

Make the Eastern Partnership great again? Planning Brussels' response to the "Trio Plus Strategy 2030" resolution

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Summary

In 2015, the EU relegated the European Neighbourhood Policy from a path towards EU membership for the European Eastern Partners – Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine – to a reward mechanism for good government behavior.

Four of the Eastern Partners – Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine, and Armenia – felt this unilateral EU decision dismissed their progress. In response, they are now holding the Union to its promises with the "Trio Plus Strategy 2030."

This time, the EU should meet the agenda-setting with proper expectations management. If membership talks are indeed no longer on the table, Brussels needs to emphasize the financial and strategic importance of a stable partnership and recognize the diligent efforts of the Trio Plus countries. To achieve this, the EU can take three important courses of action:

1. Show that the assistance it provides is an investment in the region.
2. Re-focus the Eastern Partnership agreements as EU foreign policy processes based on shared interests and responsibilities.
3. Repair the cooperative engagement with the Eastern Partner representatives assigned with managing their country's partnership with the EU.

While acknowledging that expectations have not been met, the EU should make clear that membership talks are not feasible for the EU. However, the considerable support and opportunities that attracted the Partners in the first place are still on offer.

Introduction

With the Eastern Partnership,¹ the EU has provided financial and institutional assistance to its Eastern Partners in order to support assimilating their policies, institutions, and economic progress to EU standards. This corroborates the ‘more for more’ principle entailed in the European Neighbourhood Policy² instrument that includes the Eastern Partnership. Beyond just a memorable expression, ‘more for more’ is an incentivized, performance-based strategy for the EU to guide democratization in countries throughout its neighboring regions.³

In its early days, the Eastern Partnership was considered a path towards EU membership. This end-goal made sense given that acclimatization to EU norms and standards was the applied guide for domestic reforms.

However, when faced with the dire need to focus on its own internal crises,⁴ membership for the Eastern Partners became less of a priority for the EU. In addition, criticisms of the European Neighbourhood Policy’s dependence on conditional compliance, lack

of mutual exchange, and inability to effectively promote democratization and stability spurred an evaluative review conducted in 2015.⁵ The findings clarified that not all the partner countries had the same goals or wanted the same benefits from a partnership with the EU.

Beyond just a memorable expression, ‘more for more’ is an incentivized, performance-based strategy for the EU to guide democratization.

In response, the EU relegated the policy instrument to chiefly promote the ‘more for more’ reward tactic and downgraded the Eastern Partnership from a roadmap for EU membership to financial encouragement for democratic government behavior.⁶

This in-depth study⁷ examined the unanticipated consequences and unexpected outcomes⁸ that triggered the Eastern Partnership downgrade as well as the immediate aftermath of that decision. The findings reveal why the more EU-compliant Eastern Partners now want to take the lead in setting the Partnership agenda moving forward. Interviews with EU officials particularly illuminate the disconnect between the EU’s perspective on the Eastern Partnership overall and the positions expressed

1 Council of the European Union (2009) Joint Declaration of the Prague Eastern Partnership Summit, Prague, 7 May 2009, 8435/09 (Presse 78).

2 Official Journal of the European Union, Regulation (EU) No. 232/2014 of the European Parliament and the Council of 11 March 2014 “Establishing a European Neighbourhood Instrument,” OJLL 77/27-43, 15.3.2014.

3 Ibid. See also European Commission, Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council “Establishing a European Neighbourhood Instrument,” 2011/0405(COD), Brussels, 7 December 2011, COM(2011)839final.

4 Nathalie Brack and Seda Gürkan (Eds.), *Theorising the Crisis of the European Union*, Routledge, 2021; Marianne Riddervold, Jarle Trondal, and Akasemi Newsome (Eds.), *The Palgrave Handbook of EU Crises*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2021.

5 European Commission and High Representative, Joint Consultation Paper “Towards a new European Neighbourhood Policy,” Brussels, 04 March 2015, JOIN(2015)6final.

6 Ibid.

7 Tiffany G. Williams, *Selling Normative Power Europe: Analyzing the unexpected outcomes of the European Union’s normative power approach in the South Caucasus*, PhD Dissertation, University of Vienna, 2021.

8 Olga Burlyuk (2017) “The ‘Oops!’ of EU Engagement Abroad: Analyzing Unintended Consequences of EU External Action,” *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 55:5, 1009-1025. DOI: [10.1111/jcms.12549](https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.12549).

in the Trio Plus Strategy.⁹

The Eastern Partners that had invested in domestic reforms towards EU standards expected the promises of future membership to be met. As a result, the associated¹⁰ Eastern Partners and Armenia are now setting their own agenda and expectations for moving forward – not just for themselves, but for the EU.

