



Study Guide
for
the European Council

**Topic Area: From Partnership to Membership: Reassessing the Eastern Partnership in the
Context of Ongoing EU Accession Processes**

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1. Welcoming Letter

Distinguished Heads of State and Government,

It is with great honour and utmost pleasure that we welcome you to *Rhodes Model Regional Cooperation 2026*, and, in particular, to the **European Council**, an intergovernmental European institution of paramount importance in defining the Union's general agenda and priorities.

First and foremost, keep in mind that *Rhodes MRC* is more than just a simulation; it is an opportunity to step into the role of a high-level policymaker, while forging consensus through meaningful dialogue with peers from diverse backgrounds. Thus, you will not only negotiate but also develop skills in public speaking, diplomacy, and collaboration.

In this exact environment, the European Council's crucial role is to provide the political impetus for the Union's development, and our topic, appears to be both challenging and deeply relevant. The shifting dynamics in Eastern Europe demand a critical reevaluation of how the EU transitions its neighbouring partners into fully integrated Member States.

The success of our sessions relies on your active participation, thoughtful inputs, and respectful engagement with one another, and we are confident that each of you will bring a unique perspective that will contribute to the overall outcome. We are really looking forward to meeting you all, hearing the insights you will bring to our discussions, and having a fruitful, fascinating debate!

Sincerely,

Pinelopi Liakou, *President of the European Council*

Elissavet Kalogiannidou, *Secretary-General of the Council*

2. Introduction to the Institution

The European Council is one of the seven main institutions of the European Union (EU) and functions as the Union's supreme political direction-setting body. Through the Treaty of Maastricht in 1993, it acquired formal legal status, recognised as the body responsible for providing the necessary impetus for the EU's development. Following the entry into force of the Treaty of Lisbon in 2009, the European Council became a fully-fledged EU institution with its own President, exercising its powers under Articles 13 and 15 of the *Treaty on European Union* (TEU) and Articles 235–236 of the *Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union* (TFEU).¹

In its current form, the European Council is composed of the Heads of State or Government of all 27 EU Member States, the President of the European Council, and the President of the European Commission. The High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy might also participate in its work, in the context of the European Council discussing issues concerning the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP).² In the commonly referred to as “EU Summits”, the European leaders' deliberations result in formal *Conclusions*. Conclusions are traditionally adopted by consensus among all participating Heads of State or Government, reflecting the institution's fundamentally intergovernmental character.³

It is important to highlight that the European Council is not a legislative body; it does not negotiate or adopt EU laws, but rather determines the political agenda and sets out the strategic priorities that guide the legislative and executive work of all other EU institutions.⁴

¹ Joanna Apap, “The European Council,” Fact Sheets on the European Union, European Parliament, October 2025, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/factsheets/en/sheet/23/the-european-council>.

² Council of the European Union, “European Council,” Council of the EU, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/european-council/>.

³ Council of the European Union, “European Council Conclusions,” Council of the EU, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/european-council/conclusions/>.

⁴ Council of the European Union, “How the European Council Works,” Council of the EU, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/european-council/how-the-european-council-works/>.

3. Introduction to the Topic Area

The Eastern Partnership (EaP), launched at the Prague Summit in May 2009, was conceived as the EU's primary instrument for fostering stability, democratic reform, and closer cooperation with – initially six, now five– post-Soviet eastern neighbours: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus,⁵ Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine. Built as a specific eastern dimension of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), it offered these countries a privileged but carefully bounded relationship with the Union, deliberately designed without a membership perspective.⁶

For over a decade, this framework of managed proximity served as the cornerstone of EU policy in its eastern neighbourhood; however, Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 shattered its foundational assumptions. In this environment of geopolitical turbulence, Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia applied for EU membership within weeks after the invasion, the European Council granting candidate status to Ukraine and Moldova in June 2022, and to Georgia in December 2023, while formal accession negotiations with the first countries were opened in June 2024.⁷

In this context, what was designed as an instrument of partnership, has become for three of its members, a pathway to membership, while for Armenia and Azerbaijan the Eastern Partnership remains the primary structure governing their relationship with the Union, under conditions that have shifted dramatically.⁸

⁵ In June 2021, Belarus announced the suspension of its participation in the Eastern Partnership, following EU's sanctions to Belarusian regime, in response to the 2020 presidential elections, the subsequent violent crackdown on protests, and later, the regime's support for Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The European Union aims to maintain engagement with the Belarusian civil society and democratic forces.

Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum Steering Committee, "EaP CSF Condemns Unilateral Belarusian Decision to Withdraw from Eastern Partnership," EaP CSF, July 8, 2021, <https://eap-csf.eu/articles/sc-statement-on-the-suspension-of-belarus-participation-in-the-eap/>.

⁶ European Commission, "European Neighbourhood Policy," Directorate-General for Enlargement and Eastern Neighbourhood, https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/european-neighbourhood-policy_en.

⁷ Dimitar Bechev, "Can EU Enlargement Work?," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, June 20, 2024, <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/06/can-eu-enlargement-work?lang=en¢er=europe>.

⁸ Marek Dabrowski, "Towards a New Eastern Enlargement of the EU and Beyond," *Intereconomics: Review of European Economic Policy* 57, no. 4 (2022): 209–212, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10272-022-1064-3>.

3.1. European Neighbourhood Policy

The European Neighbourhood Policy is the EU's overarching foreign policy framework for relations with countries to its east and south.⁹ Launched in 2004,¹⁰ it aimed to prevent the emergence of new dividing lines between an enlarged EU and its neighbours. The ENP offered closer cooperation in exchange for commitments to democratic reform and good governance.¹¹

The ENP's logic rested on the assumption that the EU's regulatory and economic attractiveness could drive reform in neighbouring countries without the need to offer the ultimate incentive of membership. In practice, this assumption proved increasingly difficult to sustain. However, the policy was criticised.¹² A significant revision in 2015 attempted to address these shortcomings by introducing greater differentiation between partners, reinforcing the "more for more" conditionality principle.¹³

3.2. Eastern Partnership

The Eastern Partnership was established as the tailored eastern dimension of the ENP, designed specifically for Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus¹⁴, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine. Initiated through a joint Polish-Swedish proposal and formally launched in Prague in May 2009, it sought to deepen political association and economic integration through a combination of bilateral and multilateral

⁹ There are sixteen ENP partners: Algeria, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Egypt, Georgia, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Republic of Moldova, Morocco, Syria, Palestine, Tunisia, and Ukraine.

European External Action Service, "European Neighbourhood Policy," EEAS, July 29, 2021, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/european-neighbourhood-policy_en.

¹⁰ 01-05-2004, Fifth Enlargement. Ten new countries join the EU: Cyprus, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia. This is the largest enlargement in terms of people and number of countries.

European Union, "EU Enlargement," European Union Official Website, https://european-union.europa.eu/principles-countries-history/eu-enlargement_en.

¹¹ Joanna Placzek and Rudolfs Verdins, "The European Neighbourhood Policy," Fact Sheets on the European Union, European Parliament, April 2025, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/factsheets/en/sheet/170/the-european-neighbourhood-policy>.

