



STRATEGIC CONCEPT 2026

Eastern Partnership 2.0

A new architecture for the EU's Eastern policy

Mieroszewski
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Ewa Polak

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AUTHOR	Ewa Polak
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Eastern Partnership 2.0

The Eastern Partnership enters its seventeenth year in 2026 at the confluence of several processes of fundamental importance for its future: the trajectories of the six partner states – Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine – are diverging today more than ever – ranging from the opening of successive accession negotiation clusters, through new partnership frameworks, to the effective freezing of cooperation. Russia's war against Ukraine continues to define the security conditions of the entire continent, while the erosion of the existing international order and the growing presence of China, Turkey and the Gulf states in the region are forcing the EU to revise its own approach to Eastern policy – an approach whose financial instruments will be defined in the ongoing negotiations, now entering a decisive phase, on the EU's Multiannual Financial Framework for 2028–2034.

In response to this change, Eastern Partnership 2.0 (EaP 2.0) sets itself the goal of durably anchoring the eastern partners in the European normative and institutional order, while strengthening their resilience to external threats – to the benefit of both the partner countries and the security and prosperity of the core Union. The initiative goes beyond the existing framework of the Eastern Partnership and

proposes a differentiated format of cooperation based on four pillars:

1. security and resilience,
2. economic integration and connectivity,
3. institutional transformation and the rule of law,
4. community of values, identity and strategic communication.

EaP 2.0 assumes a flexible, modular architecture that takes into account two dimensions of differentiation: the scope of cooperation, expressed in the four pillars, and the variation among the partners themselves, captured in four categories of participation – ranging from deepened sectoral cooperation to a full path of European integration for states with such a prospect. The initiative also allows for the possibility of inviting selected Central Asian states to participate in selected cooperation modules, in convergence areas such as diversification of transport and energy links and reducing excessive external dependencies.

Implementing EaP 2.0 requires the engagement of a broad coalition of Member States particularly interested in strengthening the Eastern dimension of EU policy – including Poland, the Nordic and Baltic states, Slovakia, Czechia and Romania. Poland, as co-author of



Eastern Partnership Summit in Warsaw, 2011.

Source: Ministry of the Presidency, Government of Spain, via Wikimedia Commons.

the original concept of the Eastern Partnership from 2008–2009 and one of the co-architects of the EU’s Eastern policy, bringing to this role its own experience of systemic transformation and integration with the EU, plays a particularly active role in this coalition. This is reflected, among other things, in the proposal to locate a newly established analytical and networking institution: the European Centre for the Eastern Partnership (ECEAP), in Warsaw. This role takes the form of an initiative pursued within a broader coalition, in which both the institutional architecture of EaP 2.0 and the priorities of its

individual pillars remain subject to joint shaping by the participating Member States and the Eastern partner countries.

The concept presented in the remainder of this document, together with recommendations for its implementation in the ongoing budget negotiations, is intended to enable the European Union to meet the challenges described above and to build with its Eastern neighbours a lasting partnership, based on mutual benefit and capable of strengthening the security of the whole continent.



Diagnosis: Why Do We Need EaP 2.0?

1.1 Assessment of the Eastern Partnership to date

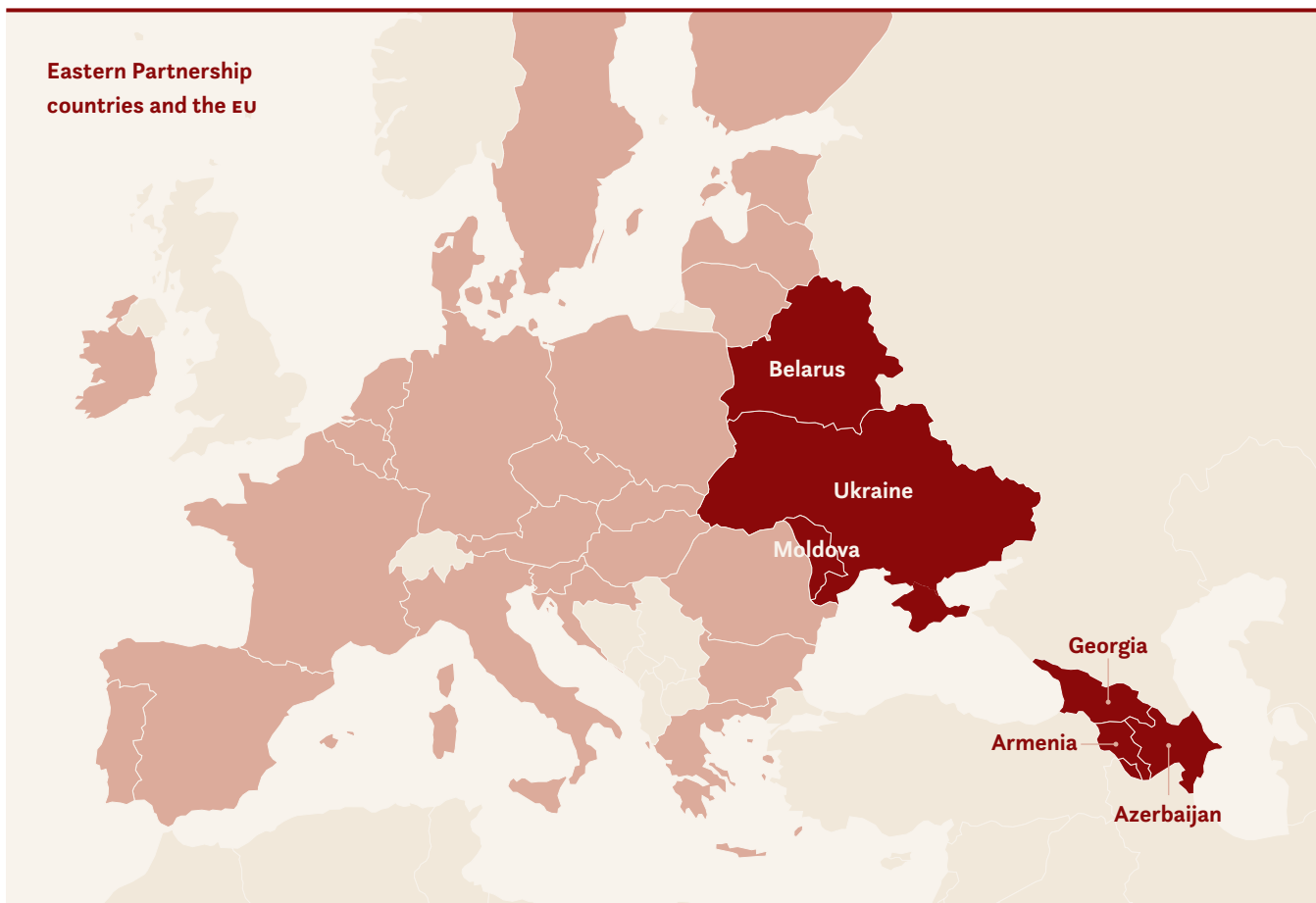
The Eastern Partnership, launched by Poland and Sweden in 2009, was a breakthrough in EU Eastern policy that created a new framework of cooperation between the European Union and six states of the eastern neighbourhood: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus*, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. This initiative, born of the conviction that the stability, prosperity and security of the European Union are inseparably linked to the situation in its immediate neighbourhood, combined from the outset a pragmatic dimension – building concrete mechanisms of sectoral cooperation – with a normative dimension, based on the promotion of democratic values, the rule of law, human rights and a market economy. In this sense, the Eastern Partnership was never merely a technical instrument of neighbourhood policy, but constituted a project of political and civilisational significance, inscribed in a broader debate on the borders, identity and future character of Europe.

Over more than a decade and a half, the initiative delivered tangible achievements across several dimensions, defining the Eastern dimension of

European policy and contributing to the genuine rapprochement of the countries of the region at the political, legal and social levels. The most tangible results include: the conclusion and implementation of Association Agreements (AA) together with Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas (DCFTA), the liberalisation of the visa regime, the intensification of people-to-people contacts through educational, scientific and cultural programmes, and the gradual harmonisation of partner states' legislation with the EU acquis in numerous sectors – from energy and transport, through environmental protection, to public administration standards. The Eastern Partnership also played a significant role in building the institutional resilience of the countries of the region, supporting anti-corruption reforms, and strengthening civil society as a lasting element of the political landscape of these countries.

At the same time, over the course of the Eastern Partnership's functioning, clear differences emerged in the horizon of aspirations of the individual states covered by the programme in

* On 28 June 2021, Belarus unilaterally suspended its participation in the Eastern Partnership. Pursuant to the Council conclusions of February 2024 concerning this country, the Union maintains cooperation with Belarusian civil society, working across six key sectors: civil society, human rights, independent media, education, culture, and small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in exile.



their relations with the European Union. From the outset, the initiative was based on the principle of differentiation and the “more for more” approach*, which – although intended to take account of the specificity and pace of reforms in individual countries – in practice led to a deep stratification within the Partnership itself.

Differentiated trajectories of the partners

Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia, sometimes referred to as the “Association Trio”, consistently pursued the closest possible integration with the European Union. Association Agreements, together with a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA), were provisionally implemented from September 2014 (Georgia, Moldova) and January 2016 (Ukraine), and entered fully

into force in subsequent years following ratification by all EU Member States. The agreements covered the approximation of national law to the EU acquis in the areas of regulation, sanitary standards, competition and public procurement. In October 2025, a revision of the EU–Ukraine DCFTA entered into force, replacing the expired Autonomous Trade Measures (ATM). Moldovan citizens gained visa-free travel in April 2014, followed by Georgian citizens in March 2017 and Ukrainian citizens in June 2017 – under Visa Liberalisation Action Plans (VLAP). This followed the fulfilment of requirements relating to document security, border management, fundamental rights and the fight against corruption. Ukraine and Moldova submitted applications for EU membership in February and March 2022 respectively and were granted candidate status in June 2022. Formal accession negotiations began in June 2024. A key breakthrough occurred

* The “more for more” principle was not introduced separately for the Eastern Partnership, but within the framework of the general review of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), covering jointly the eastern and southern dimensions. This review, carried out through a joint communication of the European Commission and the High Representative of 25 May 2011 (“A new response to a changing Neighbourhood”), was a direct reaction to the Arab Spring and aimed to strengthen positive conditionality towards all ENP partners, regardless of region.

in June 2026, when, following the withdrawal of Hungary's veto, both countries opened the first of six negotiating clusters, concerning the rule of law and democratic institutions. Just a month later, in July 2026, the second cluster, concerning foreign policy, security and defence, was opened. The authorities of both countries declare their intention to close negotiations by 2028 and to accede by 2030. Georgia applied for EU membership in March 2022, and in December 2023 obtained candidate country status. However, the accession process was de facto suspended in 2024.

Armenia and Azerbaijan developed cooperation in a more limited, selective scope, while maintaining parallel engagement in other integration structures and regional alliances. The Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA) between the EU and Armenia was signed in November 2017, provisionally applied from June 2018, and has been fully in force since 1 March 2021. In May 2026, the first EU–Armenia summit took place, at which the Partnership for Connectivity (transport, energy, digitalisation) was launched and a call for investment projects was announced. In September 2024, a visa liberalisation dialogue was launched as the

next step following the Visa Facilitation Agreement (VFA) for Armenian citizens, which has been in force since January 2014. Under the Common Security and Defence Policy, the civilian EU Monitoring Mission in Armenia (EUMA) has operated since February 2023, monitoring the situation along the Armenia–Azerbaijan border, reporting on incidents and supporting the building of trust between communities on both sides. In April 2026, a further civilian mission – the EU Partnership Mission in Armenia (EUPM Armenia) – was established, and in July 2026 it became operationally active, focused on strengthening the country's resilience to disinformation and hybrid threats (FIMI) and on cybersecurity. Relations between the European Union and Azerbaijan continue to be based on the EU–Azerbaijan Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) of 1999. In February 2017, talks began on a new framework agreement between the EU and Azerbaijan aimed at strengthening cooperation. In September 2018, Partnership Priorities were approved in the areas of strengthening institutions and good governance, economic development, connectivity, energy efficiency, environment and climate action, and mobility and people-to-people contacts.