The Trio Plus Strategy not only outlines the Partners' expectations, but also pointedly infers the EU's own differentiation and 'more for more' principles. The resolution also contends that 'less for less' should apply to Eastern Partners that do not take similar steps towards democratic reforms.

When faced with the dire need to focus on its own internal crises, membership became less of a priority for the EU.

The sticking point for the EU is that the resolution alludes to the earlier vision of EU membership for the Eastern Partners, which contradicts the EU's current agenda. This brief explains what the Eastern Partners and their citizens expect, how the EU can meet those expectations, and what it should avoid in order to safeguard its own interests.

⁹ Euronest Parliamentary Assembly, "Resolution on the future of the Trio Plus Strategy 2030: building a future of Eastern Partnership," 9 December 2019, available at: epgencms.europarl.europa.eu/cmsdata/upload/439b3edc-e523-4a0e-a9bc-e6c8db51ed75/NEST_8th_urgency_resolution_EN.pdf.

¹⁰ An Associated Country status refers to that country's Association Agreement with the EU that typically includes a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area Agreement. It can informally be considered the ultimate expression of trust for EU partner countries, and has typically signaled progress towards EU accession processes.

Eastern Partner governments' expectations beyond 2020

European Neighbourhood Policy changes: a pragmatic downgrade?

When the Eastern Partnership was demoted to an incentivized good governance measure in 2015, the EU still insisted the Eastern Partners hold special interest for the EU and its Member States.

The EU downgraded the Eastern Partnership from a roadmap for membership to financial encouragement for democratic government behavior.

Turning the focus off of EU accession was seen as a necessary step towards more realistic expectations for whether the EU can handle more members. Additionally, the EU still must decide its next steps for its candidate member countries in the Western Balkans that, according to the EU's policy mechanisms, are further ahead with respect to membership standards than the Eastern Partners.

However, the partner countries that have taken great efforts to comply with the EU's conditions for domestic reforms believe their compliance should still be rewarded as promised, regardless of other countries' interests and behavior.

The associated Eastern Partners and Armenia are now setting their own agenda – not just for themselves, but for the EU.

Eastern Partners' strategy: More for more and less for less

At the May 2019 Summit marking the 10-year anniversary of the Eastern Partnership, the expectation from the EU's side was to sign a Joint Declaration authorizing the next steps for the regional partnership; however, this did not

happen.¹¹ Many partner countries submitted statements expressing frustrations and disappointment with what they perceived to be the EU's extinguished desire for the Eastern Partners to be Members.¹²

The disagreement from Azerbaijan's government emphasizing its official position on its longstanding conflict with Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh received the most mentions in the global media. This was not surprising, and its significance was again felt roughly a year later when war between the two countries again erupted in July 2020.

In addition to Azerbaijan's position, even the associated Eastern Partners that are closer to the EU were reluctant to confirm next steps without first addressing their frustration with the lack of EU membership prospects. They have since reiterated those views in the Trio Plus Strategy, which proposes their agenda for a new partnership framework that better acknowledges their compliance with the EU's partnership conditions and emphasizes their perspective for deeper integration with the EU.

The Trio Plus Strategy was developed by the Euronest parliamentary committees of Armenia and the associated Eastern Partners.

11 Dominik Istrate, "Landmark Eastern Partnership summit ends without joint declaration," 15 May 2019, Emerging Europe, available at: <https://emerging-europe.com/news/landmark-eastern-partnership-summit-ends-without-joint-declaration/>.

12 Vlagyislav Makszimov, "Eastern Partnership's champions expect more for the 'geopolitical Commission,'" 9 March 2020, Euractiv, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/eastern-europe/news/eastern-partnerships-champions-expect-more-from-the-geopolitical-commission/>; Vlagyislav Makszimov, "Georgian ambassador: Eastern Partnership communication 'weak' on political signaling" 4 May 2020, Euractiv, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/interview/georgian-ambassador-eastern-partnership-communication-weak-on-political-signalling/>.

The sticking point for the EU is that the resolution alludes to the earlier vision of membership, which contradicts the EU's current agenda.

Armenia is included despite its different EU partnership agreement structure and non-associated status out of recognition for the country's democratic reforms in 2018.¹³

The Trio Plus Strategy confirms that the involved Eastern Partners are taking the lead in their EU partnership development. They aim to ensure that their progress receives the recognition they expect, and that the benefits they believe they have earned are not impeded by the less democratic Partners.

