

The Future of the EU's Eastern Partnership

Between Relevance and Replacement

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The European Union's decision to grant candidate status to Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine in 2022-2023 represents a historic turning point in the EU's engagement with its neighbors to the east. These developments have reinvigorated public debates about the future of the Eastern Partnership (EaP), a regional initiative launched in 2009 to strengthen the EU's relations with six post-Soviet states: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine. Initially conceived as a multilateral framework to promote "shared" norms, democratic governance, and gradual economic integration, the EaP today appears increasingly fragmented and asymmetrical. The divergent trajectories of the EaP countries have raised important questions about the continued relevance, coherence, and strategic utility of the EaP framework in the evolving geopolitical context.

The heterogeneity of the EaP countries has become particularly pronounced since Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022. Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine—often referred to as the Associated Trio—accelerated their alignment with the EU sufficiently for them to be recognized officially by the EU as accession candidate countries. Armenia, while remaining a member of the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), has pursued closer ties with Brussels, culminating in the Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA) and ongoing negotiations toward a visa-free regime. Azerbaijan, on the other hand, has emphasized a transactional relationship centered on energy exports and strategic infrastructure, notably through the Southern Gas Corridor, while largely eschewing normative alignment. Belarus, in stark contrast, withdrew from the EaP in June 2021.

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These varied trajectories highlight the declining cohesion of the EaP and signal the emergence of a differentiated integration/*rapprochement* model in the EU's eastern policy. This reflects the fact that the EU's engagement, at least in some instances, is increasingly shaped by a pragmatic, interest-based approach rather than a normative enlargement logic. In light of such shifts, the EU has begun to recalibrate its regional engagement tools. Most notably, in 2025, the European Commission unveiled a Black Sea Security Strategy, aimed at strengthening regional connectivity, resilience, and stability amidst growing geostrategic competition. This initiative, which includes not only EU member states but also several neighboring states (including EaP countries), suggests a shift toward more geographically and functionally focused engagement mechanisms.

The juxtaposition of the evolving EaP framework and the emerging Black Sea Strategy raises fundamental questions about the EU's policy architecture. Is the EaP still relevant as a unifying platform, or is it being gradually supplanted by more flexible, ad hoc strategies towards the EaP countries? To what extent can the EU maintain influence in a region where its partners pursue divergent paths and other external actors, particularly Russia and China (but also, to a lesser extent, Türkiye), continue to assert competing agendas? Addressing these questions is essential for understanding the direction of the EU's external relations policy and the future of integration and cooperation in Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus.

Reassessing the EaP: Relevance, Fragmentation, and Strategic Influence

More than 15 years since its inception in 2009, the EaP has evolved in response to a changing geopolitical environment, internal divergence among member countries, and the EU's shifting strategic priorities. The foundational logic of the EaP was rooted in multilateralism and normative convergence, assuming that the six partner countries would move along similar trajectories towards deeper integration with the EU. Initially framed within the European Neighbourhood Policy, the EaP emphasized mutual commitments to democratic governance, rule of law, and market liberalization in return for greater access to the EU market and institutional cooperation. Yet, the experiences and strategic choices of EaP members over the last decade reveal a high degree of divergence, as noted above.

This divergence has undermined the multilateral cohesion of the EaP. The differentiation among the EU's EaP partner countries has moved beyond mere policy preference and now reflects deep structural divisions in strategic orientation, regime type, and external dependencies. Ukraine's full-scale invasion by Russia in 2022, and Moldova and Georgia's subsequent receipt of EU candidate status in 2022 and 2023, respectively, have formalized a new tier within the EaP. The prospect of EU membership, long absent from the framework, has effectively redrawn the lines of engagement, positioning the

Associated Trio on a separate trajectory from the remaining EaP countries. While Armenia continues to seek closer ties with the EU, particularly following its disillusionment with Russia's role in the Second Karabakh War and its aftermath, its formal participation in the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union complicates its position. Azerbaijan, for its part, maintains a strategic posture of transactional cooperation with the EU, centered around energy exports and connectivity, while avoiding deeper political engagement. These divergent paths reflect the limits of a single, unified platform for EU engagement in the region.

Despite these divisions, some multilateral elements of the EaP retain value. Thematic cooperation in areas such as transport connectivity, climate resilience, digital transformation, and civil society engagement continues to be facilitated at least in part through EaP structures. Initiatives such as the EaP Civil Society Forum and youth mobility programs contribute to long-term norm diffusion and people-to-people contacts in those parts of EaP countries' societies that benefit from them, even in countries less aligned with the EU's political agenda. The EU's 2021 Joint Communication on the EaP reaffirmed the importance of a "renewed agenda for recovery, resilience and reform," emphasizing tailored engagement and economic support in the post-pandemic context. Nevertheless, this emphasis on flexibility and differentiation illustrates the EU's pragmatic turn away from multilateralism as the primary engine of engagement.

Indeed, the rise of ad hoc and more flexible regional strategies reflects both the EU's need to adapt to geopolitical realities and the limitations of the EaP framework in addressing heterogeneous partner ambitions. The European Political Community (EPC), initiated in 2022 as part of the EU's response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, offers an alternative platform for strategic dialogue between the EU and a wider circle of European states, including the EaP countries. Unlike the EaP, the EPC is deliberately flexible, informal, and inclusive, designed to address pressing political and security challenges rather than promote normative convergence. Its emergence illustrates the EU's recognition that rigid, institutionally embedded formats may be ill-suited for the rapid response and geostrategic alignment demanded in the current context.

