasion, the EC President Barroso congratulated the CZ PRES on its active role in the EP.

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<sup>1</sup> Consult European Commission (2008b).

<sup>2</sup> See Malmström (2009).

The Eastern Partnership Summit was set to take place on May 7<sup>th</sup> 2009 in Prague with the participation of all 27 Member States, plus all invited Partner countries. The only unresolved question has been the participation of Belarus; depending on that state's internal situation. However, the latest Council of Foreign Ministers of 16<sup>th</sup> March 2009 (Council of the EU 2009c) enabled Belarussian representatives to travel to Europe; so, their appearance at the summit was more or less secured. Russia and Turkey as important regional players were invited as well<sup>3</sup>.

The main aim was the adoption of a joint political declaration that would launch the Eastern Partnership. The task for the CZ PRES was also the final version of this document acceptable for all participants, taking into consideration all amendments, suggestions or critiques of other states. Bilateral meetings and negotiations have started only recently; that is why it was impossible to reveal the final text in advance, according to Minister Schwarzenberg. Inviting Russia and Turkey to the debates is a sign of the maturity of the EU, and represents the next step in the EU's comprehensive Eastern policy. However, Russia looks at the initiative in a rather reserved manner because of its own intentions in this controversial region. Turkey, on the other hand, rather likes its "candidate status" and the continuation of the association process to "neighbour status".

To summarize the Eastern Partnership issue in the Czech Republic; it has not been discussed much at political level, nor has it received a lot of media coverage as a phenomenon in itself. We have been analyzing articles contained in major printed media; i.e., newspapers and magazines; as well as documents available on internet<sup>4</sup>, to come to conclusions about the rather scarce, and/or very brief, information about the EP. If there has been a mention of the EP, it has usually been connected with energy security issues and the necessity to diversify the sources and transport routes from the East. It is understandable that it would not be wise to separate individual policies and strategies; quite the contrary, discuss them in the wider context. Energy issues are, moreover, a significant part of the intended cooperation within the EP, and of course, they have become a pressing problem after the latest gas crisis.

However, it would not be objective to say that there has been *no* information and/or media coverage. The CZ PRES web sites together with euroskep.cz inform of the latest developments, usually processing press releases from the Council meetings. Minister of Foreign Affairs Schwarzenberg and Vice-Minister

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<sup>3</sup> See the statement of K. Schwarzenberg at the press conference after the Council in Brussels, 24. 2. 2009 or the Press statement of 16. 3. 2009 (Council of the EU 2009c).

<sup>4</sup> We have focused on newspaper coverage, mainly in the time period November 2008 – June 2009. However, documents and articles dated differently, but still relevant for our research were also considered. We have searched in the papers (in Czech, Slovak, English and German language) on the Eastern Partnership topic, and the implications for the V4, if any.

for European Affairs Vondra conduct meetings with the representatives of the Eastern Partners, and, subsequently, organize press conferences. This also serves as a limited source of information. What we find insufficient has been the room and importance given to this priority. Eastern Partnership represents a fundamental innovation in the European integration process which enables closer partnership without enlargement. It expands the area of peace, democracy, stability and prosperity, and it offers access to the community's market, legislation and institutions without granting full membership. We think that such innovation should be given more attention by the Czech representatives and media. Neither do we have any deeper analysis, nor an explanation of the policy for the wider public. One could argue that there is still plenty of time to the Summit and to the true beginning of the implementation, and that there are number of pressing issues as financial crisis to be dealt with, first. We can partially agree. However, public support for national, as well as international, acts is essential. We would recommend the organization of topical conferences and seminars.

### **3. The Challenges of CZ PRES in the EP Agenda**

We have already mentioned that the greatest task of the CZ PRES has been to hold discussions with the relevant partners and, eventually, to incorporate their objections or suggestions into the final declaration, and/or, the implementation documents. The challenge has also been to debate with critics and work with alternative proposals from the Member States. Southern countries with France in the lead might fear the marginalization of the Southern dimension of the ENP – the Union for the Mediterranean. However, the Czech Presidency (in accord with the Visegrád position) has, on several occasions, stressed that the EP does not seek to displace the ENP, and that both dimensions are integral and complementary parts of the overall Neighbourhood Policy. On the other hand, Bulgaria and Romania might fear the overshadowing of their Black Sea Synergy. Again, the CZ PRES issues assurances that the EP does not constitute an alternative to the Black Sea Synergy, rather, it tries to pursue a strategy of complementarity and further interconnection. Another open question is the position of the Russian Federation and its invitation to participate in the discussion, and later, implementation.

The main critique from the Partners concerns the insufficient impetus omitting the full membership perspective. Statements such as: “no policy without membership perspective will ever be satisfactory”; were heard from Partners, mainly from Ukraine, as the most advanced partner. Criticism is also heard in relation to the slow progress in the visa liberalization process – one of the most often repeated demands from the Partners.

