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**Article**

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## THE FUTURE OF THE EASTERN PARTNERSHIP: “BUILDING A SHARED EUROPEAN HOME”

Maria SARAKUTSA\*  
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**Abstract:** *The year 2014 became a turning point in the history of the EU Eastern Partnership (EaP), marked by the signing of the Association Agreements with three EaP states and a conflict in Ukraine. In view of the above, current research focuses on assessing the feasibility of scenarios of the EaP future, discussed in scholarship, based on the assessment of the EU's foreign policy successes and challenges in Eastern Neighbourhood. EU's internal issues, re-emerging geo-strategic threats and domestic challenges in the EaP states are analyzed. The considered scenarios include the EU's acceptance of the status quo in the region, taking a stronger stance on the integration of Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia, as well as building “a shared European home” by promoting a rapprochement with Russia. The single scenario for the EU's policy in the EaP states is suggested, and the reason why the EU will try to “build a shared European home” is explained.*

**Keywords:** Eastern Partnership; Ukrainian crisis; Association Agreement; geostrategic challenges

### Introduction

The EU's Eastern Partnership (EaP) was introduced in 2009 in order to bring six post-Soviet states - Armenia, Georgia, Azerbaijan, Moldova, Belarus and Ukraine - closer to the EU in political, economic and cultural terms. The major peculiarity of the EaP is that it combines cooperation through the multilateral platforms<sup>1</sup> and enhanced bilateral relations between the EU and Eastern Neighbours. The initially envisaged cornerstone of the EaP bilateral track was constituted by the Association Agreements (AAs) between the EU and EaP states, including Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas (DCFTAs)<sup>2</sup>. Other tangible benefits for the Eastern Neighbours were a perspective of short-term visa-free travels to the Schengen Area and the membership in the Energy Community, launched in 2006 for the Western Balkan states to get them incorporated into the EU gas and electricity markets.

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<sup>1</sup> The platforms are “Democracy, good governance and stability”, “Economic integration and convergence with EU policies”, “Energy Security” and “People-to-people contacts”.

<sup>2</sup> The AAs (including DCFTA) were signed by the EU with Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova in 2014. Joining the Eurasian Economic Union, Belarus and Armenia refused from entering AAs with the EU. Azerbaijan also refused from the AA scheme, suggested by the EU.

To support the implementation of the above goals, the EU used a number of geographic and thematic instruments<sup>3</sup>.

The year 2014 was a turning point in the history of the Eastern Partnership initiative, marked by the EU's signing AAs with Ukraine, Georgia and the Republic of Moldova, as well as the Russian annexation of Crimea and its following military offensive in Eastern Ukraine. These developments revealed a number of challenges, concerned with the further implementation of the EaP initiative, and called for a conceptual change in the EU's approach towards shaping its relations with its Eastern Neighbours. As it stems from the overview of the post-2014 scholarly elaborations related to the future of the EaP, possible paths for such change can be identified as follows:

- *Accepting the status quo and not insisting on framework policy changes* (Friedrich Ebert Stiftung Scenario Group EU+East 2030, 2014, p.30; Hug, 2015, pp.6-12);
- *Increasing the EU support for economic stabilization and structural transformation in the EaP states (along with the policy's diversification and possible granting of candidate status to the EaP states)* (Hug, 2015, pp.6-12; Center for the EU Enlargement Studies, 2015, pp.13-14);
- *Building a "shared European home" by intensifying the EU and EaP countries cooperation with Russia and the Eurasian Union (EEU)* (Korosteleva, 2015; House of Lords, 2015, p.101; Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2014, p.30).

Determining the avenue the EU is most likely to choose requires a systemic analysis of the challenges, currently faced by the EU in the region, and elaborating on the scenarios of its actions. The feasibility of the scenarios will be assessed, based on the trajectories of the EU behavior as an international actor and the steps it has taken until now in terms of building up the relations with the EaP states.

## **1. The Eastern Partnership: moderate successes and multiplying challenges**

Shortly since the start of the implementation of the EaP programme, it has started to be broadly criticized by scholars and analysts. A year after the EaP was launched, in her contribution, aiming to assess the EaP impacts, Depo (2010) was asking whether the initiative was "a success or a failure for the diversified ENP". Not providing a precise answer to this question, Depo (2010) illustrated several major concerns, which prevented her from viewing the EaP as an EU success, such as the "Eastern

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<sup>3</sup> The EU funding instruments include the European Neighborhood Instrument (ENI), European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR), EU Instrument for Stability etc.

Partners’ unfulfilled expectation of the EU membership perspective” and “frozen conflicts” in the EaP states. Similarly, Boonstra and Shapovalova (2010, pp. 10-13) pointed out that the EaP did not overcome the weakness of the European Neighborhood Policy in transforming the EU’s Eastern Neighbours. The authors substantiated the above statement by referring to the distant nature and “vagueness” of the EU offers to EaP states, the EU’s inability to overcome the dilemma between “joint ownership” and the conditionality principles, as well as the limited EU leverage in specific partner states.

