

Time to Reassess the Reliability of the Eastern Partnership: The Need for Segmentation and Micro-Regional Strategies

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Policy Recommendations

- Develop a 21st century European Union strategy for Caucasus with a projected EU presence
- Generate strategic orientations for EU's relation with Belarus and renew the Cold War framework for economic cooperation
- Assess the reliability of the Eastern Partnership framework: did it deliver on political association and economic integration?

The European Union's actorness in the Eastern neighbourhood encountered mixed results. Actorness can be widely understood as the capacity to be recognised as a legitimate actor and to act effectively in international affairs. After ten years of the Eastern Partnership, its partners have faced, not only external aggression, but also conflicts among themselves and internal instability.

In 2009, as part of the European Neighbourhood Policy, the European Union, its Member States and six partner countries (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Republic of Moldova and Ukraine) launched a joint framework of cooperation: the Eastern Partnership (EaP). Its main goal, as announced at the Prague Eastern Partnership Summit in 2009, was to

“create the necessary conditions to accelerate political association and further economic integration between the European Union and interested partner countries.”¹ Supporting political and socio-economic reforms, promoting stability and multilateral confidence building, and developing closer ties among the partners, were among its announced objectives. Also, the declaration emphasized the need for peaceful settlement of disputes based on international law. In the meantime, this political project went through a review in 2015, introducing a more tailored approach, and gained a new impetus with ‘20 deliverables for 2020’, and new policy objectives were formulated in 2020 with a new communication focused on the EaP beyond 2020.

Most of the steps are described positively, yet the reality needs an additional assessment. ‘EaP has been instrumental in bringing the EU and partner countries together’ and ‘the current EaP policy framework is robust and delivers tangible results for the people’ are only two of the phrases used in the communication of the European Commission and the High Representative introducing the policy framework. Indeed, there are accomplishments and investments delivered in the six partner countries. However, the latest monitoring report of the ‘20 deliverables for 2020’ identified no areas of policy action completed by February 2020². The positive aspect is that all of them are in progress, even if cross-cutting deliverables, economy, governance,

connectivity and society are discussed. Few actions have been completed, yet challenges remain. Measures such as addressing the gaps in access to finance, harmonising digital markets or increasing the security of energy supply, were on track at EaP level. A few other key actions were marked with limited progress, however, in areas such as rule of law, anti-corruption and judicial reform, environment or adaptation to climate change.

After a decade the EaP's legacy remains unclear and disputed

The European Union is involved in a mixed relationship with the six partner countries. Among the landmark successes of the EaP are the association agreements and the deep and comprehensive free trade agreements with Ukraine, Georgia and the Republic of Moldova, plus a comprehensive and enhanced partnership agreement with Armenia. Azerbaijan and Belarus remain in complicated relations with the European Union. The human rights situation in Belarus influences negatively the relations with the EU and numerous individuals have been the subject of restrictive measures. The focus on democracy and fundamental freedoms on one side, and the state leaders' neutrality preference in foreign affairs on the other side, contribute to the complications of EU-Azerbaijan relations.

While relative success in low politics and less ambitious policy areas are visible, the Eastern Partnership has not contributed to reconciliation in the region. The political association and the economic integration have received, at best, mixed results. In 2009, the Republic of Moldova went through a regime change process and, by that time, Georgia had experienced the Russian-Georgian war of 2008. Overall the experience now includes: an illegal annexation and integration into the Russian Federation of a part of the territory of a partner state, the seventh year of war in Eastern Ukraine, and most member states being without ambassadors in Minsk following the 2020 Belarusian presidential elections. It also encompasses a reheated conflict in Caucasus

between Armenia and Azerbaijan. For the first time since the formation of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) a century ago, the Azeri city of Ganja has been damaged in fighting, including being hit by ballistic missiles. Accusations of the execution of prisoners of war were transmitted by the Armenian side. This conflict erupted under the participation of both partner states in the EaP multilateral forum. Indeed, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) holds the main responsibility in this discussion, yet the Union is a less visible player. The majority of the members of the OSCE Minsk Group, mandated with the negotiations towards a peaceful settlement in Nagorno-Karabakh, are currently EU member states, including one of the three permanent chairs.

The internal dynamics within the EaP individual members are not encouraging. When the EaP was formed, there was no feasible regional competitor.

“ ... within the strong influence of Iran, Russia and Turkey, with increasing investments from China and closer neighbours, the EU's strategy towards the Caucasus ... remains underdeveloped ”

Now, the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), the successor of the Eurasian Economic Community, has strengthened its capacity. Armenia joined the EAEU in 2015 and Moldova became an observer in 2017. Internally, Georgia and Ukraine are the single partners that increased their shares of pro-EU representation in the national parliaments after 2008 and 2014 respectively. However, this correlates with the security dynamics in the EaP; Armenia, Belarus and Moldova have seen increasingly pro-