Eastern Partnership Summit in Riga, 2015.

Source: Secretariat of the Latvian Presidency of the Council of the EU, via Wikimedia Commons.





Peaceful protest on Independence Avenue in Minsk, Belarus.

Source: Egor Kunovsky, Pexels.

Belarus, by contrast, took a different path. Following a period of relative revival of contacts in the middle of the previous decade, and after presidential elections not recognised by EU states together with an unprecedented scale of repression against Belarusian society, it unilaterally suspended its participation in the programme – in practice, a rupture of official intergovernmental cooperation. In addition, due to its participation in Russia's armed aggression against Ukraine – including making its own territory available as a staging base for Russian troops and providing logistical and political support to Moscow – the European Union imposed a broad package of sanctions on Aliaksandr Lukashenka's regime, which further deepened Belarus's isolation at the intergovernmental level. As a consequence, cooperation under the Eastern Partnership with this country underwent an effective freeze at the official level, and the European Union – in line with the Council conclusions of February 2024 – decided to maintain engagement exclusively with

Belarusian civil society, independent media and opposition circles operating in exile, treating this form of support as a way of preserving ties with the country while bypassing its official structures of power.

Financial balance and programming framework

At the financial level, as of 1 January 2025, a total of EUR 14.5 billion¹ had been mobilised under bilateral and regional grants, blending operations and guarantees, supporting public and private investment in transport and energy, access to finance for micro, small and medium-sized enterprises, environmental resilience, digital transformation, health and human capital. Notably, owing to the coexistence of several overlapping financial instruments – the European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument (ENPI), the European Neighbourhood Instrument (ENI) and the Neighbourhood,

Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI) – as well as separate macro-financial and emergency assistance packages, establishing a single, consolidated indicator of total expenditure over the entire period of the Partnership’s operation remains a complex task, requiring constant updating within successive multiannual financial frameworks.

Formally, the initiative is still based on the architecture set out in the communication “Eastern Partnership Policy Beyond 2020: Reinforcing Resilience – an Eastern Partnership that Delivers for All”² of March 2020 and the Council conclusions of May of the same year³, which defined five long-term objectives of cooperation: building resilient, sustainable and integrated economies; strengthening accountable institutions, the rule of law and security; pursuing environmental and climate resilience; supporting resilient digital transformation; and building resilient, fair and inclusive societies. This agenda, based on two pillars – an investment pillar, supported by the Economic Investment Plan, and a governance pillar, based on reforms and shared values – is translated into concrete priorities for regional programming for 2021–2027.

An update to this architecture is the adopted Eastern Partnership Multiannual Work Plan for 2025–2027, which defines six priority areas of cooperation at regional level: competitive, sustainable and integrated economies together with the development of human capital; good governance, the rule of law, reconciliation and security; sustainable energy and environmental and climate resilience; strengthening connectivity and digital transformation; resilient, gender-equal, fair and inclusive societies; and actions supporting EU regional policies.

The mid-term review of the Multiannual Indicative Programme (MIP) took place against the backdrop of a fundamental geopolitical shift directly in the eastern neighbourhood. Its result, alongside the revision of financial allocations for 2025–2027 (concluded by a European Commission decision of 3 July 2025), is the aforementioned Eastern Partnership Work Plan – for the first time synchronised with the rhythm of the Multiannual Financial Framework.

The war in Ukraine and new regional dynamics

Russia’s full-scale war of aggression against Ukraine is an unprecedented act of aggression on the European continent since the end of the Second World War. Supported by another Eastern Partnership country – Belarus, which made its territory available as a staging base for Russian troops – it has far-reaching consequences not only for the attacked state, but for the entire region and the global situation. This war forced a profound redefinition of the logic of EU Eastern policy towards Ukraine: from a neighbourhood policy based on gradual rapprochement, the European Union moved to a model of support for a state at war and, at the same time – since June 2022 – a candidate country for membership. This shift finds its clearest expression in the Ukraine Facility, established in 2024 – a financial mechanism worth up to EUR 50 billion for 2024–2027, combining grants, guarantees and loans, under three pillars: financial support for macroeconomic stability and reconstruction, a dedicated Ukraine Investment Framework mobilising public and private capital, and accession assistance supporting the alignment of Ukrainian legislation with EU standards. This architecture is complemented by other mechanisms launched in response to the war, including loans under the G7 initiative financed from the proceeds of frozen Russian central bank assets⁴, which together illustrate the unprecedented scale and variety of instruments mobilised to support Ukraine.

This same war, alongside forcing new financial instruments and a redefinition of relations with Ukraine, also became a direct catalyst for a historic acceleration of the EU’s enlargement policy: in 2022, at an unprecedented pace, Ukraine and Moldova obtained candidate country status, followed a year later by Georgia. However, whereas in the case of Ukraine and Moldova the integration process gained clear momentum, political events in Georgia from 2024 onward raised serious concern and effectively led to the suspension of its accession process – a significant break in the previous narrative of linear integration progress by the “Association Trio”.



Tripartite meeting of Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, European Council President Charles Michel and Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev in Brussels.

Source: The Office to the Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia. License CC BY-ND.

New dynamics can also be observed in the South Caucasus. The second Nagorno-Karabakh war of 2020 and Azerbaijan's military operation of September 2023 led to Azerbaijan gaining full control over the territory of Nagorno-Karabakh and to the effective end of the Armenian presence in that region. As a result of these events, a process of normalisation of relations between Armenia and Azerbaijan began – still unfinished and not without tensions. This was supported by the EU's observation mission EUMA (European Union Mission in Armenia), whose purpose is to build trust between the communities of the two states. This progress raises the prospect of ending a conflict that has lasted more than three decades and, with it, of a new architecture of relations in the region, including new channels of infrastructural, transmission and people-to-people connectivity.

The experience accumulated over the past fifteen years has translated into differentiated

legal-institutional frameworks and dynamics of mutual contacts, the depth of reforms carried out, and the sectors in which cooperation has been concentrated. As a result, the Eastern Partnership, originally conceived as a coherent, uniform architecture of regional cooperation, has evolved towards a multi-layered and asymmetric model, in which individual partner states today function under substantially different legal regimes, benefit from a different range of financial and political instruments, and represent a different level of actual convergence with EU standards. This differentiation, being a function of both the internal political choices of individual states and external geopolitical conditions – including Russian aggression against Ukraine and the broader rivalry for influence in the region – today constitutes a key point of reference for assessing the achievements of the initiative to date and a premise for reformulating its assumptions for the coming years.

Overview of the six Eastern Partnership countries

by legal basis, accession status, visa regime, economic integration, and specific EU instruments in the field of foreign and security policy

	Ukraine	Moldova	Georgia	Armenia	Azerbaijan	Belarus
Legal basis of relations	Association Agreement (AA) + Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) – fully in force since IX 2017	Association Agreement (AA) + Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) – in force since VII 2016	Association Agreement (AA) + Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) – in force since VII 2016	Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA) – in force since III 2021	Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) of 1999 (negotiations on a new agreement ongoing since 2017)	No active contractual framework – relations suspended since 2020
Accession status	Candidate country since VI 2022; negotiations formally opened VI 2026	Candidate country since VI 2022; negotiations opened VI 2026	Candidate country since XII 2023, but the process de facto suspended in 2024 by the authorities themselves – frozen until 2028	No candidate status; EU–Armenia Strategic Partnership Agenda (XII 2025), first EU–Armenia summit (V 2026)	No candidate status; cooperation limited to partnership priorities	None – the Lukashenka regime not recognised as a partner
Visa regime with the EU	Visa-free since 2017	Visa-free since 2014; since I 2026 within the “Roam Like at Home” area	Visa-free since 2017; since III 2026 suspended for diplomatic/service passports	Visa dialogue launched IX 2024, reforms ongoing under the action plan	Visa facilitation and readmission agreements – without a dialogue on full liberalisation	None – cooperation suspended
Economic integration	Full DCFTA , pursuit of integration with the EU internal market; the EU is the largest trading partner, investor and donor	Full DCFTA ; the EU accounts for 54% of Moldova's imports and 67% of its exports (2025); participation in the Single Euro Payments Area (SEPA) since III 2025	DCFTA since 2016 ; the EU accounts for 21–22% of Georgia's trade turnover (2025)	No DCFTA (CEPA does not cover a free trade area); growing EU investment (letters of intent from 2026)	No DCFTA ; energy cooperation under a 2022 memorandum; the EU is the main investor in the non-oil sector	None – economic cooperation with the authorities suspended
Foreign and security policy instruments	• EU Advisory Mission (EUAM Ukraine) for civilian security sector reform; • EU Military Assistance Mission (EUMAM Ukraine) – over 94,000 soldiers trained; • support from the European Peace Facility (€6.4 billion); • a total of €77 billion in military assistance (data as of August 2026)	• EU Partnership Mission in Moldova (EUPM) – support for resilience against hybrid and cyber threats; • first country with a signed Security and Defence Partnership with the EU; • support from the European Peace Facility (approx. €200 m, 2021–2025); • EU sanctions against persons destabilising the country (since 2023)	• EU Monitoring Mission (EUMM) – the only international presence on the ground (over 300 personnel); • EU Special Representative for the South Caucasus; • support from the European Peace Facility (€63 m, 2021–2023, suspended since 2024); • concluded participation in the EU Training Mission in the Central African Republic (VI 2023)	• EU Mission in Armenia (EUMA, since II 2023) monitoring the border with Azerbaijan; • new EU Partnership Mission in Armenia (established IV 2026, operationally launched VII 2026) on resilience to disinformation (FIMI) and cybersecurity; • support from the European Peace Facility (€30 m: €10 m in 2024, €20 m in 2026)	• No EU civilian mission; • regional cooperation under the Strategic Approach to the Black Sea Region; Team Europe Initiative on demining (since 2024)	• EU sanctions against the Lukashenka regime (repression, instrumentalisation of migrants, support for Russia's aggression).

1.2 New challenges and shifting geopolitical realities

The strategic environment in which EU Eastern policy operates has undergone a fundamental transformation in recent years. Russia's aggression against Ukraine in February 2022 constitutes a point of historical discontinuity – a caesura that forced a re-evaluation of the whole of the EU's Eastern policy to date. This applies both to its enlargement and integration dimension – the accession perspective and alignment with EU standards – and to the dimension of building partnerships and sectoral cooperation with the countries of the region. It ultimately also forced a revision of the Union's own security interests: military, energy – understood as independence from Russian raw materials – and those related to the resilience of value chains.

Russian revisionism: from frozen conflicts to full-scale war

Over the past three decades, Russia has consistently instrumentalised so-called frozen conflicts – in Transnistria, South Ossetia, Abkhazia and Nagorno-Karabakh – as tools of political pressure against partner states and the European Union itself. Keeping these disputes in a state of suspension allowed Moscow to limit the sovereignty of its neighbours, block their Euro-Atlantic integration, and retain instruments of pressure ready for use at a convenient moment. The interpretation of the nature of these actions was not uniform within the EU: while some Member States for a long time read them as local, incidental tensions on the periphery of the European security order, the Baltic states and Poland consistently identified in them a systemic, deliberate instrument of Russian revisionist policy – and just as consistently called for an appropriately early and decisive EU response.

Warning signals were abundant. The war in Georgia in 2008, followed by the war in Ukraine

in 2014 together with the illegal annexation of Crimea, effectively broke the logic of the strategic partnership between the European Union and Russia – an initiative launched in 2003, based on the assumption of gradual convergence of interests and values*. Even then, in 2014, this was a delayed reaction – the conflict of interest between the EU and Russia had, after all, been apparent for a long time, and earlier warning signals had gone without an adequate response. Moreover, even after 2014 the Union's response was not fully consistent: sanctions were introduced, but economic and energy cooperation with Russia continued in parallel, which undermined the credibility of EU policy and entrenched dependencies that Moscow could later use as an instrument of pressure.

In parallel with its actions in the region, Russia conducted hostile activities within the European Union itself, seeking to create strategic dependencies (above all energy dependencies) and to influence political processes – both at the national level of individual Member States and at the level of shaping the EU's common foreign policy. These activities included disinformation, support for political forces sympathetic to Moscow, and the exploitation of economic dependencies as an instrument of pressure. Not all countries recognised the scale of this threat in time, even when it took the form of open military aggression against EU partner states.

