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15 Years of the European Union's Eastern Partnership

Edited by
Adam Reichardt and Tomasz Stępniewski

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Adam Reichardt, Tomasz Stępniewski

15 years of the European Union's Eastern Partnership: an introduction

The Eastern Partnership (EaP) programme, launched in 2009, represents one of the European Union's most significant initiatives aimed at fostering closer political, economic, and social ties with six Eastern European and South Caucasus countries: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine. The programme was conceived during a time of relative geopolitical stability and optimism, with the primary goals of promoting democracy, ensuring regional growth, and enhancing economic integration between the EU and its eastern neighbours. Over the past 15 years, the EaP has evolved against the backdrop of shifting geopolitical dynamics, rising tensions between the EU and Russia, and a complex interplay of national interests and international pressure. Now, in 2024, as the EaP has reached its 15th anniversary, the perspectives of its member countries provide valuable insights into the programme's successes, limitations, and the road ahead.

The 2022 Russia-Ukraine war marked a pivotal moment for the European security landscape, bringing about critical questions regarding the future of Ukraine and the wider European Neighborhood Policy (ENP). This conflict has sparked a reassessment of the Eastern Partnership, particularly in light of the European Commission's recommendation in November 2023 to initiate accession negotiations with Ukraine and Moldova as part of the EU enlargement package. The war has undoubtedly accelerated Ukraine's path towards deeper integration with the EU, forcing a reevaluation of the EaP's role and goals in this new context. The geopolitical shifts caused by Russia's aggression have necessitated modifications to the program's initial framework, as Ukraine's situation has become more urgent and complex.

The prospect of Ukraine's EU membership marks a transformative shift in the European integration process and signals the need for structural reforms within the Eastern Partnership. The current mechanisms of the EaP, which were designed before the war, require significant adaptation to respond to the new geopolitical realities. As Ukraine moves closer to the EU, the EaP's role must evolve, aligning with a more programmatic and strategic approach that addresses the immediate challenges posed by the war while facilitating long-term integration. This shift not only underscores the importance of revising the EaP framework but also reflects a broader change in how the EU approaches its relationships with Eastern European countries.

One of the most critical perspectives comes from Ukraine, a country whose trajectory within the EaP has been profoundly shaped by both internal and external challenges. As noted by Oleksii Polegkyi in his paper *15 years since the*

launch of the Eastern Partnership – perspectives from Ukraine, Ukraine's engagement with the EaP has produced significant achievements but has also been marked by mixed outcomes. The signing of the Association Agreement (AA) in 2014 and the implementation of the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) in 2017 are among the programme's most notable milestones for Ukraine, solidifying the country's European aspirations and fostering greater political and economic integration with the EU. These agreements have been instrumental in advancing Ukraine's reforms and aligning its institutions with European standards. However, the ongoing war with Russia, particularly since the 2014 annexation of Crimea and the full-scale invasion in 2022, has overshadowed the full potential of these agreements and posed significant obstacles to the country's progress under the EaP framework.

Ukraine's journey through the EaP reflects both the programme's potential and its limitations. On the one hand, the EaP has provided a framework for Ukraine to deepen its ties with the EU and pursue its European integration goals. The Association Agreement and DCFTA represent the most tangible results of this cooperation, offering Ukraine access to the EU's internal market and promoting political association. These agreements have been critical in driving forward Ukraine's reform agenda, particularly in areas such as governance, the rule of law, and economic modernization. Yet, as Poleykyi argues, the benefits of these agreements have been unevenly realized, largely due to the external pressures exerted by Russia's aggressive actions and the internal challenges that Ukraine faces, including corruption and the slow pace of some reforms. Moreover, the Russian invasion in

2022 has further complicated Ukraine's relationship with the EaP, as the country grapples with the existential threat to its sovereignty and the challenges of post-war reconstruction. Nevertheless, Ukraine has been granted candidate status for membership in the European Union. The membership negotiations are expected to be lengthy and are contingent on the ongoing war with Russia.

The Eastern Partnership's 15-year history is not just about Ukraine; it is also about the diverse and sometimes divergent experiences of the other member states. Moldova, for instance, provides another significant case study in the evolving relationship between the EaP countries and the EU. As Alexandru Demianenco highlights in his paper *The Eastern Partnership at 15 years: Moldova's journey and its challenges*, Moldova's experience within the EaP has been shaped by its own unique set of challenges and achievements. Since the inception of the EaP, Moldova has been regarded as one of the programme's "front-runners," often cited alongside Ukraine and Georgia as one of the most committed countries to the EU integration process. Moldova signed its own Association Agreement with the EU in 2014, and like Ukraine, has made significant strides in aligning itself with European standards. However, Moldova's path within the EaP has not been without obstacles, including political instability, corruption, the ongoing influence of Russia in the region and the breakaway republic of Transnistria.

Georgia, too, provides an important perspective on the EaP's achievements and shortcomings. In the paper authored by Grigol Julukhidze and Giorgi Pipia titled *How Georgia sees the Eastern Partnership after 15 years*, the authors emphasize that Georgia remains a strong proponent of the

EaP and a leading country in terms of its commitment to European integration. Like Ukraine and Moldova, Georgia signed an Association Agreement with the EU and has worked to implement the reforms required to bring it closer to the European fold. However, Georgia's journey has also been fraught with challenges, particularly in navigating its relationship with Russia and managing internal political divisions. The experience of Georgia, as with Ukraine and Moldova, underscores the broader geopolitical context in which the EaP operates – a context dominated by Russian attempts to maintain influence in the post-Soviet space and its opposition to the EU's growing presence in the region.

In contrast, the experiences of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Belarus within the EaP highlight the programme's more ambiguous outcomes. As Valentina Gevorgyan notes in her paper *Armenia's strategic integration with the EU after 15 years of the Eastern Partnership*, Armenia's relationship with the EU has been more complex, shaped by its geopolitical position between Russia and the West. Unlike Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia, Armenia chose not to sign an Association Agreement with the EU in 2013, opting instead to join the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union. Nevertheless, Armenia has maintained some level of engagement with the EaP, particularly in areas of trade and economic cooperation. Similarly, Natalia Konarzewska's analysis of Azerbaijan's participation in the EaP in her paper *Azerbaijan and the Eastern Partnership: 15 years later* reveals a country that has been reluctant to embrace the EU's democratization agenda but remains interested in the economic benefits of cooperation, particularly in the energy sector. Azerbaijan's focus on energy and transport relations with the EU, while

eschewing deeper political reforms, exemplifies the pragmatic approach taken by some EaP countries.

Belarus, meanwhile, represents the starkest departure from the original goals of the EaP. As Kacper Wańczyk explores in his paper *The road not taken – Belarus and the Eastern Partnership*, Belarus's relationship with the EaP has been severely strained, particularly in the aftermath of the 2020 presidential election and the subsequent crackdown on political opposition by the regime of Alyaksandr Lukashenka. While Belarus was initially part of the EaP, its path diverged sharply from the other member states, and its relations with the EU have all but frozen, making it a “road not taken” in terms of European integration.

As the Eastern Partnership marks its 15th anniversary, it is clear that the programme has had a profound impact on the EU's eastern neighbours, though its outcomes have varied significantly depending on the country in question. For Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia, the EaP has provided a crucial framework for pursuing European integration, though challenges remain, particularly in the face of Russian aggression and internal political difficulties. For Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Belarus, the EaP has been a more ambivalent experience, with these countries taking different approaches to their relationships with the EU. Ultimately, the future of the EaP will depend on how these countries navigate the evolving geopolitical landscape as well as the EU's ability to adapt its own policies to the changing realities of the region.

Adam Reichardt, Tomasz Stępniewski
Kraków and Lublin, September 2024



Oleksii Polegkyi

15 years since the launch of the Eastern Partnership – perspectives from Ukraine

The Eastern Partnership (EaP) programme initiated in 2009 aimed to foster closer ties with Eastern European countries, and promote democracy, stability, and economic integration. The appearance of the Eastern Partnership led to a differentiation of the EU's foreign policy approaches to relations with the EU's southern and eastern neighbours, which were previously in the same frame of the European Neighbourhood Policy. This was important because the southern neighbours of the EU are not European states and, therefore, based on formal grounds, could not be considered as potential countries for EU membership.

Now, 15 years later, the perspective from Ukraine, particularly in the aftermath of the Russian invasion in February 2022, provides some evidence of the EaP's impact and significance. However, from Ukraine's perspective, the policy has yielded mixed results, particularly exacerbated by the ongoing war with Russia. The most significant achievement

of the EU's Eastern Partnership policy towards Ukraine was the signing and implementation of the Association Agreement (AA) in 2014 and the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) which came into effect in 2017. This landmark agreement marked a significant step towards European integration for Ukraine, laying the groundwork for political association and economic integration with the EU. While the full potential of the AA and DCFTA has yet to be realized due to the ongoing conflict with Russia, the agreement was a cornerstone of Ukraine's European aspirations and was partly an outcome of the EaP.

At the same time, particularly after 2014, it was visible that the potential of the EaP would not satisfy Ukraine's ambitions. The divergence of democratic development between EaP countries and the geopolitical shifts after the Euro-maidan revolution in Ukraine require an update of the EU's eastern policy. The resulting Joint Communication "Eastern Partnership Policy Beyond 2020: Reinforcing Resilience – an Eastern Partnership that Delivers for All" (March 2020) and Council Conclusions of May 2020 set out a new vision for the partnership. This communication underpinned the Economic Investment Plan (EIP) for the Eastern Partnership that commenced in 2021 and envisaged a budget contribution from the EU of 2.3 billion EUR, which could be used to leverage up to 17 billion EUR in public and private investments. As a part of the EaP, the EU4Business Initiative¹ started in 2009 under the name "SME Flagship", including only regional programmes at the time. EU4Business is an

¹ EU4Business Annual Report 2024, 28 July 2024, <https://eu4business.eu/reports/eu4business-annual-report-2024/>.

umbrella initiative that encompasses all EU support for small and medium-sized businesses (SMEs) in Eastern Partnership countries. Ukraine took second place in the Eastern Partnership 2023 index. This confirms its success in implementing some reforms, despite a very difficult situation.

