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Assessing the future of the Eastern Partnership: The fragmentation of a region and its consequences

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Abstract

This policy paper suggests a threefold approach to the Eastern Partnership (EaP) in its currently existing form. First, the bilateral dimension of the EaP should be dissolved and the relations between the EU and the six states of the original EaP should be pursued individually, rather than under a common umbrella. Second, the multilateral dimension of the EaP, in the sense of regional projects and cooperation, should be subsumed under the EU's Global Gateway initiative. Finally, the civil society component of the EaP, embodied in particular in the EaP Civil Society Forum, should be retained and expanded. In the following these three steps will be elaborated upon and a justification for each of them will be offered.¹

Keywords: Eastern Partnership, bilateral dimension, multilateral dimension, civil society, Global Gateway

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Assessing the future of the Eastern Partnership: The fragmentation of a region and its consequences

Since the introduction of the Eastern Partnership (EaP) in 2009, the geopolitical and international environment has changed radically. Not only is Russia engaged in a protracted and brutal war of aggression against Ukraine, but the United States under Donald Trump is reducing its involvement in Europe in a variety of ways. At the same time, the space occupied by the countries of the former Soviet Union, six of which were originally included in the EaP, has evolved in complex and uneven ways. Under these circumstances a fundamental review of the EaP and its respective components is called for.

Dissolving the bilateral dimension

The suggestion to abolish the overarching format of the EaP for the framing of bilateral relations between the EU and the six countries involved arises out of a review of the development of these relations over the course of the past 20-25 years.² It bears recalling that in the run-up to the “big bang enlargement” of the EU in 2004/2007, the European Commission realized the need to address the fact that numerous new states would become neighbours of the EU due to this enlargement round.³ This led to the Communication on a “Wider Europe” in 2003 and the introduction of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) in 2004.⁴ The ENP was designed to cover both the eastern and southern neighbourhoods and comprised sixteen countries, from Morocco to Belarus.

With time it became apparent that devising a workable policy for a large group of states which a) differed widely among themselves in terms of regime type, foreign policy priorities, domestic issues and societal developments and b) pursued vastly different approaches and goals in their respective relations with the EU was extremely challenging, to say the least. These differences, along with varying interests of the EU member states themselves towards the different areas of the neighbourhood, led to the de facto division of the ENP into two parts: the Union for the Mediterranean in the south, and the Eastern Partnership in the east. This also reflected the difference between “neighbours of Europe” and “European neighbours”.

Even if the ENP framework continued to exist, grouping six former Soviet republics within the EaP, as proposed by Poland and Sweden and accepted by all EU member states in 2009, increased the homogeneity of the format and made a general approach to these countries

² The Eastern Partnership was conceived to include the following states: Belarus, Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan. Since June 2021 Belarus has suspended its participation in the format.

³ In 2004 ten states joined the EU, eight of them from Eastern and Central Europe and the Balkans. In 2007, Romania and Bulgaria followed suit.

⁴ See “Communication from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament - Wider Europe - Neighbourhood: A New Framework for Relations with our Eastern and Southern Neighbours” (COM/2003/0104 final), <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex:52003DC0104>, and “Communication from the Commission - European Neighbourhood Policy - Strategy paper” (COM/2004/0373 final), <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex:52004DC0373>.

appear more feasible.⁵ Nonetheless, the differences across the six partner states stood out ever more starkly over time, in part due to the growing fragmentation of the area as the collapse of the USSR receded further into history and the countries developed new foreign policy priorities. The fact that two of these states, Armenia and Azerbaijan, were at loggerheads due to a dispute over the territory of Nagorno-Karabakh made approaches including all six partners difficult, if not impossible.

The pace and type of relations the countries desired to develop with the EU differed widely among the group of six. Three of them (Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia) pursued Association Agreements with Brussels, which involved commitments to incorporate large sections of the EU acquis into their legislation, even without the promise of accession to the Union. These three states began to refer to themselves as the “Associated Trio” in order to distinguish their relations to the EU from those of the other three EaP partner countries and to increase their weight in discussions with EU officials. To some extent this designation caught on and was utilized, if informally, in Brussels and other member state capitals. This was a sign of yet further differentiation of the EaP into two de facto groupings – one with greater, another with lesser proximity to the EU.