¹² European Commission, "Review of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP)," Directorate-General for Enlargement and Eastern Neighbourhood, https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/review-european-neighbourhood-policy-enp_en.

¹³ European Commission, "Review of European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP): Stronger Partnerships, Stronger Neighbourhood," Press Release, November 18, 2015, https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/review-european-neighbourhood-policy-enp-stronger-partnerships-stronger-neighbourhood-2015-11-18_en.

¹⁴ Belarus has suspended its participation since 2021, following the aftermath of the 2020 elections.

engagement.¹⁵ Specifically, on the bilateral track, it offered progressively deeper legal and economic agreements; on the multilateral track, it established a structured forum for political dialogue and regional cooperation on shared challenges.¹⁶

Over its first decade, the Eastern Partnership produced tangible results for its partner countries, deepening political dialogue, supporting institutional reforms, and progressively integrating their economies into the EU's regulatory orbit. However, the events following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 fundamentally altered the framework's political landscape, requiring that the EU adapts and reinforces the EaP mid-term agenda around key policy areas. Consequently, its current priorities for the 2025–2027 term focus on (a) supporting both accession candidates and the reform efforts of remaining partners, (b) strengthening regional security and democratic resilience, (c) advancing economic growth, the green transition, and connectivity, and (d) deepening engagement with civil society and youth.¹⁷

4. Key-Words & Definitions

Accession Process: The formal process through which a country joins the European Union, comprising three broad stages: recognition as an official candidate for membership; formal negotiations involving the adoption of EU law and the implementation of judicial, administrative, and economic reforms necessary to meet the accession criteria; and, once negotiations are completed to the satisfaction of both sides, accession to the Union.¹⁸

Acquis Communautaire: The complete body of common rights and obligations constituting EU law, binding on all Member States and which candidate countries must adopt prior to accession. It encompasses the EU Treaties and their implementing legislation, European Court of Justice case-

¹⁵ European Commission, "Eastern Partnership," Directorate-General for Enlargement and Eastern Neighbourhood, https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/european-neighbourhood-policy/eastern-partnership_en.

¹⁶ EU Neighbours East, "Policy," EU Neighbours East, <https://euneighbourseast.eu/policy/>.

¹⁷ European External Action Service, "Eastern Partnership," EEAS, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/eastern-partnership_en.

¹⁸ European Commission, "Steps towards Joining," Directorate-General for Enlargement and Eastern Neighbourhood, https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enlargement-policy/steps-towards-joining_en.

law, EU Declarations and Resolutions, Common Foreign and Security Policy measures, and international agreements concluded by the Union.¹⁹

Black Sea Synergy: A European Union regional cooperation initiative launched in 2007 as part of the European Neighbourhood Policy, in order to foster dialogue, stability, and development between the EU and countries surrounding the Black Sea. It aims to enhance cooperation in areas like energy, transport, and environment, creating a flexible, project-oriented framework for regional development.²⁰

Candidate Status: The official recognition by the European Council that a country is being considered for membership in the European Union. It is the first formal step in the accession process, triggering negotiations and requiring the country to align its laws with EU standards.²¹

Formal Accession Negotiations: The structured, legal process through which a candidate country negotiates the terms, conditions, and timeline for joining the European Union. These negotiations focus on the adoption and implementation of the EU acquis, aiming that the candidate country fulfils the conditions for membership (Copenhagen Criteria).²²

Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence: Georgia's "Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence", which passed in May 2024, defines civil society and media outlets, receiving funding from abroad, as “organizations pursuing the interests of a foreign power”.²³

Political Deadlock: Political deadlock within the institutions of the European Union refers to a situation in which key EU bodies, primarily the European Commission, European Parliament, and

¹⁹ EUR-Lex, “Acquis,” Summaries of EU Legislation, EUR-Lex, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=legisum:acquis>.

²⁰ European Commission, “Black Sea Synergy: A New Regional Cooperation Initiative,” Communication from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament, COM(2007) 160 final, April 11, 2007, summarised in EUR-Lex Summaries of EU Legislation, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/EN/legal-content/summary/black-sea-synergy.html>.

²¹ Thomson Reuters, “Candidate Country,” *Practical Law UK*, Thomson Reuters, [https://uk.practicallaw.thomsonreuters.com/9-503-0144?transitionType=Default&contextData=\(sc.Default\)](https://uk.practicallaw.thomsonreuters.com/9-503-0144?transitionType=Default&contextData=(sc.Default)).

²² EUR-Lex, “Accession Negotiations,” EUR-Lex Glossary, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/EN/legal-content/glossary/accession-negotiations.html>.

²³ Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe, “Georgia’s Transparency of foreign influence” law incompatible with democratic standards and human rights law: international human rights office ODIHR”, May 30, 2024, ODIHR, <https://odihr.osce.org/odihr/569925>.

Council of the European Union, are unable to reach agreement on policies, legislation, or decisions due to conflicting interests, legal interpretations, or political priorities.²⁴

Visa Liberalisation: The removal of visa requirements for citizens of a specific country, allowing them to travel to the Schengen Area for short stays without a visa. It serves as an important EU instrument for cooperation on migration, security, and justice, fostering mobility and diplomatic ties, yet is conditional on meeting strict benchmarks in these areas and requires ongoing monitoring to address potential migration and security risks.²⁵

5. Legal Framework

Treaty on European Union – Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union

The *Treaty on European Union* (TEU) and the *Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union* (TFEU), together known as the *Lisbon Treaties*, constitute the primary law of the European Union. All EU secondary legislation, institutional decisions, and policy frameworks must be consistent with and authorised by these Treaties.²⁶

The Foundational Framework

Article 2 TEU²⁷ establishes the Union’s foundational values –human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law, and respect for human rights– which form the normative basis of both the accession criteria and the European Neighbourhood Policy.

²⁴Ian Bond, “Taking the Pulse: Has political deadlock in member-states become a strategic problem for the EU?”, Centre for European Reform, February 6, 2025, <https://www.cer.eu/in-the-press/taking-pulse-has-political-deadlock-member-states-become-strategic-problem-eu>.

²⁵ European Commission, “Commission Reports on Partner Countries’ Compliance with Visa-Free Travel Requirements,” Press Release, December 19, 2025, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_25_3061.

²⁶ European Union, *Official Journal of the European Union*, C 202 (June 7, 2016), <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=OJ%3AC%3A2016%3A202%3ATOC>.

²⁷ European Union, “Consolidated Version of the Treaty on European Union, Article 2,” *Official Journal of the European Union*, C 202 (June 7, 2016), <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A12016M002>.

Article 21 TEU²⁸ sets out the principles governing EU external action, to which both the Eastern Partnership and the accession process must conform.

Article 49 TEU²⁹ defines the gateway to membership, on the basis of the European values established in Article 2 TEU.

Common Foreign and Security Policy – Common Security and Defence Policy³⁰

The legal basis of the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) is established in **Title V TEU**, specifically Chapter 1 (General Provisions on External Action) and Chapter 2 (Specific Provisions on CFSP). The CSDP is specifically governed by **Articles 42–47 TEU**, providing the framework for the Union’s defence and security commitments.³¹ The CSDP is further elaborated through the Lisbon Treaty’s **Protocol No. 1** (Role of National Parliaments),³² **Protocol No. 10** (Permanent Structured Cooperation, as described in Article 42 TEU),³³ and **Protocol No. 11** (Article 42 TEU),³⁴ as well as **Declaration 13**³⁵ and **Declaration 14**³⁶ concerning the CSDP and the CFSP accordingly.