Key aspects of EaP achievements include:

- **Strengthened European aspirations:** The EaP has undoubtedly solidified Ukraine's pro-European orientation, with a clear majority of the population supporting EU membership. The AA established a framework for political dialogue and cooperation, aligning Ukraine's foreign and security policy closer to the EU's.
- **Economic integration:** The DCFTA aimed to create a deep economic space between Ukraine and the EU, removing trade barriers and harmonizing regulations, and it has fostered economic ties between Ukraine and the EU, despite the challenges.
- **Democratic and institutional reforms:** The agreement spurred significant reforms within Ukraine to align with EU standards in areas such as governance, rule of law, and human rights. While progress has been uneven, the EaP has spurred some institutional reforms in line with EU standards.

The EU's Eastern Partnership (EaP) policy, while aiming for closer ties with Ukraine and other Eastern European nations, has encountered several challenges and shortcomings:

- **Lack of a clear perspective:** One of the primary criticisms of the EaP has been the absence of a clear path to EU membership for aspiring countries. This

ambiguity has dampened enthusiasm and created uncertainty. While Ukraine has been recognised as a European country, the timeline and possibility for accession remain unclear.

- Differences between EaP countries: Six of the countries of the EaP had very different levels of democratization as well as perspectives and visions of their European aspirations. Putting them all in “the same basket” impacted the policy’s effectiveness. This has led to inconsistent policy-making from the EU and the lack of a unified approach towards countries of the EaP.
- Russia’s influence: Russia has actively worked to undermine the EaP, using various tools including economic pressure, disinformation campaigns, and military aggression. This has made it difficult for Ukraine and other EaP countries to fully benefit from the policy.
- Limited financial assistance: Compared to other EU policies, the financial resources allocated to the EaP have been relatively modest. This has hindered Ukraine’s capacity to implement necessary reforms and modernise its economy.
- Slow pace of reforms: Despite the Association Agreement and DCFTA, Ukraine has faced significant challenges in implementing necessary reforms. Corruption, oligarchic influence, and bureaucratic inertia have hindered progress.

The EU’s Eastern Partnership has been an important framework for supporting Ukraine’s European integration, but it requires significant adjustments to address

its weaknesses and better meet Ukraine's current needs. The ongoing conflict with Russia has only strengthened Ukraine's resolve to join the EU, viewing it as a guarantor of security, democracy, and economic stability.

The EaP and Russia's war in Ukraine

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 marked a pivotal moment in the country's history, triggering a profound transformation that has reshaped its national identity, foreign policy aspirations, and, most notably, its relationship with Europe. Amidst the devastation and turmoil of war, Ukrainian society has witnessed a remarkable surge in support for European integration, driven by a deep-seated desire for security, prosperity, and democratic values.

Prior to the invasion, Ukrainian public opinion on European integration was already shifting towards greater support. Since 2014, Ukraine has had a strongly pro-EU parliament and two presidents who have linked EU accession to Ukraine's fight against Russian aggression and for greater democracy. The Russian invasion has accelerated this trend, galvanizing public support for European integration to unprecedented levels. A poll conducted by NDI² from 2023 found that 86% of Ukrainians believed that their country would join the EU by 2030, with 92% expressing a desire for membership. Rating Group³ conducted a study

² *Opportunities and Challenges Facing Ukraine's Democratic Transition*, National Democratic Institute (NDI), 4–16 January 2023, https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/January_2023_Ukraine_wartime_survey_ENG.pdf [30.06.2024].

³ *Twenty-fifth national survey: Dynamics of Ukrainians' attitudes towards international unions*, Rating Group, 22–23 November 2023, https://ratinggroup.ua/en/research/ukraine/dvadcyat_piyate_zagalnonacionalne_opituvanny_dinamska_stavlennya_ukrainciv_do_mizhnarodnih_soyuziv.html [30.06.2024].

of the dynamics of the attitude of the Ukrainian population toward international unions. As of the end of 2023, 78% of respondents would vote in favour of Ukraine's accession to the European Union if such a referendum were held. What is interesting is that support for membership increased across all regions of Ukraine. Ukrainians' desire to join the EU does not always mean that they trust the union and its institutions. More Ukrainians support joining the EU than trust it. This growing sentiment reflected the country's ongoing political and economic reforms, as well as its aspirations to integrate into a democratic and stable European environment.

This surge in support is attributed to several factors:

- **A heightened sense of vulnerability:** The invasion has heightened Ukrainians' perception of Russia as a threat to their national security and sovereignty. This has reinforced their belief that joining the EU would provide them with the political and military protection they need to deter future aggression.
- **A desire for democratic values:** The invasion has underscored the stark contrast between Ukraine's democratic aspirations and Russia's authoritarian regime. Ukrainian citizens view the EU as a beacon of democracy, human rights, and the rule of law, and they see membership as essential to safeguarding these values.
- **A yearning for economic stability:** The war has caused widespread economic disruption and hardship in Ukraine. Ukrainians believe that joining the EU would open up new economic opportunities, boost investment, and provide access to a larger market.

The Eastern Partnership (EaP) operates on an incentive-based system, where EaP countries are required to meet specific reform objectives to receive benefits from the EU. By making rewards contingent on political and economic reforms, the EU aims to influence these countries through soft power, thereby fostering long-term stability along its borders. This strategy relies on the concept of Europe as a “normative power”, promoting and diffusing democratic norms. Democratization studies have highlighted the promotion and diffusion of democracy as the most effective mechanisms, though other approaches such as learning and cooperation also play a significant role⁴.

Autocratic regimes like Russia not only resist the spread of democracy but also actively promote autocracy within their borders. These autocracies can serve as role models, especially if successful, for neighbouring countries, making emulation, learning processes, or policy transfers effective means of promoting autocracy. Internal democratic deficits and the adverse impact of authoritarian neighbours have hindered democratization in post-Soviet countries. A notable example is Georgia. Despite years of EU democracy promotion and political approximation with the EU, Georgia – one of the most pro-Western countries in the Eastern Partnership – appears to be drifting into Russia’s ideological camp. The Russian invasion of Ukraine has transformed Europe, with the European project displaying a newfound confidence.

⁴ A. Bank, *The Study of Authoritarian Diffusion and Cooperation: Comparative Lessons on Interests versus Ideology, Nowadays and in History*, “Democratization” 2017, vol. 24, no. 7, pp. 1345–1357.

The complexities of the Eastern Partnership have underscored the necessity of tailored approaches for each member state. The non-linear nature of reform processes, as evidenced by recent setbacks in Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia, highlights the fragility of democratic progress in the region. Fundamentally, Eastern Europe is a place of a broader ideological struggle between competing systems of governance and value orientations.

The necessity to address the Russian war against Ukraine, with all its implications for Eastern Europe, the EU, and the West itself, has led to a higher degree of pragmatism and realpolitik, which the EU had long tried to avoid⁵. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine was a clear failure of deterrence. "Russia must be seen for what it truly is: an imperialistic, authoritarian regime that aims to destroy the international order and establish a sphere of influence. It must be contained"⁶.

Vladimir Putin's ambitions extend beyond mere territorial control. Putin is unwilling to entertain any agreement that would ensure Ukraine's existence as a Western-aligned democratic state because his main objective is to dismantle Ukraine as an independent state, nation, and consolidated democracy. This goal is evident in his refusal to negotiate on terms that preserve Ukraine's Western orientation.

⁵ P. Havlicek, *The Future of the EU's Eastern Partnership Policy: "Back to the Basics and Value Origins"*, SCEEUS Guest Platform for Eastern Europe Policy, no. 3, 6 September 2022, <https://sceeus.se/en/publications/the-future-of-the-eus-eastern-partnership-policy-back-to-the-basics-and-value-origins/> [10.06.2024].

⁶ A. Polyakova et al., *A New Vision for the Transatlantic Alliance: The Future of European Security, the United States, and the World Order after Russia's War in Ukraine*, 30 November 2023, p. 89, <https://cepa.org/comprehensive-reports/a-new-vision-for-the-transatlantic-alliance-the-future-of-european-security-the-united-states-and-the-world-order-after-russias-war-in-ukraine/> [30.06.2024].

Consequently, a prolonged conflict, marked by intermittent escalation, is highly probable.

The Kremlin's overarching objective is to undermine NATO and the EU, aiming to weaken or even dissolve these Western alliances. By maintaining a state of conflict in Ukraine and hindering its democratic development, Russia seeks to create a buffer zone and assert its dominance in the region. A Russian victory would embolden Moscow's expansionist ambitions, particularly threatening the Baltic states with significant Russian minorities. This would severely undermine NATO's credibility and potentially lead to a new era of instability and conflict in Europe. A Russian victory would signal the erosion of the rules-based international order. It would embolden other authoritarian regimes to pursue aggressive foreign policies, challenging the dominance of Western democracies. The world would likely witness a more divided and competitive geopolitical landscape, with increased potential for conflict.

For a secure Europe, a clear vision of a secure, democratic, and sovereign Ukraine integrated into the EU is essential. The EU must adopt a more assertive stance, recognising the threats posed by authoritarian regimes like Russia and China. The Ukrainian case demonstrates that engaging with aggressive authoritarian regimes under the guise of "mutual interests" and prioritising business interests at any cost leads to greater losses in the future. The EU's Eastern Partnership, seen through the lens of Ukraine's experience, highlights the necessity for a robust and principled approach to foreign policy and security.

Conclusions

The war in Ukraine has fundamentally altered the geopolitical landscape. The EaP needs to evolve into a more ambitious and effective instrument to support Ukraine's European aspirations and contribute to regional stability. Theoretically, the EaP has been instrumental in bringing the EU and its partner countries closer together. There are voices to upgrade the EaP into a Partnership for Enlargement⁷. This new partnership should include three "pillars": single market integration and the reconstruction of Ukraine; a reinforced commitment to energy security and climate transition; and stronger political cooperation on security matters.

The main weak points of the EaP for Ukraine were:

- Ambiguity of membership prospects – The lack of a clear path to EU membership has led to frustration and disillusionment in Ukraine, undermining the motivational power of the EaP.
- Insufficient security guarantees – The EaP has not provided adequate security guarantees, leaving Ukraine vulnerable to external threats and ongoing conflict.

In an ideal world, the EaP would have:

- Offered a clear path to EU membership from the outset, providing a strong incentive for reforms;
- Prioritized security cooperation as a core element of the partnership;
- Developed a more robust mechanism for addressing external challenges such as Russian interference; and

⁷ P. Buras, K. Olaf-Lang, *Partnership for Enlargement: A New Way to Integrate Ukraine and the EU's Eastern Neighbourhood*, ECFR, Policy Brief, 17 June 2022, <https://ecfr.eu/publication/partnership-for-enlargement-a-new-way-to-integrate-ukraine-and-the-eus-eastern-neighbourhood/> [10.06.2024].

