



**CANADIAN GLOBAL AFFAIRS INSTITUTE**  
**INSTITUT CANADIEN DES AFFAIRES MONDIALES**

# **The European Union's Eastern Partnership: Bold Ambitions in a Troubled Region**

by Joan DeBardeleben  
July 2021

# POLICY PERSPECTIVE

---

## **THE EUROPEAN UNION'S EASTERN PARTNERSHIP: BOLD AMITIONS IN A TROUBLED REGION**

by Joan DeBardeleben

July 2021



CANADIAN GLOBAL AFFAIRS INSTITUTE  
INSTITUT CANADIEN DES AFFAIRES MONDIALES

Prepared for the Canadian Global Affairs Institute  
1800, 150 – 9th Avenue S.W., Calgary, AB T2P 3H9  
[www.cgai.ca](http://www.cgai.ca)

©2021 Canadian Global Affairs Institute  
ISBN: 978-1-77397-201-5



**W**ith the launch of the Eastern Partnership policy (EaP) in May 2009,<sup>1</sup> the European Union (EU) aimed to further strengthen its relations with six countries of Eastern Europe and the Caucasus region, with the goal of promoting democracy, an improved standard of living, closer economic ties and enhanced security. The countries included in the program – Azerbaijan, Armenia, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine – are all post-Soviet states, each facing unique geopolitical and domestic challenges.<sup>2</sup> The EaP was established to be of mutual benefit to the EU and partner countries, in the hope of assuring prosperity, good governance, stability and security – a worthy goal for a region that, since the collapse of communism, has seen localized, but seemingly intractable, conflicts and a wavering commitment to liberal reform.

2014 was a pivotal year for the Eastern Partnership, marked by both successes and disappointment. On the one hand, Russia's annexation of Crimea violated Ukrainian sovereignty, undermining the EaP's goal of peace and security in Europe. On the other hand, later that year Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia all signed important association and trade agreements with the EU, marking an important success for the policy. In response to these divergent developments, in 2015 the EaP policy was reviewed and revised to make it more responsive and resilient to the needs of individual partner countries, and in June 2019 a broad consultation on its future was undertaken. In 2017, 20 key deliverables were identified, including stronger engagement with civil society, gender equality, support for independent media and for small and medium-sized businesses, job creation, energy security, reduced greenhouse gas emissions and increased mobility and connectedness between the EU and partner countries.<sup>3</sup> While progress has been made,<sup>4</sup> the realization of the EaP's fundamental goals has faced persistent obstacles, most importantly endemic corruption and domestic elite interests in some partner countries, the perceived inadequacy of reform incentives, frozen conflicts in the region and Russian actions. The question arises whether the program's fundamental structure is sound, or whether it requires deeper, more substantial revision.



<sup>1</sup> Council of the European Union, "Joint Declaration of the Prague Eastern Partnership Summit," May 7, 2009, [https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/31797/2009\\_eap\\_declaration.pdf](https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/31797/2009_eap_declaration.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> In 2004, the EU invited Russia to join the European Neighbourhood Policy, in which the EaP is situated, but Russia declined the invitation. Accordingly, Russia is not part of the EaP.

<sup>3</sup> Council of the European Union, "20 Deliverables for 2020," <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/eastern-partnership/20-deliverables-for-2020/>.

<sup>4</sup> EAP Eastern Partnership, "20 Deliverables for 2020: Monitoring State of Play in February 2020," [https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/monitoring\\_spring\\_2020\\_20\\_deliverables\\_for\\_2020.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/monitoring_spring_2020_20_deliverables_for_2020.pdf).



## Key Achievements

The EaP is based on an incentive system in which partner countries must achieve certain reform objectives to receive benefits from the EU. By making rewards conditional on political and economic reform, the EU hopes to create a circle of friends on the Union's perimeter that share common norms and values, providing a basis for long-term stability. Among the most prized rewards for partner countries are association agreements (AA) and deep and comprehensive free trade areas (DCFTA), which extend the benefits offered in previous agreements. The AAs and DCFTAs require partner countries to commit to even more demanding reform programs than previously in order to bring their policies and structures into greater congruence with EU norms and practices. The EU is the largest trade partner, both for exports and imports, of all three partner countries that have signed DCFTAs, making up 39.3 per cent of Ukraine's total trade in 2020 (compared to 14.9 per cent with China and 7.0 per cent with Russia),<sup>5</sup> 52.3 per cent for Moldova (compared to 10.4 per cent with Russia and 8.3 per cent with China)<sup>6</sup> and 22.4 per cent for Georgia (compared to 14.1 per cent with Turkey and 11.7 per cent with Russia).<sup>7</sup> Apart from economic relations, all three countries have gained visa-waiver status for their citizens wishing to travel to the Schengen Area for up to 90 days within a 180-day period.

