

# New EU Policy Objectives Toward the EaP

## Strengthening Societal Resilience: A Conversation in Georgia

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### *Topics of Discussion*

This IDD paper summarizes the discussions that took place in a Policy Design Workshop titled “New EU policy objectives toward the EaP: How do these objectives strengthen the resilience of the societies in the EaP region” that took place on 4-5 April 2024 in Tbilisi, Georgia, under the auspices of the Institute for Development and Diplomacy’s Jean Monnet Center of Excellence in EU Studies, which aims inter alia to provide a platform for voices from three Eastern Partnership (EaP) countries (i.e., Azerbaijan, Georgia, Ukraine) to discuss the future of the EaP framework (project number: 101085083). The event explored the EU’s new policy objectives toward the EaP by bringing together policy analysts, scholars, and young researchers from Georgia and Azerbaijan.

The workshop explored various aspects of relations between the EU and EaP and was designed in a multidisciplinary format, incorporating standard presentation formats with group interactions featuring recognized experts and practitioners.

Topics for discussion included the upcoming elections in the EU, the relevance of the EU’s EaP policy in the context of membership candidate status acquired by certain EaP countries, the EU’s ambition to play a security provider role in the region, and the direction and sectors of focus for the advancement of EU-Georgia relations.

The discussion was centered around the following key questions:

- To what extent do the new EU policies towards the EaP strengthen societal resilience in this region?

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- Do the EaP states benefit from the EU's neighborhood policy and the EaP format, and how?
- What lines of convergence are there in the EaP states concerning relations with the EU?

## Background

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, the geographic proximity and shared recent history of Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine, prompted the EU to reach out to them and other countries transitioning away from communist rule. Recognizing the significance of fostering robust relationships with its neighbors, the EU initiated a multifaceted set of engagements within various frameworks, commencing with cooperation agreements in the early years of their independence.

As the geopolitical landscape continued to evolve, the EU instituted its European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) in 2003. This policy was crafted by Brussels with the overarching goal of supporting prosperity, stability, and security in regions to its east and southeast. The EU has claimed that the ENP marked a pivotal moment, for it signified a readiness to lay the foundation for a comprehensive approach to the states that make up those regions that encompassed political dialogue, economic cooperation, and social development, while emphasizing “shared values” and “mutual benefits.”

In 2009, the EU shifted gears again and launched the EaP, which specifically targeted the six aforementioned post-Soviet countries. The EaP was supposed to encompass a strategic framework to bring about a common area of “shared values” like good governance and the rule of law and “enhance cooperation” between the EU and the six aforementioned states by deepening political ties and promoting economic integration. (Left unsaid in most such narratives is that EaP was a program designed not to encourage the targeted states to aspire to membership in the European Union.)

It has been argued that the EU's trajectory from cooperation agreements to the ENP and, subsequently, to the EaP reflects a strategic evolution in the commitment of Brussels to building enduring relationships with the aforementioned six post-Soviet countries.

Years later, the EU discovered that instead of a one-size-fits-all approach to the EaP countries, emphasis by Brussels on ownership and differentiation—a more tailored approach—with each would be a more effective way forward. This groundbreaking realization, together with the onset of geopolitical complexities and political decisions made by each EaP country, contributed to still further modifications in the EU's cooperation level with each of the six countries. Some came to decide that it is in their national interest to push for deeper relations with the EU by seeking membership candidacy status or updating their respective “association agreements,” while others have conceived of their relationship with institutional Brussels in other ways, including

participating in the recently initiated European Political Community. Still others have been excluded from pursuing even this option. All active participants in the EaP have argued that the format it provides retains some utility.

As the Eastern Partnership entered its second decade, an additional revision was thought to be necessary to correct the deficiencies of the original framework. Thus, the EU and the EaP countries undertook a comprehensive revision of the original EaP policy document, issuing a new document that sets out a new vision. The new operative word became “resilience” (specifically, institutional, economic, social, environmental, and digital resilience), which is reflected in its title: “Eastern Partnership Policy Beyond 2020: Reinforcing Resilience – An Eastern Partnership that Delivers for All.” While the EU has developed a highly ambitious cooperation agenda, the current turbulent geopolitical and economic dynamics require yet further changes of practices and, Brussels hopes, more active EU engagement with each EaP country.

## *Summary of the Experts’ Discussion*

Within the structured discussion that took place within the Policy Design Workshop, six major points were identified by the participants.

