

Development of the Eastern Partnership Policy: Mechanism and Problems of Implementation

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Abstract: *Recent years have been marked by the transformation of the European Neighbourhood Policy within the framework of the Eastern Partnership into the expansion policy towards Ukraine and Moldova, as well as the withdrawal of Belarus from the programme. These circumstances determine the research's relevance. The research aims to analyse the mechanisms of development of the Eastern Partnership programme, formulate the problems of the implementation of this initiative at the present stage and propose options for their solution. The methodological basis of the research was compiled on the combination of such methods as analogy, classification, historical, political, legal analysis, forecasting, statistical data analysis, structural-functional and comparative. The research characterises the main stages of the Eastern Partnership programme's evolution and identifies cooperation principles within the initiative across different periods. It also formulates the main directions and features of EU interaction with participating countries, determines trade turnover volumes between partners, assesses Brexit's impact on programme implementation and explores the reasons and circumstances behind Belarus' withdrawal from the initiative. The article can be used by scholars whose interests include the problems of European integration, the EU foreign policy and areas of cooperation between the countries of the organisation and the post-Soviet states.*

Keywords: *European integration, interstate cooperation, neighbourhood and partnership, post-Soviet space, EU foreign policy*

Introduction

The Eastern Partnership (EaP) initiative, launched by the European Union (EU) in 2009, remains highly relevant today amidst evolving geopolitical dynamics in Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus region. With its aim to forge closer ties with six post-Soviet states – Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine – the EaP continues to serve as a crucial framework for fostering political cooperation and economic integration (Caras 2021). However, the initiative faces a range of challenges and complexities that warrant closer examination. These include varying levels of commitment among partner countries, geopolitical tensions, internal governance issues and the EU's own capacity to effectively engage with the region (Latoszek & Klos 2016). Additionally, recent developments, such as the granting of candidate status for EU accession to Ukraine and Moldova in 2022, highlight the dynamic nature of the EaP and the need for ongoing analysis and evaluation.

Against this backdrop, this article seeks to explore the current state of affairs within the Eastern Partnership, assess the progress made towards its objectives and identify key challenges and opportunities moving forward. By delving into issues such as political association, economic integration, energy security and the EU accession process, the article aims to provide insights into the complexities of EU engagement in the region and contribute to informed policy discussions. Specifically, the objectives include:

1. Characterising the historical stages of the Eastern Partnership programme's implementation, delineating key milestones and transitions.
2. Analysing the primary areas of cooperation and interaction within the initiative, encompassing political, economic and social dimensions.
3. Identifying and discussing the challenges and obstacles encountered during the implementation of the Eastern Partnership programme, with a nuanced understanding of the international context.

At the same time, in June 2021, the Belarusian authorities announced the suspension of participation in the initiative in response to EU sanctions. The ongoing armed conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh between Armenia and Azerbaijan, the war in Ukraine and separatism in Georgia and Moldova are also of particular concern to Europe, whose security interests directly depend on the region, which is part of the Eastern Partnership and is in the immediate geographical neighbourhood of the EU. Therefore, the problematics of the EU's Eastern policy are becoming increasingly important, both in terms of the geopolitical situation in the world and in the socio-political transformation of individual EaP countries. Furthermore, the differentiated approach in the implementation of the Eastern Partnership initiative gave an impetus to the development of mutually beneficial cooperation between the parties. These circumstances require the

development of new mechanisms and directions of interaction between the European Union and partner countries. This determines the research's relevance.

Despite some criticism and challenges faced by the Eastern Partnership initiative, the topic remains intriguing due to its significance in shaping EU foreign policy in the post-Soviet space. The Eastern Partnership represents an attempt by the EU to foster political association and economic integration with neighbouring countries in Eastern Europe without offering them full membership (Zhukorska 2024). This approach reflects the complex geopolitical dynamics and diverse interests at play in the region. This article makes several contributions to the discourse on EU external relations and regional cooperation initiatives. Firstly, it provides a comprehensive analysis of the evolution of the Eastern Partnership, outlining its historical development, key objectives and implementation strategies. By examining the experiences of participating countries, the article offers insights into the successes and challenges of the initiative. Secondly, the article delves into the specific interactions and cooperation areas within the Eastern Partnership framework. It highlights the varied approaches adopted by partner countries, ranging from ambitious aspirations for full EU membership to the pragmatic maintaining of a neutral stance.

Scholars devote much attention to the problems of the implementation of the Eastern Partnership programme in its various aspects. At the same time, a comprehensive assessment of the initiative considering the current geopolitical realities is carried out for the first time. Only a comprehensive study of the specifics of the transformation of the EU policy towards the partner countries will make it possible to improve the effectiveness of interaction between the parties. Thus, researcher Crombois (2023) expresses the opinion that the armed conflict in Ukraine may lead to the reformatting of the Eastern Partnership. According to the author, the fundamentals of the programme will remain unchanged for some time.

Laumulin (2014) considered the geopolitical component of the Eastern Partnership programme. He believes that this initiative aims to reduce Russia's influence in the post-Soviet space and integrate the former Soviet Union countries into the European economic and political community. Azerbaijani author Ismailli (2021) examined the EU policy of integration of the states of the former Soviet Union within the framework of the Eastern Partnership. He concluded that the EU as a mainstream integration union has noticeably strengthened and continues to strengthen its geostrategic position in the post-Soviet space by implementing the EaP programme. Russia, in its turn, by creating a regional economic union has formed its key integration trend in opposition to the EU and is trying to prevent the process of integration of all Eastern Partnership members into European structures (Kalaganov et al. 2018).

