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## IN SEARCH OF THE NEXT BENCHMARKS - PROSPECTS OF EU ENLARGEMENT AND EAP POLICY

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DENIS CENUSA

# 143

EXPERT OPINION





საქართველოს სტრატეგიისა და საერთაშორისო ურთიერთობათა კვლევის ფონდი  
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## **EXPERT OPINION**

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The EU's enlargement is often referred to as one of its most successful foreign policies. Moreover, it is often credited with possessing a transformative power in the applicant states and also in the EU's wider neighborhood (Schimmelfennig and Scholtz, (2008) albeit with varying degrees. However, one must note that the advance of enlargement as an approach of the EU has not been straightforward. It still encounters a myriad of skepticism stemming from some of its member states and outside powers; particularly, from Russia which perceives an enlarged and stronger EU as its competitor in its near neighborhood.

The EU in turn faces a dilemma, on the one hand, to manage its internal cohesion and, on the other hand, to deliver on its promises to integrate the countries of the Western Balkans (WB)<sup>1</sup> and potentially in a more distant future the countries of the Eastern Partnership (EaP)<sup>2</sup> with pro-EU aspirations, perspectives and their houses set in order. Although the new European Commission's ambition to be 'geopolitical' raises the expectations about future accessions as well as deepening relations with countries that have no clear enlargement perspective, the current COVID-19 pandemic has somewhat shifted the Union's attention towards resolving the health crisis, thereby aggravating fears about the possibility of achieving real progress between the relations of the EU and its eastern neighbors.

### **EaP Coronavirus Moment**

The developments connected to the pandemic have unveiled different sides of the vulnerability that the EU's eastern neighborhood has. The EU itself has initiated an adjustment to respond to the extreme economic and social shocks caused by the crisis. The lack of a tangible showcase of European solidarity at the beginning of the pandemic raised serious questions about the real strength of intra-EU unity (Cenusa, 2020). Later on, the observed shortcoming seemed insignificant under the weight of the historical European consensus on the Next Generation EU recovery movement and the Multiannual Financial Framework for 2021-2027, worth EUR 750 billion and EUR 1.85 trillion, respectively.

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1 The concept of the Western Balkans, launched by the Austrian Presidency of the European Council in 2001, denominates the following countries that aim at EU membership: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo under the 1244 UNSC Resolution, the Republic of North Macedonia, Serbia and Montenegro.

2 The EaP is a policy initiative to deepen relations with the EU and the six EaP countries: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine..

During the worst moments of the pandemic, the EU's attention was concentrated primarily on internal affairs. This created the opportunity for Russia and China to make their ways into conquering the public perception of the EU's neighborhood through the means of a so-called "sanitary diplomacy" (Cenusa, 2020b) which combined harsh disinformation campaigns. Despite these initial struggles, Brussels made some convincing steps towards the neighbors, clearly signaling that it does not step away from or abandon the Western Balkans or the Eastern Partnership:

*To the former one*, the EU has signaled the continuation of the enlargement agenda. During the epicenter of the COVID-19 outbreak, the EU Council gave its endorsement for the 2020 Commission's agenda of propelling the accession of the Western Balkans based on a "credible perspective" (EU Council, 2020). In spite of adding "reversibility" to the arsenal of criteria applied to the accession candidates, the Council has also assured the predictability and the credibility of the enlargement process. It gave "green" light for the further inclusion of the Western Balkans and opened accession dialogues with Albania and North Macedonia. The absorption of the Balkans will naturally create more pressure but also more perspectives for the eastern neighbors with European aspirations such Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine.

*The latter one* gained a renewed commitment from the EU in the form of the post-2020 policy which accentuates the role of resilience in the transformation of the region (EEAS, 2020). The EU revealed support for resilience building vis-à-vis the eastern neighbors in five areas of resilience: "economic," "democratic," "green," "digital" and "societal" (Cenusa, 2020, c). In each of these areas, the EU wants to share its legal-technical know-how, policy frameworks and/or financial assistance. In each case the EU sticks to the differentiation principle. Those EaP states that are willing to position themselves closer to the EU can have more support. Interconnectivity is something in which the European side is extremely keen to invest. Such an interest was prominent during the Deliverables 2020 program, which included many projects financed with EU money that attempted to increase the interdependencies between the states of the region in various ways (energy, transport). Similarly, the future groups of deliverables that the EU envisions in the EaP are supposed to strengthen the linkages between the states, making any potential disruption within the region costlier and less appealing.