The EU should send positive signals that the Eastern countries are respected partners who are incorporated into Pan-European solutions. The challenge has also been to persuade sceptics from inside the EU that the EP does not mean any enlargement in the institutional way; rather, it represents an expansion of the area of peace, democracy, stability and prosperity; which serves the interests of both the EU as well as Eastern Europe.

Russian participation and its reaction to the EU's engagement in the traditionally Russian sphere remains an open question. Russia, in its foreign-policy concept, states its interest in building economic cooperation with Belarus, and opposes NATO enlargement by Ukraine and Georgia (the President of Russia 2008); Russia perceives it as a direct threat to its security. Last summer [2008], Russia was actively involved in the military conflict in Georgia. The Russian Federation also protested against the EC Communication calling for the preparatory work to launch the EaP to be speeded up, and to the sending of signals of EU commitment to the region – directly referring to the recent conflict in Georgia. However, the CZ PRES (Topolánek 2009) assures Russia of its political and economic importance as a partner to the Union, and that the EP will be an important point in mutual discussions. But the Russian Federation must be aware that its reputation has suffered due to summer events and that it must work hard to regain the credibility it lost.

The invitation extended to Turkey does not provoke any negative emotions. It is not possible to neglect such an important regional player on the energetic, economic and cultural playground. The EU should send a positive signal to Turkey; that it is a strategic partner; before it turns itself away from the EU. To engage in cooperation in the Black Sea Region and the Southern Caucasus without Turkey would be rather unwise.

Another ongoing challenge for the CZ PRES is to activate public awareness of the new initiative. In contrast to the repeatedly declared priority given to the inclusion of civil societies into European matters, the awareness of citizens about the EP is relatively low. This is on the Member States side, as well as on the side of the Eastern Partners. We find that investment, in information campaigns, the promotion of soft projects, or, the facilitation of people to people contacts; to be justifiable. Moreover, the participation of lower level bureaucrats in the formation, and eventually, the implementation process, of the policy is inevitable. After all, these are the people who would give the initiative its practical shape.



## Conclusions

The Eastern Partnership initiative is an ambitious project of the European Union which combines elements of the enlargement policy with the privileged partnerships, and at the same time reflects the need to engage in the region beyond the EU's Eastern border. The preparations within the agenda of the EP were being finalized for launch at the May Summit. The expectations have been high on both sides – the EU and the Partners. The proposals for the Eastern Partners are considerably compelling in terms of closer political, as well as economic, attachment to the Union; the EU on the other hand, welcomes the expansion of the stable, prosperous and secure area beyond its borders.

The Czech Presidency chose the Eastern Partnership as one of its priorities. We can conclude that the CZ PRES correctly assessed its interests and potential for the successful administration of its third priority, i.e. “third E” – “Europe in the world”. The Eastern Partnership offers a fundamentally new and, at the same time, not less attractive alternative to fully fledged EU membership for the Eastern Partners. The choice of such a regional priority has proven to be justifiable in light of the recent military events in Georgia, or the gas crisis.

We have shown that the Czech Republic, building upon its historically, ethnically, politically and economically based position has great potential for enhancing further the initiative of EP. The Czech Presidency will be remembered as the one which completed the preparations for, and launched, the EP. It was also the presidency which implemented and shaped the EP's future form. This, last mentioned, will be more than desirable; however it depends on the political representation and its attitude and will towards further and deeper involvement in the EP.

When looking at the issue from the wider regional perspective, the Czech Republic, as the first Visegrád country holding the Presidency, can and should continue its work within the regional platform of Visegrád cooperation. All four members have the desirable prerequisites for becoming active supporters of the EP's implementation. These include: geographic, ethnic and cultural proximity, similar historical experience, know-how and their own experience of the transformation process and accession to the European and Trans-Atlantic organizations; as well as to the established platforms for regional cooperation. Moreover, they have, on several occasions, stressed their commitment to the Eastern Partnership as it concerns their national, as well as European, interests. Thus, this implementation and supervision of the EP can be seen as a good consolidation of future Visegrád group activity. Furthermore, in light of the upcoming presidencies of other three Visegrád members, it would be wise to pass on the experience and knowledge of all member states, and especially of the CZ PRES, to the EP, so that the V4 as a group, as well as the individual

Visegrád states, can develop their own activities within the Eastern Partnership framework.

Studying the relevant documents, papers, or articles on the topic of Eastern Partnership, we can conclude that the EP initiative has great potential. However, some feel rather sceptical about its implementation. Moreover the EaP topic has not been the too popular one. What might help to increase awareness of the initiative, and, thus, later advance the implementation process, could be increased media coverage and some type of an information campaign. Organization of conferences, seminars and round tables in the Czech Republic, as well as other Visegrád countries, can contribute to the greater engagement of the V4 group vis-à-vis its Eastern Neighbours. Yet, the Eastern Partnership – as many EU elites stress – is a long-term process, and only its proper, prompt and active implementation will make the Eastern Partnership initiative successful and fruitful.

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