



— SPECIAL REPORT —

09/11/2019

**SUMMING UP  
10 YEARS  
OF THE EASTERN  
PARTNERSHIP**



SOURCE: EU/EEAS

May 2019 marked ten years since the Eastern Partnership was launched as a platform for a mutual dialogue between the European Union and its Eastern neighbors while providing a roadmap for comprehensive actions to be undertaken. Included as part of the forum are Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine. Until then and within this framework, the European Union had had its policy heavily oriented towards political reforms in a bid to step up democratic efforts on their partners' domestic stage. Simultaneously, Brussels insisted that appropriate measures be taken to facilitate visa issuance, guarantee economic support and help local administration raise their competences as well as promote proper organization of civil society. The following report aims to summarize to what extent the chief goals of the initiative have been implemented so far.

In 2008, Poland proposed to set up a platform for cooperation, an idea that was subsequently endorsed by Sweden. Less than a year later, in May 2009, the initiative was officially launched during the summit of the heads of states and governments of the EU and partner countries,

the latter of which found themselves as part of the newly established format. What was the critical goal of the political project was to build up support for Eastern Europe and Southern Caucasus in their partnership with the European Union after the latter saw an



**EUROMAIDAN IN DOWNTOWN KIEV.  
SOURCE: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS**

enlargement round, with Central European countries joining the bloc. Also, the Eastern Partnership emerged in the context of bringing to life a French-led Mediterranean union, a political forum that surged in the framework of the European southern neighborhood policy. The Eastern Partnership was believed to correspond to the Paris-led political venture yet this time addressing the needs of Eastern European countries. Politically, although born as a result of a joint effort of Poland and Sweden, the platform was met with support from Germany that saw Europe's southern neighborhood policies in terms of Paris's dominance over EU foreign policy. Another factor that pushed Europe towards establishing the Eastern Partnership was the 2008 Georgian war. The Georgia-Russia conflict coincided with France's presidency of the Council of the European Union, with Paris throwing its full support for an initiative that sought to bolster

the EU's presence in the region. Included within its framework were both countries that remained committed to cementing their relations with the European Union in a bid to become a full-fledged member of the bloc (Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine) as well as those being somewhat skeptical about European integration: Azerbaijan, Belarus, and Armenia. The last of these countries has changed its attitude towards the idea of European integration over a decade, first making attempts to become associated with the European Union but eventually abandoned its initial pursuits to be closer to its Eurasian peers. Russia, for its part, failed to become part of the Eastern Partnership: Moscow believed that this could not be an appropriate format for enhancing ties with Brussels, with which it had direct relations without the countries of the region to take part as mediators.

## A decade of challenges

Among the countries taking part in the Eastern Partnership are those that can be referred to as having different expectations towards the initiative itself and the pace of European integration. Countries such as Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine are striving to set up a robust framework for EU cooperation while declaring willingness to become full-fledged members of the bloc. What seriously impeded the Eastern Partnership was that the European Union has failed to issue a declaration on these countries to be eventually incorporated into its structures. Though new association agreements showed a new ambitious plan for reforms to be passed by these countries, along with a need to adopt *acquis communautaire*, no information was provided whether they would be capable of joining the bloc. The EU's attitude was met with opposition from the countries that overtly declared their aspirations to become EU member states. Pro-European elites in Kiev, Chisinau, and Tbilisi pursued an integration-oriented policy, with their political campaigns being focused on explaining to the public why reforms are needed and whether it is vital to align with EU standards on the path towards EU integration.

For their part, Azerbaijan and Belarus gave their nod for constrained economic partnership with the bloc, refusing to forge a political dialogue with the European Union over human rights or the rule of law. Of all its peers, Armenia was the only country to have tilted its position towards Brussels's proposals. Initially planning to ink an Association Agreement with the European Union, Yerevan eventually bowed to pressure from Moscow, abandoning

the project and joining Eurasian political and economic structures.