The full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine introduced yet another element into the developments.⁶ By acting as an impetus for Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia to apply for EU accession, and to be granted candidate status, it at first seemed to reinforce the “Associated Trio”. However, the Georgian government decided against fulfilling EU requirements for opening accession negotiations and, despite overwhelming support for accession within Georgian society, suspended the process until 2028. Domestic political developments and growing repression by the government have called even this possibility strongly into question. In fact, even prior to the Russian invasion of Ukraine significant democratic backsliding had begun in Georgia, thereby already distinguishing its trajectory from the other two “Associated Trio” members. Thus, only Ukraine and Moldova continue to pursue the accession track, indicating the ongoing differentiation of approaches to the EU in the region.

In the meantime, Belarus has become a clear ally of Russia in the war against Ukraine. Azerbaijan continues to exhibit very little interest in the EaP, while Armenia is expressing the desire to move closer to the EU in the context of an attempt to diversify its foreign policy following growing disillusionment with Russia in the wake of the 2020 and 2023 wars with Azerbaijan.⁷ In short, the keyword “differentiation” with regard to the neighbourhood in

⁵ See “Communication from the Commission and the European Parliament and the Council: Eastern Partnership”, (COM(2008) 823 final), <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52008DC0823&from=EN>.

⁶ For an elaboration of this particular aspect see Arkady Moshes, *Beyond the Eastern Partnership: The Time has Arrived for a New Policy in the East of Europe*, Guest Commentary No. 13, 2022, SCEEU, <https://www.ui.se/globalassets/ui.se-eng/publications/sceeu/beyond-the-eastern-partnership-the-time-has-arrived-for-a-new-policy-on-the-east-of-europe.pdf>.

⁷ Russia failed to come to Armenia’s aid despite having given security commitments to the country in the framework of the Collective Security Treaty Organization. See e.g. Irina Ghulinyan-Gerz, *Disappointed in Russia: Armenia’s security disillusionment*, Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung, 4 November 2022, <https://www.boell.de/en/2022/10/14/enttaeuscht-von-russland-armeniens-sicherheitspolitische-ernuechterung>.

general, and the EaP in particular, has proven its relevance time and again.⁸ It thus appears incumbent upon the EU to draw the logical conclusion from the fragmentation outlined above and to pursue individual bilateral relationships with each of the EaP countries, rather than attempting to preserve an umbrella that no longer seems relevant in the current geopolitical environment.

Subsuming the multilateral dimension under the Global Gateway initiative

From the very beginning of the Eastern Partnership, the countries involved have demonstrated much more interest in the bilateral track (i.e. in pursuing their own respective relationships with the EU) than in the multilateral one. The latter has been emphasized more by the EU itself, in the belief that overarching issues such as energy, transport, climate change, etc. can be best addressed in a multilateral format. In this context a variety of flagship initiatives were developed, although none of them has gained particular prominence in the regional environment.

The lack of interest by the partner countries stems from several sources. First, their primary interest in the EaP was indeed the development of relations with the EU rather than with the other states of the region. Second, the “region” comprised by the six partners was not traditionally perceived as a geographical area with shared concerns and a history of common pursuits. Indeed, the countries were often viewed by some EU member states as falling into two groups – the South Caucasus on the one hand and Eastern Europe on the other. The fact that the “Associated Trio” mentioned above was formed (and even transcended the geographical division between Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus) should be seen primarily as a confirmation of the desire of the involved partner states to deepen their relationship with the EU, i.e. to intensify the bilateral track. The “Associated Trio” was an attempt to gain more traction in doing this by uniting forces to direct the EU’s attention more specifically towards those countries with Association Agreements.

Furthermore, the increasing fragmentation of the post-Soviet space has contributed to calling the added value of the multilateral dimension into question. The diverging internal developments and foreign policy orientations of the six countries have made it ever more difficult to count on a context in which cooperation among them (or even a significant subset of them) is possible. At the same time, the issues the multilateral dimension was designed to cover are being addressed to some extent by the EU’s Global Gateway initiative, called into being in 2021 to deal with questions of connectivity, competitiveness, and environmental problems worldwide. Indeed, some of the infrastructural issues present in the EaP countries have already been integrated into the Global Gateway framework, even if the financing was provided through EaP structures.⁹ Broader strategic questions concerning security, often

⁸ For a useful description of the current state of this differentiation and potential scenarios flowing from it see Denis Cenus, *Rethinking the EU’s Eastern Partnership: Three Ways to Upgrade Amid Geopolitical Competition*, Geopolitics and Security Studies Center, Vilnius, March 2025, https://www.gssc.lt/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/v03_Cenus_EaP-paper_A4_EN.pdf.

