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EASTERN PARTNERSHIP POLICY BEYOND 2020:

*Challenges and opportunities for Moldova
and the European Union*

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Proceedings of the Scientific and Analytical Seminar

***EASTERN PARTNERSHIP POLICY
BEYOND 2020: CHALLENGES AND
OPPORTUNITIES FOR MOLDOVA
AND THE EUROPEAN UNION***

Jean Monnet Centre of Excellence
University “Bogdan Petriceicu Hasdeu” of Cahul

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***EASTERN PARTNERSHIP POLICY BEYOND 2020: CHALLENGES AND
OPPORTUNITIES FOR MOLDOVA AND THE EUROPEAN UNION***
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PREFACE

This volume presents the materials of the Scientific and Analytical Seminar “Eastern Partnership Policy Beyond 2020: New Challenges and Opportunities for the Republic of Moldova and the European Union”, organized within the framework of the Jean Monnet Centre of Excellence project, co-funded by the Erasmus+ Programme of the European Union.

The seminar was conceived as an academic platform for interdisciplinary dialogue among university scholars, researchers, public authorities, civil society representatives, and students. Its main objective was to promote evidence-based discussion on the evolving European Union policies, with particular attention to the changing geopolitical environment, the future of the Eastern Partnership, European integration processes, regional security, democratic governance, sustainable development, and Moldova’s path towards EU membership.

The publication brings together the analytical contributions prepared by the seminar participants. Rather than serving as traditional conference proceedings, this volume reflects the key ideas, expert assessments, research findings, and policy-oriented recommendations presented and discussed during the seminar. The materials illustrate different academic perspectives while maintaining a common focus on contemporary European challenges and opportunities.

The editors hope that this publication will contribute to a deeper understanding of current developments within the European Union and the Eastern Partnership region, encourage further academic research, and support informed public dialogue on European integration and related policy issues.

The publication also demonstrates the Jean Monnet Centre of Excellence’s commitment to strengthening excellence in teaching and research on European Union studies, promoting academic cooperation, and disseminating knowledge among the wider academic community and society.

The editors express their sincere gratitude to all authors, speakers, reviewers, and participants whose valuable contributions made both the seminar and this publication possible. Special appreciation is extended to the Erasmus+ Programme of the European Union for sup-

porting initiatives that foster academic excellence, critical thinking, and dialogue on the future of Europe.

We trust that the materials presented in this volume will serve as a useful resource for researchers, university teachers, students, policy-makers, and everyone interested in European studies and the European integration of the Republic of Moldova.

Ludmila Golovataia, PhD

Project Coordinator

Jean Monnet Centre of Excellence

Editor of the Volume

(Project No. 101126909)

ABOUT THE JEAN MONNET CENTRE OF EXCELLENCE

The Jean Monnet Centre of Excellence “Strengthening and Sharing Knowledge about the European Union” was established within the Erasmus+ Programme of the European Union to promote excellence in teaching, research, academic dialogue and public outreach in the field of European Union studies.

The Centre serves as an interdisciplinary academic platform that brings together university teachers, researchers, students, representatives of public institutions, civil society organisations and international partners interested in European integration processes and contemporary European policies. By combining education, scientific research and policy dialogue, the Centre contributes to strengthening knowledge and understanding of the European Union at both academic and societal levels. The activities of the Centre are designed to foster evidence-based discussion on key European issues, encourage critical thinking, support the dissemination of European values, and promote informed public debate. Particular attention is devoted to analysing the challenges and opportunities arising from the evolving political, economic, and security environment in Europe and its neighbouring regions.

The Centre implements a wide range of academic and dissemination activities, including the development of innovative university courses, scientific and analytical seminars, international conferences, round tables, workshops, public lectures, training events, and the publication of scientific and educational materials. These activities contribute to strengthening institutional capacity in European studies and to promoting cooperation between academia, public authorities, and civil society. Special emphasis is placed on supporting interdisciplinary research and encouraging the active participation of young researchers and students in academic discussions on the future of the European Union. The Centre also promotes international academic cooperation and facilitates the exchange of knowledge, experience and good practices with partner institutions in Moldova and abroad.

This volume has been prepared as one of the dissemination outputs of the Jean Monnet Centre of Excellence. It presents the scientific and analytical contributions developed within the framework of the Seminar “Eastern Partnership Policy Beyond 2020: New Challenges and Opportunities for the Republic of Moldova and the European Union.” The

publication reflects the Centre's commitment to promoting high-quality academic research, policy-oriented analysis and constructive dialogue on issues of European integration, regional cooperation and sustainable democratic development.

The Jean Monnet Centre of Excellence reaffirms its commitment to supporting academic excellence, fostering cooperation between universities and society, and strengthening knowledge about the European Union as an essential foundation for democratic development, resilience and European integration.

Funded by the European Union through the Erasmus+ Programme (Jean Monnet Actions). The views and opinions expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA). Neither the European Union nor EACEA can be held responsible for them.

ABOUT THE SCIENTIFIC AND ANALYTICAL SEMINAR

The Scientific and Analytical Seminar was conceived as a structured academic discussion on the evolution, achievements and future strategic positioning of the European Union's Eastern Partnership. Its programme reflected the profound changes that have taken place in the Eastern European region since the launch of the initiative in 2009, as well as the need to reconsider the relevance, instruments and priorities of the Eastern Partnership in the context of the European Union's renewed enlargement agenda.

The Seminar brought together university professors, researchers, experts and students with the aim of critically examining the effectiveness of the Eastern Partnership and identifying possible directions for its development in the period 2025–2030. The discussions combined an assessment of past policy results with an analysis of current geopolitical, institutional, economic and security challenges. Particular attention was paid to the differences between the associated countries—Ukraine, Georgia and the Republic of Moldova—and the non-associated Eastern Partnership countries—Armenia, Azerbaijan and Belarus.

The programme was organised into three interconnected thematic blocks.

The **Introductory Block** provided a conceptual and historical foundation for the discussion. It examined the principal achievements and limitations of the Eastern Partnership since 2009, including its key strategic documents and the implementation of the “20 Deliverables for 2020”. Special attention was devoted to the European Union’s “More for More” approach, according to which greater progress in democratic and economic reforms should lead to increased financial assistance, market access and political cooperation. The comparative analysis of associated and non-associated partner countries raised important questions concerning the effectiveness of conditionality, the resistance of oligarchic interests, the persistence of corruption and the emergence of so-called “reform fatigue”.

The introductory discussions also addressed the changing scope of the Eastern Partnership after 2020. Participants considered whether the policy should incorporate a more explicit security and defence dimension, particularly for countries seeking EU membership. They also examined how the European Green Deal and the Digital Agenda could be implemented without creating disproportionate economic and social costs for partner countries facing limited financial resources and considerable infrastructure modernisation needs.

The **Main Block: Strategic Challenges and New Priorities** focused on democratic resilience, institutional reform and the integration of emerging European Union priorities into the Eastern Partnership framework. The presentations and subsequent discussions analysed the continuing challenges related to corruption, the rule of law, justice reform and the vulnerability of democratic institutions to political change and vested interests.

