

## Reshaping the Eastern Partnership: a view from Georgia

*Kakha Gogolashvili, Senior Fellow at GFSIS*

### **Introduction**

Georgia was granted EU membership candidate status in December 2023, a year and a half later than Moldova and Ukraine. Both neighbours have already started accession talks while Georgian authorities, by their later moves, have endangered the country's European perspective. All three of them remain part of the Eastern Partnership initiative, which was not designed for the enlargement objectives. It is well known that Belarus does not actually participate in the Eastern Partnership and that Armenia-Azerbaijan relations, before the final reconciliation happens, disturb their full participation in the EaP. The future of the Eastern Partnership remains unclear and might depend especially on the results of the war in Ukraine. What kind of Eastern Partnership may be in Georgia's interest?

- As candidate countries, Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova need to have separate multilateral platforms for cooperation with the EU. The platform can remain within the EaP but be exclusive for the other three partners (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus) before (and if ever) they also show ambition for EU membership and gain the European Perspective.
- Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia – (and the still nominally existing) Association Trio<sup>1</sup> (TRIO) – can form an institutional linkage with the formats of cooperation established in the Western Balkans, and should become beneficiaries of Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA III). Alternatively, the former ENI, now integrated into the NDNCI,<sup>2</sup> can be amended and adapted to fit with the enlargement tasks;
- The new security crises in Europe shows that the EU alone is not able to safely deliver development and transformational programs and policies in Eastern Europe and the Black and Caspian Sea regions. At the same time, with the NATO membership of Finland and Sweden, the EU has become more closely tied to the alliance. These two facts may imply the necessity for increasing EU-NATO joint actions in Eastern Europe, and for exploring synergy of their programs and activities in the region. EU's transformational policy in the region will increasingly need securitization and the backing of hard power. The EU candidate countries, Georgia in particular, will need more contributions to their military capabilities to reach a satisfactory level of resilience towards the threats of direct aggressions.
- Georgia might be interested to continue and deepen EaP frameworks if the EU's approaches towards all six EaP countries remain homogenous and unified (but respectful of limits). Then the EaP can positively impact on regional cooperation and support peace in the region.

The EU offers EaP countries the opportunity to cooperate on security and foreign affairs issues through several mechanisms. These include joining the CFSP declarations, establishing high-level dialogues on strategic security at the senior officials' level (bilateral dimension), and engaging on security and defence issues via the CSDP multilateral panel with all EaP partner states. This cooperation is often based on bilateral agreements regarding participation in EU CSDP missions, the exchange of

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<sup>1</sup> Association Trio – Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia. The countries established the mentioned format in 2021 with the aim to cooperate on EU integration issues

<sup>2</sup> Since June 2021 European Neighbourhood Instrument (ENI) merged with other global financial instruments of the EU now called - Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument – Global Europe (NDICI – Global Europe). For the convenience we in this paper continue calling it ENI

intelligence information, and more. This engagement helps partner states strengthen their ties with the EU and improve their national security policies.

However, this cooperation does not significantly enhance the EU's role in bolstering the security of the partner states. The security situation in the Black Sea region (to which five out of six EaP countries belong) raises many concerns. The success of the EU's transformative projects in the region, including those under the EaP framework (both multilateral and bilateral dimensions), is questionable unless the independence and territorial integrity of the participating states are secured.

Russia poses a real threat to almost all EaP countries, either through direct use of force or the threat thereof. Additionally, Russia conducts hybrid warfare in Eastern Europe with the aim of destabilizing these countries or exerting influence over them. If Russia achieves its regional objectives, the EU will not be able to accomplish its own. The EU's soft and normative power may not be effective against Russia's hard power tactics deployed against EaP countries. The EU is not a hard power actor and lacks the military or sufficient counter-hybrid war capabilities to prevent partner states from succumbing to their aggressive neighbour.