Simultaneously, the granting of EU candidate status to Ukraine, Moldova, and later Georgia, preceded by the December 2021 launch of the EU's Global Gateway connectivity strategy, has signaled a further move towards bilateralism and sectoral cooperation. Global Gateway prioritizes strategic infrastructure, digitalization, and energy diversification, enabling the EU to partner with countries based on shared interests rather than shared values. While this shift may be necessary to maintain engagement with Azerbaijan or the Central Asian states, it also risks hollowing out the normative and political core of the EaP. This suggests that the EU is increasingly shifting toward "geopolitical pragmatism" that decouples technical cooperation from political transformation, particularly in light of global competition and internal EU constraints.

The erosion of the EaP's multilateralism must also be seen in the context of external

competition, particularly from Moscow and Beijing. Russia continues to exert influence across the region through a combination of military presence, energy leverage, information operations, economic influence, and elite networks. Its role is especially pronounced in Belarus, Armenia, and the occupied parts of Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine. Moscow's strategic objective of preventing further EU and NATO enlargement in its perceived sphere of influence poses a direct challenge to the EaP's ambitions. In contrast to the EU's conditionality-based approach, Russia offers immediate security guarantees, albeit at the cost of sovereignty and reform.

China's role in the region, while less overtly political, has grown through economic engagement and digital infrastructure. Its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), along with investments in transport, telecommunications, and energy, offers partner countries alternative sources of capital and connectivity. China's influence is particularly notable in Azerbaijan and Georgia, where its economic footprint is expanding. While Chinese engagement is typically devoid of political conditionality, it often undermines the EU's efforts to promote the Brussels version of transparency, environmental standards, and rule of law. In this competitive environment, the EU's normative leverage is weakened, and its self-assigned role as a "transformative actor" is increasingly challenged.

Given these dynamics, the EU must confront a fundamental dilemma: how to maintain influence and relevance in EaP countries in a situation in which its partners are diverging, its model is contested, and other external actors are gaining ground. The answer lies not in abandoning the EaP but in reimagining it. Rather than remaining a rigid multilateral framework, the EaP should be reconceptualized as a flexible platform that accommodates differentiated integration pathways while preserving a shared strategic vision. Differentiation should be managed within a cohesive policy architecture whereby Brussels allows for upward mobility among EaP partners whilst maintaining a standard set of benchmarks for democratic governance and reform. In other words, a tiered approach to partnership—anchored in a clear logic of incentives and conditionality—may be more sustainable than uniformity.

Moreover, the EU must recalibrate its engagement to respond to the security needs of its most committed partners. The Associated Trio, now formally on the path to accession, requires not only economic and technical assistance but also security guarantees, resilience funding, and greater involvement in EU foreign and defense policy mechanisms. In the Associated Trio (and perhaps one or more of the other EaP countries), enhancing the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) presence, supporting hybrid threat defense, and aligning security cooperation with NATO and other strategic partners should be considered to be essential steps in this regard. In Moldova and Georgia, where Russian interference remains acute, such measures are not merely supportive but could be seen as existential.

At the same time, the EU must continue to invest in societal engagement across the

region. Where political elites are resistant or captured, civil society actors, independent media, and youth communities remain the most effective vectors of norm diffusion and “Europeanization.” Expanding access to Erasmus+, Horizon Europe, and the European Solidarity Corps can foster long-term societal alignment with the EU, even in countries less committed at the governmental level [editorial note: such a course of action could be considered illegal in certain EaP countries]. Furthermore, the EU should enhance its strategic communication capabilities, countering disinformation, and highlighting the tangible benefits of cooperating with the EU in local languages and contexts.

Finally, the EU must learn to compete with Russia and China not only through normative frameworks but also by delivering visible, impactful results to the EaP countries. The success of Global Gateway will depend on its ability to provide timely, high-quality infrastructure and digital projects that meet local needs and align with local interests. In this sense, the EU must become a more agile geopolitical actor, capable of integrating its normative agenda with strategic investment and rapid deployment of resources.

Conclusion

The EaP no longer functions as a fully coherent unifying platform. The internal heterogeneity of partner countries, the rise of non-EU external influence, and the EU’s own shift toward differentiated engagement have eroded the foundations of EaP multilateralism. Nevertheless, the EaP still holds potential as a complementary platform for coordination, regional dialogue, and long-term societal engagement.

Rather than rendering the initiative obsolete, these developments highlight the need for reform. By reconfiguring the EaP as a flexible, modular framework that aligns with both geopolitical realities and the EU’s normative ambitions, Brussels can sustain its influence in the region and preserve what it believes to be the transformative potential of its eastern policy. The challenge is not to preserve the EaP in its original form but to adapt it to a multipolar world in which resilience, responsiveness, and strategic clarity are prerequisites for effective external relations. Such an approach could ensure that the EaP is reestablished as a vital, if reconfigured, pillar of the EU’s Eastern Neighbourhood Policy.