**Eastern Partnership - Georgian perspective**

***Tbilisi, 13 September 2019***

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# **General comments**

The European Union's Eastern Partnership initiative, inaugurated in Prague in 2009, was originally intended to be a unified platform for bilateral and multilateral cooperation between the EU and the six post-Soviet partner countries of Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. This cooperation was to cover economic and social policies, the promotion of democracy and the rule of law, the development of social and civil dialogue, trade, energy, security and environmental protection. However, fairly quickly this uniform approach proved to be illusory and it was impossible to implement.

The overarching objective of the Eastern Partnership is to promote the values of the European Union. It is aimed, first and foremost, at ensuring that the principles enshrined in the Treaties are respected and that steps are taken to bring partner countries' legislation more closely into line with the *acquis communautaire*.At the heart of these efforts lies not so much a belief in the superiority of European values, but rather the assumption that a certain degree of legislative integration across individual fields of cooperation facilitates such cooperation, and is beneficial both for the partner countries and for the EU.

Within the agreed areas of cooperation, the partners jointly decided that the main aim was to bring significant benefits to the daily lives of their citizens by combating corruption, attracting investment, supporting SMEs, creating good quality jobs, particularly in new economic fields, increasing opportunities for trade by facilitating access to new markets, strengthening democratic institutions and the rule of law, implementing key reforms of the justice system, improving transport infrastructure, supporting energy independence and energy efficiency, strengthening media pluralism and independence, and enhancing social and civic dialogue.

The Eastern Partnership policy is often overestimated in terms of its potential, and its imaginary alleged objectives belong rather to the realm of political fantasy than are related to any specific plans or decisions that have been taken. On the other hand, the Eastern Partnership is sometimes underestimated in terms of its actual achievements. This is because the aspirations and expectations of political stakeholders, both in the various Member States of the European Union and in the partner countries, have been and continue to be very different, they are often hidden or remain concealed behind oblique statements. This is also partly due to the very false perception by some actors that the Eastern Partnership's objectives are part of a great geopolitical game, the outcome of which is aimed at re-establishing or perpetuating the division of post-Soviet Europe into spheres of influence. This belief could be the result of the unhealthy superpower ambitions of certain political forces on the EU side, but it is largely the result of the dark propaganda coming out of the Kremlin, which specifically seeks to spread such views among a naive Western European public.

On the other hand, structural, economic, social and societal changes that are real and substantive, resulting from the implementation of bilateral agreements concluded within the framework of the Eastern Partnership policy, are often overlooked.

However, it remains the case that the Eastern Partnership has not solved any of the problems relating to the security of the partner countries and has not helped put an end to any of the territorial conflicts. The EU's approach to the Partnership has remained mostly technocratic, maintaining its strategic ambiguity as regards its long-term political objectives, which has left the door open to other major players in the region to engage in a more determined diplomacy and a policy of facts, based on strength and the ability to impose their own vision and to carry it out without paying heed to international law, agreements, obligations or sense of decency.

A separate issue is that the partner countries are divided into two groups with different aspirations, possibilities and degrees of institutional ties to the EU. The group with the strongest links with the EU in the form of association agreements consists of Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova. The less integrated group is Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus.

# **The evolution of the Eastern Partnership as part of the European Neighbourhood Policy**

The Eastern Partnership is part of the European Neighbourhood Policy, which also covers its southern flank. The dramatic events of recent years in both the south and east have necessitated a relatively radical change in the EU's policy towards its neighbours. This policy is based on Article 8 (1) of the Treaty on European Union, which states that "The Union shall develop a special relationship with neighbouring countries, aiming to establish an area of prosperity and good neighbourliness, founded on the values of the Union and characterised by close and peaceful relations based on cooperation." Initially, the ambitious overarching aim was to create the closest possible political association and economic integration with partner countries. The outcome of economic integration was supposed to be access to the European Single Market, to be accompanied by difficult political, economic, social and institutional reforms, as well as commitment to the principles of democracy, the rule of law and respect for human rights.

Russia's aggressive policy and military action in the area covered by the Eastern Partnership have completely destabilised countries in the region; they have forced some of them to change their outlook, led to a two-speed partnership and obliged the EU to radically alter its approach. Currently, only Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova have association agreements coupled with the free trade area agreements (DCFTA). This means that the remaining three countries, whose political situation and level of proximity to the EU remain very different, do not have the opportunity to meet the goals initially put forward in the Eastern Partnership. The plan to revise the European Neighbourhood Policy and Eastern Partnership policy was therefore based on making it sufficiently flexible so as to retain within its orbit those countries which are unable or unwilling to meet expectations associated with aligning their legislation with the *acquis communautaire*.

Thus, the initial uniform approach has been replaced by the principle of "differentiation", which has in fact been made necessary by the current situation, and one of the main political objectives has become stabilisation, which is understandable because the Russian method of achieving dominance in the region is destabilisation, together with a variant on this approach – hybrid warfare.