Paramonov et al. (2017) focused on the EU's influence on Central Asian states (Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Kyrgyzstan) and assessed

the likelihood of expanding the EaP programme to this region. The authors believe that due to the deteriorating situation in Europe itself, the EU will devote more attention to internal problems and relations with its immediate neighbours, taking cooperation with such a geographically distant region as Central Asia out of its priorities. Ibrayeva et al. (2017) considered the problem of strengthening the cooperation of the Caspian region countries (Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, Iran and Russia) with the EU in the field of energy security. Azerbaijan, which is a member of the EaP and plays an important role in the transit of energy carriers from Central Asia to Europe, is of particular interest in this context.

According to the researchers, Brussels is pursuing a policy to preserve energy security, which has two dimensions in the form of integration and diversification. The first component consists of expanding trade ties with the countries of the Caspian region, which have rich oil and gas reserves. Diversification efforts are related to attempts to establish new routes bypassing Russia, to attract new energy suppliers and, finally, to promote the development of 'green' energy. At the same time, the authors note that the EU lacks a comprehensive energy strategy for the states in the region.

The research object is the relations between the European Union and the post-Soviet states within the framework of the 'Eastern Partnership'.

Materials and methods

The methodological basis of this research was formed on a qualitative combination of such methods as analogy, classification, comparative method, historical, forecasting, method of political and legal analysis, and structural, functional and statistical analyses of data. In addition, the empirical data provided an assessment of publications in periodicals, materials of scientific and practical conferences, official documents, interstate agreements and international treaties.

The analogy method was used to identify common features of the post-Soviet countries of Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus that joined the Eastern Partnership initiative. The classification method was used to identify the main objectives of cooperation between the EU and partner countries within the framework of the EaP programme.

The historical method was used to characterise the stages of the evolution of the Eastern Partnership initiative, highlight the characteristic features of each of them, identify cause-and-effect relations and trace the emerging trends and peculiarities of the development of relations between the project participants. In addition, it was used to study the historical prerequisites for the formation of the project based on the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP).

The comparative method became the basis for comparing the conditions of cooperation between the European Union and Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan and Belarus until 2021, as well as for analysing the achieved results

in this sector. It also provided an opportunity to highlight the peculiarities and main directions of cooperation between the partner states in this context. The main focus was on cooperation in the economic, cultural and political spheres, as well as interaction between the participants of the initiative themselves.

The method of political and legal analysis was used to examine bilateral agreements, international treaties and other documents that characterise the directions and conditions of joint work between the European Union and the partner countries. In particular, the Joint Address ‘Strengthening Sustainability – Eastern Partnership that Benefits All’ (EaP priorities after 2020), the memorandum between the ministers of foreign affairs of Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine on the establishment of the Associated Trio and the declaration ‘Recovery, Sustainability and Reform’ were studied (Eastern Partnership Policy... 2020; Ministry of Foreign Affairs... 2021; Council of the European Union 2021).

The method of statistical data analysis was used to assess the trends of social and economic development of the states participating in the programme. Namely, statistical information from the World Trade Organisation and the World Bank was used, characterising the economy and foreign trade of the states that joined the initiative, as well as export and import volumes by country and commodity (World Bank 2023). These data helped to formulate a picture of economic development trends, to determine the volume of EU investments in the economies of the partner states and the trade turnover between them.

The forecasting method was used to outline the main and most probable ways of developing the Eastern Partnership programme for the coming years, identify regularities and trends of changes in the implementation of the initiative considering the current geopolitical realities, as well as to formulate promising sectors for further cooperation, considering the principle of differentiation of the partner countries.

The structural-functional method was used to study the place of the post-Soviet states in the EU foreign policy and to assess Brussels’ approaches in relations with the countries participating in the Eastern Partnership programme. It was also used to analyse the multi-level institutional structure through which the EU political influence on the states of Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus is exercised, the mechanisms and instruments of this influence, and its manifestations in domestic political processes.

Results

Conditions and prerequisites for the formation of the Eastern Partnership initiative, the first achievements of the programme

After the collapse of the USSR, the main targets of Brussels’ eastern policy were the states of the socialist camp. They immediately announced their European

choice, although they travelled the path of integration with varying speed and success. As a result of these processes, the Czech Republic, Poland, Slovakia, Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, Hungary and Slovenia became EU members in 2004, and Bulgaria and Romania in 2007. After that, Brussels' attention shifted to the post-Soviet countries. In 2004, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Ukraine, Belarus and Moldova, together with ten Southern Mediterranean states, were invited to participate in the European Neighbourhood Policy programme.

In 2009, when the Eastern Partnership was launched, the political situation in Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus was notably complex and tumultuous. Prior to this, Eastern Europe had experienced significant political upheavals, including the Orange Revolution in Ukraine in 2004 and the Rose Revolution in Georgia in 2003. Additionally, the region was plagued by unresolved conflicts such as the disputes in Transnistria, Abkhazia, South Ossetia (the so-called Tskhinvali Region) and the Nagorno-Karabakh region. The fall of the communist regime in Moldova in 2009 further exemplifies the era's political instability and the broader context of change and uncertainty in the region. These events had a major impact on international politics and security in the region. The EaP was not primarily designed as a tool for crisis management or conflict resolution (Razakova 2024). Instead, its focus was on fostering political association and economic integration with the European Union. As described in the literature, the EaP sought to support the development of democratic institutions, enhance economic cooperation and strengthen bilateral ties with the EU. While it did address some aspects of regional instability, its core objectives were centred around reform and integration rather than directly managing crises or resolving conflicts. In particular, the European Union sought to strengthen stability and democracy in the region through cooperation with the countries of Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus.