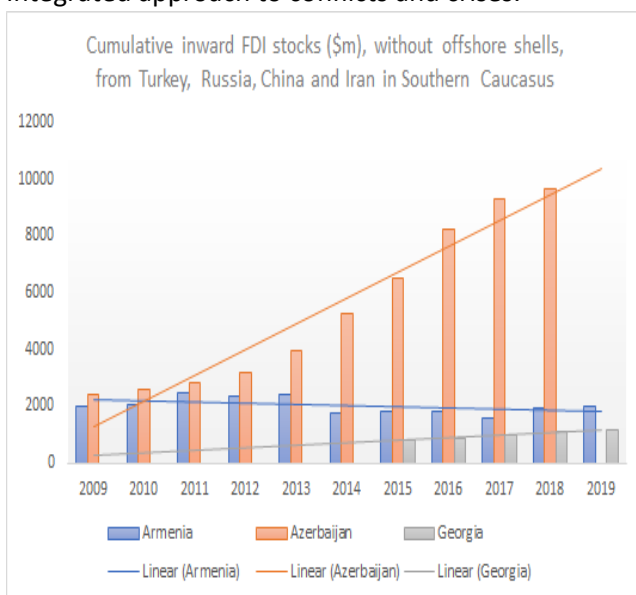
Eurasian foreign policy options in their national parliaments.

The EaP faces a significant gap which has not been addressed, despite its renewed focus on differentiation, ownership, focus and flexibility. It lacks coherence. Its building blocks and its development as an 'Eastern' dimension for ENP have shown their limits.

The EU needs a Caucasus strategy in an area of globally contested influence

The European Union has a Western Balkans strategy and it has a Central Asia strategy, however it has no strategy for the Caucasus. There are, to a large extent, strategic frameworks guiding the relations with the

neighbours of Caucasian countries. In the medium and long-term, this will impede the EU's capacity to act in a region where it needs partners. Between the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea, within the strong influence of Iran, Russia and Turkey, with increasing investments from China and closer neighbours, the EU's strategy towards the Caucasus, which is a strategic region for EU foreign policy, remains underdeveloped. The EU can act as an honest broker for multilateral dialogue in the region and support the region's development. However, it requires more articulated commitments on a case by case basis, as encouraged by the EU Global Strategy in its integrated approach to conflicts and crises.¹



Source: Data extracted from ITC's Investment Map, 2020, <https://www.intracen.org/itc/market-info-tools/foreign-direct-investment/>

The economic standpoint for a Caucasus strategy has a critical foundation. Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia have jointly a GDP of around 250 billion USD. Their population is almost 17 million. This is equivalent to the 6th most populous country of the EU. Of more importance is that in recent years their intra-regional trade has doubled compared to its level when the EaP was formed, despite this being a tiny fraction (5%) of their overall trade. The chart above highlights the increasing FDI stocks from established powers in the region. Strategically, there is increased competition in the Caucasus as it provides a corridor that has not been entirely dominated by actors with declared greater ambitions in the region. And there is

also a success story of pro-European momentum as in the case of Georgia. This shows that there is potential for increasing the role of the EU in the region, firstly economically, but also in political, social and cultural spheres.

The EU should define the regional strategy for its neighbouring Eastern plains

A discussion about Belarus is essential, since the EU failed in achieving a mechanism for effective cooperation with Belarus. The EU has a policy on Belarus lacking strategic orientation, except the focus on human rights, fundamental freedoms and, to some extent, modernisation. The strategic objectives of the EU's foreign policy towards Belarus remain a mystery, as already established channels of communication are strained after serial turmoil following presidential elections.

The Russian Federation still largely dominates foreign direct investment in Belarus. The trade agenda between Belarus and the EU is similarly weak. The trade agreement currently in force between the European Economic Community and USSR in 1989, was signed over 30 years ago. Since 2007, Belarus has not benefitted from the trade preferences under the Generalised Scheme of Preferences. However, the EU maintains these preferences with states which have complicated human rights situations.

The image of EU trade with Belarus is bleak: - 18% of the country's trade in goods with nominal values similar to those registered one decade ago. This approach is counterintuitive if the normative assumptions of trade contributing to better human wellbeing and to an improved human rights situation are considered. Thus, what are the achievements of EU's policy on Belarus, if both economically and politically the relations are strained? The pressure on human rights violations has not delivered visible results to date, as the death penalty situation and the disproportionate brutality of the regime against its citizens are still unchanged.

Furthermore, the current framework ignores the Union State between Belarus and the Russian Federation, the single self-declared political union in the region. The perspective of separate, even on some points divergent, policies on Belarus and the

Russian Federation raise questions of the coherence of EU's relations with the extra-EU Sarmatic Plain.

Is the Eastern Partnership a reliable framework internally and externally?

In this context, the Eastern Partnership needs segmentation, understood as a division into reliable segments for cooperation, particularly at a strategic level. Flexibility and differentiation are insufficient to deal with the complex relations in the East. A multilateral track engaging the entire East based on proximity neglects the complex political, economic, social and cultural differences among the partner countries.

Consequently, the major question is to what extent the conceptual EaP, as an umbrella framework, support the goals and the aims of the EU's external action in the East. What is the added value of the EaP for the EU, its Member States and for the region and the partner states? A revamp may not be enough for the framework; maybe a wider restructuring of the EU's policy in the Eastern neighbourhood is necessary. The bilateral track does not require a unique and overlapping multilateral approach since it can further cooperation on its own, as the developments in the previous decade have shown. Nevertheless, micro-regional groupings could be further developed, based on a more realistic assessment of the interests of the partner states, and of the EU, within the EaP. While the umbrella of the EaP is saluted by many actors, it can be upgraded. A strategic segmentation, apart from its currently flexible approach, would bring added value to political association and economic integration for the EU and its EaP partner countries.

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