The structural conflict of interest between the EU and Russia is therefore not a product of 2022 – it has accompanied EU–Russia relations from the very beginning and stemmed from two incompatible visions of the regional order: democratisation and the approximation of institutional-legal standards to EU ones on one hand, and Russia's claim to an “exclusive sphere of influence” on the other. It was precisely this dispute over the principles of the regional order that lay at the root of tensions at every

* In September 2008, the EU temporarily suspended talks on a new, expanded partnership agreement following the Russia–Georgia war, although negotiations were conditionally resumed later that same year. After the illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014, the European Council formally suspended regular EU–Russia summits, bilateral visa talks, and negotiations on a new comprehensive agreement. Following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the EU severed all remaining practical, cross-border and scientific cooperation, ending all remaining functional application of partnership objectives.

earlier stage – in Georgia in 2008, in Crimea and the Donbas in 2014.

The full-scale war of aggression unleashed by Russia in February 2022 is, however, something qualitatively different from a further instalment of this dispute. It is not another stage in the rivalry for regional influence, but an open attempt at the military destruction of Ukraine's independent statehood, denying its right to exist as a sovereign entity – a war waged with mass violence against the civilian population, with openly exterminationist rhetoric towards Ukrainian national and state identity. At the same time, it is a direct threat to the security of the whole of Europe: a violation of fundamental principles of the international order (the inviolability of borders, the prohibition on the use of force), a demonstration of Russia's readiness for open military confrontation with the West, and a signal that Russian revisionism is not confined to hybrid instruments but, when necessary, takes the form of full-scale conventional war on European territory. It is precisely this qualitative escalation – from hybrid pressure and frozen conflicts to open aggressive war – that makes Russian revisionism a lasting, existential factor destabilising the European security architecture, requiring a fundamental revision of the whole of EU Eastern policy to date.

Acceleration of EU enlargement policy

The European Council's decision of June 2022 to grant Ukraine and Moldova candidate country status – confirmed and developed in December 2023 by the decision to open accession negotiations – constitutes a qualitative turning point in the Union's relations with the region. For nearly a decade, since the signing of the Association Agreements in 2014, Brussels consistently avoided an unambiguous declaration on the European perspective of Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia, treating the Eastern Partnership as a cooperation formula separate from the enlargement process and deliberately devoid of accession automaticity. Russia's full-scale aggression forced the Union to revise this approach almost overnight: Ukraine's membership application, submitted a few days after the invasion began, was processed at an unprecedented pace by EU standards, and the decision on candidate status came just four months later.

This change is significant beyond mere symbolism. Candidate status fundamentally transforms the nature of the EU's relations with Ukraine and Moldova – from a formula of sectoral partnership and association towards an accession process that, by definition, assumes gradual but ultimately full institutional, legal



**Charles Michel,
Volodymyr Zelenskyy
and Ursula von der
Leyen, Kyiv,
February 2023.**

Source: European Union.
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European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen with Moldovan President Maia Sandu during a visit to Chişinău ahead of the EU accession referendum.

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and economic integration. This in turn requires new instruments of support, ill-suited to the existing Eastern Partnership toolkit. The granting of candidate status also means that the Union had to abandon its previous strategic ambivalence towards its own eastern borders in favour of committing to the integration of Ukraine and Moldova – even if this process is not definitively assured (being dependent both on progress in implementing reforms and on the need to obtain the consent of all EU Member States) and does not have a definitively defined final time horizon.

Erosion of the old order and the growing agency of regional actors

The full-scale war in Ukraine and the war in the Middle East – or, more precisely, several parallel, interlinked episodes of conflict in the region (Gaza, Lebanon, Iran, the Gulf states, the blockade of the Strait of Hormuz) – function as catalysts of a broader, already long-running process of erosion of the multilateral order. The primacy of power politics over the rules of international law and the return of mercantilism in economic relations (protectionism, the instrumentalisation of trade dependencies, industrial policy based on national security) further drive and confirm this process. At the same time, the United States is redefining its international engagement – both in the transatlantic dimension,

where expectations regarding Europe's share of the costs of security are rising, and in relations with other key actors, where a search for a new, more transactional basis for relations is visible – at times approaching the logic of a concert of great powers, in which direct arrangements between the main powers replace multilateral institutional mechanisms. This tendency is giving rise, in Europe, to concerns about the marginalisation of its voice in matters directly concerning the security of the continent.

The weakening of international institutions – from the paralysis of the UN Security Council, through the erosion of arms control regimes, to the limited effectiveness of the WTO – is forcing the European Union to adopt a role far more assertive than before: not only a normative promoter of multilateral rules, but an active guarantor of regional order, ready for independent action (sanctions, military support, resilience instruments) in situations where traditional multilateral mechanisms fail or are blocked. This is a structural change, going beyond rhetoric – requiring new competences, financial instruments and the political readiness of Member States to act where the EU has hitherto remained a secondary actor.

The countries of the region, having consolidated after the period of transformation following the collapse of the USSR, of which they were part before 1991, have strengthened their agency on

the international stage. The post-Soviet space has ceased to be treated by international actors as an exclusive domain of Russian influence or a peripheral area of EU interest. This shift is itself largely the result of deliberate choices by the countries of the region, which are consistently diversifying their international ties, spreading dependencies across multiple partners instead of basing their entire strategy on a relationship with a single centre – Russia, the West or China. China’s active policy, pursued largely through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) – infrastructure investment, financing of transport and energy projects – is increasing Beijing’s presence in the region. In parallel, Turkey, drawing on historical and linguistic ties as well as its growing capabilities in the defence sector, is consistently expanding its influence – from the South Caucasus (visible in the Nagorno-Karabakh war and cooperation with Azerbaijan) to Central Asia. The Gulf states, with surplus investment capital, are for their part seeking new directions for economic diversification, including in the region’s energy and infrastructure sectors. This multi-actor presence requires the EU to position itself strategically – not only vis-à-vis Russia, but within a far more complex map of interests, in which the Union is one of many external actors, rather than the sole partner alternative to Moscow. This entails the need for a more precise definition of the Union’s own offer, above all its added value relative to China, Turkey or the Gulf states, and for building coalitions of interest with partners sharing convergent priorities.

Towards a new EU foreign policy

From the European Union’s own point of view, a series of crises in recent years – the COVID-19 pandemic, followed by Russian aggression – has revealed the scale of the Community’s structural vulnerabilities arising from excessive dependence on external suppliers in areas of strategic importance: medical and technological supply chains during the pandemic, and subsequently energy raw materials in the confrontation with Russia. The response came, on one hand, in the form of sanctions against Russia, and on the other, the REPOWEREU programme, whose objective was to accelerate independence from Russian

fossil fuels and gas through supply diversification, the expansion of LNG infrastructure, and the acceleration of the energy transition. These experiences triggered a broader structural reflection, going beyond the energy sector itself: the central point of reference today is the question of building independence from China – or, in the European Commission’s own terminology, “de-risking” relations with it – in areas such as critical raw materials, digital technologies and industrial supply chains. This is accompanied by a growing awareness of the need to increase the Union’s own responsibility for security on the European continent, including in the military dimension, which remains in tension with the existing, deeply rooted reliance on the US security umbrella. The sum of these experiences has led to a significant shift in thinking about the Community’s foreign policy. A model based primarily on normative soft power – attraction through conditionality and development support – is giving way to an approach that takes greater account of hard security interests, strategic resilience, and readiness to act under conditions of geopolitical rivalry among third-power actors – understood as expanding partners’ room for manoeuvre through cooperation with the EU, rather than forcing unambiguous geopolitical choices where this is neither possible nor desirable. At the same time, the Union is not entirely abandoning its existing repertoire of normative instruments.

The processes outlined above, though differing in origin and dynamics, together form a coherent picture of a strategic environment in which the previous assumptions of EU Eastern policy have ceased to be valid. The revision of the approach towards Russia, the opening of the accession path for Ukraine and Moldova, the need for strategic positioning vis-à-vis other powers and regional actors, the strengthening of the Union’s own resilience, and the new opening towards Central Asia – are not separate phenomena, but elements of a single, broader process of redefining EU Eastern policy under conditions of lasting change in the geopolitical environment. It is precisely this set of interlinked challenges that sets the framework within which the new architecture of EU relations with its eastern neighbourhood must today be shaped.



Vision and Strategic Objectives of EaP 2.0

2.1 Strategic vision

Eastern Partnership 2.0 seeks to build a shared space of security, resilience and prosperity, stretching from the Baltic to the Caspian Sea – co-created by the European Union and its Eastern partners as sovereign, agentic participants. This space is founded on the rule of law and gradual integration with the European economic-legal order, with the possibility of full EU membership for those partners who meet the criteria and express such a will – and it delivers tangible benefits to both sides, strengthening at the same time the security and resilience of both the Eastern partners and the Union itself against external threats.

2.2 Strategic objectives

Overarching objective: Stabilisation and transformation of the eastern neighbourhood

The renewed Eastern Partnership (EaP 2.0) – shaped under the fundamentally altered geopolitical realities described in the previous chapter – must go beyond the existing formula of sectoral cooperation and adopt as its overarching objective the durable anchoring of the

Eastern partners in the European normative and institutional order, while strengthening their resilience to external threats of a multi-dimensional character – from hybrid actions, through economic pressure, to challenges related to border management and energy security. In Ukraine's case, this resilience directly encompasses also the capacity to withstand military threat and the reconstruction of the state. Consequently, strengthening the resilience of the partners will also contribute to increasing the security of the EU itself.

Specific objectives

SECURITY

Strengthening resilience and building a regional security architecture.

ECONOMY AND CONNECTIVITY

Deepening economic integration with the European single market and building physical, digital and energy connective infrastructure between the EU and the partner region.

RULE OF LAW

Supporting institutional transformation leading to the full adoption and application of the *acquis communautaire* by candidate partners.

SOCIAL RESILIENCE

Strengthening civil society, free media and education as the foundation of democratic transformation.

This anchoring is to be understood broadly, on at least three levels. First, as an institutional process – differentiated depending on the status of individual partners, but in every case assuming the gradual adoption of EU legal, administrative and regulatory standards (the *acquis* or elements thereof). Second, as a normative process – the entrenchment of the values underlying European integration: the rule of law, judicial independence, freedom of the media and civil society, which at the same time constitute the most effective barrier against external interference and democratic erosion. Third, as a process of building resilience – the capacity of partners to withstand external pressure independently (disinformation, cyberattacks, energy blackmail, economic dependencies), irrespective of the pace and ultimate outcome of their institutional integration with the EU.

This objective requires correcting the assumption – dominant in the first decade of the Eastern Partnership’s operation – that regulatory convergence in itself generates stability. Experience of recent years shows that institutional transformation without a parallel strengthening of resilience leaves partners vulnerable to external destabilisation, while, conversely, resilience built without lasting anchoring in a coherent, strategic vision of cooperation remains equally susceptible to reversal with a change of political priorities or external circumstances. Both dimensions must therefore be pursued in parallel and in mutual connection.

Achieving the overarching objective requires moving away from a model of cooperation based exclusively on a one-sided donor–recipient logic, in which the EU acts as a source of financial support and exporter of standards, towards a partnership delivering tangible benefits to both sides. This matters practically as well as politically – it strengthens the durability and legitimacy of cooperation, making it more resilient to fluctuations in political conditions on both sides.

Advantages for the Eastern partners include above all: access to the EU internal market and the associated economic growth and inflow of investment; financial and technical support in building state institutions resilient to corruption and external interference; strengthening of security (including energy security) through supply diversification and integration with European infrastructural networks; and, finally, the prospect of membership as the strongest available incentive to carry out difficult domestic reforms for states aspiring to full integration with the European Union.

Benefits for the EU are equally concrete, though less often articulated in the Partnership’s narrative to date. A stable, resilient and economically integrated eastern neighbourhood means for the Union: a reduced risk of uncontrolled migration and conflicts at its own borders; access to strategic resources (critical raw materials, transport corridors, energy potential – including renewable) necessary for the EU’s energy transition and supply chain resilience; an expanded sales market and production base in close geographical proximity; and a strengthening of the Union’s own position vis-à-vis Russia and other powers instrumentalising influence in the region as a tool of pressure.

