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# GEO-POWER-EU

THE RELEVANCE OF EaP

## GEO-POWER-EU: EMPOWERING THE GEOPOLITICAL EU IN THE EASTERN NEIGHBOURHOOD AND THE WESTERN BALKANS

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## ABOUT GEO-POWER-EU PROJECT

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GEO-POWER-EU aims to empower the EU to manage security threats in its Eastern Neighbourhood and the Western Balkans amidst a deteriorating geopolitical environment. The project's primary ambition is to surpass current standards and develop a comprehensive EU strategy for these regions, utilizing new and reformed policy instruments while considering the strategic ambitions of other geopolitical actors.

To achieve this, GEO-POWER-EU's work plan is built on six specific objectives: proposing adaptations to the EU Enlargement policy to reflect new realities; examining the relevance of the Eastern Partnership (EaP) and providing policy recommendations for its reform; assessing the influence of other geopolitical actors, including the United States, Russia, China, and Turkey, in these regions; offering strategic foresight on the prospects of geopolitical competition in these areas; exploring ways to enhance the EU's ability to contain military threats from beyond its borders; and proposing a comprehensive, multidimensional EU strategy to guide relations with Western Balkan and Eastern Partnership countries.

The project's research aims to advance beyond the current state of the art by developing a new conceptual and policy framework using both quantitative and qualitative methods. Methodologically, GEO-POWER-EU leverages cutting-edge expertise from various disciplines, implementing a multi-stage plan grounded in a participatory and inclusive approach. This approach involves systematic engagement of researchers from third institutions, decision-makers, stakeholders, and citizens – including those from the regions under analysis – throughout the project cycle.

More about the project: <https://geo-power.eu/>

## LIST OF PARTNER BENEFICIARIES INVOLVED

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- European Neighbourhood Council (ENC), Belgium
- University of the Peloponnese (UoP), Greece
- Kentro Erevnon Notioanatolikis Evropis Astiki Mi Kerdoskopiki Etaireia (SEERC), Greece
- Alma Mater Studiorum - Universita Di Bologna (UNIBO), Italy
- Wiener Institut Fur Internationale Wirtschaftsvergleiche (WIIW), Austria
- Sveuciliste U Rijeci (UNIRI), Croatia
- Institut Za Demokratija Societas Civilis Skopje (IDSCS), Republic of North Macedonia
- Univerzitet U Beogradu – Fakultet Političkih Nauka (FPN), Serbia
- Vienneast Consulting Gmbh (VE Insight), Austria
- Democratization Policy Council (DPC), Germany
- Institutul Pentru Dezvoltare Si Initiative Sociale Viitorul (IDIS VIITORUL), Republic of Moldova
- Odeskiy Nacionalniy Universitet Imeni I.I. Mechnikova (ONU), Ukraine
- Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies - Gfsis (GFSIS), Georgia
- Utrikespolitiska Institutet Informationsavd (UII), Sweden

## ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

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|       |   |
|-------|---|
| BRI   | The Belt and Road Initiative  |
| DCFTA | Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area                                  |
| EaP   | The Eastern Partnership   |
| EEA   | European Economic Area  |
| EN    | The Eastern Neighbourhood   |
| ENP   | The European Neighbourhood Policy                                       |
| EPC   | The European Political Community  |
| EU    | The European Union  |
| EUMM  | European Union Monitoring Mission in Georgia                            |
| IR    | International relations   |
| FTA   | Free Trade Agreement  |
| NATO  | The North Atlantic Organization   |
| NDICI | The Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument |
| RF    | The Russian Federation  |
| TEN-T | The EU's trans-European transport network                               |
| USA   | The United States of America  |

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Since its launch, the Eastern Partnership (EaP) has struggled with two fundamental challenges: the diversity and complex reform trajectories of its state partners, and the intensifying geopolitical competition of the main IR actors in the region. The EU's approach to treating the Eastern Neighbourhood as a unified political region has limited its ability to promote reforms and weakened its geopolitical influence. Russia's aggression against Georgia and Ukraine has exposed the reactive nature of the EaP framework, which has exposed the limitations of a one-size-fits-all approach.

Key findings reveal that the EaP suffers from strategic shortcomings that undermine its effectiveness and credibility. The EU policy lacks differentiation and a tailored approach to the needs and political conditions of EaP countries. Its overreliance on soft instruments has not matched the scale or urgency of the region's hard security threats. Financial transparency remains limited, while overlapping tools and slow crisis responses have damaged institutional trust.

There is a growing consensus among EU officials and Eastern partners that the EaP must be fundamentally reformed. A re-imagined EaP should be more flexible, security-conscious, and strategically grounded. The new EaP model envisages a *multi-track* approach, aligning EU policies, instruments and funding with the partners' democratic progress, their geopolitical position and their EU aspirations. Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia should therefore be integrated into the enlargement process, while Armenia and Azerbaijan will benefit from pragmatic, sector-oriented bilateral partnerships. Only by adapting to the changing region's realities can the EU strengthen its credibility and protect its interests.

### PURPOSE AND SCOPE OF THE DELIVERABLE

The purpose of the deliverable is to analyse to what extent and how the EaP can respond to the changing geopolitical environment in order to help enhance the role of the EU as a geopolitical actor. The deliverable problematizes the continued relevance of the Eastern dimension of the European Neighbourhood Policy after the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the EU's decision to give a clear European perspective to Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine.

The research is based on the elite interviews' method aiming to seek and analyse the views of analysts, journalists, civil society representatives and decision-makers on EU policies in the Eastern Partnership partner states (Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, as countries with EU accession perspective, and Belarus, Armenia and Azerbaijan) and the EU institutions and member states.

## INTRODUCTION

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The European Neighbourhood Policy became a tool for implementing the concept of a “Wider Europe”, aimed at creating a new format of relations with neighbouring countries and forming a “circle of friends” – a secure, politically, economically and socially stable space to the east of a united Europe. The Eastern Partnership initiative has been launched to “serve the stability, security and prosperity of the EU, partners and indeed the entire continent” (European Commission 2008). At the Prague Summit in 2009, the Eastern Partnership (EaP) was launched with the aim of deepening the political association and economic integration between the European Union and six **Eastern European partner countries**. It is based on shared values (democracy, the rule of law, good governance, human rights and market economy principles), while fully respecting the sovereign choice of each country and without prejudice to their future aspirations within the EU. As the then EU High Representative Federica Mogherini stated at the Brussels conference marking the 10th anniversary of the EaP, the initiative “is not a geopolitical instrument and has never been intended to create spheres of influence” (European External Action Service 2019). While the EaP did not include Russia due to the strategic partnership with the EU signed in 2003, it was also not intended to increase geopolitical competition for influence in the region.

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The emergence of the EaP was necessitated by the several normative and geopolitical drivers: a) the EU’s statutory obligation under Article 8 of the Treaty on European Union; b) the challenge of eastern enlargement and the EU’s attempt to reconcile the lack of a clear enlargement perspective for the EaP countries with the strong membership aspirations of some of its eastern neighbours – particularly Ukraine and Georgia; c) the new security environment created by Russia’s war in Georgia in August 2008, which underscored the need for the EU’s geopolitical awakening. Despite the acceleration of European initiatives in its Eastern Neighbourhood, these mostly remained reactive responses to the assertiveness of the Russian Federation (RF). Subsequent political crises and increasing competition with Russian-led regional integration platforms (i.e. the Eurasian Economic Community, since transformed into the Eurasian Economic Union), combined with Russian hard power, rendered this format of cooperation insufficient to meet the emerging challenges (Empowering the Geopolitical EU 2024; Maksymenko 2014).