In 2013 the EU External Action Service (EEAS) conducted a critical assessment of the EaP impact in the region and singled out four major domains, whereby the project was successful. Firstly the EaP was found to have elevated the bilateral relations between the EU and Eastern Partners in political, economic and cultural dimensions. Secondly, the EaP included a multilateral component, uniting the EU, its Member States and the Eastern Neighbours around a range of crucial issues. Thirdly, the EU, its Member States and the Eastern Partners strengthened sector cooperation. Finally, the EaP architecture allowed involving a range of actors beyond the government into the cooperation with the EU (EEAS, 2013).

At the same time, 2013 was the year, when the first contributions, calling for “a start of a real partnership” (Wisniewski, 2013) and “smart geostrategy” (Youngs and Pishchikova, 2013) emerged in light of the upcoming EaP Summit in Vilnius, where a range of AAs were to be signed. Emphasizing that the EaP could continue serving as a framework for the EU relations with Eastern Neighbours, P.D.Wisniewski (2013, pp.7-10) viewed the inconsistencies in the way the EU differentiated between the Partners and inadequate financing as major deficiencies to be rethought. Furthermore, the author pointed out to the fact that Russia was using hard and soft power to influence the EU and the Eastern Partners to weaken the initiative (Wisniewski, 2013, p.1). Youngs and Pishchikova (2013, p. 3) concentrated on the EU-Russia rivalry over the region, mentioning trade sanctions, energy supplies interruptions and power struggles in regions among the means Russia was using to damage the EaP. Assessing the EaP prospects for the future before the Vilnius Summit, Korosteleva (2012), P.D.Wisniewski (2013) and Youngs and Pishchikova (2013) underlined the need for a more ambitious partnership, focusing on genuine political and economic transformation in the EaP states, rather than the transfer of *acquis*. Evidently, short before the 2013-2014 events in Ukraine, the failures of the EaP and required policy changes were already addressed far more frequently than the benefits, brought about by the initiative.

Subsequently, the ongoing Ukrainian crisis and related geostrategic threats gave a new impetus to the debate regarding the challenges, faced by the EaP, and the ways out of emerging a new ‘Cold

War”<sup>4</sup>. Similar to the state of 2013, the EaP achievements drew the insignificant attention of researchers. Gromadzki (2015, pp. 12-13) addresses the signing of the AAs with Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia as a “big success”, along with the Partners’ steps forward in the approximation of legislation with the EU’s *acquis communautaire*. Granting Moldova a visa-free regime is viewed as a factor, capable of breaking a stereotype of the unattainability of the ‘free travel’ incentive. However, the multiplicity and complexity of the EaP current challenges, led to the EaP, being addressed as “a failed birth of better tomorrow” that is also to blame for the initiation of the Ukrainian crisis (Mearsheimer, 2014).

In light of the issues clearly outnumbering and (most possibly)<sup>5</sup> outweighing achievements, it is suggested to acquire an insight into the nature, scope and mutual influence of the challenges, posed to the EU by the EaP. For the purposes of clarity, it is suggested to divide the considered issues into three major groups, such as:

- The EU internal challenges;
- Geostrategic threats;
- Domestic challenges in Eastern Neighbours.

### ***1.1. The EU internal challenges***

Historically, the foreign policy and security domains were most challenging for the EU to integrate due to the Member States’ disposition to protecting their sovereignty in these policy spheres. Despite the fact that the Lisbon Treaty provided for the strengthening of the Union’s role in the international arena, the EU policy towards third states is still highly dependent on Member States’ positions and foreign policies. The differences in Member States’ attitudes to the EaP became especially apparent in light of Ukrainian crisis.

While Sweden and Poland remain most vocal supporters of the EaP in general and the EU intensified efforts in the field of the European integration of Ukraine in particular, the positions of other EU states are far from unified. Despite Germany’s evident leadership with regard to the crisis in Ukraine, German foreign policy thinking (especially the one of the centre-left SPD) is still concerned with Cold war *Ostpolitik*, favouring engagement with Russia (Hug, 2015, p.11). Both

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<sup>4</sup> Causing the stand-off between the West and East, Ukrainian crisis was already repeatedly addressed as an impetus for the emergence of new “Cold War”. See: Trenin, D. (2014), *The Ukraine Crisis and the resumption of Great-Power rivalry*.

<sup>5</sup> The word “possibly” is underlined, because the full assessment of the EaP’s impact can be conducted only following the end of the initiative’s implementation.

Hungary and Austria, enjoying long-standing political and economic links with Russia, repeatedly pushed the EU for softening its stance as regards the response to the crisis in Ukraine via the sanctions’ policy (Sannikov, 2014). Evident pro-Russian positions were also expressed by strong national political forces in the Member States, such as the National Front in France, Greece’s far-right Golden Dawn and the Lega Nord in Italy (Sannikov, 2014). In view of the outcomes of the most recent elections to the European Parliament<sup>6</sup>, the Eurosceptics’ opposition to strengthening the EaP initiative can be viewed as a crucial diplomatic challenge, preventing the EU from radically reframing the EaP (e.g., supplementing it with a membership incentive).

