



# ENC ANALYSIS

## The Eastern Partnership beyond Summitry

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### Summary

This paper discusses the implementation of the EaP at times of prolonged volatility placing emphasis on the progress marked and its key drivers and claims that the EaP advances when some of the following enabling conditions are met: institutionally bound commitment of partner countries' elites is present, incentives for EaP implementation on both the EU and the EaP partners' side are strong, joint ownership is built on the active engagement of other actors than the government and an enabling external stimulus exist. This paper claims that the EaP should remain closely connected to the EU's internal policy agenda and equally linked to the policy priorities of the partner countries. It should not remain hostage to a single issue but advance its comprehensive resilience building agenda.

## Introduction

In the first half of 2021, the sixth Eastern Partnership (EaP) Summit between the leaders of the EU and all its Eastern neighbours (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine<sup>1</sup>) is expected to be held in Brussels. EaP Summits held every two years sets the political framework that guides the agenda of the cooperation process between the EU and its Eastern neighbours. The 2021 Summit is expected to endorse long-term objectives and a new set of deliverables post-2020 on the basis of the joint communication '*Eastern Partnership policy beyond 2020: Reinforcing Resilience – an Eastern Partnership that delivers for all*' presented by the European Commission (EC) on 18 March 2020.

The EaP, a joint Polish-Swedish proposal, was adopted as EU's eastern policy in the Prague Summit of 2009 aimed to achieve prosperity, stability and security in the region, promoting democratic institutions, good governance, human rights and the rule of law. The special place of the neighbours on the EU's agenda has a statutory basis as it is recognized in Article 8(1) of the Treaty on European Union (TEU), which states that 'the Union shall develop a special relationship with neighbouring countries, aiming to establish an area of prosperity and good neighbourliness, founded on the values of the Union and characterized by close and peaceful relations based on cooperation'.

The Eastern dimension is at the heart of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP). It was the EU's Eastern enlargement of 2004/7 and the associated new challenges emanating from this part of Europe that triggered the ENP in the first place in 2003. Instituting good governance and consolidating stability has since then been an "unfinished business" throughout the European neighbourhood both in the south and the east. The export of European governance is challenged by competing policies and governance models of Russia, particularly in the EaP. Moscow views the EaP as a covered enlargement process of the EU in a region where it considers it holds exclusive and privileged interests. Moscow has thus employed means of both diplomatic pressure (as in the case of Armenia) and military intervention (as in the case of Ukraine) to this process, despite EaP populations' wishes towards further EU alignment and economic prosperity. The last decade of EaP's implementation has been a prolonged period of volatility and crises including the Eurozone crisis, the conflicts in Georgia (2008) and Ukraine (2014), Brexit and lately the Covid-19 pandemic.

This paper discusses the implementation of the EaP at times of prolonged volatility placing emphasis on the progress marked and its key drivers. It also joins the debate on the direction that the EaP policy should follow in light of a worsening regional security complex.

## Policy implementation at times of volatility

The EaP policy builds on a threefold pillar: regional stability, governance and development, and it aims to bring to the EU's neighbours 'a lasting political message of EU solidarity, alongside additional, tangible support for their democratic and market-oriented reforms and the consolidation of their statehood and territorial integrity'.<sup>2</sup> That explicitly points to EaP's fundamental aim to ensure that the double transition to market economy and liberal democracy is successfully concluded and sustained. Reform thus became a dominant feature of the structural policy in the EaP with the word 'reform' appearing sixteen times in the 2008 Communication of the European Commission launching the EaP.

The implementation of the EaP has regularly run into difficulties. Launched in the aftermath of the Russo-Georgian war of August 2008 as the eastern pillar of the ENP, it did not constitute a security policy although it was accelerated by security developments. There is ample debate about the

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<sup>1</sup> Russia is not included in the EaP.