As for the European Union itself, its member states presented a diverse range of reactions to the idea of European integration of the countries covered by the Eastern Partnership. Western European countries eyed skeptical moods going high in fear of future ties with the Russian Federation, seen as the critical trading partner for all countries of the region. Greatest enthusiasm for the initiative aroused among Central European countries that are in the close neighborhood of Belarus, Ukraine, and Moldova. Political and economic stability for the Eastern Partnership countries seals a guarantee of a safe and secure neighborhood, acting as a geopolitical buffer zone between them and Russia.

Over the past decade, the European Union has insisted on establishing a solid framework for regional cooperation aimed at fitting all interested parties. Though no decisions regarding the abolition of the visa regime or the EU

---

**Political and economic stability for the Eastern Partnership countries seals a guarantee of a EU's safe and secure neighborhood, playing the role of a geopolitical buffer zone between EU and Russia.**





**THE 5TH EASTERN PARTNERSHIP SUMMIT, BRUSSELS, 2017.**  
**SOURCE: COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION**

Association Agreement were considered individually, Eastern Partnership summits, or a series of conferences that attracted members of civil society, were mainly of a local character, serving as an area for talks bringing together state leaders that would not be able to meet otherwise. This is best exemplified by what takes place in Armenia and Azerbaijan, as neither country is interested in maintaining diplomatic ties, broken off primarily due to the ongoing Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

What served as a critical test for the Eastern Partnership were the events in Ukraine that commenced in the aftermath of President Yanukovich's refusal to sign a EU Association Agreement. A social reaction that came in response to the Euromaidan civil unrest was a clear signal for the authorities in Kiev, prompting them that the people seek an alliance with the European Union. The Eastern Partnership sees losing Ukraine, which is the region's largest country that boasts considerable economic potential, as a de facto political defeat of the European roadmap for the area. The Euromaidan revolution ensured victory,

and though this victory was marred by the bitterness of Russia's annexation of Crimea from Ukraine and the war in Donbas, the European Union has come out triumphant while seeing Kiev leaving the Russian sphere of influence.

---

**The Euromaidan revolution ensured victory, and though this victory was marred by the bitterness of Russia's annexation of Crimea from Ukraine and the war in Donbas, the European Union has come out triumphant while seeing Kiev leaving the Russian sphere of influence.**

# Dilemmas of the Eastern Partnership

Countries covered by the EU's Eastern Partnerships that have tied their future to the European Union since the political forum was brought to life seemed yet skeptical about its actions. This was chiefly about including as part of the initiative the states that find it challenging to adopt a set of fundamental democratic rules (Azerbaijan and Belarus), a step that deems somewhat controversial for any countries aspiring to join the EU and those that are eager to align their legislation with the bloc's internal rules (Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine). In their turn, the countries that are least advanced in the joint European initiative are afraid that the EU's actions will lead to the outbreak of color revolutions in Minsk and Baku on their way to topple the regimes of Lukashenko and Aliyev. Both Belarus and Azerbaijan eye cooperation with the European Union as somewhat a wind of change in international politics, as a bid to counterbalance their heavy reliance on Russia with the chance to forge closer ties with Europe. This move has a tactical dimension, though ; Belarus is part of Russia's geopolitical sphere of influence while the oil-rich regime in Baku does not need to be bankrolled by Brussels. What is more, political cooperation with the European Union would require Azerbaijan to pass through a set of democratic reforms in the country, a far less desirable solution for President Aliyev's authoritarian regime.

The countries that have become part of the EU's Eastern Partnership program can boast various stages of cooperation with the bloc. Launched as a platform for strengthening

democracy, the rule of law and preventing the countries from getting embroiled in an actual confrontation with Russia, the initiative has yet failed to reap entirely satisfactory benefits for the states that went well while cooperating under the format. First to cement its ties with the European Union, an effort that led to establishing a visa-free regime to the Schengen zone, Moldova has witnessed a massive corruption scandal, with an amount of some \$1 billion having flown out of the state budget. Involved in the case were top Moldovan politicians, including former Prime Minister Vladimir Filat, now in jail. For Ukraine, the Eastern Partnership has failed to play any fundamental role in the Ukraine-Russia conflict over Crimea and the war in Donbas, both of which ignited back in 2014. Peace negotiations took place as part of the Normandy format, with the participation of Germany and France, albeit turning out badly for bringing together the European Union as a whole, or the Eastern Partnership