Efforts to review the EaP have had limited impact, largely due to the lack of political momentum. This resulted from two factors. First, the EU’s own shifting priorities (e.g. Brexit) and weak



strategic direction; and second, ‘partnership fatigue’ among EaP partners caused by the predominance of a normative and functional approach.

Since 2009, key successes include the achievement of ambitious Association Agreements, Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas, as well as visa liberalisation with Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia. However, progress has been neither linear nor consolidated, with inertia and backsliding apparent (Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum 2021). By around 2025 (Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum 2025), even the leading EaP countries – Ukraine and Moldova – remain far from achieving a satisfactory level of institutional development when measured against the Copenhagen criteria. Limited progress has been made in advancing the EaP’s objectives in Belarus and Azerbaijan within the multilateral framework and in terms of regional connectivity. Armenia has shown a steady pace of Europeanization, making tangible progress in its democratic transformation. Georgia, once considered a frontrunner among EaP reformers, experienced significant democratic backsliding in 2021 – 2025.

Traditionally, EU officials stress the great significance of the EaP initiative for Europe and the neighbouring countries. Former European Commissioner Johannes Hahn stated that “we are stronger together”, while former European Council President Donald Tusk said, “we are reuniting Europe step by step” (European Commission 2017a; European Council 2017). Echoing Hahn’s assertion that the EaP is “in the EU’s genuine interest” (European Commission 2017a), Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker emphasised its role in contributing to “making the region as a whole more stable”; meanwhile, “stability must start at home” (European Commission 2017b). In his numerous speeches, High Representative Josep Borrell emphasised that the EaP remains high on the European Union’s foreign policy agenda due to the security interdependence between the EU and the EaP partners. As he put it: “Our neighbours’ strength is also the European Union’s strength” (European Commission 2020a; European Commission 2021b). It was for these reasons, as President Ursula von der Leyen herself pointed out, “[that] we invited our Eastern partners to get on board and to work with us on building new links in the shared region” (European Commission 2021a).

According to the document “A Global Strategy for the European Union’s Foreign and Security Policy”, the EU “will engage responsibly across Europe and the surrounding regions to the east” because Russia’s aggressive policy against Ukraine and preserving protracted conflicts in the

wider Black Sea region “have challenged the European security order”. Therefore, the EU will “engage further in the resolution of protracted conflicts in the Eastern Partnership countries” and “promote resilience” together with its partners, as “our security at home entails a parallel interest in peace in our neighbouring and surrounding regions” (European Union External Action 2016). However, the Joint Communication on Eastern Partnership policy beyond 2020 avoids any mention of conflict resolution and the EU’s role therein, instead reaffirming bilateral cooperation as the main way to ensure a tailor-made approach and focusing on strengthening the resilience of the EaP as the core of the new EU policy to jointly address common challenges (European Commission 2020a).

The growing security concerns within the EU in relation to the EaP partners are reflected in the 2021 Joint Declaration of the Eastern Partnership Summit, which stated that enhanced cooperation among the partners on recovery, resilience and reform “remains the necessary condition for progress and support, increasing prosperity and fostering peace, stability, sustainability and resilience in the region” (Council of the European Union 2021). At the same time, although the EU’s contribution to conflict resolution is mentioned multiple times throughout the document – including its stated “commitment to being a constructive and active partner in conflict resolution and peace-building efforts in the EaP, aligning with its broader objectives of promoting stability, resilience, and sustainable development” (European Council 2021) – this contribution has seen limited realization, with little concrete progress in either multilateral or bilateral tracks.

The full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has severely impacted stability and security in the wider Black Sea region, which include the EaP (European Union Satellite Centre 2022), demanding that the EU become “a stronger and more credible security and defence actor” through further support for Ukraine and “fruitful security and defence dialogues and consultations with Georgia and Moldova, aiming to enhance their resilience” (European Union External Action 2023; European Union External Action 2024). The idea of “reinforcing Europe’s role as a reliable geopolitical actor” through forging cooperation with the EaP countries, Turkey, and relevant partners and organisations is a core part of **the 2025 EU strategic approach to the Black Sea region**, aimed at promoting long-term peace and security. The new strategy places direct focus on the EaP state partners, maintaining the same priority areas – stability, resilience, economic growth, environment, and energy – while opening additional windows of opportunity for deeper

cooperation. For the first time, the new strategy acknowledges the EU enlargement process in the Black Sea region, marked by the opening of accession negotiations with Ukraine, Moldova and potentially Georgia. This represents a major commitment to regional security and increasing the EU's role and responsibility in an “area of significant geostrategic importance” (European Commission 2025).

Russia's aggression has significantly changed the geopolitical environment, thereby **challenging the fundamentals of the EaP**. First, it questioned the normative approach that underscored the EaP. Second, it prompted the (re-)opening of the accession perspective. With the growing differences between EaP partners—marked by the granting of candidate status to Ukraine and Moldova, and conditionally to Georgia, alongside vague prospects for advancement in Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Belarus—the EaP policy now faces an **existential crisis**. Moreover, the symmetrical hardening of the EU's position towards the RF has raised the need to review the EU's neighbourhood policies (Empowering the Geopolitical EU 2024).

**The question remains** whether the current EaP format—reaffirmed by the EaP/EU joint ministerial meeting (European Council 2022)—can help overcome its own shortcomings, withstand the competing policies of Russia and China, and address the intertwined challenges of democratisation and securitisation that continue to weaken the EU's influence and the effectiveness of its Eastern policy. Can it evolve into a strategically oriented framework, equipped with effective instruments to advance both EU interests and the concerns of its eastern neighbours?

## METHODOLOGY

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To assess the complexity of the EaP in today's challenging environment, a tailored methodological approach was developed for this study. First and foremost, it is based on **in-depth elite interviews** conducted with the EU's and EaP representatives. In-depth elite interviews are face-to-face, semi-structured interviews with people who either have significant influence on decision-making within and outside a public or private organisation or are highly qualified, professionally competent experts (Harvey 2011: 432-433).

**In total**, 65 in-depth elite interviews were conducted either in person or via video conference between January and June 2025. Among the interviewees, there are 10 European Union officials and diplomats; 1 representative of a regional organisation; 6 representatives of EU academia; while the views of the EaP state partners are represented by 5 diplomats, 7 policy makers, 14 analysts,

11 NGO representatives, 5 journalists and 6 representatives of the private sector. The initial list of interviewees was compiled by the partner institutions of the Geo-Power-EU project with joint oversight and approval. The list was regularly amended during this research. Ethical and confidentiality procedures were followed according to the project's Handbook and Data Management Plan.

The current paper is based on a qualitative analysis of the interview reports prepared by the partner institutions of the Geo-Power-EU project with the aim of providing insights into the reasoning behind elite perceptions of the EaP and the EU's enlargement policy.

To better capture the relevance of the EaP initiative as a whole, as well as every EaP partner states' internal and external situation, official EU documents, Eastern Partnership Summits, speeches, academic research and policy papers were utilised as well.

This research methodology allowed us to achieve the following **objectives**, which have not been sufficiently addressed:

- To provide a critical account of the low effectiveness and stagnation of the EaP.
- To scrutinise whether the EaP is a political region and to what extent it matters for the EU's geopolitical role.
- To examine the adequacy of current policy instruments and resources.