The focus on the year 2030 is explained as a "strategy to help more advanced Eastern Partnership countries to keep their motivation and ... stresses that EU needs to upgrade and reform its policy instruments in order to match the progress done [sic] by our Eastern Partners."¹⁴

These reasons for the nod to ten more years communicates that there is some disappointment after the last ten. The lack of EU accession prospects being a key motivator for such disappointment.

The Trio Plus countries may disagree with the EU about their accession readiness. Nevertheless, the Trio Plus Strategy does not discount the financial assistance and programmatic support the EU offers. However, whether the partner countries' citizens actually benefit, or are aware of such benefits and their origins, can also impact partnership development between the EU and its Eastern Partners.

13 "Trio Plus Strategy 2030," page 2.

14 "Trio Plus Strategy 2030," page 3.

Eastern Partner citizens' perceptions in 2020

In addition to economic support, the EU maintains a security and border defense monitoring role in its Eastern Neighbourhood, most notably the European Union Border Assistance Mission to Moldova and Ukraine and the European Union Monitoring Mission in Georgia.¹⁵ These actions position the EU as a dominant influence against Russia, the region's longstanding power, countering both Russia's military aggression and its soft power posturing.

While citizen trust in the EU is relatively stable in Eastern Partnership countries, it is not especially confident.

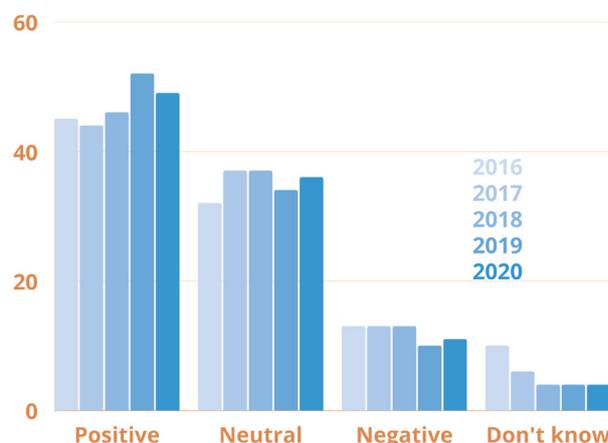
However, in spite of the financial and security assistance, recent polling data demonstrates that while citizen trust in the EU is relatively stable in Eastern Partnership countries, it is not especially confident. Neither citizens nor governments seem to be convinced that the EU will meet its ambitious promises, particularly since the degree of transformation necessary for Eastern Partners to qualify for EU membership seems both ambiguous and inaccessible.

The 2020 "EU Neighbours east" opinion poll¹⁶ shows that 49 percent of the respondents hold a "Positive View" of the EU, which is less than the previous year's poll result of 52 percent, yet still higher than years prior to 2019.

¹⁵ For more information about these Monitoring Missions, please see respectively, <https://eubam.org/> and <https://www.eumm.eu/>.

¹⁶ "EU Neighbors east" Annual Survey Report: Regional Overview – 5th Wave (Spring 2020), https://www.euneighbours.eu/sites/default/files/publications/2020-06/EUNEIGHBOURS_east_AS2020report_EaP_OVERVIEW.pdf.

Do you have a 'very positive', 'fairly positive', 'neutral', 'fairly negative' or 'very negative' image of the European Union?



"EU Neighbors east" Annual Survey Report: Regional Overview – 5th Wave (Spring 2020), p. 10.

While an average of 60 percent of the total respondents who knew of the EU reported a tendency to trust the Union, there was a clear split between the Trio Plus countries and Azerbaijan and Belarus. Between 60 to 69 percent of respondents from the Trio Plus countries reported trust in the EU, while this was reported by only 45 percent of respondents from Belarus and 41 percent of respondents from Azerbaijan.

How much trust do you have in the EU?



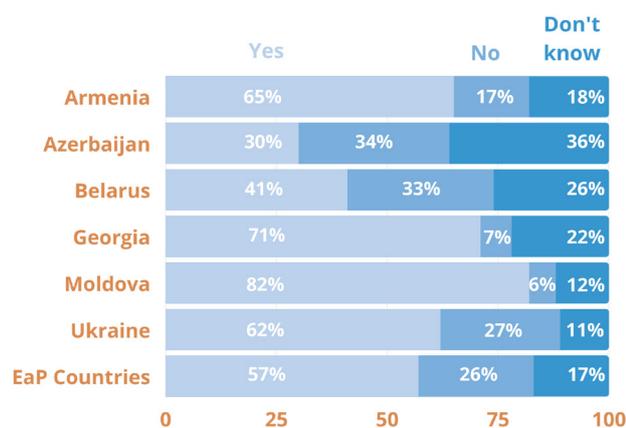
"EU Neighbors east" Annual Survey Report: Regional Overview – 5th Wave (Spring 2020), p. 14.

