

Tamar Gamkrelidze* - 16 June 2025

Reimagining the Eastern Partnership: Enlargement, Security and Strategic Engagement

Sixteen years after its inception, the Eastern Partnership (EaP) now stands at a critical crossroads. Three countries - Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia - that benefited the most from their association with the EaP have progressed to EU candidate status, although Georgia remains in limbo, as its path to full candidacy has been put on hold due to concerns over democratic backsliding. Belarus has suspended its participation altogether. Azerbaijan, with its limited engagement in the EaP, has grown in strategic importance to the EU, primarily due to its energy resources. Meanwhile, there is also Armenia's uniquely tailored EaP special association.

These divergent trajectories underscore a growing fragmentation among EaP countries - most notably with the three associated countries advancing beyond the partnership's remit to candidate status, placing them in an enlargement framework of cooperation - raises questions about the initiative's relevance and the rationale for its continuation for the remaining countries which are neither interested in nor benefiting much from further integration. The issue is particularly relevant now, given that the EaP may come to an end unless it is extended or restructured before 2027.

In its 16 years, the EaP has experienced both successes and shortcomings. Building on the experience gained through bilateral cooperation with partner countries, the EU now needs to reinvent the EaP platform and adapt to the evolving situation. In these times of uncertainty and security challenges, this means delivering on its security commitments and developing a two-track approach towards partners: enlargement preparations and strategic presence.

Enlargement Preparations: Candidates Early Engagement in Institutional Reforms

Enlargement has returned to the EU agenda with renewed momentum. The forthcoming enlargement is likely to be the most challenging yet, as the Union continues to grapple with the future of the European security architecture, the credible and coherent enforcement of membership

conditionality, and its own institutional preparedness and need for reform.

For enlargement to proceed smoothly, institutional reforms must enhance decision-making efficiency, including a possible reconsideration of unanimity voting in key areas. Without addressing the overuse of veto power, the EU risks stagnation - particularly in foreign policy, enlargement decisions, and budget negotiations. Discussions around extending qualified majority voting (QMV) and restructuring the Commission could be pivotal in ensuring the Union's functionality within a larger and more diverse membership framework.

In this context - and early in the process of institutional reform - the EaP can create and provide platforms for candidate countries to engage directly, albeit as observers, in shaping those reforms. This will help ensure they take ownership of the EU's future institutional arrangements. Establishing clear milestones and benchmarks for participation would help structure this involvement, while regular feedback mechanisms - such as annual EaP-EU forums - could ensure that reforms remain responsive, inclusive, and aligned with the evolving needs and contributions of candidate countries.

Inclusion of the Candidate Countries into EU Governance Structures

Moreover, there is a need to foster a context in which the general public in both Member States (MS) and in candidate countries accept one another. Each MS must approve the accession of new members, which requires having confidence that candidate countries are prepared for, and committed to, the responsibilities of enlargement. Conversely, candidate countries must consciously take on board that EU membership entails a partial loss of sovereignty. Most importantly, it requires accepting the EU as a partner in governance and domestic politics. Consequently, negotiations and concessions by national governments will be part of the accession process, and the public must be prepared for this type of political and institutional alignment.

***Tamar Gamkrelidze** is operations coordinator and postdoctoral fellow at the European Neighbourhood Chair, College of Europe in Natolin. She holds a PhD in Political Science from Ilia State University and a Master's in European Studies from Maastricht University. A recipient of several fellowships, she is an alumna of Academic Swiss Net, EUCACIS, and DAAD. Her research covers identity politics, EU external affairs, and discourse theory. Her work has appeared in *Democracy and Security*, *Contemporary Politics*, *East European Politics*, etc..

In this context, the EaP can be reimagined as a platform to support the gradual integration of candidate countries into EU governance structures well before formal accession. Facilitating early participation - such as observer status in EU institutions - would deepen candidates' understanding of EU policies and decision-making mechanisms. This involvement prior to signing the accession treaty would help prepare candidates for the responsibilities of membership, while also enhancing the democratic legitimacy of the process by ensuring their perspectives are considered. Engaging candidate countries early in policy discussions allows them to contribute meaningfully to EU initiatives, drawing on their experiences and expertise.

Conditionality & Convergence

Within the EaP, the EU has consistently promoted a long-term, low-politics, technocratic approach to supporting domestic reforms in the eastern neighbourhood, aiming to foster gradual alignment with the Union. A key component of this strategy has been alignment with the EU *acquis*, particularly in areas related to the internal market. However, convergence with the *acquis* has proven uneven. Implementation has proceeded more smoothly in policy areas with limited political sensitivity, while reforms touching on democratisation, pluralism, and the rule of law have faced substantial resistance.

Amidst these challenges, the EU must reimagine the EaP platform to better reflect the evolving political and institutional realities in the region. As democratic setbacks persist and reform trajectories diverge, the EU faces the critical task of maintaining coherence in its approach to compliance and non-compliance among both candidate and partner countries. The principle of conditionality remains central to the EU's enlargement and neighbourhood strategies. However, its current application has shown signs of ineffectiveness and declining credibility, particularly where incentives are weak or enforcement is inconsistent. This calls for a strategic reassessment of the EU's engagement tools to ensure that reform incentives are better aligned with political realities and that the integration process remains credible and results-oriented. The EU can support this process through the EaP, which serves as a framework for encouraging institutional and legal convergence.

