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### RESOLUTIONS

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I

(Resolutions, recommendations and opinions)

RESOLUTIONS

EURONEST PARLIAMENTARY ASSEMBLY

RESOLUTION

on strengthening democratic processes: the role of political parties, civil society, a fair electoral environment, and free and pluralistic media

(2021/C 361/01)

THE EURONEST PARLIAMENTARY ASSEMBLY,

— having regard to the Constituent Act of the Euronest Parliamentary Assembly of 3 May 2011,
— having regard to the Joint Declaration of the Eastern Partnership Summit held in Brussels on 24 November 2017, as well as to its previous declarations,
— having regard to the Euronest Parliamentary Assembly resolution of 3 April 2012 on strengthening civil society in the Eastern Partnership Countries, including the question of cooperation between government and civil society, and the question of the reforms aimed at empowering civil society,
— having regard to the Euronest Parliamentary Assembly resolution of 1 November 2017 on ensuring media freedom and integrity in the EU and Eastern European partners,
— having regard to the Euronest Parliamentary Assembly resolution of 19 December 2019 on parliamentary oversight as a tool to strengthen democracy, accountability and effectiveness of state institutions in the Eastern Partner countries,
— having regard to the European Parliament resolution of 23 March 2006 on European political parties,
— having regard to the European Parliament resolution of 6 April 2011 on the application of Regulation (EC) No 2004/2003 on the regulations governing political parties at European level and the rules regarding their funding,
— having regard to the European Parliament resolution of 4 July 2013 on improving the practical arrangements for the holding of the European elections in 2014,
— having regard to the European Parliament resolution of 11 November 2015 on the reform of the electoral law of the European Union,
— having regard to the European Parliament resolution of 25 October 2016 with recommendations to the Commission on the establishment of an EU mechanism on democracy, the rule of law and fundamental rights,
— having regard to the European Parliament resolution of 21 May 2013 on the EU Charter: standard settings for media freedom across the EU,
— having regard to the European Parliament resolution of 3 May 2018 on media pluralism and media freedom in the European Union,
— having regard to the European Parliament resolution of 10 October 2019 on foreign electoral interference and disinformation in national and European democratic processes,
— having regard to the European Parliament resolution of 19 April 2018 on the need to establish a European Values Instrument to support civil society organisations which promote fundamental values within the European Union at local and national level,
— having regard to the European Parliament recommendation of 19 June 2020 to the Council, the Commission and the Vice-President of the Commission/High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy on the Eastern Partnership, in the run-up to the June 2020 Summit,

— having regard to the Council conclusions of 11 May 2020 on Eastern Partnership policy beyond 2020,

— having regard to the European Parliament decision of 18 June 2020 on setting up a special committee on foreign interference in all democratic processes in the European Union, including disinformation, its responsibilities, numerical strength and term of office,

— having regard to the Association Agreements between the EU, of the one part, and Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine, of the other part,

— having regard to the Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement between the EU, of the one part, and the Republic of Armenia, of the other part, which fully entered into force on 1 March, 2021,

— having regard to the relevant PACE Resolutions, including (2007) on the code of good practice for political parties, (2020) on threats to media freedom and journalists’ security, and (2020) on setting minimum standards for electoral systems in order to offer the basis for free and fair elections,

A. whereas strengthening democratic processes remains a key objective of cooperation between the EU and the Eastern Partnership (EaP) countries;

B. whereas democracy, the rule of law and fundamental rights are of great importance for the proper functioning of state institutions, political parties, civil society, and media at national and transnational level;

C. whereas in an attempt to resolve difficulties faced by democratic institutions, it is absolutely necessary to develop solutions to cope with future challenges resulting from the COVID19 pandemic crisis; highlights that all adopted measures should be clear, necessary and strictly proportionate, notably in view of the restrictions and limitations on fundamental freedoms that could have serious repercussions on political life, elections, civil society and the media;

D. whereas promoting and protecting equal rights and the right to political participation for all requires the development of inclusive and resilient societies where everyone’s voice is heard;

E. whereas the free and independent work of the opposition, civil society organisations and the media is a cornerstone of a democratic society based on the rule of law; whereas political parties, civil society, a fair electoral environment and free and pluralistic media are are essential components of the democratic process;

F. whereas making democratic values and principles more visible and strengthening accountability, transparency and access to information requires proper efforts to be made by the EU Member States and EaP countries, including their authorities at national, regional and local levels, as well as by institutions and agencies;

G. whereas strengthening the legislative capacity of the EaP countries to establish an effective model of financial transparency of political parties, solid rules for conducting election campaigns, as well as furthering the development of independent public media, and the involvement of civil society in democratic processes, are of crucial importance and should continue to be supported by the European Union and also respected by its Member States;

H. whereas maintaining the equilibrium of EaP countries’ and EU Member States’ political systems by means of proper checks and balances between different institutions, can strengthen the states’ ability to give an effective answer, through a reinforced international and European cooperation, including the exchange of best practices and methodologies, as none of our societies is immune to the current common challenges, such as pandemics, migration crises, disinformation, or illiberal tendencies;

I. whereas the deepening of cooperation between regional and international organisations, such as the Council of Europe, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe and the United Nations, should be reinforced in order to generate new synergies, prevent possible democratic deficits and tackle current and emerging challenges such as the COVID19 pandemic;
J. whereas enhanced democratic participation – through political parties based on broad membership and clear political programmes, institutional mechanisms for involvement of civil society, independent and responsible media and stable electoral frameworks – can stimulate the implementation of even more bottom-up models of governance and improvement of its quality, strengthening the resilience of democratic institutions and processes, including against external interference;

K. whereas politically-motivated trials against opposition representatives which constitute a regrettable long-standing practice in some EaP countries puts into question the independence of the judiciary from political interference and thereby weakens the democratic process;

L. whereas strong financial dependence of some political parties in EaP countries from large industrial groups, or oligarchs highlights the need for more detailed legislation on membership fees, access to public funding and campaign financing to prevent money of corrupt criminal activities from influencing democratic processes;

M. whereas there are negative trends connected to the monopolisation of authority in some EU Member States, which give cause for concern with regard to maintaining and strengthening democratic institutions, the separation of powers, the application of the principle of checks and balances, the independence of the judiciary and the media, and the development of civil society;

N. whereas the fight against disinformation requires access to authoritative sources for up to date information and the promotion of reliable sources in order to reduce the visibility of false or misleading content and to remove harmful and illegal content;

O. whereas the Russian Federation is interfering in the democratic processes of the EU Member States and the EaP countries, either directly, or by using of proxies from business, media or political circles, thereby threatening the sovereignty, independence and security of those states;

P. whereas the Russian Federation is continuing blatant violations of sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine and Georgia, undermining the security, humanitarian and human rights situation and violating fundamental principles and norms of international law in Georgia's occupied regions of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia, as well as in the illegally occupied Autonomous Republic of Crimea, city of Sevastopol and in certain areas of Donetsk and Luhansk regions of Ukraine;

Q. condemning the continued occupation and the steps taken towards the de-facto annexation of Georgia's regions of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia, as well as the attempted annexation of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea and the ongoing armed aggression by the Russian Federation in the east of Ukraine, calling international community to intensify efforts in order to restore Georgia's and Ukraine's sovereignty and their territorial integrity within their internationally recognised borders;

R. whereas safeguarding freedom at home and building support for a foreign policy that protects fundamental values and rights abroad are essential to foster a better understanding of democratic principles by the public, especially among young people;

S. whereas the 9 August 2020 elections in Belarus have been defined by many Belarusian citizens and representatives of Belarusian civil society, as well as by international actors, as 'stolen elections';

T. whereas protests condemning the official results of the Belarus elections have been happening throughout the country;

**The role of political parties**

1. Notes that political parties play an important role at all levels of society – in so far as they aggregate interests and opinions, formulate political answers to political problems and social challenges and channel these into the political system via elected representatives – thereby promoting genuine participation of all citizens and nationalities living in a country on a regular basis, not only during the election period, but also in all other aspects of political life; stresses in this context that the volatility of the political environment in the majority of the EaP countries needs to be addressed by strengthening the role of political parties in order to consolidate democratic standards and build citizens' confidence in state institutions and democratic processes;
2. Calls on national parliaments to strengthen independent and impartial judiciary, as well as to adopt legislation in favour of transparent party financing, in particular by establishing the legal responsibility of political parties for accepting donations from unknown or criminal sources or from sources that aim to distort and undermine democracy, advocate terrorism or inspire war and civil conflict, and by making it easier to identify paid political advertising and the organisation responsible for it; underlines that political corruption, destroys the trust of citizens in state institutions, elected representatives and political actors and will ultimately erode democratic checks and balances;

3. Urges political parties to continue increasing party-internal democracy and to adhere to the principle of gender equality, and encourages them to improve their diversity in order to better represent the societies they serve, for example by ensuring better representation of women and minorities on electoral lists and among elected members;

4. Calls on the national authorities to penalize vote-buying in all its forms, as well as the use of administrative resources in campaigning; Appropriate dissuasive sanctions should be put in place, including restricting the wrongdoer campaign’s access to state financing; Appropriate measures should be put in place to prevent hate-speech in all its forms, incitement to violence, fake news and misinformation for political gain;

5. Calls on national parliaments to adopt legislation on guaranteeing the rights of opposition parties and their political groups represented in parliament and in local councils, in order to monitor stated intentions and the activities undertaken by the executives; considers that to do so will contribute to achieving transparency in the decisions taken and will better the oversight over compliance with the rule of law and spending of public finances, which is of importance for ensuring the quality of political debate and of the public services provided by the government and will also help to ensure an appropriate role for the opposition, including its right to political expression of its views and positions;

6. Expresses its serious concern over cases of politically motivated judicial proceedings against leaders and members of opposition parties and those who do not agree with the position of the government in EaP countries; calls on governments to refrain from using their subordinate structures or such politically motivated judicial cases, and to implement the highest standards of the rule of law, in particular on judicial independence and the right to a fair trial;

7. Calls on all representatives of political parties to ensure the non-harassment of political actors by treating each other, including opponents, in a fair and respectful way and to safeguard freedom of expression, of association and of assembly, including the right to peaceful demonstration, in order to foster an issues-based political debate and enhance citizens' trust in democratic processes;

8. Calls on the European Commission to offer technical support to strengthen parliamentary oversight in all EaP countries and EU Member States in order to reduce the existing gaps in effective response mechanisms;