A central issue was the need to identify stricter and more sustainable mechanisms capable of ensuring the irreversibility of reforms. The participants discussed whether traditional incentives based mainly on financial support and access to the EU market remained sufficient, or whether they should be complemented by stronger monitoring, institutional safeguards, public accountability and broader participation by civil society and local authorities.

The Main Block also examined the role of the European Green Deal, the Digital Agenda, energy resilience, transport connectivity and regional cooperation as potential drivers of modernisation. Particular emphasis was placed on the need to adapt European requirements to

the economic capacities of partner countries so that green and digital transformation would become instruments of development rather than additional burdens. Energy independence and the development of common markets, interconnections and transport corridors were discussed as essential elements of national sovereignty and regional resilience.

The Positioning Block: The Future of the Eastern Partnership and Its Strategic Positioning addressed the changing relationship between the Eastern Partnership and the EU enlargement process. The discussion focused on the “Associated Trio” initiative and on the consequences of the European integration progress achieved by Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova and Georgia.

Particular attention was paid to the candidate status of Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova and to the question of whether the Eastern Partnership remains an adequate framework for countries that have already entered the enlargement process. Participants considered whether the European Union should offer associated countries a clearer accession perspective as the principal incentive for reforms or continue to apply a policy of strategic ambiguity and differentiated integration.

The debate also covered the need to strengthen mechanisms in the areas of anti-money laundering, justice reform and protection of the EU internal market from misuse by oligarchic networks. Regional cooperation in transport, energy and infrastructure was analysed not only as an instrument of economic integration but also as a means of reducing external vulnerability and countering geopolitical threats.

The concluding part of the Seminar was designed to transform academic discussion into policy-oriented results. Participants summarised the principal conclusions of each thematic block and worked in groups to formulate priority recommendations for the future of the Eastern Partnership in the period 2025–2030. The proposed measures were subsequently presented, discussed and assessed according to their strategic importance.

The Seminar culminated in a central policy question: what single transformative measure should become the European Union’s strategic priority in the Eastern Partnership in order to ensure not only the resilience of associated countries, but also the irreversibility of their democratic and institutional reforms?

The present volume reflects the main intellectual outcomes of the Seminar. It brings together analytical contributions addressing the evo-

lution of the Eastern Partnership, the effectiveness of EU conditionality, democratic resilience, green and digital transformation, regional security, energy independence and the relationship between neighbourhood and enlargement policies. Taken together, these contributions demonstrate that the Eastern Partnership is no longer merely an instrument of cooperation with the European Union's neighbours. It has become an increasingly differentiated framework whose future depends on its capacity to respond to the enlargement aspirations, reform needs and security challenges of its partner countries.

P R O G R A M

OF THE SCIENTIFIC - ANALYTICAL SEMINAR

“EASTERN PARTNERSHIP POLICY AFTER 2020“

INTRODUCTORY BLOCK

Cornea Valentina, Ph.D., Associate Professor

Overview of the achievements and failures of the Eastern Partnership (EP) policy since 2009: key documents, “The 20 objectives for 2020.”

Golovataia Ludmila, Ph.D., Associate Professor

Analysis of the “More for More” model and its application to the three associated countries (Ukraine, Georgia, Republic of Moldova) in comparison with the three non-associated countries (Azerbaijan, Armenia, Belarus).

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. *How effective has the “More for More” approach proved to be for structural reforms (rule of law, fight against corruption) in the associated countries? Was the financial support and market access provided by the EU a sufficient incentive to overcome the resistance of oligarchic interests?*
2. *Why, despite the “More for More” model, has “reform fatigue” emerged in some EP countries? What should be added to the “More for More” principle (beyond money and market access) to ensure the irreversibility of democratic change?*
3. *Should the EP policy after 2020 explicitly include a security and defence component for the associated countries (especially for the candidate countries) or does this go beyond the mandate of the EU’s civilian policy? What is the main risk of ignoring the security factor?*
4. *How can the EU ensure that new priorities, such as the European Green Deal and the Digital Agenda, do not become an excessive economic burden for EP countries already struggling with poverty and infrastructure modernization?*

MAIN BLOCK: STRATEGIC CHALLENGES AND NEW PRIORITIES

Cazacu Vitalie, PhD, Associate Professor

Analysis of democratic resilience issues (corruption, rule of law) and “reform fatigue” in associated countries.

Bădărău Elena, PhD, Associate Professor

Exploration of the new EU priorities (European Green Deal, Digital Agenda) and how they can be integrated into the Eastern Partnership (EP) to stimulate modernization.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. *Should the EP policy after 2020 include a clear security and defence component for associated countries or does this go beyond the mandate of civilian policy?*
2. *How can the EU ensure that the reforms associated with the “European Green Deal” do not become an excessive economic burden for EP countries?*
3. *Despite many years of support, there is still oligarchic influence and much corruption in partner countries. What new, stricter mechanisms from the EU should be introduced to ensure that reforms in the rule of law and justice cannot be undone, even if political power changes?*
4. *How can the Eastern Partnership policy be changed to overcome “reform fatigue”? What new incentives (besides money) can be used to increase the involvement of civil society and local authorities, so that reforms are felt and supported “from the bottom up”, not only at the level of central governments?*
5. *The new EU priorities (Green Deal, Digital Agenda) require large investments. With limited economic resources, how can the EU adapt these “green” and “digital” requirements so that they become a driver of modernization, not an additional burden for the EP countries?*
6. *Energy independence/resilience is essential for sovereignty. What forms of regional cooperation (e.g. common energy markets or transport corridors) between partner countries can be strengthened with EU support to reduce dependence on external monopolists?*

POSITIONING BLOCK: THE FUTURE OF THE EASTERN PARTNERSHIP AND ITS STRATEGIC POSITIONING

Mandaji Elena, Msg. lector univ.

Analysis of the “Associated Trio” initiative (Georgia, Republic of Moldova, Ukraine) and their current status as EU candidate states.

Golovataia Ludmila, Ph.D., associate professor

Should the EU offer a clear perspective of accession to the associated countries, as the main incentive for reforms, or maintain “strategic uncertainty”?

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. *To what extent has the candidate status of Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova made the Eastern Partnership (EaP) policy less relevant for these countries? Should the focus shift to the accession negotiation process?*
2. *What control mechanisms should be strengthened (e.g. anti-money laundering, justice reform) to prevent access to the EU internal market from being used to benefit oligarchic interests?*
3. *How can regional cooperation (among EaP partners, e.g. in the areas of transport and energy) be strengthened as a tool to counter external threats?*

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1. *Summary of key conclusions for each block.*
2. *Development of recommendations: divide participants into 3 groups (10 minutes each) to formulate two priority policy recommendations for the EU on the Eastern Partnership (EP) in the period 2025–2030.*

Brief presentation of recommendations and vote on the most strategically important measure.



PART I. UNDERSTANDING THE EVOLUTION

The opening session of the Seminar focused on assessing the evolution of the Eastern Partnership since its launch in 2009. The discussion examined the principal policy documents, the implementation of the “20 Deliverables for 2020” initiative, and the overall achievements and shortcomings of the Eastern Partnership in the context of changing geopolitical realities. The analytical material presented below summarizes the key issues discussed during the session and provides an integrated assessment based on the presentations and expert debate.