The lack of the membership incentive, entailed into the EaP project, clearly stems from the fragmentation of the EU Member States’ approaches to the cooperation between the EU and the Eastern partners. It is important to underline that particularly a non-inclusion of the enlargement incentive into the scope of the EaP has been viewed as a crucial weakness of the EaP. Such an opinion, frequently substantiated by the referrals to the experience of *Europeanization* in Central European states, was expressed in both merely conceptual contributions (Boonstra and Shapovalova, 2010) and case studies’ analyses (Dimitrova and Dragneva, 2013; Delcour, 2013). At the same time, the “enlargement-free design” is only an element of a broader debate, whereby it is argued that the EaP external incentives<sup>7</sup> are too insignificant and distant to achieve the initiative’s genuine transformative power.

While the diverging positions of the EU Member States and specific national political forces lead to the EU’s inability to introduce rapid policy changes, inter-institutional tensions may significantly hinder the dialogue between the EU, Member States and the Eastern Partners (Hug, 2015, p.7; Kostanyan, 2015, p.22). According to Kostanyan (2015), the tensions between the European Union External Action Service (EEAS) and the respective Directorates General (DGs) of the European Commission (DG External Actions, DG Neighborhood and Enlargement Negotiations) cause the responsibility overlaps and ‘grey zones’ of responsibility between agencies. The EU-Eastern Partners’ dialogues as regards the DCFTA- and Visa Liberalization-related dialogues were also admitted to have been negatively affected by the tensions between the EEAS and DGs Migration and Home Affairs and Trade respectively (Kostanyan, 2015, p.23).

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<sup>6</sup> The 2015 elections to the European Parliament (EP) were characterized by significant popularity of Eurosceptic and nationalist parties. France’s Nationalist Front, UKIP, Greece’s Golden Dawn and Italian Five Star and Lega Nord movements are currently holding more seats in the EP than before.

<sup>7</sup> On a debate about the EU conditionality model and the use of external incentives, see: Schimmelfennig, F., Sedelmeier, U. (2004), Governance by conditionality: EU rule transfer to the candidate countries of Central and Eastern Europe. *Journal of European Public Policy*, Vol. 11, No.4, pp.661-679.

To conclude, the diverging positions of the EU Member States as regards the future of the Eastern Partnership and the inter-institutional issues lead to both the *ad hoc* dialogue-related difficulties, as well as to the Union's limited power to introduce conceptual differences into the EaP design (subsequently limiting the initiative's transformative power).

### ***1.2. Geostrategic threats***

The "Revolution of Dignity" in Ukraine, the Russian annexation of Crimea and the following pro-Russian unrest in Eastern Ukraine led to significant changes in the balance of powers in both global and regional terms, bringing new concerns to the surface.

The key security concern, stemming from Russia's role in the Ukrainian crisis is that the Westphalian deal can no longer be viewed as a solid foundation for the world security (Nichols, 2014). In other words, nowadays the world community lacks efficient diplomatic, legal and economic means to stop the Great Powers from committing evident violations of the basic principles of international law<sup>8</sup>. Subsequently, it becomes possible that the EU's attempts to increase its presence in the Eastern Neighborhood may lead not only to the escalation of Ukrainian conflict (despite current fragile ceasefire), but to the emergence of threats to the security of Poland and of the Baltic states (Larrabee, Wilson&Gordon, 2015, p.viii). Moreover, Russia's annexation of Crimea led to a significant increase in Russia's maritime power and sharpened the collisions in the Black Sea region. Key geostrategic threats in this regard relate to the security of Moldova, possible toughening of the historical rivalry between Russia and Turkey, as well as Russia's increased ability to influence the events in the Western Balkans and the Middle East (Blockmanns, 2015; Larrabee *et al.*, 2015, pp.viii-ix).

Apart from the fact that the EU can no more rely on Russia's playing by the 'international law' rules in the competition over the region, a significant concern deals with the threat of Russia's reinforcing of its "hybrid war" strategy<sup>9</sup> in Ukraine and beyond. According to Kofman and Royanski (2015, p.1), the hybrid war is viewed by the West as "as a threatening precedent – even a likely model – for future conflicts on Russia's periphery". At the same time Lanoszka (2016, pp. 182-185) underlines that the former Soviet states are especially vulnerable to the application of the hybrid

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<sup>8</sup> On the analysis of Russia's violations of international law during the conflict in Ukraine, see: Zadorozhny, A. (2014), *Ukrainian 'Revolution of Dignity' and international law*, Kyiv: KIS.

<sup>9</sup> Hybrid war combines a range of conventional strategies, such as irregular combat operations, economic retaliatory measures, sponsoring of political protests and massive informational campaigns in the shadow of conventional war.

warship due to the ethnical heterogeneity of the region, existing historical complexities and insufficiently developed civil society.

Importantly, soon after Russia’s annexation of Crimea, the influential representative of the realist approach to international relations J.Mearsheimer (2014) claimed that the “United States and its European allies share most of the responsibility for the crisis” in Ukraine. Even despite the fact that the EaP has never included a membership perspective for Ukraine, its development and an offer of the Association Agreement to Ukraine is considered to have contributed to provoking Russia’s actions in Ukraine, along with NATO’s Eastern enlargement.