9. Calls on the EaP countries’ authorities to create proper conditions for civil society, the middle classes and small and medium-sized business to be more involved in political affairs; recognises the importance of civil oversight over the adherence and implementation of democratic principles and values, and for finding and reporting of corrupt practices, frauds and conflict of interest in order to reduce the role of oligarchs in political life; calls on political parties to prioritize their work on developing comprehensive political programmes and representing broad interests of society as a whole;

10. Encourages all political parties to engage in the creation of new forms of multipartyism and cooperation to define strategic objectives for their country and the region; stresses that the diversity of political ideologies and opinions is crucial for the proper functioning of a parliament that represents and works for all its citizens;
11. Calls on the political parties to work on clear programmes with concrete policy agendas; emphasises that strengthening political culture in society can only be achieved through the implementation of transparent political decisions, political education in schools and universities, and through fighting populism and radicalism;

12. Encourages political parties to use digitalisation to communicate directly with society and to address declining membership numbers, as there is an urgent need to adapt to new digital innovations, which can help parties to achieve their objectives;

13. Stresses that, owing to quarantine restrictions, campaigning during electoral processes under conditions of unequal access to voters and media resources (as the main sources of information dissemination and communication with voters), as well as through social networks, can become a big challenge;

14. Condemns the abuse of influence over media by political parties for their own political gain and encourages their support for a free and independent media environment in the EU and the EaP; condemns instrumentalization of public media outlets, funded by taxpayer money, by governing political parties for their own political gains, and calls on appropriate independent oversight by media regulatory authorities;

15. Condemns the abuse of social media by political parties for creating fake accounts with attempts to impersonated their political rivals, opinion makers, activist groups, and media entities, and attack political opponents and civil society organizations;

16. Stresses the importance of a vibrant civil society as an indicator for the state of democracy; calls to establish mechanisms that ensure adequate participation of civil society in the democratic process, for example through public consultations, parliamentary expert hearings, etc.; calls on political parties to support and engage openly with civil society in all aspects of their work on behalf of citizens, in order to take account of diverse opinions, strengthen domestic oversight over democratic reforms and add to their transparency and sustainability;

17. Underlines that, in some Eastern Partnership countries, civil society organisations continue to face challenges, mainly with regard to access to funding, state interference or lack of digitalisation;

18. Reiterates that a lively democracy needs a vibrant civil society and independent media which can operate in a safe environment and ensure a sound scrutiny of public institutions leading to the necessary checks and balances in a democratic society; calls on the EU and its Eastern partners to counter the shrinking space for civil society and independent media and ensure that they can work free from all restrictions and take the responsibility of creating favourable conditions for the work of Civil Society Organisations;

19. Condemns public attacks by officials and politicians on Civil Society Organisations, activists and human rights defenders by promoting lies, conspiracy theories, demonisations, or other forms of decredibilisation; any attempt then to legislatively restrict the activity of civil society groups based on such illiberal discourse is an attack on the basic democratic freedoms;

20. Calls on the EU to adapt and communicate a clear and structured system for providing grants to NGOs, including a renewed mechanism for evaluation by EU delegations and expert groups and a mechanism for broad participation by different organisations, with priority given to NGOs working on democracy standards, thereby avoiding the awarding of grants to ‘GONGOs’ (NGOs established and financed by governments through informal channels), as well as to NGOs working to combat the negative consequences of the COVID 19 pandemic;
21. Urges governments to refrain from abusing the Covid pandemic and their response to it as an excuse to silence critical voices, quench opposition or otherwise backsliding on democratic standards;

22. Calls on the EU and its Eastern partners to establish concrete inclusive mechanisms to make cooperation and consultation with civil society, including minorities' and women's rights organisations and human rights defenders, a standard element of the work of their institutions;

23. Calls on donors not to suspend their support for NGOs in EaP countries because of the economic crisis that may follow the COVID-19 pandemic, but to invest in long-term sustainable funding for civil society organisations; encourages the simplification of application methods and grant requirements in order to provide the possibility of financial support not only to large, experienced organisations, but also to smaller regional NGOs;

24. Encourages the mobilisation of financial resources for local, regional and international networks of NGOs in order to facilitate their cooperation, as this will permit them to step up the finding of good legislative examples that give legal security to the citizens in the social, economic and political dimensions; stresses that NGOs will also have the vital role of outlining those issues, which are of direct relevance to the non-compliance with the rule of law, infringement upon the freedom of expression, disinformation and fraud;

25. Stresses the need for the state to provide assistance in a transparent manner to identify and support grassroots movements and organisations in order to promote social change, the improvement of the general well-being and more inclusive, equal and sustainable societies;

26. Urges the EU and EaP countries to strengthen their support to local authorities in order to ensure sustainable participation and representation of citizens in the decision-making process under quarantine constraints, in particular by using online platforms and virtual consultation methods, designing the engagement strategy and deploying appropriate dialogue methods, reaching out to all stakeholders and social groups, especially by listening to their voices, insights and innovative ideas; at the same time underlines the importance of refraining from using local authorities and their resources before and during the elections to put pressure on citizens in favour of the currently governing party;

27. Encourages the European institutions to apply existing or future EU programmes concerning European values, such as the Rights and Values Programme, not only to EU Member States but also to the EaP countries and NGOs, by creating and promoting possible methods of cooperation between counterparts in the EU and the neighbourhood countries;

28. Underlines the importance of media freedom, which should entail equal access for all political actors to the media, editorial independence, pluralistic, impartial and non-discriminatory coverage of political views in programming in private and in particular public broadcasters, and transparent media ownership;

**The role of free and pluralistic media**

29. Stresses the need to increase awareness, to develop media and information critical literacy, which is necessary for all citizens; including persons belonging to national minorities, to be able to navigate in an increasingly complex media environment, in order to hinder the possibilities for manipulation of perceptions of facts and events and to understand both the origins of the news they rely on, the way it is produced, what interests are behind its production, and the editorial, technological and other forces involved in the filtering of information;
30. Calls on national governments and parliaments to create and maintain a safe and secure environment for journalists and other media actors, including foreign journalists, seeking to prevent any misuse of different laws or provisions which may impact on media freedom – such as those on defamation, anti-terrorism, national security, public order, hate speech, blasphemy or memory laws – which are too often applied to intimidate and silence journalists; highlights the importance of taking a gender-sensitive approach when considering measures to address the safety of journalists;

31. Strictly condemns all forms of pressure used for political purposes to silence critical media or independent journalists, especially violence, criminal prosecution and all other forms of intimidation; expresses its concern over the threats to media freedom and pluralism posed by some politicians, oligarchs and their cronies by buying up commercial media outlets and hijacking the public service media to serve partisan interests;

32. Calls on governments to advance transparency and ensure appropriate access to information of public interest, particularly the media and watchdog organizations, including by publishing information of public interest; condemns efforts by governments to unduly restrict access to information on issues important for the public by the use of unjustified administrative barriers;

33. Urges the EaP countries to thoroughly and in a transparent manner investigate the physical attacks, threats and online harassment against journalists and media workers, and ensure a safe and secure working environment for journalists and media workers reporting from the conflict zones, public protests and during the elections;

34. Condemns in the strongest possible terms politically motivated abductions and imprisonments of journalists and media workers, and calls for the immediate and unconditional release of all wrongfully imprisoned journalists and media personnel in the EaP countries;

35. Calls on the EU and its Eastern partners to increase support, including financially, to free and independent media, as a basis for informed public discourse and pluralistic societies, in light of increasing challenges and funding problems;

36. Calls on national regulators to ensure full transparency on the part of private and public companies in the use of algorithms, artificial intelligence and automated decision-making, which should not be used for the purpose of manipulating public opinion, as well as to ensure full transparency in ownership of private media and to increase transparency requirements for foreign state-owned media outlets;

37. Recommends that the Commission establish and support an EaP media cluster based on innovation and sustainability; believes that such a cluster would strengthen the transnational informational space and reinforce co-productions between media players from the EU and the EaP countries in order to highlight their diversity and promote high quality, particularly in public broadcasting;

38. Notes that countries should develop their digital policy and strategy in accordance with a human rights-based approach, in full compliance with the relevant provisions of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights and of the ECHR;

The role of a fair electoral environment

39. Reaffirms that holding fair, equal and transparent elections that are conducted by secret ballot and are based on democratic principles – and with full respect to the electoral right of active and passive participation of citizens – remains the main conditions for democratic representation and good and effective governance; urges political actors to discuss and adopt electoral reforms based on cross-party support and consultations with civil society in order to achieve the broadest possible support; urges the EU and Eastern Partnership Member States to improve their voting and counting systems;
40. Stresses the importance of strong parliaments, particularly in democracies in the process of consolidation, in order to avoid the temptation by hyper-centralised presidential regimes that finally derive towards authoritarian trends;

41. Calls on all EaP countries to implement outstanding OSCE/ODIHR and Venice Commission recommendations and address shortcomings identified in the electoral framework or the preparation and organisation of elections, concerning, inter alia, campaign financing, opposition representation in the election administration, dispute settlement;

42. Welcomes the appointment of the Personal Envoy of the European Council President, Charles Michel, for the EU mediated dialogue in Georgia, Christian Danielsson, and urges all political forces in Georgia to put aside their partisan interests for the sake of Georgia’s future, to work constructively towards resolving the crisis in a spirit of compromise and conciliation and to refrain from further stirring up an already heated political climate;

43. Strongly condemns the flawed 2020 elections in Belarus, and particularly the repression applied by the authorities against their own citizens, who were exercising their right to demonstrate peacefully;

44. Reiterates the EU’s demand to respect the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Moldova, stressing that unconditional withdrawal of the Russian military, combat vehicles and ammunition from the territories of the Republic of Moldova, is the only guarantee for a peaceful settlement of the conflict. Underscores that unilateral concessions requested by 5 + 2 mediators and observers cannot be made at the expense of the constitutional freedoms and liberties of the democratic citizens of Moldova. Recognize that Moldovan citizens must enjoy their right to live in a country protected against deep-seeded security, defence and hybrid threats, to move freely along the territory of Moldova, be protected against unlawful search or discretionary arrests of the unrecognized structures of the separatist bodies in Tiraspol, which must be seen as a priority compared to other elements of the conflict settlement;

45. Supports the decisions of the EU and many European states not to recognise the election results announced by the Belarusian Central Electoral Committee and not to recognise Alexander Lukashenka as the legitimate president of the country anymore after his term of office expired;

46. Calls the European Commission, the Council of the EU and the European Council to promote an ambitious vision on the EaP future, taking into account the willingness of the associated partners, including the Republic of Moldova, to further develop an enhanced cooperation with the EU in line with their European integration aspirations;