Alongside EU assistance to EaP countries, individual member states also contribute generously to EaP objectives. The three Baltic states (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania) and Poland have been particularly active with Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine offering expertise based on their experience in making painful and difficult transitions from previous Soviet-era structures. Aid also takes a concrete form; for example, in 2019 Lithuania alone offered over four million euros to the six EaP countries in bilateral development assistance with a wide range of purposes supporting civil society development, independent media, rule of law, public finance and entrepreneurship.<sup>8</sup> Likewise, the Estonian Centre of Eastern Partnership (ECEAP)<sup>9</sup> operates a wide range of training programs, and participation in EU twinning projects also allows Baltic experts to share their expertise with counterparts in EaP countries. The Baltic countries have also offered humanitarian and pandemic relief aid to EaP countries.<sup>10</sup>

Unlike Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine, the other three EaP countries have chosen not to pursue AAs or DCFTAs with the EU. The EU signalled a greater willingness to accommodate the differing aspirations and situations of each EaP country in 2015 and this has yielded good results, at least with Armenia and Azerbaijan. Relations with the EU have formed an important element of each country's foreign policy, although less clearly so for Belarus. Armenia became a member of the Russian-dominated Eurasian Economic Union in 2015, but the country also concluded a Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA) with the EU in June 2018. Although less extensive than an AA or DCFTA, CEPA offers Armenia preferential trade access to

---

<sup>5</sup> European Commission, "Trade in Goods with Ukraine," [https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/isdb\\_results/factsheets/country/details\\_ukraine\\_en.pdf](https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/isdb_results/factsheets/country/details_ukraine_en.pdf).

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., "Trade in Goods with Moldova," [https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/isdb\\_results/factsheets/country/details\\_moldova\\_en.pdf](https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/isdb_results/factsheets/country/details_moldova_en.pdf).

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., "Trade in Goods with Georgia," [https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/isdb\\_results/factsheets/country/details\\_georgia\\_en.pdf](https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/isdb_results/factsheets/country/details_georgia_en.pdf).

<sup>8</sup> Lithuanian Development Cooperation, "Bilateral Assistance," <https://orangeprojects.lt/en/activities/bilateral-assistance>.

<sup>9</sup> Estonian Center of Eastern Partnership, "Latest News," <https://ecep.eu/>.

<sup>10</sup> Euronews, "Lithuania to Donate 200,000 COVID-19 Vaccines to Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine," May 14, 2021, <https://www.euronews.com/2021/05/14/lithuania-to-donate-200-000-covid-19-vaccines-to-moldova-georgia-and-ukraine>.



the EU market, under certain conditionality requirements. Armenia also benefits from EU support for development of new markets, for improvement in areas such as electoral legislation, the judicial sector, e-governance<sup>11</sup> and co-operation in the fields of education and research. Armenia, along with Azerbaijan and Belarus, has also concluded readmission and visa facilitation agreements with the EU.

Azerbaijan has pursued a more restrained approach in its relations with the EU. However, following agreement on new partnership priorities in 2018, advances have been made to reach a new framework document to replace the 1999 Partnership and Co-operation Agreement. The EU sees Azerbaijan as a strategic energy partner due to its fossil fuel exports and its location as a transit route for gas supplies coming from the Caspian Sea area.<sup>12</sup> The EU also provides assistance to Azerbaijan in areas such as justice-sector reform, development of new markets and economic diversification. However, unlike Armenia, Azerbaijan does not enjoy preferential trade access, although some trade quotas have been eliminated.