- Provided more substantial financial assistance to support economic development and institution building.

In conclusion, while the EU's Eastern Partnership has brought some benefits to Ukraine, the policy has been hampered by slow internal reform, limited resources, and external pressures. By providing clear membership prospects, enhancing security cooperation, streamlining support mechanisms, and engaging more deeply with civil society, the EaP could become a more effective tool in fostering a stable, democratic, and prosperous Ukraine. Overcoming these challenges and providing a clearer path to EU membership will be crucial for the success of the policy.



Alexandru Demianenco

The Eastern Partnership at 15 years: Moldova's journey and its challenges

As the Eastern Partnership (EaP) celebrates its 15th anniversary, it is crucial to reflect on its significance, particularly from Moldova's standpoint. Launched on 7 May 2009, the EaP was envisioned as a platform to foster closer relations between the European Union (EU) and six Eastern European and South Caucasus countries, including Moldova. Its goals were to promote democracy, economic integration, and sustainable development. However, with the geopolitical shifts following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the EaP's future has come under scrutiny. This article examines Moldova's journey within the EaP, highlighting its achievements, challenges, and the evolving nature of its relationship with the EU.

Challenges for Moldova's EaP journey: political instability and oligarchic rule

The Eastern Partnership has been a cornerstone of Moldova's European integration efforts since its inception in 2009. For Moldova, the EaP has represented a vital framework for fostering closer ties with the European Union, promoting democratic governance, economic development, and enhancing security. Over the past 15 years, Moldova has benefited significantly from the EaP, both in terms of financial support and the broad spectrum of areas it has covered.

Financially, the EaP has provided Moldova with substantial support aimed at facilitating its transformation into a more democratic and economically stable nation. Between 2009 and 2024, the EU allocated over 1.2 billion EUR to Moldova through various initiatives and programs. These funds have been instrumental in supporting reforms in governance, justice, and public administration as well as in fostering economic development and improving social services. Additionally, the EaP has played a key role in supporting Moldova's energy security, with investments directed toward diversifying energy sources and reducing dependence on Russia.

The EaP's assistance has extended across multiple sectors, covering areas such as infrastructure development, education, healthcare, and civil society empowerment. The initiative has provided crucial support for Moldova's efforts to align its legal and regulatory frameworks with EU standards, thereby enhancing the country's integration prospects. Visa liberalization, achieved in 2014, is one of the most tangible benefits Moldovan citizens have experienced, allowing them to travel freely within the Schengen Area.

Moreover, the DCFTA signed in the same year opened up the EU market to Moldovan products, leading to a significant increase in trade and investment flows between Moldova and EU member states. This development, described by Foreign Minister Mihai Popșoi as a critical achievement, was a tangible expression of Moldova's European aspirations, making the benefits of closer ties with the EU visible to its citizens.

Despite the substantial support and progress made under the EaP, Moldova's path has been marked by significant challenges. Political instability has been a recurring issue, often hindering the effective implementation of reforms. Frequent changes in government, political infighting, and a lack of consensus on key reforms have slowed down Moldova's progress toward European integration. The political environment during much of this period was characterized by uncertainty, which not only impeded reform efforts but also eroded public trust in the government.

The oligarchic period under Vladimir Plahotniuc, who effectively controlled Moldova's political and economic landscape from 2010 to 2019, exacerbated these challenges. Plahotniuc's influence permeated all levels of government, leading to widespread corruption and the erosion of democratic institutions. Former US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo described Plahotniuc as an "oligarch" involved in "significant corruption", noting his role in undermining the rule of law and compromising the independence of Moldova's democratic institutions. During this period, the EU's response included a mix of diplomatic pressure and financial sanctions aimed at curbing corruption and promoting reforms. However, the oligarchic capture of state

institutions significantly undermined the effectiveness of these measures.

The judiciary, which was supposed to be a pillar of Moldova's reform efforts, suffered greatly during this time. Despite formal advancements such as the establishment of anti-corruption bodies, the judiciary remained vulnerable to political interference, particularly during Plahotniuc's reign. Reports from the European Commission, the Council of Europe, and Transparency International consistently highlighted these issues, noting that the judiciary's compromised independence severely undermined public trust in the rule of law. Efforts to reduce case backlogs and introduce electronic case management systems were steps in the right direction but they were insufficient to address the deep-rooted problems within the justice system.

Gradual progress amidst geopolitical challenges

Despite the significant setbacks during the oligarchic period, Moldova began to make gradual progress in the years following Plahotniuc's departure from power in 2019. The political environment, while still fraught with challenges, started to stabilize, allowing for a renewed focus on implementing the necessary reforms for European integration. Moldova's government, supported by civil society and with guidance from the EU, began to take steps to restore public trust and improve governance. Efforts to combat corruption were reinvigorated, with the establishment of more robust anti-corruption bodies and increased transparency in public administration. This progress was particularly crystallized and visible since the landslide victory of pro-European forces in 2020 and later in 2021.

The unprovoked full-scale Russian aggression against Ukraine in 2022 marked a significant turning point for Moldova and the broader region. The conflict underscored the importance of European integration for Moldova's security and stability. Recognizing the urgency of the situation, Moldova submitted its application for EU candidate status on 3 March 2022. This historic step reflected Moldova's deepening commitment to its European path and the desire to secure its future within the EU.

In response to Moldova's application, the EU set out nine key recommendations that Moldova needed to address to move forward in the accession process. These recommendations focused on areas such as judicial reform, anti-corruption measures, and the protection of human rights. Over the following two years, Moldova worked diligently to implement these recommendations, demonstrating a renewed commitment to reform and European integration. The efforts paid off when, in 2024, the EU opened negotiations for Moldova's accession. This milestone marked a new chapter in Moldova's journey within the EaP, signalling that the country was moving in the right direction despite the challenges it faced.

As Moldova continues on its path towards European integration, a crucial moment is approaching: the referendum scheduled for the fall of 2024. This referendum will ask the Moldovan people to decide on the country's future direction – whether to continue on the path toward EU membership or to reconsider its position. The referendum represents the culmination of years of work under the EaP framework and is a direct result of the progress Moldova has made in aligning with EU standards.

The outcome of the referendum will be a decisive factor in Moldova's future. A vote in favour of EU membership would not only solidify Moldova's European aspirations but also provide a clear mandate for the government to continue its reforms and deepen its integration with the EU. Conversely, a negative outcome could stall Moldova's progress, complicating its relationship with the EU and potentially leaving the country more vulnerable to external pressures, particularly from Russia.

Adaptation and response to geopolitical challenges

Moldova's journey toward European integration has been profoundly shaped by its struggle to reduce its dependency on Russia, especially in terms of energy and economic ties. The EaP has played a crucial role in offering Moldova a viable alternative to Russia's influence, particularly in the face of economic and energy pressures. Through the EaP framework, Moldova has found support in diversifying its economy and enhancing its energy security, which has been vital in countering Russian leverage.

Economically, the EaP has provided Moldova with a platform to reorient its trade away from Russia and towards the European Union. Today, over 65% of Moldova's exports are directed to the EU market, a significant shift that has bolstered Moldova's economic stability and growth. This reorientation was largely facilitated by the DCFTA, signed in 2014, which opened up EU markets to Moldovan products. The DCFTA has been a cornerstone of Moldova's economic strategy, enabling increased trade and investment flows that have helped mitigate the impact of Russian sanctions such as those imposed on Moldova's agricultural sector.

Energy security has been another critical area where the EaP has provided essential support to Moldova. Moldova has long been vulnerable to Russian energy blackmail, particularly in terms of gas supply and electricity, much of which is controlled through the breakaway region of Transnistria. In response to these pressures, the EaP has facilitated significant EU investments aimed at diversifying Moldova's energy sources and reducing its reliance on Russian energy. These investments have included infrastructure projects to connect Moldova's energy grid with that of the EU, enhancing the country's energy independence and resilience.

Minister of Foreign Affairs Mihai Popșoi emphasized the importance of these efforts, noting that “the geopolitical landscape, particularly relations with Russia, has significantly impacted Moldova's involvement in the EaP. Moldova has had to navigate a delicate balance between pursuing its European integration goals and managing its historical and economic ties with Russia”. This delicate balance has been particularly evident during crises such as the Russian annexation of Crimea and the ongoing war in Ukraine, which began in February 2022. These events heightened regional security concerns, prompting Moldova to reaffirm its commitment to the EU while seeking to mitigate the adverse impacts of Russia's actions.

In response to Russia's economic and energy pressures, Moldova has consistently moved closer to the EU through the EaP framework. For instance, when Russia imposed trade restrictions on Moldovan agricultural products in 2013 and 2014, Moldova accelerated its efforts to integrate with the EU market.

To further bolster its resilience, Moldova has increased its cooperation with the EU and NATO in areas of security and defence. This cooperation includes participation in EU security initiatives, enhancing border security, and modernizing military capabilities with the support of Western partners. These steps are essential for safeguarding Moldova's sovereignty and continuing its path toward European integration.

EaP challenges for Moldova and the region

Political instability within EaP countries, particularly Moldova, has been another significant challenge. Frequent changes in government, political infighting, and the influence of oligarchic interests have often stalled reform efforts and weakened institutional capacity. In Moldova, the legacy of oligarchic control has left deep scars on the political landscape, undermining public trust in democratic institutions and complicating the country's path toward European integration. This political volatility not only hampers the progress of individual countries but also weakens the overall effectiveness of the EaP, making it difficult to achieve consistent and sustainable outcomes across the region.

Minister Popșoi suggests that to enhance the effectiveness of the EaP for Moldova amidst current regional and global challenges, several key areas need attention:

- **Increased Flexibility:** Adapting the EaP framework to be more responsive to the unique needs and circumstances of each partner country.
- **Enhanced Security Cooperation:** Strengthening cooperation on security and resilience, particularly in light of regional conflicts and hybrid threats.