The creation of the Eastern Partnership was a response to the need to develop a new strategy for cooperation between the EU and the countries of the Eastern neighbourhood, aiming to differentiate the approach from that applied to the 'neighbours of Europe' in the south (Volkov & Poleshchuk 2019). This strategy focused on supporting reforms, fostering trade and economic growth, and strengthening democracy and human rights in the region. In a broader regional context, the launch of the Union for the Mediterranean in 2008 also played a significant role. This initiative was established as a response to similar challenges in the southern Mediterranean region and sought to enhance political and economic cooperation between EU member states and Mediterranean countries. The Union for the Mediterranean aimed to address regional issues through collaborative projects and initiatives, complementing the Eastern Partnership by focusing on different geographical and political dynamics. Both the Eastern Partnership and the Union for the Mediterranean were part of the EU's broader strategy to engage with its neighbouring regions, addressing

specific regional needs while promoting stability, prosperity and cooperation (Walter 2020).

The first meeting, which adopted a joint declaration and formally endorsed the Eastern Partnership, took place in Prague in May 2009. This historic moment reflected an important step in cooperation between the EU and the partner countries. The main goal of the initiative was to create conditions for accelerating political and economic integration between the EU and partner countries by promoting socio-economic and political structural reforms. In its initial phase, the initiative envisaged the conclusion of Association Agreements with the EU, signing of agreements on the establishment of a free trade area based on the harmonisation of national legislation with the EU regulatory framework, and visa liberalisation, taking into account measures to improve security and combat illegal migration. These measures were aimed at strengthening cooperation and partnership between the EU and the EaP countries to promote sustainable economic growth and democratic development in the region. Warsaw then hosted the second EaP summit in 2011, when the two-year-long-terms for the high-level summits were confirmed.

It announced that, by the end of the year, negotiations with Georgia and Moldova on concluding FTA agreements were planned to start. Armenia also demonstrated its readiness to engage in dialogue on this issue. Negotiations with partner countries also continued in the energy sector. Moldova and Ukraine signed an agreement on an energy community, which implies obligations to ensure uninterrupted supplies of transit energy carriers to Europe.

In November 2013, the third Eastern Partnership Summit took place in Vilnius. It was scheduled to initiate an FTA with Moldova and, if several requirements were met, to sign Ukraine's Association Agreement with the EU. Representatives of Georgia and Moldova initiated the agreements, while Armenia and Ukraine refused to sign similar agreements. In May 2015, the fourth EaP Summit in Riga highlighted the need to revise the ENP and to pursue a differentiated policy towards the post-Soviet states. This included a tailored approach to Armenia, Azerbaijan and Belarus, which do not aspire to EU membership.

Meanwhile, notable progress was observed in the collaboration with Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia, which have committed to European integration. These countries have signed Association Agreements and Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreements (DCFTAs), with the agreements entering into force on different dates: 1 July 2016 for Georgia and Moldova, and 1 September 2017 for Ukraine. Moldova gained visa-free travel privileges in 2014, while Georgia and Ukraine obtained this status in 2017. Consequently, Brussels has tailored specific partnerships with each of these states, making it somewhat inaccurate to lump them together under the umbrella term 'Eastern Partnership countries'. The fifth Eastern Partnership Summit convened in November 2017, with a primary focus on advancing the initiative's objectives, particularly in sectors

such as small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), the digital economy, transportation, infrastructure and energy. During the Summit, progress was made on several agreements, including a new bilateral agreement between the EU and Armenia, the establishment of a Common Aviation Area Agreement with Armenia, and the expansion of the Trans-European Transport Network to include the Eastern Partnership states. However, it is important to recognise that while these achievements represent steps forward, the overall progress of the Eastern Partnership has not yet reached the level of significant change that was initially hoped for. Despite these developments, the outcomes have been more incremental, highlighting the ongoing challenges and the need for continued efforts to achieve more substantial and transformative results. On the eve of the sixth Eastern Partnership Summit, in May 2021, Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia established the Associated Trio. This is a trilateral format for enhanced cooperation, coordination and dialogue between the foreign ministries of the three countries, as well as with the EU on issues of mutual interest related to European integration. The importance of Brussels' support for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine within their internationally recognised borders and for strengthening their stability and security is also noted. The trio is working, inter alia, to strengthen the EU's role in promoting peaceful conflict resolution in appropriate formats and platforms.

At the summit itself in December, plans to invest more than EUR 2 billion in the countries of the initiative were announced, with the possibility of attracting up to EUR 17 billion of public and private investment in the future. These funds would be used to help small and medium-sized enterprises, reconstruct roads, fight corruption and support media and non-governmental organisations. In addition, the Summit participants identified new challenges related to recovery from the coronavirus pandemic and opportunities for cooperation on green and digital transitions.

Problems of project implementation at the present stage

So far, the EU has signed association agreements, started implementing FTAs and agreed to visa-free travel with Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. In addition, in June 2022, Brussels granted Ukraine and Moldova candidate status for membership in the organisation (Mosches 2022). Within the framework of the Eastern Partnership, these three countries have managed to modernise their economies, diversify trade flows and improve energy security, as well as consolidate civil society and strengthen political pluralism. However, Georgia has not yet been granted candidate status. Tbilisi needs to do more in the areas of judicial reforms, rule of law and media freedom if it is to succeed on its path to EU membership.

Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia have a high level of ambition towards the EU, while the other three have taken different paths. Armenia, for example, is a member of the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), but it has also concluded a Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement with the EU in an attempt to balance its relations with the West. Azerbaijan, seeking to capitalise on its role as Europe's largest energy supplier, has agreed on several partnership priorities and has begun negotiations on a new framework agreement with the EU. Belarus has had the weakest institutional relations with the European Union all these years, not even a framework agreement was signed. And in 2021, the country suspended participation in the programme in response to the European sanctions. As emphasised by the official representative of the EU Foreign Policy Service N. Massrali, Minsk's decision will lead to 'further isolation of Belarus and is another demonstration of the regime's disdainful attitude towards the Belarusian people' (Kovalenko 2021). The head of the EU diplomacy, J. Borrel, stated in his turn that Brussels was ready to continue cooperation with the Belarusian people. Political scientist E. Preigerman noted that the wording of the statement of the Belarusian authorities sounds like they retain the possibility of returning to the EaP if changes in foreign policy circumstances occur. However, in his opinion, the improvement of relations is a rather distant and vague prospect (Without the Eastern Partnership 2021).