⁹ See e.g. the European Commission’s Global Gateway website: https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/stronger-europe-world/global-gateway_en. It includes a map that indicates the presence of Global Gateway projects in Moldova, Ukraine and Armenia, as well as with regard to the Black Sea.

missing in the Eastern Partnership framework, can to some extent be addressed within the recently created European Political Community (EPC).¹⁰

Switching to a focus on the Global Gateway initiative, rather than continuing to insist on the multilateral dimension of the Eastern Partnership, would allow for greater flexibility and increased benefit to the EaP partner countries. It would not prevent the countries from cooperating among themselves where this is appropriate and feasible, but would open up further opportunities for broader types of international cooperation drawing on EU assistance and involvement. Retaining the multilateral dimension, which has never been particularly appreciated by the countries it was intended to target, would unnecessarily duplicate projects that can be implemented in the Global Gateway framework, while simultaneously limiting the geographical range of these projects in an impractical manner.¹¹

Meanwhile, issues such as democracy, rule of law and good governance could be better addressed through bilateral relations, as these are areas where the differentiation across the EaP partner countries is most significant. A remaining opportunity for multilateral engagement on these topics is the Council of Europe, where all EaP countries except Belarus are present.

While it is true that the Global Gateway initiative has been subject to criticism regarding its approach and the transparency of its objectives, this is perhaps inevitable with such an ambitious and wide-reaching framework.¹² These criticisms should be taken seriously and addressed, both to ensure the productivity of the initiative and to preserve the EU's credibility as a global actor more broadly. However, retaining the multilateral dimension of the Eastern Partnership despite the introduction of the Global Gateway would only compound the possibilities for inefficient overlap and unnecessary bureaucracy.

Preserving and developing the civil society component

Despite the difficulties of the EaP outlined above, its civil society component has played an important role and can be considered a success on various levels. The most visible aspect of this component is the Civil Society Forum (CSF), which includes individuals and organizations from each of the six partner countries.¹³ While the creation of civil society platforms within the EaP framework in each of the six countries has not been uncontroversial, the horizontal and vertical exchanges made possible by this framework have brought benefits to all sides.¹⁴

¹⁰ This applies to all the EaP countries except Belarus, which is not part of the EPC.

¹¹ For a different assessment, see Bob Deen et al., *The Eastern Partnership: Three dilemmas in a time of troubles*, Clingendael Report, January 2021, <https://www.clingendael.org/pub/2021/the-eastern-partnership/>.

¹² For assessments of the Global Gateway initiative, see e.g. Fanny Sauvignon and Stefania Benaglia, *An EU global gateway ... to what?* CEPS, 27 November 2023, <https://www.ceps.eu/ceps-publications/an-eu-global-gateway-to-what/>; San Bilal and Chloe Teevan, *Global Gateway: Where now and where to next?*, ECDPM Discussion Paper No. 368, June 2024, <https://ecdpm.org/application/files/1617/1776/7785/Global-Gateway-Where-now-and-where-to-next-ECDPM-Discussion-Paper-2024.pdf>;

Alexandra Gerasimcikova and Farwa Sial, *Who profits from the Global Gateway? The EU's new strategy for development cooperation*, Eurodad/Counter Balance/Oxfam, October 2024, <https://counter-balance.org/uploads/files/GG-report.pdf>.

¹³ Even if Belarus has suspended its participation in the EaP, civil society representatives in exile can nonetheless be involved.

¹⁴ See e.g. Anastasia Pociumban, *Advancing democratisation in the Eastern Partnership countries: the role of civil society in national reforms, and European integration*, EaP CSF Working Group 1 Policy Paper, March 2025, <https://dgap.org/en/research/publications/advancing-democratisation-eastern-partnership-countries>.

First of all, increasing exchange between civil society representatives in each of the partner states and EU officials has allowed the latter to achieve a broader perspective on developments in the partner countries and given them important insights into reform processes there. At the same time, the civil society representatives have gained a better sense of how the EU functions, enabling them not only to monitor ongoing reforms in their countries in a more targeted fashion, but also to convey information about EU priorities and mechanisms to their respective populations. While these benefits should not be idealized and can be further enhanced, they appear to outweigh the possible disadvantages of this type of interaction.¹⁵

In addition, by consistently engaging with civil society organizations and taking their input seriously, the EU conveys to political actors in the EaP countries that civil society is a valuable and appreciated partner in the spheres of policymaking, reforms, and societal development.