---

**Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine are in high hopes of joining EU structures as soon as possible. For their part, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Belarus see their co-operation with Brussels as counterbalance for Russian influences.**



**A DEMONSTRATION IN TBILISI, GEORGIA.  
SOURCE: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS**

as a specific political forum dealing with Eastern European policy issues. Following the war with Russia in 2008, Georgia lost authority over the two separatist statelets of Abkhazia and South Ossetia while undergoing a bitter experience of their territories being partially

occupied. The EU's reaction, still as part of the Eastern Partnership acting as a mediator in re-integrating Georgian territories, was narrowed down to deploying European Union Monitoring Mission – EUMM in Georgia, yet restricted to operate only in Tbilisi-controlled areas.

## Eastern Partnership as a tool for European integration

Since its inception, the Eastern Partnership has not served as a platform for incorporating Eastern European countries into the European Union. The initiative's general provisions, statements from top European officials and Association Agreements failed to raise the issue of feasible membership in any of its

aspects. The EU's approach was chiefly linked to the fear over its further ties with Russia; from the very beginning of the Eastern Partnership format, Moscow believed it to be a tool for drawing these countries straight into the European Union. Hence, as for EU talks with Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine, no





SOURCE: EU NEIGHBOURS

promises have been made on their plausible membership in the bloc. It can thus be concluded that the Eastern Partnership was seen as an alternative to EU membership while countries covered by the initiative were to be offered an opportunity to become associated or to join specific actions, yet with their doors closed to formal membership.

Under the Eastern Partnership, the European Union has at its disposal a set of tools for making Eastern European countries enter the bloc's economic and political spheres. Although having no formal blueprint for further membership, Association Agreements seek to bring partner countries closer to the European market, chiefly in the context of the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA). Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova have so far signed association and free trade agreements with the European Union. Inked between the EU and its associated countries, the trade agreement lifts customs tariffs on all goods being shipped to the European Union

while regulating EU legal standards for cooperation, sanitary and technical measures, and the process gets financial support from Brussels. The European Union therefore has set its own rules for trading goods, leaving the door open for an important European market and making the EU the biggest trading partner for the associated countries.

---

**Under the Eastern Partnership, the European Union has at its disposal a set of tools for making Eastern European countries enter the bloc's economic and political spheres, an example of which are free trade agreements.**



The DCFTA seems a critical piece to forge long-lasting economic ties between the European Union and its partner states. In 2013 Armenia announced its decision not to sign the EU Association Agreement, but at the 2017 Eastern Partnership summit in Brussels managed to negotiate a new deal. Armenia signed the Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA). For its part, the CEPA does not contain any provisions on a free trade zone. Under the deal, the European Union is set to earmark more than €160 million in assistance for Armenia by 2020. Armenia is making efforts to pursue a multivector policy; although formally being part of the Eurasian Customs Union, the country hopes for a lasting dialogue with the European Union, as evidenced by its society's aspirations. The CEPA is not an association agreement but a partnership deal that does not give the European Union any direct influence on a country, which makes it unable to apply the EU law in all issues related to trade exchanges. The fact of Armenia's signing the EU deal is seen as an attempt to sail towards a European dialogue. Yerevan's successful cooperation with the European Union under the CEPA may serve as an example to be followed by Azerbaijan and Belarus. Despite having no possibility of associating with the EU, both countries are yet free to kick off cooperation with Brussels, offered as part of EU partnership deals.

So far EU-Belarusian cooperation within the Eastern Partnership initiative was narrowed down to regular meetings, often boycotted by the Belarusian side. Minsk has many times come under harsh criticism from the European Union over violating human rights, especially after opposition politicians were detained in the aftermath of the 2010 presidential election.