²⁸ European Union, “Consolidated Version of the Treaty on European Union, Article 21,” *Official Journal of the European Union*, C 202 (June 7, 2016), <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A12016M021>.

²⁹ European Union, “Consolidated Version of the Treaty on European Union, Article 49,” *Official Journal of the European Union*, C 202 (June 7, 2016), <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A12016M049>.

³⁰ European Parliament, “Common Security and Defence Policy,” Fact Sheets on the European Union, European Parliament, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/factsheets/en/sheet/159/common-security-and-defence-policy>.

³¹ European Union, “Consolidated Version of the Treaty on European Union, Preamble,” *Official Journal of the European Union*, C 202 (June 7, 2016), https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=uriserv%3AOJ.C_.2016.202.01.0001.01.ENG&toc=OJ%3AC%3A2016%3A202%3ATOC#d1e826-13-1.

³² European Union, “Protocol No. 1 on the Role of National Parliaments in the European Union,” *Official Journal of the European Union*, C 202 (June 7, 2016), <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A12016M%2FPRO%2F01>.

³³ European Union, “Protocol No. 10 on Permanent Structured Cooperation Established by Article 42 of the Treaty on European Union,” *Official Journal of the European Union*, C 202 (June 7, 2016), <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A12016M%2FPRO%2F10>.

³⁴ European Union, “Protocol No. 11 on the Schengen Acquis Integrated into the Framework of the European Union,” *Official Journal of the European Union*, C 202 (June 7, 2016), <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A12016M%2FPRO%2F11>.

³⁵ European Union, “Declaration No. 13 on the Common Foreign and Security Policy,” *Official Journal of the European Union*, C 202 (June 7, 2016), <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A12016L%2FAFI%2FDCL%2F13>.

³⁶ European Union, “Declaration No. 14 Concerning the Common Foreign and Security Policy,” *Official Journal of the European Union*, C 202 (June 7, 2016), <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A12016L%2FAFI%2FDCL%2F14>.

European Neighbourhood Policy ³⁷

The ENP's primary legal basis is **Article 8 TEU**,³⁸ which highlights the Union's obligation to develop a special relationship with neighbouring countries, aiming to establish an area of prosperity and good neighbourliness founded on EU values. Its external action dimension is further grounded in **Title V TEU**, in line with CFSP and CSDP.³⁹

The trade components of the ENP are governed primarily by **Article 207 TFEU**,⁴⁰ while **Articles 216–219 TFEU**,⁴¹ establish the legal framework for concluding international agreements, the basis upon which Association Agreements, Partnership and Cooperation Agreements, and Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas with EaP partner countries are negotiated and concluded.

EU Accession Process

The EU accession process is governed by Article 49 TEU, the Copenhagen Criteria established in 1993, and the revised 2020 enlargement methodology introducing a cluster-based approach to negotiations.⁴²

The Copenhagen Criteria

The Accession Criteria (Copenhagen Criteria), established at the June 1993 European Council in Copenhagen and strengthened in 1995 at Madrid, constitute the essential conditions all candidate countries must satisfy to become an EU Member State. They comprise three pillars: the *political*

³⁷ Joanna Placzek and Rudolfs Verdins, "The European Neighbourhood Policy," Fact Sheets on the European Union, European Parliament, April 2025, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/factsheets/en/sheet/170/the-european-neighbourhood-policy>.

³⁸ European Union, "Consolidated Version of the Treaty on European Union, Article 8," *Official Journal of the European Union*, C 202 (June 7, 2016), <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A12016M008>.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ European Union, "Consolidated Version of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, Article 207," *Official Journal of the European Union*, C 202 (June 7, 2016), <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A12016E207>.

⁴¹ European Union, "Consolidated Version of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union," *Official Journal of the European Union*, C 202 (June 7, 2016), <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:12016E/TXT#d1e7289-1-1>.

⁴² Council of the European Union, "How Enlargement Works," Council of the EU, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/how-enlargement-works/>.

criteria; the *economic criteria*;; and the *institutional and legal criteria*.⁴³ Lastly, it is important to highlight that the Criteria are broad and subject to political interpretation.⁴⁴

The Cluster-Based Methodology

In February 2020, the European Commission introduced a revised enlargement methodology, grouping the 35 –later 33 operational– chapters of the *acquis* into six thematic clusters.⁴⁵ In particular, negotiation chapters are now divided in the following thematic clusters: *Cluster 1 (Fundamentals)* –covering the judiciary, fundamental rights, justice, freedom, security, and public procurement– opens first and closes last, indicating the emphasis given to fundamental reforms, with its progress determining the overall pace of negotiations; *Cluster 2 (Internal Market)* covers the four freedoms and competition policy; *Cluster 3 (Competitiveness and Inclusive Growth)* covers industry, science, education, and customs; *Cluster 4 (Green Agenda and Sustainable Connectivity)* covers environment, transport, and energy; *Cluster 5 (Resources, Agriculture and Cohesion)* covers agriculture, fisheries, and regional policy; and *Cluster 6 (External Relations)* covers foreign policy, security, and financial control.⁴⁶

The Steps towards Accession

The formal accession process follows nine steps, as established by the European Commission.⁴⁷ After the country submits a formal application to the Council, the Commission prepares an Opinion on the application, and Member States unanimously decide to grant candidate status. After conditions are met, Member States agree to open accession negotiations upon unanimous decision, whereas the Commission proposes a draft negotiating framework, with negotiations formally beginning once Member States approve it. During negotiations –structured according to clusters and chapters– the candidate country implements EU laws and standards, and, once all areas are finalised, the Commission issues an Opinion on readiness. Subsequently, Member States

⁴³ EUR-Lex, “Accession Criteria (Copenhagen Criteria),” EUR-Lex Glossary, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/EN/legal-content/glossary/accession-criteria-copenhagen-criteria.html>.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Chapters 34 (Institutions) and 35 (Other Issues) remain outside the clusters and are handled separately.

⁴⁶ European Commission, “Chapters of the Acquis,” Directorate-General for Enlargement and Eastern Neighbourhood, https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enlargement-policy/conditions-membership/chapters-acquis_en.

⁴⁷ European Commission, “EU Accession Process Step by Step,” Directorate-General for Enlargement and Eastern Neighbourhood, https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/eu-accession-process-step-step-0_en.

unanimously decide on admission, with the European Parliament's consent required, and, finally, all parties sign and ratify a *Treaty of Accession*.⁴⁸

Bilateral Legal Agreements

The bilateral agreements described below constitute the primary legal instruments through which the Eastern Partnership's objectives are implemented at country level. Each operates on a distinct legal basis and reflects a different degree of integration between the EU and its partner countries. Understanding their hierarchy is essential for grasping both the current state of EU-EaP relations and the options available to the European Council in adapting those relations to the new geopolitical reality.