<sup>2</sup> European Commission (2008). Eastern Partnership, COM(2008) 823 final, Brussels, 3 December.

shortcomings of the EaP, spurred especially by the Ukrainian crisis since 2013 and the illegal annexation of Crimea by Russia in 2014, the slowdown in democratic reforms and the setbacks in regional stability. The Autumn 2020 war in Nagorno-Karabakh was revealing of the increased militarization of regional security. The volatile security environment in the Eastern neighbourhood has undermined the reform agenda and structural change driven by the EU and local actors.

Progress in the twelve years of the EaP's implementation has been regularly monitored through the EaP Index,<sup>3</sup> the European Commission<sup>4</sup> and independent studies of a regional or national scope<sup>5</sup>. The EaP has received more criticism than merit, either when assessed as a tool of soft power,<sup>6</sup> or as a security provider<sup>7</sup>. The EaP –unequipped with security tools and mechanisms– has definitely fallen short in establishing conditions to prevent military conflict and interstate war. The main features and rationale of the EaP point to a foreign policy tool; an instrument for the EU to shape and determine the structure of the regional political economy within which its neighbours operate rather than directly address security concerns.<sup>8</sup> How far has the EaP gone as a structural foreign policy in setting the context of social interaction beyond EU's borders and addressing universal and second degree policy goals?

One of the widely acknowledged achievements of the EaP has been the creation of a regularly adjusted **comprehensive, policy framework** for the EU's relations with its neighbors. This institutional proliferation from the intergovernmental to the civil society level has gone along with the deepening of political and economic integration of the eastern partners in Europe which is primarily managed through the Association Agreements (AAs) and specialized integration programmes such as the EU4Climate, the EU4Business and the EU4Digital. The goal of establishing a single policy framework for all eastern neighbours has, nevertheless, not been met. The Association Agreements, the visa-free regimes and intensified political dialogue point to increasing differentiation. The Eastern partners have been grouped in two tiers of institutional and political differentiation whereas Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine are the frontrunners having ratified an Association Agreement with the EU in 2014 (the

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<sup>3</sup> Eastern Partnership Index, Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum. Available at: <https://eap-csf.eu/what-is-eap-index>

<sup>4</sup> 20 Deliverables for 2020 Monitoring – State of Play, European Commission, March 2019. Available at: [https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/20\\_deliverables\\_for\\_2020\\_monitoring\\_state\\_of\\_play\\_2019.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/20_deliverables_for_2020_monitoring_state_of_play_2019.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> Such as 'Georgia's Implementation of 20 Eastern Partnership Deliverables for 2020', Georgian Institute of Politics, 2019 (available at: <http://gip.ge/georgias-implementation-of-20-eastern-partnership-deliverables-for-2020/>) and Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum Structured Consultation on Eastern Partnership. The civil society perspective: Country Report Moldova, June 2019 (available at: <https://eap-csf.eu/project/country-report-moldova-structured-consultation-on-the-eastern-partnership-beyond-2020/>) and Secieru S. and S. Saari (eds.) 2019, 'The Eastern Partnership A Decade On', Chaillot Paper 153, EUISS, Paris, July (available at: [https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUISSFiles/cp153\\_EaP.pdf](https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUISSFiles/cp153_EaP.pdf)).

<sup>6</sup> Nielsen, K. L. & M. Vilson (2014). 'The Eastern Partnership: Soft Power Strategy or Policy Failure?' *European Foreign Affairs Review*, 19(2): 243 – 262.

<sup>7</sup> Gresse, C. (2020), 'The Eastern Partnership's missing security dimension', Zentrum Liberale Moderne, LibMod Policy Paper, June. Available at: [https://libmod.de/wp-content/uploads/LibMod\\_PolicyPaper\\_EasternPartnership3.pdf](https://libmod.de/wp-content/uploads/LibMod_PolicyPaper_EasternPartnership3.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> Manoli, P. (2017). 'A Structural Foreign Policy Perspective of the European Neighbourhood Policy', *Theorizing the European Neighbourhood Policy*, Gstohl, S. & S. Schunz (eds.), London and New York: Routledge: 124–142.