Belarus has been the most problematic country for the EaP because of its authoritarian government, headed by President Alexander Lukashenko since 1994, and its especially close ties to Russia, as a founding member of the EAEU. The EU has tried various approaches to support human and democratic rights in Belarus including sanctions, targeted sectoral reform and efforts to support civil society actors. However, none of these moves has generated significant or enduring success; apparent steps toward reform have generally been followed by periods of crackdown. Government repression of opposition activists following the contested presidential election of 2020 evoked a new round of criticism and sanctions by the EU and other Western countries. Further EU sanctions were imposed on Belarus after the diversion of a Ryanair flight headed for Lithuania to Minsk on the pretext of a bomb threat; Belarusian authorities arrested the opposition figure, Roman Protasevich, who was aboard the plane. Lithuania and Poland have served as a safe haven for Belarusian opposition figures and journalists, many of whom are trying to avoid persecution or arrest in their home country. At the same time, the higher standard of living in the Baltic states and neighbouring Poland serves as a beacon for citizens of Belarus and other EaP countries like Ukraine. Nonetheless, the EU's approach has faltered; it has not been able to move Belarus in a consistent liberalizing direction.

## Obstacles to EaP Success

Endemic corruption, the influence of powerful economic oligarchs and political influence over the judiciary are widespread problems in EaP countries, with some exceptions. In some cases, the EU has facilitated improvement, but not consistently across the region. Georgia, for example, has made significant progress in reducing corruption in parts of the state apparatus, but other countries, including Moldova and Ukraine, have been less successful. In Moldova in particular,

---

<sup>11</sup> European Commission, "European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations, Armenia," [https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/neighbourhood/countries/armenia\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/neighbourhood/countries/armenia_en).

<sup>12</sup> EAP Fact Sheet, "Facts and Figures about EU-Azerbaijan Relations," [https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/default/files/eap\\_factsheet\\_azerbaijan.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/default/files/eap_factsheet_azerbaijan.pdf).



this has adversely impacted the EU's reputation because of the corrupt practices of some pro-European leaders. In 2020, the European Commission flagged improved governance as an area in which EaP objectives have been less fully achieved in all six EaP countries,<sup>13</sup> especially relating to rule of law, human rights, media independence and corruption control. Liberalizing reforms are hard to achieve because they have the potential to undermine the power of existing elites. Changes in these areas are hard to engineer from above, as they may depend on a fundamental shift in values and orientation on the part of both the public and elites, as well as on an activated citizenry, able and willing to hold the political leadership to account. Furthermore, the lack of a clear EU membership perspective for EaP countries no doubt weakens the incentive for implementing assertive reform measures. Other organizations besides the EU are also monitoring governance issues in the region. For example, the Council of Europe and its Venice Commission<sup>14</sup> have raised concerns regarding minority rights, including language education in Ukraine.

Frozen conflicts also present obstacles to achieving the EaP's objectives. The conflicts in Georgia and Moldova involve secessionist regions supported by Russia, whereas a third conflict involves a dispute between two EaP countries, Armenia and Azerbaijan. These conflicts, along with ongoing problems in Eastern Ukraine, produce instability near the EU's perimeter and benefit Russia by complicating the efforts of partner countries to develop closer ties with the EU. The EU has made limited efforts to mediate these conflicts, while maintaining a modest monitoring mission near the borders of Georgia's secessionist regions<sup>15</sup> and support for a border control monitoring mission on the Transnistrian/Ukraine border (EUBAM).<sup>16</sup> The EU has also taken a largely hands-off approach to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Guided by the principle of self-determination, Armenia would like to see the region under its control, while Azerbaijan sees Armenian claims as infringing on its territorial integrity. Since 1992, shortly after the conflict first erupted, the OSCE Minsk Group, chaired by France, Russia and the U.S., has worked to try to find a peaceful resolution, but without enduring success. In the most recent eruption of violent conflict, in fall 2020, Russia mediated a ceasefire agreement and is monitoring it, resulting in gains for Azerbaijan. Despite disappointment with this outcome, Armenia, a small country, remains dependent on Russia for energy resources and looks to Russia as its security guarantor not only in relation to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict with Azerbaijan but more generally in a region characterized by a complicated network of geopolitical alliances involving more powerful actors.