"Unemployment" was reported as the most pressing national issue by respondents from Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia; "Poverty" was the most pressing for respondents from Ukraine; and for respondents from Belarus and Moldova, "Low salaries/pensions" was their

top concern.¹⁷

While over half of respondents from each country reported that they believe the EU has “Good” relations with their country,¹⁸ those from Azerbaijan and Belarus, the Eastern Partners left out of the Trio Plus Strategy, did not seem convinced that the EU provides their country with financial support.

As far as you know, does the EU provide your country with financial support?



“EU Neighbors east” Annual Survey Report: Regional Overview – 5th Wave (Spring 2020), p. 16.

Additionally, respondents throughout the Eastern Partner countries reported areas related to economic development, employment, healthcare, and education as the top sectors where the EU “should play a greater role”¹⁹ for their respective countries.

17 Question 4.2.: “What do you consider to be the most pressing problems facing your country?”, Table A7, p. 48.

18 Question 2.4.: “In general, how would you describe the relations that the European Union has with your country?”, Figure 7, p.15. Percentages refer to citizens who have heard of the EU and responded with “Good.” Responses: Armenia: 86%; Azerbaijan: 69%; Belarus: 54%; Georgia: 77%; Moldova: 74%; Ukraine: 64%.

19 Question 2.9.: “Please tell us in which sectors you think the European Union should play a greater role. (Three most important areas),” Table A4, p.47.

Overall, issues directly related to the economy weigh most heavily for the majority of respondents. This corroborates the EU’s decision to boost its economic incentives with its ‘more for more’ principle, but also demonstrates the importance of making sure that the citizens meant to benefit from those incentives are aware of and acquire them.

Recommendations

Moving forward as strategic partners

Given citizens’ perceptions of the EU and the firm position of the Trio Plus Strategy, the EU has three considerations to address in order to correct its course with its Eastern Partners:

First, the EU should better advertise the assistance it provides in its Eastern Neighbourhood to the citizens of those countries. This need was recognized in the 2015 review, yet much room for improvement remains. Along with more prominently publicizing its support, the EU should clarify that its means of assistance are not just handouts, but rather the partnerships entail shared investment in partner countries that are implementing their own democratic and economic reforms.

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Second, it is time to unequivocally shift away from the conditional reward for compliance that dangles the possibility of potential future membership – particularly given the echoed statement that EU accession for Eastern Partner countries is still not on the horizon. Instead, the EU should clarify its foreign policy objectives regarding its Eastern Neighbourhood in a manner that recognizes its excellent relations with the Trio Plus countries. In other

words, it should not take those relations for granted. Economic progress and advancement in democratic political reforms have occurred thanks in part to the EU's encouragement and support, but more so because of the Trio Plus countries' perseverance. These achievements already outline shared interests and common goals from which to construct a forward-looking partnership agenda. From there, the EU and its Member States can work with the Eastern Partners to establish a framework for strategic partnership between equal parties.

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Third, the EU must acknowledge the frustrations of the representatives assigned to manage their country's partnership with the EU. As suggested, better highlighting the EU's investment in the region – and expressing it as such – can reinvigorate perspectives regarding what lies ahead for the EU and its Eastern Partners. These discussions should be framed around promoting the benefits of a more equal partnership that recognizes common goals and shared interests, rather than a conditional reward for compliance.

Hurdles to avoid

While survey data suggests that citizens across all Eastern Partners may believe the EU has good relations with their country, it is important to make sure that the less EU-compliant partner countries still have a clear way ahead in order to maintain those relations.

It is also imperative to avoid the perception that the Trio Plus Strategy is a snub to the excluded Azerbaijan and Belarus. Notably, it does not mention the grave territorial conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan, which was the reason given for Azerbaijan's decision to block the Joint Declaration in 2019. A careful

approach is particularly warranted given the Eastern Partners' differing and at times contentious relations amongst themselves, and with other regional influences like Russia, Turkey, and Iran.

Discussions should be framed around a more equal partnership that recognizes common goals and shared interests, rather than a conditional reward for compliance.

The fact that the overly ambitious EU accession goals from years past have not been met does not lend trustworthiness; yet this cannot be overlooked and should not be downplayed. This means that while the Trio Plus Strategy seems to hope for membership talks in 2030, the EU should make clear that this is not on the imminent horizon.

However, the financial assistance, institutional and programmatic support, and education and employment opportunities that attracted the Eastern Partners to the EU in the first place – and that citizens report are most important now – are still on offer. Securing these benefits through partnerships based on shared investment and common interests is a more feasible and sustainable framework to bring – and keep – the EU and its Eastern Partners closer together.

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