In view of the above security threats under the game with no rules and a fear to be blamed for further provoking Russia’s aggression in the region, the EU is not eager to aggravate an existing burden by changing its “enlargement-free” approach to Ukraine and to other Eastern Neighbours. To understand the scope and importance of the combined effects of the above challenges, it is worth referring to the fact that the crisis in Ukraine has already been viewed as a resumption of the Great Powers’ rivalry. In the modern era of tight economic links between the East and the West, regional tensions and shared global concerns imply that the new ‘Cold War’ is even more dangerous than it was in the second half of the twentieth century.

An important consequence of the resumption of the tensions between Great Powers made the “West or East” choice, initially contained in the EaP design, more apparent. This development, as well as the EU’s inability to significantly enhance the EaP incentives, may inspire the Eastern Partners to join the EEU (as Armenia and Belarus already did)<sup>10</sup>. As their choice means sacrificing the chance to enter into the AA (including the DCFTA) with the EU, the EU currently faces a challenge of reconsidering Armenia’s and Belarus’ role in the EaP in a way that will not reassert Russia’s pressure on them, further limiting the space for maneuver. Willing to pursue its own economic and political path, Azerbaijan willfully refused to proceed with the AA and DCFTA with the EU. Subsequently, a further challenge for the EU is to sustain its leverage in Azerbaijan as the EaP country through a currently developed ‘strategic partnership for modernization’.

To sum up, following the crisis in Ukraine, equated to the resumption of the Cold War-style East-West rivalry, the implementation of the EaP is associated with a number of geostrategic threats. The Union being prevented from radical steps towards the strengthening of the EaP initiative may mean further decrease the transformative power of the EaP.

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<sup>10</sup> Assessing the above development’s impact on the EaP states’ strategic choices, it is important to take into account the different levels of relationships’ evolution between the EU and EaP countries before the “Revolution of Dignity”.



### ***1.3. Domestic challenges in Eastern Neighbours***

The domestic context of the EaP states is characterized by unique challenges to be considered in terms of the EU policy towards the Eastern Neighbours. The chapter below focuses on the domestic issues in EaP countries, highlighted in the literature over the period from 2012 to 2015.

#### *Ukraine*

In light of the ongoing conflict, the situation in Ukraine remains one of the EU's crucial concerns. Despite the IMF short-term funding and the EU support packages for Ukraine's economy and political reforms, introduced in both 2014 and 2015, a range of challenges persist. A considerable difficulty, accompanying the reform of "structurally weak" Ukrainian economy, deals with the occupation and lost capacities of the country's major industrial lands (Hug, 2015, p.11). In turn, the persisting conflict, high defense expenses and the country's dependence on external financial aid led to a continuing increase of the public debt, sharp depreciation of the national currency and growing unemployment rates (EEAS, 2014). The EU and Ukraine's efforts in promoting the benefits of the EU-Ukraine DCFTA for Ukrainian exporters are considered crucial against the background of the rapid fall of Ukraine's exports to Russia.

Russia's aggression in the East of Ukraine led to a drastically deteriorating human rights situation in Crimea, Sevastopol and Eastern Ukraine (especially, with regard to the freedom of expression, assembly and the media). The most challenging fields of political transformation in Ukraine include the constitutional review process (that is to enable the reforms of decentralization and judiciary), anti-corruption and good governance, as well as public management (EEAS, 2014, p.3).

According to the opinion of G. Soros (2015), further supported by A. Hug (2015, p.12), the scale of international aid, provided by Ukraine, does not respond to the challenge of the country's post-crisis recovery. While it is being proposed to deploy the unused resources of the European Financial Stability Facility to increase the amount of aid to Ukraine, the structuring and ensuring the effectiveness of such aid remains a difficulty.

### *Georgia*

While the GDP in Georgia demonstrated a steady growth over the period from 2012 to 2014, inflationary pressures and the high unemployment rate (at around 14.1%) are the challenges, undoubtedly requiring new views and solutions (EEAS, 2014, p.10). The prevalence of non-formalized government-business coordination mechanisms and the “careless legislative approximation process” are perceived as major obstacles on the path towards the successful implementation of the EU-Georgia DCFTA (Visegrad Fund and GISS, 2014, p.15).

The fight against corruption and ensuring the independence of the judiciary remain the most problematic fields of the EU-Georgia cooperation. Generally, the political environment in Georgia is currently assessed as being “more volatile” than before following the resignation of the most internationally-known members of the Georgian “Dream Coalition” and the narrowed space for dialogue between the civil society activists and government (Hug, 2015, p.18).

A major concern is posed by the increased separation between Georgia and the breakaway territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, accompanied by Russia’s signing of the “Alliance and Strategic Partnership” agreements with these territories. While the EU remains committed to the territorial integrity of Georgia and discussed the issues of Georgia’s breakaway territories with the Russian Federation in bilateral terms in 2014, no significant progress was made in this regard.

