



**Joint Statement of the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the Visegrad Group
on the occasion of the meeting of Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the V4 and the Eastern
Partnership countries (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine)**

Budapest, 31 August 2017

Strategic challenges of the Eastern Partnership before the Brussels Summit

The Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the Visegrad Group reaffirmed their strong support to the Eastern Partnership as a strategic dimension of the European Neighborhood Policy and a key and active factor of stability, security and economic progress in Eastern Europe. They urge - as it was referred to in the EU Global Strategy and ENP Review - to keep the Eastern Partnership high on the EU's political agenda. The Ministers also call for the adequate funding within the next Multiannual Financial Framework that would correspond to the priorities of the EaP.

The Ministers emphasized that the Eastern Partnership should have a clear political narrative, a new strategic vision and an architecture that guarantees joint ownership of European institutions, Member States and partner countries. They agreed that the Brussels Declaration should reflect different aspirations of the partner countries and offer a European perspective for those interested, as well as to set out an ambitious agenda for the Eastern Partnership in the longer term.

The Ministers supported the Eastern Partnership' focus on regional cooperation, inclusivity, common values, mutual accountability, differentiation and its multilateral dimension. They recalled the need to react strategically to the consequences of the present challenging geopolitical situation both for the Eastern Partnership countries and the European Union. In this context they underlined the necessity of continuing the reforms in partner countries to strengthen their internal stability, resilience and civilian security, and welcomed the Summit's focus on tangible benefits delivered to citizens of the six Eastern Partnership countries. They also emphasized the importance of cooperation on strategic communication.

The V4 Ministers welcomed the introduction of visa-free travel for Georgian and Ukrainian citizens into the Schengen zone. This will undoubtedly contribute to enhance people-to-people contacts among the EU and the partner countries. In addition, the V4 also welcomed

the upcoming entry into force of the Association Agreement/Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area between the EU and Ukraine.

The Ministers reconfirmed that the implementation of Association Agreement/Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area is the key task for Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine to further develop their relations with the European Union. They welcomed the initialed new framework agreement with Armenia and called for further progress in the ongoing process of negotiations with Azerbaijan, which they consider a key partner in terms of energy security and regional stability. They acknowledged Belarus' willingness to deepen EU-Belarus relationship and called for starting negotiations aiming at a new framework agreement as soon as possible.

Visa-free regimes with Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine have proved that they bring tangible results for their citizens. Ministers recognized the wish of Armenia and Azerbaijan to continue visa liberalization dialogue and expect further steps in that direction. They also expressed hope for relaunching negotiations and finalizing the Visa Facilitation and Readmission Agreement with Belarus and welcomed the signing of the Mobility Partnership with the EU by Minsk.

Connectivity: energy, cross-border cooperation and people-to-people contacts

The Ministers emphasized the importance of pursuing the implementation of all of the four Riga priorities: strengthening institutions and good governance; economic development and market opportunities; connectivity, energy efficiency, environment and climate change; mobility and people-to-people contacts. They highlighted the special importance of the development of transport and infrastructure interconnections between the EU and the Eastern Partnership countries. Better connections shall contribute not only to the strengthening of economic cooperation and people-to-people contacts, but also to the tightening of political ties.

As to the cooperation with the Eastern Partnership countries in the context of the broader area, the ministers called for the possible synergies taking into account the goals of the EU-China Connectivity Platform which aims at enhancing synergies between the One Belt One Road initiative, the EU's connectivity initiatives and other regional initiatives in this regard. The decision on extension of TEN-T to the EaP countries should be further developed in the near future.

The Ministers agreed that in accordance with the objectives of the Energy Union aiming at enhancing energy security via diversifying sources and routes of supply, bolstering regional energy market integration by developing firm reverse-flow capacity infrastructures with all neighbouring countries remains a V4 priority. Better interconnectivity, along with a diversified energy portfolio is imperative for securing affordable and sustainable energy supplies, also a precondition for economic growth and prosperity in the long run. In line with this, the Ministers reaffirmed the importance of the timely realization of the North-South Gas Corridor,

along with the Southern Gas Corridor. The Ministers further underscored that any new initiative building on the concept of integrating the Southern Gas Corridor with the Visegrad region, and enabling Central and South-Eastern Europe access to Caspian gas, enhances energy security and market liquidity of the EU as a whole.

The Ministers also stressed the importance – as highlighted in the Warsaw, Vilnius, and Riga declarations - of the Eastern Partnership multilateral dimension in strengthening cooperation among the partners themselves as well as with the V4 and the EU, including territorial, especially cross-border cooperation. The V4 partners agreed that supporting sustainable development along the EU's external borders, reducing differences in living standards (including access to the broadband internet and reducing roaming tariffs), addressing common security challenges and enhancing people-to-people contacts across these borders can only be effective if cross-border cooperation programmes remain high on our agenda. Promoting cross- border cooperation programmes with an increased EU funding should remain a key element in the fulfilment of strategic objectives of the Eastern Partnership. In that context the V4 Ministers expressed hope that the European External Investment Plan will contribute to this end. They also agreed that there is a need to seek support from other financing infrastructure instruments (blending, ENI, NIF, European IFIs).