Using a digital format, the EU gathered the leaders of the EaP states in a “virtual summit” in June 2020 where the European stakeholders expressed their “commitment and high importance” of the region on the foreign policy agenda. Primordially, the discussion focused on the solidarity that the EU showed towards its eastern neighbors. From ensuring financial support for the purchasing of personal protection equipment as part of its urgent support to more specific financial assistance, the EU extended the helping hand in a very palpable manner. This includes a lump sum for immediate needs valued at EUR 140 million, EUR 700 million to ease socio-economic shocks, EUR 962 million of additional financial support (Cenusa, 2020, d) and finally around EUR 1.5 billion in macro-financial assistance for Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine (European Parliament and Council, 2020). The European playbook has, however, very specific rules as the President of the European Council, Charles Michel, remarked after the “virtual reunion.” These rules imply “democracy, human rights, the rule of law, structural reforms or fighting disinformation” that are meaningful to the EU while operating in the region. Indeed, these principles are not always applicable on the ground. Nevertheless, these deficiencies are prerequisite for fatigue or disengagement vis-à-vis the EaP. By contrast, Charles Michel compared the EaP to a “geopolitically essential partnership” that the EU wants to “consolidate and strengthen” (Charles Michel, 2020).

### **In Search of the Next Benchmarks**

There is an unwritten consensus about the urgent need to search for a vision for the EaP. In this context, the European Parliament, which has been pro-actively monitoring the implementation process of the Association Agreements and 20 deliverables, has come up with several ideas. For instance, in 2017 Members of the European Parliament called for the creation of the EaP + model according to which the frontrunners – Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova – could join the energy and customs union, the digital union and even the Schengen area as well as abolishing mobile roaming tariffs (European Parliament, 2017). However, neither the Brussels Summit of 2017 nor the conference of 2019 included any of these recommendations thereby leaving the EaP policy devoid of a tangible target.

The newly elected European Parliament continued suggesting a few other initiatives that also included an attempt at certain institutional

modifications within the European Parliament. For example, Andrius Kubilius, Chair of the delegation to the Euronest Parliamentary Assembly, initiated the establishment of an EU Neighborhood East, an informal permanent forum of discussion and a place of various political events with the aim of attracting political attention, on the one hand, and providing knowledge support to the European Parliament, on the other hand, because “the information the European Parliament is receiving from this region does not always reflect a complete picture of the events in those countries”(EU Neighborhood East, 2019).

In addition, the Lithuanian delegation in the EPP prepared the Trio Strategy non-paper with the aim of strengthening the dialogue of the three EU associated countries and the EU. The document acknowledges that a new long-term instrument is needed and called for the creation of a European Trio Process as a new dimension of EaP policy to be led by the EU institutions and a coalition of the like-minded countries of the Trio Strategy 2030, replicating the Berlin Process.<sup>3</sup> The prospects of an intensified cooperation of the associated trio triggered a certain resonance in Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. The three governments represented by their foreign ministers signed a joint declaration and pledged for trilateral cooperation with the EU in 2019. Yet, the success of such a cooperation remains to be seen. Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine have for some time been forging a close partnership with the EU; for example, already in 2015 the parliaments of Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine established the Inter-Parliamentary Cooperation Initiative (IPCI) with the aim of agreeing on joint strategies of EU integration and a coordination of positions while in 2019 the chairpersons of the Committees on European Integration in the three countries adopted a joint communique committing themselves to a trilateral cooperation. Despite these declaratory frameworks, the concrete outcomes of such a cooperation are not evident at national levels while EU leaders have not yet clearly stated their positions at the international level. In the EU’s 2020 communication, there is no reference to the joint request of Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine to open a ‘quadrilogue’ on sectorial integration and access to the four freedoms not to mention the absence of the EU membership perspective for which the association countries are desperately striving.

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3 A diplomatic initiative launched by the German Chancellor, Angela Merkel, with the aim of keeping the European perspective alive for the Western Balkan countries by creating a framework to advance the reform process and enhance regional and economic cooperation.