Cultural concerns, such as “the rise of pressure against European liberal values”, are also seen as a potential obstacle to the further deepening of the EU-Georgia relations.

### *The Republic of Moldova*

Similar to the other countries in the region, Moldova faces a challenging economic situation due to embargoes, posed on goods of Moldovan origin, by the Russian Federation. While until February 2015 the Moldovan leu demonstrated a significant fall, the National Bank of Moldova was forced to make large investments to stabilize the national currency and calm down the market. The Three of Moldova’s most important commercial banks’ inability to repay emergency loans, priorly provided to them by the government to avoid bankruptcy, led to a large financial hole in the banking sector (amount to 15 percent of the GDP) and decreased Moldova’s attractiveness for investors (Secieru and Sobjak, 2015, p.3).

Due to the marginalization and low credibility of some of its members, the installation of the new minority government in Moldova led to the deterioration of Moldova’s relations with some of

the EU Member States, such as Germany. Moreover, the new government is evidently less active in pursuing the European integration path than the previous one, and the debate regarding Moldova's possible submission of the EU membership application<sup>11</sup> seems to be a thing of the past. Persistent and high-level corruption and the lack of transparent design for party and campaign financing remain the least successful reform fields in Moldova. The lack of progress in the field of democratic reforms led to addressing them as merely "pro forma" by analysts (Secieru and Sobjak, 2015, pp.2-3)

Limited progress has been made by now by Moldova and the EU with regard to the resolution of the Transnistrian conflict. Being supported by Russia, Transnistria continues opposing constructive negotiations on its status and security.

### *Armenia*

Armenia's decision to stop the preparation for the conclusion of the AA and DCFTA with the EU in 2013 led to an increase of previously strong Russian leverage and the EU's limited opportunities to facilitate further dialogue with Armenia. While the EU and Armenia successfully cooperate in terms of the EU-Armenia Visa Facilitation and Readmission Agreement of 2014, it is claimed that Armenia's total progress in implementing the European Neighborhood Action Plan is limited (Hug, 2015, p.18).

Armenia also continues to suffer from an unresolved border conflict with Azerbaijan over the self-declared Nagorno-Karabakh Republic, whereby ensuring security remains a crucial concern.

Further shifts in Armenia's domestic positions regarding European integration can be possible only in case of Armenia's decreasing energy and security dependence on Russia and enhanced political will of the government.

### *Belarus*

Similar to Armenia, Belarus sacrificed an opportunity to conclude the AA and DCFTA with the EU for the sake of further Eurasian integration. That is why, the development of new policy tools is required to preserve existing EU leverage in Belarus and provide new incentives for further evolution of the EU-Belarus relations.

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<sup>11</sup> In 2014 the president of Moldova announced that the Republic would submit the application for the EU membership in 2015 in order to boost the ongoing integration process. Already following the change of the government in 2015, it was claimed that

Until 2015 the crucial source of tension in the EU-Belarus relations was manifested by the presence of political prisoners in Belarus. Despite the prisoners’ release in summer 2015, democratization and the observance of human rights in Belarus can still be addressed as important concerns in the relations between the EU and this country.

### *Azerbaijan*

While Azerbaijan is the most prosperous among the EaP countries due to the availability of significant oil and gas reserves, its human rights and governance standards can be estimated as very low (Hug, 2015, p.13). Apart from the lack of civil society’s capacities and an ability to influence the governmental policies, negative attitudes to foreign donors remain a crucial obstacle on the path towards the improvement of human rights- and the democratic governance-related situation.

Unlike other EaP countries, Azerbaijan is not particularly interested in the EU budget support and strongly promotes its security and economic interests in its relations with the EU. Following such a strategy and preserving its elites’ interests (Alieva, 2014), Azerbaijan refused from furthering its relations with the EU within the framework of the EU- Azerbaijan AA and DCFTA. Instead, the Government of Azerbaijan proposed a new document entitled a “Strategic Modernization Partnership”. As the EU refused to enter into such a partnership with Azerbaijan, insisting on the signing of the EU-Azerbaijan AA, the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement of 1999 and the EU Neighborhood Instrument remains the framework for the EU- Azerbaijan relations.

Apart from the need to elaborate on a modern workable framework for the EU- Azerbaijan cooperation, an important challenge is concerned with helping Azerbaijan and Armenia achieve consensus as regards the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic. A formal upgrade of the relations with Azerbaijan is also required in light of the deteriorating European values in this country.

### *Summary of the challenges, faced by the EaP*

Initially, the conceptual basis of the EaP as an initiative, combining the multilateral and bilateral elements, was constituted by the EU’s perceived homogeneity of the Eastern Neighbours’ interests. Already in 2012-2013 the perspective of the new two-speed Eastern Partnership became apparent in light of the fact that only three Eastern Partners (Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia) saw the signing of the AAs with the EU as a political goal. The introduction of the above differentiation and the resulting re-allocation of funds was viewed by specialists as a way to accommodate the strategic choices of all

Eastern partners, simultaneously enhancing the EU support for countries, clearly opting for the European future. The major EU task with regard to the “second circle” of Eastern Neighbours was viewed as “maintaining the current level of engagement” (EEAS, 2015a). At the same time, it was emphasized that the multilateral track of the EaP needs to be revisited to improve the EU overall leverage in the region.