- **Targeted Economic Support:** Providing more targeted support for economic development, particularly in addressing economic disparities and promoting inclusive growth.
- **Strengthened Rule of Law and Anti-Corruption Measures:** Intensifying efforts to support judicial reforms, anti-corruption initiatives, and good governance practices. Providing technical assistance, training, and resources to strengthen institutions that uphold the rule of law and combat corruption can help build public trust and create a more transparent and accountable governance framework.
- **Improved Public Communication and Engagement:** Enhancing communication and public engagement efforts to increase awareness and understanding of the benefits of the EaP and EU integration. This could involve more effective use of media, public consultations, and information campaigns to build public support and counteract misinformation. Engaging civil society organizations and local communities in these efforts can help ensure a broader reach and impact.
- **Strengthened Regional Cooperation:** Promoting deeper regional cooperation among EaP countries to address common challenges and share best practices. Facilitating cross-border projects, regional dialogues, and collaborative initiatives can enhance solidarity and collective progress towards European integration goals.
- **Increased Financial and Technical Assistance:** Allocating more financial and technical resources to support Moldova's reform and development efforts.

Ensuring that funding is effectively managed and directed towards high-impact projects can maximize the benefits of external assistance and accelerate progress towards EU integration.

Lastly, the EaP faces the challenge of maintaining its relevance and adapting to the evolving needs of the region. As new geopolitical realities emerge such as the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, the EaP must evolve to address these developments effectively. The EaP needs to provide more tailored support, taking into account the unique circumstances of each partner country while also enhancing regional cooperation. Ensuring that the EaP remains a dynamic and responsive framework is essential for overcoming the existing challenges and achieving the long-term goal of closer integration between the EU and its Eastern neighbours.

Conclusions

Moldova's experience within the Eastern Partnership over the past 15 years reflects both the potential and limitations of this initiative. Significant progress has been made in political and economic reforms but numerous challenges persist, including corruption, political instability, and geopolitical tensions. As Moldova stands at a crossroads with the upcoming referendum on EU membership, its relationship with the EU is poised to deepen. A nuanced and adaptive approach within the EaP framework, coupled with strengthened bilateral ties with the EU, is essential for Moldova to overcome its challenges and realise its European aspirations.

The Eastern Partnership has undoubtedly brought substantial benefits to Moldova, particularly in terms of

economic integration, mobility, and institutional reform. However, much more could have been done to address the persistent challenges that have hindered Moldova's progress. The journey ahead may be complex, but Moldova's commitment to the principles and values of the Eastern Partnership offers a beacon of hope for a more democratic, prosperous, and secure future within the European family. It is imperative for both the EU and Moldova to continue fostering a strong partnership, ensuring that the aspirations of the Moldovan people for a European future are fully realised.



Grigol Julukhidze, Giorgi Pipia

How Georgia sees the Eastern Partnership after 15 years

The Eastern Partnership initiative, which unites six former Soviet republics that are not members of the European Union, has completed its 15th anniversary. The Eastern Partnership is made up of three countries from Eastern Europe (Belarus, Moldova, and Ukraine) and three from the South Caucasus (Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan). Currently, only three countries are actively involved in this initiative – Moldova, Ukraine, and Georgia. As for Belarus, Armenia, and Azerbaijan, their foreign policy courses do not currently lead to integration with the European Union for various reasons. Under pressure from Moscow, Armenia did not sign the Association Agreement in 2013, due to which its prospects for rapprochement with the EU diverged from the course of Moldova, Ukraine, and Georgia. Today, relations between Armenia and the EU are warming up again. Azerbaijan has a multi-polar foreign policy and joining the Union is not its main priority. As for Belarus, after the events of 2020, when peaceful demonstrations were

violently suppressed by the regime of Alyaksandr Lukashenka, the election results were hijacked and relations between the EU and Belarus froze indefinitely.

However, it can be argued that in some cases this historic initiative brought concrete results, which manifested in the fact that three of its six members (Moldova, Ukraine, and Georgia) have the status of candidates for EU membership today. After obtaining candidate status, the phase of negotiations has already begun, which means that the idea and initiative of the Eastern Partnership have achieved tangible results in the context of the three mentioned countries. Based on this, the Eastern Partnership brought outcomes that became possible in the newly-created geopolitical situation and thus actually partially fulfilled its mission. Today, after 15 years, the foreign political aspirations of the partnership member states are clear.

One of the main reasons why the Eastern Partnership initiative did not bring more benefits to the countries of Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus is the lack of security guarantees and the Russian military presence in these regions. It should be taken into account that all three countries (Moldova, Ukraine, and Georgia) who are members of the Eastern Partnership and are already candidates are vulnerable from a military point of view. Their safety is not guaranteed, especially as Russia has been waging a large-scale military campaign in Ukraine for more than two years. There are Russian military units in Moldova (Transnistria). Russian military bases are also located in two regions of Georgia – Abkhazia and Samachablo. This means that the territorial integrity of these countries is violated, and if this

picture does not change, the sovereignty of all three states may be questioned in the future.

The success or failure of the Eastern Partnership initiative was largely determined by the relationship between the EU and Russia and Russia's strong (Belarus, Armenia) or limited (Moldova, Ukraine, Georgia) influence in the member countries of the initiative, where the EU's liberal/democratic neighbourhood policy and Russia's rigid, military-oriented foreign policy towards the former Soviet republics clashed. The reality is so complex that Moldova, Ukraine, and Georgia depend not only on the goodwill of the EU but also on regional stability, containment of threats from the Kremlin, healthy positioning of domestic politics, and public sentiments.

Since it is a founding, fundamental value of the European Union to spread economic stability, security, and prosperity in its neighbourhood in order to ensure domestic stability and security in its own union, the Eastern Partnership initiative is no exception. This is especially true in light of Russia's increasing aggression and pressure on the former Soviet republics becoming evident in the last ten years. There is no doubt that the main challenge for the EU's neighbourhood policy is the threat from Russia, along with China's economic expansion.

As for the case of Georgia, of course, no one can deny the fact that the Eastern Partnership initiative has had historical importance for Tbilisi, which brought positive results and helped the country to develop in many directions. Between 2014 and 2024, the European Union provided assistance to Georgia in the amount of 700 million EUR. Among them, it should be noted, were a number of packages of economic

assistance in such areas as health care, education (Erasmus+), agriculture, strengthening of state institutions, and support for small and medium-sized businesses.

It is also worth noting the expenses incurred for democratic and legislative reforms as well as the benefits that a significant part of the population received as a result of visa liberalisation with the EU. Hundreds of thousands of Georgian citizens, for various purposes, were able to travel visa-free to the Schengen zone. Since the signing of the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area together with the Association Agreement, the EU has become the most important trade partner for Georgia.

The greatest single benefit that the Eastern Partnership initiative has brought to Georgia is its candidate status. This has meant that Georgia should start negotiations on joining the European Union, and after fulfilling specific reservations and standard requirements, Georgia would have a high chance of becoming a full member of the Union. Candidate status for Georgia means increased financial and political assistance and closer proximity to the EU, which will contribute to the accelerated development of the country.

The main reason why the issue of candidate status has been on the agenda recently is the Russia-Ukraine war. On 24 February 2022, Russia's military invasion of Ukraine accelerated the process of negotiations between Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova, opening a new window of opportunity where an application for membership to the European Union was submitted in an accelerated manner. Ukraine applied first, just a few days after the start of the invasion. In early March, Moldova and Georgia expressed their official desire to join.

Approximately 85% of the population of Georgia supports joining the EU. This position was expressed on a mass scale with crowded rallies in February and March 2022. The failure of the government to apply for membership, or delaying it in any way, only harmed the ruling party. However, after three months, Moldova and Ukraine received candidate status, and Georgia was granted a European perspective, which meant granting candidate status only after fulfilling a twelve-point package of conditions. This decision was followed by an anti-government protest where more than 100,000 people took to the streets, believing that the government's anti-European rhetoric and inert positioning had cost Georgia the chance to receive candidate status on time. Finally, it took a year and a half for Georgia to get candidate status.

On 8 November 2023, the European Commission recommended that Georgia be granted candidate status. According to Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission, the EU expressed its full support for the will of the Georgian people regarding Georgia's accession to the European Union and called on the authorities to take into account this desire of the population. The aforementioned recommendation provided for the fulfilment of nine conditions in order to continue the negotiation process after receiving candidate status, some of which were part of the previous twelve points, and some contained new reservations.

At a solemn event related to the acceptance of candidate status, the Ambassador of the European Union, Paweł Herczyński, emphasised the merit due to the Georgian population in achieving this important historical result. He noted that, first and foremost, this is the achievement of the

Georgian people, who permanently and faithfully support Georgia's accession to the European Union. Since the candidate status of Georgia has been granted, the approach of the European Union towards Georgia as a potential member appears to be ambiguous. It implies that, on the one hand, the institutions of the EU express dissatisfaction with the actions of the Georgian authorities, both in terms of the inertness of the internal legislative and executive mechanisms and also because of the foreign, non-Western political course. On the other hand, the Union emphasises its support for Georgian society and appreciates its aspiration towards the West.

As for the current context, on the road to European integration, the Georgian government took a harmful step which was manifested in the fact that the law on the transparency of foreign influence (the so-called foreign agent law), recalled in March 2023, was reversed in April 2024 and re-initiated. The government had promised its population that it would not re-introduce the law. In 2023, the European Union and partner countries strongly criticised the government's action. Against this background, internal tensions reached their peak, which pushed the Georgian Dream into backing down. A year later, on 3 April 2024, the ruling party re-initiated the same draft bill with a changed name and minor, insignificant amendments. People called it the "Russian law" due to its intrinsic and purposeful nature. Hundreds of thousands of people took to the streets again; several large-scale, peaceful demonstrations were held, but this time the government did not listen to the will of the majority of its population, showed a rigid approach and violently broke up a number of rallies.

At the same time, the recommendations of the European Council, European Commission, Venice Commission, and European partner countries were not taken into account. The adoption of the foreign agent law, which was accompanied by frequent violations of human rights, the use of force against peaceful protesters, anti-Western, anti-European rhetoric, and disinformation campaigns, brought the process of negotiations with the European Union to a dead end and seriously questioned the country's accession to the European Union. Today, the European perspective and future of Georgia are unclear. From a democratic point of view, Georgia's strategic partner, the United States, evaluated the adoption of the law as a step backwards and as an anti-democratic action. In the end, it can be said that during its 12 years of being in power, the Georgian Dream most clearly and openly expressed its anti-European, anti-democratic position, thereby causing the dissatisfaction of hundreds of thousands of people, the majority of whom will probably not vote for the ruling team in the upcoming elections scheduled for 26 October 2024.