Further complicating the implementation of the programme is the security situation in the region, which remains fragile and unstable. This is due to various frozen armed conflicts (Transnistria, Nagorno-Karabakh and Donbas). If Azerbaijan and Armenia have come close to signing a peace treaty, the situation in Ukraine and Moldova is far from being resolved. At the same time, following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the EU supported Kyiv in the war politically and financially. Assistance is provided in the form of budgetary injections, and macro-financial and humanitarian aid (Ketners 2024). In addition, for the first time in its history Brussels is allocating funds for the purchase of weapons and other military equipment for a non-member country. At the same time, the EU imposed unprecedented sanctions against Russia and Belarus for complicity in the war. Therefore, in all likelihood, the EU's cooperation with partner countries in the coming years will be aimed at conflict resolution and strengthening regional security.

Regarding Brexit, the UK's withdrawal from the EU had virtually no impact on the implementation of the EaP. London's desire to independently determine the foundations of its foreign policy course only testifies to the fundamental changes that have taken place in world politics – the active phase of formation of a multipolar world and the victory of the concept of 'Europe of different speeds' (Brexit 2016). London was one of the main donors to EU funds, including the Eastern project. However, Brexit was not a financial blow to the EaP states. From 2020 to 2025, EUR 2.3 billion in grants, blended finance and guarantees

are planned for the initiative. This investment and economic plan will combine local, national and regional projects, and will be tailored to the specific needs of each country.

Priority areas of cooperation within the framework of the Eastern Partnership

The creation of the EaP represents a strategic move by the EU to bolster its economic, cultural and political presence in the post-Soviet region. Engaging in this initiative offers participating countries opportunities to enhance collaboration with the EU across key sectors, including trade, transportation, environmental protection, digital development, border security, customs, energy security and the promotion of investment. The main objectives of the partnership are stated in the Joint Declaration of the EaP Prague Founding Summit held on 7–8 May 2009 (Joint Declaration of... 2009). The document states that the initiative aims to create the conditions necessary to accelerate the process of political association and further economic integration between the EU and the partner states. It is planned that it will be achieved through the implementation of political and socio-economic reforms in the post-Soviet countries. At the same time, it was proposed to develop cooperation both bilaterally and multilaterally.

Within the EaP, the European Commission initially defined four areas of co-operation: democracy, quality of public administration and stability – promotion of administrative reforms, training of personnel, implementation of anti-corruption measures, development of civil society institutions and free press; economic integration and rapprochement with the EU in the field of sectoral policy – harmonisation of the countries' legislation with the EU legal framework and creation of FTAs; energy security – improving the energy security of the EU and partners by diversifying energy supply routes bypassing the Russian Federation, integrating the energy markets of the initiative's parties; people-to-people contacts – liberalising the visa regime between the EU and the partnership countries, as well as combating illegal migration. An updated Eastern Partnership policy programme was approved at the Brussels Summit in 2021 (Eastern Partnership Policy... 2020). This document includes five main objectives aimed at economic recovery, sustainable development and reforms: together towards robust, resilient and integrated economies; together towards accountable institutions, rule of law and security; together towards environmental and climate resilience; together towards sustainable digital transformation; together towards sustainable, just and inclusive societies.

A joint working document 'Recovery, Resilience and Reform: Post-2020 Priorities' was also adopted, which builds on these goals and sets the agenda for addressing the priorities. The top ten goals by 2025 in this new programme are as follows: investing in competitive and innovative economies; investing

in people and knowledge societies; investing in security and cyber resilience; investing in digital transformation; investing in inclusive, diverse, gender-equitable societies and strategic communication; and investing in health systems sustainability. The new programme and long-term goals are supported by an economic and investment plan. The investment volume will amount to EUR 2.3 billion with the possibility of further attracting up to EUR 17 billion of public and private investment. The investment and economic plan are underpinned by two components – investment and governance (Ketners & Tsiatkovska 2024). The investment component of the EaP’s post-2020 priorities promote socio-economic recovery from the coronavirus and its revitalisation through accelerated green transition and digitalisation. These investments must go hand in hand with clear progress in public administration and human rights, as well as judicial reform. These are the ingredients of the governance pillar, which includes support for democracy, human rights, rule of law reforms, anti-corruption, gender equality and a developed civil society.

The development of trade, the entry of the products of the states of the initiative to the world markets and, as a consequence, the achievement of sustainable economic growth by the states holds a prominent place in the implementation of the Eastern Partnership programme (Table 1).

Table 1: Gross domestic product (GDP) per capita in the EaP countries (USD billion)

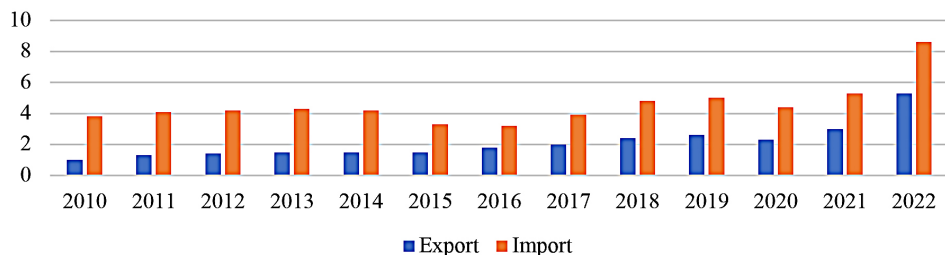
	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Azerbaijan	46.94	48.05	42.69	54.62	78.72
Armenia	38.4	42.1	39.6	43.8	52.7
Belarus	59.66	63.08	60.26	68.21	72.79
Georgia	16.21	17.74	15.89	18.63	24.61
Moldova	11.31	11.96	11.91	13.68	14.42
Ukraine	131	154	156	200	160