However, it would be an oversight not to mention that the revision of the Eastern Partnership policy also has been prompted by reasons other than Russian attempts to dismantle this policy.

The "more for more" approach has proved to be only partially successful. It was ineffective where local elites were opposed to the EU-backed transformation. Furthermore, the application of the "more for more" principle could give the impression of paying to ensure compliance with EU values. However, the only way to ensure that European values are respected is to have peoples and communities believe in their universal importance and adopt them as their own. Paying for projects to ensure compliance with values does not work. Yet civil society organisations, including trade unions and employers, as natural allies and beneficiaries of respect for fundamental rights, can play a crucial role in this, especially if their enthusiasm and spontaneous sense of initiative are not stamped out.

However, by accepting the "differentiation" method in the name of the political realism, we cannot allow the primary objective of stabilisation to overshadow values; put simply, the principle of "more for more" cannot be replaced by "more for less". The principle of conditionality must be upheld if the Eastern Partnership is to deliver results in terms of bringing partner countries closer to the EU.

Of course, it remains a major question for debate (which will take time to answer) whether or not the principle of "differentiation" will gradually lead to the dismantling of the multilateral dimension of the Eastern Partnership, leaving only its bilateral dimension.

# **Georgian transformation**

Georgia has come a long way since 2009, i.e. in the ten years it has been participating in the Eastern Partnership policy, and its economic, social, legal and structural transition towards EU standards has been far-reaching. While in the realms of political fiction we might speculate how and at what pace Georgia would have developed outside the Eastern Partnership, it is an undisputed fact that Georgia is at the forefront of reform among the six partner countries. This progress is largely linked to the successful implementation of the Association Agreement, particularly its trade component (DCFTA).

Nor can it be overlooked that the difficult and unstable situation of Georgia in the aftermath of the war with Russia in 2008 was an incentive and immediate impetus for adopting the Eastern Partnership policy. The dominance of its large neighbour and the military threat it poses, alongside the fact that the Russian military controls part of Georgian territory, was a serious obstacle to fulfilling Georgia's aspirations of strengthening its sovereignty, restoring territorial integrity and fully reorienting the country towards European standards. In this situation, Europe could not remain indifferent, particularly as defending EU values and ensuring a favourable and stable neighbourhood along its eastern borders was at issue.

In view of the domestic situation too, Georgia retains a special position among the three associate countries, not to mention the other three countries which left the group of countries seeking to harmonise their legislation with the *acquis communautaire*.It is a country which, unlike the others, enjoys constant, solid public support for moving closer to the EU and in the hypothetical scenario that the opposition were to form a government, that process would not be undermined. This situation is much more complicated in Ukraine and particularly in Moldova.

The Eastern Partnership, especially the association agreements with the DCFTA, is a project designed as an alternative to full membership. This project, including for Georgia, is based on action plans tailored to each country's specific circumstances. The DCFTA has particular economic importance, as it helps open up each other's markets based on stable and predictable conditions, underpinned by the Single Market and the four freedoms, i.e. the free movement of people, goods, capital and services. The introduction of these rules has helped to significantly improve the economic climate and to tackle corruption, which in turn has increased investor confidence.

Cooperation in the framework of the Association Agreement and the DCFTA is very tangible and is yielding interesting results in a number of areas. Here are a few examples (according to data from the European External Action Service, May 2019):

**Strengthening the economy**

* The EU is Georgia's largest trading partner with a 27% share of its overall trade, supporting economic development and job creation.
* Since 2009, 40 000 small and medium-sized enterprises and farmers have received loans, and loans of EUR 130 million are available for innovative SMEs under the Horizon 2020 project.
* As part of support for the development of the agricultural cooperative model, financial and technical assistance has been provided to 1600 agricultural cooperatives and 250 000 farmers have been trained.
* The EU is helping the Georgian government to stabilise the macroeconomic situation, with EUR 45 million of support being released in 2018 as the third phase of this operation.

**Supporting the rule of law**

* As part of efforts to ensure equal access to justice, the EU has supported the establishment of the Government Legal Aid Service. This service has provided assistance to 330 000 people. In 123 000 cases, this included representing them in court.
* 5000 judges, prosecutors, prison staff, police investigators and lawyers have been trained.
* In order to facilitate the handling of cases with state offices, the EU has supported the setting up of 44 municipal centres providing public services, including banking, free internet and libraries for more than 90 000 citizens living in remote regions.

**Better connectivity**

* The EU makes grants available to Georgia for the development of transport links as well as water and energy infrastructure.
* The EU is also supporting major projects in the fields of environment, green economy, renewable energy and energy efficiency.