47. Stresses the need for better regulation of the digital and data-based electoral campaigns on social media, based on user segmentation and profiling – especially dark advertising on platforms targeting potential voters – in order to ensure transparency and data protection;

48. Is deeply concerned about ongoing external interference in the sovereign electoral process, which has the purpose to influence public debate and to affect the preferences of the voters; considers that this creates the need to set up appropriate preventative measures; hence, calls for the strengthening the efforts of the European institutions, its Member States and the Eastern Partnership countries to combat consciously organised disinformation campaigns and cyberattacks, often carried out directly by third countries or indirectly supported by their authorities; points out, in this regard, the recent disinformation campaigns supported by Russia and China on the causes and effects of the COVID-19 pandemic;

49. Calls on national parliaments to refrain from adopting changes to electoral legislation less than one year before elections, or to introduce such changes only in critical situations, on the basis of a broad consensus between all political actors and within society;
50. Consistent with the EU objective in development cooperation with all its willing and associated partners, as indicated in the European Consensus on Development and the Agenda for Change of 2015, and assuming that bringing Moldova closer to the EU programmes, policies and standards, will impact on the quality of participatory democracy and the rule of law, human rights and fundamental freedoms, good governance, a functioning market economy and sustainable development, the European Union shall consider to invite Moldova to join new policy areas and priorities, such as EU's Rural Development Policy and the Leader Financing Programme;

51. Calls on governments and authorities to foster electoral reforms in order to ensure free, fair, competitive and transparent elections and encourage full compliance of election processes, notably in the adoption of legislative amendments to electoral laws and party financing, with international standards, the recommendations of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and the opinions of the Venice Commission;

52. Welcomes regular independent, international election observation missions to EaP countries in order to support the process of strengthening institutions, election processes and democratic accountability;

53. Notes that decisions to conduct or postpone elections or referendums in a pandemic situation should be taken only after carefully evaluating the advantages and disadvantages of both scenarios, and after consulting the different stakeholders in the electoral process, as well as the authorities responsible for ensuring public health, safety and security;

54. Strongly condemns the illegal voting and so-called elections organised by the Russian Federation in the temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine and Georgia and Moldova, and calls upon all international and European Union institutions and their Member States to abstain from any form of recognition of the legitimacy of the voting, referendums and 'elected' persons on the territory of the Crimea, Luhansk and Donetsk regions and the Georgian regions of Abkhazia, Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia; Recognize that Moldovan citizens must enjoy their right to move freely throughout their country, without illegal control restrictions, and live without threats to their lives, be protected against unlawful search or discretionary arrests of the unrecognized structures of the separatist bodies in Tiraspol, which must be seen as a priority compared to other elements of the conflict settlement;

55. Instructs its Co-Presidents to forward this resolution to the European Parliament, the Council, the Vice-President of the Commission/High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, the Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement, and the governments and parliaments of the EU Member States and the EaP countries.
RESOLUTION
on synergies between education and the economy in the EU and Eastern Partnership countries
(2021/C 361/02)

THE EURONEST PARLIAMENTARY ASSEMBLY,

— having regard to the development of the Eastern Neighbourhood policy since 2004 and its Eastern Partnership component since 2009, and in particular to the Commission’s progress reports on its implementation,

— having regard to Articles 5 and 6 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, as well as Articles 145 to 149 (Title IX – Employment) and Articles 166 and 165 (Title XII – Education, vocational training, youth and sport),

— having regard to the Association Agreements between the EU and Georgia (\(^1\)), the EU and Moldova (\(^2\)), and the EU and Ukraine (\(^3\)), including the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas, the Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement between the EU and Armenia (\(^4\)), and the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement between the EU and Azerbaijan (\(^5\)),

— having regard to the Constituent Act of the Euronest Parliamentary Assembly of 3 May 2011 (last modified on 26 June 2018) (\(^6\)),

— having regard to the Commission and European External Action Service joint staff working document of 9 June 2017 entitled ‘Eastern Partnership – 20 Deliverables for 2020 focusing on key priorities and tangible results’,

— having regard to the joint communication of the Commission and the Vice-President/High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy of 18 March 2020 entitled ‘Eastern Partnership policy beyond 2020: Reinforcing Resilience an Eastern Partnership that delivers for all’, and to the Council conclusions of 11 May 2020 on Eastern Partnership policy beyond 2020,

— having regard to the message of the Bureau of the Euronest Parliamentary Assembly of 12 June 2020 on the occasion of the Video Teleconference of the Leaders of the Eastern Partnership of 18 June 2020,

— having regard to European Parliament recommendation of 19 June 2020 to the Council, the Commission and the Vice-President/High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy on the Eastern Partnership, in the run-up to the June 2020 Summit (\(^7\)),

— having regard to the remarks made by European Council President Charles Michel after the Video Teleconference of the leaders of the Eastern Partnership of 18 June 2020,

\(^1\) OJ L 261, 30.8.2014, p. 4.
\(^3\) OJ L 161, 29.5.2014, p. 3.
\(^5\) OJ L 246, 17.9.1999, p. 3.
\(^6\) OJ C 198, 6.7.2011, p. 4.
\(^7\) Texts adopted, P9_TA(2020)0167.
— having regard to the 2018-20 action plan of the Conference of the Regional and Local Authorities for the Eastern Partnership,

— having regard to the resolution of the Euronest Parliamentary Assembly of 9 December 2019 on innovation in education and education reforms in the EU and Eastern Partners’ countries: challenges and opportunities (8),

— having regard to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development adopted at the United Nations Sustainable Development Summit on 25 September 2015, and in particular to Sustainable Development Goal 4 on ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all,

— having regard to the European Pillar of Social Rights proclaimed by the European Parliament, the Council and the European Commission at the Social Summit for Fair Jobs and Growth in Gothenburg on 17 November 2017, and in particular to Pillar 1 on the right to quality and inclusive education, training and life-long learning for everyone in order to maintain and acquire skills that enable them to participate fully in society and manage successfully transitions in the labour market,


— having regard to the resolution of the Euronest Parliamentary Assembly of 22 March 2016 on the mutual recognition of professional qualifications, work experience and university diplomas within the Bologna process (10),

— having regard to the Commission staff working document of 10 June 2016 entitled ‘Analytical underpinning for a New Skills Agenda for Europe’,

— having regard to the Commission communication of 10 June 2016 entitled ‘A New Skills Agenda for Europe: working together to strengthen human capital, employability and competitiveness’ (COM(2016) 0381),

— having regard to the Commission communication of 7 December 2016 on improving and modernising education (COM(2016) 0941),


— having regard to the Commission proposal of 17 January 2018 for a Council recommendation on promoting common values, inclusive education and the European dimension of teaching (COM(2018) 0023),

— having regard to the Commission proposal of 17 January 2018 for a Council recommendation on key competences for lifelong learning (COM(2018) 0024),

— having regard to the Commission communication of 22 May 2018 on building a strong Europe: the role of youth, education and culture policies (COM(2018) 0268),

— having regard to the Commission communication of 30 September 2020 on achieving the European Education Area by 2025 (COM(2020) 625),

— having regard to the Council recommendation of 26 November 2018 on promoting automatic mutual recognition of higher education and upper secondary education and training qualifications and the outcomes of learning periods abroad (11),

— having regard to the Rome Ministerial Communiqué of 19 November 2020 following the ministerial meeting of the European Higher Education Area,

— having regard to the European Parliament resolution of 11 December 2018 on education in the digital era: challenges, opportunities and lessons for EU policy design (12),


(8) OJ C 134, 24.4.2020, p. 16.
— having regard to the European Economic and Social Committee opinion of 5 May 2020 on the ‘Proposal for a Council decision on guidelines for the employment policies of the Member States’,


— having regard to the International Labour Organization’s Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) Convention of 25 June 1958,

— having regard to the International Labour Organization’s Human Resources Development Convention of 23 June 1975,

— having regard to the Commission proposal of 26 February 2020 for a Council decision on guidelines for the employment policies of the Member States (COM(2020) 0070), and to the European Economic and Social Committee opinion of 5 May 2020 and the European Parliament legislative resolution of 10 July 2020 on this proposal (\(^1\)),

— having regard to the Commission communication of 10 March 2020 on a New Industrial Strategy for Europe (COM (2020) 0102),

— having regard to the Commission communication of 27 May 2020 entitled ‘Europe’s moment: Repair and Prepare for the Next Generation’ (COM(2020) 0456),

— having regard to the European Council conclusions of 21 July 2020 and to the Parliament resolution of 23 July 2020 on the conclusions of the extraordinary European Council meeting of 17-21 July 2020 (\(^2\)) and to the European Council conclusions of 10-11 December 2020,

— having regard to the Commission report ‘on the implementation of macro-financial assistance to third countries in 2019’ (COM(2020) 296),

— having regard to the European Investment Bank Annual Report 2018 on Eastern Partnership Technical Assistance Trust Fund,

— having regard to the Commission proposal of 6 July 2018 to establish ‘Digital Europe Programme 2021-27’ (COM (2018) 434),

— having regard to the Commission communication of 11 December 2019 to set out The European Green Deal, in particular putting emphasis to ensure environment, energy and climate partnerships with the Eastern Partnership states (COM(2019) 640),

— having regard to Regulation (EU) 2017/1601 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 26 September 2017 establishing the European Fund for Sustainable Development (EFSD), the EFSD Guarantee and the EFSD Guarantee Fund,


— having regard to the UN Paris Climate Convention of 12 December 2015,

— having regard to the Commission communication of 19 January 2021 to the European Parliament, the European Council and the Council entitled ‘A united front to beat COVID-19’, in particular to ensure access to some of the 2.3 billion doses secured by the EU to the Eastern Partnership countries (COM(2021) 35),

— having regard to the Commission communication of 10 March 2020 entitled ‘An SME Strategy for a sustainable and digital Europe’ (COM(2020) 103),

— having regard to the European Parliament resolution of 10 October 2019 on foreign electoral interference and disinformation in national and European democratic process,

— having regard to the European Parliament resolution of 19 September 2019 on the importance of European remembrance for the future of Europe,

— having regard to the Commission communication of 11 March 2020 on a new Circular Economy Action Plan (COM (2020) 98),


\(^1\) Texts adopted, P9_TA(2020)0194.