Source: World Bank (2023)

The government in Armenia, with the assistance of international donors, has been implementing reforms aimed at intensifying trade and attracting foreign investment (Figure 1). This has yielded positive results in the form of GDP growth. The only exception is 2020 when the coronavirus pandemic and the resulting economic crisis began. The main growth driver was the services sector, which grew by more than 10%, driven by retail, tourism, financial services and hospitality. However, Armenia’s relatively small market size and closed borders with two of its four neighbouring countries limit the potential for rapid economic growth. At the same time, new opportunities are opening up for the

country to use the potential of the EaP and European engagement as a pillar for deeper democratisation, accelerating economic reforms, attracting foreign investment and expanding trade relations. However, Armenia is also a member of the EAEU. The main reasons for joining the organisation were not economic, but rather geopolitical, as Moscow and Yerevan have allied relations. But the Armenian authorities also pointed to the more favourable economic prospects of cooperation with Russia compared to the European Union.

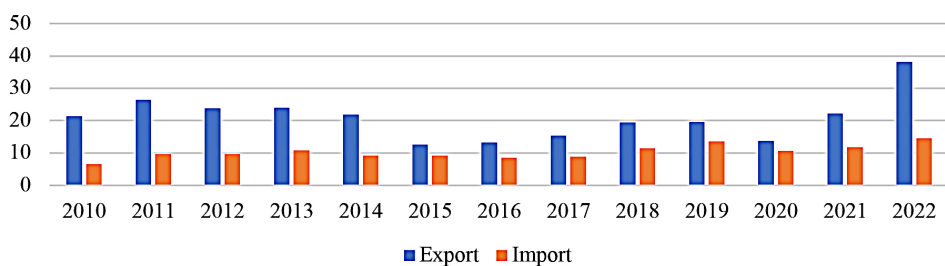
Figure 1: Dynamics of Armenia's exports and imports of goods (USD billion)



Source: Authors (based on their own calculations)

Azerbaijan's economy is growing mainly due to the oil and gas sector. By the end of 2022, Azerbaijan's GDP grew to a record high of almost USD 80 billion. The country's foreign trade turnover for the same period exceeded USD 50 billion, with a foreign trade surplus (excess of exports over imports) of about USD 25 billion (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Dynamics of Azerbaijan's exports and imports of goods (USD billion)



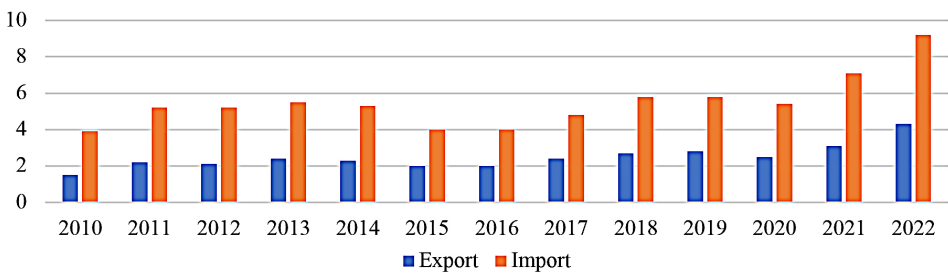
Source: Foreign Trade of Azerbaijan (2023)

The country exports oil, gas, refined products, non-food products of the oil sector and precious metals to the world markets. Therefore, it is not surprising that for Brussels Baku is, first of all, an important energy partner, providing about 5% of gas demand. For Azerbaijan, the EU states are the largest trading

partners. The top five countries in 2022 for exports from Azerbaijan are Italy, Turkey, Russia, India and China, and for imports are Russia, Turkey, China, Germany and Kazakhstan. Moreover, after Western countries imposed unprecedented economic sanctions against Russia for its invasion of Ukraine and refused to use Russian energy carriers, Baku benefited from gas and oil sales to Europe. Thus, by the end of 2022, total gas exports from Azerbaijan amounted to about 19 billion m³, of which over 9 billion cubic metres to Europe (Musavi 2023). In addition, in recent years, certain improvements have been recorded in the country in the sphere of doing business. Even though these changes did not occur directly due to the Eastern Partnership, the programme has become a kind of catalyst for these processes.

EU-Moldova relations within the EaP have gone through different periods. Although the country has become as open as possible to various European projects, it has so far failed to build sustainable markets and political institutions. Chisinau needs to strengthen its engagement with Brussels in the area of security and the sustainability of state institutions, as well as to provide opportunities to expand the range of products exported to the European market. At the same time, the macroeconomic situation in Moldova is relatively stable. Over the last 10 years, the economy has been growing at an average annual rate of 4.6%. Imports of goods and services account for a high share of GDP and exceed exports in a ratio of 2:1. Compared to 2010, imports increased by 1.4 times and exports by 1.6 times (Figure 3). The EU is Moldova’s largest trading partner, accounting for over 50% of its total trade.