‘Trio’<sup>9</sup> while Armenia, Azerbaijan and Belarus are the ‘laggards’ with looser institutional links to the EU. Moreover, institutional association with the EU came at a high price especially in the case of Ukraine, where the denial of the government of V. Yanukovych to sign the concluded Association Agreement with the EU in Autumn 2013 led to widespread popular protests, a protracted conflict in Eastern Ukraine with Russian military involvement and the illegal annexation of Crimea by Moscow.

**Addressing second degree goals** (connectivity, mobility and standards) is where progress has been evident even in the second tier countries as indicated in the **monitoring** undertaken by the EC.<sup>10</sup> From a **sectoral perspective**, progress has been marked especially in three areas; stronger economy, society and connectivity. Various indicators such as the increase in trade flows to the European market have provided evidence to support the attainment of second degree goals as is extending the access of companies in the region to loans by European financial institutions (EBRD, EIB), SMEs development and harmonization of digital markets. Still, progress in secondary degree goals does not necessarily reflect or be a result of closer institutional association with the EU as in the case of people-to-people contacts in Belarus and connectivity in Azerbaijan, partners with loose European institutional set-ups. The EU has spurred lower-level reform and provided civil society support but the pace and type of reforms in partner countries is largely determined by their national institutions and priorities, political and economic conditions rather than they are principally driven by the EaP institutions.

Where the EaP has fallen behind expectations is in addressing **universal goals** as in good governance, democracy and human rights pointing to the limits of the normative power of the EU compared to its market and regulatory strengths. Various studies indicate a variety across the EaP countries in terms of the quality of democracy and democratic reforms.<sup>11</sup> Despite the EU's increased interest, setbacks were marked in Ukraine especially between 2010 and 2014, in Moldova between 2014 and 2020 – a country considered the front-runner of the EaP – while reforms in Georgia have slowed down as well. Armenia, even with loose links with the EU has comparable scores in levels of democracy and human rights.<sup>12</sup> No signs of democratic change are evident in Azerbaijan and Belarus where autocratic rule is further consolidated despite EU's policy of critical engagement of sectoral cooperation with the regime (a policy mostly relevant to Belarus since 2016). The EU's transactional turn reflected in the ENP revision in 2015 further undermined EU's normative power. The revised strategy proposal for the EaP of March 2020<sup>13</sup> raises once more the relevance of the policy to the delivery of universal goals this time through the prism of resilience but compared to the former EaP agenda this one turns into the challenges of ecological and digital transformation (Paris Agreement on Climate Change and the UN 2030 Agenda and its Sustainable Development Goals) as priority ones.

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<sup>9</sup> The ‘Trio’ of Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine submitted their common ‘Trio Strategy 2030’ on the EaP Future in October 2019 during the consultation process on EaP. Available at: <https://tsajunga.lt/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/LT-EPP-Trio-Strategy-2030.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> 20 Deliverables for 2020 Monitoring – State of Play, European Commission, March 2019. Available at: [https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/20\\_deliverables\\_for\\_2020\\_monitoring\\_state\\_of\\_play\\_2019.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/20_deliverables_for_2020_monitoring_state_of_play_2019.pdf)

<sup>11</sup> Bosse, G. (2019). ‘Ten years of the Eastern Partnership: What role for the EU as a promoter of democracy?’ *European View* 18(2): 220-232.

<sup>12</sup> Aleksanyan, A. (2018). ‘Regional perspectives on democratisation of Eastern Partnership countries’, *Global Campus Human Rights Journal* 2: 193-208.