What matters here is that this mutuality of benefit should not be treated as a mechanism of symmetrical transactional exchange (which would in any case be unrealistic, given the asymmetry of potentials), but rather as a principle for designing cooperation instruments: every new EaP 2.0 mechanism – whether in trade, energy or security – should be constructed so as to generate tangible added value for both the Eastern partner and the Union itself, thereby building a durable foundation for further integration, grounded in real interests rather than solely in normative commitment.

3

Conceptual architecture: the four pillars of EaP 2.0

Eastern Partnership 2.0 rests on four mutually interconnected pillars, which together form a coherent architecture of cooperation: (I) security and resilience, (II) economic integration and connectivity, (III) institutional transformation and the rule of law, and (IV) community of values, identity and strategic communication.

The individual pillars are modular – partners may participate in them with varying intensity, in accordance with the principle of differentiated integration. Each pillar is in turn built around a set of complementary instruments and areas of action, detailed below.

**European Union
Mission in Armenia
(EUMA) observers in
Vayots Dzor Province,
Armenia,
January 2026.**

Source: European Union Mission
in Armenia. License: cco 1.0
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Pillar I: Security and resilience

Russian aggression against Ukraine confirmed that, without a strong security dimension, EU Eastern policy remains structurally incomplete – no institutional or normative transformation is durable if a partner remains defenceless against external threats, whatever their character. The security pillar of EaP 2.0 responds to this gap on several mutually connected levels, drawing on the experience gained in supporting Ukraine since 2022, as well as on other, consistently developed formats of cooperation in the region: support for Moldova and Armenia in countering disinformation, or long-standing border management programmes, such as the EU Border Assistance Mission to Moldova and Ukraine (EUBAM) or the Border Management Programme in Central Asia (BOMCA). Together, they provide models that can be adapted to other partners in the region, in line with their differing situations and needs.

Support for partners' defence capabilities and resilience

Ukraine's experience has shown in practice that the EU, despite treaty limitations in the field of defence*, possesses a real capacity to finance military equipment, training and support for the defence industry of a partner facing direct threat. This approach should be entrenched as a permanent, rather than purely crisis-driven, element of relations with Ukraine.

Towards the remaining partners, this pillar should not be based on a single, universal model of support, but on differentiating instruments according to the status and exposure to threat of each of them. For neutral states such as Moldova, this means developing formats of bilateral defence cooperation that do not require abandoning neutrality, while constituting a real alternative to alliance-based formulas. For partners engaged in a process of border stabilisation and confidence-building following a period of

armed tension, on the other hand, the key element remains civilian presence – observation and monitoring missions supporting de-escalation without becoming engaged in a dispute of a military character.

Border security

The protection of borders is a critical point of contact between the security of partners and that of the Union itself. Experience of recent years shows that the eastern borders of the EU and its partners are deliberately used as an instrument of migratory pressure – organised, state-sponsored flows of migrants directed at selected sections of the external border constitute one of the most visible manifestations of this type of instrumentalisation. At the same time, the region's borders remain a critical point for organised crime – the smuggling of people, weapons and sanctioned goods, money laundering, and the circumvention of sanctions regimes. EU support in this area should accordingly cover several complementary dimensions: infrastructural and technological (monitoring, control of the flow of goods and persons, digitalisation of border procedures), training (upgrading the competences of partners' border services, including in recognising hybrid threats and identifying cross-border organised crime), and institutional – aligning the border management standards of partners with the model of Integrated Border Management applied in the EU, drawing on the experience of EU agencies responsible for the protection of the Union's external borders and on already existing mechanisms of operational cooperation.

Countering hybrid threats

Disinformation, interference in electoral processes, cyberattacks on critical infrastructure,

* The limitation arises from Article 41(2) TEU, which excludes from the EU's general budget expenditure on operations having military or defence implications. The EU circumvented this barrier by creating in 2021 the off-budget European Peace Facility (EPF) – a general mechanism financed directly from Member State contributions, used to support EU partners worldwide, including Ukraine, where it has covered, among other things, the costs of the EU training mission and the purchase of equipment and ammunition. It is complemented by instruments financed from the general budget, directed at supporting the production capacities of the European defence industry.

and covert, externally sponsored influence over the domestic political processes of partner countries require strengthened cooperation with the EU. The starting point should be the systematisation and deepening of existing channels for the exchange of information between specialised EU institutions and their counterparts on the partner side – in the areas of cybersecurity, the protection of critical infrastructure, and the identification of disinformation campaigns – capable of supporting partners remotely at critical moments through real-time monitoring, early warning and the exchange of analysis, and, ultimately, of building their capacity to act independently in these areas.

Energy and raw-material security as an integral element of partners' security

The experience of Ukraine and Moldova – including Russian attacks on energy infrastructure and historical dependence on Russian supplies – shows that diversification of energy sources, the construction of cross-border links with the European grid, and the inclusion of partners in EU supply-security mechanisms constitute not so much an economic issue as a direct condition of state resilience. A tangible example of such anchoring is the synchronisation of the electricity systems of Ukraine and Moldova with the Continental European electricity grid. An analogous role may be played by the subsea power cable currently under construction connecting Georgia and Azerbaijan with Romania and Hungary. Access to critical raw materials is of similar significance, where the interests of the Eastern partners, possessing substantial resource potential, and of the EU, seeking to diversify supplies and reduce dependence on China, may be mutually complementary.

Crisis response capacity

The EU Civil Protection Mechanism, which Ukraine and Moldova joined as full participants, has served to coordinate humanitarian aid, medical evacuations and material support on an unprecedented scale. This experience should become the starting point for extending the mechanism to the remaining Eastern partners not yet participating in it, as well as for deepening the already existing engagement of Ukraine

and Moldova – towards durable financing of preparedness, the building of reserves (including under resCEU) and regular joint exercises, rather than only an ad hoc response to crises. This approach should cover both humanitarian aid and rapid financial or logistical support in situations of sudden crisis (natural disasters, attacks on infrastructure, refugee waves).

Sanctions

Sanctions policy towards Russia remains one of the instruments available to the EU in response to aggression, without direct engagement in armed action – and as such should be treated as a permanent, long-term element of EaP 2.0's security architecture. The effectiveness of sanctions depends in practice on the integrity of the sanctions regime, which requires constant monitoring and elimination of channels for its circumvention, including through third countries. In this context, the two-track engagement of the Eastern partners in EU sanctions policy is of key importance. On one hand, involving them in the process of implementing analogous restrictive measures against Russia, Belarus and related entities constitutes an element of building their institutional resilience and alignment with EU standards in this area, while at the same time strengthening the coherence of the entire sanctions regime. On the other hand, the use of their territory or economic entities to circumvent sanctions – regardless of whether this results from deliberate action or from a lack of adequate control capacities – should carry real consequences, including the possibility of secondary sanctions against the entities involved. Clarity of expectations, combined with technical support in building partners' control capacities, is a condition for the credibility of the EU's entire sanctions regime in the region.

The common denominator of all the above elements is the conviction that the security of the Eastern partners is not a matter separate from the process of European integration, but an integral precondition for it. This pillar brings together differentiated instruments – from defence support, through formats of bilateral cooperation adapted to neutrality status, civilian presence and monitoring missions, to crisis-response mechanisms – selected according to the situation, exposure to threat and needs of each partner. The shared goal remains to make the strengthening of the region's resilience a durable, rather than merely ad hoc, element of EU Eastern policy.

Pillar II: Economic integration and connectivity

Pillar II focuses on delivering tangible and meaningful benefits from cooperation with the EU, benefits that do not remain at the level of political declarations but translate into concrete improvements in living conditions and business conditions in the partner states. This encompasses a broad spectrum of actions: from the reconstruction of Ukraine, through gradual integration with the internal market and the expansion of infrastructural links, to the green and digital transformation and investment in human capital. These benefits do not, however, flow in one direction only – access to raw materials, transit corridors and sales markets in close proximity is equally in the interest of the Union itself, which makes this pillar a natural field for building a partnership based on genuine mutuality, rather than solely on normative commitment. This matters economically as well as politically: the durability of pro-European orientation in the region depends to a large extent on whether integration with the EU produces tangible effects visible to citizens and entrepreneurs, thereby strengthening the domestic political coalitions advocating the continuation of reforms and rapprochement with the Union – in opposition to pro-Russian or Eurosceptic narratives.

Reconstruction of Ukraine

Support for the reconstruction of Ukraine should be understood not as a project deferred until the end of hostilities, but as a process already under way in parallel with the ongoing conflict, integrating immediate assistance – the repair of destroyed critical infrastructure, including energy infrastructure, a regular target of Russian attacks – with the long-term reconstruction of the country's economic and infrastructural capacities. Ukraine, in rebuilding its destroyed transport, energy and digital infrastructure, has a unique opportunity to rebuild it to standards close to those of the EU and in direct connection with the European network – which makes reconstruction a de facto accelerated path of infrastructural integration, rather than merely a restoration of the pre-war state. This applies in particular to energy networks (integration with the European energy market, development of renewable energy sources as an element of decentralised, resilient infrastructure) and to transport corridors, whose reconstruction can be carried out in direct connection with the development of the TEN-T network and other links.



Participants of the Ukraine Recovery Conference, Gdańsk, June 2026.

Source: European Union, 2026.
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This process requires the engagement of a wide spectrum of actors on both sides – not only central institutions, but equally enterprises, regions and local governments, both Ukrainian and EU, which can become key partners in reconstruction at the operational level, drawing on direct partner relationships and on experience accumulated in earlier phases of cooperation. In this context, national development agencies and development banks have an important role to play, and their engagement in financing reconstruction should be treated as an integral part of the broader implementation architecture of EaP 2.0, described further in this document.

Gradual integration with the single market

Partners possessing Association Agreements together with a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia) should obtain access to further segments of the EU internal market as progress is made in implementing the relevant parts of the acquis – not on the basis of a one-off, comprehensive opening of the market (which remains reserved for full membership), but as a gradual, sector-by-sector process (e.g. the digital market, energy, transport services), giving partners a tangible, perceptible incentive to continue regulatory reforms even before formal accession. An example of such an approach – although applied to a country without a DCFTA agreement – is the proposal announced on 2 July 2026 by European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen for autonomous trade measures liberalising nearly 80% of Armenian exports to the EU, a response to growing economic pressure from Russia. This solution, although by design temporary and not resulting from a formal process of regulatory approximation, constitutes an effective instrument for strengthening export capacity and reinforcing the market linkage of a partner country with the EU, combining economic, resilience-related and political components – and may serve as an inspiration for similar, ad hoc instruments supporting partners under sudden economic pressure from Russia, regardless of the formal stage of their integration with the EU.

Infrastructural connections

Durably binding the Eastern partners economically to the EU requires the expansion of physical infrastructural links in three dimensions: transport (development of eastward corridors of the trans-European transport network TEN-T), digital (expansion of telecommunications infrastructure, including cable connections and data-exchange capacity, reducing partners' dependence on infrastructure controlled by Russian entities), and energy (expansion of cross-border electricity links with Central Europe, enabling fuller integration of partners with the European energy market). This infrastructure has a dual significance – economic (reduction of transaction costs, growth of trade) and strategic (a physical, difficult-to-reverse anchoring of partners in the European economic space).

Green and digital transformation

The competitiveness of partner economies in the medium and long term depends on their capacity to participate in a European economic ecosystem based increasingly on environmental and digital standards, including in the context of the EU's carbon border adjustment mechanisms and the regulatory requirements of the digital single market. Support for energy transition (moving away from coal, developing renewables) and for the digitalisation of partners' administration and economy is therefore not a secondary matter relative to economic integration, but a precondition for it – without adaptation to these standards, access to the internal market will in practice remain limited. For the partners themselves, however, this means something more than meeting an external requirement: in the energy dimension – diversification of sources and independence from external suppliers; in the digital dimension – building their own technological and administrative capacities, reducing dependence on infrastructure and solutions controlled by entities outside the European regulatory ecosystem. Both dimensions ultimately add up to a real strengthening of the partners' economic sovereignty.