Partnership and Cooperation Agreements

Partnership and Cooperation Agreements (PCAs) were the first generation of bilateral frameworks concluded between the EU and post-Soviet states in the 1990s. Armenia concluded a Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA) in 2018,⁴⁹ structurally similar to an Association Agreement but excluding the DCFTA component (see below), while Azerbaijan continues to operate under its original PCA,⁵⁰ with negotiations on a new comprehensive framework initiated in 2017 but not yet concluded. These instruments, although important for the overall collaboration with the European Union, represent a significantly more limited degree of legal and economic integration than the full AA/DCFTA framework.⁵¹

Association Agreements

⁴⁸ European Commission, "Steps towards Joining," Directorate-General for Enlargement and Eastern Neighbourhood, https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enlargement-policy/steps-towards-joining_en.

⁴⁹ European Union, "Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement between the European Union and the European Atomic Energy Community and Their Member States, of the One Part, and the Republic of Armenia, of the Other Part," *Official Journal of the European Union*, L 23 (January 26, 2018), [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:22018A0126\(01\)](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:22018A0126(01)).

⁵⁰ European Union, "Partnership and Cooperation Agreement between the European Communities and Their Member States, of the One Part, and Ukraine, of the Other Part," *Official Journal of the European Union*, L 49 (February 19, 1998), <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A01999A0917%2801%29-20091101>.

⁵¹ Jan Rood, "The European Neighbourhood Policy: Perspectives and Challenges," Clingendael Paper, Netherlands Institute of International Relations, December 2009, https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/pdfs/20091200_cesp_paper_rood.pdf.

Association Agreements (AAs) are concluded under Article 217 TFEU⁵² and represent the most ambitious legal instrument available within the ENP framework. They establish a comprehensive framework for political association and economic integration.⁵³ Georgia,⁵⁴ Moldova,⁵⁵ and Ukraine⁵⁶ signed AAs with the EU in 2014, with the agreements entering into provisional force in stages and being fully ratified by 2016.⁵⁷

Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas

Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas (DCFTAs) constitute the trade and regulatory integration pillar of the AAs. Unlike conventional free trade agreements, DCFTAs require broad regulatory alignment with EU standards across product safety, customs, competition law, intellectual property, and public procurement –progressively integrating the partner country’s economy into the EU’s regulatory space without conferring the institutional rights of membership.⁵⁸

⁵² European Union, “Consolidated Version of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, Article 217,” *Official Journal of the European Union*, C 326 (October 26, 2012), <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex%3A12012E217>.

⁵³ European Parliament, Think Tank, “EU Association Agreements with Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia,” European Parliamentary Research Service, 2012, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/LDM_BRI\(2012\)120333](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/LDM_BRI(2012)120333).

⁵⁴ European Union, “Association Agreement between the European Union and Its Member States, of the One Part, and Ukraine, of the Other Part,” *Official Journal of the European Union*, L 161 (May 29, 2014), <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A22014A0830%2802%29>.

⁵⁵ European Union, “Association Agreement between the European Union and the European Atomic Energy Community and Their Member States, of the One Part, and the Republic of Moldova, of the Other Part,” *Official Journal of the European Union*, L 161 (May 29, 2014), <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A22014A0830%2801%29>.

⁵⁶ European Union, “Association Agreement between the European Union and the European Atomic Energy Community and Their Member States, of the One Part, and Georgia, of the Other Part,” *Official Journal of the European Union*, L 261 (August 30, 2014), <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A22014A0529%2801%29>.

⁵⁷ When Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia applied for membership, they did so exclusively on the basis of Article 49 TEU.

⁵⁸ Centre for European Policy Studies, “The EU’s Association Agreements and DCFTAs with Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia: A Comparative Study,” CEPS, <https://www.ceps.eu/ceps-publications/the-eus-association-agreements-and-dcftas-with-ukraine-moldova-and-georgia-a-comparative-study/>.

6. Main Discussion of the Topic

6.1. From Alignment to Divergence: Reassessing Eastern Partnership in a Changing Enlargement Landscape

6.1.1. *The Diverging Paths of Eastern Partnership States*

The Eastern Partnership has been at the core of ongoing debates regarding the EU's foreign policy and the Union's geopolitical role. Debates primarily focus on the effectiveness of the initiative, given the developments in the current international landscape, and its correlation to the promotion of EU's enlargement policy. Despite the requests for greater differentiation and securitisation of the EaP through "security partnerships", the EaP review in March 2020 did not reflect neither the growing needs of the States involved nor the raised challenges.⁵⁹ It is undeniable that the shifts in the geopolitical environment, following Russia's full scale invasion of Ukraine, and the multipolarity among EaP's States, question EaP's relevance.

The EaP's framework does not adequately address the individual needs of partner countries, since it refers to a common, coherent regional framework that fails to adequately correspond to each Country's geopolitical reality.⁶⁰ The six countries that the EaP includes are too different to be treated under the same, uniform policy and to be considered as a single political region. Therefore, the term "Eastern Neighbourhood" does not fully reflect the substance of the regional geopolitical reality nowadays, but it is a term of administrative significance.⁶¹ Despite the infamous ineffectiveness of the framework, the EU's role in promoting democratisation remains crucial, although it –as in every other aspect of the policy– varies across the EaP countries. China's rising influence through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)⁶² and Russia's violation of international norms and resources restrictions challenge EU's capability of completely reinforcing its democratisation

⁵⁹ Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum, "EaP Index 2020–2021: Charting Progress in the Eastern Partnership: Democracy and Good Governance, Policy Convergence and Sustainable Development", (Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum, 2021), <https://eap-csf.eu/content/uploads/2024/07/EaP-Index-2020-2021.pdf>

⁶⁰ "THE RELEVANCE of EaP," n.d., <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.16632880>.

⁶¹ Olga Brusylovska, Sergii Glebov, Iryna Maksymenko, "The Relevance of EaP," Geo-Power (Geo-Power, September 2025), <https://geo-power.eu/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/The-relevance-of-EaP.pdf>.

⁶² Council on Foreign Relations, "China's massive Belt and Road Initiative," CFR, (CFR, February 2023), <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounders/chinas-massive-belt-and-road-initiative>.

agenda. Thus, the diverging progress, trajectories and aims of the countries of the Eastern Partnership, function as a corroboration of the insufficiency of the policy and as a prompt that each of them requires a different individualised approach.