<sup>13</sup> European Commission (2020). ‘Eastern Partnership policy beyond 2020: Reinforcing Resilience – an Eastern Partnership that delivers for all’, Joint Communication, Brussels, 18 March. Available at: [https://ec.europa.eu/info/publications/joint-communication-eastern-partnership-policy-beyond-2020-reinforcing-resilience-eastern-partnership-delivers-all\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/info/publications/joint-communication-eastern-partnership-policy-beyond-2020-reinforcing-resilience-eastern-partnership-delivers-all_en)

At a time when the EaP has received much critical assessment for its performance especially in the security field, the eruption of the Covid-19 pandemic, highlighted some of the strengths and relevance of the EaP for the well-being of the eastern partners' societies as a crisis management tool in cases that bear major socioeconomic impact. As part of its global response to the **coronavirus outbreak**, the European Commission mobilized an **emergency support package** for the Eastern partners worth 58 million Euro for immediate support and more than 1 billion Euro for health systems and support for the short and medium term social and economic recovery of the region.<sup>14</sup>

### Enabling Factors

Regional security problems, the Russian counter interference and local chronic oligarchies that have captured both state and market have been the key stabling blocks hindering the attainment of EaP's goals of reform. Offsetting, even if partly, such persisting stabling blocks, there are few enabling factors underwriting policy progress.

First, the conclusion of an Association Agreement is itself a driver of reforms. Association Agreements indicate not only the willingness but also the long-term **commitment of the political elites** of the partner countries to undertake demanding but essential reforms that often take time to deliver tangible effects. They come along with monitoring mechanisms that set the pace of reforms and a web of institutions engaging the civil society which is essential to building joint ownership of the reform process. Other related agreements such as the Visa Free Agreements and the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas (DCFTAs) have spill-over effects in domestic reforms in different fields such as the transportation sector and people-to-people contacts.

Second, the existence of **strong incentives** on both the EU's side and the partners' side. On the EU's side, incentives are closely linked to **policy consistency** between the EaP deliverables and EU's internal policy priorities. Thus, marked progress in the field of connectivity with EaP partners is well-linked to the EU's own priorities in trade, transport and energy security. From the partners' perspective, beyond the consistency of the EaP deliverables to national reform objectives (e.g. the profit tax reform and the SME Development Strategy 2016-2020 in Georgia), it is important that immediate benefits are offered such as financial assistance, political recognition, visa liberalization and free access to EU's market. Financial assistance becomes a strong incentive as it comes with significant welfare effect domestically (e.g. in Georgia, through Horizon 2020, around 30 million Euro has been made available in loans leading to the creation of an estimated 10,300 jobs<sup>15</sup>).

A third, key driver of success is the active engagement of other than governmental actors, especially of local public actors, the civil society and the private sector who take **ownership** of the EaP process and vested interests are thus created. Accordingly, the EU has been re-shifting aid from the central administration towards other levels of policy and the civil society while **adjusting EaP's implementation** methods to realities on the ground. Thus, in Moldova, there is a tailor-made EU approach, where local public authorities and other local actors are prioritized, given the EU's distrust of the central administration in previous years. By contrast, in Ukraine, the EU pursues the fulfillment of the reform agenda in a close relationship with the central government.

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<sup>14</sup> European Commission (2020). The EU's response to the coronavirus pandemic in the Eastern Partnership. Available at: [https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/coronavirus\\_support\\_eap.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/coronavirus_support_eap.pdf)

<sup>15</sup> Georgia's Implementation of 20 Eastern Partnership Deliverables for 2020, Georgian Institute of Politics, International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy, Tbilisi, 2020. Available at: <http://gip.ge/georgias-implementation-of-20-eastern-partnership-deliverables-for-2020/> ).

Success in delivering the EaP goals is widely underwritten by a fourth driver which is **the enabling external stimulus** or the absence of a negative external influence. Having said that, a common ground is that the implementation of the EaP has taken place mostly in an obstructive external environment either due to the opposing policies of other, competing, powers (in particular actions of Russia) or due to the unintentional effects of developments such as the global financial crisis that swept European economies since 2008, or the Brexit negotiations which redirected EU's priorities away from the Eastern neighbourhood. (External) threat perceptions of the EaP countries amidst the absence of any credible security provider have pushed their elites and societies to support the EaP policy especially in the cases where protracted conflicts endure (Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine). Reflections on an enabling external stimulus should, however, also have a strong sectoral perspective. The enabling external influence is not confined to geopolitical, security and economic considerations at a macro level but rather points to supporting trends in the sectoral policy areas concerned. Thus, membership in the World Trade Organisation (WTO) and the opening of partner economies to the global markets have pushed ahead EaP deliverables foreseen in building a stronger economy pillar of the EaP policy.