The solution lies in engaging NATO to bring more security and resilience to EU projects. It is high time for the EU and NATO to synergize their efforts and reinforce the region with greater security and military backing for the EU's transformational projects, including the EaP. In fact, it was already time for such a development before the war in Ukraine. Are NATO and the EU's goals compatible enough to allow such a synergy? Yes. NATO's non-European members understand the necessity of bringing Eastern Partner states closer to the EU, improving democracy and good governance, economic performance, and resilience in a broader sense.

Simultaneously, there is a proper understanding within the EU, among its Member States, of NATO's primary role in ensuring peace and security in the entire region, especially now as Sweden's and Finland's (they were recently non-aligned countries) accession to the alliance is a reality. The EU-NATO synergy would also help re-establish the UK as a key ally and political partner of the EU in the region.

### **Georgia in the EaP**

Georgia's involvement in the Eastern Partnership (EaP) has been a significant facet of its European integration efforts. Georgia has used this framework to deepen its political and economic ties with the European Union. A major achievement in this respect was the success in the bilateral track when parties established new institutional linkages through the Association Agreement (AA) and the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) in 2014. The AA is facilitating political association and economic integration and the DCFTA provides comprehensive access to the EU's single market, promotes trade liberalization and regulatory convergence.

Another important milestone on the same bilateral track was the Visa Free regime in 2017, under which Georgian citizens can enjoy visa-free travel to the Schengen Area for short stays. This milestone reflects the progress Georgia has made in aligning with EU standards and strengthening people-to-people contacts. Sectoral Cooperation, which allowed Georgia to actively participate in various EU programs and agencies under the EaP framework, encompassed areas such as education, science, environment, and security. Among them Erasmus+ can be mentioned, which enhanced educational exchanges, while initiatives in sectors like energy and transportation have supported Georgia's infrastructural development and environmental sustainability. Cooperation in Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) has also been one of important tasks. In this regards Georgia's active participation in the EU's CSDP missions, contributing to peacekeeping and crisis management operations can be mentioned as a matter of bilateral cooperation with the Union. Georgia was also an

active participant and contributor to the CSDP panels organised within the multilateral track of the EaP. This multilateral security dialogue under the EaP have helped Georgia address its security challenges, particularly those arising from its geopolitical situation and conflicts with Russia. The EU-Georgia Security Dialogue through the EaP allows Georgia to conduct a high-level cooperation in strategic security issues, including defence capabilities and policy alignment with EU standards. Since 2015, Georgia has established cooperation on intelligence sharing with EU. Cooperation with East Stratcom and in Cyber Security issues has contributed to Georgia's resilience against external threats.

Enhancement of connectivity throughout the EaP countries and the EU is an important matter too. The so-called EaP TEN-T<sup>3</sup> was introduced in 2017 and was designed to attract international investments to the development of transport links and connections between EaP countries and the Trans-European transport corridors. In Georgia, despite certain setbacks in the implementation, there were some impressive developments, especially the improvement of East-West road infrastructure, including logistical installation, bridges and tunnels. The EIB and the EBRD together with other international financial institutions are actively contributing to this end. The EU's Economic and Investment Plan, which supports EaP countries with around 1.5 billion EUR for investments in priority areas, SMEs and entrepreneurship, transport and energy infrastructure, digital transformation, environmental sustainability, and human capital development.

For the success of the regional trade dimension of the EaP, it is necessary to pay more attention to cooperation among partner states: increased volume of trade between associated EaP countries (Moldova and Ukraine) has not only economic but also political significance. It is important to support projects of cooperation (joint ventures, supply chains) with companies in the three associated states as much as possible. At the same time, the deepening of cooperation among the AA Trio states with other EaP states should be encouraged, including the EU, to promote peace and regional stability. In this regard, it is necessary to facilitate and encourage development of the supply chains linking the economies of non-DCFTA and DCFTA countries. This could enhance the trade potential of the DCFTAs.

