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On the Future of the EU's Approach to Eastern Europe

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Awarding candidacy status to Ukraine and Moldova in June 2022 provided new impetus to the EU's eastern policy but also created new challenges for the Eastern Partnership, which until now has been the most significant tool in the EU's foreign policy on Eastern Europe. This paper addresses the key dilemma of how to navigate the European strategic debate between different EU policy instruments and establish a new balance among the Eastern Partnership, enlargement and the European Political Community.

One of the fundamental questions facing the Swedish Presidency of the Council of the European Union in the coming months is the future setting for the EU's eastern neighbourhood policy. The primary tool of the EU's engagement with Eastern Europe, the Eastern Partnership (EaP), has been widely labelled no longer relevant, or even 'dead', as a consequence of the new phase of the Russian war against Ukraine. Russia's aggression against Ukraine poses many challenges for the future sustainability of the EU's approach, even though Ukraine itself plays an essential role in the EU's thinking about the region.

At the joint EU and EaP foreign ministers' meeting on 12 December 2022¹, it became clear that after months of negotiations both sides had retreated from previously more radical positions to endorse continuation of the EaP and start looking for new opportunities within the existing format for cooperation. This was to avoid the risk that the EaP might be definitively marginalised despite the fact that it had brought practical benefits to individual countries, and above all their citizens, for the past decade.

For the Swedish EU Presidency, it will be challenging to mediate between EaP supporters and some traditionally lukewarm EU member states and partners that would welcome a weakened EaP or even a complete freeze on future EU enlargement. It will be essential to navigate the strategic debate within the EU to accommodate the triangle of the recently launched European Political Community (EPC), the EU's enlargement policy and the EaP. It will be particularly important to identify a clearly defined place, the financial means and the added value of each of these policy instruments while ensuring that they remain compatible and mutually reinforcing.

1 <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/international-ministerial-meetings/2022/12/12/>

Based on past experience, it became obvious at the inaugural summit of the EPC in Prague in October 2022 that the new initiative would be a more geopolitical and normative platform in the field of high-level politics, in contrast to the EaP which is more of a practical toolbox for achieving specific tasks. In the past, for more structured tasks, the EaP multilateral format – with its working groups, platforms and panel discussions as well as regular coordination involving both state and non-state actors at various levels – was the traditional way the EU coped with particular policy problems. At the same time, however, enlargement was hard to imagine for these Eastern European countries, and hence off the table. This only changed for Ukraine and Moldova in June 2022, and partially also for Georgia.

Both the EaP and the EPC have a common and important goal in promoting and stimulating gradual the closer integration of interested parties into EU structures, bringing with it the concrete benefits of cooperation not in the long term, as with enlargement, but over a relatively short period. This is essential for EaP citizens who should see results in order to maintain stable support for future EU integration, which will necessarily require often painful reform and deep structural change. This is particularly significant when taking the current context and challenges facing the EaP into account, especially from Russian aggression. Therefore, for the revival and reinforcement of enlargement, it will be important to establish a combination of more practical and efficient high-level politics, however, without substituting any of the current cooperation formats.

The EaP certainly plays a leading role, especially when it comes to the EU's comprehensive approach to the region based on a strong tradition of multilevel cooperation, as well as a profound need for a single regional policy toolbox. At the same time, it will be necessary to carefully recalibrate to achieve a better balance between the multilateral and bilateral tracks, to make them more relevant, practical and efficient for the more ambitious countries, especially Ukraine and Moldova, while concurrently not excluding Armenia or Azerbaijan. The two tracks, which in the current situation will inevitably deviate more towards the multilateral, will have to undergo further review to better reflect the new reality and the attitudes of relevant actors, including, for example, the Belarusian opposition.

This means that the three associated countries – Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia – will necessarily deepen and intensify their relations with the EU. The trend set by the Czech EU Presidency, by inviting the closest allies to meetings of the Council should be maintained not only because of the importance of overcoming common challenges, but also as a means of socialisation with EU procedures. The association trio's participation in the Gymnich meeting of foreign ministers in Prague was a good example of such efforts. In this context, the European Parliament, in its 2020 resolution on the future of the EaP, has also called for the involvement of the trio in so-called *Comitology* and other internal EU processes.