Integration into the Middle Corridor

The growing importance of the transport route linking Asia with Europe while bypassing Russian territory creates an opportunity for deeper economic integration not only with the direct Eastern partners, but also with the states of Central Asia – in particular Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan – with Azerbaijan playing the role of a key transit hub connecting the two regions. Incorporating this corridor into EU Eastern policy makes it possible to combine directions of EU engagement previously treated separately – the Eastern Partnership and relations with Central Asia, elevated to the level of a Strategic Partnership – into a more coherent regional connectivity strategy.

Mobility, education and human capital

The durability of economic and social ties with the Eastern partners ultimately requires investment in human capital and mobility: expanding academic and educational exchange programmes to citizens of partner states, facilitating legal labour migration for specialists – within existing EU pathways for skilled workers from outside the EU – and developing joint research and scientific programmes. This dimension has particular significance – it builds direct, people-to-people ties between the societies of the partners and the EU, which often prove more durable and resilient to fluctuations in political conditions than relations conducted purely at the institutional or governmental level, while at the same time counteracting the risk of human-capital drain through programmes encouraging return and the transfer of knowledge.

The common denominator of this pillar is the conviction that the durability of partner states' pro-European orientation depends not only on political or normative incentives, but equally on whether cooperation with the EU generates real economic benefits felt by broad sections of society – not only by the political or administrative elites directly engaged in the integration process.

Pillar III: Institutional transformation and the rule of law

Pillar III continues and deepens the existing approach based on regulatory convergence – an approach that has formed the axis of the Eastern Partnership since its inception. The experience of the last decade, however, calls for it to be enriched with support for building strong, resilient state institutions – lying equally in the interest of the partners themselves and of the European Union – and with support commensurate with the scale and pace demanded by the current geopolitical moment. This pillar comprises four complementary instruments – expanded institutional partnerships between administrations, systematic assessment of the rule of law as a condition for access to support, a legislative-compliance review for candidate partners, and support for decentralisation and local self-government – bound together by the principle of positive and negative conditionality, which governs how they are applied.

Expanded institutional partnerships (twinning)

The proven formula of close cooperation between EU public institutions and their counterparts in partner states – based on the secondment of experts, the joint development of regulatory solutions and the practical transfer of administrative know-how – today requires significant strengthening: increasing available financing, extending the time horizon of programmes (going beyond the previous, often too-short project cycles), and covering a broader range of institutions, including those responsible for areas of critical importance to state resilience. A proven point of reference for this type of activity is the Eastern Partnership Academy of Public Administration, commissioned by the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs and run by the National School of Public Administration – a training programme for officials from partner countries, which EaP 2.0 could treat as a model to be developed with the involvement of training institutions from other interested Member States.

Systematic assessment of the rule of law as a condition for access to support

The independence of the judiciary, the effectiveness of anti-corruption mechanisms, and the quality of the rule of law should not be treated as a separate, declaratory area of monitoring, but as a direct condition for access to financial instruments and further stages of integration. This requires developing transparent, measurable assessment criteria and a regular, evidence-based review of progress – modelled on existing practice applied to candidate countries, but applied consistently to all partners, regardless of their formal status.

Legislative compliance review (acquis screening)

For partners holding candidate status, the process of systematically reviewing the compliance of national legislation with the EU legal acquis remains a fundamental tool structuring the accession process – it allows regulatory gaps to be precisely identified and the sequence of necessary reforms to be planned. It is essential that this review be accompanied by appropriately tailored technical support at the implementation stage, so that the process does not stop at diagnosis but leads to the actual implementation of the standards adopted.

Support for decentralisation and local self-government

The durability of democratic reforms depends not only on the quality of central institutions, but equally on the condition of local and regional authorities – it is at this level that citizens most directly experience the quality of governance, and strong, autonomous local governments constitute an additional barrier against the centralisation of power or its appropriation by narrow



Protests in Tbilisi – demonstrators holding Georgian and EU flags.

Source: Ramaz Bluashvili, Pexels

interest groups. Strengthening the administrative and financial capacities of local authorities should be a permanent element of institutional support, complementary to reforms at the central level. Experience of such cooperation is already provided by the U-LEAD with Europe programme implemented in Ukraine, financed by the EU and its Member States in support of decentralisation, the building of local government administrative capacity, and the development of local infrastructure – a model based on direct, practical support for local authorities, worth further developing and gradually extending to Moldova and, ultimately, to other countries covered by EaP 2.0, as an element of a broader formula of support for decentralisation in the region.

Positive and negative conditionality

The effectiveness of the entire pillar depends on the credibility of the link between reform progress and the scale of support. This means, on one hand, a readiness to increase the scope of assistance and the pace of integration in response to genuinely achieved, verified reform progress, and, on the other, an equally consistent readiness to suspend or limit support in the event of a clear regression in democratic standards or the rule of law. The credibility of this mechanism requires that it be applied predictably and free from exceptions dictated purely by considerations of political convenience or geopolitics – otherwise it loses the trust of both the partners and the societies of the EU Member States.

The common denominator of this pillar is the conviction that lasting institutional transformation of the Eastern partners is not possible through the formal approximation of legislation to EU standards alone – it requires a genuine strengthening of the capacity of institutions to function independently. The credible, consistent enforcement of the link between reform progress and the scale of support received is intended to ensure that regulatory convergence does not remain a purely formal process, but translates into the actual quality of governance and institutional resilience of partner states.

Pillar IV: Community of values, identity and strategic communication

Pillar IV addresses the soft, yet no less important, dimension of the partnership – the building of a shared cultural, informational and educational space, without which the institutional and economic transformation described in the previous pillars remains fragile. Experience in the region shows that legal reforms or infrastructural investments are not enough if they are not accompanied by a parallel shift in social awareness, access to reliable information, and a sense of belonging to a shared space of European values. This pillar comprises four complementary elements: support for independent media and countering disinformation, programmes of civic exchange and inter-societal dialogue, European education, and strategic communication of EaP 2.0 – conducted both within the EU and among partner societies.

Support for independent media and countering disinformation

A key element of this pillar is support for journalists and editorial teams from Belarus, Russia* and Ukraine who cannot safely create content and work in their own countries – following the model of already existing projects supported by EU funding, such as the Free Media Hub EAST⁵. This dimension encompasses two complementary goals: on one hand, protecting and enabling the work of journalists operating under conditions of repression, external aggression and war, and, on the other, building a high-quality, credible offer of information in the Russian language, addressed to a far broader group of recipients than merely citizens of Russia. The Russian-speaking public, estimated at around

* Although Russia is not a partner of EaP 2.0, support for independent Russian-language media constitutes an element of the information resilience of the Eastern Partnership region itself – it limits Moscow's ability to use the shared linguistic space as a channel of influence over Belarus, Ukraine and Moldova, as well as over Russian-speaking segments of Central Asian societies.

President of Georgia Salome Zourabichvili during a meeting with representatives of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum, Tbilisi, July 2022.

Source: Administration of the President of Georgia. Autor: Giorgi Abdaladze. License CC BY-SA 4.0. via Wikimedia



188 million people in Russia, Belarus, Ukraine, Moldova and several EU states⁶, remains to a significant extent cut off from independent sources of information, which makes it a natural target of Russian state propaganda. The experience of this type of initiative should be treated as a starting point for solutions of a more systemic character – including the development of editorial teams and news services in the local languages of partners, operating within the already existing EU and international broadcasting infrastructure (following the model of local-language services developed under *rtv World* or *Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty*) – as well as consideration of extending this type of support, as needed, to other Eastern Partnership countries where the media space remains under strong pressure from external influence or internal authoritarianism. The importance of this support grows with the scale of the threat – the development of AI-generated content and increasingly sophisticated disinformation campaigns (*FIMI*) make investment in quality journalism an urgent element of the region's information resilience.

Programmes of civic exchange and dialogue as a source of resilience

The durability of European rapprochement ultimately requires building direct people-to-people ties – through youth, academic and professional

exchange programmes, which allow citizens of partner states and the EU to get to know one another outside the framework of official diplomacy. This direction, developed for years, among others by the *Mieroszewski Centre* in its analytical, educational and networking work with expert and civic circles in the region, demonstrates the value of dialogue conducted systematically and over the long term, based on genuine partnership rather than an occasional political gesture. An important element of this process is joint work on strengthening the visibility of the region's own self-narrative – how the societies of Eastern Europe, the South Caucasus and Central Asia themselves tell their own history, culture and identity. Dialogue conducted in this spirit matters academically as well as practically: on one hand, it strengthens the partners' autonomous national identity as a foundation of resilience against further attempts at their subjugation, and, on the other, it builds on the EU side a more mature, more adequate understanding of the region, necessary for conducting a policy towards it based on genuine partnership, rather than on projections inherited from a different, external perspective on the region.

European education

A complement to the above actions should be systematic support for education about European



Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya calls on Europe to step up support for the democratic forces in Belarus.

Source: European Union

integration – both within formal school systems and through non-formal programmes – building among citizens of partner countries a genuine understanding of the institutions, values and mechanisms of the functioning of the EU, going beyond superficial associations with financial assistance or political rhetoric.

Although grassroots work with younger generations – through school, academic and youth programmes – is of key importance for the durability of this process in the long term, European education should not be reduced to it alone. In this context, it is worth pointing to already existing initiatives, such as the University of Warsaw's Centre for East European Studies and the accompanying scholarship programmes for students from Eastern Europe, the South Caucasus and Central Asia, which for years have been building a community of future intellectual elites of the region connected to Poland and the EU – a model whose scale and geographical reach make it a natural point of reference for similar initiatives financed at the pan-European level. The College of Europe programmes have for years educated students from across Europe, including from Eastern Partnership countries, in a spirit of shared reflection on European integration. Existing programmes of this kind constitute a natural starting point for expanding the network of academic institutions engaged in building lasting intellectual ties between the EU and the region.

Equally important is building solid knowledge about the EU among groups that shape public opinion and make decisions: officials of public and local administration, journalists, sectoral specialists, entrepreneurs and local community

leaders. It is precisely the quality of their understanding of integration processes – not merely declaratory support for membership, but practical knowledge of the mechanisms of the EU's functioning and the obligations arising from them – that to a large extent determines the effectiveness of reform implementation. An important element of European education understood in this way should also be countering the myths and simplifications about the EU that function in parts of partner societies' populations – both those resulting from deliberate disinformation activities and from insufficient contact with the actual functioning of EU institutions. This requires an approach going beyond one-directional transmission of knowledge, in favour of combining formal education with direct experience, such as that offered by exchange programmes, internships or joint research projects.

Strategic communication of EaP 2.0

The success of the renewed Partnership ultimately depends on its professional, purposeful communication – conducted in parallel in two directions. Within the EU, this communication must build and sustain political legitimacy for engagement in the region, under conditions of limited resources and competing budgetary priorities among Member States. In partner states, on the other hand, its task is to build genuine, grassroots social demand for European integration – so that this process is not seen solely as a project of political or administrative elites, but as a choice broadly shared by society, resilient to fluctuations in political sentiment or disinformation campaigns questioning the sense of rapprochement with the EU.

The common denominator of this pillar is the conviction that the durability of transformation in partner states ultimately depends on whether European integration takes root in social consciousness – in access to reliable information, in a sense of historical and cultural community with Europe, and, where more relevant, in an honestly defined community of interests and mutual benefits flowing from cooperation – and in authentic, rather than purely declaratory, public support. Without this rootedness, processes reduced solely to a formal layer will remain vulnerable to reversal.

4

Partner Architecture: Differentiation and Modularity

One of the key premises of EaP 2.0 is a move away from a uniform approach in favour of a flexible architecture that takes account of the differentiation among partners. In the proposed conception, four categories of participation are distinguished, defined by the nature of engagement and scope of cooperation, rather than by a fixed assignment of specific states to them. This construction is deliberate: it allows the concept to retain durability and resilience irrespective of the changing political situation of individual partners, while at the same time giving policy

towards each of them flexibility – including the possibility of moving between categories as reforms progress or regress, without the need to revise the architecture of EaP 2.0 itself. Pillars I–III accordingly vary in depth depending on a partner’s category of participation, reflecting the degree of engagement of its governmental institutions. Pillar IV, given its societal rather than intergovernmental character, remains accessible at every level of engagement – including in situations where cooperation at the governmental level is limited or suspended.