To assess relevant ideas and arguments on the EaP from both the EU and the participating countries' perspectives.

## 1. THE CURRENT RELEVANCE OF THE EASTERN PARTNERSHIP POLICY

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This chapter will examine (1) the reasons for the low efficiency of the EaP as a policy, (2) the impact of the geopolitical situation on partners, (3) changes associated with the beginning of the processes of accession of Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia to the EU, and (4) ideas on how to increase the relevance of the EaP policy.

The numerous **debates** on the relevance of the EaP initiative focus primarily on the actual *raison d'être* of the policy – as well as its relevance to enlargement and effectiveness in promoting reforms and stability in the region where the countries lack a clear EU membership perspective (Polskie

Radio, 2016). Yet by replicating the EU enlargement methodology, the EaP came to be perceived as a form of ‘enlargement lite’ (Popescu and Wilson 2009). Although Associated Trio countries called for greater differentiation and supported the securitization of the EaP through ‘security partnerships’ (Gressel and Popescu 2020), the EaP review in March 2020 did not represent a major departure from its original design (Manoli 2021)..

The shifts in the geopolitical environment following Russia’s annexation of Crimea and its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 have revived the debate on the relevance of the Eastern Partnership (EaP); a concern echoed both in the literature and in interviews conducted for the Geo-Power-EU project.

The EaP policy, once a pivotal tool for economic integration and liberalization, faces questions regarding its continued relevance in light of **shifting geopolitical dynamics**, particularly the EU accession processes of Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia. Some scholars argue that the EaP is irrelevant for several reasons: namely, Russia’s war in Ukraine, the EU membership perspective of Ukraine and Moldova, and the protracted crisis in Western relations with Belarus. Therefore, “the EU’s Eastern Partnership initiative is looking increasingly anachronistic and out of sync with reality” (Moshes 2022). Others framed the initiative more harshly. “*The EaP was born like a living organism, it developed, reached its peak of development, and then it died. They’re artificially keeping it alive*” (GA.8, Interview with NGO Representative, online, 26 February 2025). It should be replaced with a more ambitious but at the same time more individually tailored set of policies; rejecting the idea of dealing with a distinct region, yet enabling clear differentiation among the partners and achieving tangible results through separate bilateral relationships (Evelyn 2025).

The original **design** of the EaP was flawed (“*originally it was far, far too big and unworkable*”, GBR.1, Interview with Analyst, online, 13 February 2025.). One of the main reasons was the EaP was always a bureaucratic compromise (“*kind of artificial and somewhat bureaucratic*”, EU.1, Interview with EU Diplomat, online, 11 February 2025). While the EaP continues to support various projects, there is a notable lack of “*transparency about how the money is used for those specific projects is not available to the public*” (EU.14, Interview with Analyst, online, 21 March 2025), suggesting that this limits broader engagement with the initiative.

The interviews conducted indicate that there is shared concern about a comprehensive **EU soft power concept**; one through which European values are promoted among the countries that are

either near or bordering the EU. *“The EU’s policy must be adapted to current realities, because the strategic documents we have are out-dated”* since 2007 (EU.7, Interview with EU Parliament Advisor, online, 17 March 2025.). The EU’s focus has shifted, overshadowing the EaP’s original purpose: *“The EaP was already geopolitical, that is true; but now enlargement has become political. So then what role is left for the EaP?”* (EU.13, Interview with Analyst, online, 21 February 2025). The Eastern Neighbourhood, as originally conceived in the early 2000s and later expanded through the EaP, is no longer the right model. *“The EaP as an instrument was good to work on stable situations, integration, or concession. However, the EaP is not suitable anymore and must be more tailored”* (EU.11, Interview with Analyst, online, 28 January 2025).

Different opinions are expressed regarding the relevance of the EaP in the new circumstances. The 2009 Prague Declaration, which launched the Eastern Partnership (EaP), stated: “It [the EaP] will be developed without prejudice to the aspirations of individual partner countries for their future relations with the European Union” (European Commission 2009). However, Jean F. Crombois notes that Russia’s unprovoked war against Ukraine calls into question the future of the EaP on two levels: “First, the war challenges the very geopolitical premise that underpins the Partnership. Second, the EU’s granting of candidate status for Ukraine and Moldova <...> undermines the main rationale of the EaP: to keep the door to EU membership closed” (Crombois 2023). Chkhikvadze agrees with this view, stressing that nowadays the EaP’s unattractiveness in its current format became more visible “for Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine, while it was never genuinely interesting for Azerbaijan and Belarus” (Chkhikvadze 2024). For Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia, the enlargement process has rendered the EaP functionally obsolete (EU.13, Interview with Analyst, online, 21 February 2025). Indeed, as a Georgian policymaker put it: *“Everything is changing and the EaP also needs new life”* (GA.2, Interview with Policy Maker, Tbilisi, 4 March 2025). EaP countries no longer fit within a single framework due to their diverging political trajectories. The EU’s influence and relevance in the Caucasus diminished: *“There is no politics. There is an attempt done by somebody else sometimes in the past”* (EU.11, Interview with Analyst, online, 28 January 2025).

The EaP’s **rigid framework** does not adequately address the individual needs of partner countries, which now require tailored strategies rather than a regional approach (UA.9, Interview with Journalist, online, 26 February 2025). *“I believe more in bilateral relationships than in those big*

*programs that are too general*” (GA.10, Interview with Private Sector Representative, Tbilisi, 3 March, 2025). *“The emphasis now is much more on the bilateral. That’s going to be much more efficient and save an awful lot of time”* (GBR.1, Interview with Analyst, online, 13 February 2025). An EU analyst was in agreement, saying that while the EaP was historically useful, today a more flexible and bilateral approach is necessary, which suits the EU’s aims and the geopolitical challenges facing the EU (EU.11, Interview with Analyst, online, 28 January 2025).

The interviews revealed that the main reason for scepticism about the EaP as a cohesive regional framework is that the six countries it includes – Belarus, Ukraine, Moldova, Armenia, Georgia, and Azerbaijan – are **too different to be treated under a uniform policy**.

Defining the Eastern Neighbourhood as a **political region** is largely an administrative convenience rather than an organic geopolitical reality. *“It should be considered as a region, not because it’s a region, but because it facilitates the administrative task of the European institutions”* (EU.15, Interview with Analyst, online, 17 February 2025). The Eastern Neighbourhood is highly heterogeneous, with a lack of shared identity or political unity, making it difficult to treat as a cohesive political entity. The grouping of these countries is primarily a methodological decision driven by pragmatic considerations; both as a response to the Union for the Mediterranean and as a means of supporting the EU’s eastern neighbours. However, this overly ambitious approach has not helped the EU to overcome fundamental limitations of the EaP state partners and construct a unified approach to the Eastern Neighbourhood. *“The EU tried to create a region or to construct a region which is not a region”* (EU.13, Interview with Analyst, online, 21 February 2025).

Therefore, the initial assumption in the development of the Eastern Neighbourhood strategy that the EaP area would be a single political region is a methodological error. *“In fact, these are quite different countries in terms of history, in terms of the internal situation, the political situation in each of these countries, ideological and religious factors, and even the psychological and political mentalities of the different peoples who inhabit this region. Different countries require an individual approach”* (UA.4, Interview with Policy Maker, online, 14 February 2025). From the beginning, there were doubts about the viability of this grouping *“because it is six very different countries. And it was perhaps a lovely but flawed assumption that they could be treated in a uniform way”* (GBR.1, Interview with Analyst, online, 13 February 2025).