INTRODUCTORY BLOCK

OVERVIEW OF THE ACHIEVEMENTS AND FAILURES OF THE EASTERN PARTNERSHIP POLICY SINCE 2009: KEY DOCUMENTS AND THE “20 DELIVERABLES FOR 2020”

Valentina Cornea, PhD, Associate Professor

Abstract

Since its launch in 2009, the Eastern Partnership (EaP) has become the principal framework governing relations between the European Union and six Eastern European partner countries. Originally conceived as the eastern dimension of the European Neighbourhood Policy, the initiative aimed to promote political association, economic integration and democratic reforms through differentiated cooperation and positive conditionality. Over the past fifteen years, however, profound geopolitical transformations, institutional reforms within the European Union and the changing aspirations of partner countries have significantly altered both the objectives and practical implementation of the Eastern Partnership.

This analytical paper examines the evolution of the Eastern Partnership from its establishment in 2009 to its current transformation under the renewed EU enlargement agenda. Particular attention is devoted to the principal policy documents that shaped the initiative, the implementation of the 20 Deliverables for 2020, and the extent to which these objectives contributed to political, institutional and socio-economic modernisation within partner countries.

The paper analyses the major achievements of the Eastern Partnership alongside its structural limitations, including differentiated political ambitions, uneven reform implementation and growing geopolitical challenges. It argues that the granting of EU candidate status to the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine has fundamentally transformed the political logic of the Eastern Partnership, shifting it from a neighbourhood policy instrument towards an increasingly differentiated framework supporting pre-accession reforms.

The paper concludes that while the Eastern Partnership remains an important mechanism of regional cooperation, its future effectiveness will depend on its ability to accommodate both candidate countries pursuing EU membership and partners maintaining alternative forms of cooperation with the European Union.

Keywords: Eastern Partnership; European Neighbourhood Policy; European integration; 20 Deliverables for 2020; EU enlargement

1. Introduction

The Eastern Partnership (EaP) represents one of the most significant regional initiatives developed by the European Union in the field of external relations during the twenty-first century. Established in 2009 as the eastern dimension of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), the initiative sought to strengthen political association, economic integration and sectoral cooperation between the European Union and six partner countries: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine.

Unlike previous neighbourhood initiatives, the Eastern Partnership introduced a more ambitious and differentiated model of cooperation. Rather than offering a uniform framework for all neighbouring states, it recognised that partner countries possessed different political ambitions, institutional capacities and levels of readiness for European integration. Consequently, cooperation evolved according to the principles of differentiation, conditionality and shared ownership, allowing each country to determine the depth of its engagement with the European Union.

Over the past fifteen years, the Eastern Partnership has evolved far beyond its original objectives. Initially centred on democratic governance, economic cooperation and people-to-people contacts, it grad-

ually expanded to include energy security, digital transformation, environmental sustainability, transport connectivity, resilience against hybrid threats and institutional modernisation. This transformation reflected both internal developments within the European Union and profound geopolitical changes affecting the Eastern European region.

The initiative has also been shaped by several major external events. The signing of the Association Agreements with Georgia, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine in 2014 fundamentally deepened bilateral relations. Subsequently, the implementation of the 20 Deliverables for 2020 shifted the policy towards measurable and results-oriented co-operation. More recently, Russia's full-scale aggression against Ukraine and the granting of EU candidate status to the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine have redefined the strategic context of the Eastern Partnership, bringing it closer to the EU enlargement agenda than at any previous stage of its development.

Against this background, assessing the Eastern Partnership requires more than a simple review of policy documents or institutional achievements. It requires an understanding of how the initiative has adapted to changing political realities and whether its original objectives remain appropriate in the context of a transformed European security architecture.

This chapter analyses the evolution of the Eastern Partnership from its establishment in 2009 to its current transformation. It examines the principal strategic documents that shaped the initiative, evaluates the implementation of the 20 Deliverables for 2020, identifies its principal achievements and structural limitations, and discusses the implications of recent geopolitical developments for the future of EU policy towards its Eastern neighbours.

2. Evolution of the Eastern Partnership Policy (2009–2025)

The development of the Eastern Partnership can be divided into several distinct phases, each reflecting changing priorities within both the European Union and the partner countries.



Figure 1.
Evolution of the Eastern Partnership Policy

The first phase (2009–2013) focused primarily on establishing institutional structures for cooperation. The Prague Summit formally launched the initiative by introducing four multilateral thematic platforms, bilateral cooperation mechanisms and a differentiated approach towards political association and economic integration. During this period, emphasis was placed on democratic governance, public administration reform, mobility, trade facilitation and regional dialogue.

The second phase (2014–2017) marked a qualitative transformation of the initiative. The signing of the Association Agreements and

Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas (DCFTAs) with Georgia, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine established legally binding frameworks for political association and economic integration. For the first time, three partner countries committed themselves to comprehensive legislative approximation with substantial parts of the EU acquis. Consequently, the Eastern Partnership increasingly became a mechanism supporting structural reforms rather than simply facilitating political dialogue.

The third phase (2017–2020) introduced a stronger results-oriented approach through the adoption of the 20 Deliverables for 2020. Instead of defining broad political aspirations, the European Union identified concrete and measurable objectives covering economic development, governance, connectivity and societal cooperation. This represented a significant shift from process-oriented cooperation towards evi-

dence-based policy implementation.

The fourth phase began after 2020 and accelerated dramatically following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. The granting of EU candidate status to the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine fundamentally altered the strategic environment in which the Eastern Partnership operates. The initiative increasingly functions not only as an instrument of neighbourhood policy but also as a platform supporting reforms required by the accession process. As a result, the distinction between neighbourhood policy and enlargement policy has become progressively less pronounced for the associated partner countries.

3. Strategic documents shaping the Eastern Partnership policy

The evolution of the Eastern Partnership has been accompanied by a series of strategic documents that progressively redefined both the objectives of the initiative and the instruments through which cooperation with partner countries has been implemented. Rather than representing isolated political declarations, these documents reflect the gradual transformation of the European Union's approach towards its Eastern neighbourhood—from a policy primarily concerned with stability and cooperation to one increasingly linked with resilience, differentiation and, more recently, the enlargement process.

During the initial phase of the Eastern Partnership, policy documents concentrated on establishing institutional mechanisms for political dialogue and regional cooperation. As relations between the European Union and partner countries deepened, subsequent documents placed greater emphasis on measurable reforms, legislative approximation, sectoral integration and democratic governance. Following the dramatic geopolitical changes after 2020, strategic priorities shifted once again towards resilience, security, energy independence and support for candidate countries.

The evolution of these documents illustrates that the Eastern Partnership has never been a static policy framework. Instead, it has continuously adapted to changing political realities, reflecting both the internal evolution of the European Union and the aspirations of partner countries.

Table 1.