Georgia's participation in the Eastern Partnership has been instrumental for its European integration. Despite the challenges, the EaP has provided a platform for Georgia to advance its political, economic, and security ties with the EU. As Georgia continues to pursue its European aspirations, its commitment to reform and cooperation within the EaP framework will be key determinants of its success in achieving closer integration with the EU.

### **Unexpected U-Turn in Georgia's European path**

Unexpectedly, the ruling Georgian Dream (GD) party began after 2021 to ignore EU recommendations, prioritizing state sovereignty and independent decision-making. This stance, reminiscent of Putin's "sovereign democracy," led to controversial actions like resisting judicial reforms and improving the election code. Instead of aligning with the EU, the government strengthened economic ties with Russia, even after the invasion of Ukraine. The most notable action was the adoption on May 30, 2024 the "Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence," mirroring Russia's 2012 law aimed at controlling civil society and the media. This provoked protests, divided the society, and alarmed international partners – and, ultimately, increased Georgia's isolation from the democratic world and its vulnerability to authoritarian powers, especially Russia. The same law was first attested to be adopted in March 2023, but strong protests from the society and warnings from the EU and the US made the GD to withdraw the proposal from the second reading. When Georgia received in December 2023 its candidate status, it was somehow a result of this redemption. Georgia got as a gift because it had not implemented

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<sup>3</sup> See at: [https://transport.ec.europa.eu/transport-themes/international-relations/european-neighbourhood-policy/eastern-partnership-eap/eastern-partnerships-indicative-ten-t-maps\\_en](https://transport.ec.europa.eu/transport-themes/international-relations/european-neighbourhood-policy/eastern-partnership-eap/eastern-partnerships-indicative-ten-t-maps_en)

all 12 priorities assigned to Georgia by the European Council decision of June 2022. That should have encouraged GD to fulfil the new conditions rapidly – the EUs so-called “Nine Steps”.<sup>4</sup> These new conditions combined the remaining unfulfilled previous priorities and added some new ones – fighting disinformation, alignment with the EUs CFSP, and strengthening oversight of the law enforcement and security sector. However, only three months later, the GD reintroduced the bill that had been withdrawn one year earlier. Obviously, this move provoked massive protests among citizens as well as strong criticism from our partners – the EU and the US. The country thus fell behind its Trio partners in the EU integration process, and lost a chance to start membership negotiations in 2024. Still, Georgia remains a candidate country and a EaP partner.

### **Limitations of the EaP**

The Eastern Partnership initiative was rooted in collaborative efforts within EU member states and institutions. Approved by the Council on December 3, 2008, the initiative<sup>5</sup> aimed primarily at fostering closer ties between the Eastern partner states and the EU, focusing on political association and economic integration. The goal of "political association" involved extensive dialogue to align on international peace, security, and democratic principles, promoting human rights, good governance, and rule of law, while enhancing mobility between Eastern partners and the EU.

Economic integration under the EaP was outlined in the Association Agreements (AAs) and the prioritized in the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreements (DCFTAs)<sup>6</sup> covering trade, energy, and regulatory alignment. While the EaP aspires to create economic areas akin to the European Economic Area, this remains an abstract idea without a clear path forward. Additional dimensions of the EaP include visa-free travel dialogues and EU labor market access, alongside sectoral integration in education, science, environment, and law enforcement, aimed at aligning national policies with EU standards. The EaP's objectives, focusing on functional integration and enhanced mobility of goods, services, and people, mark a significant step towards integration compared to the Western Balkans' accession process. Despite limitations, like the absence of a clear European perspective,<sup>7</sup> EaP countries retain aspirations for deeper EU relations, as affirmed by the Prague Declaration, ensuring no restrictions on their future EU ambitions. Thus, while EaP aims at functional rather than institutional integration with the EU, it does not preclude further aspirations towards full EU membership, serving as a cooperative framework rather than a barrier to deeper integration.