\(^2\) Texts adopted, P9_TA(2020)0206.
having regard to the agreement of 15 December 2020 between the European Parliament and the Council on provisional deal on the EU4Health programme for 2021-27 (COM(2020) 405),

A. whereas the Eastern Partnership (EaP), launched in 2009 as a joint policy initiative, aims to deepen and strengthen relations between the EU, its Member States and its six Eastern neighbours (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine);

B. whereas collective efforts under the EaP project have already brought considerable, tangible benefits to people in Europe including more trade, mobility, increased economic development, more people-to-people contacts and a better quality of life;

C. whereas the ‘Eastern Partnership policy beyond 2020’ strategy put forward by the Commission and the Vice-President/High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy stresses the importance for stabilisation of sustainable development achieved through investment in economic modernisation with a particular focus on youth and unemployment, with a view to boosting prosperity across Europe;

D. whereas the EU strategy for international cultural relations (JOIN(2016)29) commits support for a vibrant cultural/social exchange between the EU and its Eastern partners, to engage citizens, state actors and cultural operators alike, strengthens civil society and afford greater economic opportunities;

E. whereas the right to education is enshrined in Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 14 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union and Article 2 of the Protocol to the Council of Europe Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms concerning the right to education;

F. whereas human rights and fundamental freedoms are an integral part of all key EaP cooperation areas, with specific priorities identified for each country; whereas the human rights protection of minorities, including of LGBTI people, against all forms of intolerance and discrimination, is directly linked to access to quality education for the population;

G. whereas the right to engage in work and pursue a freely chosen or accepted occupation is enshrined in Article 15 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union;

H. whereas the EU Member States must regard their economic policies and the promotion of employment as a matter of common concern and must coordinate their actions accordingly within the Council;

I. whereas the EU is working with its Member States to pursue a coordinated European Employment Strategy, encouraging cooperation between them, and supporting and evaluating their efforts, for example through the European Semester, guidelines on employment and the monitoring of national policies via the Joint Employment Report, the National Reform Programmes and the country-specific recommendations;

J. whereas the EU must contribute to the promotion of quality education, vocational training and youth policies, as well as access to education for all, by encouraging its Member States and, when necessary, supporting, coordinating and complementing their actions;

K. whereas the European Pillar of Social Rights, endorsed by the Council, Parliament and the Commission on 16 November 2017, highlights the importance of education, training, lifelong learning, equal opportunities regardless of gender, racial or ethnic origin, religion or belief, disability, age or sexual orientation, active support in gaining employment and fair working conditions, underlines in particular that young people have the right to further education, an apprenticeship, a traineeship or a job offer of good standing within four months of becoming unemployed or leaving education, and stresses that children have the right to affordable early education;

L. whereas the enabling framework of the European Education Area has been proposed by the Commission to succeed the strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training (ET 2020) and to continue to be a forum that allows participating countries to exchange best practices, learn from each other, gather and disseminate knowledge, and advance educational policy reforms at national and regional levels; whereas ET 2020 the new framework should also be based on a lifelong learning approach, addressing outcomes from early childhood to adult vocational training and higher education, and covering learning in all domains and in all forms (formal, non-formal and informal);
M. whereas the Commission is currently working on a proposal for a Council recommendation on online and distance learning for primary and secondary education, focusing on an EU-wide, common understanding of how to make distance, online and blended learning effective, inclusive and engaging by the end of 2021;

N. whereas a Council recommendation on the enabling factors for successful education by 2022 is currently being prepared;

O. whereas the COVID-19 crisis has led to an unprecedented, massive shift to online learning, training and teleworking methods, that require innovative distance learning solutions and foster a positive long-term digital transformation, with the risk that large disparities in technology access may contribute to achievement gaps among students and workers;

P. whereas the Europe 2020 strategy for growth, jobs, social equity and inclusion highlights the importance for EU Member States to increase their investment in education and training policies at all levels;

Q. whereas the Commission is currently working on a proposal for a Council recommendation on improving the provision of digital skills in education and training, and is cooperating with the business sector so as to identify and update skills needs as they emerge;

R. whereas the persisting mismatch between the qualifications offered by academic and vocational institutions, and the rapidly changing demands of the labour market – marked in recent years by the development of information and communication technologies and of the tertiary sector as a whole – remains a major challenge for some EU Member States and, to an even greater extent, the Eastern Partners;

S. whereas regular and substantial consultation and cooperation activities at national, regional and local levels, involving stakeholders such as education and training institutions, civil society organisations, businesses, social partners and employment agencies and young people themselves, are key to reducing this mismatch;

T. whereas within the revised multilateral architecture of the EaP, Platform 4 (mobility and people-to-people contacts) works to increase the participation of EaP countries in EU programmes in fields such as education, research and innovation, and aims to boost cooperation between education and training authorities, higher education institutions, schools and research institutions, and to enhance knowledge and foster the exchange of best practices in these domains;

U. whereas the EU, its Member States and its Eastern Partners must defend their citizens' rights to quality education, apprenticeships and traineeships, and to fair chances in an inclusive labour market, so that they can contribute in turn to a competitive and sustainable European economy;

V. whereas the New Skills Agenda is a five-year plan that will help EU citizens to develop more and better skills and put them to use, enabling them to find quality jobs and thereby strengthening sustainable competitiveness, as set out in the European Green Deal; whereas the agenda will also ensure equal opportunities, put into practice the first principle of the European Pillar of Social Rights (access to education, training and lifelong learning for everybody, everywhere in the EU), and build resilience to enable the EU Member States to react to crises, based on the lessons learnt during the COVID-19 pandemic;

W. whereas the COVID-19 pandemic has wrought havoc on Europe's families, workers and businesses, and therefore requires an unprecedented response;

X. whereas the EU needs a skills transformation in vocational education and training to ensure people can thrive during the green and digital transitions, and to facilitate its recovery from the socioeconomic fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic;

Y. whereas it is essential that EU Member States and its Eastern Partners' governments measure the skills gap of their existing workforce and then invest heavily in closing it;

Z. whereas this recovery must be based on the European Green Deal, the Digital Agenda for Europe and the New Industrial Strategy for Europe, so that the Member State economies emerge from the COVID-19 crisis stronger, more resilient, more sustainable and more competitive, and can lead the twin transitions towards climate neutrality and digital leadership;

I. Recalls that the Joint Declaration of the Eastern Partnership Summit of 24 November 2017 highlighted the participants' commitment to strongly engage with all partners in modernising education and training, research and innovation systems and to lay the emphasis on supporting and empowering young people;
2. Calls on the EU, its Member States and its Eastern Partners to work together toward resilient, sustainable and integrated economies, i.e. by increasing their investment in people, with a special emphasis on the young, and by better connecting education, research and innovation with the needs of the business sector;

3. Urges the EU, its Member States and its Eastern Partners to step up their efforts to pursue four common objectives, in line with the priorities set out in ET 2020 and to be further developed in the European Education Area enabling framework: make lifelong learning and mobility a reality, improve the quality and efficiency of education and training, promote equity, democratic values, social cohesion and active citizenship, and enhance creativity and innovation, including entrepreneurship, at all levels of education and training;

4. Insists that everyone in Europe should have access to attractive, innovative and inclusive quality life-long learning programmes, one of the reasons being that skills are becoming obsolete more quickly, which improves learners’ life chances and lays the groundwork for active citizenship, social mobility and a more equitable society;

5. Stresses that well-calibrated education and lifelong learning policies play a central role in better aligning the skills of the workforce with the needs of the economy, and that people equipped with the skills truly needed on the labour market are bound to have better employment opportunities; notes that access to quality education for all, including vocational education, are key to adult education and skills learning as part of a lifelong learning approach; stresses that engaging education, business and workforce development leaders is key to create a framework for how countries can more effectively align educational systems and local labour market needs;

6. Stresses the importance of European Neighbourhood Instrument (ENI) continuation by the new NDICI instrument, including allocation of at least EUR 19,2 billion to the Eastern Neighbourhood projects, for the period of 2021-27;

7. Insists that educational reforms must be carefully promoted through implementation of key programmes, such as Erasmus+, Creative Europe and Horizon Europe, in order to prevent future shortfalls between the education systems and labour market demand in EaP states;

8. Calls on the EU, its Member States and its Eastern Partners to strengthen people-to-people contacts and to acknowledge the importance of cross-border mobility under EaP Platform 4 ‘Mobility and people-to-people contacts’ programme;

9. Stresses the importance to promote multilateralism, strategic priorities and the achievement of key international commitments and objectives concerning climate change, including the Sustainable Development Goals, the 2030 Agenda and the Paris Agreement;

10. Deplores expectation that digital technologies for education and training generally will enhance synergy between economy and education, and that investments in information and communication technologies by education and training institutions coherence will bring fruitful results; underlines the need to integrate ICTs into teaching and learning processes and to remodel education from knowledge transmission to knowledge co-creation; this should encompass a wide array of transformations including enhanced autonomy of schools and of teachers; introduction of new hybrid forms of learning as well as substantial reforms in student assessment while always prioritising in-person learning as schools ensure a pastoral role which cannot be replicated online;

11. Stresses the need for EaP countries to improve the quality of their education systems, notably by retraining teachers and by modernising the education system to make it fit for the digital age; commends Georgia for leading the way in this regard, through its Education Reform Plan 2018-23 aimed at aligning the Georgian education system with European standards, with special emphasis put on secondary schools and vocational training centres;

12. Calls on the EU, its Member States and its Eastern Partners to step up their strategies and increase their investments in education and training systems, so as to provide high-performing, accessible and inclusive education, including vocational education and training, lifelong learning, upskilling and reskilling, focusing in particular on providing effective support to workers and the unemployed, and making full use of the opportunities offered by information and communication technologies including emphasis on circular economy benefits, while taking digital and green competence requirements into account;
13. Calls on the EU, its Member States and its Eastern Partners to pursue these objectives by providing better infrastructure, connectivity and digital equipment, training teachers to embrace technology and apply digital methodologies, and promoting top-quality learning content, user-friendly tools and secure platforms that respect privacy and ethical standards and strengthens resilience towards cyberthreats;

14. Notes that education and learning mobility foster the development of key competences and experiences that are crucial for active participation in the labour market and in society in general, and emphasises the importance of mutual recognition of diplomas in order to enhance this mobility; underlines in this respect that Erasmus+ (2014-20), a flagship EU programme in the fields of education, training, youth and sport, has been a key contributor to ET 2020, as it has provided opportunities for over four million Europeans to study, train and gain experience abroad, thus making the principle of lifelong learning a reality; calls on the Commission to explore way to increase involvement of young students and workers from EaP countries in EU-based mobility projects, including volunteering activities;

15. Notes that the mid-term evaluation of the Erasmus+ programme highlighted the positive impact of mobility on learners' confidence, independence, social integration and their subsequent integration into the labour market, and contributed to the creation of a sense of European identity; stresses the importance for more people-to-people contacts, mutual learning between recipients of Member States and its Eastern Partners, and increasing mutual cultural exchanges, achieved through a wider use of the Erasmus+ programme;