Major Strategic Documents Shaping the Eastern Partnership

Year	Strategic document	Main contribution to the Eastern Partnership
2004	European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP)	Established the general framework for co-operation with neighbouring countries.
2009	Prague Declaration	Official launch of the Eastern Partnership and establishment of bilateral and multi-lateral cooperation mechanisms.
2011	Warsaw Declaration	Reinforced the principles of differentiation and shared ownership.
2013	Vilnius Summit Declaration	Confirmed the strategic importance of Association Agreements and DCFTAs.
2015	Riga Declaration	Introduced resilience and differentiated integration as emerging priorities.
2017	20 Deliverables for 2020	Shifted the initiative towards measurable, results-oriented cooperation.
2020	Joint Communication "Reinforcing Resilience – an Eastern Partnership that Delivers for All"	Reoriented the policy towards resilience, sustainable development and digital transformation.
2022	European Council Decisions granting candidate status to Moldova and Ukraine	Opened a new stage linking the Eastern Partnership with the EU enlargement process.

The progression illustrated above demonstrates that the Eastern Partnership has gradually evolved through three interconnected policy paradigms.

The first paradigm (2009–2013) was characterised by institution-building and confidence-building measures. Cooperation focused primarily on establishing common platforms for dialogue, promoting democratic values and encouraging voluntary political approximation.

The second paradigm (2014–2020) concentrated on implementation. Association Agreements transformed political commitments into legally binding obligations, while the introduction of the 20 Deliverables for 2020 enabled progress to be measured through concrete outputs rather than political declarations.

The third paradigm, emerging after 2020 and particularly after 2022,

reflects a fundamental strategic transition. Democratic resilience, security, energy independence, digital transformation and accession-related reforms have become increasingly interconnected. For the associated countries, the Eastern Partnership now functions not merely as a neighbourhood policy but as an important preparatory framework for eventual EU membership.

4. The “20 Deliverables for 2020”: From Political Commitments to Measurable Results

A significant milestone in the evolution of the Eastern Partnership was the adoption of the **20 Deliverables for 2020**, endorsed at the Brussels Eastern Partnership Summit in 2017. Unlike previous policy documents, which primarily established strategic objectives, this framework translated broad political ambitions into measurable actions and concrete deliverables.

The initiative reflected an important methodological shift within European Union external policy. Success was no longer assessed exclusively through legislative commitments or institutional reforms; instead, increasing attention was devoted to tangible improvements affecting citizens, businesses and public administrations.

The framework was organised around four mutually reinforcing priorities that collectively sought to strengthen the resilience and competitiveness of partner countries.

Table 2.

The four priority areas of the “20 Deliverables for 2020”

Priority area	Main objectives	Selected results
Stronger Economy	SME development, access to finance, trade facilitation	Support for thousands of SMEs, increased investment, expanded export opportunities
Stronger Governance	Rule of law, anti-corruption, judicial reform, public administration	Institutional reforms, improved public services, strengthened transparency
Stronger Connectivity	Energy efficiency, transport, digital transformation, environmental protection	Better transport links, digital infrastructure, renewable energy initiatives

Stronger Society	Education, mobility, civil society, youth cooperation	Erasmus+ participation, visa liberalisation, increased academic and civic exchanges
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One of the principal strengths of the 20 Deliverables for 2020 was its emphasis on practical outcomes rather than procedural compliance. The framework introduced measurable indicators that enabled both the European Commission and partner governments to monitor implementation more systematically. This represented a significant improvement compared with earlier stages of the Eastern Partnership, where progress was often assessed through broad political commitments without clearly defined performance criteria.

From an economic perspective, the initiative contributed to the expansion of support for small and medium-sized enterprises, increased access to European financial instruments and improved conditions for cross-border trade. Numerous enterprises benefited from financing provided through the European Investment Bank and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, while regulatory convergence facilitated greater participation in the EU internal market.

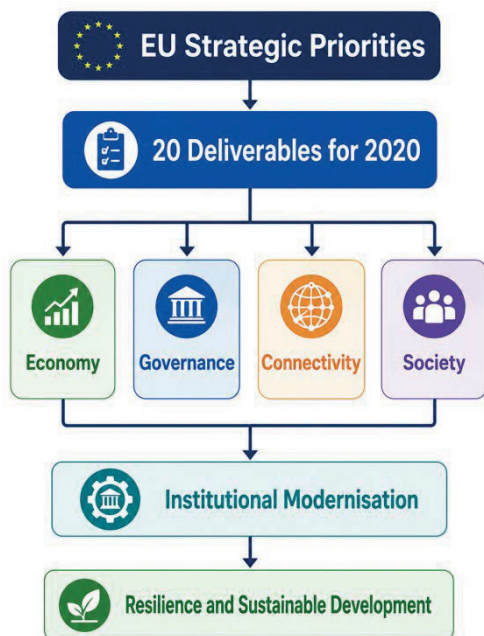
Equally important were achievements in governance. Public administration reforms, digitalisation of government services and improvements in transparency strengthened institutional capacity in several partner countries. Although progress remained uneven, the framework encouraged governments to adopt more systematic approaches to public sector modernisation.

The social dimension also became increasingly significant. Erasmus+, Horizon Europe and other European programmes expanded opportunities for academic cooperation, research partnerships and youth mobility. Visa liberalisation for Georgia, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine represented one of the most visible achievements from the perspective of ordinary citizens, strengthening interpersonal contacts and reinforcing public support for closer relations with the European Union.

Nevertheless, implementation also revealed important differences among partner countries. Progress depended not only on the availability of European financial assistance but also on domestic political commitment, administrative capacity and the willingness of governments to implement sometimes politically difficult reforms.

Figure 2.
The logic of the “20 Deliverables for 2020”

The figure illustrates the operational philosophy of the initiative. Rather than treating economic development, governance and social cooperation as separate policy domains, the framework integrated them into a comprehensive model of sustainable development centred on institutional modernisation and resilience.



5. Achievements of the Eastern Partnership: a multidimensional assessment

After more than fifteen years of implementation, the Eastern Partnership has produced significant achievements that extend beyond traditional political cooperation. Although the pace and depth of reforms have varied considerably across participating countries, the initiative has contributed to the transformation of political institutions, economic relations and societal cooperation throughout the region.

The most visible achievements can be grouped into four interconnected dimensions: political and institutional transformation, economic integration, sectoral modernisation and societal cooperation.

Table 3.

Major achievements of the Eastern Partnership

Dimension	Key achievements	Long-term significance
Political	Association Agreements; strengthened political dialogue; democratic reforms	Deeper political association with the European Union
Institutional	Public administration reform; judicial reforms; anti-corruption institutions	Improved governance and institutional capacity
Economical	DCFTAs; regulatory approximation; SME support	Greater integration into the EU internal market
Societal	Visa liberalisation; Erasmus+; civil society cooperation	Stronger people-to-people contacts and European identity

The political dimension represents perhaps the most significant long-term achievement of the initiative. Association Agreements fundamentally transformed relations between the European Union and the associated countries by establishing legally binding commitments covering virtually every area of public policy. These agreements created unprecedented opportunities for political dialogue while providing comprehensive roadmaps for democratic and institutional reforms.

Institutional achievements have been equally important. Throughout the implementation of the Eastern Partnership, partner countries introduced extensive reforms in public administration, judicial governance, customs administration, public procurement and financial management. Although implementation remains uneven, these reforms have substantially improved the institutional foundations necessary for closer European integration.