Another recent initiative worth noting in terms of strengthening the security dimension of the EaP is the so-called “security compact” as suggested by the former foreign ministers of Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova. Their joint letter address to EU institutions highlights the importance of developing security partnerships; particularly, in combating hybrid threats, ensuring cyber security and cooperating in ESDP formats (EurActiv, 2020). The ex-ministers call upon the member states and the EU institutions to combine and coordinate funding, knowledge, intelligence or cyber capabilities. Donald Tusk, the EPP president, supported the initiative referring to it as a “good starting point” in order to discuss increased cooperation between the EU, its member states and EaP countries in the areas of security, intelligence and defense. It is uncertain what kind of follow-up this initiative will get from the EU institutions but the fact that none of the EPP affiliated parties, whose representatives suggested the idea, are represented in the government might be an obstacle.

Usually, the sad fate of such initiatives is that quite often they are **less coordinated and are often seen as partisan**. For example, the idea of the Trio, that goes beyond party politics and entails a fully-fledged cooperation among the three countries, was first initiated by the EPP at the Zagreb Congress in 2019. There are little chances that there were consultations about this with the national administrations or the diplomatic corps apart from the affiliated party leadership at the domestic level. This kind of gap in political communication creates the sense of partisan belongings; in other words, the national governments, acknowledging losing their ownership, either avoid investing their political capital in such initiatives or react with a delay which jeopardizes the whole process. The same logic applies to the idea of the “security compact.” It is unclear to what extent the governing parties and the diplomatic corps had been engaged in the reflection process. In such cases, it is **important to reach a cross-party consensus both at the national and the EU levels** vis-à-vis such crucial initiatives in order to avoid a fragmentation of political efforts. Better coordination also increases the chances of getting the “green light” from the Council and its working groups.

In the search of alternative formats for EU integration, the national administrations of the three associated countries took inspiration from the EEA type of partnerships. This so-called Norwegian Model; that is, the European Economic Area, consists of the EU member states and the three countries of the European Free Trade Association (EFTA), excluding



Switzerland. Membership in the EEA implies access to the EU single market and its four freedoms (goods, services, capitals and persons). Naturally, there will be limitations in applying the EEA model to the EaP - perhaps the most visible reason is that the GDP per capita of the associated countries are far below from EU average not to mention the lack of political stability in the EaP countries that poses a risk to the implementation of structural reforms (the EEA type entity means upholding the common rules and keeping up with the evolution of EU law). In the light of the current migration burden and other pressing priorities with which the EU is dealing, it seems difficult to get the support of the member states and materialize a fully-fledged EEA model. However, picking some elements from it and adjusting them to the EaP; for example, **expanding the DCFTA, the liberalization of financial services, the extension of the free movement of highly skilled professionals, the involvement of EaP officials in EC working groups (similar to the practices of EEA countries)** etc., could be envisaged. It will be highly useful if the national governments together with the European Commission conduct an economic analysis of such a model involving the European Parliament which could emerge and efficiently advocate for such a model and see it as an opportunity to incorporate its initiatives as the “Trio,” the “Trio Plus,” the “EaP plus,” the EEA+, etc.

### **The Russian Factor – “To Be or Not to Be”**

In all of the EU’s calculus, Russia will pop up as a geopolitical rival that wants to dictate the rules of the game in the region. Moldova is the weakest spot among the three associated countries while the other three – Belarus, Armenia and Azerbaijan – have weaknesses either because of their inner “autocratic regimes” or because of imbalances in relations with Russia (trade, military support). The Eurasian Union is another factor that has been used to keep the region fragmented in terms of the potential of European integration.

To make real progress in the region, the EU should handle the turbulent domestic democratization and the foreign malign interferences of Russia which are particularly visible through its disinformation warfare and the (re) activated separatist conflicts. In achieving having a constructive influence in region, the European stakeholders are then obliged to deal seriously with the leverages that Russia still has over the ex-Soviet republics.

At the same time, without a tangible European solidarity, reform-driven conditionality and altruism in supporting the economically poor neighborhood, the EU is doomed to lose supporters and increase the army of enemies in the form of autocratic regimes and EU-sceptic populists. The EU has the right engines in its hands but it should make use of them in proactive, confident and creative ways.

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