Partner Architecture

Candidate partners full path of integration

- Full participation in all four pillars.
- **MAIN OBJECTIVE:** accession to the EU.
- **INSTRUMENT:** the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA), incorporated into the architecture of the new Global Europe Instrument under the 2028–2034 Multiannual Financial Framework.

Associated partners deep sectoral integration

- Deepened participation in the pillars of an intergovernmental character, gradual integration with the internal market, deepened political partnership.
- Possibility of moving to the next level of cooperation and integration upon meeting the relevant conditions.

Sectoral partners selective cooperation

- Cooperation in the sectors of energy, transport, connectivity, transit corridors, critical raw materials, trade, institution-strengthening and people-to-people contacts.
- Participation in selected modules of the pillars.
- No prospect of membership, but real benefits from sectoral integration.

Partners in countries with limited institutional cooperation dialogue and readiness

Narrow sectoral cooperation, maintenance of channels of dialogue and support programmes for civil society and independent media.

4.1 Differentiated model of participation

This kind of flexibility has a partial precedent in EU neighbourhood policy. The Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) allows for the implementation of regional projects without requiring the participation of all Member States; individual undertakings involve those states that are interested and ready to cooperate, while common political and institutional frameworks for the whole initiative are preserved. The UfM experience confirms the more general principle that a differentiated scope of engagement need not lead to the disintegration of an initiative into a set of unconnected bilateral formats, provided

that common frameworks and a clear, recognisable institutional identity are maintained.

In the case of EaP 2.0, however, differentiation goes further than in the UfM model – it concerns not merely the choice of individual undertakings, but the depth and nature of the entire relationship with the Union. The co-presence of partners within a single architecture does not imply similar obligations or expectations towards all participants, regardless of whether they aspire to EU membership or are interested in cooperation of a narrower, sectoral character.

4.2 Inclusion of Central Asian states

The growing importance of transport corridors linking Asia with Europe while bypassing Russian territory – in particular the so-called Middle Corridor (Trans-Caspian International Transport Route) – together with the region's wealth of energy and raw-material resources (gas, uranium, rare earth metals), creates new, concrete points of contact between the interests of the EU and Central Asia, going beyond the Union's previously rather limited scale of engagement in the region.

The energy crisis of 2021–2022 – whose origins predated even the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, and whose culmination was Russia's use of gas supplies as a tool of political pressure – exposed

a structural energy-security deficit of the European Union and of the region of its eastern neighbours. This experience clearly pointed to the need for diversification of energy sources and supply directions (LNG, alternative pipelines, renewable energy sources) and the construction of real, physical interconnections in a region that for decades remained infrastructurally oriented towards Russia as a central supply hub. The consequence is an acceleration of work on regional energy networks – both within the EU itself and in relations with Eastern Partnership partners and Central Asia – treated no longer as projects of a purely technical or commercial character, but as an element of security strategy. Energy security has ceased to be a secondary

matter relative to the mainstream of EU Eastern policy – it has become one of its central pillars, closely linked both with climate policy and with the broader strategy of resilience against external dependencies.

At the same time, the Central Asian states themselves (the C5 format – Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan) are seeking to recalibrate their foreign relations, treating the current moment as a historic opportunity to reduce their previous, deep dependence on Russia – weakened by the war in Ukraine and by sanctions – while avoiding falling into full dependence on China, whose economic influence in the region is steadily growing. This opens room for a new phase in relations with the EU: the C5 states are seeking more balanced, diversified external partnerships, which converges with the EU interest in diversifying strategic raw-material supplies and building alternative transport routes. This convergence of interests – though not free of asymmetry (differences in potential, different political systems, human rights issues) – is one of the more promising, though still insufficiently exploited, directions for the development of EU Eastern policy in the broad sense.

The inclusion of selected Central Asian states in selected modules of Eastern Partnership 2.0 – within its flexible architecture based on differentiated engagement – constitutes one of the initiative's key strategic innovations. The rationale for such a proposal is multifaceted. First, it carries geopolitical significance: the C5 states' pursuit of more balanced partnerships requires proposing alternative frameworks of association, favouring the diversification of these states' international ties and limiting their one-sided dependence on Russia or China – to the benefit of both the Central Asian states themselves and the EU. Second, the Trans-Caspian transport corridor has gained strategic importance since 2022 as an alternative to routes through Russia, and EU investment in its expansion directly serves the interests of European firms and consumers. Third, the region's critical raw-material deposits (lithium, cobalt, other rare earth metals) are necessary for the European energy transition and defence industry, allowing a reduction in the dependence of both the EU and the C5 states on China. Including Central Asia as sectoral partners does not dilute the identity of EaP 2.0, but expands its strategic significance and legitimises the European presence in the Eurasian space.





First EU–Central Asia summit, Samarkand 2025

Source: European Union

Extending selected EaP 2.0 modules to Central Asian states, however, requires directly addressing an issue that today constitutes the most serious burden on relations with the Union, namely the circumvention of EU export restrictions towards Russia. In the twentieth sanctions package, adopted on 23 April 2026, the EU for the first time applied to a third country a mechanism countering the circumvention of sanctions, imposing an export ban to Kyrgyzstan on selected categories of industrial and telecommunications equipment. The subsequent, twenty-first package also covered entities from Kazakhstan with restrictive measures. The membership of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan in the Eurasian Economic Union, which entails the absence of customs controls on trade with Russia, means that this risk is structural in nature, rather than incidental.

For EaP 2.0, this means that participation in trade, technological and infrastructural modules should be linked to concrete requirements concerning export controls, compliance with customs regulations, and transparency of re-export. It should not, however, depend on

the fulfilment of political-system conditions that the states of the region will not be ready to accept. Conditions defined in this way are also easier to justify in the Council, since they directly serve the Union's own interests. Existing assistance programmes, including the Border Management Programme in Central Asia (BOMCA), already provide ready mechanisms for strengthening the administrative capacities of partner states.

The essence of the European offer for this region should be to expand the scope for independent action by partner states and to create for them an additional direction of cooperation, rather than to confront them with a choice between competing blocs, a choice they consistently seek to avoid. In practice, this also means taking account of differences among the Central Asian states themselves. The natural core of deepened cooperation remains Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, while the participation of Turkmenistan, owing to its policy of permanent neutrality, will likely be more limited and concentrated on selected areas of cooperation.

5

Institutional Architecture

The effectiveness of the four pillars described above depends in practice on whether EaP 2.0 has adequate institutional backing – capable of conducting independent analysis, political coordination and efficient implementation at the operational level. The existing Partnership architecture, based mainly on Commission and EEAS structures, did not provide such backing to a degree adequate to the scale of the challenges described in earlier chapters. The contrast with the southern dimension of neighbourhood policy is instructive in this regard. Both dimensions received, admittedly, parallel directorates-general in February 2025 – for the Middle East, North Africa and the Gulf, and for enlargement and the eastern neighbourhood – yet only the South has, in addition, a permanent regional secretariat of the Union for the Mediterranean in Barcelona and a joint dialogue institution in the form of the Anna

Lindh Foundation in Alexandria, co-created and co-financed together with partner states. The eastern dimension of neighbourhood policy has not to date acquired either of these two elements, despite the scale of challenges it must now confront. Closing this asymmetry requires building its own institutional backing, fulfilling both an analytical function and the function of a standing platform for dialogue with partners. The proposed architecture rests on four complementary elements: a new analytical-networking centre, taking over part of the dialogue and coordination functions hitherto lacking in the eastern dimension; the strengthening of existing coordination structures; the decentralisation of implementation through increased development cooperation by Member States; and consideration of establishing a European implementing agency for projects of the largest scale.

5.1 Institutional and implementation backing

European Centre for the Eastern Partnership (ECEaP)

A key institutional innovation of EaP 2.0 is the establishment of the European Centre for the Eastern Partnership, headquartered in Warsaw with an office in Brussels – an agency of the European Union operating under the Common Foreign and Security Policy regime, constructed on the model of the European Union Institute for Security Studies (EUISS). This model, proven and in operation for almost 25 years, makes it possible to combine the physical presence of an EU analytical institution in one Member State with the full preservation of its EU, rather than national, decision-making and supervisory character – the management, financing and staffing of the Centre should be constructed so as to preclude any reading of this solution as a takeover of EU Eastern policy, while at the same time avoiding legal objections related to the limitations on transferring to EU agencies decision-making competences reserved for the Commission.

The Centre's mandate would cover the whole of the Eastern Partnership agenda: providing independent analysis and recommendations for EU institutions, monitoring the implementation of EaP 2.0 of an advisory character, devoid of binding force, and – particularly importantly – the function of a networking platform for analysts, decision-makers and experts from the EU and partner countries, giving dialogue and mutual acquaintance a lasting institutional anchor, capable of maintaining contact even when cooperation at the governmental level is limited. This function should be complemented by an annual assembly of the Centre, bringing together representatives of EU Member States and of the partners covered by EaP 2.0, of an advisory and consultative character. Political decisions on the priorities of the EaP 2.0 pillars and on the main budgetary allocation would, however, remain exclusively within the purview of the Commission, the EEAS and the Council – the

Centre is to serve as an analytical backstop, not a decision-making hub.

The choice of Warsaw as the seat of the ECEaP rests on the threefold role that Poland plays in relation to EU Eastern policy. First, Poland is a country that itself underwent systemic transformation and the process of integration with the EU, possessing thereby unique, still relevant experience – concerning institutional reform, the building of the rule of law, or regulatory alignment – from which the partners covered by EaP 2.0, today at various stages of an analogous path, can draw. Second, Poland has deep expertise on the region, built up over decades, gathered both by public administration and by a developed ecosystem of think tanks and non-governmental organisations (including the Casimir Pulaski Foundation, the Centre for Eastern Studies, the Polish Institute of International Affairs, and the Jul Mieroszewski Centre for Dialogue), which makes it an active architect of EU Eastern policy. Poland has played this role since the very beginning of the Eastern Partnership, whose original concept was created in 2008–2009 as a joint Polish–Swedish initiative. Third, locating the Centre in Warsaw represents the EU's recognition of the special role that Poland and the other states of the eastern flank play in the co-shaping of common security policy. These three dimensions – transformation experience, regional expertise, and symbolism of engagement in the security of the eastern flank – mutually reinforce one another, making Warsaw a location justified on the merits, and not solely politically.

Locating an institution of neighbourhood policy outside Brussels would not be a solution without precedent – the EUISS itself, on whose model the ECEaP is based, is headquartered in Paris, not in Brussels, while fully preserving its EU character.

The financing model should follow the solution adopted for the EUISS: contributions from all Member States calculated according to the gross

national income key, under the supervision of a Governing Board chaired by the High Representative. A mechanism constructed in this way ensures that financial responsibility for the Centre is spread across the whole Union in proportion to the economic potential of its members, rather than resting on a narrow group of states particularly interested in Eastern affairs – which further limits the risk of the Centre’s seat being perceived as a special privilege of the host state.

Strengthening existing EU structures

The establishment of the ECEaP does not replace, but complements, the role of the institutions already responsible for coordinating Eastern policy. Coordination of EaP 2.0 should remain the responsibility of the European Commission and the European External Action Service, with a clearly defined political mandate and a dedicated, easily identifiable budget allocation within the future Global Europe instrument. This approach rests on the conviction that the effectiveness of EaP 2.0 depends to a greater degree on the quality and clarity of the mandate assigned to already existing structures than on multiplying new decision-making centres – the dispersal of coordination functions across too many institutions would risk weakening, rather than strengthening, the coherence of the whole policy.

The clarity of this mandate has significance going beyond purely organisational matters. A dedicated and clearly identifiable budget line within the Global Europe Instrument also has a political dimension – under conditions of the new instrument’s growing flexibility, a clearly identified allocation for the Eastern dimension of the Partnership constitutes a necessary condition for ensuring that EaP 2.0 priorities do not get lost amid competition with other geographic and thematic objectives. It is also important that the strengthened coordination mandate encompass systematic use of the analysis and recommendations provided by the ECEaP – so that the Centre’s work translates into the actual decision-making process, rather than remaining purely analytical work conducted in parallel to the actual political process. Strengthening EU institutions also facilitates cooperation with the coalition of states engaged in EaP 2.0, giving it

an institutional point of reference around which it can formulate its priorities and political initiatives.