## Which Way Forward for the EaP?

Most of the problems that inhibit the EaP's success are beyond the EU's control. For example, frozen conflicts are not subject to easy or quick resolution through the usual practices of conflict

---

<sup>13</sup> European Union, "European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations, 3-4, [https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/default/files/joint\\_communication\\_on\\_the\\_eap\\_policy\\_beyond\\_2020.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/default/files/joint_communication_on_the_eap_policy_beyond_2020.pdf).

<sup>14</sup> Council of Europe, European Commission for Democracy through Law (Venice Commission), "Ukraine: Opinion on the Law on Supporting the Functioning of the Ukrainian Language as the State Language," adopted by the Venice Commission at the 121<sup>st</sup> Plenary Session (Venice, December 6-7, 2019), December 9, 2019, Opinion No.960/2019, [https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/?pdf=CDL-AD\(2019\)032-e](https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/?pdf=CDL-AD(2019)032-e)

<sup>15</sup> [https://www.eumm.eu/en/about\\_eumm](https://www.eumm.eu/en/about_eumm).

<sup>16</sup> European Union External Action, "What We Do," <https://eubam.org/what-we-do/>.



mediation; conflict management is the best hope. Likewise, Russia's perception that the EaP threatens its geopolitical interests stems from a deep-rooted sense of entitlement to dominance in the former Soviet space; Russia has also made clear, through its actions in Georgia in 2008 and in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine since 2014, that it is prepared to use a wide range of tools, including regular and irregular military resources, to enforce that dominance. Domestic obstacles to EaP success are also formidable. Corruption is deeply rooted in societal and economic structures, as well as in embedded norms and the power of economic oligarchs. The political costs to existing elites of liberalizing reform are unavoidable.

However, attempts can be made to address each of these issues through sustained action, and the EU has already adopted most of these measures. Regarding the larger geopolitical context and Russia's self-defined interests in the region, the longer term goal should be to avoid facing EaP countries with an either-or choice. This is important for two reasons. First, in an either-or contest it is not clear that the EU will always win, given that economic and political elites in some EaP countries may feel they have more to gain from an association with Russia; this is particularly true for leaders with an authoritarian bent, whose power is threatened by the transformations required by EU conditionality. Second, EaP countries themselves will benefit from maintaining good relations with both of their powerful neighbours. An either-or choice can contribute to heightened domestic polarization. Furthermore, many citizens have deep cultural ties to Russia, and economic synergies from the Soviet period still support regional industry and businesses. While the gains to be made from EU association are substantial, they are likely to be longer term, because they are premised on the realization of difficult to accomplish reforms; severing existing ties to Russia can be costly in the short to medium term.

Armenia's example suggests that EAEU membership can be compatible with close and productive ties with the EU; at the same time, there is no reason why Ukraine and Moldova should not maintain their status in the CIS free trade agreement (which involves Russia) while having an AA and DCFTA with the EU. In this case, however, Russia decided to unilaterally deprive Ukraine and Moldova of the benefits of the CIS trade agreement. The EU should support Ukraine and Moldova in regaining access to these benefits. Given the sustained high level of tension between Russia and the EU since 2014, it may currently be difficult to achieve win-win scenarios for EaP countries, but this objective should remain in clear sight for the longer term for the sake of EaP countries themselves as well as to promote longer term stability in the region.

Regarding frozen conflicts, the EU's risk-averse inclinations work against any direct EU involvement in conflict resolution efforts, except perhaps in Georgia's case. On the other hand, ceding this role to Russia slants the process in favour of Russia's clients or allies, and deprives the EU of the regional influence required to assure stability in the EU's perimeter and to promote the EU's reform objectives. In these circumstances, key EU member states or their leaders have, in the past, taken on a lead role (e.g., former French president Nicolas Sarkozy's mediation of the 2008 Georgia-Russia crisis, France's role as co-chair of the OSCE Minsk Group for Nagorno-Karabakh and the role of Germany and France in fashioning the Minsk Protocol in relation to the Ukraine crisis). Intensified co-ordination of such efforts with the EU's External Action Service may produce a more robust effort. In the case of Nagorno-Karabakh, it seems unwise for the EU



to align itself with either Armenia or Azerbaijan, given the duelling principles of self-determination and territorial integrity that are involved. In the other two (and with Eastern Ukraine possibly three) frozen conflicts, a key concern of the EU should also be mitigating negative effects on local populations. Furthermore, the EU should do everything possible to leverage its influence through benefits accorded under the DCFTAs with Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine, in order to gain further recognition of the legitimate states in Chişinău, Tbilisi and Kyiv by businesses and other actors in the secessionist or uncontrolled regions. This strategy has already been somewhat successfully applied in relation to Transnistria in Moldova.