### **EaP Reformed**

In 2017 the multilateral dimension of the EaP was reshaped by introducing what got known as the 20 deliverables for the 2020 program. By this novelty, the European Commission, who was the initiator of this change, tried to set very concrete reform targets for EaP countries. The new reality had some consequences for the program between the three Associated countries and the other three partners – for instance around the new ambitions for achieving DCFTA aims. However, there was no principal change in membership perspectives for the mentioned countries.

A subsequent and important reform of the EaP was intended in 2019, following the European Council in June 2019 tasking the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and the Commission to develop a new set of long-term policy objectives beyond 2020. The broad consultation ended on 31 October 2019 EU and the Eastern partner countries developed a new set of long-term policy objectives embedded in the EC Joint Communication “Reinforcing Resilience - an Eastern

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<sup>4</sup> 2023 Communication on EU Enlargement . Policy. Brussels, 8.11.2023 COM(2023) 690 final. p.75

<sup>5</sup> see: Brussels, 3.12.2008 COM(2008) 823 final available at:  
[https://www.europarl.europa.eu/cmsdata/219089/EaP\\_COM\(2008\)823.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/cmsdata/219089/EaP_COM(2008)823.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> *ibid*, p.5

<sup>7</sup> Joint Declaration of the Prague Eastern Partnership Summit Prague, 7 May 2009. Brussels, 7 May 2009 8435/09 (Presse 78) available at: [https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/31797/2009\\_eap\\_declaration.pdf](https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/31797/2009_eap_declaration.pdf)

Partnership that delivers for all”, adopted on 18 March 2020. The new approach outlined the new Eastern Partnership objectives for the EU and EaP partner states:

- together for resilient, sustainable and integrated economies;
- together for accountable institutions, the rule of law and security;
- together towards environmental and climate resilience;
- together for a resilient digital transformation;
- together for resilient, gender-equal, fair and inclusive societies

This emphasis on the resilience of neighbouring partners was initially voiced in the EU’s Global Security Strategy from 2016<sup>8</sup>. This new strategy reflected the conceptual understanding of the indivisibility of the security with EU’s neighbours and the importance of securitizing the EU’s foreign policy, including foreign aid actions. Around the same period the EU explicitly recognised the existence of hybrid warfare attacks by Russia against the EU and its partners, and it developed other institutional actions and mechanisms to counter the new threats. In other documents, the EU developed its approaches to the resilience building process in the neighbourhood, including EaP area.

Analysing the EU’s new Strategic Agenda 2020-2024,<sup>9</sup> one can observe that the EaP direction beyond 2020 strategy in many ways overlaps with the way the EU sees its own near future and the actions it prepares to take to secure itself. The main priorities of the EU’s agenda were:

- protecting citizens and freedoms
- developing a strong and vibrant economic base (including digital market)
- building a climate-neutral, green, fair and social Europe
- promoting European interests and values on the global stage.

In the development, the EU attempts to make EaP countries to catch up with the EU and develop in the same direction and with the same priorities.

The Strategic Plan 2020-2024<sup>10</sup> states that, in the neighbourhood, the DG NEAR “...helps to promote EU values, policies and interests in the region, and contributes to developing the special relationship of the EU with its neighbouring countries.” But on enlargement, it “...assists those countries with the prospect of joining the EU in their efforts to meet the EU membership criteria...monitors the progress of enlargement countries towards the EU and supports accession negotiations...”<sup>11</sup>

## **EU Assistance Instruments**

Two different international assistance instruments, IPA III and NDICI, are used for enlargement countries, on the one hand, and for the neighbourhood, on the other. The EU regulation says that “The objective of an instrument for pre-accession assistance is to prepare beneficiaries for future

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<sup>8</sup> see at: [https://eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/top\\_stories/pdf/eugs\\_review\\_web.pdf](https://eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/top_stories/pdf/eugs_review_web.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> see at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/39914/a-new-strategic-agenda-2019-2024.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> [https://commission.europa.eu/publications/strategic-plan-2020-2024-neighbourhood-and-enlargement-negotiations\\_en](https://commission.europa.eu/publications/strategic-plan-2020-2024-neighbourhood-and-enlargement-negotiations_en)