16. Notes that Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance must provide not only financial support but also a clear framework of social, employment and labour market integration policies to prepare partners for future membership of the European Union and support their accession process;

17. Insists that, in a context of globalised education, training and employment environments, it is essential that young people are able to make the best possible use of all learning opportunities across Europe; therefore welcomes the Commission's proposal that the budget for the successor programme of Erasmus+ for the 2021-27 period – Erasmus – be doubled to EUR 30 billion and that there will be a stronger focus on the inclusion of persons with fewer opportunities;

18. Calls on the EU, its Member States and its Eastern Partners to increase their efforts to help low-skilled adults acquire a minimum level of literacy, numeracy and digital skills, for instance through targeted financial incentives and modular learning opportunities to encourage training participation;

19. Calls on the EU, its Member States and its Eastern Partners to provide assistance with the Twinning instrument projects by delivering public expertise both from public administration in EaP states, while implementing activities that include workshops, training sessions, expert missions, study visits, internships and counselling to prepare skilled workforce in various areas, particularly in digital, circular and green economies;

20. Calls on the EU, its Member States and its Eastern Partners to create targeted EaP programmes in specialised universities and an electronic educational platform for online training courses focused on European values and the rule of law, good governance, public administration and eradication of corruption in the EaP countries;

21. Supports strengthening academic and educational cooperation among the EU and EaP countries, including intra-EaP cooperation and establishment of regional programme supporting centres of academic and research excellence in the region;

22. Calls on the EU, its Member States and its Eastern Partners to analyse and share best practices on how to manage the movement of highly skilled and qualified workers between countries, thereby laying down the conditions for a well-balanced ‘brain flow’, and preventing the loss of young and educated workforce with detrimental effect for the economic growth and development of their countries of origin;
23. Encourages the Commission to work with the EU Member States and the EaP countries to meet the targets set under ET 2020, namely that at least 95 % of children should have access to early childhood education, that less than 10 % of children should leave education and training early, that the share of higher education graduates should be increased to at least 40 % of 30- to 34-year-olds, that at least 15 % of adults aged between 25 and 64 should be participating in lifelong learning at any given time, that at least 20 % of higher education graduates and 6 % of 18- to 34-year-olds with an initial vocational qualification should have spent some time studying or training abroad, and that at least 82 % of upper secondary or higher education graduates between the ages of 20 and 34 who left education one to three years ago should be in employment;

24. Notes with satisfaction that all EaP countries have managed to enrol children in schools and keep them in education, despite the economic challenges;

25. Calls on the EU, its Member States and its Eastern Partners to safeguard academic freedom as part of the implementation of the Bologna Process and in line with the European Charter of Fundamental Rights; reminds in this respect that higher education activities need a regulatory model for institutional autonomy;

26. Calls on the EU, its Members States and its Eastern Partners to enhance basic digital skills and competences from an early age, and to develop attractive higher education curricula that produce more digital specialists, while ensuring that special attention is paid to equal opportunities and gender balance in digital studies and careers;

27. Calls on the EU, its Member States and its Eastern Partners to pay special attention to the needs of disadvantaged, discriminated against and marginalised groups in education ensuring also that they are not doubly excluded in the online learning environment;

28. Underlines the necessity of ensuring the right to education in conflict situations and zones and emphasises in this regard the need to safeguarded schools as they should provide a safe space where children can be protected from threats and crises; notes that education is a critical step in breaking the cycle of crisis and reduces the likelihood of future conflicts;

29. Calls on the EU, its Members State s and its Eastern Partners to reduce gender gaps and promote more gender-sensitive teaching in schools, in line with the new Gender Equality Strategy 2020-25, in order to promote a gender equal workplace culture and help combat all forms of discrimination, including gender stereotyping;

30. Emphasises the importance of stronger cooperation at European level in learning from the COVID-19 crisis, during which technology has been used at an unprecedented scale in education, training and work, thus marking a defining moment, changing significantly the educational landscape; underlines that this crisis has made gaps in internet access and online opportunity starker, but is also an opportunity to make education and training systems fit for the digital age, in line with the 2021-27 Digital Education Action Plan;

31. Stresses that any technology should be complementary to ‘traditional’ and in person teaching, and points to the problems that many people, in particular children, have not been able to follow school online due to a lack of access to electricity, internet or a computer, as well as of necessary digital skills;

32. Calls on the EU, its Member States and its Eastern Partners to increase synergies and coordination between the relevant stakeholders – such as civil society actors, employer associations, trade unions, social partners, academic institutions, training centres and employment agencies – and to involve them in the design and implementation of their respective measures, so as to identify and close gaps between the needs of their labour markets, and the academic qualifications and vocational skills offered by their education and training systems;

33. Highlights the fact that the European Endowment for Democracy (EED) and the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR), have an important role to play in the EaP countries by providing young people with the tools and knowledge to engage in civic activism and create a better future for themselves and their countries; calls for the Commission, the EEAS, the Member States and Eastern Partners to support the work of the EED and EIDHR, and make full use of the potential for cooperation and synergies with Eastern partners on the aspect of democratic education;
34. Underlines that close cooperation between education and training providers and the business sector is key to future-proofing our education and training systems; recalls that effective school-to-job transitions rely on a strong engagement between business and higher education institutions to adapt curricula, provide internships and mentorships while always preserving the autonomy of education and training institutions; encourages the promotion of public-private partnerships to train young people and communicate employers’ expectations about the skills of the future workforce;

35. Calls on the Commission to explore possible ways in which EU Member States and their Eastern Partners can integrate entrepreneurship into education from an early age and enhance support for young entrepreneurs;

36. Underlines that the modernisation of the EaP countries' education and training systems will bring tangible benefits to their citizens – in line with the underlying principles of the Eastern Partnership Policy – preventing the loss of intellectual capital, and fostering economic resilience;

37. Notes that a friendly business climate, with smart, transparent, clear and predictable regulations and minimum red tape, is indispensable for promoting entrepreneurship, start-ups and innovation, while fighting corruption and protecting competition can provide the much needed economic opportunities for young emerging entrepreneurs;

38. Calls on the Commission to play a more proactive role in identifying, sharing and scaling up good practices in the field of digital education, and fostering cooperation between all stakeholders at national, regional and local levels by creating a new European Digital Education Hub;

39. Underlines the need to launch a pilot project aimed at establishing the Eastern Partnership Open Science and Innovation Centre, a network of thematic centres of competence across the EaP States to provide R&I support and services;

40. Notes that, while the EU Member States retain primarily responsibility for their education and training systems, the EU itself already plays a key role by supporting and supplementing their endeavours, notably through the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (Cedefop);

41. Calls on the Commission to monitor more closely the effects of EU funds on youth and to mainstream youth considerations into the EU budget and macroeconomic policy;

42. Encourages the Commission and all the countries participating in the European Higher Education Area to step up their efforts to achieve, by 2025, automatic and mutual recognition of higher education and upper secondary education diplomas as well as the outcomes of learning periods abroad, in line with the Council recommendation of 26 November 2018, thus building on progress already made in other fora, notably the Bologna Process and the Lisbon Recognition Convention; calls on all participating countries to bring down, across Europe, barriers to learning and promoting innovative and inclusive education and training for all, thus making the European Higher Education Area a reality;

43. Urges the EU, its Member States and Eastern Partners to respect the provisions of the Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region (Lisbon Convention), with due consideration of the competent authority of a State Party to this Convention while recognising higher education diplomas within Erasmus+ and other educational programs, as well as in their bilateral cooperation;

44. Calls on the EU to further expand its support for young people in the Eastern Neighbourhood, increasing funding from EUR 75 million for the 2014-16 period to EUR 340 million for the 2017-20 period, under the Education & Youth package, which is aimed at creating the necessary conditions for young people to study, train, work and engage in society; calls on the EU to further expand its support in this respect;

45. Welcomes the inauguration of the very first Eastern Partnership European School in September 2018 in Tbilisi; recalls that, as one of the EaP’s '20 Deliverables for 2020', this flagship school provides students from all six EaP countries with an innovative programme that is recognised worldwide; calls on the EU to consider opening similar schools in other EaP countries;
46. Calls on the EU, its Member States and its Eastern Partners to step up their efforts in unlocking the full potential of effective synergies between education and economy by utilizing the guiding principles enshrined in the EaP declarations (COM(SWD(2020) 56)) namely Democracy, Good governance and Stability; to create initiatives on cultural and democratic education with a view to boosting mobility and people-to-people contacts; and achieving stronger societies through sustainable, social, and economic development;

47. Welcomes the novel 'European Skills Agenda for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience', as it contributes to deliver on the European Pillar of Social Rights and notably the first principle, which enshrines the right to qualitative and inclusive education, training and lifelong learning, and is also firmly anchored in the European Green Deal, the new EU Digital Strategy and the new EU Industrial and SME strategies, which will only succeed if workers have the relevant skills;

48. Notes that the new EU Circular Economy Action Plan and the EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030 also point out the key role of skills in the transition to a green economy; welcomes the Commission's proposals for action to enhance the green transition in education;

49. Regrets that current long-term jobless rates and youth unemployment figures continue to be challenging in a number of EU Member States and EaP countries; stresses the importance of creating more quality jobs for young people; notes that this is particularly testing in the context of structural drivers of change such as technological innovations and globalisation, which pose both opportunities and challenges in the field of employment; underlines that the fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic, which is estimated to cause the EU's GDP to fall by over 7% in 2020 and the unemployment rate to reach 9%, will demand even stronger active labour market policies than under normal circumstances;

50. Notes that the COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the digital transition and has given impetus to rethink the sustainability and efficiency of the education paradigm; notes that, while teleworking and distance learning have become a reality for tens of millions of people across Europe, the limitations of our digital preparedness have often been revealed, the digital skills gap has been accentuated and new inequalities have emerged, yet the pandemic helped to rethink our digital preparedness by pointing out affairs that must be reinforced in the digital field;

51. Underlines that now, the EU laid the foundation for the transition to a new skills agenda, and yet has to deliver a clear framework for jobs to drive twin transition, to ensure recovery from the socioeconomic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, to strengthen sustainable competitiveness, to ensure decency, equal opportunities and to build up the EU's resilience;