Figure 3: Dynamics of Moldova’s exports and imports of goods (USD billion)

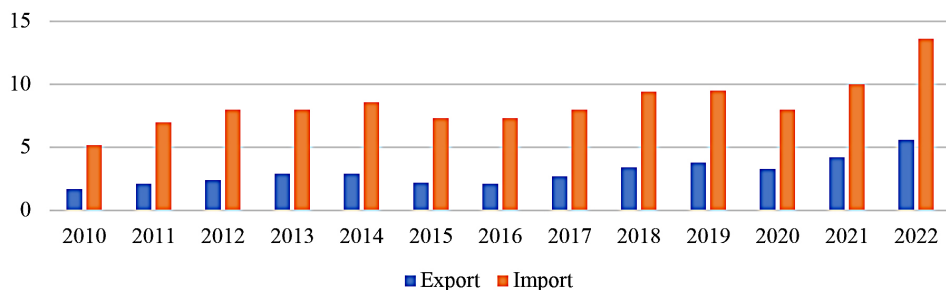


Source: Foreign Trade of the Republic of Moldova (2023)

Over the past 13 years, the Georgian authorities have been implementing reforms to support private sector development and sustainable economic growth. The country’s achievements in the context of the EaP initiative can also be considered significant. These include visa-free travel, opening of FTAs, adaptation of laws to the European legal system and cooperation in energy, tech-

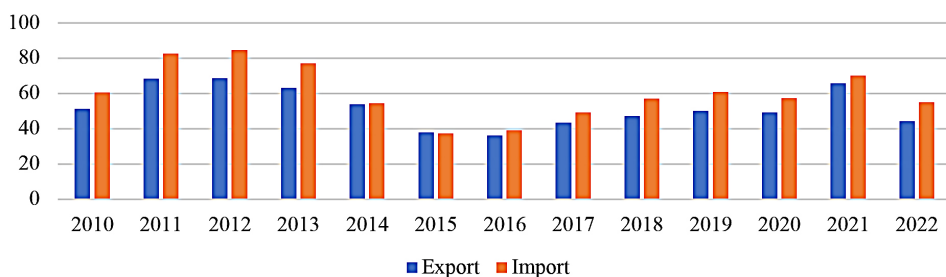
nology, transport and communications (Shiolashvili 2020). At the same time, the country needs to integrate more with EU markets and apply for membership in the Central European Free Trade Association. Georgia's foreign trade is characterised by a negative trade balance, which means that imports are several times higher than exports (Figure 4). To develop foreign trade, the authorities have simplified customs procedures, which has already yielded positive results. Reforms have been made to bring trade legislation in line with EU standards.

Figure 4: Dynamics of Georgia's exports and imports of goods (USD billion)



Source: External Merchandise Trade (2023)

Figure 5: Dynamics of Ukraine's exports and imports of goods (USD billion)



Source: Foreign Trade of Certain Types of Goods by Countries of the World (2023)

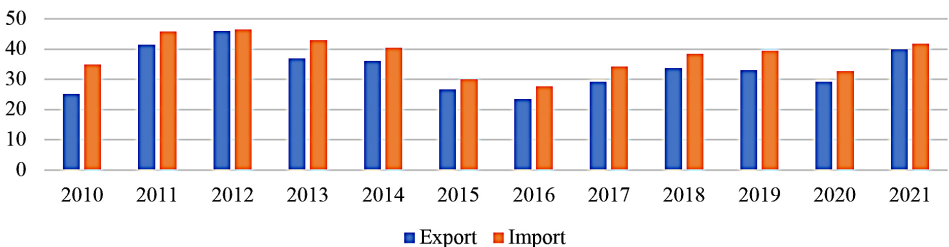
Regarding Ukraine, the Eastern Partnership remains an important platform for interaction between Kyiv and Brussels. However, the country's geopolitical ambitions are aimed at EU membership and are enshrined in the constitution. The armed conflict between Ukraine and Russia has contributed to deepening cooperation in the economic and security sectors. In 2022, the EU provided Ukraine with 9 billion euros in macro-financial assistance in the form of loans and grants. Another 18 billion euros are planned to be allocated

in 2023. Brussels has also temporarily liberalised trade with Ukraine; since May 2022, no duties have been levied on any Ukrainian exports to the EU (What has Already

... 2023). Largely due to these measures, the EU has significantly supported Ukraine's economy. According to Eurostat, from January to October 2022 the EU imported 15.7% more goods from Ukraine than in the same period in 2021, while exports increased by 3.2% (EU Trade with Ukraine 2023). Together with Moldova, the EU launched railway 'solidarity lines' to allow Ukraine to reopen blocked agricultural exports (Figure 5). Through this initiative, more than 20 million tonnes of grain were exported from the country.

An important factor for Belarus in joining the EaP was to strengthen cooperation with the EU in the economic and energy sectors, as well as to attract European investments and technologies to the country. Minsk's political interest, in turn, was to expand its possibilities for manoeuvring in the international arena and to give the state's foreign policy a real multi-vector approach. Despite some positive changes in relations since 2013, Minsk and Brussels have not been able to form a full-fledged contractual framework and agree on the priority areas of partnership within the framework of the initiative. In 2021, the EU imposed economic sanctions on Belarus, which include a ban on the direct or indirect sale, supply, transfer or export to anyone in Belarus of equipment, technology or software for use in monitoring or interception of internet and telephone communications, as well as dual-use goods and technology for military use and to specified persons, organisations or bodies in Belarus. Trade in petroleum products, potassium chloride and goods used for the production or manufacture of tobacco products is restricted (EU Imposed Sanctions... 2021). In addition, the European Investment Bank has ceased payments and disbursements under any existing agreements for public sector projects and any existing technical assistance service contracts. EU member states will also be required to take measures to limit the country's participation in multilateral development banks of which they are members.

Figure 6: Dynamics of Belarus' exports and imports of goods (USD billion)



Source: Foreign Trade in Goods (2023)

In response to these measures, Belarus suspended its participation in the Eastern Partnership programme, focusing on interaction with Asian countries. At the same time, the top five key trade partners in 2022 include two EU countries – Germany and Poland (Figure 6). And the top three are Russia, China and Ukraine.