<sup>11</sup> Strategic Plan 2020-2024 Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations - DG NEAR, European Commission, 2020, p.6. Available from:

[https://ec.europa.eu/info/system/files/near\\_sp\\_2020\\_2024\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/info/system/files/near_sp_2020_2024_en.pdf)

membership of the Union and to support their accession process.”<sup>12</sup> The NDNCI (in part related to the Neighbourhood), is “based on the European Neighbourhood Policy objectives and priorities outlined in the regional strategies, such as the renewed Eastern Partnership...”<sup>13</sup> Obviously, even without going into the details, we can say that the NDNCI, the only geographic instrument the EaP countries are eligible for, cannot serve the aims of preparing a country for EU membership. To some extent, the NDNCI may be useful in assisting the candidate and potential candidate countries on their way to EU membership. In particular, both facilities support administrative reform, the rule of law, human rights, and institutional developments. Both instruments are also compatible in terms of their purpose. The priorities mentioned in the Commission Implementing Decision on IPA III<sup>14</sup> largely overlap with the declared priorities for the reformed EaP agenda mentioned above. Both facilities also support the EU’s “Economic and Investment Plans” for the Western Balkans and for EaP countries. Still, the objective for IPA III related to good governance reforms explicitly mentions as a thematic goal the alignment with the EU *acquis*, and the IPA III is a more powerful financial tool than the NDNCI and can help the beneficiary countries to bolster the legal harmonisation process in candidate countries with greater efficiency.

### **Security as a dimension for EaP**

The EU offers EaP countries the opportunity to cooperate on security and foreign affairs issues through several mechanisms. These include joining the CFSP declarations, establishing high-level dialogues on strategic security at the senior officials' level (bilateral dimension), and engaging on security and defense issues via the CSDP multilateral panel with all EaP partner states. This cooperation is often based on bilateral agreements regarding participation in EU CSDP missions, the exchange of intelligence information, and more. This engagement helps partner states to strengthen their ties with the EU and improve their national security policies. However, this cooperation does not significantly enhance the EU's role in bolstering the security of the partner states. The security situation in the Black Sea region (to which five out of six EaP countries belong) raises many concerns. The success of the EU’s transformative projects in the region, including those under the EaP framework (both multilateral and bilateral dimensions), was always going to be questionable unless the independence and territorial integrity of the participating states were secured.

Georgia, as a Black Sea state, may play a pivotal role as a transit country: it is an important component of European energy security as well as for securing the eastern border of the EU and NATO against the malign activities, from hybrid attacks to attempts of the direct aggression. Indeed, Georgia itself needs to enhance the level of self resilience and the defence capabilities. Proper support from the EU and NATO could effectively increase Georgia’s capacity and convert it into the real Western stronghold in the Eastern Black and Caspian region.

### **What’s next?**

For Georgia to continue its effective integration with the EU it is necessary that the ruling party comes back to the EU trajectory and agrees to implement all reforms, as the European Commission advises in its Enlargement Report 2023.<sup>15</sup> This can be achieved only through increased engagement by the EU and the US in Georgia. It is important to continue supporting democracy and increase conditionality and pressure to treat the nondemocratic inclinations of the government. About 80% of the population

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<sup>12</sup> <https://www.eumonitor.eu/9353000/1/j9vvik7m1c3gyxp/vlmg8vgy3qzu>

<sup>13</sup> see: [https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/funding-and-technical-assistance/neighbourhood-development-and-international-cooperation-instrument-global-europe-ndici-global-europe\\_en](https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/funding-and-technical-assistance/neighbourhood-development-and-international-cooperation-instrument-global-europe-ndici-global-europe_en)

<sup>14</sup> [https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/31bfefb3-5839-4f39-81bc-d667b833a2a1\\_en?filename=C\\_2021\\_8914\\_COMMISSION\\_IMPLEMENTING\\_DECISION\\_EN.pdf](https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/31bfefb3-5839-4f39-81bc-d667b833a2a1_en?filename=C_2021_8914_COMMISSION_IMPLEMENTING_DECISION_EN.pdf)

<sup>15</sup> See at: [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/%20en/ip\\_23\\_5633](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/%20en/ip_23_5633)

actively supports the European and Euro-Atlantic integration, and the EU has to respond with proper policies supporting the democratic aspirations of the people of that European country.