### With an eye on the future

As a structural foreign policy, the EaP has pushed forward reforms projecting EU's transformative power in the neighbourhood but it has fallen short in linking either with EU's foreign policy objectives or the partners' security concerns. Much of the current debate on EaP's future ahead of the 2021 Summit<sup>16</sup> stems from the above assessment and points to the need for a more securitized and geopolitical EaP beyond 2020.

Acknowledging that the EaP area has become a terrain of military aggression and war –as in the recent cases of Ukraine and Nagorno-Karabakh– as well as of hybrid war, proponents of a securitized EaP have argued that the EU needs to exercise its security muscles to remain a relevant actor in European security architecture. Indicatively, Gressel and Popescu have suggested an 'Eastern Partnership Security Compact' that contains intelligence cooperation, 'soft' and 'hard' security and assistance to modernise military capacity.<sup>17</sup> Similar voices are raised by the 'EaP Trio' (Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine) who are single-minded in pushing forward their EU membership.<sup>18</sup> On the other hand, critics of a securitized EaP point to the negative effects and risks of a deepening security antagonism in the Eastern neighbourhood that such a development would signal. Geopolitical considerations and security concerns are indeed reflected in the March 2020 Joint Communication on the EaP which calls for improved security cooperation within the EaP. Still, the proposed reforms in the Joint Communication reinforce even further the structural transformation aspects of the EaP through an emphasis on resilience building rather than on foreign policy and security issues.

Despite the heated academic debate on EaP's security dimension, the policy is mostly relevant to the socioeconomic development of the Eastern partners. Both the bilateral and, especially, the multilateral pillar of the EaP do not entail tools and mechanisms that would appropriately address pressing hard security problems in the region. The incorporation of security related aspects including countering hybrid war and security sector reform could derail the EaP from its successful, even though moderate, record on structural socio-economic reforms, impeding focused political attention and

<sup>16</sup> See for example the Report prepared by the Clingendael institute for the Netherlands and the EU. Available at: <https://www.clingendael.org/pub/2021/the-eastern-partnership>

<sup>17</sup> Popescu, N. and G. Gressel (2020). 'The Best Defence: why the EU should forge Security Compacts with its eastern neighbors', ECFR Policy Brief, November.

<sup>18</sup> Statement of the Foreign Ministers of Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova on the Future of the Eastern Partnership, 5 December 2019. Available at: <https://mfa.gov.ua/en/news/76418-ministri-zakordonnih-sprav-ukrajini-gruziji-ta-moldovi-vistupajuty-za-diferencijovanij-pidkhid-u-ramkah-iniciativi-jes-skhidne-partnerstvo>

resources. Furthermore and on top of not addressing the security deficit in the region, the EaP remains exposed to regional insecurity that seriously limits its potential and success. A realistic approach would be to enhance the EaP's structural policy aspects relevant to all eastern partners while introducing a parallel security dialogue framework addressed to the willing neighbours that would be embedded in the context of NATO-EU enhanced cooperation. As no structural policy such as the EaP can fully deliver in a security vacuum or in an adverse security environment, it becomes expedient for the EU to reconsider its own security actorness in its neighbourhood.

Ahead of the 2021 Summit, the EaP leaders will have to reassess among others the regional security complex in the aftermath of the Nagorno-Karabakh 2020 war and settlement, the civil protests in EaP countries especially in Belarus and the state of affairs in Russia's relations with the West after the new Biden administration. Still, they will also have to make a cartography of the new post-Covid environment throughout Europe and the neighbours. In reshuffling the EaP, the policy should not remain hostage to a single issue (as in a Russia-first perspective); it should rather advance its comprehensive, structural reforms agenda and tools.