Furthermore, the interactions among civil society representatives from different partner countries have resulted in greater connections across the region and in learning processes. Opportunities to compare developments in their own country to those of their neighbours contribute to a broader perspective and allow for exchange of best practices in dealing with shared challenges, whether they be related to governmental repression, obstacles to reform, or shaping the relationship with the EU. In particular the representatives of civil society from those countries that have been most reticent to engage with the EaP, Belarus and Azerbaijan, have repeatedly emphasized the advantages of the Civil Society Forum and related frameworks for them and their home societies. However, increasingly it has been necessary to involve civil society representatives in exile, as the conditions in some of the EaP countries have become more and more repressive. This may soon be the case for Georgia as well.

Thus despite major differences across the EaP countries, the involvement of civil society in the overall initiative seems to have been advantageous in several ways, while the disadvantages have been minimal. The amount of resources required for the civil society component of the EaP is relatively low compared to the benefits it provides. It would thus appear sensible to continue the work of the CSF and foster interactions across the civil societies of the region in the future, even if the EaP framework as such should gradually be dissolved.

At the same time, some improvements to existing formats for civil society cooperation could be envisaged. In particular, due to the increasingly dire security situation in the region, stronger input from relevant civil society actors could be sought in this area. In this conjunction, security in the Black Sea region, which is of concern for the majority of the EaP partner countries, could be a priority, especially given the newly developed EU strategy towards the area.¹⁶ For certain discussions it could be helpful to go beyond the EaP framework

¹⁵ On some problematic aspects of relationships between civil society and external donors, see e.g. Orygia Lutsevych, *How to Finish a Revolution: Civil Society and Democracy in Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine*, Chatham House Briefing Paper, January 2013,

https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/public/Research/Russia%20and%20Eurasia/0113bp_lutsevych.pdf; Nicola Banks et al., "NGOs, States, and Donors Revisited: Still Too Close for Comfort?", *World Development*, Vol. 66, pp. 707-718, February 2015, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2014.09.028>.

¹⁶ See European Commission, Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council, "The European Union's strategic approach to the Black Sea region", Brussels, 28 May 2025, JOIN(2025) 135 final, https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/170d9b3a-d45f-4169-80fa-9adb753c0921_en?filename=EU%20Strategic%20Approach%20Black%20Sea%20Strategy.pdf.

and include Turkish civil society representatives as well, given that Türkiye plays a crucial role with regard to Black Sea security. Other priorities, such as youth-related activities, could also be integrated more explicitly into the civil society component. Overall, due to the extensive pull-out of USAID from the EaP region (and indeed worldwide), a further influx of resources into the civil society sphere in the countries of the Eastern Partnership is more necessary than ever, given the need to enhance societal resilience in the face of growing authoritarian trends and heightened security challenges in the region.

Conclusion: Parting with outdated structures

It is always difficult to eliminate existing institutional arrangements, not least because they create interested parties, which then argue for their preservation. However, one sign of a vibrant and adaptable organization is its capacity for adjustment in response to changes in its environment. The EU's Eastern Partnership served an important function as a transitional stage away from the unwieldy European Neighbourhood Policy towards the current context, in which the EaP region has further fragmented due to the outbreak of wars, an increasingly unreliable and aggressive Russia, and the growing role of external actors such as Turkey and China. One result of this fragmentation is a further differentiation of the domestic and foreign policy priorities of the countries of the region, including their respective relations with the EU.

In this situation an assessment of the EaP reveals the inefficiency of retaining both its bilateral and multilateral dimensions. The commonalities of the six partner countries are too few to justify preserving the shared umbrella. Differentiation has led to a situation in which the bilateral track can be better pursued with each state individually, while the emergence of the Global Gateway has rendered the multilateral dimension partially obsolete. The remaining aspects of the multilateral track, such as issues of democracy and good governance, can be incorporated into bilateral relations. Only the civil society component, embodied first and foremost in the Civil Society Forum, has not only stood the test of time, but indeed become even more salient in view of the withdrawal of USAID support from the region. A willingness by the EU to acknowledge the transitional nature of the EaP would permit recognizing its positive contributions while admitting that resources can now be more productively invested elsewhere. This appears all the more essential given the EU's major efforts to support Kyiv and to bolster its own position as a security and defence actor in the face of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, which has long-lasting implications for the EU and its member states, as well as for the countries of the Eastern Partnership.

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