Coming back to the Eastern Partnership we can say that the policy/initiative (amid its “not-for-membership” status) still remain an important tool for intra-regional cooperation and the stabilization of Eastern Europe. One of the objectives mentioned in the Prague Declaration of 2009<sup>16</sup> is precisely the support to and stimulation of regional cooperation among partner states. To stimulate regional trade and further linkages with the EU market, it is essential to encourage the development of the supply chains connecting the economies of non-DCFTA and DCFTA countries.

While the EaP remains an EU+6 format, the Association TRIO can still have a separate panel to develop a trilateral agenda of cooperation on EU Integration issues. To stimulate this multilateral (trilateral) cooperation, which was always (and is) the reality in other regional enlargements (CEE accession, for Western Balkans), two possibilities could be explored:

- the EU supporting the creation of a special sub-regional format of economic integration and political cooperation between Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova;
- the EU suggesting all TRIO countries to join the Central European Free Trade Area (CEFTA) (Moldova is already a part) and other South-East European regional cooperation formats<sup>17</sup>.

The first possibility will emphasize the initiation of a new enlargement area and the second may be considered as an amplification of already existing enlargement processes in South-East Europe, including Western Balkans and Turkey.

The eligibility of TRIO countries, namely Georgia, to the IPA III is a political question as it stresses the belonging of the beneficiary countries to the enlargement related funding procedure. But it is also a practical challenge as the NDICI is not properly designed for assisting an EU candidate country in its full transposition of the EU acquis. The problem is that IPA-III and ENI are included in the EU’s multiannual financial framework 2021-2027, which is difficult to modify and restructure until there is a new framework. To avoid complications, the TRIO countries can remain beneficiaries of ENI until 2027, but then changes may be produced in the regulation to make it reflecting the new reality and the new tasks.

At the same time, a more flexible approach should be provided for the use of the IPA-III funds in terms of the beneficiary countries; in particular, the facility should be allowed to fund certain activities and projects in TRIO countries too. The possible financial gap (not too large), which the IPA-III may face because of getting new beneficiaries, may be filled by voluntary contributions from EU member states, or other relevant sources. In parallel, relevant changes need to be produced in the forthcoming DG NEAR Strategic Plan 2025-2029, which will define different tasks and objectives towards the countries eligible to IPA-III and those eligible to ENI.

Finally, the NATO-EU synergy can be realised in the following (non-exhaustive) areas

- Countering hybrid threats in EaP countries;
- Assisting in the development of the security sector institutions;
- Security sector oversight related reforms;
- Building up and developing defence industries;

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<sup>16</sup> Brussels, 7 May 2009 8435/09 (Presse 78), p.6, Available from: [https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/31797/2009\\_eap\\_declaration.pdf](https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/31797/2009_eap_declaration.pdf)

<sup>17</sup> see at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/international-summit/2022/10/06/>

- Participation in the EU's Permanent Structural Cooperation projects.

The amplification of the NATO labelled projects with EU funding will bring a stronger sense of security and deterrence in the region. The new approach to EaP needs to emphasize the security and defence as a particular, separate dimension of cooperation between the partner states and the EU. Indeed, the intensity for such cooperation should be defined individually, depending on the level of political association of a particular EaP country with the EU. A special multilateral panel of TRIO countries can focus the *Neighbourhood Economic Community* on cooperation in defence and security.