Finally, in terms of incentives for reform and elite interests in EaP countries, the process is long-term and will require a consistent application of principles already applied – the strongest possible support for independent anti-corruption agencies, the continued application of clear conditionality requirements to reward the creation of market structures, and regulatory systems that help to assure a more level playing field for new businesses and support for independent media with autonomous sources of finance. Offering the prospect of EU membership, while a laudable goal, does not seem realistic now, given public sentiment in the EU, other challenges facing the Union and the EU's commitment to countries of the West Balkans.

Ultimately, the EaP's success may depend on its normative appeal with the population and elites alike, and on its contribution to an improved quality of life. While more than half of EaP citizens surveyed in 2020 indicated awareness of EU programs and their benefits, with increasing awareness over time,<sup>17</sup> the EU should seek to make the benefits of its support and association even more visible to the public at large and to elites. Of key importance for the EU is to listen to the concerns and viewpoints of partner-state citizens and civil society organizations, so that EU support enables and empowers domestic political competence rather than simply being a source of external funding for these actors. Only in this way will the deep cultural and societal change required to embed liberal values and to hold elites accountable to the public have a chance to prevail.

---

<sup>17</sup> European Union, EU Neighbours East, "Opinion Survey 2020: Regional Overview," <https://www.euneighbours.eu/en/east/stay-informed/publications/opinion-survey-2020-regional-overview>.

## ► About the Author

---

**Joan DeBardleben** is Chancellor's Professor in the Institute of European, Russian, and Eurasian Studies (EURUS) at Carleton University in Ottawa, where she is also Co-Director of Carleton's Centre for European Studies. She is coordinator of the Jean Monnet Network on EU-Canada Relations (2017-2022) and held the Jean Monnet Chair in EU Relations with Russia and the Eastern Neighbourhood from 2016-2019, both co-funded by the Erasmus + program of the European Union. Her current research, based on a grant from Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, is entitled *The European Union's Eastern Policy and the Ukraine Crisis: Causes and Impacts*. She also conducts research on elections and regional politics in Russia. Dr. DeBardleben is former president of the European Community Studies Association-Canada and is lead editor of the *Canadian Journal of European and Russian Studies*, an online peer-reviewed open-access publication hosted by Carleton University.

## ► **Canadian Global Affairs Institute**

---

The Canadian Global Affairs Institute focuses on the entire range of Canada's international relations in all its forms including (in partnership with the University of Calgary's School of Public Policy), trade investment and international capacity building. Successor to the Canadian Defence and Foreign Affairs Institute (CDFAI, which was established in 2001), the Institute works to inform Canadians about the importance of having a respected and influential voice in those parts of the globe where Canada has significant interests due to trade and investment, origins of Canada's population, geographic security (and especially security of North America in conjunction with the United States), social development, or the peace and freedom of allied nations. The Institute aims to demonstrate to Canadians the importance of comprehensive foreign, defence and trade policies which both express our values and represent our interests.

The Institute was created to bridge the gap between what Canadians need to know about Canadian international activities and what they do know. Historically Canadians have tended to look abroad out of a search for markets because Canada depends heavily on foreign trade. In the modern post-Cold War world, however, global security and stability have become the bedrocks of global commerce and the free movement of people, goods and ideas across international boundaries. Canada has striven to open the world since the 1930s and was a driving factor behind the adoption of the main structures which underpin globalization such as the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, the World Trade Organization and emerging free trade networks connecting dozens of international economies. The Canadian Global Affairs Institute recognizes Canada's contribution to a globalized world and aims to inform Canadians about Canada's role in that process and the connection between globalization and security.

In all its activities the Institute is a charitable, non-partisan, non-advocacy organization that provides a platform for a variety of viewpoints. It is supported financially by the contributions of individuals, foundations, and corporations. Conclusions or opinions expressed in Institute publications and programs are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of Institute staff, fellows, directors, advisors or any individuals or organizations that provide financial support to, or collaborate with, the Institute.