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Good neighbours

The Eastern Partnership with the EU's neighbours is about much more than accession to the bloc

Read this article in German and Russian.

Viewing the Eastern Partnership solely as a waiting room for EU accession would be to lessen the prospects for success of this initiative, whose objectives are far broader. The aim is to support the EU's eastern neighbours – Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine – in their political, economic and social transformation, so they can benefit from the EU's achievements and regional cooperation. In turn, the Union benefits from stability and security on its doorstep. The point is to share as much as possible, without membership of the EU institutions, and prevent new dividing lines from forming.

As a part of the European Neighbourhood Policy, the Eastern Partnership (EaP) combines two approaches: bilateral EU support for specific reforms, including offers of close cooperation, and incentives for improved multilateral cooperation within the region, both between the eastern states themselves and with the EU. As such, the EaP finds itself facing two challenges.

First, it needs to maintain the drive towards reform and ensure the effective implementation of reforms that have already been agreed in the neighbouring states – especially Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine, which have concluded ambitious association agreements covering political cooperation and economic integration as well as free trade agreements of increased scope and depth.

Unfortunately, the EU occasionally sends out misleading signals to its neighbours when it comes to the purpose of the partnership.

The EU must work to counteract the impression that a chapter has been closed with the conclusion of these agreements. It also has to resist the pressure to offer another milestone on the path of cooperation as quickly as possible. On the contrary, the conclusion of these agreements has created opportunities for closer cooperation whose potential is still a long

way from being fully exhausted.

Second, the EaP is faced with the challenge of preventing a division between its partners in countries that have concluded association agreements with the EU and those that have not yet signed such an agreement. In addition to Ukraine and Moldova, Georgia in particular is making efforts to demand even more extensive accommodations from the EU on the basis of their associate status.

Mixed messages

Despite repeated calls for a tailored policy for the individual neighbours, the EU should not allow itself to surrender its aspiration of improving multilateral cooperation between its eastern neighbours. This can only succeed if the EaP retains a minimum degree of cohesion and solidarity – and this, in turn, means not continuously distinguishing between associate and non-associate partners in every forum. Long-term stability and security will ultimately be driven by cooperation and partnership throughout the neighbourhood. It is also in the EU's interest to encourage a positive spill-over effect from the countries that are successfully implementing the necessary reforms in connection with their association agreements.

Unfortunately, the EU occasionally sends out misleading signals to its neighbours when it comes to the purpose of the partnership. It is, of course, entirely understandable for the eastern EU member states in particular to want their immediate neighbours to be able to follow the same recipe for success as their own transformation; in other words, the offer of EU accession as an incentive for democratisation and market economy reforms. Nevertheless, in dealing with their partners, and especially when visiting the neighbouring states themselves, the EU and its parliamentary representatives must take care not to encourage unrealistic expectations of cooperation and false hopes when it comes to the prospect of accession.

Fanning the flames of conflict

The EU does not do itself or its partners any favours by adopting an ambivalent attitude to the question of finality in the EaP. If anything, this only serves to fan the flames of conflict, whether conflicting political goals within the EU, internal policy disputes in the neighbouring states or foreign policy tensions with respect to Russia. The EU institutions and the EU member states need to reaffirm the original remit of the Eastern Partnership. It was never intended as a one-dimensional enlargement policy geared towards EU accession. As its name suggests, it

offers a framework for partnership and cooperation between the eastern neighbours and with the EU.

The discussion concerning future cooperation within the EaP must focus on the following questions: How can the EU provide the most effective support for its eastern neighbours when it comes to strengthening democratic institutions, the rule of law, economic modernisation and social progress? What initiatives can be used to expand regional cooperation so it also has a positive impact on security, personal freedom and economic exchange?

New cooperation initiatives must be tied to the effective implementation of agreed reforms in order to reward ambitious reform efforts while retaining incentives for further successful transformation. Cooperation projects should focus on supporting small and medium-sized enterprises, expanding cross-border transport and energy infrastructure, simplifying inter-societal contacts and promoting dialogue and knowledge-sharing in education and research.

If the EU wishes to achieve the objective of its Eastern Partnership – namely, partnership-based cooperation in and with its eastern neighbours – it must continue to take the regional dimension of this policy seriously and take action to strengthen it. Dividing the partners into countries with and without accession agreements is not in the EU's interests. As before, the EU's core message must be that the nations concerned can only achieve long-term political and economic strength and success by cooperating with their neighbours in a spirit of partnership.



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