This overarching problem can be further disaggregated into **two specific reasons**. The first reason is that the EaP includes countries that are planning to join the EU and are focused on this – such as Ukraine and Moldova. Ukraine is the only country currently aligned with Moldova in terms of geopolitical risks and objectives. *“Only with Ukraine do we share the same risks, the same threats”* (MD.2, Interview with Diplomat, online, 29 January 2025). Accordingly, they are interested in the EaP programs only as a source of additional funding. So, *“in its current form, the EaP does not work and cannot work. It will be able to work if it includes countries that will obviously not have the right to join the EU”* (UA.8, Interview with Journalist, online, 14 March 2025).

The second reason is the wide variety of local differences. For example, Belarus is not ready for cooperation because of its dictatorial regime, whereas Armenia’s political course has been constantly changing (MD.1, Interview with Policy Maker, online, 4 February 2025). *“Azerbaijan formally participates, but in fact is only interested in economic cooperation with the EU – effectively dictating its own rules. Georgia is now moving in a direction which Brussels considers a deviation from the European path”* (AM.1, Interview with Journalist, online, 12 February 2025).

Beyond this regional incoherence, a separate structural problem is the **multilateral format** of the EaP itself, which was criticised in most interviews. This traditional format is ineffective when applied broadly across different regions such as the Western Balkans and the EaP: it *“puts countries in one basket and then they’re moving somehow forward in some policies of the EU,”* which is no longer sustainable (EU.12, Interview with Analyst, online, 7 February 2025). The multilateral architecture of the EaP has come under increasing criticism for its rigidity and lack of responsiveness. Moreover, *“a standardized approach to all countries will be seen by many EU members as a form of manipulation”* (UA.7, Interview with Private Sector Representative, online, 20 February 2025); *“if the EU wants to be credible, it must talk to both sides. Right now, we see asymmetry”* (AZ.6, Interview with Analyst, online, 9 April 2025); *“we are not Eastern partners. We are energy partners. Let’s speak the same language”* (AZ.4, Interview with Analyst, online, 2 April 2025). Azerbaijani respondents were the most sceptical of the EaP. Many see it as irrelevant due to its lack of security mechanisms and political bias: *“The EaP did not prevent war, did not help post-war. Why should we care?”* (AZ.7, Interview with Analyst, online, 18 April 2025). Some rejected the relevance of EU soft tools: *“Workshops and strategies are not what we need. We need*



*strategic dialogue and concrete investments*” (AZ.1, Interview with NGO Representative, online, 18 March 2025). Others criticized the EU’s focus on values over interests: *“If the EU wants to compete with Russia or China, it must offer more than lectures”* (AZ.4, Interview with Analyst, online, 2 April 2025).

According to most interviews, the multilateral approach is out-dated and requires a more strategic, bespoke approach. While regional coordination remains relevant, **bilateral engagements should be prioritized**. Future cooperation should emphasize country-specific engagement, which allows differentiation and strategic depth while maintaining regional coordination where necessary (UA.6, Interview with NGO Representative, online, 26 February 2025). Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia have made more significant progress through direct engagements with the EU. The EU should consider sectoral rather than broad regional approaches to maximize the success of engagement (EU.13, Interview with Analyst, online, 21 February 2025). Multilateralism may retain value for select policy areas – particularly where cross-border coordination is essential – but its role would need to be significantly narrowed and refocused. Functional **multilateral formats should be developed in key areas** like trade, investment, and infrastructure. Initiatives such as Team Europe hold potential for targeted cooperation. However, countries have largely advanced through bilateral agreements rather than regional structures. The future of the EaP should focus on flexible, interconnected tools that accommodate different speeds of EU integration while maintaining regional stability through **sectoral cooperation** in key policy areas. Sectoral formats for cooperation – whether in transport, energy, or digitalisation – are seen as better suited to managing differentiated partnerships. This reflects broader shifts within EU external policy, where flexibility, conditionality, and interest-driven engagement are central.

Analysts believe that the intensifying geopolitical competition is sharpening the differences between the six EaP countries. As such, the EU must revise the EaP, which should be based on variable geometry integration model and focused on the emerging policy dilemmas related to dissonance between the EU geopolitical interests and increasing security challenges with its normative aspirations (Cenusa 2025; Deen et al. 2021; Kubilius and Umland 2022; Raik 2022).

For **countries on the EU accession path**, enlargement policies have largely superseded the EaP framework. However, for **non-candidate states** such as Armenia and Azerbaijan, the EaP still offers strategic value, albeit without a clear direction. Moving forward, the EU must adapt its

neighbourhood policies to account for these changing dynamics, ensuring that the EaP evolves into a more flexible, bilateral approach.

## 2. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE EaP FOR EU'S GEOPOLITICAL ROLE

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This chapter examines (1) the reasons why the EaP has failed to enhance the EU's geopolitical role, (2) the impact of strategic partnerships with other IR actors on relations with the EU, and (3) some ideas about the possible future importance of the EaP for the EU and partners.

The interviews conducted indicate that one of the key criticisms of the EaP is that it no longer aligns with the current **geopolitical reality**. While the EaP was useful in times of stability, it now fails to enhance the EU's geopolitical role: *"The EaP remains too Eurocentric"* (EU.11, Interview with Analyst, online, 28 January 2025). Partner countries have multiple strategic options, including relations with Russia, Turkey, and other regional players. For example, *"in some parts of the EaP, Turkey wants to be a stronger player... the EU is not up to the level of competition that is played there"* (EU.16, Interview with Private Sector Representative, Vienna, 11 March 2025); *"we want customized partnerships, not generic platforms. That's how we work with China and Turkey"* (AZ.2, Interview with NGO Representative, online, 20 March 2025).

The EaP has long been a source of geopolitical tension between the EU and Russia. Its bilateral nature has created a dilemma for participating countries, forcing them to choose between deeper integration with the EU or maintaining economic ties with Russia: *"If you entered into this FTA, you cannot enter into a customs union or an economic union with Russia anymore. So it's either or"* (EU.13, Interview with Analyst, online, 21 February 2025). *"Moscow read the EaP as a threat. And we have statements from leading Russian officials saying that the EaP was a zero-sum game"* (GBR.1, Interview with Analyst, online, 13th February 2025).

It is noteworthy that this is a mistaken perception for two reasons. First, the EaP does not automatically establish a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) or even a basic Free Trade Agreement (FTA) between the member country and the EU. Furthermore, Participation in the EaP does not preclude a country from choosing alternative economic alignments: for example, Armenia opted to join the Eurasian Economic Union despite its involvement in the EaP. Second, even when a country concludes a DCFTA with the EU, it retains the right to pursue FTAs with

other partners. Georgia has signed a free trade agreement with China alongside its DCFTA with the EU. In contrast to the EU, **it is Russia that imposes exclusivity** through its pressure on Eastern European countries to join the Eurasian Customs Union, thereby preventing them from entering into FTAs with third parties, including the EU (De Micco 2015; Popescu 2021).

