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What can the EU offer its eastern neighbours?

The EU's Eastern Partnership with six post-Soviet states is threatened by a split. But Brussels should stick to its inclusive framework

On 15 November, the EU's Eastern Partnership (EaP) Summit with six post-Soviet states – Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine – is taking place in Brussels. Finally. The last meeting was more than four years ago. In 2019, there was an anniversary celebration, in 2020 only a short video conference.

There's enough to discuss: Ukraine, Belarus, Nagorno-Karabakh. Experts have been speaking of EaP's 'death' for some years, however. With the formalisation of the so-called 'Trio Initiative' in May 2021 by the states with EU association agreements – Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova – it is at least threatened by a split. That's reason enough to look at the consequences of tailor-made offers to our eastern neighbours.

When the EaP was founded in 2009, its goal was spelled out as creating the necessary conditions for accelerating the EaP states' political association and further economic integration. But what is the initiative primarily about? Peace, economic development, or democracy?

What's the EaP about?

From the perspective of the countries of the Trio Initiative – Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova – the peace dimension certainly plays a decisive role. In view of the territorial conflicts caused by Russia, this is hardly surprising. The EU, however, refuses to expand the EaP's rather rudimentary security dimension as the three states would like to see it. Brussels is aware of how this would be received in Moscow. Summit declarations regularly state that the EaP is 'not directed against anyone' – even though the Kremlin may perceive this differently.

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'multilateral track'. In both, economic integration dominates the agenda. This is hardly surprising, because it also dominates in the EU itself. In the discussions around the premises for the EaP in the time after 2020, the emphasis lies on 'institutions, rule of law, and security' and a stronger commitment to climate change resilience and digital transformation. There continue to be special ambitions for the 'development of resilient and sustainable economies'. At its heart lies a 'regional economic and investment plan' that aims to mobilise up to €17bn.

Who, then, cares about democracy, some might say. But according to Council President Michel, the EaP is also a 'catalyst for democracy, good governance reforms, and the rule of law'. Sometimes this works better, sometimes worse – but on the whole it's rather bad. This is where improvements must and will be made, above all through the greater use of so-called 'conditionality'.

Special treatment for the Trio?

Here we come back to the Trio Initiative. It should serve to underpin and advance European ambitions. The goal of Ukraine's, Georgia's, and Moldova's governments is the same. Even if this is often met with incredulity in Europe: All three want to join the EU. As quickly as possible.

But a trio alone does not solve any problems. And the Trio countries aren't perfect either. Contrary to popular opinion in the three states, there is currently not only no prospect of EU accession because of Russian reservations – even though Brussels may well be considering them – but because the states are still far from fulfilling the relevant criteria. The fact that the EaP is no fast track to join the EU should actually clear. But since different EU states have different agendas and sometimes express themselves in deliberately sibylline terms, they have probably raised unrealistic expectations nevertheless.

In light of recent developments, the EU however seems willing to offer the Trio 'more' – if certain reform criteria are met. Above all, the EU is concerned that the states might otherwise take a less pro-European path again. What that 'more' might be, however, is not yet clear. This is one of the reasons why a formal mention of the Trio is not to be expected in the EaP summit's final declaration.

Nevertheless, the Trio initiative is here to stay – and it's an expression of justified demands. Brussels will have to think about how these demands can be met. But in return, the three states must also deliver. Judicial reforms and the fight against corruption, for example, must be tackled more consistently. The key is to strive for more democracy, rule of law, and economic progress, not least out of self-interest. Then, the ball is in Brussels' court again. And the EU faces another important task: to maintain the balance to such an extent that the EaP can continue to exist as a whole despite different developments in the various partner states.

Why?

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In Belarus today, democracy and the rule of law are foreign words. Consequently, Minsk announced that it would suspend its membership in the EaP in response to the EU sanctions at the end of June. Nevertheless, the EU wants to continue supporting the Belarusian people. An additional €30 million will be made available. An extensive investment plan with grants and loans has also already been agreed in Brussels, but tied to a democratic transition. Burying the inclusive EaP approach and putting Belarusian concerns on the back burner to focus on the Trio would send a fatal signal to the democracy movement.

The case of Armenia

At the same time, Armenia offers perhaps the best reasons to stick to an inclusive EaP structure. Armenia is the only EaP state that is also a member of the Eurasian Economic Union, yet it has signed a partnership agreement with the EU. It has maintained its pragmatic-constructive relations with the EU despite all its Moscow-enforced dependence on Russia. France in particular, with its large Armenian diaspora, is fighting to prevent the gap between Armenia and the Trio states from widening (even further). The calculation is understandable: Armenia could be driven into even greater dependence on Russia.

The renewed escalation of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan gives the EU another important reason to engage with the EaP states eyond the Trio. So far, Brussels has missed the opportunity to act as a serious mediator. More EU engagement is needed here, not less.

For the Azerbaijani autocracy, the following is also true: Despite all the strategic considerations regarding the differentiation and inclusiveness of the Eastern Partnership – and all the good economic arguments for close cooperation, including with Baku – the EU must not completely throw its principles overboard and must constantly review whether its actions reflect these principles. Like in the case of Belarus.

In short, it would be dangerous to focus too much on the Trio states at the expense of the EaP. Incidentally, this also applies to the three states themselves. There is much to criticise about the EaP. For example, that the socially just design of the reform programmes is still less important. But the EU has achieved a lot, not only in terms of increased trade volumes. The EaP is also important because it brings people together. It has led to visa liberalisation, it helps young people broaden their experience, and it promotes regional interconnectivity and relations between partner countries. Especially the latter is more important than ever in times of crisis and should not be jeopardised.

Giving the people of Belarus, Armenia, and Azerbaijan the cold shoulder to create space to focus on the Trio states would be Brussels' biggest mistake. The EaP must stick to its inclusive approach. Flexibility may be the order of the day. Nevertheless, there are good reasons for keeping together what supposedly no longer belongs together.



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