It seems that the Eastern Partnership is doomed to remain a political initiative with a mission to stop neighboring countries at some stage of their integration with the European Union. Countries that strategically aspire to join the European Union see the Eastern Partnership as a kind of limitation, being aware that any steps taken as part of the program are narrowed down to associate with the bloc. If the EU gives its go-ahead for launching accession talks with individual countries covered by the Eastern Partnership, these will take place independently of the political platform. The forum may still create an opportunity for countries such as Belarus and Azerbaijan to keep political ties with the European Union in the area of a friendly neighborhood policy.

---

**The Eastern Partnership, on the one hand, brings EU partners close to Brussels, both economically and politically, while hoping to stop them at a pre-accession stage.**

# Possible development of the Eastern Partnership

The Eastern Partnership is unlikely to make a tilt in its formula, remaining a substitute in lieu of EU membership. At the Eastern Partnership summit of November 2017 in Brussels, a proposal was made to launch the Eastern Partnership Plus model, a concept that would embrace a group of the outstanding countries of the Eastern Partnership by offering them the possibility of joining the customs union, energy union, digital union or even the Schengen area, yet without paving their way for becoming EU member states. Once pushed forward, a similar solution would trigger off the fall of the Eastern Partnership as a local initiative. Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine would be given an opportunity of expanding their framework of cooperation with the European Union while the Eastern Partnership could still welcome those countries that are incapable of joining any EU rapprochement mechanisms.

What offers the EaP+ format runs in parallel to full-fledged membership, a solution that drifts some countries away to Europe's political margins despite many privileges it gives. This acts to the detriment of the EaP countries, especially given their current stance on Russia. When staying outside the European Union, they will have no political mechanisms to safeguard their vital interests in EU institutions, making them incapable of handling external challenges.

With its current form, the Eastern Partnership boasts great potential for entering into cooperation with Azerbaijan, Belarus, and Armenia, the three countries that see it tactically.

---

**The suggested concept of the Eastern Partnership Plus would embrace a group of the outstanding countries of the Eastern Partnership by offering them the possibility of joining the customs union, energy union, digital union or even the Schengen area, yet without a promise to join the European Union.**

Yerevan, in its turn, is making efforts to build relations with the European Union yet all while maintaining an alliance with Russia, the latter solution eyed as a guarantee of security in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

The future of the Eastern Partnership will much rely on Russia's attitude to the initiative itself. European politicians remain cautious when making promises to EU partner countries, which stems both from a set of intra-EU preconditions and the Russian factor. Moscow fears that the Eastern Partnership could trigger political reshuffles in Armenia, Belarus, and Azerbaijan in a bid to kick them out from the

Russian sphere of influence. Russia seems to take a grip on its current political course, targeting their actions at reducing the importance of the Eastern Partnership. Being capable of controlling conflicts within Armenia, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine, either directly or not, Moscow has some tools for rebuffing these countries' prospects for EU membership.

Notwithstanding that and given all the changes that have taken place in Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine after these three inked EU Association Agreements, there is still a chance for the development of Brussels's ties with the region. These are ties strengthened both at the top level and thanks to a constructive dialogue with members of civil society or local authorities. Changes have occurred as part of grassro-

ots initiatives, thus far from any elite agreements. Therefore it can be concluded that what so far has happened within their societies is permanent and primarily to be owed to the Eastern Partnership program.

---

**Changes that so far have taken place in Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine, especially in their social dimension, shall be seen as a permanent stage to be owed to the Eastern Partnership program.**

**Author:**

**Jakub Lachert**

Jakub Lachert is a PhD candidate at the Faculty of Political Sciences and International Studies at the University of Warsaw. His research interests include: European Union neighborhood policy, including, in particular, Eastern policy, Eastern Partnership, Western Balkans in the process of integration with the EU.



© COPYRIGHT 2019 Warsaw Institute

The opinions given and the positions held in materials in the Special Report solely reflect the views of authors.



**Warsaw Institute**  
**Wilcza St. 9, 00-538 Warsaw, Poland**  
**+48 22 417 63 15**  
**[office@warsawinstitute.org](mailto:office@warsawinstitute.org)**