More specifically, the EaP includes countries that, on the one hand, are planning to join the EU such as Ukraine and Moldova. Ukraine is the only country currently aligned with Moldova in terms of geopolitical risks and objectives and they are interested in the EaP programs only as a source of additional funding.⁶³ On the other hand, countries such as Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia, put an effort on balancing their relations and their foreign policy between EU and Russia.⁶⁴ Georgia holds candidate status at step three, but its process has been suspended until 2028, following the European Council Conclusions of 2024 in light of Georgia's government's course of action, which runs counter to the EU's founding values and principles.⁶⁵ Last but not least, the Russian anti-EU propaganda and misinformation in Belarus⁶⁶ and the Union's failure to address regional crises still remain.⁶⁷

Initially, **Ukraine** and **Moldova** are the only EaP countries aligned with the EU. They have been granted candidate status in June 2022 and received green light for the EU accession negotiations in November 2023. They are currently engaged in step six of the EU Accession Process, with negotiations formally opened in June 2024, though the opening of the first cluster remained pending as of early 2026, due to a veto by Hungary.⁶⁸ These countries are turning towards the EU economically and are cooperating with the EU in energy and transport, seeking to strengthen European practical integration and replace post-Soviet ties with Russia.⁶⁹ Ukraine and Moldova, host EU Common Security and Defence Policy Missions, which can have a civilian and/or military

⁶³ Gabriel Gavin, Sebastian Starcevic, Nicholas Vinocur, Martina Sapio, "EU Forges Ahead with Membership for Ukraine and Moldova after Orbán's Exit," Politico, (Politico, April 23, 2026), <https://www.politico.eu/article/eu-forges-ahead-membership-ukraine-moldova-after-orban-exit/>.

⁶⁴ Valeria Stefania Caras, "Eastern Partnership: between linkages with the EU and Russia", *Debater a Europa*, no. 25 (2021): 45–50, https://doi.org/10.14195/1647-6336_25_2.

⁶⁵ Council of the European Union, "Georgia," Council of the EU, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/georgia/>.

⁶⁶ *Belarus suspended its participation in 2021

⁶⁷ European External Action Service, "EU Statement on the Situation in Belarus," EEAS, (EEAS, 2020), https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/council-europe/eu-statement-situation-belarus_en?s=51.

⁶⁸ New Union Post, "Ukraine and Moldova Open All Accession Chapters – but Informally," *The New Union Post*, March 17, 2026, <https://newunionpost.eu/2026/03/17/ukraine-moldova-eu-informal-negotiation/>.

⁶⁹ Denis Cenușă, Rethinking the EU's Eastern Partnership: Three ways to upgrade amid geopolitical competition," GSSC, March 2025, https://www.gssc.lt/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/v03_Cenusa_EaP-paper_A4_EN.pdf.

focus.⁷⁰ The EU Military Assistance Mission in support of Ukraine (EUMAM) has a military focus, and the EU Partnership Mission in the Republic of Moldova (EUPM) has a mandate to combat hybrid warfare. In addition, Ukraine has benefited from €6.1 billion and Moldova from €137 million through the European Peace Facility (EPF) since its creation in March 2021.⁷¹ The two countries have also signed agreements with the EU on security. The war has changed the outlook for EU-Ukraine and EU-Moldova relations. The Russian invasion of Ukraine has caused damages in civilian and energy infrastructure and a refugee crisis. At the same time, Moldova faced hybrid Russian interference in electoral processes in 2024, while Moscow challenged the country by instrumentalising Moldova's dependencies on Russian gas and energy generation in the Transnistria region. Civilians in Ukraine are viewing rather positively the prospect of EU Membership in order to mitigate the negative impact of continued Russian attacks. Public opinion regarding the EU is not so stable in Moldova. Two significant factors undermining the EU's popularity have been anti-European propaganda from Russian sources and the implications of Maia Sandu's government's structural reform failures –primarily concerning the rule of law and anti-corruption policies– impacting EU accession prospects. Ukraine and Moldova are closely aligned with the EU's external action policies, particularly regarding sanctions against Russia. Meanwhile, democratisation efforts have been most successful in these two countries, precisely due to the accession process. Although, democratisation processes in Ukraine and Moldova have been affected by the Russian-centric approach of EU Member States that prioritises security, with the two countries stressing out that the EU should not sacrifice its core values to promote its geopolitical interests.⁷²

Apart from the EU candidate states that are aligned with the EU, there are also States that are found at a strategic crossroads regarding their relation with the EU in the context of the EaP. These are mainly the States of the South Caucasus, that is to say, Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia.

To begin with, **Armenia** has traditionally maintained a balanced foreign policy because of its geographically difficult position. After the second Nagorno-Karabakh War, Armenia pledged to build

⁷⁰ Denis Cenușă, "The Russian War in Eastern Europe and the Emergence of EU CSDP Missions: Three Distinct Cases in Ukraine, Armenia and Moldova," GSSC, July 17, 2023, <https://www.gssc.lt/en/publication/the-russian-war-in-eastern-europe-and-the-emergence-of-eu-csdp-missions-three-distinct-cases-in-ukraine-armenia-and-moldova/>.

⁷¹ European Commission, "The European Peace Facility," *European Commission*, https://fpi.ec.europa.eu/what-we-do/european-peace-facility_en.

⁷² Ibid.

closer ties with the EU and limit the influence of Russia,⁷³ Dialogue on visa liberalisation was launched in September 2024, making Armenia the fourth EaP country, after Moldova, Ukraine, and Georgia, to benefit from the free movement of people within the Schengen region.⁷⁴ Simultaneously, Armenia reduced cooperation with the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) due to Russia's non-intervention for deterrence purposes during Azerbaijani military actions to recapture Karabakh in late 2023. Furthermore, Armenian authorities have advocated for EU military aid through the EPF, worth €10 million, to increase crisis management capacity. This was preceded by the establishment of the EU Mission in Armenia (EUMA) in February 2023.⁷⁵ Although Armenia is ready to deepen its relations with the EU beyond the CEPA, it is in no situation capable of reducing its economic dependence on Russia, as trade volume with Russia constitutes 35% of the total export, and has a prospect of growing. Armenia has made a major reorientation in the security sphere towards the EU, but must now establish a bridge with the EU in the economic dimension of the partnership.⁷⁶

Azerbaijan is the only EaP country that maintains strategic relations with both the EU and Russia. With Russia's support in the Nagorno-Karabakh War, Azerbaijani authorities could take control of the region. Following this, the 43-point Declaration of Strategic Cooperation signed between Azerbaijan and Russia in February 2022 confirms the deepening of relations.⁷⁷ The two countries agree to pursue an independent foreign policy while coordinating their actions regarding security and stability in the South Caucasus, including deepening military cooperation.⁷⁸ In the meantime, Azerbaijan has deepened its energy cooperation with the EU, in order to avoid deeper political

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ European Commission, "Commission presents Action Plan on Visa Liberalisation with Armenia," *European Commission- Migration and Home Affairs*, https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/news/commission-presents-action-plan-visa-liberalisation-armenia-2025-11-05_en.

⁷⁵ Onnik James Krikorian, "European Mission in Armenia Completes Its First Year amid Regional Tensions," *Jamestown Foundation*, March 11, 2024, <https://jamestown.org/european-mission-in-armenia-completes-its-first-year-amid-regional-tensions/>.

⁷⁶ Council of the European Union, "European Peace Facility: Council Adopts the First Ever Assistance Measure in Support of the Armenian Armed Forces," Press Release, July 24, 2024, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2024/07/22/european-peace-facility-council-adopts-the-first-ever-assistance-measure-in-support-of-the-armenian-armed-forces/>.

⁷⁷ President of the Republic of Azerbaijan - Ilham Aliyev, "Declaration on allied interaction between the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Russian Federation," President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, February 22, 2022, <https://president.az/en/articles/view/55498>.