The proof of this is the official position voiced by the ambassador of the European Union in Georgia. Herczyński said that the direct support of the European Union to the Georgian government will be reduced, and the European assistance will be directed towards civil society and the media, where the pro-European position is unwavering and reliable. Within these measures, the EU has frozen 30 million EUR intended for the support of Georgia's defence sector. Herczyński also declared that the European integration process is suspended for Georgia.

In addition to the issues listed above, the adoption of the foreign agent law has a geopolitical dimension. The suspension of negotiations with the EU is also in the interests of Russia, which openly says that the joining of the former Soviet republics to the Euro-Atlantic structures is not in its geopolitical interests. Against this background and according to the government's recent rhetoric, Georgia's departure from the European path automatically means a return to the Kremlin orbit, an increase in Russia's influence in the country, and ultimately its transformation into an autocracy dependent on Moscow. This is evidenced by the fact that the adoption of the law in three readings took almost two months in the face of overcoming the president's veto and internal tension. During this time, the Russian minister of foreign affairs and the highest representatives of the Russian government expressed their support for the Georgian Dream.

Since the government did not take into account the warnings from the European Union and strategic partners like the US or the OSCE, and most importantly, Georgian society, in order not to adopt the aforementioned law, at this stage, the elections scheduled for October appear to be of decisive importance. On the one hand, the October 26 elections will be a kind of referendum where the Georgian people will decide what they want: the West, joining the European Union or increasing dependence on Russia and returning to the Russian orbit. On the other hand, it is difficult to say how the elections will be held as there is a chance that the government will not hold fair and impartial elections due to the current situation, against the background of growing dissatisfaction in society.

In the end, the European future of Georgia is in difficult times and is unclear at this stage. If Georgia returns to the European path, specific recommendations are implemented, and negotiations with the European Union are opened, the country will have a chance to become a member of the European Union in the coming years. This would largely be to the credit of the Eastern Partnership initiative and, if this happens, 15 years of work and a path full of difficulties will have a logical and just end. However, due to the current situation, the chances of reopening negotiations with the EU are unfortunately very low. Until the elections are held, it is difficult to make concrete predictions for the European future of Georgia, it will all depend on the fair conduct of the elections and their results.



Valentina Gevorgyan

Armenia's strategic integration with the EU after 15 years of the Eastern Partnership

The Eastern Partnership (EaP), originally a Swedish-Polish Initiative, has been about two things: to keep the EU's eastern border safe and to offer deeper EU integration to partners in return for their democratisation efforts – through bilateral and multilateral means. In its regional policy, the EU has widely promoted the principles of coherence, consistency, and cohesion; however, these principles do not seem to have worked well, considering the current state of the EaP today. Presently, the members are very dissimilar to each other; instead, they naturally assembled into three groups: the so-called front-runners or EaP-favourites (Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine), the so-called *no-progress, no-hope* members (Azerbaijan, Belarus, later with a suspended membership status), and Armenia – an outlier case, which still has to gain a title that would best describe the country's position vis-à-vis the Eastern Partnership based on its public aspirations and the effort of the government towards that aim.

Armenian society – and the treatment of Armenia by its neighbours – makes the country’s case unique. Things are shifting in Armenia. The mood of the Armenian public regarding more EU integration is now on the rise. Studies and opinion polls conducted since 2018¹ portray a gradually growing tendency in public perceptions and attitudes towards more EU integration, rejecting formerly established security- and economic-membership structures and allies. In Armenia’s post-shock society², more evidence emerges regarding a shift in public positioning regarding the country’s future and its former main ally Russia. More people in Armenia see Russia and the Putin regime as a threat to the security and political stability of Armenia³. There is a growing understanding among the Armenian population that Russia’s enabling of Azerbaijani efforts against establishing peace demonstrates that Russia is no longer an ally of Armenia. Amid the growing external challenges for the country today, the role of the EaP and the need for alternative mechanisms to deliver strategic integration for Armenia and its citizens is urgent. Armenian society is now ready for more integration with the EU.

Armenian society mobilised to pursue the European path

Despite the immediate security and societal challenges, Armenia participates in and even organises international summits related to democracy. In this way, it confirms its place

¹ An example: <http://www.acgrc.am/>.

² <https://www.peterlang.com/document/1396725>.

³ <https://www.iri.org/resources/public-opinion-survey-residents-of-armenia-december-2023/>.

among the international democratic community. Amid its difficulties, the government acknowledges the priority of institutional development and solutions. Furthermore, the Armenian society, with the help of its democratic forces, has opted for strengthening its political identity into one corresponding with the European ways of thinking and living. Even the Armenian church as an institution seems to have lost its former mobilising potential due to its adopting an anti-democratic role – similar to Russia and other post-Soviet republics. Instead, there seems to be a growing debate on the need for a citizen vote on EU integration.

Apart from citizens or the society at large, Armenia retains a growing democratic force active in the country's public and political discourse. The democratic forces include both extra-parliamentary groups that are gaining popularity as well as political parties and formal and informal civil society organisations, all of which aim to support Armenia's democratisation and its alignment with European standards.

A recent example is a coalition of Armenia's democratic forces initiating steps to prepare the country for a referendum on joining the EU. The intention is to provide an understanding of citizens' positioning and intentions towards deeper integration. Armenia's National Assembly standing committee on European integration has also organised a hearing on opportunities towards the EU vote, to promote the discussion among the political and expert community on the matter. Recently, a Conference on Armenia in the EaP was organised by Armenian democratic forces, civil society and the National platform of the EaP's Civil Society Forum, prioritising arguments for the political, security, and

economic growth within EaP's orbit. A recent report⁴ highlights an increased understanding among the civil society community regarding the role of the EU-Armenia Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA) and its proper implementation for the country's development.

The civil society and expert community treat the EU-Armenia CEPA as a stepping stone to the EU Association Agenda. In brief, Armenia is progressing in its compliance with the EU's political, economic, and EU *acquis* Copenhagen criteria. It may soon be ready to discuss membership. Nevertheless, the time for Armenia's Association Agenda is quickly approaching. To be fair, Armenia's record over the last 15 years has seen several episodes of backsliding, starting with the initial refusal to sign the Association Agreement after pressure by Russia, which skilfully manipulated Armenia's and Nagorno-Karabakh's (NK) security architecture. Today, after the 2018 revolution, and especially after the 2020 war in Nagorno-Karabakh, the Armenian society and government institutions are mobilised and looking towards strategic partnership and deeper integration with the EU. Considering Armenia as a trusted partner in the region of consolidated and unpredictable autocrats, the EU is also taking steps towards that purpose. Taking one step at a time for Armenia's integration, the European Commission recently confirmed a decision to start a visa liberalisation dialogue with Armenia.

⁴ <https://eapcivilsociety.eu/news/research-news/report-on-csc-in-armenia.html>.

Many levels of strategic integration

Why is Armenia a strategic partner to the EU and why does it deserve a revisited and strategic integration within the Eastern Partnership? Time and again, the EU has advocated for a stable EaP region. On the macro-level, the interests may lie at the crossroads of Armenia's geographic positioning in terms of the eastern-western routes and communication infrastructure. An independent, secure, and importantly, democratising Armenia will only contribute to improved Euro-Atlantic cooperation throughout the region. On a meso-level and internally, Armenia's deeper EU integration will prioritise the EaP's policy objectives by addressing the areas and issues institutionally. On a micro-level, Armenia's deeper integration with the EU, and the more opportunities that it provides, will enhance the society's cultural underpinnings to secure a prosperous life, free enough for citizens and minimising the risk of illegal migration to the EU. A new and strategic partnership on all levels will mean removing any barriers standing in the way of Armenia's deeper integration and working with the government institutions and civil society.

For strategic integration with Armenia, the EaP will need to take into consideration society's primary and immediate needs today. Armenia's strategic integration with the EaP means new and deeper cooperation avenues with the EU and its institutions. In Armenia's current security and political context, strategic involvement encompasses select primary areas such as security, democracy, economic development, and civil society. First of all, a revisited engagement for Armenia requires flexibility and openness for the update of cooperation in security reform, to support Armenia in order

to diversify its defence infrastructure. With gradual steps, the country has already navigated a basis for withdrawal from the Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO). The opportunities with the EU may include initiating cooperation with Frontex, the EU border force, to assist Armenia in the complicated process of border delimitation and demarcation with Azerbaijan; as well as exploring opportunities with the European Peace Facility, the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) and the European Defence Agency.

Armenia has already initiated and needs more security cooperation with EU individual member states to modernise its army and improve interoperability with the support of European partners. Importantly, cooperation in the security sector should include investing in connectivity and communications to support the country's critical infrastructure. Armenia's revision of its entire security architecture and the seeking of new cooperation initiatives – as the members of Armenia's government have declared on numerous occasions – is solely aimed at increasing the country's capacities to be able to protect its borders and sovereignty. With the same enthusiasm and proactive determination, Armenia is committed to signing a peace agreement with Azerbaijan, despite the latter's consistent refusal.

Armenia's updated and strategic engagement with the EaP should also encourage strengthened cooperation towards the country's institutional development and the rule of law. Good governance mechanisms on all levels, anti-corruption policies and their implementation as well as the fight against crime, will need to be evaluated against Armenia's will for implementation. The EaP should continue

prioritising Armenia's economic growth to reduce unemployment, increase opportunities for small and medium businesses, and encourage more private investment. The EU's EaP programme and Armenia must work together to invest in long-term measures for Armenia's increased market competitiveness and, therefore, its economic integration into the EU's internal market. This will prepare Armenia and make the case for the signing of the Association and the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas (DCFTA) Agreements. Whenever possible, the EU officials keep highlighting that the EaP remains committed to supporting all its eastern partners in this regard.

The autocratic pushback will remain in the EaP as long as the region retains consolidated autocrats, the likes of Ilham Aliyev and Alyaksandr Lukashenka, not to mention the presence of Vladimir Putin. This may be the main reason for the EU and the EaP continuing to invest in closer cooperation and reliance on civil society in partner countries, by identifying trusted partners and especially so for Armenia. Increased and regular support to Armenian civil society must be a priority, along with the EaP's more structured consultations and direct discussions with reliable partners in the field. The EaP policy must revolve around preconditions for Armenia's government to include civil society in the process of assessing reform implementation, within the scope of EaP policy and EU-Armenia CEPA. The EU should continue to advocate for providing direct support towards the EU-Armenia CEPA implementation, namely to the EU-Armenia CEPA Civil Society platform and Armenia's strong and experienced civil society coalitions.