Economic integration has also advanced considerably. The Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas have expanded trade with the European Union, encouraged regulatory convergence and stimulated improvements in product quality, food safety standards and customs procedures. For many enterprises, access to the European market has become a powerful incentive for technological modernisation and increased competitiveness.

Finally, the societal dimension has emerged as one of the most enduring successes of the initiative. Academic mobility, youth exchanges,

cooperation between universities, civil society partnerships and visa liberalisation have strengthened interpersonal relations between the European Union and the Eastern Partnership countries. These developments have contributed to the gradual emergence of stronger European social and cultural links that extend well beyond formal political cooperation.

6. Persistent Challenges and Structural Limitations

Despite its considerable achievements, the Eastern Partnership has encountered a number of structural limitations that have constrained both the pace and sustainability of reforms. The experience accumulated over more than fifteen years demonstrates that successful policy implementation depends not only on the quality of European initiatives but also on domestic political commitment, institutional capacity and the broader geopolitical environment.

Unlike enlargement policy, the Eastern Partnership was originally designed as a flexible framework for cooperation rather than a pre-accession instrument. While this flexibility enabled partner countries to pursue different levels of integration according to their ambitions, it also produced considerable asymmetry in reform outcomes. Countries committed to closer political association with the European Union advanced significantly further than those pursuing more limited forms of cooperation.

Another important limitation concerns the implementation gap between legislative approximation and institutional practice. Many partner countries adopted comprehensive legal reforms aligned with European standards; however, practical implementation frequently proved slower than anticipated. Judicial independence, anti-corruption measures, administrative professionalism and regulatory enforcement often remained constrained by limited institutional capacity, political instability and resistance from entrenched political and economic interests.

The geopolitical environment has also fundamentally affected the implementation of the Eastern Partnership. The illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014, Russia's military aggression against Ukraine, hybrid threats, cyberattacks, disinformation campaigns and energy coercion demonstrated that democratic reforms cannot be considered independently from security considerations. The original architecture of the

Eastern Partnership was developed in a substantially different geopolitical context and therefore required adaptation to address these emerging challenges.

In addition, economic disparities among partner countries have influenced the effectiveness of policy implementation. Differences in economic development, administrative resources and investment capacity have affected the ability of governments to implement increasingly complex European regulatory requirements, particularly in areas related to environmental standards, digital transformation and industrial competitiveness.

These limitations do not diminish the strategic importance of the Eastern Partnership. Rather, they demonstrate that future policy must combine political conditionality with stronger institutional support, greater flexibility and more differentiated instruments adapted to the specific circumstances of each partner country.

Table 4.

Main structural challenges of the Eastern Partnership

Internal Challenges	External Challenges
Political instability	Russian military aggression
Corruption and institutional capture	Hybrid threats
Weak administrative capacity	Cybersecurity risks
Reform fatigue	Energy insecurity
Limited financial resources	Geopolitical competition
Uneven implementation of reforms	Economic shocks and supply chain disruptions

The interaction between these internal and external challenges illustrates that democratic transformation cannot be understood solely as a domestic reform process. Institutional resilience increasingly depends upon the ability of states to respond simultaneously to political, economic and security pressures.

Policy Box 1

The Transformation of the Eastern Partnership after 2022

The decision of the European Council in June 2022 to grant EU candidate status to the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine marked a fundamental turning point in the evolution of the Eastern Partnership. For the first time, the initiative became directly connected with the European Union's enlargement policy. As a consequence, democratic reforms, legislative approximation and institutional capacity are no longer evaluated exclusively within the framework of neighbourhood policy but also as essential components of the accession process. The Eastern Partnership has therefore entered a new stage in which differentiation increasingly reflects different pathways towards European integration rather than different levels of neighbourhood cooperation.

7. From Neighbourhood Policy to a Pre-Enlargement Instrument

Perhaps the most significant development in the evolution of the Eastern Partnership has been the gradual transformation of its strategic purpose. Although the initiative formally remains part of the European Neighbourhood Policy, recent developments indicate that its practical role has changed substantially for the associated countries.

Initially, the Eastern Partnership was conceived as a mechanism for promoting stability, democratic governance and economic cooperation without offering an explicit membership perspective. Political association and regulatory convergence were regarded as objectives in themselves rather than as stages of the accession process.

However, successive developments progressively altered this logic. The conclusion of Association Agreements and DCFTAs introduced legally binding obligations that closely resemble elements of the EU pre-accession framework. The implementation of the 20 Deliverables for 2020 strengthened policy monitoring through measurable benchmarks. Finally, the granting of candidate status to the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine fundamentally redefined the relationship between the Eastern Partnership and the enlargement policy.

Today, many reforms undertaken within the Eastern Partnership simultaneously fulfil the requirements of both neighbourhood policy and accession negotiations. Judicial reform, anti-corruption measures, public administration modernisation, public financial management, competition policy, environmental legislation and digital transformation are

no longer viewed exclusively as instruments of closer cooperation but increasingly as prerequisites for future membership.

This transformation does not imply the disappearance of the Eastern Partnership. On the contrary, the initiative continues to provide an important regional framework that facilitates policy dialogue, regional cooperation and knowledge exchange among partner countries. Nevertheless, its strategic function has evolved. For candidate countries, the Eastern Partnership increasingly serves as a bridge between neighbourhood cooperation and accession.



Figure 3.
Transformation of the Eastern Partnership

The figure demonstrates that the Eastern Partnership has evolved from a policy of cooperation into an increasingly structured framework supporting European integration and accession-related reforms.

8. Policy Implications for the Republic of Moldova

The experience of the Eastern Partnership provides several important lessons for the Republic of Moldova as it advances along the European integration path.

First, the implementation of European legislation should increasingly focus on institutional effectiveness rather than legislative approximation alone. Sustainable integration depends upon the ability of public institutions to apply reforms consistently, transparently and independently of political change.

Second, strengthening democratic resilience should become a strategic objective of national governance. Judicial independence, effective anti-corruption institutions, professional public administration and active civil society represent essential conditions for maintaining reform momentum during the accession process.

Third, greater attention should be devoted to strengthening local governance and regional development. European integration should generate visible benefits not only at the national level but also within local communities through improved public services, infrastructure, education and economic opportunities.

Finally, the Republic of Moldova should continue to utilise the Eastern Partnership as an important platform for regional cooperation while simultaneously preparing for the more demanding requirements of the enlargement process. Participation in regional initiatives, academic networks and cross-border cooperation remains an important complement to bilateral accession negotiations.

9. Concluding Remarks

More than fifteen years after its establishment, the Eastern Partnership remains one of the European Union's most influential regional policy initiatives. During this period, it has significantly strengthened political dialogue, promoted democratic reforms, expanded economic integration and fostered closer societal links between the European Union and its Eastern neighbours.

The initiative has evolved considerably beyond its original objectives. What began as an instrument of the European Neighbourhood Policy has progressively incorporated elements of differentiation, conditionality, measurable performance and democratic resilience. Recent geopolitical developments have accelerated this transformation, bringing the Eastern Partnership into much closer alignment with the European Union's enlargement agenda.