The EaP was originally envisioned as a soft power instrument, facilitating integration and reform among six post-Soviet countries. However, as several respondents note, it lacked a foundational geopolitical strategy: *“The EU failed to realize that in this space geopolitics is essential”* (MD.7, Interview with Analyst, online, 4 February 2025). This design flaw has become more apparent in the wake of Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine. In response to the invasion, the EU granted candidate status to Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia; a move described by interviewees as *“a geopolitical response”* (MD.4, Interview with NGO Representative, online, February 6, 2025). However, this shift was not accompanied by a reconfiguration of the EaP aiming to increase its relevance in the area that now centres enlargement and security policy. Ukraine-based experts expressed scepticism about the **EU’s ability to serve as a geopolitical actor** due to on-going *“economic growth problems and the ability to coordinate the interests of that large number of countries”*. This also *“affects a certain sluggishness of the EaP”* (UA.4, Interview with Policy Maker, online, 14 February 2025). Moreover, *“the EU is no longer perceived as a strategic player by Eastern neighbours”* (MD.8, Interview with Private Sector Representative, online, 17 February 2025).

The analysis of elite perspectives on the EaP reveals a complex and evolving debate over its effectiveness and geopolitical significance. While some experts argue that the initiative remains relevant in addressing security and economic challenges, others contend that it is out-dated and **too Eurocentric**.

The EU must navigate these differing perspectives carefully, ensuring that its policies are **more adaptable, regionally inclusive, and security-conscious**. To enhance its geopolitical role, the EU must **move beyond traditional frameworks**, integrate security measures more effectively, and adopt a flexible cross-regional approach. Therefore, by expanding its policy focus beyond predefined regional divisions, the EU can strengthen its role as a global actor and improve cooperation with neighbouring states.

### 3. THE EaP'S STRATEGIC COHERENCE

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This chapter analyses (1) the reasons and consequences of attempts to expand the EU instrumentalities (Black Sea Synergy, EaP, EPC, Strategic Compass, and EU enlargement policy), and 2) ideas on how to improve the coherence of EU policy instruments in the EaP.

The shift in the EU's approach to its Eastern Neighbourhood has led to a reassessment of the EaP and the rise of the significance of **the European Political Community (EPC)**. It is unclear whether attempts to expand the EU's toolkit may be seen as successful or, on the contrary, counterproductive. For example, the parallel launch of the Black Sea Synergy and EaP undermined the credibility of EU's strategic approach towards the region: *“when an entity like the EU puts out one policy, which was positively received when it first came out in 2007, and then two years later it does something else, which undercuts the previous one, it does lose credibility. EaP never really had credibility. It was never really taken seriously. And if they bury it, that's the best thing to do”* (REG.1, Interview with Regional Organization Representative, Thessaloniki, 12 March 2025).

The EU's strategic coherence is further strained by overlapping institutional frameworks. Experts point out that *“the EU operates with too many parallel frameworks;”* with the Enlargement Process, the EPC, the Strategic Compass, and the broader ENP combining to produce redundancy and confusion without effective coordination (EU.9, Interview with EC Official, online, 19 March 2025; AZ.6, Interview with Analyst, online, 9 April 2025).

The Strategic Compass designed as a blueprint for EU security and defence is already *“considered out-dated”* in the face of Russia's aggression in Ukraine. It lacks both ambition and implementation mechanisms (UA.1, Interview with Analyst, online, 31 January 2025).

European experts widely criticized the lack of coherence between the EaP, EU enlargement policy, EPC, and the Strategic Compass. They argued that the EU should not think in terms of broad regional groupings but instead focus on concrete challenges and policy responses: *“I think talking about Eastern still in this kind of singular way isn't helpful”* (GBR.1, Interview with Analyst, online, 13 February 2025). They argued that it would instead be more helpful to analyse threats, their roots, and policy responses. Experts highlighted the diminished relevance of the EaP, noting that with Ukraine's and Moldova's accession process underway and Georgia's aspirations, alongside Armenia's evolving stance, the EPC presented a more promising future. It is more

pragmatic and ambitious in its focus on security and energy, even if it has yet to take full shape (EU.11, Interview with Analyst, online, 28 January 2025; EU.13, Interview with Analyst, online, 21 February 2025).

Others, however, believe the EPC looks “*more like a talking shop*” where participation does not lead to concrete decisions (EU.13, Interview with Analyst, online, 21 February 2025). While they acknowledged that the EPC provides a platform for discussion, they argued that it does not replace the structured agreements the EaP once offered. The EaP now exists in a hybrid space, with Ukraine and Moldova prioritizing accession while Armenia, Georgia, and Azerbaijan seek alternative engagement models. The EaP maintains more strategic coherence than the EPC due to its structured financial and institutional framework. While the EPC is an informal platform primarily focused on dialogue among leaders, the EaP has been part of the ENP and is tied to financial planning, concrete projects, and various stakeholders: “*So, it was more logical, it was more structured than EPC*” (EU.14, Interview with Analyst, online, 21 March 2025).

Only a differentiated, issue-based strategy can reassert the EU’s influence in the region. However, the EU’s aspirations to become a global strategic power are constrained by its structure, which requires unanimity among member states. These limitations affect the EU’s ability to act decisively, including in areas like sanctions on Georgia or aid to Ukraine. Thus, the problem of increasing the coherence of using the EU’s diverse policy instruments in the EaP space is secondary, and its solution depends on the **restructuring of decision-making processes in the EU itself**.

## 4. THE SECURITY DIMENSION OF THE EaP

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This chapter explores (1) the problem of the importance of security for the EaP countries and, at the same time, their perception of the EU as ineffective compared to NATO and the US in this area; and (2) the difference in the positions of candidate countries and other EaP countries. However, the general rule is that the less the EU pays attention to security, the more vulnerable the EaP countries will be to external pressure.

According to all EaP elites who were interviewed, **the lack of a security dimension** in the EaP has been one of its greatest weaknesses. Ukraine and Georgia have long demanded stronger security commitments, but EU reluctance has led to growing disappointment. “*The EU took too*

*long to offer the EU perspective. Even in 2008, they were very disappointed in the EU's response. They said: Well, it's clear that you really don't care about us. If the EU had come with security commitment earlier, five years ago, then maybe Georgian Dream would not have come to that point where they completely sort of gave up on the EU"* (EU.13, Interview with Analyst, online, 21 February 2025).

Moldova today has emerged as a frontrunner among EaP states, benefiting from a pro-European government and gaining EU candidate status. Still, the threat posed by Russian influence – especially in the breakaway Transnistrian region – raises concerns about long-term stability. Without a clear commitment from the EU, Moldova risks falling back into a geopolitical grey zone (MD.1, Interview with Policy Maker, online, 4 February 2025; MD.3, Interview with Journalist, online, 16 February 2025).

Azerbaijan has engaged with the EaP on economic terms, demonstrating the lack of security coordination. There is frustration with an approach that is regarded as Eurocentric and values-based, which does not account for regional dynamics. Speaking about the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, the Azerbaijani representative summed it up this way: *"The EU never clearly condemned violations of Azerbaijan's sovereignty. This damages trust"* (AZ.5, Interview with Analyst, online, 4 April 2025). There were also concerns that EU actions in Armenia created an image of imbalance. *"We want strategic dialogue, not lessons. The EU should treat us as partners, not students"* (AZ.1, Interview with NGO Representative, online, 18 March 2025).

Armenia, after realizing the limits of Russian security guarantees, has started to look toward the EU, but security cooperation remains minimal. The European Union Mission in Armenia (EUMA) was highlighted as a major development (AM.5, Interview with NGO Representative, online, 1 February 2025). Armenians called for expanding the EU's role beyond soft tools. *"We are not asking for troops, but we need real security dialogue with Europe"* (AM.4, Interview with NGO Representative, online, 30 January 2025). The urgent need for the EU to assume a stronger security role – particularly in border management and military cooperation – is especially evident in Armenia, where Russia continues to dominate border security (EU.11, Interview with Analyst, online, 28 January 2025).