Development cooperation as an implementation mechanism

The operational dimension of EaP 2.0 – that is, the actual implementation of projects in the areas described within the individual pillars – should rest predominantly on the expanded engagement of Member States’ national development agencies, operating in a coordinated formula close to the Team Europe approach already applied in EU practice. This model combines the advantages of decentralisation – including in particular the use of the existing experience, competences and field presence of individual national agencies – with the need to preserve the strategic coherence of the whole undertaking.

The scale of the funds that will be subject to this implementation model justifies the particular weight of this institutional choice. Under the currently applicable 2021–2027 Multiannual Financial Framework, around 10 per cent of the entire EU budget is allocated to the Community’s external policy, most of which goes towards the performance of tasks in the development cooperation model, implemented directly by the European Commission, jointly with Member States, or through national agencies and development banks. The financial framework being negotiated for 2028–2034 is to significantly increase this allocation – from EUR 110 to 200 billion, of which 90 per cent of expenditure is to qualify as Official Development Assistance (ODA). This increase means that the choice of the right, efficient implementation model – capable of effectively distributing a growing pool of funds – takes on strategic significance going beyond the institutional architecture of EaP 2.0 itself.

A condition for the success of such an approach is ensuring balanced participation by entities from various Member States, including smaller donors and providers of foreign aid, so that the implementation of EaP 2.0 does not in practice become dominated by a few of the largest national agencies, which would weaken the sense of shared ownership of the initiative on the part of the Union as a whole.

Towards a European implementing agency – the European Eastern Agency

For undertakings whose scale exceeds the capacities of individual national agencies – large infrastructural, energy or resilience-related projects – it seems reasonable to consider, over the longer term, establishing a European implementing agency of a purely operational character, analogous to the Commission's existing executive agencies. A body of this kind, like the ECEAP, would remain subordinate to decisions of the Commission and the EEAS, without its own political competences – it would differ from the ECEAP, however, in function: whereas the ECEAP provides analysis and builds a platform for dialogue, the Agency would implement concrete projects on behalf of partners, taking on the operational role that the ECEAP does not, by design, perform.

A certain institutional asymmetry, already visible today in comparison with national models, argues in favour of considering such a solution. At Member State level, development cooperation typically rests on a pair of institutions with complementary functions – a development bank, responsible for financing (loans, guarantees,

equity instruments), and an implementing agency, responsible for the operational execution of projects on the ground (management, technical expertise, field presence) – examples of which include the German tandem of KfW and GIZ, the Polish BGK and FSM, the Swedish Swedfund and SIDA, the Austrian OeEB and ADA, and others. At EU level, an equivalent of the first element of this pair exists – through the European Investment Bank and cooperation with the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development – but a fully developed equivalent of the second element is lacking: an EU-wide implementing agency functionally comparable to GIZ, the Austrian ADA, or the Swedish SIDA. This structural gap, alongside the need to handle a growing scale of projects, constitutes a significant argument for considering such a solution within the EaP 2.0 architecture.

This solution should, however, at the present stage, be treated as a direction for further reflection, rather than a ready-made element of the EaP 2.0 architecture – its merit will depend on the experience accumulated during the earlier implementation phase, based on Member State development cooperation and on deepened cooperation with financial institutions such as the EIB and the EBRD, already actively engaged in the region today.

5.2 Coherence with existing EU instruments

An important premise of the EaP 2.0 architecture is that it does not create a parallel structure of financing and coordination, but rather constitutes an overlay and a coordinating framework for instruments that already function or are currently being designed within the EU's external and internal policy. This approach makes it possible to avoid multiplying separate financial and administrative mechanisms, and instead to concentrate effort on the coherent targeting of existing funding streams towards the objectives and priorities described in the earlier pillars.

The central place in this architecture is occupied by the future Global Europe Instrument, which, in the 2028–2034 multiannual financial framework, is to replace the existing NDICI, the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA III), and the Ukraine Facility, becoming the main source of financing for EaP 2.0 – in particular through the geographic pillar covering enlargement and the eastern neighbourhood, which forms the main budgetary envelope for the Partnership's actions*. A separate, though complementary, role is played by the European Peace

* In accordance with the Commission's proposal, support for Ukraine under the GEI will not be financed from the ordinary geographic envelope, but from a separate, off-budget reserve of around EUR 100 billion – so as not to burden the main pool of funds for the remaining partners of the Eastern Neighbourhood and the Western Balkans.

EU Instrument		Application within the pillars of EaP 2.0
GEI	Europe Pillar (Enlargement and Eastern Neighbourhood)	Central source of financing for EaP 2.0 in the 2028–2034 MFF; replaces NDICI, IPA III and the Ukraine Facility. Main source for: institutional reforms, budget support, integration with the internal market (Pillars II and III of EaP 2.0).
	Policy-based loans / MFA	Pillar I of EaP 2.0 – rapid macro-financial assistance in crisis situations; systematic support for budgetary reforms
	Blended finance / Global Gateway	Pillar II – EastConnect, Middle Corridor Plus; mobilisation of private capital for infrastructure
	Cushion (reserve)	Flexible response to destabilisation, hybrid threats, humanitarian assistance.
European Peace Facility		Pillar I – support for partners' defence capabilities; outside the MFF ceilings; complementary to the GEI
Connecting Europe Facility III (CEF III)		Extension of the TEN-T and TEN-E networks to selected Eastern partners and Asian corridors under PMI and PCI (Projects of Mutual Interest, Projects of Common Interest) in synergy with the Global Gateway strategy.
Erasmus+ / Horizon Europe		Pillar IV – educational and research mobility; open to Eastern partners on terms adjusted to the level of partnership
Bilateral contributions from Member States		European Centre for the Eastern Partnership (ECEAP)

Facility, supporting the development of partners' defence capabilities in a manner complementary to the actions envisaged under Pillar I of EaP 2.0, concerning security. In the infrastructural dimension, the Connecting Europe Facility (CEF III), together with the trans-European transport and energy networks (TEN-T, TEN-E), is of key importance, with their extension to Eastern partners constituting a direct reflection of the priorities described in Pillar II. The entirety of these infrastructural and investment actions in turn forms part of the broader Global Gateway initiative, in relation to which EaP 2.0 is positioned as a more geographically specific formulation for the eastern neighbourhood region – with the expansion of the TEN-T network and the Middle Corridor as flagship projects financed in synergy between Global Gateway and Global Europe Instrument funds. Finally,

the educational and scientific dimension of the Partnership is based on already existing EU programmes – Erasmus+ and Horizon Europe – open to Eastern partners on terms adjusted to the level of advancement of individual partner relationships.

The architecture designed in this way has an important consequence for the assessment of EaP 2.0's feasibility: its success depends to a large degree not on the creation of new sources of funding, but on the capacity of EU institutions to ensure coherence and appropriate prioritisation of the Eastern dimension within instruments that simultaneously serve many other objectives of the Union's external and internal policy – which entails a real risk of competing priorities within the same, aggregated budgetary envelopes.

5.3 Governance

The architecture of multilateral governance of the Eastern Partnership – Partnership summits held cyclically at the level of heads of state and government, ministerial meetings, specialised thematic platforms, as well as Euronest as a forum for parliamentary dialogue, the Civil Society Forum, and CORLEAP as a platform for cooperation between local and regional authorities – remains unchanged in principle under EaP 2.0. These elements constitute proven, long-functioning channels of political, parliamentary and civic dialogue between the EU and its Eastern partners, and there is no need to replace them with a new decision-making structure.

What EaP 2.0 brings to this architecture is therefore not a new level of political governance, but two elements that reinforce it. First,

the previously postulated strengthening of the coordination mandate on the part of the Commission and the EEAS is to give the existing summits and ministerial meetings greater strategic coherence, linking them more clearly to the priorities of individual pillars and to the allocation of funds under the Global Europe Instrument. Second, the ECEAP, headquartered in Warsaw, complements this architecture with a standing, independent analytical and networking backstop, which has hitherto had no equivalent – none of the existing platforms (Euronest, the Civil Society Forum, CORLEAP) performs the function of systematic monitoring of implementation or in-depth expert analysis, being focused rather on political, parliamentary and local-government dialogue than on the analytical-advisory layer.

6

The 2028–2034 MFF and the Global Europe Instrument: A Window of Opportunity for EaP 2.0

Negotiations on the Multiannual Financial Framework for 2028–2034 are currently entering a decisive phase. This is a moment of key importance for EaP 2.0 – budgetary decisions taken in the second half of 2026 and in 2027 will determine the financial framework of the initiative for the entire following seven-year period, including the relative weight of the Eastern dimension of neighbourhood policy against other geographic and thematic priorities financed from the same, consolidated Global Europe instrument.

This moment should be seen above all as a window of opportunity, not merely as a source of risk. The consolidation of existing instruments – NDICI, IPA III and the Ukraine Facility – into a single, integrated Global Europe Instrument opens up space for designing the financing architecture of EaP 2.0 from the ground up, in a manner corresponding to the priorities set out in the earlier chapters, rather than adapting new objectives to the logic of instruments designed in a different geopolitical context.

The scale of this opportunity results primarily from the fact that the consolidation of instruments within the GEI requires a new geographic distribution of funds – the point of reference for the negotiations is therefore not the defence of the existing status quo, but the active shaping of a new allocation structure. The very architecture of the GEI already partly responds to

postulates relevant from the EaP 2.0 perspective: the inclusion of enlargement processes (including the candidacies of Ukraine and Moldova) and the eastern neighbourhood within a common geographic pillar, “Europe”, means that accession logic and neighbourhood logic will no longer be dispersed between separate, weakly connected envelopes, as was the case with the previous separation of NDICI and IPA III. It is also worth noting that the most urgent financial needs related to the war and the reconstruction of Ukraine remain largely addressed outside the GEI itself – through dedicated instruments beyond the main MFF budget – which to some extent relieves the GEI negotiations of the need to resolve this issue directly.

The greatest conceptual challenge, however, remains the very direction of the reform within which the GEI is being created. It forms part of a broader restructuring of the multiannual financial framework, aimed at creating a smaller number of more flexible instruments, based to a greater degree on funds not pre-assigned to specific objectives or geographic envelopes – which is intended to give the Commission greater room for manoeuvre and a faster, more effective response to crisis situations. This direction is, in principle, desirable from the point of view of the Union’s capacity to respond flexibly to changing geopolitical circumstances, but it also means at the same time that the previous logic of rigid, guaranteed geographic envelopes will

GEI Pillar	Significance for EaP 2.0
Europe	The key pillar for EaP 2.0. Covers: all candidates (Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia), Eastern partners (Armenia, Azerbaijan), and support for the civil society of Belarus, but is not identical to EaP 2.0, also covering the Western Balkans.
Southern Neighbourhood and the Gulf	Not directly relevant to EaP 2.0 – important for the overall coherence of the GEI’s global strategy.
Asia, Pacific, Americas, Caribbean	Sectoral partners from Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan) may be financed from this pillar or from the global pillar.
Sub-Saharan Africa	Outside the scope of EaP 2.0.
Global Pillar	Thematic initiatives – four areas referred to as the “4Ps” (People, Planet, Prosperity, Partnerships): human rights and democracy, support for civil society organisations, peace, stability and conflict prevention. Complementary to the geographic pillars and to cross-regional EaP 2.0 actions.
Cushion (reserve)	A flexible financial mechanism intended for rapid response to unforeseen crises and new geopolitical challenges.

most likely give way to a model based to a greater extent on discretionary allocation of funds. The challenge for EaP 2.0 is therefore no longer solely to secure a formally earmarked budgetary envelope, but to ensure that the priorities and logic of the Eastern dimension of the Partnership – described in the earlier pillars – are durably embedded in the criteria and practice according to which this increased decision-making discretion of the Commission will actually be exercised.