**Removing barriers for society**

* Since the entry into force of visa liberalisation rules on 28 March 2017, 300 000 Georgian citizens have travelled to the EU without a visa.
* As part of the Erasmus programme, there have been over 5500 exchanges of students and researchers, and more than 9300 apprentices and young workers from Georgia have participated in joint exchanges, training or volunteering projects.
* Since 2018, Tbilisi has been home to a European School, enabling students from Eastern Partnership countries to learn together and get involved in the field of European values.

# **The impact of the Eastern Partnership on the region's development**

The celebrations of the 10th anniversary of the Eastern Partnership admittedly took place with fanfare in the EU, but without a political summit, a joint declaration, a clear vision for the future and without enthusiasm. Indeed, in the area of the Eastern Partnership which was designed as a region of peace, good neighbourliness, rising prosperity and social progress, with dissemination of European standards, alignment of legal systems with the *acquis communautaire* and progressive economic integration within a free trade area, these aspirations have only been partially achieved and only for some of the partner countries. Without denying that in some areas the partnership has brought great benefits, particularly for the three associate countries, it cannot be overlooked that the area has become a place of confrontation with Russia.

Confrontation with Russia is first and foremost the result of the inconsistencies in the EU's eastern policy. On the one hand, the Eastern Partnership was adopted in response to Russia's imperialistic policy in the region, with the war between Russia and Georgia being an immediate incentive, and one of the objectives of the Partnership was to enable countries covered by this policy to make a sovereign choice over their own path of development, namely a European choice. On the other hand, the EU has closed its eyes to the fact that such an imperialistic policy has actually been pursued, pretending to believe that Russia acknowledges the right of post-Soviet countries to full sovereignty and to decide their own destiny.

Of course, nobody is denying Russia the right to its own neighbourhood policy, provided that it respects international law, recognises neighbours' right to independence and renounces the use of force to change borders or to enforce its own arguments. At the same time, Russia does not regard its own policy in the area of the Eastern Partnership as a neighbourhood policy, but rather as the defence of its own sphere of influence and any action challenging its control over it produces a decisive response. If this is accepted by the West, it necessarily leads to the conclusion that either a confrontation with the Kremlin is inevitable or that we accept the delimitation of the zone of influence and the fact that the Brezhnev doctrine will remain in force, i.e. the limited sovereignty of the States in the post-Soviet area. Since neither of these scenarios was welcome, it was convenient, in the short term, to pretend that these risks did not exist and not to take action. However, it is precisely this lack of any sign of perceived hazard and the absence of a vigorous response to Russia's aggressive behaviour that has led to the current situation and the loss of control over parts of their territories by Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova, i.e. all three associate countries.

It would be naive to believe that Russia has military control over Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Crimea, Donbas or Transnistria because it has special interests there. This costly and seemingly absurd operation makes sense only because it is intended to destabilise the entire region and, in the long term, to ensure its overall subordination to the Kremlin.

# **Conclusions**

The proposals should be subdivided into more general recommendations, covering both Georgia and the future of the Eastern Partnership as a whole, and into recommendations on an action plan for Georgia, and the implementation of the Association Agreement with the DCFTA.

**Recommendations for cooperation with Georgia**

* Georgia has made substantial progress towards democracy and the rule of law. Nevertheless, there is still a high level of nepotism and corruption. The joint institutions monitoring the implementation of the Association Agreement and the DCFTA should pay particular attention to this.
* Reform of the justice system, independence and pluralism of the media, public administration reform, development of independent anti-corruption bodies, gender equality and non-discrimination, and transparency in economic and political matters must remain central to the institutional transformation.
* Social dialogue, compliance with the International Labour Organization's standards and recommendations, including the establishment of effective labour inspections, are crucial, not only for formal reasons but above all because of the need for stabilisation and public acceptance of the difficult transition process.
* It is important to get rid of the ambiguous definition of the political objective of the association between Georgia and the EU. Open talks are needed on this matter, as is a declaration that the association is a transition phase for full membership. A clear European perspective and a calendar of activities are an important factor in strengthening the implementation of the Association Agreement.
* Cooperation in the field of security and technical assistance for Georgia's peaceful cooperation with the separatist regions should be enhanced.
* Stronger cooperation and financial support for civil society organisations playing an important role in monitoring the implementation of the Association Agreement.

**Conclusions on the Eastern Partnership policy**

* The "more for more" conditionality principle should be developed. The various forms of cooperation available should include a specific political dimension and be made more explicit. A reasonable European perspective should be provided for countries that make significant progress, such as Georgia.
* Consider setting up an organisation for the group of associate countries. The aim would be to deepen mutual cooperation and to coordinate actions and a policy of solidarity both in the face of external pressures and towards the EU.
* There is a need for systematic and unambiguous support for the territorial integrity of associate countries, within the borders recognised by international law. Any kind of "land for peace" cannot succeed, since the whole of the Eastern Partnership is at stake, not only the provinces that have been separated.
* More effective methods to counter anti-European propaganda need to be developed. Local action through civil society organisations may turn out to be key in this regard.