Belarusians offered a dual perspective: while values-based approaches have failed to influence the regime, they remain vital for society. *"Democracy promotion must continue, but it has to be smart,*

*patient, and society-focused*” (BY.3, Interview with Analyst, online, 5 March 2025). Belarusians focused on sanctions and border management. *“The EU underestimated how Belarus would help Russia bypass sanctions. It needs smarter tools”* (BY.4, Interview with Policy Maker, online, 9 February 2025).

The less attention paid by the EU to security, the more **vulnerable the Eastern Partnership countries will be to external pressure**. The literature debates the scope of the EU’s capabilities and strategic direction (Cenusa 2025). The most common problem is the Eastern Partnership’s failure to address **hard security** issues. While it has provided platforms for civil society, trade, and governance, it has avoided the issue of creating a regional security structure, a shortcoming that has become critical in the light of Russian aggression (Crombois 2023).

Security threats remain at the forefront but external actors, foremost the USA, play a crucial role in shaping the security landscape (UA.4, Interview with Policy Maker, online, 14 February 2025). The approach of politicians like President Donald Trump towards Ukraine can create ripple effects across the entire region. At the same time, the EU’s ability to act as “a robust geopolitical actor” is hampered by its “internal disarray and lack of unified strategic direction” (EU.15, Interview with Analyst, online, 17 February 2025). Even in Georgia, where the EU has had a long-term security presence via the non-armed, civilian European Union Monitoring Mission in Georgia (EUMM), perceptions of ineffectiveness persist. *“This security dimension exists, though this is very narrow, small and weak. There are extremely important topics you can’t secure without Georgia, for instance, Black Sea security”* (GA.4, Interview with Diplomat, online, 28 February 2025). Without **significant institutional reforms and credible instruments for defence cooperation and containment**, the EU’s Eastern policy will remain inadequate, offering only weak security assurances to its eastern partners. Currently, NATO remains the only real security provider in the region. *“I don’t think anybody in the region is convinced that offshoots of the EU can do more than unarmed monitoring missions”* (GBR.1, Interview with Analyst, online, 13 February 2025). European politicians and analysts emphasize the EU’s **institutional weaknesses and slow response times**. Interviewees believe that, among the various external actors, US policies are a primary factor shaping regional security, but the EU and NATO must assume greater responsibility. Additionally, all stress that **border management**, as well as **infrastructure security, resilience-building, and hybrid threat mitigation**, should be incorporated into the EaP framework as part of a broader geopolitical restructuring.

Experts from EaP's countries emphasized the resulting **credibility gap**: *"If the EU cannot properly ensure its security, then the question of to what extent the Eastern partners can rely on the EU in this matter has arisen"* (UA.4, Interview with Policy Maker, online, 14 February 2025). They suggested that any viable future framework must **integrate security cooperation** more explicitly, not as a parallel track but **as a core pillar**. *"The EU does not have collective decision-making in defence and security [...] anything that you can do will be watered down"* (GA.1, Interview with Analyst, online, 26 March 2025). **Ukraine**, in this view, represents not only a victim of aggression but a potential **strategic partner**. *"The trump card of the Europeans is Ukraine as the strongest military-political asset [...] there is a need to find a model of consolidation or combination of military-industrial complex of the EU countries with the capabilities of Ukraine"* (UA.3, Interview with Analyst, online, 24 March 2025).

Unlike in other areas, there is **broad agreement** that the EU lacks a coherent security strategy, sufficient military capabilities, and the political will to act. Thus, it has failed to provide meaningful security guarantees to its eastern partners. However, it is a positive indicator that the EaP partners are able to be involved in certain components of the EU's Permanent Structured Cooperation, dedicated to the development of joint military-industrial projects, innovations and technological promotion and exchange in the defence sector. The plans of the EU to enhance defence cooperation could include the participation of willing EaP partner states in the process.

The literature and interviews conducted indicate that the EaP today faces a dual crisis of structure and purpose. For some, it still has residual value as a platform for non-candidate states and sectoral engagement. For most, however, it is a legacy policy: symbolic, under-resourced and increasingly irrelevant. If the EU wishes to remain a relevant actor in the Eastern Neighbourhood, the EaP must be redefined or replaced by more **flexible, strategic, and security-conscious formats**. This would require not only institutional reform but also a fundamental shift in how the EU approaches power, partnership, and presence beyond its borders.

## 5. THE EU'S IMPACT ON THE DEMOCRATIZATION IN THE EaP COUNTRIES

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This chapter examines (1) the areas of democratisation in the EaP countries where the EU has been most effective, (2) the reasons behind the significant variation of outcomes across these countries, and (3) whether there is a need to revise the EU's instruments aimed at accelerating democratisation among its eastern partners.

The interviews show that the EU has played a role in democratisation in the Eastern Partnership region, with the EaP proving most effective in areas such as supporting reforms and improving governance.

Defenders of the EU's role in promoting democratization today acknowledged that the EU's influence is often difficult to measure in the short-term but remains crucial: *"The EU is still a good democracy promoter ... These are things that change some mentalities that change the way some people in societies work"* (GBR.1, Interview with Analyst, online, 13 February 2025). Indeed, the EU's support for **civil society**, **independent media**, and **business development** helps to create conditions for democratic resilience.

The EU's influence on democratization varies across EaP countries. Belarus remains entirely disengaged from EU democratization efforts due to its authoritarian regime. The expert described the situation as *"post-democratic repression. There is no negotiation space now"* (BY.1, Interview with Analyst, online, 9 February 2025). They viewed EU sanctions as necessary but not sufficient. Sanctions and diplomatic isolation have yielded limited change, and Belarus's growing orientation toward China's Belt and Road Initiative further reduces the EaP's influence (BY.2, Interview with Analyst, online, 3 March 2025; BY.3, Interview with Analyst, online, 5 March 2025). A second expert argued: *"The EU must think long-term. Democracy here is exiled, but not dead"* (BY.2, Interview with Analyst, online, 3 March 2025). Another interviewee emphasized support for Belarusian diaspora, independent media, and students: *"If the EU cuts all ties, we will lose a generation"* (BY.4, Interview with Policy Maker, online, 9 February 2025). Informal and cross-border cooperation were seen as essential lifelines.

Armenia's engagement with the EU is driven by pragmatic economic and security concerns. Armenia has become more open to EU cooperation on democratization following Russia's failure to protect its interests in Nagorno-Karabakh (EU.3, Interview with EEAS Official, Brussels, 13 March 2025). Its geopolitical balancing act between Moscow and Brussels has led many elites to call for more targeted bilateral relations (AM.1, Interview with Journalist, online, 12 February

2025). Interviewees emphasized Armenia's readiness to deepen EU ties; however, *"expectations are growing fast. If the EU delays, public frustration will rise"* (AM.7, Interview with Analyst, online, 19 February 2025). They called for more structured support for democratic institutions and public administration. *"The EU supports us through grants, training, and access to networks"* but *"more can be done in digital democracy, media, and rule of law"* (AM.4, Interview with NGO Representative, online, 30 January 2025). They encouraged the EU to help bridge the gap between urban and rural engagement.

