

Eastern Partnership – Still Relevant, or Redundant?

The day 7 May 2024 marks the 15th anniversary of the Eastern Partnership (EaP), which was created to deepen political and economic relations between the EU, its member states, and six EaP partners: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine. One of the critical achievements of the EaP is that it drew the dividing lines between the European neighbors (which included the countries to the east of the EU) and neighbors of Europe (countries bordering the EU from the south, from North Africa to the Middle East).

The EaP initiative was a significant attainment for Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine, all three having historical aspirations to eventually join the EU and be treated by the EU as European countries rather than just neighbors. These three have been asking for a tailor-made approach as opposed to a 'one size fits all' policy offered by the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP). Moreover, the ENP provided the perspective of the European Neighborhood Agreement, which was not an exciting prospect for countries that did not want to stay as neighbors forever.

From Transformative to Redundant

The Eastern Partnership was initiated several months after Russia attacked Georgia in August 2008. Launching a new strategic program for the eastern neighbors was a signal that the EU cared about its neighbors and would not accept Russia treating them as its backyard. Back then, EaP and the instruments it contained promised great transformative potential.

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The three pro-European states - Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine - seized the moment and started approximation with the EU by undertaking necessary reforms. All three signed the Association Agreements, including the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA), and received visa-free travel to the EU and Schengen zone coun-



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tries. This erected the natural fence within the EaP - creating the “Trio Format” on the one hand and leaving Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Belarus in the second tier. However, after Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia received EU candidate status in 2022 and 2023, the Eastern partnership appeared to have lost its relevance.

Today, EaP is still rolling on inertia. The Trio states switched their focus to accession, and the remaining beneficiaries are the states that prefer partnership over accession. Armenia is keen to revive the EU integration process but needs to cross some painful geopolitical red lines like abandoning the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO); Azerbaijan is not interested in European integration and wants to strengthen its position as a key regional player providing natural gas to the EU. The EU and Azerbaijan [signed](#) the Memorandum of Understanding to double the natural gas import from Azerbaijan to at least 20 billion cubic meters annually by 2027. Belarus’s presence in the Eastern Partnership is simply irrelevant since

its government and authoritarian leader, Aleksandr Lukashenko, are not recognized as legitimately elected.

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The EU member states do not seem optimistic about the EaP prospects either. The EaP’s biannual summits initially were hosted by the Member states (2009 Czechia, 2011 Poland, 2013 Lithuania, 2015 Latvia), but after that, they slowly moved to Brussels. The last one was held in 2021, and at the time of writing, there is no enthusiasm to organize one, even to celebrate 15 years since the format’s inception.

The EaP’s multilateral track also needs to be patched. Two of its members, Armenia and Azerbaijan, were at war just a few months ago; Ukraine and Georgia have all but severed bilateral relations, and Moldova and Georgia rarely engage at the

highest political level. There are almost no regional cooperation projects among the Trio states and Belarus has been assisting Russia against Ukraine, including by allowing the transit of military forces through its territory.

Since its inception, the EaP has been only partially successful. It made the EU the number one trade partner for four out of six EaP states and broadly contributed to setting up and developing thousands of new small and medium-sized enterprises. It also upgraded the level of political relations between the EaP states and the EU. After all, the non-signature of the Association Agreement led to the change of government in Ukraine.

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However, the EaP, as a format, was not equipped to deal with serious challenges. Five of the six EaP countries have territorial conflicts stirred by Russia, and neither security nor conflict resolution has ever been a serious agenda item for the EaP. It also fell short of building a common area of shared values of democracy, prosperity, stability, and increased cooperation. According to Freedom House data, two of the six EaP countries – Azerbaijan and Belarus – belong to countries with consolidated authoritarian regimes. The remaining four are transitional or hybrid regimes. All the more, once a poster child of the Eastern Partnership, Georgia has recently taken a full swing towards authoritarianism.

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The future of the EaP does not look bright either. Moldova will have a crucial presidential election in the autumn of 2024 and a referendum on joining the EU. This will happen against the background of increased risks and information manipulation from Russia aimed at [destabilizing](#) the country.