GEI architecture: five geographic pillars and a global pillar

The mechanism for linking partners from separate geographic baskets of the Global Europe Instrument would not be an isolated solution for EaP 2.0. An analogous logic of triangular co-operation, going beyond the formal division of

geographic pillars, was already adopted by the European Commission in October 2025 within the framework of the Pact for the Mediterranean, which – alongside cooperation with ten southern-neighbourhood partners – envisages deepened cooperation with the Gulf states, Sub-Saharan Africa, the Western Balkans and Turkey, financed partly from a separate geographic pillar of the GEI. This indicates that the GEI architecture, despite its division into separate regional envelopes, by design allows for flexible, project-based linking of partners related in terms of strategic interests – irrespective of formal pillar affiliation. The inclusion of Central Asian states in EaP 2.0 fits into this same direction: the linking of partners whose interests – in the areas of connectivity, diversification of energy and raw-material supplies, or resilience against external dependencies – show a genuine convergence, irrespective of which geographic envelope ultimately finances their engagement.

7

Conclusions and Recommendations

Eastern Partnership 2.0 is an ambitious but necessary response to the fundamental geopolitical changes taking place in Europe's eastern neighbourhood. The proposed architecture deliberately combines continuity with innovation: it builds on more than fifteen years of the Eastern Partnership's achievements, its institutional network and accumulated experience, while at the same time fundamentally reforming its logic, instruments and objectives, so that they correspond to the realities of the contemporary world, to new challenges, and to new opportunities.

A new Partnership

Over the years of cooperation, the very dynamic of relations between the European Union and its Member States and the countries of the Eastern Partnership region has changed. Partner states – to a greater degree than ever before – are ceasing to be seen solely as recipients of assistance and are becoming co-creators of the security, stability and resilience of the entire European continent. Ukraine, defending itself against full-scale aggression, has contributed to shared European security combat experience, defence innovations (including, among others, in the field of drones, cyber warfare and cognitive warfare), and knowledge of the nature of the contemporary Russian threat that no EU Member State possesses to a comparable degree. Moldova, functioning for years under direct hybrid pressure, has, with EU support, developed practical experience in countering disinformation and external interference. The lessons from this experience are valuable for the whole Union. The

South Caucasus, together with the advancing process of normalisation of relations between Armenia and Azerbaijan, is gaining a chance to transform itself from a region of long-standing conflict into a new connectivity hub – both transit and energy – linking Europe, Turkey, Central Asia and the broader Caspian Sea region, opening up new possibilities of cooperation for the EU that go beyond the previous engagement logic dominated by the management of a frozen conflict. The Central Asian states, for their part, in seeking to diversify their own external relations, offer the EU a real contribution to the continent's energy and raw-material security.

This change has far-reaching consequences for the nature of the Partnership itself. A relationship previously based largely on a one-directional transfer – of financing, standards, expert knowledge – is giving way to a relationship based on mutuality, in which the Eastern partners contribute to the shared undertaking their own unique resources and experience, rather than solely a need for support. EaP 2.0 should fully reflect this change – not through rhetorical declarations of partnership, but through concrete mechanisms of co-decision, the use of their expert knowledge (including within the networking platform of the European Centre for the Eastern Partnership), and the building of a joint, rather than solely EU, agenda for the region's security and resilience.

This growing agency of the partners is reflected in several areas of strategic importance for the whole of Europe, in which the significance of EaP 2.0 extends far beyond neighbourhood

policy alone. First and foremost, this concerns the security of the whole of Europe – EaP 2.0 should be seen as an instrument for strengthening it through the stabilisation of the EU’s immediate neighbourhood, rather than as a separate policy concerning its periphery. It is precisely the resilience and active engagement of the partners themselves – not only actions taken by the EU – that today constitute the first line of defence against the destabilisation that, as shown in earlier chapters, Russia (and potentially other hostile actors) consistently employs as a tool of political pressure. The process of postwar reconstruction of Ukraine, already under way in parallel with the ongoing conflict, should be seen as an undertaking engaging a broad spectrum of actors on both sides – not only central institutions, but equally enterprises, regions and local governments, non-governmental organisations, both Ukrainian and EU, which can become key partners in this process at the operational level, drawing on direct partner relationships and experience gained in earlier phases of cooperation. Closer cooperation in sectors of strategic importance for resilience – energy, cybersecurity, critical raw-material supply chains – brings

symmetrical benefits: it strengthens both the partners’ capacity to withstand external pressure and the security of the Union itself, for which this region remains an immediate geographic neighbourhood. The expansion of transport, energy and digital infrastructure linking the EU with its Eastern partners and Central Asia creates space for the emergence of a new logistical hub, connecting the transport corridors of Central Europe with the Middle Corridor and, further, with the Central Asian region – significant both economically and strategically, in the context of diversifying trade routes.

It would be a mistake, at the same time, to underestimate the human dimension of mutual relations. Investment in universities, scholarship programmes and academic exchange remains one of the most effective, though longest-horizon, tools for building lasting, pro-European-oriented elites in partner states – elites that, over the coming decades, will shape the political and economic direction of their countries – and of societies for which Europe can be a source of inspiration on the path towards shaping their own prosperity, development and security.

Recommendations

1. Building a coalition of states supporting EaP 2.0.

The success of the initiative depends on the ability to build, within the Council of the EU, a lasting coalition of Member States particularly interested in strengthening the Eastern dimension of neighbourhood policy – in the first instance Poland, the Nordic and Baltic states, as well as Slovakia, Czechia and Romania. Such a coalition should act in a coordinated manner at

every stage of shaping EaP 2.0 – from budget negotiations, through the development of the institutional architecture, to ongoing implementation – so that the Eastern dimension of EU policy does not have to rely on the initiative of individual states, but rests on broad, geographically differentiated political support.

2. An initiative to establish EaP 2.0 at the European Council level

The initiative should be brought to the highest political level of the EU in parallel with the final phase of negotiations on the 2028–2034 Multiannual Financial Framework, so that decisions on the priorities and architecture of EaP 2.0 are

taken in parallel with decisions on the shape of the Global Europe Instrument, rather than as an afterthought taken only once the budget negotiations have been concluded, when room for manoeuvre would be significantly limited.

3. Actively negotiating the shape of the Global Europe Instrument.

In light of the described reform moving towards greater flexibility of the GEI, it is essential to ensure that the logic and priorities of the Eastern dimension of the Partnership are durably embedded in the allocation criteria applied in practice by the Commission within the “Europe” pillar. At the same time, efforts should be made

to secure appropriate consideration of the interests of sectoral partners from Central Asia within the Asian and global pillars of the GEI, so that the growing importance of this region finds financial reflection adequate to its strategic weight.

4. Advocating for the establishment of the ECEaP and investment in regional expertise.

The establishment of the European Centre for the Eastern Partnership, headquartered in Warsaw with an office in Brussels, should be treated as an institutional priority of the coalition of states supporting EaP 2.0. At the same time, it is necessary to increase funding for national

and regional centres of expertise – universities, think tanks and non-governmental organisations engaged in Eastern policy – as the foundation on which the quality of the analysis and recommendations feeding the EU decision-making process in this area rests.

5. Developing implementation capacity through development cooperation.

The effective implementation of EaP 2.0 at the operational level requires the active engagement of the coalition of states supporting the initiative in expanding implementation capacity based on development cooperation. In practice, this means expanding the engagement of national development agencies in the Team Europe formula, while ensuring balanced participation by smaller donors, so that implementation is not dominated by the largest entities. At the same time, it is necessary to make fuller use of the potential of national and European development banks – including the European Investment Bank and the European Bank for

Reconstruction and Development – as instruments of debt and blended finance, complementary to grant support from the Global Europe Instrument, particularly in the area of large infrastructural and energy projects. Finally, the coalition should actively monitor whether the scale and complexity of undertakings related to the reconstruction of Ukraine and the development of regional infrastructure justify considering the establishment of a European implementing agency of a purely operational character, dedicated to projects exceeding the capacities of individual national agencies or banks.

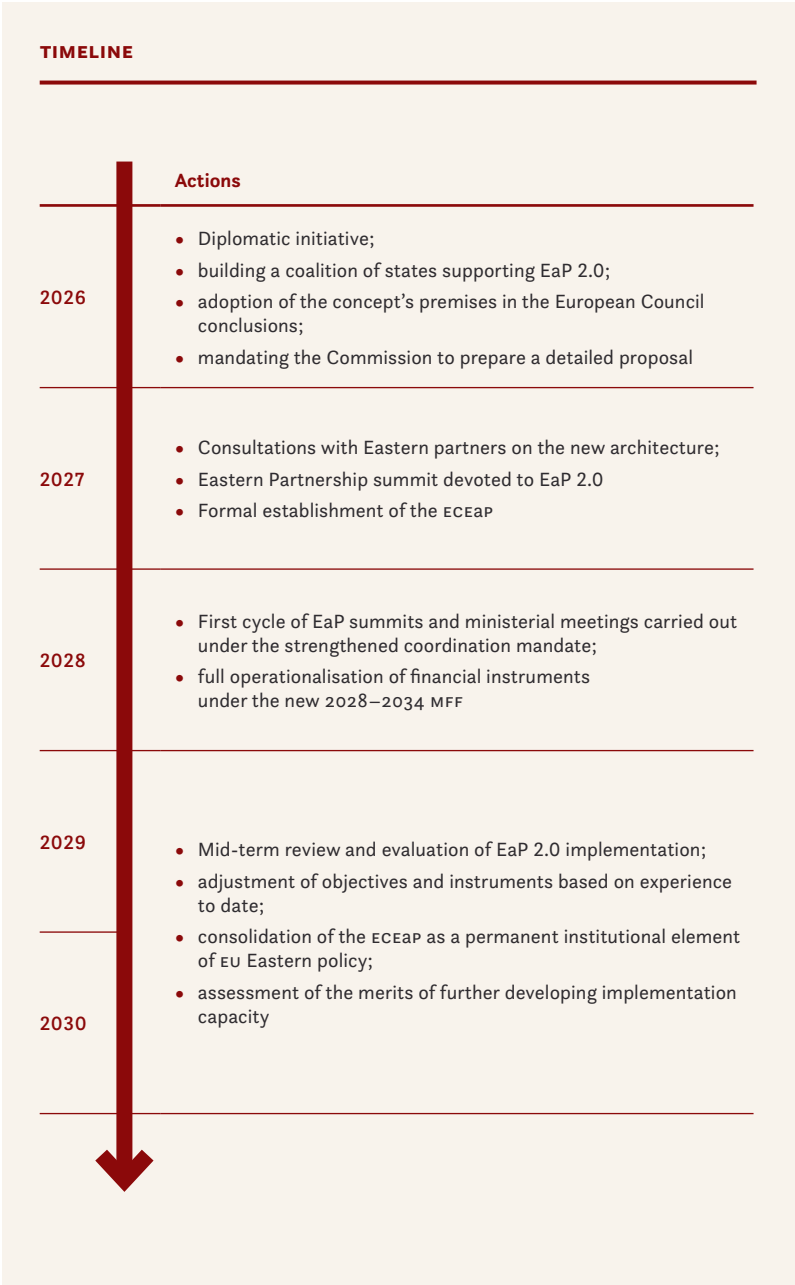
6. Inclusion and partnership.

Treating partners as independent, agentic subjects of the relationship – based on dialogue and mutual acquaintance, rather than on a one-directional transfer of standards or narrative from the EU to the countries of the region – should be a permanent principle in the design of EaP 2.0. In practice, this means involving representatives of partner societies – experts, local-government officials, non-governmental organisations – at as early a stage as possible

in the design of individual instruments, rather than solely at the implementation stage. European integration, legal and institutional rapprochement in individual areas, sectoral cooperation between partners and the Union, and inter-societal dialogue should be consistently treated as an expression of their sovereign choice, resulting from a community of interests, rather than as an element of geopolitical rivalry.

7. Conducting consistent strategic communication around EaP 2.0.

The success of the initiative requires professional communication conducted in parallel in two directions: within the EU – building and sustaining political legitimacy and readiness for appropriate financing of the initiative under conditions of competing budgetary priorities; in partner states – building authentic, grassroots social demand for European integration, resilient to disinformation campaigns questioning the sense of this rapprochement. Without such consistent communication, even the best-designed institutional and financial architecture of EaP 2.0 will remain exposed to erosion of political support on both sides.



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