Azerbaijan, meanwhile, leverages its strategic energy cooperation with the EU to avoid deeper political integration. While Baku plays a key role in the EU's diversification of energy supplies, its lack of democratic reforms and human rights concerns limit the scope of deeper engagement (AZ.1, Interview with NGO Representative, online, 18 March 2025). Azerbaijan has ignored EU democratization efforts (*"as long as Azerbaijan has oil and gas, they forget about democracy"*, EU.13, Interview with Analyst, online, 21 February 2025; *"the EU is not seen as a credible actor in democracy promotion here"*, AZ.1, Interview with NGO Representative, online, 18 March 2025). Despite constraints, EU support in education and green energy is valued. Furthermore, an interviewee underlined that *"soft engagement is better than confrontation; small steps matter"* (AZ.2, Interview with NGO Representative, online, 20 March 2025). Long-term dialogue and trust-building, even under restrictive conditions, are most welcome.

The current phase of EU democratization efforts in these three countries is a "moment of truth," where long-standing political realities are becoming evident. All three countries noted the **importance of civil society**, though the respective environments in which they operate differ dramatically. In Armenia, civil society remains strong and well-integrated into EU cooperation formats. *"We are often more agile than state structures. The EU should keep supporting us directly"* (AM.6, Interview with Analyst, online, 5 February 2025). In Azerbaijan, civil society is limited in scope (*"We work quietly, and the EU's role is mostly technical"*, AZ.2, Interview with NGO Representative, online, 20 March 2025), but there is still room for engagement (*"Work with us through technical projects, training, or culture. Avoid politicizing it too much"*, AZ.7, Interview with Analyst, online, 18 April 2025). Belarusian respondents were most vocal on this point. *"The regime destroyed our NGOs, but the networks survive – in exile, in underground. The EU must bet on society, not structures"* (BY.3, Interview with Analyst, online, 5 March 2025).

In the EU candidate countries – namely, Ukraine and Moldova – democratization efforts have been most successful precisely due to the accession process (UA.4, Interview with Policy Maker, online, 14 February 2025). Opinions are divided on the **transparency of the EU’s intentions**. One expert stressed that “*EU membership is the strongest democratization tool*” (UA.5, Interview with NGO Representative, online, 21 February 2025). Other interviewees expressed concern about EU limited understanding of internal political dynamics: “*there is no consistency on democracy support [...] only immediate interests*” (UA.6, Interview with NGO Representative, online, 26 February 2025). Democracy cannot be imposed but must evolve through improving living standards and historical experiences. The EU must therefore **adopt a value-based approach linking democratic commitment to rewards**.

The visa liberalization process, EU-driven reforms have had tangible benefits for the Moldovan public: “*It was the reforms that reflected the will of the majority at the time*” (EU.11, Interview with Analyst, online, 28 January 2025). One Moldovan policymaker noted that “*governance will return through ‘more for more’ and ‘less for less’*”, indicating the need for a results-based approach (MD.1, Interview with Policy Maker, online, 4 February 2025). Moldova’s leadership understands EU expectations and views reforms as tied to tangible outcomes. They emphasized that the EU must avoid *instrumentalizing* democracy and instead **support societal resilience**. Furthermore, the policymaker noted improved public understanding of democratic processes and credited the EU’s role in supporting **decentralization and media freedom**. However, they cautioned **against over-centralization in reform implementation**.

Georgia has shifted away from democratic reforms under its current government, demonstrating a decline in EU’s influence (GA.2, Interview with Policy Maker, Tbilisi, 4 March 2025). Yet, as one interviewee emphasised, “*the EU should continue funding watchdogs and grassroots initiatives*” (GA.6, Interview with NGO Representative, online, 20 March 2025). Another interviewee noted that there should also be a stronger linkage between funding and reform delivery: “*Access to EU support should be tied to public benefit, not elite loyalty*” (GA.7, Interview with Opposition Representative, online, 27 February 2025). The EU must have clearer positions on electoral and judicial reforms.

The elite representatives from Ukraine and Moldova stress that the EU democratization process has been affected by the Russian-centric policy of the EU member states, which prioritises

security. The interviewees agree that **“the EU cannot and should not compromise its core values” or “lower democratic standards for geopolitical gains”**.

Similar to their Ukrainian and Moldovan counterparts, Armenian elites stress the geopolitical aspects of the EaP initiative and agree that the fundamental values of the EU must remain the main basis of cooperation and a key to the democratisation of the EaP, security and stability there.

Georgian elites underline two factors: first, the lack of understanding from the EU as to the specific mentalities among the EaP countries; and, second, the risk posed by the growing influence of other actors – such as Russia and Turkey – in the EaP region. Therefore, the EU should not obstruct engagement with civil society in the EaP, but rather safeguard this space as essential for both democratic development and security.

Azerbaijani elites disagree on the issue of the EU’s effective cooperation with civil society. Belarusians outline the futility of any democratization efforts for as long as an authoritarian political regime is in place and Russian influence is strong. Thus, all **elites are doubtful as to the prospect of resetting relations with the EU while anti-democratic regimes form the governments of EaP countries**.

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The EU has been slow to acknowledge entrenched political issues, particularly in Georgia and Moldova. In Georgia, the EU was *“very, very, very late to react”* to the dominance of oligarchic rule, despite clear signs of democratic stagnation (EU.14, Interview with Analyst, online, 21 March 2025). A similar pattern is emerging in Moldova, where reforms are either stagnating or failing, yet **the EU remains entangled with certain political elites, making it difficult to admit policy missteps**. As a European analyst put it: *“The EU doesn’t want to acknowledge that something is wrong in Moldova,”* such as politically motivated anti-corruption policies and judicial reforms (EU.14, Interview with Analyst, online, 21 March 2025). Analysts point to instances where the government has pressured anti-corruption officials to resign and restructured institutions to remove independent figures that refuse to follow political directives. These developments **discredit the EU’s democratization agenda** and expose the risks of Brussels relying too heavily on certain political actors without adapting to changing geopolitical and domestic conditions.

Furthermore, the interviews revealed that the impact of the EU’s democratization efforts is also regarded as having weakened due to shifting geopolitical realities, rendering the original EaP

model less effective. The EU's soft power and conditionality measures have produced mixed results. While these tools were historically effective in promoting democracy, they now face increasing challenges. Three key challenges emerged.

The first is China's rising influence. Through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China provides an alternative to Western-style democratization, reducing EU leverage. The second is Russia's violation of international norms, with its aggressive policies, particularly in Ukraine, undermining democratic governance and limit the EU's ability to enforce norms. The third challenge is posed by resource constraints. Indeed, the EU's limited financial and policy resources, combined with shifting priorities, indicate that democratization is no longer a top agenda item. As a result, **the EU's ability to push through its democratization agenda is weakening**. While the EU still holds normative power, its leverage over certain countries is declining. Countries like China selectively adhere to EU norms when beneficial but otherwise undermine them. To maintain influence, the EU must establish **clear benchmarks and conditions** for engagement with the EaP countries.

The biggest weakness of the EU in the Eastern Partnership region, as highlighted by the interviewees, is its **lack of understanding of the specific mentality of the EaP countries and their fear of other players** (i.e. Russia, Turkey). Conversely, its biggest strength is the demonstrated effectiveness of the EU in areas such as driving reforms and improving governance, as well as supporting decentralization and media freedom. In the future, the fundamental values of the EU should remain the main basis for cooperation and the key to democratization. The development of digital democracy, media and the rule of law can be useful tools. The EU should avoid instrumentalizing democracy, supporting certain individuals rather than ideas and organizations, and instead should support the sustainability of civil society.