52. Insists on strengthening economic and social development including through increased connectivity and regional development, agriculture and rural development and social and employment policies, by aiming to reinforce environmental protection, increase resilience to climate change, accelerate the shift towards a low-carbon economy and develop the digital economy and society;
RESOLUTION

on ‘Towards energy efficiency, diversification and independence; addressing capacity needs for strengthening European energy policy and countering energy security threats in the Eastern Partnership’

(2021/C 361/03)

THE EURONEST PARLIAMENTARY ASSEMBLY,

— having regard to the Council Conclusions on Eastern Partnership policy beyond 2020 approved on 11 May 2020;

— having regard to the Joint Communication of the European Commission and the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy of 18 March 2020 entitled ‘Eastern Partnership policy beyond 2020: Reinforcing Resilience – an Eastern Partnership that delivers for all’;

— having regard to the ‘20 Deliverables for 2020’ document endorsed by the Brussels Eastern Partnership Summit in November 2017;

— having regard to the Paris Agreement on Climate Change ratified by the European Union, to which the Eastern Partnership countries are also party;

— having regard to the Association Agreements between the EU and Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine, in particular the provisions on energy cooperation;

— having regard to the Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA) between the EU and Armenia, in particular the provisions on energy cooperation;

— having regard to the Treaty establishing the Energy Community, of which the three associated countries are contracting parties and Armenia observer;

— having regard to the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) between the EU and Azerbaijan, in particular the provisions on energy, and to the ongoing negotiations of an enhanced agreement;

— having regard to the work of the Eastern Partnership Platform 3 – ‘Connectivity, energy efficiency, environment and climate change’, and in particular the Energy Panel;


A. whereas energy security is a fundamental element of national security of EU Member States and Eastern partner countries alike; whereas increasing connectivity, domestic renewable energy capacities and energy efficiency are key in order to enhance energy security and limit dependence on imports from dominant suppliers and foster social, economic and political stability in the region;

B. whereas the European Union has always shown interest in creating lasting and powerful bilateral and multilateral relations with the Eastern partner countries, with a great focus on the energy sector; whereas this partnership, based on common values and rules, mutual interests and commitments as well as shared ownership and responsibility, aims at delivering tangible results for citizens in the region, including in the area of energy efficiency;

C. whereas fulfilling the Paris Agreement is a common commitment of the EU and the Eastern partner countries; whereas climate change is an issue that cannot be ignored; whereas there is a strong need for ‘green’ investments in energy efficiency and in municipal infrastructure, in order to strengthen environmental and climate resilience across the region; whereas clean energy transition, decarbonising the economy and boosting the use of renewable energy sources in most cases also contribute to increasing energy security;
D. whereas the Russian Federation is notably the biggest energy supplier for most European countries and this aspect is often used as a measure of political pressure and leverage; whereas recent developments in the EU-Russia diplomatic relations, especially the incarceration of Alexei Navalny and the expulsion of European diplomats from Russia, during HR/VP Joseph Borrell’s meeting with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, show that Russia can be an unreliable partner; whereas significant dependence on the Russian gas threatens the energy security and the economic stability of the European Union and its partners;

E. whereas energy security and the clean energy transition are integral parts in two out of the five long-term Eastern Partnership policy objectives beyond 2020;

F. whereas Eastern partner countries are in the process of modernising their energy regulations and infrastructures and implementing policies on renewables and energy efficiency, but continued EU support is essential to provide technical assistance and monitoring of its implementation and create the necessary investment framework conditions;

G. whereas support of the EU and its Member States has played an important role in improving energy efficiency and developing energy production from renewable sources in the Eastern partner countries, including through projects on energy efficiency of buildings, district heating, urban transport, street lighting, renewable energy (solar, hydropower, biomass) and others, financed, inter alia, by the Neighbourhood Investment Platform, the Eastern Europe Energy Efficiency and Environmental Partnership (E5P) or in the framework of the Covenant of Mayors; whereas the room for energy efficiency gains and potential for renewable energy exploitation in the Eastern partner countries compared to EU Member States remains significant;

H. whereas projects supported by the EU and other partners have contributed to building interconnections and modernising infrastructure across the region to improve energy security of the countries involved, for example the Romania-Moldova gas and power interconnections, the Armenia-Georgia power interconnection, or the Southern Gas Corridor (including relevant interconnectors);

I. whereas energy poverty remains an important challenge for many households in the Eastern partner countries;

J. whereas, as part of the European Green Deal, the EU envisages strong environment, energy and climate partnerships within the Eastern Partnership; whereas, following up on the ‘20 deliverables for 2020’, a new set of goals for the Eastern Partnership is to be determined for the period 2021-2030;

K. whereas most estimates suggest that world fossil fuel reserves will deplete by 2060; whereas this aspect should encourage the EU and all its partners to strive towards diversification of their energy mix including a stronger focus on renewable energy sources;

1. Reiterates its support to increased energy cooperation between the EU and the Eastern partners and to the creation of tailor-made strategies to advance more ambitious forms of cooperation and integration where desired by the partner countries to enhance their energy security and resilience, while protecting the environment, contributing to the achievement of climate policy goals, and furthering the integration of associated countries into the European energy market with regard to the Trio Plus Strategy 2030; states that cooperation of Member States with their neighbours and partners regarding the implementation of energy policy is of vital importance in order to have an open, secure and competitive European energy market;

2. Stresses the need to step up efforts on decarbonisation and environmental protection, in line with the European Green Deal, and to pursue ambitious climate and environmental policies, in particular to meet the commitments under the Paris Agreement; calls on the Commission to extensively include the Eastern partner countries in the EU sectorial policies and particularly in the European Green Deal; calls in this respect for a comprehensive regulatory framework enabling and facilitating access to financing and other incentive mechanisms and for supporting a more effective energy policy implementation; encourages Eastern partners to set clear renewable energy and energy efficiency targets for 2030 and 2050;

3. Reiterates the need for reliable, secure, independent, environmentally sustainable and affordable energy for all citizens from both the European Union and its partner countries;
4. Acknowledges the great efforts and progress made by Eastern partner countries towards fighting widespread corruption; believes, however, that there are still multiple issues that need to be addressed regarding corruption and calls on the relevant authorities to step up measures to eradicate it, bolster the rule of law and promote good governance that can help underpin the sectoral reforms, including in the energy sector, envisaged by the Eastern Partnership policy beyond 2020;

5. Reiterates the importance of reducing greenhouse gas emissions from the energy sector; believes that stronger cooperation between the EU and the Eastern partner countries is needed in order to address energy security and reliability, energy efficiency, energy poverty and the development of the renewable energy sector;

6. Observes that the energy intensity in Eastern partner countries remains considerably higher than the EU average and highlights the enormous potential for energy savings in those countries; observes that increasing energy efficiency is strongly linked to reduction in energy poverty; points to the importance of national building renovation policies and of introducing, maintaining and enforcing regulatory and institutional frameworks that define minimum energy efficiency standards for buildings, provide for incentives for the renovation of buildings and for energy efficiency in industries and SMEs, promote optimisation of energy infrastructures, including through minimum energy efficiency criteria for public procurement when relevant, and guarantee appropriate information to consumers including accurate metering of energy consumption; stresses that EU funding directed towards renovation of the public building stock in collaboration with Eastern partner countries should assess the possibility of introducing minimum energy efficiency standards;

7. Notes that the development of renewable energy sources is a crucial element of efforts towards clean energy transition, competitiveness and energy independence, while also contributing to local job creation; welcomes the establishment of a regional network on renewable energy, led by Lithuania and Georgia, under the Eastern Partnership Energy Panel; encourages the establishment of similar bilateral or multilateral networks between Eastern partner countries and EU Member States, with the support of the EU;

8. Stresses that investment towards ensuring an independent and secure energy sector in the EU and in the Eastern partner countries must also be corroborated by sustained investment in the renewable energy sector;

9. Emphasises the need to pursue efforts to improve connectivity between Eastern partner countries and with the Trans-European Networks for Energy and to develop strong cross-border infrastructure, starting with the full implementation of objectives earlier identified within the ‘20 deliverables for 2020’; calls for continued support to build technical capacity for connectivity projects; encourages using diversified routes and further developing the Black Sea coast connections with EU Member States;

10. Welcomes the operationalisation of the Southern Gas Corridor, bringing important benefits in terms of diversification and economic opportunities; welcomes the start of commercial operations and transportation of first gas via the Trans Adriatic Pipeline (1); stresses the importance of connecting Eastern and Central Europe to the Southern Gas Corridor; welcomes the operationalisation of the Iasi-Ungheni gas pipeline between Romania and the Republic of Moldova, increasing supply diversification and bringing a significant improvement to the energy security situation of the region;

(1) On 15 November 2020, the Trans Adriatic Pipeline (TAP) commenced operations. First gas has reached Greece and Bulgaria, via the Nea Mesimvria interconnection point with DESFA, as well as Italy, via the Melendugno interconnection point with SNAM Rete Gas (SRG). The Southern Gas Corridor consists of the South Caucasus Pipeline expansion (SCPX) through Azerbaijan and Georgia – 428 km of new 48-inch pipeline through Azerbaijan; 59 km of new 48-inch pipeline and 2 new compressor stations in Georgia; the Trans Anatolian Pipeline (TANAP) – 1 340 km of 56-inch pipeline, 34 km of 36-inch pipeline and 476 km of 48-inch pipeline across Turkey; and the Trans Adriatic Pipeline (TAP) – 878 km of 48-inch pipeline across Greece, Albania and Italy.
11. Welcomes the development of the Black Sea Transmission Line and calls for greater focus on the development and financing of electricity interconnections, as well as smart grids, in order to ensure the necessary infrastructure allowing to reach the climate and energy targets; emphasises that the security of electricity grids is a key element of energy security and encourages increased EU support to efforts of Eastern partners that so desire towards synchronisation with the European continental energy grid (ENTSO-E);

12. Recognises the substantial financial and technical support provided to the Eastern partners by the EU, in coordination and cooperation with other international actors, promoting decarbonisation, as well as connectivity; welcomes in particular the work of the EU4Energy Initiative, Initiative for coal regions in transition in the Western Balkans and Ukraine, investments and policy-based loans under the Neighbourhood Investment Platform, the E5P partnership, the Covenant of Mayors and EU budget guarantees for loans from the European Investment Bank and other International Financing Institutions;

13. Encourages the Eastern partner countries to collaborate with the EU Member States regarding the importation of energy technologies available in the EU and to exchange good practices of energy policy and administration; states that there is a great need for knowledge transfers and inter-institutional transformation and collaboration towards achieving a greater share of green technology; believes that cooperation between universities and research centres in the EU and those from the Eastern partner countries is a necessary step in achieving common goals;