At the same time, the implementation of the Eastern Partnership has revealed important structural limitations. Sustainable democratic transformation depends not only on financial assistance and legislative approximation but also on institutional capacity, political commitment, public trust and the resilience of democratic systems in the face of internal and external challenges.

The granting of candidate status to the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine represents a decisive milestone in the evolution of the initiative. While the Eastern Partnership continues to provide an essential framework for regional cooperation, it increasingly performs the function of supporting reforms required for eventual EU membership. Its future relevance will therefore depend on its capacity to reconcile neigh-

bourhood cooperation with the differentiated needs of candidate and non-candidate partner countries.

Ultimately, the Eastern Partnership should be understood not as a completed policy project but as a continuously evolving framework that adapts to changing geopolitical realities and the European aspirations of its partner countries. Its future success will be determined by its ability to promote resilient institutions, sustainable reforms and a credible European perspective capable of delivering long-term stability, prosperity and democratic development across the Eastern neighbourhood.

Key Takeaways

- The Eastern Partnership has evolved from a regional cooperation initiative into an increasingly differentiated framework closely connected with the EU enlargement process.
- The 20 Deliverables for 2020 introduced a results-oriented approach that strengthened policy implementation through measurable objectives and performance indicators.
- Association Agreements and DCFTAs fundamentally transformed relations between the European Union and the associated partner countries by establishing comprehensive legal and institutional frameworks for integration.
- Democratic resilience, institutional capacity and effective implementation have become as important as legislative approximation in assessing reform progress.
- For the Republic of Moldova, the Eastern Partnership remains both a platform for regional cooperation and an important preparatory framework supporting the country's accession to the European Union.

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ANALYSIS OF THE “MORE FOR MORE” MODEL AND ITS APPLICATION IN THE ASSOCIATED AND NON-ASSOCIATED EASTERN PARTNERSHIP COUNTRIES

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Abstract

The principle of “**More for More**” has become one of the defining features of the European Union’s approach towards the Eastern Partnership. Introduced within the revised European Neighbourhood Policy and subsequently incorporated into the Eastern Partnership framework, this principle established a differentiated model of cooperation whereby countries demonstrating greater commitment to democratic reforms, the rule of law and market-oriented transformation receive increased political support, financial assistance and opportunities for deeper integration with the European Union.

This chapter examines the conceptual foundations of the “More for More” principle and analyses its practical application in both associated and non-associated Eastern Partnership countries. Particular attention is devoted to the differentiated trajectories of the Republic of Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia compared with Armenia, Azerbaijan and Belarus. The paper evaluates the effectiveness of positive conditionality as an instrument for stimulating structural reforms and assesses its contribution to political association, economic integration and institutional modernisation. It further argues that, while the “More for More” approach has significantly strengthened differentiation within the Eastern Partnership, recent geopolitical developments and the granting of EU candidate status to the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine require a reconsideration of the principle within the broader context of the EU enlargement process. The chapter concludes by identifying the future role of differentiated integration as one of the principal mechanisms guiding relations between the European Union and its Eastern partners.

Keywords: Eastern Partnership; More for More; positive conditionality; differentiated integration; Association Agreements

1. Introduction

One of the principal innovations introduced by the European Union within the framework of the Eastern Partnership has been the application of differentiated integration. Unlike traditional regional initiatives based upon identical commitments for all participating countries, the Eastern Partnership recognised from its inception that partner states differed considerably in their political aspirations, institutional capacities and willingness to undertake democratic reforms.

This differentiated philosophy was formalised through the principle commonly known as **“More for More”**, which established a direct relationship between reform performance and the level of political, economic and financial support provided by the European Union. Countries demonstrating greater commitment to democratic governance, respect for fundamental rights, judicial reform and market liberalisation were expected to receive greater access to European programmes, financial assistance, trade opportunities and institutional cooperation.

The introduction of this principle represented a significant departure from earlier neighbourhood policies. Rather than treating all neighbouring countries identically, the European Union increasingly adopted a performance-based approach in which incentives were linked to measurable reform achievements. Positive conditionality became one of the principal mechanisms through which the European Union attempted to encourage sustainable political transformation without imposing formal accession obligations.

During the fifteen years following the establishment of the Eastern Partnership, the “More for More” principle profoundly influenced the development trajectories of participating countries. The Republic of Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine progressively deepened their relations with the European Union through Association Agreements and Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas (DCFTAs), whereas Armenia, Azerbaijan and Belarus pursued more selective forms of engagement reflecting their own domestic priorities and geopolitical orientations.

Recent geopolitical developments have fundamentally altered the context in which differentiated integration operates. The granting of EU candidate status to the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine, together with the evolving enlargement agenda, has raised important questions regarding the future relevance of the “More for More” principle. Increasingly, differentiation is no longer confined to neighbourhood policy but

forms part of a broader continuum linking neighbourhood cooperation with accession preparation.

Against this background, this chapter analyses the conceptual evolution of the “More for More” model, evaluates its practical implementation across the Eastern Partnership countries and considers its future role within the changing architecture of European integration.

2. Conceptual Framework

2.1. The Emergence of Positive Conditionality

Conditionality has long represented one of the principal instruments of European Union external policy. Traditionally associated with the enlargement process, conditionality links political and economic incentives to the fulfilment of clearly defined reform objectives. Candidate countries seeking EU membership are expected to comply with the Copenhagen criteria and progressively align their legislation and institutions with the EU acquis.

The European Neighbourhood Policy adapted this logic to countries for which membership was not initially envisaged. Rather than relying upon accession negotiations, the European Union introduced positive conditionality, offering enhanced cooperation in exchange for demonstrated reform progress.

The revised European Neighbourhood Policy, adopted in 2011, formally articulated the principle of “**More for More**”, establishing that those partners making greater progress towards democratic reforms would receive greater political support and financial assistance.

This represented an important conceptual innovation. Instead of imposing uniform obligations upon all partner countries, the European Union recognised that neighbouring states

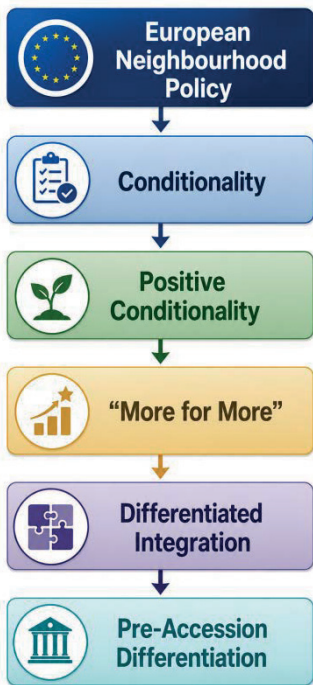


Figure 1.
Evolution of the principle of
differentiated integration

possess different political ambitions and varying capacities for reform. Consequently, cooperation became increasingly differentiated rather than standardised.

The figure demonstrates the gradual evolution of European Union policy from a general neighbourhood framework towards an increasingly differentiated model that rewards reform performance and, more recently, supports accession-related reforms.