In conclusion, it is worth noting that trade relations between the EU and partner countries are mutually beneficial. On the one hand, the EaP states are new markets and consumers for European enterprises. On the other hand, the deep and comprehensive FTAs with Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine provide their citizens with a wide choice of quality and safe products. In addition, higher consumer protection standards make these products more affordable. Trade between the EU and the EaP countries has almost doubled in the last decade (Priorities of the Eastern... 2021). The EU is the first trading partner for Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine, and the second largest for Armenia and Belarus.

Prospects for programme implementation in the coming years

Almost 14 years of programme implementation have demonstrated that the aspirations of the partnership states vary widely, from stopping participation in the initiative to full integration into the European Union. Therefore, it is likely to continue to maintain the integrity of the initiative and to adopt a country-by-country approach. Thus, in June 2021, Belarus suspended its participation in the programme and started implementing the procedure for terminating the readmission agreement with the EU. Minsk explained such steps as a forced response to the introduction of restrictive measures by Brussels. The EU sanctions against the Belarusian authorities are related to the repression of opposition politicians and journalists. Belarus is not expected to resume participation in the programme in the near future. After all, in 2022, the EU imposed new restrictions against Minsk for complicity in the war against Ukraine.

Azerbaijan maintains a balance and keeps its distance towards all geopolitical actors. The most likely scenario will be the preservation of the present situation in relations between Baku and Brussels. Trade and energy will continue to be potential sectors of cooperation between the sides. The country is key for the EU on the issues of diversification of energy sources and their delivery, as well as reducing Russia's presence in the European energy market. Since Azerbaijan is located at the intersection of East-West and North-South transport corridors, the country is constantly improving its logistics infrastructure and plays an important role in the transit of goods, including those from Asia to the EU. Of particular note is the East-West transport corridor, which is more than 5000 km long. It is the shortest route between China and Europe and is efficient in terms of transit and cargo transport. The average transit time along it is 15 days. With the launch of the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway in 2017,

a significant increase in container traffic along the international transport corridor was achieved.

In the case of Armenia, the Eastern Partnership could open up prospects for democratisation and economic reforms for the country. However, Russia's influence will remain strong in the country. Moscow's increasing confrontation with the West makes it impossible for Armenia to deepen its cooperation with the European Union. Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia have announced plans to become part of the EU. The first two countries were granted candidate status for EU membership in 2022. Along with the candidate status, they were given several recommendations, the fulfilment of which was a condition for moving to the next stage – membership negotiations. Georgia will have to fulfil several requirements to obtain candidate status. But at the same time, all three states need to undertake several reforms to meet the standards of a united Europe. These countries also have uncontrolled territories (in the form of self-proclaimed republics in Moldova and Georgia and annexation of regions of the Russian Federation in the case of Ukraine) and threats of further aggression from Russia. Therefore, there is a request for the creation of a special institute within the EaP whose activities would be aimed at coordinating actions in the field of security and the return of lost territories. The effectiveness of such cooperation will depend on at least three indicators: filling the Eastern Partnership with new real content, the political will of all parties to develop cooperation and common responsibility for the results (Turchyn 2016).

Brussels, for its part, will try to develop relations in the region and continue the work of the programme. This is confirmed by the 'Recovery, Resilience and Reform: Priorities for the Eastern Partnership beyond 2020', which outlines the priorities of the programme as a whole, complementary performance indicators and flagship initiatives for each country. On this basis, it can be concluded that the implementation of the programme will continue and will receive a new focus in the context of the current security challenges. The initiative may lose its relevance in connection with the accession of Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia to the EU. However, this process may drag on for years. Brussels may then shift its focus to Central Asia and establish a new project aimed at deepening cooperation with the Central Asian states.

Discussion

The question of cooperation between European countries and post-Soviet states became prominent immediately after the collapse of the USSR. However, Brussels' relations with them began to develop into a coherent foreign policy direction only post-2004 when the ENP was developed. It includes cooperation with the post-Soviet countries and the states of the Mediterranean region. And since 2009 the scientific interest in this topic has significantly increased in connec-

tion with the launch of the Eastern Partnership initiative. European scholars and authors from the post-Soviet countries are mainly engaged in the research of the problem. For example, some European scholars view the EaP from the perspective of the security component, which has been given little consideration in the implementation of the initiative. The regional analysis notes that after 2022, the EaP has gradually become marginalised within the EU's foreign policy. This phenomenon reflects the change in the EU's priorities and strategic interests, which has affected the role and importance of the EaP (Reassessing the EU Enlargement... 2023). The analysis shows that although the EaP initiative was created to strengthen cooperation with the Eastern Neighbourhood countries and to support political and economic reforms in these countries, its impact has diminished due to several key factors. The EU's strategic priorities have changed, in particular due to increased attention to other regions, such as the Southern Mediterranean and Western Balkans, as well as changes in the EU's internal politics. The war in Ukraine and its aftermath, as well as other geopolitical developments, forced the EU to rethink its foreign policy strategies. As a result, the Eastern Partnership has become less important in the context of the EU's overall policy, which has affected the funding and support for initiatives under this programme. Internal political and economic crises in the EaP countries themselves also contributed to the marginalisation of this initiative. The lack of significant achievements in implementing reforms and stabilising the situation in the region has reduced the EU's motivation to actively support the EaP (Youngs 2017).

Havlicek (2023) discusses the prospects for the EU's approach to Eastern Europe in the face of changes in the international context. The author emphasises that the EU's strategy in Eastern Europe needs to be rethought, in particular in light of new geopolitical and economic challenges. The author emphasises the need for a more active and flexible approach to the Eastern Partnership countries to ensure effective support for reforms and stability in the region. An article by Dubský et al. (2024) examines the impact of the European Union's eastward enlargement in the context of its foreign policy. The authors analyse how changes in the EU's enlargement policy, in particular those aimed at integrating the Eastern Partnership countries, have affected the EU's foreign policy. They argue that the eastward enlargement has become a key moment in the change of the EU's foreign policy, creating new challenges and opportunities for the EaP countries. The article also discusses how these changes may affect the EU's future strategies towards its neighbours.