⁷⁸ Emin Aliyev, "Aliyev resolved Karabakh dispute within mere 24 hours", *Daily Sabah*, September 21, 2023, <https://www.dailysabah.com/turkiye/turkiye-expands-zero-waste-practices-in-transport-sector/news>.

integration, becoming a major natural gas supplier through the Southern Gas Corridor when the EU began to phase out Russian gas.⁷⁹ Apart from the energy sector, Azerbaijan has very limited ties with the EU, which is very cautious about criticising continued serious human rights violations in Azerbaijan. Moreover, the EUMA is perceived negatively by Baku, which accused it of being used for future NATO involvement.⁸⁰ Moreover, there is a lack of trust between Azerbaijan and the EU, especially France, regarding the delimitation and demarcation of borders with Armenia and, especially, the case of New Caledonia.⁸¹ Azerbaijan's behaviour reveals selective cooperation with the EU and more strategic coordination with Russia in the South Caucasus. Azerbaijan has ignored EU democratisation efforts.

Relations between the EU and **Georgia** have deteriorated sharply since 2022. The EU has failed to determine a consistent policy towards a country that has systematically reevaluated its stance towards the Union.⁸² The main issue is the divergent approaches of the EU's institutions on the one hand and of EU Member States, on the other. The European Commission's relationship with the ruling Georgian Dream party initially appeared stable.⁸³ Georgia's Association Agreement entered into force in 2016, and in 2017 the country enshrined EU and NATO integration in its Constitution. Since EU membership is considered positively by most of the country's population, the government proceeded to an application for an EU Membership⁸⁴, a move of rather symbolic meaning, even though, at the start, it seemed like a strategic decision with long-lasting perspectives. Georgia's announcement, in early 2022, that it would neither join Western economic sanctions against Russia nor introduce its own, caused a breach of relations between the EU and Georgia.⁸⁵ The Georgian

⁷⁹ Trans Adriatic Pipeline, "The Southern Gas Corridor," TAP, <https://www.tap-ag.com/about-tap/the-big-picture/the-southern-gas-corridor>.

⁸⁰ European External Action Service, "About European Mission in Armenia," EEAS, January 7, 2026, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/euma/about-european-union-mission-armenia_en?s=410283.

⁸¹ Gabriel Gavin, Océane Herrero, Victor Goury-Laffont, "France Accuses Azerbaijan of Fomenting Deadly Riot in Overseas Territory New Caledonia," *Politico*, May 2024, <https://www.politico.eu/article/france-accuse-azerbaijan-fomenting-deadly-riot-overseas-territory-new-caledonia/>.

⁸² Tamar Shvelidze, "Brussels' Deadlock: EU Diplomats on Georgia's Uncertain Future," *OC Media*, November 20, 2025, <https://oc-media.org/brussels-deadlock-eu-diplomats-on-georgias-uncertain-future/>.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Italian Institute for International Political Studies, "The Road to the European Union-Georgia 'Deadlock,'" *ISPI*, December 22, 2025, <https://www.ispionline.it/en/publication/the-road-to-the-european-union-georgia-deadlock-225197>.

⁸⁵ Katie Shoshiashvili, "Georgia's Ambivalence Towards Sanctions on Russia," *Euractiv*, February 13, 2025, <https://www.euractiv.com/news/georgias-ambivalence-towards-sanctions-on-russia/>.

Government pleaded “reasons of national interest” as an excuse, but the reality is quite the opposite. The decision appears consistent with Georgia’s policy towards Russia, since the latter actively affects the country’s economic and political landscape.⁸⁶ Since Georgia plays a key role in the circumvention of sanctioned goods, the EU urged the Georgian Government to take additional measures in order to prevent Russia from bypassing sanctions.⁸⁷ Accession talks were suspended, by the Georgian Government until 2028, after the 2024 disputed elections, and the prior reintroduction of the “foreign influence” law.⁸⁸ However, the European Parliament has passed, since 2022, seven resolutions expressing alarm over democratic regression in Georgia. A 2025 resolution labelled the 2024 elections “fraudulent”, characterised the parliament as “illegitimate”, and associated Georgian Dream with Russia’s geopolitical agenda.⁸⁹ Member States exhibited the greatest divergence in their approach to Georgia.⁹⁰ This fragmentation among Member States limited the EU’s capacity to deliver a unified response.

Belarus stands as an exception, in the face of Russian aggression against Ukraine, it has moved closer to Russia and has *withdrawn from the EaP in 2021*. The EU has imposed sanctions on Belarusian leaders as well as on various companies and products.⁹¹ Relations with the EU worsened in 2020 following the presidential elections, which the EU described as “fraudulent”.⁹² The Belarusian authorities have carried out various actions that have increased tensions with the neighbouring EU Member States.⁹³ Belarus uses the threat of force against the EU and NATO to show Russian military potential, particularly nuclear potential.⁹⁴ At present, the main obstacle in

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Kornely Kakachia, “Georgian-Russian Relations: A Shift from Influence to Ideological Convergence,” *Georgian Institute of Politics*, February 27, 2025, <https://gip.ge/publication-post/georgian-russian-relations-a-shift-from-influence-to-ideological-convergence/>.

⁸⁸ Civil Georgia, “Daily Cable,” *Civil Georgia*, May 14, 2024, <https://civil.ge/archives/606294>.

⁸⁹ Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe, “Urgent Opinion on the Law of Georgia on Transparency of Foreign Influence,” May 30, 2024, <https://cdn.osce.org/sites/default/files/f/documents/b/d/569922.pdf>.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Council of the European Union, “Sanctions against Belarus,” Council of the EU, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/sanctions-against-belarus/>.

⁹² AP News, “Russia and Belarus: Lukashenko, Putin, Nuclear Oreshnik, Ukraine,” *AP News*, December 10, 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/russia-belarus-lukashenko-putin-nuclear-oreshnik-ukraine-0cb678c1d0144fb6b372693a4ec6af4d>.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Luke Harding, “Russia Claims to Have Moved Nuclear-capable Missile System into Belarus,” *The Guardian*, 30 December, 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/dec/30/russia-claims-moved-nuclear-capable-missile-system-belarus>.

dialogue with the EU is Belarus's involvement in Russian aggression against Ukraine. However, the EU still has one of the few tools to promote cooperation with non-state actors, such as civil society organisations, and EaP could serve as a ground for this kind of collaboration.⁹⁵

6.1.2. EU Foreign Policy Deficiencies

The EU's evolving approach to its Eastern Neighbourhood has evoked a major reevaluation of the Eastern Partnership.⁹⁶ The continuing introduction of overlapping initiatives has damaged the EU's credibility in the region. The launch of the Black Sea Synergy in 2007, followed by the EaP just two years later, created confusion about the EU's strategic priorities.⁹⁷ Critics argue that the EaP was never considered as effective and useful and lacked credibility from the outset.⁹⁸ The multiplicity of the EU's institutional architecture with a variety of parallel frameworks, without any specific coordination, generates redundancy rather than additional action.⁹⁹ Decision Making remains fractured,¹⁰⁰ the unanimity required for CFSP decisions frequently produces outcomes with a low common denominator or incapacity on controversial issues.