EaP Security Mechanisms: limited engagement

Prior to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the EU's approach to security in the EaP region focused primarily on promoting good governance and institutional resilience, rather than directly engaging in protracted

conflicts - largely because Russia is a party to all of them. This cautious stance was shaped by internal divisions among EU member states over how to engage with Russia. However, specific mechanisms demonstrated pragmatic flexibility.

The EU ramped up support for Ukraine after Crimea's annexation through initiatives like the Support Group for Ukraine (SGUA), which was quickly adapted post-2022 to provide emergency aid, support for local NGOs, and infrastructure for displaced persons. In Moldova's Transnistria region, the EU Border Assistance Mission (EUBAM) helped curb smuggling and integrate local exporters into the EU market, although this also inadvertently reinforced the *de facto* authorities. In Georgia, the EU engaged early through the 2008 ceasefire and the European Union Monitoring Mission (EUMM), but its influence was limited by Russia's ongoing military presence and the EU's inability to access the breakaway regions. These constraints, combined with the EU's reliance on soft power instruments, limited its ability to influence conflict dynamics in the region.

EU involvement in the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict has historically been limited, mainly channeled through civil society engagement via the European Partnership for the Peaceful Resolution of the Conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh (EPNK). Though EPNK fostered some dialogue, its impact remained marginal due to limited state-level engagement and asymmetries between civil society actors - particularly in Azerbaijan. However, the EU signaled a more assertive shift with the launch of the European Union Mission in Armenia (EUMA) in February 2023, established at Armenia's request and operating without Azerbaijani consent. Its deployment marks a departure from earlier EU approaches towards the conflict, but the mission's long-term impact on regional security remains uncertain.

Comprehensive Security in the EaP

The legacy of the EaP, with all its shortcomings, is too substantial to be discarded. Moreover, the EaP countries - shaped by necessity and urgency - now occupy a central role in the EU's security policy strategy. Rather than focusing solely on promoting security and stability through democratisation and good governance, the EU must learn from past experiences and adapt the EaP to today's challenges. The security dimension of the EaP must be redefined to address both hard and soft security concerns. This means delivering not only civilian and military training, but also providing military equipment assistance where appropriate.

The EU needs to revitalise the EaP if it is to fulfil its promise of providing security and deepen its strategic engagement in the region. This revitalisation must encompass military, internal, and cybersecurity components alike. Russia's interventions, while military in nature, have increasingly relied on non-military means due to their failure to win the war in Ukraine. These include targeting the most vulnerable through disinformation, cyberattacks, and influence operations, which have been particularly evident in Georgia and Moldova. Therefore, the EaP's security dimension needs to cover different layers of both soft and hard security, with technological threats - especially misinformation and disinformation - treated as serious security challenges.

EU's Strategic Presence: Differentiation and Civil Society Resilience as Strategic Anchors

Strengthening the principle of differentiation is essential not only to support a smooth enlargement process but also to sustain a strategic presence across the EaP, especially in increasingly hostile environments prone to disengagement. While Belarus and Azerbaijan have long marginalised the EU's influence, Georgia has more recently begun to follow suit - adopting restrictive laws and targeting civil society and opposition parties. Although Georgia currently exhibits many features of state capture - similar to Belarus and Azerbaijan - it differs in one crucial respect: its civil society. Georgian civil society has shown notable resilience in the face of state-led restrictive measures.

This is the dimension the EU should focus on: strengthening civil society resilience and enhancing people-to-people contacts. In settings where formal political engagement is constrained, civil society becomes a vital conduit for maintaining the EU's presence and values. By doing so, the EU can help preserve democratic space and foster societal alignment with European norms, even when governments drift toward authoritarianism. Engagement through the European Endowment for Democracy, Erasmus+, and the Civil Society Facility are examples of

how the EU can remain relevant on the ground despite political pushbacks.

In this context of pragmatic presence and adaptation to evolving political realities, the EaP can continue to serve as a platform for tailored arrangements with the EU, allowing the Union to exert at least some influence on public discourse—even if it cannot actively participate in domestic political processes. While its engagement may be limited to cultural diplomacy, educational cooperation, and civil society support, these 'margins' still provide meaningful entry points for influence, narrative-building, and long-term societal alignment with the EU.

Recommendations

The EaP needs to be reimagined and reinvigorated before the current funding mechanism expires. This requires laying the groundwork for a renewed policy framework that places stronger emphasis on enlargement, security, and strategic engagement - with both state and non-state actors - across all six EaP countries. These efforts should target the following areas:

1. Deepening support for candidate countries (e.g., Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia), and anchoring candidate countries early into the EU governance and policy framework will help to ensure a smoother and more credible accession process. This includes focusing on enlargement preparations and integration-related reforms.
2. Strengthening the security dimension across the region is essential for the long-term stability of both the Eastern Neighbourhood and the EU. A comprehensive approach should include support for projects that enhance resilience, preparedness, and rapid response to hybrid threats and disinformation.
3. Maintaining a strategic presence in countries with limited or relatively limited political openness - such as Belarus, Azerbaijan, and Armenia - allows the EU to preserve channels for dialogue and cooperation on technical, economic, and people-to-people issues, keeping it engaged and prepared for future openings.

References:

European Commission (2008) *Eastern partnership*; COM (2008) 823.
European Council. (2009). *Declaration on the Eastern Partnership*. D/09/1. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/DOC_09_1