2.2. The logic of the “More for More” principle

The “More for More” principle is based on a relatively simple but strategically significant assumption: countries undertaking more ambitious reforms should receive greater benefits from cooperation with the European Union.

These benefits extend beyond financial assistance. They include broader political dialogue, participation in European programmes, access to the internal market, visa liberalisation, technical assistance, institutional cooperation and increased opportunities for investment.

Table 1.

The logic of the “More for More” principle

Reform progress	EU incentives	Expected outcomes
Democratic reforms	Financial assistance	Institutional modernisation
Rule of law	Political association	Better governance
Market reforms	DCFTA implementation	Economic integration
Regulatory approximation	Access to EU programmes	Legislative convergence
Effective implementation	Stronger partnerships	Sustainable European integration

The principle therefore combines incentives with responsibility. It does not guarantee identical benefits for all participants but encourages voluntary convergence by linking rewards to measurable reform achievements.

Unlike negative conditionality, based primarily on sanctions or restrictions, the “More for More” approach relies predominantly upon positive incentives. This reflects the European Union’s broader philosophy of transformative engagement, whereby cooperation is expected to generate long-term democratic and institutional change through partnership rather than coercion.

2.3. Differentiation as the organising principle of the Eastern Partnership

The practical application of the “More for More” principle gradually transformed differentiation into the defining characteristic of the Eastern Partnership.

Although all six partner countries participate within the same regional framework, their relationships with the European Union increasingly follow distinct trajectories. The Republic of Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia have pursued comprehensive political association and economic integration through Association Agreements and DCFTAs. Armenia has developed cooperation through the Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA), while Azerbaijan has preferred a more sectoral and pragmatic partnership. Belarus, particularly after recent political developments, has experienced a substantial reduction in institutional cooperation with the European Union.

Consequently, differentiation should not be interpreted as unequal treatment. Rather, it represents a flexible mechanism allowing cooperation to reflect the political ambitions, reform capacities and strategic choices of individual partner countries.

This evolution has made the Eastern Partnership significantly more adaptable but has also introduced new challenges concerning policy coherence, regional solidarity and the future relationship between neighbourhood policy and EU enlargement.

3. Application of the “More for More” Principle in the Eastern Partnership

The practical implementation of the “More for More” principle has been neither uniform nor linear. Although all six Eastern Partnership countries formally participated within the same regional initiative, their cooperation with the European Union gradually followed different trajectories reflecting domestic political developments, reform performance and foreign policy orientations.

From the outset, the European Union deliberately avoided applying a uniform integration model. Instead, it developed a differentiated approach allowing each partner country to determine the depth of its relationship according to its own political ambitions and reform capacity. Consequently, differentiation became not an exception but one of the fundamental principles governing the Eastern Partnership.

The Republic of Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine progressively demonstrated stronger political commitment towards European integration. Their governments accepted extensive obligations concerning legislative approximation, judicial reform, public administration modernisation, competition policy, environmental protection and trade liberalisation. These commitments culminated in the signing of the Association Agreements and the establishment of Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas (DCFTAs), which created comprehensive legal frameworks for long-term integration with the European Union.

By contrast, Armenia, Azerbaijan and Belarus pursued different strategies. Armenia opted for selective regulatory approximation through the Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA), preserving important elements of cooperation while maintaining alternative geopolitical commitments. Azerbaijan concentrated primarily on economic and energy cooperation without seeking comprehensive political integration, whereas Belarus progressively reduced institutional cooperation following political developments after 2020.

These divergent pathways illustrate that the “More for More” principle did not produce a single model of integration. Instead, it created several parallel models reflecting different levels of political ambition, reform commitment and institutional readiness.

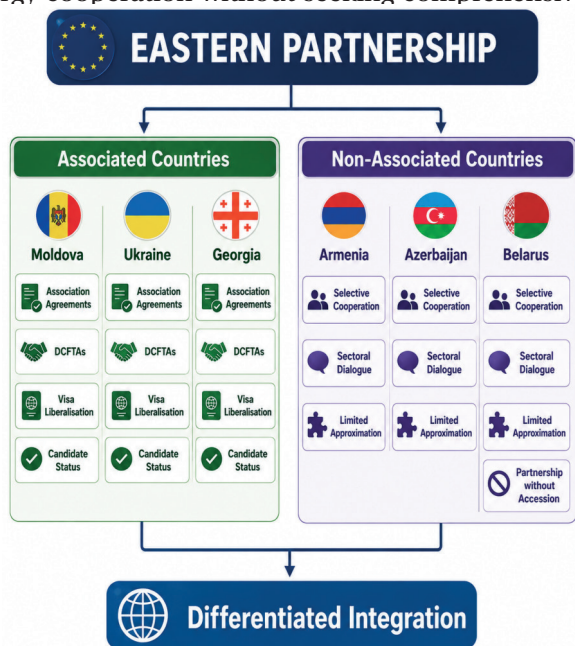


Figure 2.
Differentiated integration within
the Eastern Partnership

The figure illustrates that differentiation should not be understood as fragmentation. Rather, it represents a flexible governance model enabling partner countries to engage with the European Union according to their own strategic choices while remaining within a common institutional framework.

4. Comparative Assessment of the Associated and Non-Associated Countries

The practical implementation of the “More for More” principle demonstrates that reform incentives alone cannot fully explain differences in national performance. Domestic political leadership, institutional capacity, public support for European integration and geopolitical context have all significantly influenced reform trajectories.

Table 2.

Comparative assessment of the implementation of the “More for More” principle

Dimension	Moldova	Ukraine	Georgia	Armenia	Azerbaijan	Belarus
Association Agreement	✓	✓	✓	✗ (CEPA)	✗	✗
DCFTA	✓	✓	✓	✗	✗	✗
Visa Liberalisation	✓	✓	✓	✗	✗	✗
Candidate Status	✓	✓	✗*	✗	✗	✗
Legislative Approximation	High	High	High	Moderate	Selective	Limited
Political Integration with the EU	High	High	High	Moderate	Limited	Minimal

*At the time reflected in the seminar discussions.

The comparison reveals several important patterns.

First, associated countries consistently demonstrate a substantially higher degree of institutional integration with the European Union. Their reform agendas extend across virtually all sectors of public policy and involve continuous approximation to the EU acquis.

Second, non-associated countries have generally preferred more selective cooperation. Their participation has focused on areas of mutu-

al economic interest while avoiding broader political commitments that might affect domestic governance structures or geopolitical alignments.

Third, differentiation has produced asymmetrical outcomes. While this flexibility has enabled partner countries to pursue nationally appropriate strategies, it has also generated increasing disparities in institutional convergence, regulatory harmonisation and political association.

These findings suggest that differentiation has simultaneously strengthened the effectiveness of EU policy and reduced the coherence of the Eastern Partnership as a homogeneous regional initiative.

5. Assessing the effectiveness of the “More for More” model

More than a decade of implementation provides sufficient evidence to evaluate the effectiveness of the “More for More” principle as an instrument of European Union external policy.

Overall, the principle has demonstrated considerable success in encouraging voluntary reforms through positive incentives. Countries that consistently implemented democratic reforms gained access to progressively deeper forms of cooperation, including financial assistance, trade preferences, visa liberalisation, participation in European programmes and, eventually, candidate status.