6.2. Eastern Partnership at a Strategic Crossroad

6.2.1. Neighbourhood Policy as a Geopolitical Instrument

Evolving geopolitical dynamics have exposed important restrictions in its design and implementation, raising questions about its effectiveness as a geopolitical instrument. One of the main criticisms is that the policy, though Eurocentric, still remains insufficiently adapted to today's multipolar environment.¹⁰¹ While it once functioned effectively in a relatively stable regional context, partner countries now operate within a far more competitive geopolitical space. States in

⁹⁵ EEAS Press Team, "Belarus: The Sixth Meeting of the Consultative Group with Democratic Forces and Civil Society Held in Brussels," EEAS, March 6, 2026, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/belarus-sixth-meeting-consultative-group-democratic-forces-and-civil-society-held-brussels_en.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Marius Ghincea et Laurențiu Pleșca, "Enlargement Reimagined: The Shifting Logics behind the EU's Expansion," *The Loop* (ECPR), July 15, 2025, <https://theloop.ecpr.eu/enlargement-reimagined-the-shifting-logics-behind-the-eus-expansion/>.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Vano Chkhikvadze, "Eastern Partnership – Still Relevant, or Redundant?," *GEOpolitics*, May 2024, <https://politicsgeo.com/eastern-partnership-still-relevant-or-redundant/>.

¹⁰⁰ Joana Mendes, "Taking on the Structural Weakness of EU Law's General Principles," *European Law Open* 2, no. 4 (2023): 693–96. <https://doi.org/10.1017/elo.2024.4>.

¹⁰¹ Peter Kratochvíl, "Evaluating the Multilateral Framework of the Eastern Partnership," *ÚMV*, January 2010, <https://www.iir.cz/evaluating-the-multilateral-framework-of-the-eastern-partnership>.

the EU's Eastern Neighbourhood increasingly pursue diversified foreign policies, engaging not only with the EU but also with actors such as Russia, Turkey, and China.¹⁰² As a result, they often prefer flexible, tailored partnerships over standardised EU frameworks.

The EaP has also contributed to geopolitical tensions, particularly with Russia. The EU has been viewed as an entity “pressuring” candidate countries to adhere to its demands to join the Union. This perception has placed partner countries in a difficult position, seemingly forcing them to choose between closer integration with the EU and maintaining ties with Russia.¹⁰³

A key weakness of the ENP lies in its original lack of a strong geopolitical and security dimension.¹⁰⁴ This shortcoming became particularly evident following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, which prompted the EU to adopt more overtly geopolitical measures, such as granting candidate status to certain partner countries.¹⁰⁵ Despite this shift, the broader neighbourhood framework has not been sufficiently restructured to reflect new security priorities or enlargement dynamics.

At the same time, other global actors are expanding their presence in the region. China, for instance, has increased its engagement through infrastructure investments and trade initiatives under the Belt and Road Initiative.¹⁰⁶ Unlike the EU, China tends to avoid political conditionality, offering financial support without linking it to governance reforms.¹⁰⁷ This approach can be attractive to

¹⁰² GeoPower, “Geo-Power-EU Research Report: Sentiment Analysis of the EU, U.S., Russia, China and Turkey in Social Media of the Western Balkans and three EaP Countries,” *GeoPower*, February 20, 2026, <https://geopower.eu/news/research-report-sentiment-analysis-of-the-eu-u-s-russia-china-and-turkey-in-social-media-of-the-western-balkans-and-three-eap-countries/>.

¹⁰³ Ozlem Demirtas-Bagdonas, Thomas S. Eder, Arzu Geybullu, Richard Giragosian, Julia Lisiecka, Michal Makocki, Anaïs Marin, et al, “Third Powers in Europe's East,” *Chaillot Papers*, EU Institute for Security Studies, 2018, <https://doi.org/10.2815/380336>.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Iveri Kekenadze Gustafsson, “EU enlargement is often deeply political - as Ukraine and Montenegro show”, *The Conversation*, April 28, 2026, <https://theconversation.com/eu-enlargement-is-often-deeply-political-as-ukraine-and-montenegro-show-257055>.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Frank Bickenbach, Dirk Dohse, Rolf J. Langhammer, Wan-Hsin Liu, “EU Concerns about Chinese Subsidies: What the Evidence Suggests”, *Intereconomics*, 59 no. 4 (2024): 214–221, <https://www.intereconomics.eu/contents/year/2024/number/4/article/eu-concerns-about-chinese-subsidies-what-the-evidence-suggests.html>.

partner countries facing economic vulnerabilities, even if it raises concerns about long-term dependency and political leverage.¹⁰⁸

In this context, the EU's Neighbourhood Policy must evolve if it is to function effectively as a geopolitical instrument. This requires moving beyond rigid, one-size-fits-all frameworks and adopting a more flexible, differentiated approach that reflects the diverse priorities of partner countries. It also necessitates a stronger integration of security considerations, alongside economic and institutional cooperation.

6.2.2. The Question of Security

The EaP's security guarantees are considered fragile and uncertain. An increasingly imperialistic Russian Federation is threatening and putting pressure on the EU's and NATO's strategic role regarding regional security. Russia expanded its military presence and changed the regional security context. This includes an enhanced military presence on the Black Sea, the Sea of Azov, and, more recently, Belarus.¹⁰⁹ The EU failed not only to respond to these challenges sufficiently but also to tackle multiple hybrid threats adequately: widespread disinformation and the weaponisation of energy, migrants, and coronavirus vaccines, undermining the region's stability and creating uncertainty and insecurity.¹¹⁰

The EU was a passive "spectator" in the Nagorno-Karabakh War while Russia brokered the ceasefire,¹¹¹ and now plays a central role in peace talks. Taken together, these conflicts allow Russia to project power across the region.

The less effective the EU is regarding security, the more vulnerable the Eastern Partnership countries will be to external pressure. The most common problem is the EaP's failure to address hard security issues. While it has engaged in civil society, trade, and governance, it has avoided the issue of creating a regional security structure, a shortcoming that has become critical in the light of

¹⁰⁸ Ionela Maria Ciolan, Amanda Paul, "Lessons from the Eastern Partnership: Looking Back to Move Forward," *European Policy Centre*, December 2021, <https://www.epc.eu/publication/Lessons-from-the-Eastern-Partnership-Looking-back-to-move-forward-44d130/>.

¹⁰⁹ Luke Coffey, "Russian dominance in the Black Sea: The sea of Azov," *Middle East Institute*, September 25, 2020, <https://mei.edu/ar/publication/russian-dominance-black-sea-sea-azov/>.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Alexander Baunov, "Why Russia is Biding Its Time on Nagorno-Karabakh," *Carnegie Moscow Center*, <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/82933>.

Russian aggression. Security threats remain at the forefront but external actors, foremost the USA, play a crucial role in shaping the security landscape. Currently, NATO remains the only real security provider in the region.¹¹² Any viable future framework must integrate security cooperation more explicitly, not as a parallel factor but as a core pillar. Thus, it has failed to provide meaningful security guarantees to its eastern partners.