14. Acknowledges that EU Member States and their partners should be more oriented towards greater liberalisation of the energy market for different operators, and states that this should be accompanied by the creation of a more collaborative market from which all could benefit greatly;

15. Points out that the energy transition needs to be fair, inclusive and cost-efficient and that it should ensure sustainability, security of supply and affordability of energy; notes that current low fossil fuel prices benefiting from price regulation, subsidies and not internalising external costs mean that additional incentives will be needed in order to spur investment in energy-saving and clean energy projects; points to the need to reform energy pricing and taxation to avoid penalising renewable energy against other energy forms and giving the wrong price signals to final energy consumers;

16. Stresses the need to support consumer empowerment to generate, consume, store and sell energy, bearing in mind it can help fighting energy poverty; highlights the potential of decentralised renewable energy production which can increase the utilisation of local energy sources, increase local security of energy supply, and foster community development and cohesion; highlights the importance of overcoming oligarchic monopoly in the energy sector;

17. Encourages Eastern partner countries to appropriately tackle energy poverty wherever it is identified and protect vulnerable energy consumers, in particular those in remote areas; stresses the importance of adopting a clear definition of ‘energy poverty’ and ‘vulnerable energy consumer’ for better monitoring and policymaking;

18. Calls for closer cooperation within the Eastern Partnership on renewable hydrogen production and use and for the promotion of common standards on hydrogen; notes the necessity to ensure that imports of hydrogen do not undermine decarbonisation;
19. Calls on the EU and its Member States to critically review cooperation with Russia in various foreign policy platforms and on projects such as Nord Stream 2; expresses concern over the construction of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline, which reinforces EU dependency on Russian gas supplies, threatens the EU internal market and is not in line with EU energy policy or its strategic interests; acknowledges Nord Stream 2’s long-term fundamental political, economic and security risks and calls on all stakeholders, and, in particular, those in the Member States and Europe, to make use of the available legal clauses to halt the project; reiterates the crucial role of Ukraine in the European energy supply network and calls on an enhanced cooperation with Ukraine as a major transit country;

20. Points out to the fact that EU and Eastern partner countries must stand united in order to be resilient to abuse from monopolistic energy suppliers; acknowledges that while such suppliers can financially afford to suspend the energy supply for one country, it is not sustainable to do that with the entire bloc; calls for halt on the Nord Stream 2 construction;

21. Reiterates its support to aid Eastern partners in reducing energy dependency from the Russian Federation by developing their domestic energy production as well as energy efficiency which will impact their energy needs and consequently their dependence on external suppliers;

22. Points out to the great danger that the frozen conflicts on the territory of Eastern Partnership countries pose to energy security, to democracy and to development; asks for further cooperation towards putting an end to such conflicts, namely in Crimea, Transnistria, Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Nagorno-Karabakh;

23. Calls for closer cooperation towards reducing greenhouse gas emissions in the transport and mobility sector; recalls that as well as reducing CO\textsubscript{2} emissions, a great attention should be paid to reducing emissions of other substances, which have harmful effects both on the environment and public health; welcomes the publication of the study ‘Prospects of LNG markets in Eastern Partner countries’; encourages Eastern partner countries to explore possibilities towards the increased use of LNG in freight transport, to the detriment of diesel; underlines that the use of LNG should only be part of a transitional solution towards sustainable green mobility and transport reliant on renewable energy sources; calls on the Commission and Eastern partner countries to enhance cooperation towards the development of new mobility infrastructure, such as high-voltage charging stations for electric vehicles;

24. Welcomes the establishment of the working group on gas led by Poland and Ukraine, under the Eastern Partnership Energy Panel, which should focus on the promotion of hydrogen and green gases, building business partnerships and investments attraction;

25. Stresses the importance of promoting evidence-based energy policy based on comprehensive data, as well as enforcement of legislation, and encourages further EU support to strengthen the Eastern partners’ administrative capacity in this area; calls for more transparent and readily available energy related data from European partner countries; calls on the Eastern partner countries to strengthen and protect their cyber security and critical energy infrastructure;

26. Recalls the commitments of the relevant Eastern partner countries under the Association Agreements, the Energy Community and the CEPA in terms of transposition of or approximation to EU energy regulations; takes the view that additional financial support should be conditional on effectively implementing and enforcing commitments of the partner countries, carrying out necessary reforms and making more ambitious commitments in the context of the European Green Deal, in line with the ‘more for more’ principle; acknowledges progress already made by some Eastern partner countries and calls for appropriate actions to enhance cooperation and support in order to reinforce the drive for reforms;
27. Commemorates the 35th anniversary of the Chernobyl disaster, expresses deepest condolences to the families of victims and solidarity to everyone affected, and calls for ensuring that existing and new nuclear installations in the Eastern partner countries comply with the highest environmental and nuclear safety standards, according to the international conventions; calls for ensuring that unsafe energy projects such as the Astravets nuclear plant will not be part of the European electricity network;

28. Recalls that energy cooperation and trade between EU and Eastern partner countries imply full cooperation and respect for international and European safety production standards and that this cooperation is now jeopardised by Belarus' refusal to fully comply to International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and European Nuclear Safety Regulators Group (ENSREG) safety improvement recommendations regarding the newly functional Astravets nuclear power plant; urges Belarussian authorities to address all safety issues regarding the functioning of the power plant;

29. Instructs its Co-Presidents to forward this resolution to the President of the European Parliament, the Council, the Commission, the Executive Vice-President in charge of the Green Deal, the Vice-President of the Commission/High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, the Commissioner for Energy, the Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement, the European External Action Service, the governments and parliaments of the EU Member States and the Eastern European partner countries;
RESOLUTION
on quality of life, including sound healthcare systems and sustainable pension reform in the EU and Eastern Partnership countries
(2021/C 361/04)

THE EURONEST PARLIAMENTARY ASSEMBLY,

— having regard to the Constituent Act of the Euronest Parliamentary Assembly of 3 May 2011,

— having regard to the Joint Declaration of the Eastern Partnership Summit held in Brussels on 24 November 2017, as well as to the joint declarations of previous summits,

— having regard to the Euronest Parliamentary Assembly resolution of 3 April 2012 on strengthening civil society in the Eastern Partnership Countries, including the question of cooperation between government and civil society, and the question of the reforms aimed at empowering civil society (1),

— having regard to the European Parliament recommendation of 19 June 2020 to the Council, the Commission and the Vice-President of the Commission/High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy on the Eastern Partnership, in the run-up to the June 2020 Summit (2),

— having regard to the joint staff working document of the Commission and the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy of 9 June 2017 entitled ‘Eastern Partnership – 20 Deliverables for 2020: Focusing on key priorities and tangible results’ (SWD(2017)0300),

— having regard to the joint communication of the Commission and the European External Action Service of 18 March 2020 on Eastern Partnership Policy beyond 2020 (JOIN(2020)0007), and to the accompanying staff working document entitled ‘Reinforcing Resilience – an Eastern Partnership that delivers for all’ (SWD(2020)0056),

— having regard to the Council conclusions of 11 May 2020 on Eastern Partnership policy beyond 2020,

— having regard to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, and in particular to Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 3 on ensuring healthy lives and promoting well-being for all at all ages, and SDG 4 on ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all,


— having regard to the European Pillar of Social Rights, especially to principle 15 on old age income and pensions,

— having regard to its recommendation to the Council, the Commission and the Vice-President of the Commission/High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy of 19 June 2020 on the Eastern Partnership in the run-up to the June 2020 Summit (3),

— having regard to its resolution of 17 April 2020 on EU coordinated action to combat the COVID-19 pandemic and its consequences (4),

— having regard to the UN Secretary-General António Guterres’ urgent appeal for a global ceasefire in all corners of the world to focus on defeating COVID-19 on March 23rd 2020;

— having regard to the Association Agreements between the EU, of the one part, and Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine, of the other part, the EU-Armenia Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement, the EU-Azerbaijan Partnership and Cooperation Agreement and in particular to the chapters of these agreements on trade and sustainable development as well as on employment, social policy and equal opportunity;
A. whereas the Council conclusions of 11 May 2020 on Eastern Partnership policy beyond 2020 highlight that strengthening resilience as an overriding policy framework will be one of the key goals for the Eastern Partnership over the coming years, including in the areas of the environment, health (notably in the context of the current COVID-19 pandemic) and human security;

B. whereas the joint communication of 18 March 2020 on Eastern Partnership policy beyond 2020 puts special emphasis on reinforcing resilience and envisages the scaling up of action in areas that are critical for people’s health and wellbeing;

C. whereas improving quality of life is a longstanding explicit and implicit policy objective of national governments, while its adequate definition and measurement is challenging and often elusive;

D. whereas quality of life is a broad concept that covers more than just economic growth and material living conditions; whereas it encompasses a range of indicators reflecting its multidimensionality, including life satisfaction, employment, health status, social relationships, free time, education and skills, work-life balance, civic engagement and governance, environmental quality, human security and governance;

E. whereas the Eastern Partnership (EaP) Association Agreements and the EU-Armenia Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA) each contain a chapter dedicated to health issues, which provides for cooperation covering a wide range of areas with the aim of improving public health standards and the protection of human health, as well as a chapter dedicated to the environment, with the objective of achieving a high degree of regulatory convergence;

F. whereas significant disparities exist within and between EU Member States and EaP countries, as reflected by socioeconomic indicators and the Human Development Index; whereas life expectancy as a key indicator is lower by up to seven years in the EaP countries than the EU average;

G. whereas the combination of a large informal sector, high unemployment, low savings rates and a heavy reliance on remittances in the EaP region points to the vulnerability of large segments of society in EaP countries which are likely to experience increased levels of poverty and inequalities because of the COVID-19 crisis;

H. whereas socioeconomic shocks resulting from the pandemic negatively affect people’s incomes and physical and mental wellbeing, and the social integrity of communities as a whole;

I. whereas affordable, effective, accessible, sustainable and resilient public health systems are a key determinant for improving citizens’ quality of life and well-being;

J. whereas healthcare expenditure, both in absolute terms and as a share of GDP, is significantly lower in EaP countries than in the EU;

K. whereas civil society organisations have been and will continue to be essential in mitigating the effects of the pandemic in the long term and will require support to ensure the continuity of these key support activities to mitigate the economic, social, and health consequences of the COVID-19 crisis;

L. whereas the COVID-19 pandemic has put a critical spotlight on the need to boost preparedness and response capacities across the wider European region against emergencies and notably serious cross-border threats to health;

M. whereas the COVID crisis has stressed the importance of supporting and fastening the green, care and digital transition so that no one is left behind;