As a result of multiplying economic, political and reforms-related challenges in Eastern Neighbours following the crisis in Ukraine and sharpened East-West tensions, discussing the feasibility of building relations with all the EaP countries under a single umbrella gained a new impetus. Nowadays, the popular suggestion is to launch the “3-1-2” approach that will preserve the benefits, gained through the multilateral track of the EaP, but will let the EU to be more flexible in its relations with the EaP states (Hug, 2015, p.19). While it is clear that there is currently no way for the EU to reverse the strategic decisions, taken by Belarus and Armenia in relation to the Eurasian integration, the EU shall still maintain the dialogue with these countries, focusing on good governance and the human rights agenda. A specific challenge is represented by Azerbaijan, where the EU clearly lacks incentives to promote the improvement of human rights- and the governance-related situation. Launching the mutually beneficial workable framework for the EU-Azerbaijan relations is a crucial diplomatic exercise the EU needs to perform to counter existing human rights violations in the country and to contribute to the mitigation of the border conflict over the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic.

Given complex economic and political challenges in Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia, the EU faces a need to readdress the current EaP incentives in these countries to sustain and to improve the value of European integration for both the governments and society.

## **2. Scenarios for the future: accepting the status quo, insisting on change or building “a shared European home”?**

The assessment of the EU internal challenges, geostrategic threats and domestic issues in the Member States’ provides an opportunity to critically reassess the scenarios for EaP development, previously introduced by the literature.

The major scenarios to be addressed include the EU’s accepting of the status quo and not insisting on framework policy changes; increasing the support for economic stabilization and structural transformation for Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia, as well as attempting to “build a shared European home” by involving Russia into cooperation projects.

The developments of the EU relations with Eastern Neighbours are projected for the period of the next 10 years (up to the year 2026) (see Table 1 annex for a summary on scenarios).

***2.1. Scenario 1. The EU accepts the status quo and does not insist on conceptual policy changes (based on Friedrich Ebert Stiftung Scenario Group EU+East 2030 (2014); Hug (2015))***

***Scope of the scenario.*** The EU makes the division between the “two circles” of the EaP more explicit than it currently is. However, no crucial changes into the existing scope of incentives for the states of the “first circle” are introduced. Specifically, the EU does not grant any of the above countries candidate/potential candidate status or suggests amending the AAs by the long-term perspective. At the same time, the EU will merely rely on existing funding instruments to support the domestic reforms in Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova. However, special emphasis will be made on sustaining and improving the change, envisaged by the 2014 and 2015 Special Measures in favour of Ukraine.

The EU bases the relations with Armenia and Belarus on the new overarching cooperation agreements and the application of the EU unilateral geographic and thematic instruments. However, the Union does not apply efforts to complete the diplomatic exercise, offered by the need to conceptually reframe the EU-Azerbaijan relations. The Partnership and Cooperation Agreement remains the basis for the EU-Azerbaijan ties, granting the EU virtually no chances to influence human rights and civil society issues in the country.

Importantly, the Union sustains and possibly strengthens its response to Russia’s annexation of Crimea, including a broad range of economic sanctions. No significant steps for a long-term rapprochement with Russia and the EEU are made.

***Feasibility assessment***

The introduction of further differentiation into the EaP can be viewed as inevitable in the light of the outcomes of the EaP’s most recent Summit in Riga<sup>12</sup>, coupled with the need to enhance support for the EaP states that signed AAs with the EU.

Despite active scholarly debate on the need to strengthen the EaP incentives for Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia, Riga Summit did not result in the introduction of the new incentives, apart from launching the new Small and Medium Enterprises Facility and a clearer prospect for visa-free travels for Georgia

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<sup>12</sup> On the deepening differentiation in the EaP initiative, see: EU External Action Service (2015a), Joint Declaration of the Eastern Partnership Summit (Riga, 21-22 May 2015).

and Ukraine (EEAS, 2015a). Granting the EaP countries candidate status or including the membership perspective in the AAs is highly doubtful in view of the lack of Member States' unity as regards further enlargement of the Union and the future of the EaP initiative. The 2014-2015 rise of Euroscepticism, the hard economic consequences of the 2004 'Big Bang' enlargement, as well as the current refugee crisis and related security concerns make the membership perspective for the EaP "first circle" even more shady.

The ENI framework provides for the possibility of launching new financial facilities to support the EaP states. The experience of the EU's introduction in 2014 and 2015 of the Special Measures for Ukraine allows suggesting that further support measures, financed from the general budget of the EU, can be introduced to counter political and economic issues in Ukraine. However, there is no evidence that any Special Measures can be launched in support of reforms in Georgia and Moldova.