No progress without peace

The EU must reach a political decision to support Armenia's territorial integrity strategically by accumulating efforts for that aim. As the last and vital area or even a responsibility, the EaP should take on the role of discussions with its other member, Azerbaijan, as it has an undeniable influence on Armenia's deeper integration with the EU. Azerbaijan needs to commit to signing a peace treaty with Armenia. For that, increased pressure, including within the EaP framework and by individual member states is urgently required. The peace process in the region is purposefully and consistently delayed by the Russia-Azerbaijan duo. It is clear by now that the delay of Azerbaijan's signing of a peace agreement with Armenia is directly associated with the Azeri-Russian close relationship, which both have capitalised on since the NK War of 2020.

Azerbaijan continues to put forward artificially construed preconditions for Armenia's further concessions, at the same time having no intention of signing the agreement, rather for the sake of extending the process. Azerbaijan has crossed and wholly disregarded the boundaries of international law⁵. While putting forward more ungrounded demands, Azerbaijan, on its side, has made little effort, much less any concessions, to demonstrate an actual desire for peace. The EaP's performance evaluation calls for a transformation to better address members' needs, especially when interests coincide. If the parties – with stakes in the region and an actual intention for peace – do not put pressure on Azerbaijan, they inadvertently implement the Russian-Azeri

⁵ https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2024-06/DDF_FH-REPORT_06.2024.pdf.

mutually agreed agenda on delaying the signing. There is no doubt that for peace in the region, both parties – Armenia and Azerbaijan – must commit to Western, more importantly the EU-based, formats of facilitation.

As Azerbaijan strengthens its strategic ties with Russia, the EU should consider strengthening ties with Armenia for the possibility of development in the region. For decades the EU's widely promoted principles of coherence, consistency, and cohesion have been applicable in the EaP to the cases of Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine. Now, Armenia expects the same principles to be applied in its regard. Both the EU and Armenia have a role to play, by establishing an institutional solution or a separate panel on Armenia's updated and strategic integration with the EU for immediate and regular consultations on the reform implementation and obliging Armenia to have no alternative but to choose the Association. Deeper integration with the EU is the strategic preference of Armenian society.



Natalia Konarzewska

Azerbaijan and the Eastern Partnership: 15 years later

Fifteen years of Azerbaijan's participation in the European Union's Eastern Partnership (EaP) project bears mixed results since Azerbaijan eschews the EU's democratization agenda and refuses to adopt any reforms that would endanger the stability of the authoritarian regime in power. Hydrocarbon-rich Azerbaijan, empowered by its recent successful military operation resulting in it taking full control over the separatist Nagorno-Karabakh region, remains assertive towards Brussels and some of the European Union members such as France, and prefers to focus on energy and transport relations with the EU rather than adopting its democratic rules.

Baku and Brussels: an uneasy relationship

The EU and Azerbaijan have strategic interests in each other but their relations are marked with ups and downs. Azerbaijan is important for the European Union in terms of security, transit, and energy cooperation. Azerbaijan's hydrocarbon

wealth and its strategic geopolitical location came into focus after the Russian aggression against Ukraine in 2022, which prompted the EU to wean itself off Russian hydrocarbons and find alternative transport and transit routes. In 2022, the European Commission signed a deal with Azerbaijan to double imports of its natural gas by 2027, that is to 20 billion cubic meters (bcm) a year within the span of 15 years. The EU is also interested in the political aspect of relations with Baku, particularly in the human rights dimension and democratization as well as mediation in the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Yet, so far, the EU has failed to promote democracy and respect for fundamental rights in Azerbaijan since it has few levers on Baku. President Ilham Aliyev's regime has virtually eliminated political opposition, independent media, and free and fair elections. Azerbaijan's poor human rights record and its treatment of the Armenian minority in Nagorno-Karabakh have resulted in the country's delegation being suspended from the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) in January 2024, which highlights brewing tensions between some Western states and Baku.

Azerbaijan also has a strategic interest in the EU. The European Union remains Azerbaijan's biggest export market and an important trade partner, accounting for roughly 48.5% of the country's total trade¹. Moreover, Baku sees Europe as a lucrative market for its oil and natural gas. For a long time, Azerbaijan has been interested in becoming

¹ EU trade relations with Azerbaijan. Facts, figures and latest developments, European Commission, https://policy.trade.ec.europa.eu/eu-trade-relationships-country-and-region/countries-and-regions/azerbaijan_en.

an energy hub for delivering Caspian gas from Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan to Europe via Turkey. Energy cooperation with the EU is important for Azerbaijan, which derives 92% of its export revenue and more than half of its state income from oil and gas sales².

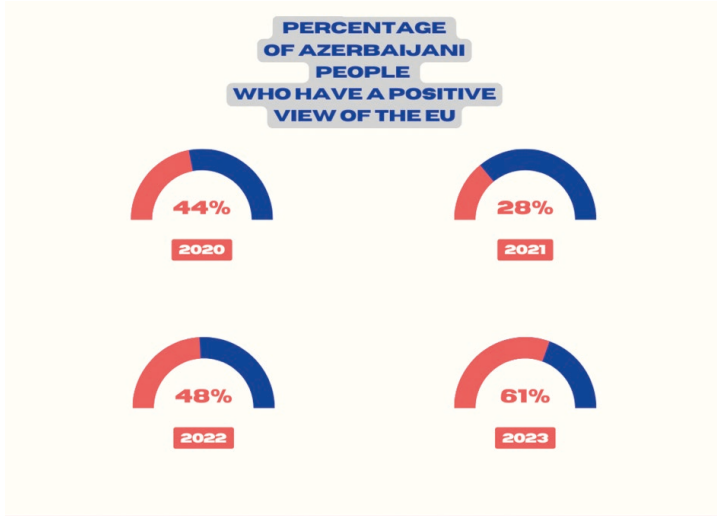
Baku also has its eye on cooperation with the EU in the transport and transit dimensions. Using its strategic geopolitical location at the intersection between Europe and Asia, Azerbaijan is keen to position itself as a logistic hub which can link East and West. To achieve this, the country has been enhancing its logistic infrastructure such as international rail and road infrastructure, air cargo facilities, Baku Port, and the nearby free trade zone at Alat³ (these are expanded with the EU's financial assistance). Moreover, the majority of Azerbaijanis have a favourable attitude towards the EU and are convinced that their country has positive relations with the bloc.

Chart 1 illustrates changes in Azerbaijanis' attitudes towards the European Union in the last four years and a noticeable growth in respondents' positive views of the EU since 2021.

² 2023 Investment Climate Statements: Azerbaijan, U.S. Department of State, <https://www.state.gov/reports/2023-investment-climate-statements/azerbaijan/>.

³ Azerbaijan Country Commercial Guide. Transportation and Logistics, International Trade Administration, U.S. Department of Commerce, 21 November 2023, <https://www.trade.gov/country-commercial-guides/azerbaijan-transportation-and-logistics>.

Chart 1. Changes in Azerbaijanis' attitudes towards the EU in the last four years illustrate the growth of respondents' positive views of the EU since 2021



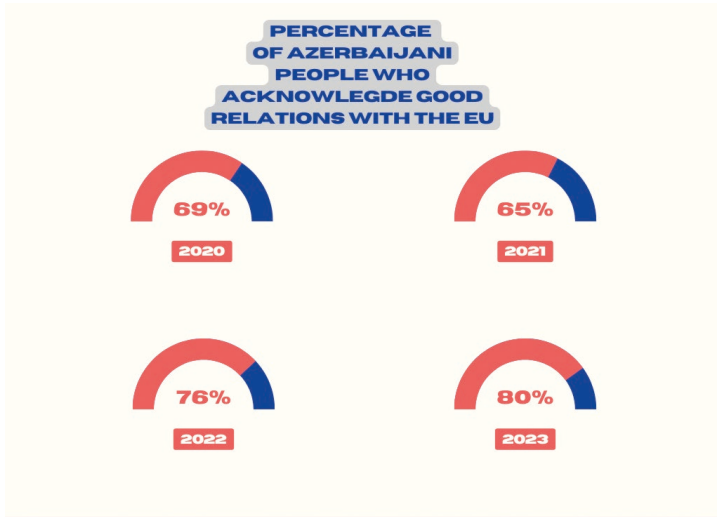
Source: Author's own work based on *Annual Survey 2023 – Azerbaijan. Perception of the European Union*⁴.

Chart 2 shows that the percentage of Azerbaijanis who think that their country has good relations with the EU is high and has seen steady growth to 80% in 2023.

Azerbaijan placed great importance on the resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and hoped that engagement with the EU would help it to regain control over the separatist region, which until 2023 was fully or partially (after the 2020 war) controlled by Armenians. Up until 2022, the EU made some modest attempts to play a more active role in mediation between Armenia and Azerbaijan but generally lacked the political will to make a more significant contribution to the peace process. This status quo was frustrating for Baku,

⁴ <https://euneighbourseast.eu/news/publications/opinion-survey-2023-azerbaijan>.

Chart 2. The percentage of Azerbaijani people who assess that their country has positive relations with the EU has seen steady growth in the last three years



Source: Author's own work based on *Annual Survey 2023 – Azerbaijan. Perception of the European Union*.

which hoped for more Western engagement in resolving the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. The situation changed in 2022 when Russia's temporary exit from the mediatory position in the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict (caused by its military aggression against Ukraine) opened up new opportunities for the EU and the United States to engage in the peace process. So far, both Western mediators, who act in synergy, have organised numerous meetings between representatives of Armenia and Azerbaijan, including their leaders, and tried to facilitate a dialogue between Yerevan and Baku.

Brussels is regarded as a most trustworthy mediator by Armenia and Azerbaijan. For example, EU diplomacy was able to bring Yerevan and Baku together to sign groundbreaking agreements to exchange prisoners of war or on

the delimitation of the common border (which was one of the pressing issues between them) and break the stalemate which occurred in negotiations after Azerbaijan's takeover of Nagorno-Karabakh in 2023. The EU is also significantly engaged in concluding a peace agreement between Armenia and Azerbaijan. However, Azerbaijan's political relations with some of the EU members remain problematic – lately, Baku has been engaged in a bitter conflict with France over its military and political support for Armenia.