Ukraine is engaged in a war of survival with Russia, with unclear prospects and timelines for peace. As for Georgia, there is a high chance that the ruling anti-European Georgian Dream party will introduce the Russian-style foreign agents' law, effectively killing civil society and the critical media and keeping unchecked and unaccountable power for a fourth consecutive term. These divergent trends will highly likely undermine the EaP format even further.

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By now, the EaP has lost its attractiveness for Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine, while it was never genuinely interesting for Azerbaijan and Belarus. Unless the EU finds ways to transform the format, it will remain a loose partnership of unwilling and unable states without political ambitions. However, dealing with the hybrid threats from Russia, promoting small and medium-sized enterprises, and enhancing connectivity could still save the EaP from staying toothless.

One of the most significant achievements the EaP has brought to some of its partners is visa liberalization. Encouraged by the promise of visa-free travel, Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia improved document security, border management, and personal data protection. As a result, their citizens were granted the opportunity to travel visa-free to EU and Schengen zone countries. Extending visa liberalization to Armenia could seriously incentivize Yerevan to continue Europeanization and decrease its dependence on Russia.

Armenia – New Hope for the EaP?

In 2013, Armenia was close to signing the Association Agreement, including the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) with the EU.

Offering an ambitious Visa Liberalization Action Plan (VLAP) would help Armenia improve border management, enhance document security and personal data protection, and protect human rights in exchange for receiving visa-free travel.

However, Putin cornered then-President Serzh Sargsyan into refusing to sign the deal and joining the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union instead. But ten years later, after losing Karabakh, Armenia is trying to engage closer with the European Union, despite not having a large room for maneuver because of the memberships of the Eurasian Economic Union and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). At this stage, EU-Armenia relations are regulated by the Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA), and due to close economic and trade ties with Russia, the EU is not in a position to offer Armenia AA/DCFTA. However, EaP and EU member states can support Armenia's European aspirations and provide at least two carrots. In the short term, this could be visa liberalization, provided that the country takes gradual steps to carry out necessary reforms. Offering an ambitious Visa Liberalization Action Plan (VLAP) would help Armenia improve border management, enhance document security and personal data protection, and protect human rights in exchange for receiving visa-free travel. This would also send the signal to ordinary Armenians that the EU cares about them.

Meanwhile, the EU should consider giving Armenia a European perspective. This move would not cost much to the EU. The EU granted the candidate status to Georgia in December 2024, which positioned the EU as a geopolitical player bold enough to step into the South Caucasus region and compete with Russia. This time, the bold decision might encourage the Armenian elite to push for reforms and consolidate pro-European forces.

The European Union can also consider offering some concrete steps that countries like Moldova, Ukraine, and Georgia are already benefitting from, such as lowering the roaming tariffs to Armenia's citizens and considering that Armenia joins the Single European Payment Area (SEPA). Being part of SEPA could be beneficial for a sizeable Armenian diaspora that regularly uses bank transfer services.

Competing with China and Russia

To reform the EaP, the EU must acknowledge that it competes with Russia, China, and Türkiye in the region. This competition showcases that European integration is not the only game in the region. Azerbaijan-Türkiye relations are based on security guarantees and military assistance, which was instrumental in Baku gaining victory in the Nagorno-Karabakh war. Russia fully controls Belarus, leaving no room for the EU to step in. Georgia has [signed](#) a Free Trade Agreement with China and [announced](#) that its relations with Beijing now rank as a strategic partnership. With the Belt and Road Initiative, China aspires to expand its influence on other EaP countries as well through the connectivity carrot. The Middle Corridor's [potential](#) will likely serve as an incentive for allowing Chinese actors to participate in important regional projects such as the Anaklia deep sea port on the Black Sea.

The last 15 years have demonstrated that EU normative power and values clash with realpolitik in the Eastern Partnership region. The EU must become strategic about its plans for the EaP, which, together with the success stories of Europeanization and concrete benefits for the participating nations, also includes developing sophisticated and targeted strategic communication. Building societal resilience in the EaP region towards foreign malign influence, disinformation, and interference is another aspect that the EU must keep as a priority for the Eastern Partnership region ■