6.2.3. The Question of Integration

The Eastern Partnership was designed to offer integration without membership –a structured convergence with EU values and markets without committing either side to the full obligations of accession. However, that model has been overtaken by events, and with three EaP members being now formally on the accession track, the EU must simultaneously manage their path towards membership while maintaining credible integration for those who remain outside it. These are two fundamentally different challenges, and the existing policy architecture was built for neither.¹¹³

For **Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia**, the integration challenge is defined less by political will than by the gap between aspiration and institutional reality.¹¹⁴ The accession process presupposes administrative capacity, legislative alignment, and rule of law consolidation that takes years to build under stable conditions –Ukraine is pursuing this while fighting a war, Moldova while managing acute economic fragility, and Georgia while its government has moved in a direction the European Council formally identified as incompatible with the EU path. The process is further complicated by the formal linkage of Ukraine’s and Moldova’s negotiations, meaning political blockages affecting one can stall the other regardless of its own reform record.¹¹⁵ The central question for these three countries is, therefore, not whether they should join, but whether the current environment is adequate to get them there, and at what pace conditionality can be upheld without becoming a

¹¹² Kakha Gogolashvili, “The New Reality in Europe: Time to Reshape the Eastern Partnership,” *Stockholm Centre for Eastern European Studies*, November 21, 2022, <https://www.ui.se/globalassets/ui.se-eng/publications/sceeus/the-new-reality-in-europe-time-to-reshape-the-eastern-partnership.pdf>.

¹¹³ Marek Dabrowski, “Towards a New Eastern Enlargement of the EU and Beyond,” *Intereconomics: Review of European Economic Policy* 57, no. 4 (2022): 209–212, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10272-022-1064-3>.

¹¹⁴ Branislav Stanicek, Jakub Przetacznik, and Antonio Albaladejo, “Enlargement Policy: Reforms and Challenges Ahead,” December 2023, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2023/757575/EPRS_BRI\(2023\)757575_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2023/757575/EPRS_BRI(2023)757575_EN.pdf).

¹¹⁵ European Council on Foreign Relations, “Accelerate the Accessions: Why Faster Is Better in EU Enlargement Policy,” ECFR, <https://ecfr.eu/publication/accelerate-the-accessions-why-faster-is-better-in-eu-enlargement-policy/>.

pretext for indefinite deferral.¹¹⁶ For **Armenia** and **Azerbaijan**, the integration question takes an entirely different form. Neither holds candidate status, yet both remain formally within the EaP framework, and the EU has clear strategic interests in maintaining substantive engagement with both –particularly with Armenia.¹¹⁷ In this context, as EU attention shifts primarily towards the accession process, the risk is that the partnership framework for non-candidate states becomes progressively hollowed out, credible in name but insufficient in substance.¹¹⁸

According to relevant political research and analysis, three structural tensions underlie both challenges. The most fundamental one concerns the EU's own institutional readiness. The Union's decision-making architecture, i.e. including unanimity requirements, one Commissioner per Member State, and finite budgetary resources, was not designed for a membership of thirty or more states, some of which would be among the largest recipients of cohesion and agricultural funds in the Union's history. Enlargement on this scale is not merely an external policy choice; it is a constitutional challenge requiring the EU to reform itself in parallel with preparing candidate countries.¹¹⁹ Closely related is the tension between democratic conditionality and geopolitical urgency.¹²⁰ Both of these tensions are compounded by a third, most specific to this topic: the growing overlap and potential redundancy between the Eastern Partnership framework and the accession process itself. For countries on the accession track, the EaP's instruments increasingly duplicate the accession framework's own tools; for those outside it, the EaP risks becoming a second-tier instrument, associated with the absence of a membership perspective rather than a genuinely ambitious alternative form of integration.¹²¹

¹¹⁶ Pascal Sciarini, "EU Accession Criteria and Procedures: Up for the Challenge?," *Swiss Journal of European Studies* 4 (2024), <https://eizpublishing.ch/artikel/euz/04-2024/eu-accession-criteria-and-procedures-up-for-the-challenge/>.

¹¹⁷ European Parliament, "Three Eastern Partnership Neighbours in the South Caucasus," Fact Sheets on the European Union, European Parliament, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/factsheets/en/sheet/172/three-eastern-partnership-neighbours-in-the-south-caucasus>.

¹¹⁸ Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, "The EU and the South Caucasus: Geoeconomics at Play," Carnegie Europe, October 2024, <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/10/the-eu-and-the-south-caucasus-geoeconomics-at-play?center=europe>.

¹¹⁹ Marek Dabrowski, "The European Union's Geopolitical Ambitions: Enlargement, Neighbourhood and Necessary Institutional Changes," *Intereconomics: Review of European Economic Policy* 59, no. 6 (2024): 327–331, <https://doi.org/10.2478/ie-2024-0064>.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Ibid

Within this geopolitical environment and with an eye on the EU's internal structure and goals, what this Council must ultimately determine is whether the EU's current integration offer –to candidates and partners alike– is commensurate with the strategic moment. The question of integration is also a question of credibility: whether the Union can translate its political commitments into a coherent, adequately resourced framework that delivers real outcomes.¹²²

7. Conclusion

Since its launch in 2009, the Eastern Partnership has become increasingly misaligned with the evolving, diverging political, institutional, and geopolitical realities of the EU's Eastern Neighbourhood. The Framework lacks differentiation and fails to respond adequately to the region's growing security challenges, while limited strategic engagement has damaged trust among States. And while the EaP seems to be a priority for Russia, the same cannot be said for the EU. In this context, the Union should forge or reimagine the EaP under the new circumstances in order to sustain a credible and coherent policy and actively play the role of a geopolitical core actor. At the same time, the Union should stress the importance of stabilising the Eastern Neighbourhood, initiating a security and defence dialogue with the EaP states and improving its communication of EaP achievements and benefits to partner countries. Ultimately, the Partnership's prospects and effectiveness should be reconsidered and reevaluated, taking into consideration that the EaP has gradually become a crossroad of geopolitical and geo-economic competition.

8. Points to be Addressed

The following questions draw from three key thematic pillars of our Agenda and must be viewed as a starting point for your practical debate. Based on the Study Guide and current developments, you

¹²² Dimitar Bechev, "Can EU Enlargement Work?," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, June 20, 2024, <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/06/can-eu-enlargement-work?lang=en¢er=europe>.

are expected to form your own substantive points that shall dominate the discussions of our sessions on specific matters of different nature that should be addressed.

Accession: Given the diverging paths of Eastern Partnership States regarding accession to the European Union, how should the European Council exercise its role in ensuring that the accession process remains credible, predictable, and resistant in order to sustain beneficial financial and regulatory convergence, without creating fragmentation or misalignment with the EU's strategic objectives?

Security: Considering that the Eastern Partnership was structurally designed without a security dimension, yet current geopolitical evolutions have brought the question of security into the spotlight, what strategic direction should the European Council provide to define the EU's security role in the eastern neighbourhood?

Strategic Influence and Global Influence: What measures should the European Council take in response to the increasing impact of third parties like China in the Eastern Neighborhood region to prevent any dependency issues that might affect their potential membership into the EU through investments in vital infrastructures and technologies?

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