Despite some attempts as presented above to upgrade political relations between Azerbaijan and the European Union, political integration between them is non-existent. Bilateral relations are focused mainly on cooperation in the energy, trade, and transit fields, while the political component remains underdeveloped. Azerbaijan refuses to implement the EU's democratic agenda and, as a non-aligned state, eschews any form of integration; the last political agreement between Baku and Brussels was inked in 1999. Since Baku has refused to sign an association agreement, the EU and Azerbaijan began negotiations in 2017 on a new agreement and formulated a new set of partnership priorities in the next year that were more tailored to Azerbaijan's needs. However, negotiations on the new deal have not yet been concluded, apparently because of Baku's assertiveness, and are constantly postponed⁵. It is likely that Azerbaijan's inflexibility prompted senior EU representatives to admit that Baku is a partner but there are "real difficulties" in this relationship.

⁵ Sh. Ahmadzada, *Can Energy Ties Prevent an Azerbaijan–EU Rift?*, Carnegie Politika Commentary, 8 April 2024, <https://carnegieendowment.org/russia-eurasia/politika/2024/04/can-energy-ties-prevent-an-azerbaijan-eu-rift?lang=en>.

Azerbaijan is likely to remain intransigent. The successful military operation in 2023 to regain control over Nagorno-Karabakh has elevated Baku's regional profile and boosted the popularity of its president, Ilham Aliyev. What is more, the country's role in ensuring European energy security has grown as well. For these reasons, the EU is visibly losing leverage over Azerbaijan to pressure Baku to curb its authoritarian tendencies and stop aggressive moves against Karabakh Armenians and Armenia. This has been evident multiple times in recent years, as Brussels' appeals to Baku to lift the blockade of the Lachin corridor, which caused a humanitarian disaster in Nagorno-Karabakh, respect the rights of Karabakh Armenians, and cease military attacks on the Armenian border have been ignored by Azerbaijan.

Baku and the EaP: a rocky road

The Eastern Partnership programme is a major platform for EU-Azerbaijan relations. In contrast to the European Neighbourhood Policy, which put the EU at the centre of relations with partners who were encouraged to adopt European values, the EaP took a more nuanced approach to relations with Eastern neighbours and aimed to tailor its offer to their needs. However, it soon turned out that the EaP not only failed to differentiate its offer for the participating countries enough but also did not fully take into account their ambitions and national interests⁶. The member states also have different approaches to the partnership policy toward

⁶ E. Korosteleva, *The Eastern Partnership Initiative. A New Opportunity for Neighbours?*, [in:] eadem (ed.), *Eastern Partnership: A New Opportunity for the Neighbours*, New York 2012, p. 12.

the EU's eastern neighbours. Poland, the Baltic states, and Sweden were more invested in the EaP programme than members in the south, who prioritised relations with Africa and the Middle East. This situation started to change in 2022 after Russia waged war against Ukraine, prompting nearly all EU members and institutions to acknowledge the importance of a robust and effective policy towards the Eastern neighbourhood and to seriously tackle the security, humanitarian, and economic challenges caused by Russian aggression.

Inconsistency and the lack of cooperation between the EU institutions and member states also contribute to the EaP's lack of robustness. Some EaP partners such as Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova, were eager to integrate with the EU and adopt its core values, principles, and laws. Two of the EaP's more notorious authoritarian regimes – Azerbaijan and Belarus – refused to implement the EU's democratic principles and wanted to engage with the bloc on what they deemed as equal terms. The EU has tried to fix some of these shortcomings by adopting a more flexible approach towards the Eastern neighbours and introducing a “more for more” policy, which aims to take a differentiated approach towards EaP countries based on their willingness to reform and democratise. But even this tailored policy did not work in the case of Azerbaijan, which was able to use its strategic geopolitical location at the crossroads of Europe and Asia as well as its hydrocarbon reserves to push the EU to drop the majority of its conditions and mute the criticism of its autocratic tendencies. Azerbaijan's strategic importance for the EU rose after Russia's aggression against Ukraine in 2022, which encouraged the European Union to diversify

away from Russian hydrocarbons and find alternative energy sources and transit routes.

EU institutions and member states have inconsistent approaches towards Azerbaijan, which prevents the EU from forming a unified policy when dealing with Baku. The European Commission is eager to cooperate with Azerbaijan in the energy field, while the European Parliament is more critical of its human rights violations and aggressive actions against Armenia and Armenians⁷. Moreover, individual member states such as Italy, Germany, and Hungary have strong political and business ties with Azerbaijan, which also contributes to the EU's overall lack of conditionality and muted criticism of Baku⁸.

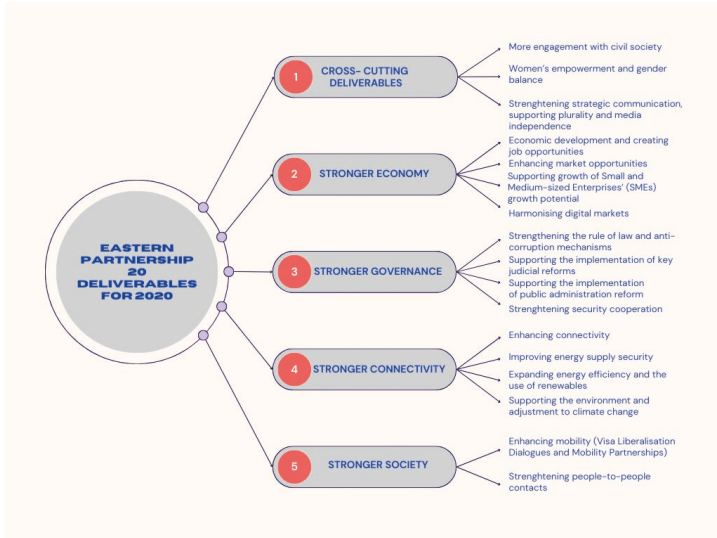
Azerbaijan mostly resisted implementing EU standards in the fields of democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. However, Baku introduced some regulatory reforms in line with the EaP principles which it deemed useful and acceptable. Azerbaijan's implementation of EU regulations and its participation in EaP programmes are assessed below in accordance with EaP 20 deliverables for 2020. This is the new Eastern Partnership's common agenda, a work plan divided into four main policy areas (stronger economy, stronger governance, stronger connectivity, and stronger society)

⁷ S. Kolarz, *EU Searching for Approach to the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict*, "PISM Bulletin" 2023, no. 148(2267), <https://www.pism.pl/publications/eu-searching-for-approach-to-the-nagorno-karabakh-conflict>.

⁸ J. Kobzova, L. Alieva, *The EU and Azerbaijan beyond oil*, European Council of Foreign Relations Policy Memo, May 2012, pp. 3–5, https://ecfr.eu/rchive/page/-/ECFR57_EU_AZERBAIJAN_MEMO_AW.pdf.

coupled with cross-cutting deliverables of gender equality, civil society, and strategic communication⁹.

Chart 3. Overview of Eastern Partnership’s “20 Deliverables for 2020” agenda



Source: Author's own work based on *EaP. 20 Deliverables for 2020: Bringing tangible results for citizens*¹⁰.

Azerbaijan adopted new measures in the banking sector to improve access to finance and boost the level of public confidence in this sector. In particular, Azerbaijani small and medium enterprises (SMEs) and start-ups received access to cheaper credit via the State Entrepreneurship Development Fund, financed by the state. Moreover, SMEs

⁹ *Eastern Partnership. Key developments*, European Union External Action, 17 March 2022, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/eastern-partnership_en.

¹⁰ <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/44362/20-deliverables-for-2020.pdf>.

from Azerbaijan (and other EaP countries) receive assistance from the EU-funded Eastern Partnership Ready to Trade programme to facilitate access to the European market.

Azerbaijan also participated in several EU programmes for Eastern partner countries (Partnership for Good Governance being the most recent) to improve governance and implemented some reforms in the fields of judiciary and public services (digitalisation and quality improvement). The latter is a part of developing the digital economy in the country with the assistance of the EU4Digital Initiative. Azerbaijan, which is heavily reliant on fossil fuels and experiences problems with water resources, cooperates with the EU in several programmes targeting Eastern partner countries such as EU4Climate and EU4Environment to promote the development of renewable energy in the country and improve water management¹¹.

As a part of its civil society and people-to-people dimension, the EaP supports Azerbaijani civil society, which for decades has experienced crackdowns and persecution, via the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum (EaP CSF), a platform dedicated to promoting European integration, democratic reforms, and political participation as well as strengthening civil society in EaP states. EaP CSF often criticises the Azerbaijani government for violating fundamental rights. The EaP's civil society and people-to-people dimension also aims to establish sustainable peace between Armenia and Azerbaijan and engages in peacebuilding measures

¹¹ N. Gasimova, N. Islamli, E. Mammadov, *Azerbaijan*, [in:] S. Gerasymchuk (ed.), *Eastern Partnership Prospects Post-2022*, Foreign Policy Council "Ukrainian Prism", 1 December 2022, pp. 56, 58, 62, 70, https://prismua.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/A5_Eastern-Partnership_M-fin.pdf.

through a number of projects in the framework of Track-two diplomacy¹² initiatives. One of them is EU4Dialogue, which is aimed at facilitating the peace process by enhancing people-to-people contacts between Armenian and Azerbaijani civil society and other non-governmental actors.

Conclusions

Fifteen years of the Eastern Partnership for Azerbaijan has resulted in mixed outcomes caused by the complicated nature of relations between Baku and Brussels, which are overtly focused on energy and transportation issues but lack significant political components. Azerbaijan's relationship with the EU and its participation in the EaP is marked by Baku's assertiveness and cherry-picking approach. This is not to say that Azerbaijan fully refused to participate in a variety of programmes which the EaP offers – Baku adopts reforms which align with its internal agenda but does not feel the urgency for deeper political integration with the EU. There is, however, the potential for stronger cooperation in the political sphere between Baku and Brussels, especially in peace negotiations between Armenia and Azerbaijan, which are moderated by the EU. Also, more vigorous relations in the energy, trade, and transit spheres could potentially usher in the conclusion of a more up-to-date partnership agreement

¹² Track-two diplomacy is a number of unofficial and informal interactions between members of opposing groups or nations aimed at developing strategies, influencing public opinion, and organising human and material resources to facilitate the resolution of their conflict. It is not meant to be a substitute for Track-one diplomacy (formal negotiations between the conflicted nations conducted by professional diplomats) but aims to compensate for its constraints. See: J. Mapendere, *Track One and a Half Diplomacy and the Complementarity of Tracks*, "Culture of Peace Online Journal", no. 2(1), p. 68, https://peacemaker.un.org/sites/peacemaker.un.org/files/TrackOneandaHalfDiplomacy_Mapendere.pdf.

between Azerbaijan and the European Union. Relations between Azerbaijan and the EU are still likely to be marked with difficulties, but any potential rifts might be mitigated by the strategic importance of the partnership. At the same time, Azerbaijan's strategic importance for the EU results in Brussels visibly losing leverage over Baku, which is empowered by its recent victory in Nagorno-Karabakh and its elevated role in European energy security.