Belarus, Armenia and Azerbaijan have completely different dynamics, which limits their cooperation only to particular policy areas, such as an energy dialogue in the case of Azerbaijan. It is all the more important that the EU's stance remains strongly normative. This is significant for achieving the EU's traditional goals, which are not only stability and security, but also prosperity, which is essentially linked to good governance and the rule of law. Further democratisation should also remain at the core, and cooperation with civil society and other pro-reform actors a cross-cutting priority. In the Belarusian case, the EU should look for new opportunities to cooperate with the NGO sector and independent media, as well as the political opposition led by Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya.

In any case, it will be necessary to carefully explain the added value of the regional dimension of the EU's eastern policy, as it is currently the most questioned and underestimated element of mutual cooperation. Its value lies in the established institutional framework of the EU institutions and work at multiple levels, from parliaments and local government to civil society, social actors or youth. Multilateral partnerships used to offer a number of opportunities for socialisation, exchange of best practices or identification of new solutions at various levels. From the EU's perspective, it is obvious that the trio has many common or shared challenges that can best be resolved by close mutual cooperation within the region.

On enlargement, it will be essential to review the current state of play as progress has largely stalled over the past decade and received a new impetus only recently. In the past, individual EU member states often preferred to defend the status quo and exert pressure, as in the case of Bulgaria, or Greece and North Macedonia. It is important to recognise the strategic context and energy stimulated by Ukraine and Moldova, which helped to finally unblock the accession talks with Albania and North Macedonia, as well as the candidacy status of Bosnia and Herzegovina – and to motivate Kosovo to make its own application. It will be necessary to maintain objective, process-based and measurable criteria to stimulate the required political will within the EU. The EU's internal reform has also become more urgent since the speech by the German Chancellor, Olaf Scholz, in Prague in September 2022, which made it a precondition for further expansion. This should not, however, block the parallel process of undertaking reform, but rather stimulate the EU to have its own discussion about the future of the European project.

Finally, the EPC should stand to some extent separate from the EaP and enlargement. The EPC should strengthen other policies and offer new resources and opportunities for cooperation to a greater number of countries located around the EU. These resources and opportunities could be to create common positions and new alliances or to hold practically oriented high-level summits on current issues relevant to the European continent. These issues might include economic interdependence, a future green or digital agenda or infrastructural connectivity, which might gain political weight and investment and could be of benefit to all. However, it will be in the most profound interests of Sweden, Czechia and other like-minded countries to ensure that these ideas do not ultimately lead to the creation of a de facto alternative to both, but on the contrary link all initiatives to the final perspective of membership for those interested and well-prepared states.

Recommendations for the Swedish EU Presidency

- Conduct a high-level stocktaking exercise of the EU's eastern policy to clearly determine the added value(s) of each policy tool and framework;
- Continue with the high-level dialogue among EU member states on enlargement and its future review, and on the possibility of so-called *Staged Accession* to the EU, which should be gradual and merit-based, based on the European Commission's assessment, but also flexible and incentivise reform;

- Review the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) and especially NDICI-Global Europe, as well as the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA), which should be more balanced and generous in favour of the new candidate countries on their way to commencing accession talks and stimulate reforms;
- Ensure that the interim assessment of Ukrainian, Moldovan and Georgian progress planned by the European Commission for March 2023 is complex, merit-based and reportable to member states and the associated countries themselves;
- Continue the review of the EU's regional approach to Eastern Europe, including within the EaP multilateral track, which should become more tailor-made, efficient and goal-oriented while remaining inclusive of all relevant parties;
- Strive to achieve progress in the Western Balkans, which would motivate Eastern Europe, even those countries that are currently more sceptical about closer EU integration. New partnerships with third countries, including from Central Asia, might benefit the overall process and open up additional opportunities for exchange.



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