The commitment to the inclusiveness of the EaP is contained in the EaP Riga Summit Declaration (EEAS, 2015a). To promote and deepen the EU-Armenia bilateral relations, countries currently negotiate the new agreement that is to substitute the existing PCA. A Similar intention was recently expressed by Belarus. However, no progress regarding the EU-Azerbaijan relations can be currently traced. In view of Azerbaijan's prosperity, developed trade relations with the EU and weak interest in the EU financial assistance, it can be contemplated that no significant changes in the EU- Azerbaijan's bilateral relations will take place.

While the ceasefire in Eastern Ukraine remains fragile, the EU sanctions against Russia were not lifted in 2015. At the same time, the EU remains committed to the policy of non-recognizing Russia's annexation of Crimea, extending the operation of related sanctions until June, the 23<sup>rd</sup> 2016. At the same time, it is important to mention a gradual move towards the softening of the EU-Russia relations, conditioned by the fear of the new "Cold War" perspective and cooperation-related needs (see a "shared European home scenario" for further details).

## ***2.2. Scenario 2. The EU increases support for economic stabilization and structural reforms in Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova (emphasizing the EaP differentiation) (based on Hug (2015); Center for the EU Enlargement Studies (2015))***

### *Scope of the scenario*

The scenario is different from the first one with a generally stronger stance the EU takes with regard to reforms in the region without introducing the membership perspective to the countries.

Cutting the support programmes in Belarus, Armenia and Azerbaijan, the EU concentrates on attaining specific deliverables with regard to reform processes in Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. Importantly, unlike the first scenario, the EU will focus not only on post-conflict stabilization in Ukraine, but supplementary support for reforms in Georgia and Moldova. A focus on deliverables will be maintained through enhanced cooperation with other donors, new conditionality mechanisms and launching new technical cooperation facilities. The EU also includes the membership perspective as the final aim of the EaP project for the “first circle” countries.

The EU also takes a stronger position with regard to resolving “frozen conflicts” in the region (the cases of Transnistria, South Ossetia and Abkhazia) and a potential “frozen” conflict in Donbas region of Ukraine. In particular, it engages in consultations with the leaders of the self-declared republics and Russia and launches special structural support programmes for the above regions. Similar to the previous scenario, the EU continues to apply diplomatic and economic measures to condemn Russia’s annexation of Crimea and its followup actions in Eastern Ukraine.

#### *Feasibility assessment*

The focus on specific deliverables, rather than vague *pro forma* changes is specified in the Joint Declaration of the EaP Summit in Riga without mentioning the specific ways to implement such a focus.

The issue of conditionality remains a tough one due to the fact that the EU is factually running out of new effective incentives following the EaP states’ entering AAs and DCFTAs and receiving a visa-free regime. At the same time, the problem of *pro forma* changes and the adoption of the *acquis*, lacking the real-life implementation opportunities, continue to undermine the EU support of reforms in neighbouring countries. Moreover, the resignation of many “Dream Coalition” members in Georgia and the installation of a minority-led government in Moldova brought about additional challenges to EU cooperation with these countries. In the light of the Ukrainian crisis and its geostrategic consequences, as well as the toughening situation in the Middle East, the introduction of additional country-specific tools to support reforms in Moldova and Georgia seems unlikely, as well as the long debated inclusion of the membership perspective.

The EU’s approach in taking a stronger stance as regards South Ossetia and Abkhazia is problematic due to Russia’s recent successes in building up strategic alliances with these territories (Dempsey, 2014). Transnistria also remains profoundly ‘pro-Russian’. In this view, the avenues for EU involvement remain limited. Overall, the fears of regional spillovers of the Ukrainian crisis and



the new ‘Cold War’ represent an important obstacle to a conceptual shift in the EU’s approach towards the leading EaP states (including the disputed territories issue).

***2.3. Scenario 3. Building a “shared European home” by intensifying the EU and EaP countries cooperation with Russia and the Eurasian Union (EEU) (based on the House of Lords (2015); Friedrich Ebert Stiftung Scenario Group EU+East 2030 (2014)***

*Scope of the scenario*

The EU continues active policy towards the EaP states, in particular the implementation of the AA/DCFTAs. Neither of the EaP states received a membership perspective. The EU continues to support Ukraine in post-conflict recovery. Unlike other scenarios, the EU pays specific attention to including Azerbaijan, Armenia and Belarus by targeting human rights challenges, civil society developments and sector cooperation. Special attention is also paid to cross-border cooperation between the EaP states.

Additionally, the EU makes steps to including Russia (and the EEU) into cooperation programmes in a range of fields, such as trade, the system of collective security, education and culture. In this way the Union uses the success story of European Coal and Steel Community as an economic project, promoting security through enhanced interdependencies.

*Feasibility assessment*

As it was mentioned before, the focus on the EaP inclusiveness was already underlined by the EaP participants as a result of the Riga Summit 2015. Furthermore, the ongoing negotiations of new overarching schemes for EU-Belarus and EU-Armenia bilateral cooperation testify to the Union’s intention to further strengthen the links with these countries. The EU’s continuing emphasis on cross-border cooperation can be substantiated by referring to the scope of the newly launched ENI Cross-Border Cooperation funding instrument<sup>13</sup>.