## CONCLUSIONS AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS ON THE FUTURE OF THE EaP

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Since its launch in 2009, the Eastern Partnership has become increasingly misaligned with the evolving political, institutional, and geopolitical realities of the EU's eastern neighbourhood. Key findings reveal that the EaP suffers from major strategic shortcomings that continue to undermine its effectiveness and credibility. The EaP lacks differentiation; relies excessively on soft instruments; and fails to respond adequately to the region's growing security challenges. Financial

opacity, slow institutional response, and limited strategic engagement have damaged trust and reinforced perceptions of superficiality – particularly among countries seeking deeper integration. The main concerns are as follows:

### 1. Structural Misalignment of the EaP Framework

(a) **DIVERGENT COUNTRY TRAJECTORIES** have exposed the limits of a uniform approach. Ukraine and Moldova are advancing toward EU integration, Georgia is experiencing democratic backsliding, Armenia is revising its security posture, Azerbaijan engages on transactional terms, and relations with Belarus remain frozen because of its authoritarian regime.

(b) **OBSOLETE MULTILATERALISM** currently characterizes the EaP. Its multilateral structure no longer reflects the diverging ambitions, institutional conditions, and governance models of its members.

(c) **HYBRID ENGAGEMENT SPACE**: The Eastern Partnership faces the fact that some partners aspire to EU membership, while others prefer functional cooperation in specific areas, which makes it ineffective within the existing EaP structure.

### 2. Deficiencies in the EU's Foreign Policy Architecture

(a) **FRAGMENTATION OF STRATEGIC INSTRUMENTS**, including the EaP, European Political Community, Strategic Compass, Black Sea Synergy, and European Neighbourhood Policy, has led to redundancy, overlapping mandates, and diluted strategic focus.

(b) **LIMITED HARD SECURITY INSTRUMENTS**: The EPC lacks formal mandates and commitments; the Strategic Compass remains out-dated and unenforceable. These tools have not been adapted to address the scale and urgency of post-2022 security threats.

(c) **INSTITUTIONAL INFLEXIBILITY** continues to weaken EU foreign policy. The unanimity requirement hampers rapid and unified responses to urgent challenges such as Russia's aggression or democratic erosion within partner states.

### 3. Inconsistent Democracy Promotion and Normative Influence

(a) **UNEVEN DEMOCRATIC OUTCOMES** are a defining feature. Moldova and Ukraine have made meaningful reforms, incentivized by the accession process. By contrast, Belarus

remains repressive, Azerbaijan resists democratic norms, and Georgia's democratic performance has deteriorated.

(b) **WEAK CONDITIONALITY AND ELITE DEPENDENCY** have damaged the EU's normative credibility. Civil society and media support has not been matched by effective measures against political capture or stalled reforms.

(c) **EXTERNAL AUTHORITARIAN INFLUENCE**, including Russia's disinformation and military assertiveness, and China's expanding economic role, has eroded the EU's normative appeal, particularly in resistant or strategically pressured contexts.

**In sum**, the Eastern Partnership must be transformed into a flexible, differentiated and strategically coherent framework. The EU must consolidate its foreign policy instruments, prioritize security integration, and apply conditionality consistently. It must engage more meaningfully with civil societies while defending democratic values in the face of authoritarian pushback. A reformed multi-track EaP – responsive to each partner's unique political trajectory and grounded in both democratic and geopolitical realism – is essential for sustaining EU influence and promoting long-term regional stability.

To restore the relevance and impact of the EaP, the EU must adopt a more flexible, strategic, and security-aware framework. The following policy recommendations are proposed:

- *Integrate Hard Security into Eastern Policy*. Make security cooperation a core pillar by supporting defence reform, cyber resilience, border control, and infrastructure protection. Strengthen coordination with NATO, the European Peace Facility, and operationalize the Strategic Compass to address security gaps and enhance EU credibility.
- *Recalibrate the EaP as a Differentiated Tool*. Replace the uniform EaP model with a tailored, variable-geometry framework. Align support for Ukraine, Moldova, and potentially Georgia with enlargement policy, while offering sectoral cooperation (e.g., energy, digital, connectivity) to countries like Armenia and Azerbaijan.
- *Enhance Strategic Coherence across EU Instruments*. Consolidate and coordinate overlapping initiatives (EPC, ENP, Strategic Compass, and Black Sea Strategy) to avoid redundancy and strengthen institutional clarity. Align them with the EaP to ensure consistency and impact.

- *Strengthen Democratic Governance and Conditionality*. Reinforce support for civil society, independent media, and local watchdogs. Link EU assistance more clearly to reform benchmarks, focusing on anti-corruption, judicial independence, and reduced elite capture.
- *Revisit EaP Scope and Membership Logic*. Move toward a multi-tiered structure: integrate accession-track states into the enlargement process and establish tailored partnerships for others, potentially based on models like the EEA or “everything but institutions.”
- *Expand Thematic Focus with Incentives*. Prioritize strategic themes such as energy security, green transition, digital transformation, and connectivity. Tie reforms to tangible benefits using instruments like NDICI under a “more for more” principle.
- *Support Regional Cooperation and Infrastructure Connectivity*. Advance projects like the Economic and Investment Plan, TEN-T extension, EU4Digital, and cross-border energy initiatives (e.g., Georgia-Romania cable) to strengthen intraregional ties and economic resilience.
- *Enhance financial transparency across EaP-related instruments*. The EU must back its financial commitments with visible investments and foster regular, high-level strategic dialogue with partner governments and civil society while clearly communicating funding allocations, objectives, and impact. Streamlining overlapping tools and establishing faster, more responsive crisis mechanisms would help rebuild institutional trust.
- *Adopt a Realistic, Value-Based Approach to Democratization*. Maintain consistent support for independent actors in authoritarian contexts. Recognize limits of direct influence while upholding EU values through credible, long-term engagement.
- *Engage Societies, Not Just Institutions*. Deepen people-to-people ties through education, youth exchange, digital cooperation, and support for informal networks, especially in fragile or repressive environments like Belarus.
- *Boost Visibility and Political Ownership of the EaP*. Increase high-level engagement, strategic communication, and flagship initiatives particularly around Ukraine’s reconstruction to enhance public support and legitimacy.

This report outlines three potential scenarios for the future of the EaP.



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## SCENARIO 1: STRATEGIC DIFFERENTIATION

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This model envisions a tailored approach, aligning EU policies, instruments, and funding with each partner's democratic progress, geopolitical positioning, and EU aspirations. Candidate countries – Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia – would gradually transition into enlargement frameworks. Armenia and Azerbaijan would benefit from targeted bilateral partnerships. This approach is recommended as the most realistic and security-conscious, allowing the EU to maximize its influence through flexibility and precision.

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## SCENARIO 2: EaP 2.0 – REFORM AND REBRANDING

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In this scenario, the EaP would be restructured around thematic clusters – such as digitalization, climate resilience, and infrastructure development – allowing states to opt into specific initiatives. This model maintains symbolic cohesion and provides a framework for innovation but might lack the political clarity needed in an increasingly fragmented region.

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## SCENARIO 3: PHASED REPLACEMENT WITH BILATERALISM

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The third approach would involve gradually phasing out the EaP, replacing it with bilateral agreements tailored to each country's needs. While this would streamline the EU's engagement with candidate countries and allow for focused cooperation elsewhere, it could dilute regional coordination and reduce the visibility of EU efforts in non-candidate states.

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