*First*, at the societal and political level, the EU aims to strengthen democratic resilience in EaP countries through various programs. When it comes to the democratic aspect of resilience, it is basically how societies perform to increase their democratic practice (presumably, to fit more closely to the model envisaged by the EU) and societal participation in the institutional development of democracy. In Georgia, the EU is increasingly focused on helping to build more local political institutions that are more accountable and transparent. Moreover, the EU promotes civil society and civil activism, which is regarded as a supplement to the system. In this regard, the workshop participants noted that the EU should build closer ties with the public, civil society organizations, and EaP leaders and expand utilizing its soft power measures through different educational, cultural, and support programs to counterbalance Russian influence in the region, which Brussels sees as being counter to its interests. Workshop participants also highlighted that the EU should focus more on societal resilience by, for instance, establish an inclusive platform for sharing experiences between all EaP countries. To that end, the EU should be actively involved in opening up avenues for increased economic, cultural, and people-to-people exchanges in the South Caucasus.

*Second*, the EU used to deal with this region as a part of the ENP, which is no longer appealing. It was highlighted that there is a lack of strategic understanding and vision from the EU side about how to effectively cooperate with the three South Caucasus states. Thus, the EU needs to adjust its foreign policy towards the South Caucasus by inter alia trying to understand the three states that make up the region as they each understand themselves. Moreover, the EU should encourage the three South Caucasus states to take

regional cooperation more seriously, which could help reshape the identity of the region. The three countries can stimulate intra-regional trade and economic cooperation, and thus increase their resilience and independence. From this point of view, connectivity projects (including the Middle Corridor) are very important and to some degree depend on how Armenia-Azerbaijan relations will evolve (Azerbaijan and Georgia have a well-established and still deepening cross-border relationship built along those and other lines).

*Third*, after the current round of fighting in Ukraine ends, deepening cooperation and partnership with the South Caucasus will be vital for the EU to achieve its objectives in the context of its “green deal.” Given Azerbaijan’s enormous onshore and offshore wind and solar potential, as well as Georgia’s sizeable hydropower potential (Armenia, too, albeit not as much), the South Caucasus as a whole has great prospects to become a starting point on the green energy corridor to European markets by exporting green electricity and, potentially, green hydrogen. Taking place against the backdrop of the global-level transformation in the energy markets, a new EU energy security strategy requires a comprehensive review of its ties with South Caucasus states, including extending strategic support to the project outlined in the December 2022 landmark Agreement on Strategic Partnership in the Field of Green Energy Development and Transmission Between the Governments of Azerbaijan, Georgia, Romania, and Hungary.

*Fourth*, participants noted that the EU has strategic interests in terms of enabling its energy diversification and supporting various transport and economic corridors, including the Middle Corridor project. That is why it is in the strategic interest of the EU to have stability and development in the region. Despite all this, the EU is failing to realistically assess the risks to regional stability and security and also why it cannot actively take part in the processes that affect regional security. Participants noted that the EU’s strategic communication in the region is weak. Furthermore, it was noted that the EU will unlikely come up with a security agenda in this region that works for the region’s states themselves. Participants also noted their skepticism regarding the EU’s ability to provide effective security guarantees to the region’s countries.

*Fifth*, workshop participants noted that the EU lacks the capacity to deter security risks and be more present in the region in terms of contributing to peace and security. Yet the EU’s enlargement policy will unlikely change and remain as “cautious” and “gradual” as it has been. Current challenges in the EaP region are crucial in determining the EU’s role in global governance and the directions of EU external action in its neighborhood in the decade ahead. The existing neighborhood policy framework cannot respond to the realities of the region while rivals are exploring hybrid tactics to leverage influence towards the region. Thus, the upcoming decade should be characterized by a paradigmatic transformation of the EU’s EAP policy. Not many participants were convinced that this would actually happen, however.

*Sixth*, recent developments in the “EaP region” show that the region itself is not politically and economically coherent and needs different approaches from the EU side, depending on the political and economic specifics of each country. In the context of the emergence of new actors and new international problems, as well as the growing interaction between various outside major powers and the EaP countries themselves, the EU’s EaP policy and its traditional approach is increasingly unable to respond to the policy needs, priorities, preferences, and challenges of the countries belonging to the region itself. The EU needs to understand that the South Caucasus is undergoing a transformation, and, therefore, Brussels should remain committed to supporting acceptable and realistic initiatives that promote peacebuilding, reconciliation, and trust-building.