After the annexation of Crimea and Russia’s intervention in Eastern Ukraine in 2014, followed by the tough diplomatic and economic measures, applied by the members of the world community,

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<sup>13</sup> On the EU’s current efforts to enhance the cross-border cooperation in the EaP countries, see: European Commission (2012), *Memo. New EU funding to boost regional cooperation in the Eastern Partnership region*.

the EU's rapprochement with Russia would be perceived as impossible. However, while the sanctions are still operating, promoting relations with Russia starts to be more than ever a subject broader discussed in scholarship and policy recommendations. In its Report issued on the 10th February 2015 the British House of Lords stated that the “Member States have to live with Russia as a neighbor, as a member of the United Nations Security Council, and as a regional power” (House of Lords, 2015, p. 80). The major spheres for reinforcing EU-Russian cooperation, underlined by the House, include collective security, a common economic space, as well as cultural and educational exchanges. Irrespective of the way the Ukrainian crisis will continue influencing the EU-Russian economic and security relations, it is suggested that “an ongoing cooperation with Russia in the fields of education, culture and science “shall not be sacrificed” (House of Lords, 2015, p.82). Finally, the House views a possible long-lasting era of cold relations with Russia as “a failure of imagination and diplomacy” (p. 82). Recognizing the impossibility of rebuilding fully-fledged relations with Russia in short-term perspective, Forsberg and Haukkala (2015) and Gromadzki (2015) emphasize the importance of using cultural cooperation and people-to-people ties as the tools to rebuild trust in the long-term perspective. The need to cooperate with the EEU to avoid the “spheres of influence” issue is underlined by Korosteleva (2015).

Importantly, the trend of considering opportunities for including Russia into ambitious economic and security cooperation is conditioned by a range of factors, such as the economic impact of sanctions, fears of the regional spillovers of the Ukrainian crisis, as well as the need for cooperation on global issues. Moreover, cooperation with Russia can help the EU counter the challenge of an “unstable Neighborhood”, caused by a region's political complexity and the presence of disputed territories. Given the scale and importance of the above issues, as well as the signs of the gradual rapprochement in Western countries' relations with Russia, it is suggested that the EU will try to build new bridges with Russia in the medium- and long-term perspectives.

## **Conclusion**

The analysis of the feasibility of the possible scenarios for the development of the EU-EaP policy shows that the most likely developments include elements of different scenarios.

Firstly, the EU is highly likely to accept the status quo and not introduce significant changes to the EaP design. Given Eurosceptic developments in a range of Member States, the EU is highly unlikely to supplement the AAs with a membership perspective or grant any EaP states candidate or potential candidate status. While the EU will pay specific attention to supporting post-conflict

transformation in Ukraine, country-specific challenges in Moldova and Georgia may prevent the EU from taking a stronger stance to reform-related efforts in these countries. Importantly, the EU is not likely to intensify its involvement into the resolution of territorial disputes in Eastern Europe, merely due to the persistence of other challenges (e.g., the refugee crisis) and Russia's influence in the disputed territories.

While the differentiation of the EaP is to be preserved, the EU will evidently elaborate on the new focuses and approaches to its cooperation with Armenia, Belarus and Azerbaijan. The inclusive approach to the EaP is important for the EU to sustain its role as a key structural foreign policy player in the region, rather than a player, focusing on highly specific influence areas.

As regards Russia, the EU is most likely to adhere to the dual-track approach. Evidently, the Union will not take radical steps to improve relations with Russia in the short-term perspective. Continuing to condemn Russia's actions in Ukraine and applying sanctions, the EU is likely to use educational and cultural cooperation, as well as people-to-people ties as the preconditions for further trade and security cooperation. The creation of common economic and security spaces, including the EaP countries and Russia, can be viewed as a long-term objective of the Union.

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## ANNEX

Table 1 – Summary of scenarios regarding the EaP future

	<b>Scenario 1:</b> <i>Accepting the status quo</i>	<b>Scenario 2:</b> <i>Taking a stronger stance</i>	<b>Scenario 3:</b> <i>Building “a shared European home”</i>
Policy differentiation	Included.		
Adding the membership perspective for the “first circle” of states	Not included	Included. Not likely due to internal disagreements in the EU and geo-strategic fears.	Not included.
Special emphasis on post-conflict recovery of Ukraine	Included.		
The introduction of special measures to support reforms in Georgia and Moldova	Not included.	Included. Not likely due to the countries’ domestic challenges and resources’ scarcity	Not included.
Inclusiveness of Azerbaijan, Armenia and Georgia	Included.	Not included.	Included.
Emphasis on cross-border cooperation between EaP states	Included (reliance on existing instruments)	Not included.	Included (facilitated in a more active manner)
Active stance regarding “frozen conflicts” in the region	Not included	Included. Not likely due to the disputed territories integration arrangements with Russia	Not included
Sustaining diplomatic and economic pressure on Russia in short-term perspective	Included	Included.	Included.
Creating avenues for rapprochement with Russia and the EU in medium- and long-term perspectives	Not included. Likely in light of sanctions’ policy effects and security concerns		Included.

Source: own elaboration, based on the scenarios and their feasibility assessment