Kacper Wańczyk

The road not taken – Belarus and the Eastern Partnership

Robert Frost's poem, *The Road Not Taken* could be read as a call for picking up the track that is less travelled; however, another interpretation is also possible – Frost could have been simply mocking his friend Edward Thomas, who would always complain that during their walks in the woods, they could have taken another route. One might also argue that Frost tells us that regardless of how we see the path we have taken – are we satisfied with it, or do we regret picking it up – the other path remains unknown. This is a road that Alyaksandr Lukashenka never took – a road to the EU. And we do not know how the leaves and grass look on that trail.

In this analysis, I aim to describe which turns were omitted, and which trees were never looked upon during this journey, which never happened.

Business in exchange for human rights

Belarus joined the Eastern Partnership at the beginning of a period of large but pretended opening up to cooperation

with the West. Lukashenka announced a series of actions that were supposed to loosen the state's grip over the economy. The most widely advertised change was the abolishment of the so-called "golden share" that allowed Belarusian authorities to take over any enterprise (even private) when they saw fit. Moreover, Minsk was suggesting that it would strengthen the development of small and medium enterprises and create favourable circumstances for foreign investors.

Decision-makers in many EU countries, including Poland and Germany, believed that this change may be genuine. One of the concepts that was popular in the small circle of people covering Belarus at the time assumed the so-called "spill-over" effect; a belief that if foreign investments came to Belarus, they would change the economic institutional framework of the country and eventually lead to democratisation.

Historically, this idea was the child of the results of economic research during the late Communist period (particularly in Hungary), which showed that Western FDI changed the setup of communist enterprises. Only, the said research talked exclusively about modification of the methods of production or management, not the whole institutional setup of a state.

The trick was that Lukashenko never intended to change the economic structure of the Belarusian economy, so these promises were never realised. However, they served Minsk's purposes well for a significant amount of time. The Belarusian authorities chose to pick up projects that may bring at least some profit to them, while avoiding flagship initiatives that suggested any introduction of real democratic reform,

strengthening the rule of law, or any other deep institutional changes.

As a result, examples of cooperation within the EaP were scarce. They included a twinning project with the National Bank of Belarus, aimed at strengthening different tools of management and monitoring of financial markets. The project was run by a consortium managed by the Bundesbank with the participation of the Polish and Lithuanian national banks. The Belarusian Central Bank was one of those institutions that was always used by the authorities when there was a need to present a professional and “Western-like” face of the system.

Strategic lack of conceptualisation

At the same time, most EU countries and the EU leadership did not have a concrete idea of what to do with Belarus, either within the Eastern Partnership project or outside it. Policies towards Minsk were more reactive than based on a concrete strategic plan. It was the nature of the times – eastern policy was not something the EU was good at or even interested in. Countries of the so-called “new EU” were still learning the EU ropes and focusing on cases that would promise more success in the EU’s eastern policy like Ukraine, Moldova, or Georgia.

Only future archival research will likely solve the dual approach taken in assessing the reasons for the birth of this part of the EU Neighbourhood Policy. Was it a veiled attempt by Central Europe to ensure EU membership for the countries of the region in the future? Or was it an attempt by some of the more Western Europeans to guarantee exactly the opposite – that these states would remain in the

grey zone outside the formation, with only a blurred promise of the future?

Regardless of the reasons, the EaP setup allowed only limited room for manoeuvre – it was a project that was aimed at introducing a unified set of changes to countries bordering the EU. This made sense since the idea was to introduce the member states to changes similar to the institutional setups of the EU countries. But it was harder to tailor this to relationships with countries like Belarus. The only move that could have been made within the EaP itself was limiting Minsk’s participation in the multilateral project – Belarusian authorities were not allowed to cooperate within the Flagship Initiatives, only with a group of EU countries. What remained was a hope for a “spill-over” effect, and for Minsk to see – for some reason – the benefits of the programme. This lack of strategic alternatives on one side and a lack of the will to cooperate on the other quickly reduced EU-Belarusian relationships within the project to nothing more than ritual moves.

Minsk, after only two years of participating in the programme, declared the suspension of its membership. The decision came in September 2011 and was a direct effect of the introduction of sanctions on the Belarusian authorities after the crackdown on protests that followed the December 2010 elections. Minsk’s politicians were trying to blame the EU – which is their traditional policy – stating that this showed the failure of the spirit of cooperation the Partnership was supposed to present. The final and official Belarusian suspension of their membership occurred almost exactly a decade later when another package of sanctions

was approved by EU-member states after even more brutal suppression of the 2020 mass protests in Belarus.

Between these two suspensions, whenever EU politicians and bureaucrats would discuss Belarus in the context of the Eastern Partnership, this exchange would be about the EaP Summit. Specifically, each time, the officials would struggle while trying to figure out whom of the Belarusian politicians to invite. Finally, between 2013 and 2017, the country was represented by the late Uladzimir Makiej, a Foreign Minister at that time. Despite his 11-year background as a Soviet military intelligence officer (retired as colonel) and long-term work as Lukashenko's assistant and then a head of his administration, he was perceived by many decision-makers in the West as a "technocrat" and "Western-thinking", so was an obvious choice for a participant in one of the few official discussion forums between the EU and Belarus. The last 2020 COVID-19 EaP online Summit was attended by Prime Minister Roman Golovchenko.

With the lack of any progress in the official or transformation cooperation between the EU and Belarus, it was no surprise that Minsk was not offered an Association Agreement that followed the EaP cooperation. It would have been impossible.

Meet people, study, learn

However, one element of the programme did bring some effect; however, it was more a result of the fact that it was detached from the economic, social, and political elements of the programme. It was the educational part of the EU-Belarus cooperation and was not directly included in the Flagship Initiatives but functioned alongside them.

Probably the best-known project within that sphere was the ERASMUS+ scheme, a programme that allows students from Belarus to train and study in European universities on all three levels: bachelor, master, and doctorate. Between 2015 and 2020 around 2500 people from Belarus were able to profit from the project. Erasmus Mundus Joint Master's Degrees allowed for study at two different European universities in different countries.

As with many grants and stipends, these projects also have serious limitations. The limits set on individual grants do not keep up with inflation or changes in living costs. As a result – these are accessible mainly to people who already have additional resources at their disposal, that allow them to travel and study abroad.

Belarus also participated in the Capacity Building in Higher Education action. This is a project that supports the reform of the higher education system in more technical terms. It is used for financing projects that could change policies in that area or increase the cooperation between enterprises and universities. However, given the fact that this project supports institutional reforms and is more addressed to the institutional actors, it was not particularly popular with Belarusian educational associations. Similarly, participation in the Jean Monnet project, which supports research concerning the functioning of the EU in Belarus, remains low.

Finally, another tool that has supported the exchanges between EU and Belarusian societies is the EaP Civil Society Forum. This platform, bringing together organisations from the EU and the Eastern neighbourhood, allows the NGOs from Belarus a platform from where they can have

their voice heard, and also gives them a place to exchange information and experience. The Forum has a grant scheme that allows for the financing of civil society organisational activities. In the current 2021–2024 cycle of delegates, organisations from Belarus account for 11%.

Is there a path ahead?

The Eastern Partnership project had no effect on Belarusian authorities and the internal institutional setup of the country. In hindsight, one might argue that this was bound to happen but it is always easy to be a preacher after the fact. At the time, there were no other ideas for how to work with the countries of the Eastern EU Neighbourhood in a way that would allow for addressing the peculiarities of the Belarusian economic and political systems. Again, today we may say that we could have had more ambitious goals within the EaP, and more effective tools, but – well – here we are.

Lukashenko was never really ready to introduce the economic reforms he suggested. The Belarusian Lukashenko model does not allow for the introduction of any significant modifications as this would mean loosening his grip over the society and economy of the country. And this he does not want. Hence, he could not have participated in the EaP, a project that he perceived as a threat.

It seems that only parts of Belarusian society were able to benefit to some extent from the EaP, mainly thanks to projects that supported social society and educational exchange. I believe that these results should be preserved at all costs. Sadly, the current situation in the region is not helpful.

First of all, Belarusian society is at risk once again of falling victim to the structural set-up of the EU's eastern

policy. For obvious reasons, Ukraine is at the centre of the discussion, but even Moldova is more in the game given that Chisinau is in another country that has initiated EU accession talks. This focus of the EU bureaucrats may lead to the lack of a Belarus-specific strategic approach to reactive policy yet again.

Secondly, due to carelessness, the European media and – consequently – EU politicians, tend to mix Belarus with Russia and treat their societies as one (or at least very similar). Belarusian society in 2020 and 2022 en masse showed that it does not support either the regime or its assistance to Russian aggression in Ukraine. The institutional setup of Belarusian autocracy differs from that of Russia. Ignoring these facts due to laziness would lead to ineffective policies. Meanwhile, the popular idea of decolonisation from Russia requires the EU to have different policies and tools towards different partners in their eastern neighbourhood.

There is a new track behind the bushes. We just need to make a little more effort to find it.



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As the Eastern Partnership marks its 15th anniversary, it is clear that the programme has had a profound impact on the EU's eastern neighbours, though its outcomes have varied significantly depending on the country in question. For Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia, the EaP has provided a crucial framework for pursuing European integration, though challenges remain, particularly in the face of Russian aggression and internal political difficulties. For Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Belarus, the EaP has been a more ambivalent experience, with these countries taking different approaches to their relationships with the EU. Ultimately, the future of the EaP will depend on how these countries navigate the evolving geopolitical landscape as well as the EU's ability to adapt its own policies to the changing realities of the region.

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