N. whereas in response to the COVID-19 crisis, the EU has mobilised an emergency support package of EUR 80 million for immediate needs and up to EUR 1 billion to support health systems and the short- and medium-term social and economic recovery in the Eastern Partnership region;
O. whereas programmes such as the European Union Solidarity for Health Initiative in the Eastern Partnership countries provide short- and medium-term assistance to address the challenges of the COVID-19 crisis and could act as a stepping stone towards further cooperation;

P. whereas the COVID-19 crisis has demonstrated the importance of joint EU action; whereas Parliament has called, inter alia, for the creation of a European health response mechanism to better prepare for and respond in a common and coordinated way to any type of health or sanitary crisis;

Q. whereas the EU has committed itself to a united, coordinated approach in order to act effectively and with solidarity when addressing the COVID-19 crisis, notably with regard to the procurement and roll-out of vaccines, while Member States retain full ownership of their public health policies and responsibility for organising and delivering health services and medical care;

R. whereas older women are at greater risk of poverty due, among other factors, to the wage and pension gap, gender segregation in the job market, the gender care gap, and the gender gaps regarding working time;

S. whereas the Commission and the World Health Organization (WHO) Regional Office for Europe recognised in their joint statement of 4 November 2020 (*) that further efforts are needed to assist the Eastern Partnership countries to improve regional and sub-regional health security, address health inequalities, bolster the resilience of health systems and strengthen the cooperation between WHO country offices and EU Delegations while enhancing the partnership between the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) and WHO Europe in order to ensure coherent strategic approaches across the entire region;

T. whereas predictable, adequate and sustainable pension systems constitute an important element in providing good quality of life after leaving the workplace, as well as ensuring income security, preventing poverty and reducing inequality in old age;

U. whereas managing pension systems remains a Member State competence within the EU; whereas the facilitation of mutual learning and the exchange of best practices between the EU and its partner countries has significant potential to improve responses to demographic challenges and to enhance the adequacy and sustainability of pension systems;

V. whereas in the context of accelerating population ageing, a significant informal sector and a large number of seasonal workers, as well as the unfolding economic crisis, it is becoming more challenging to achieve pension policy objectives in the Eastern Partnership region;

W. whereas the European Pillar of Social Rights contains a number of provisions dedicated to pension rights, including the right of workers and the self-employed to a pension commensurate with contributions and ensuring an adequate income; the right to equal opportunities to acquire pension rights for both women and men; and the right to resources that ensure dignity in old age;

X. whereas investment in the care economy is of paramount importance to ensure decent life for all and protect all people living in the EU and the Eastern Partnership; whereas older persons have been and still are heavily hit by complications and fatalities linked to different diseases, including COVID-19;

Quality of life

1. Welcomes the EU’s overall emphasis on resilience in the current focus of its Eastern Partnership strategy and notes that stepping up cooperation in the areas of the environment, climate change social policies, gender equality, labour rights and social protection, in particular decent employment, public health and education would contribute to tangible long-term benefits to quality of life in the EU and its Eastern neighbourhood;

2. Notes that most objectives and existing programmes under the Eastern Partnership contribute to improving quality of life indirectly, but that the visibility of their direct value added is mostly very limited for citizens, calls therefore for a better coordination of economic and social policies as well as their coherence with the ecological transformation of the economy in line with the commitments taken under the Paris Protocol to mitigate;

3. Stresses that decent living and access to social protection constitutes a serious joint challenge for EU Member States and EaP countries and should therefore be key topics of joint efforts and cooperation;

4. Calls on all stakeholders to realise the full potential of the existing provisions of bilateral agreements between the EU and EaP countries, as well as of the multilateral Eastern Partnership platform, using innovative policies to generate and measure tangible improvements to quality of life, while also increasing the visibility of such concrete actions and outcomes;

**Sound healthcare systems**

5. Calls on all stakeholders to draw lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic and step up needs-based cooperation between the EU and EaP countries, with the involvement of the relevant international organisations, civil society and local health services;

6. Recalls the crucial importance of accessible, affordable and quality healthcare for all;

7. Is of the view that public healthcare systems should focus primarily on their beneficiaries, rather than on costs, that they should be funded well enough to pay correctly and operate in good conditions;

8. Calls on the European Commission and EaP governments to address in their programs the needs accentuated by the current crisis, in particular to ensure social protection and safeguarding employment, access to resilient public health care services as well as access to education, including online learning, food security and material assistance for the most deprived;

9. Underlines the need to ensure universal access to health care services and to medical infrastructure such as hospitals, care facilities, medicines, tests and vaccines in times of COVID-19 and to preserve and strengthen public health care services and substantially increase their funding: stresses the need to increase joint efforts within the WTO to meet the global dimension to overcome the Covid-19-pandemic;

10. Calls on the EU and the EaP governments to address inequalities in access to health and care services, by focusing on strengthening the health services and capacities at the local and regional level within the planning of the next EaP programmes beyond 2020 and within the programming of the EU’s bilateral support;

11. Urges EU Member States and EaP countries to respect the right to health by maintaining universal and equal access to health and care services, without discrimination on the basis of age, race, ethnicity, linguistic or social group or sexual orientation, gender expression, gender identity or sex characteristics, or any other grounds;

12. Insists that healthcare access for minorities should be strengthened during the current pandemic and stresses that they should not be targeted by restrictive pandemic measures without any specific indication for the necessity of such special measures in order to avoid discrimination;

13. Notes that therapy and care options for chronic diseases, such as cancer, should not be negatively affected by and be secured despite the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on healthcare systems and public finances;
14. Notes that quality of life in Eastern Partnership countries is not only lower than in the EU countries, but many people, especially those living in rural areas, face difficulties in reaching basic social standards due to the poor infrastructure and sanitation, lack of distant medical and educational services;

15. Encourages regular and structured information and staff exchanges to improve the resilience of health systems and to reduce pressure on critical health infrastructure and staff, as well as to facilitate mutual learning on best practices, institutional preparedness and management;

16. Calls on the EU to consider bilateral and regional technical assistance programmes for healthcare reform in the EaP region with a view to improving the legislative framework and financial management of national healthcare systems, achieving better access to public health services and raising the overall quality of care, as well as to undertake targeted or sectoral health programmes bringing tangible long-term benefits to citizens and their quality of life;

17. Notes that the maternal mortality rate in the EaP countries are few times higher than in the EU and urges to address this issue by necessary healthcare reforms;

18. Notes with concern the potential negative impacts, including significant societal costs, of low remunerations and brain drain in the healthcare sector, which are exacerbated during times of crisis, notably the COVID-19 pandemic;

19. Welcomes the joint declaration of the Commission and the WHO Europe Regional Office of 4 November 2020 expressing a need to pool efforts to improve human health across Europe and actively support countries in achieving the highest level of health and health protection; fully supports further exchanges of information on best practices, consultations and regular structured dialogues with a view to considering joint actions and initiatives and urges the development of more concrete plans outlining projects;

20. Notes with concern that according to projections, COVID-19 vaccines provided in the framework of the COVAX scheme will cover on average only around 20 percent of the EaP population; and encourages further cooperation between the EU and the EaP countries in this regard; reiterates that it is of particular importance that COVID-19 vaccines are made available on the basis of clear and transparent criteria in the whole European region, including in the Eastern Partnership countries, without delay, in order to increase the speed of vaccine roll-out; welcomes in this context the establishment of a common EU vaccine sharing mechanism;

21. Emphasises that there is no effective COVID-19 pandemic management without fast and efficient transmission of adequate amount of vaccines to the EaP countries; without ensuring it, the virus will be spreading across EU as large group of people is working in many EU countries;

22. Recalls the need for sharing comparable national data related to health emergencies, infectious disease outbreaks and pandemics, as well as a viable system of mutual recognition of vaccinations;

23. Recognises the need to build on the example of the 1st Eastern Partnership Ministerial Conference on Tuberculosis and Multi-Drug Resistant Tuberculosis in 2015, which brought together ministers and high-level officials from national governments and international and non-governmental organisations;

24. Recalls the untapped potential of the Eastern Partnership framework for addressing cross-border aspects of healthcare cooperation, exchange programmes and emergency relief with the participation of medical staff from EU and EaP countries;
25. Highlights the work of civil society organisations during the COVID-19 pandemic, supporting vulnerable groups and health care workers and doctors; Stresses the need to strengthen EaP societies' resilience after the pandemic with a particular focus on vulnerable groups and the growing number of people socially affected by the crisis, calls for enhanced support for local civil society organisations in the EaP countries in order to enable them to fulfil their potential for mitigating the effects of the pandemic and improving the health and socioeconomic wellbeing of their populations, notably the most vulnerable groups and those who are disproportionately affected;

26. Underlines the will of EU and Eastern Partnership countries to build age-friendly societies, where high quality public services ensure intergenerational solidarity;

**Sustainable pension reform**

27. Takes note of the diversity of pension systems and the relevant legislative frameworks across EU and EaP countries; notes, however, the untapped potential of the EaP framework for helping the partner countries to move towards stronger welfare systems including more protective pension systems, with solidarity and dignity at its heart;

28. Underlines that all citizens in the EU and in the EaP countries shall be guaranteed a minimum pension that reflects national income levels;

29. Recommends stepping up cooperation in the area of public finance management, including management of pension systems, notably by training pension administration staff and supporting existing technical assistance programmes, such as those run by the World Bank;

30. Encourages governments to move towards greater sustainability and adequacy in their pension systems by widening the contribution base through increased formalised employment; urges countries to consider their appropriate legal retirement age with a view to enacting long-term reforms tailored to their individual economic circumstances;

31. Regrets the existing gender pension gap and calls on EU Member States and EaP countries to put forward concrete measures to tackle it, including by combating the gender pay gap and increasing women’s employment rate through work-life balance measures and combating precarious and informal work, and ensuring a minimum income for all;

32. Notes the close link between the retirement age and final sum of the pension received by the pensioner; takes note that pensions are relatively low compared to the cost of living what results

33. Recalls the vital role of accompanying structural and institutional reforms, such as those aimed at improving labour market regulation and increasing formalised employment, or at building a well-functioning tax administration and an adequate regulatory framework for the financial sector;

34. Recognises the complexity of achieving a balance between time spent working and time spent in retirement, in view of expected continued gains in life expectancy, while also improving the fairness of state-administered pension systems, including by further strengthening the link between benefits and contributions;

35. Calls for further technical assistance from the EU and its Member States for the assessment and testing of mandatory complementary (pillar II) and fully voluntary (pillar III) pension schemes to complement state pensions in the EaP countries.