Raik (2022) explores the problem of the development of the EU's ties with the Eastern Partnership countries, given the growing competition between liberal and illiberal approaches to regional integration. He conducted his study on the example of Ukraine and concluded that for the integration of the EaP states into Europe it is necessary to strengthen physical links. In particular, the author

highlights the development of road infrastructure, establishing cooperation in the field of energy and optimising trade flows. It is in these sectors that positive developments in cooperation between Kyiv and Brussels have been observed.

The significance of the Eastern Partnership for Belarus is considered by Tikhomirov (2018). According to the researcher, concerning Minsk, Brussels' goals within the EaP were to change the foundations of domestic and foreign policy. It is primarily the liberalisation of the political system and the weakening of Moscow's influence. For the Belarusian leadership, the priority areas of cooperation were strengthening trade and economic cooperation, receiving financial assistance from the EU, implementing joint energy and transport projects, and simplifying the visa regime. The unwillingness of the parties to make concessions to each other predetermined the insufficiently high efficiency of cooperation. It was these contradictions that led Belarus to withdraw from the programme and focus on cooperation with Russia and China.

Kaunert & Pereira (2023) explore the prospects of the EaP in the context of geopolitical changes and regional security challenges. The scholars suggest that one of the goals of the initiative is to preserve security in the countries neighbouring the EU. At the same time, the war in Ukraine has demonstrated Brussels' inability to provide it. According to the authors, this is caused by Russian considering the post-Soviet states its sphere of influence and preventing their convergence with the EU in every possible way. However, it should be noted that when faced with Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the EU reacted quickly and decisively, using all of its economic, diplomatic, military and financial power instruments (Akchurina & Della Sala 2018; Mirel 2022). However, Brussels has so far not been proactive in resolving the frozen conflicts in Moldova and Georgia. The Finnish scholar Haukkala (2015) also considered the same issue. The author considers the Eastern Partnership countries as a zone of confrontation between the European Union and Russia in the post-Cold War period. He calls the war in Ukraine the culmination of this confrontation.

The peculiarities of the European Union's interaction with the South Caucasus states (Azerbaijan, Armenia and Georgia) from the early 1990s to the present are studied by Aliyeva (2022). The researcher calls this region an object of geopolitical competition between major international forces. In the author's opinion, the countries of the South Caucasus have achieved certain results in the economic sphere with the support of the EU. Within the framework of the EaP, democratic reforms have been implemented in Georgia and Armenia. However, problems in the justice sector, the fight against corruption and environmental protection remain unresolved. At the same time, the author does not consider the security problems in the region, including the armed conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh between Armenia and Azerbaijan and the occupation of a part of Georgia's territory, nor does the author suggest ways to solve them through Brussels' involvement. Shortcomings of the EU's policy in the South Caucasus,

which is manifested in the growing Russian and Turkish influence in the region, are also not analysed in the study (Delcour & Hoffmann 2018).

The evolution of the EU's relationship with Central Asian (CA) states as part of the post-Soviet space is explored by Ospanova & Kilybaeva (2019). The scholars conclude that the region is currently the object of Brussels' attention. This is because Central Asia has rich oil and gas deposits. This region also has a strategically important location on the Eurasian continent. Therefore, the EU's interest in Central Asia can be expressed by launching a programme similar to the Eastern Partnership. Cooperation within the framework of the project could be relevant in the field of security, the fight against organised crime and international terrorism, as well as in the economic sector.

The conclusion that can be drawn here is that it is difficult to consider the Eastern Partnership countries as one whole. Although all the states have a common past, they have chosen different paths of development after gaining independence in 1991. In addition, the mechanisms, and conditions of their interaction with the European Union differ. The war in Ukraine and the confrontation between Russia and the EU for influence in the post-Soviet space occupy a special place in the study of this issue.

Conclusions

The Eastern dimension of the EU foreign policy was formed based on the common interests of Brussels and the post-Soviet countries in preserving peace and stability on the European continent and creating favourable foreign policy conditions for development. At the same time, Brussels did not initially offer the initiative states the prospect of full membership. The programme envisaged only 'political association' and 'economic integration' with the EU and offered association agreements, participation in (DC)FTAs and visa-free travel as instruments of implementation. Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia utilised the potential of the EaP and declared their aspirations to join the EU as full members. In addition, the first two countries were granted candidate status for EU membership.

Azerbaijan, Armenia and Belarus took a different path, choosing a relatively neutral and certainly pragmatic positions on the issue of rapprochement with the EU. In addition, Belarus suspended its participation in the initiative in response to the sanctions, preferring interaction with Russia and China. As for the future of the Eastern Partnership, the initiative may lose its relevance after the accession to the EU of the two states that have embarked on a course of European integration. However, Ukraine and Moldova are not expected to acquire membership in the coming years due to the need to carry out large-scale reforms. The official Minsk will not return to the programme in the near future, as the EU has imposed new sanctions on the country for complicity in the war against Ukraine, even if the EaP remains open for its citizens. The situation may

further change radically only in the case of a change of power on a democratic basis. Azerbaijan is likely to maintain the status quo in its interaction with the EU within the framework of the Eastern Partnership, balancing between East and West. Cooperation between Baku and Brussels will continue to focus on economic and energy sectors.

The prospect of further research on this topic is to consider the experience of other countries or regions of the world in cooperation with the European Union. In addition, this study can serve as a reference point for studying the problems of European integration and the EU policy towards the post-Soviet states.

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