Unlike traditional models based primarily on political pressure, positive conditionality strengthened domestic reform coalitions by demonstrating tangible benefits arising from European integration. Reform became associated not merely with compliance but with concrete opportunities for economic development, institutional modernisation and international cooperation.

Nevertheless, the experience of implementation also revealed several important limitations.

Financial assistance and preferential market access alone proved insufficient to guarantee the sustainability of reforms. In several cases, legislative progress outpaced institutional implementation. Judicial independence, anti-corruption measures and public administration reform frequently encountered resistance from entrenched political and economic interests.

Another limitation concerns the asymmetry of incentives. While associated countries benefited from increasingly comprehensive integration instruments, the attractiveness of European incentives proved weaker for countries whose political priorities differed from those of the

European Union. Consequently, the capacity of positive conditionality to stimulate reforms depended not only upon the generosity of European support but also upon domestic political willingness to pursue long-term transformation.

The changing geopolitical environment has further complicated the application of the “More for More” principle. Russia’s aggression against Ukraine demonstrated that democratic reforms cannot be separated from broader questions of national security, energy resilience and strategic autonomy. As a result, contemporary European policy increasingly combines traditional conditionality with broader resilience-building measures.

Table 3.
Strengths and limitations of the “More for More” principle

Strengths		Limitations
Encourages voluntary reforms		Uneven implementation across countries
Respects national differentiation		Dependent on domestic political will
Provides measurable incentives		Financial incentives alone are insufficient
Strengthens EU-partner relations		Vulnerable to geopolitical pressures
Supports gradual integration		Growing asymmetry within the Eastern Partnership

The overall assessment indicates that the “More for More” principle remains one of the European Union’s most innovative instruments of external governance. However, its future effectiveness depends upon adapting differentiated integration to the realities of the evolving enlargement process, strengthening institutional resilience and ensuring that reform incentives remain credible, transparent and closely linked to measurable implementation outcomes.

6. From “More for More” to pre-accession differentiation

The political developments that followed 2022 have significantly altered the context in which the “More for More” principle operates. The decision of the European Council to grant candidate status to the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine marked not only a major milestone in the EU enlargement policy but also a turning point in the evolution of the Eastern Partnership.

Originally, the “More for More” principle functioned as an instrument of neighbourhood policy. Its primary objective was to encourage democratic reforms by offering progressively greater political and economic incentives while avoiding explicit commitments regarding future membership. Within this framework, differentiation reflected different levels of cooperation rather than different stages of accession.

The granting of candidate status fundamentally changed this logic. For the associated countries, differentiation increasingly reflects different stages of the European integration process. Legislative approximation, judicial reform, anti-corruption policies and public administration modernisation are no longer pursued solely to strengthen neighbourhood cooperation but also to satisfy the requirements of the accession process.

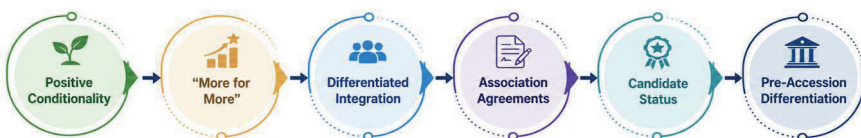
Consequently, the “More for More” principle is gradually evolving into what may be described as pre-accession differentiation. The depth of integration increasingly depends not only on reform performance but also on progress towards fulfilling the political, legal and institutional conditions required for EU membership.

This transformation has important implications for the future architecture of the Eastern Partnership. While the initiative continues to provide a common regional framework, its internal differentiation is becoming more pronounced. Candidate countries require policy instruments increasingly aligned with the enlargement methodology, whereas other partners continue to benefit primarily from neighbourhood cooperation mechanisms.

The future challenge for the European Union will therefore be to preserve the inclusiveness of the Eastern Partnership while accommodating different levels of integration without undermining regional cooperation.

Figure 3.

Evolution of the “More for More” principle



The figure illustrates that the “More for More” principle has not been replaced by the enlargement process. Rather, it has evolved into a broader mechanism that increasingly connects differentiated neighbourhood cooperation with accession-related reforms.

Policy Box 1

Key Policy Message

The experience of the Eastern Partnership demonstrates that positive conditionality is most effective when three conditions are simultaneously fulfilled:

- clear political objectives;
- measurable reform benchmarks;
- credible long-term incentives.

The evolution of the Eastern Partnership suggests that future differentiation should combine the flexibility of neighbourhood policy with the predictability and institutional discipline of the EU enlargement framework.

7. Policy implications for the Republic of Moldova

The experience of implementing the “More for More” principle offers several important lessons for the Republic of Moldova as it advances towards European Union membership.

First, the effectiveness of European integration depends increasingly upon the quality rather than the quantity of reforms. Future policy should therefore prioritise implementation capacity, institutional effectiveness and administrative professionalism alongside legislative approximation.

Second, Moldova should continue to use differentiated integration strategically. Participation in EU programmes, sectoral integration initiatives, research cooperation and cross-border projects should complement the formal accession negotiations, thereby strengthening institutional preparedness before membership.

Third, democratic reforms must be accompanied by continuous public communication. Sustaining public support for European integration requires that citizens perceive tangible improvements in governance, public services, infrastructure and economic opportunities resulting from the implementation of European standards.

Fourth, the Republic of Moldova should strengthen regional cooperation with other associated countries. The experience accumulated by Ukraine and Georgia in implementing Association Agreements, judicial reforms and sectoral approximation provides valuable opportunities for policy learning and institutional cooperation.

Finally, the transformation of the Eastern Partnership creates new responsibilities for Moldova. Candidate status should be regarded not as the conclusion of the European integration process but as the beginning of a more demanding stage requiring greater administrative capacity, stronger democratic institutions and sustained political commitment.

Table 4.

Future directions for the “More for More” principle

Policy Area	Traditional Approach	Future Direction
Conditionality	Reform incentives	Accession preparedness
Political Dialogue	Bilateral cooperation	Enlargement dialogue
Financial Support	Neighbourhood assistance	Pre-accession support
Governance	Legislative approximation	Institutional effectiveness
Integration	Association	Progressive participation in EU policies

The future development of differentiated integration will therefore depend upon its capacity to balance flexibility with credibility while preserving the fundamental principles of democratic governance, the rule of law and sustainable reform.

8. Concluding Remarks

The “More for More” principle represents one of the most innovative elements of the European Union’s relations with its Eastern neighbours. By linking political and economic incentives to measurable reform achievements, it introduced a differentiated model of cooperation that recognised the diversity of political ambitions and institutional capacities among partner countries.

Over the past decade, the principle has significantly influenced the evolution of the Eastern Partnership. It facilitated the conclusion of Association Agreements, encouraged comprehensive legislative approximation and promoted institutional modernisation in the associated countries. At the same time, it allowed other partners to pursue alter-

native forms of cooperation reflecting their own political priorities and strategic choices.

The experience of implementation demonstrates that positive conditionality has generated important achievements but also revealed several limitations. Financial assistance, market access and political dialogue can encourage reforms, yet they cannot substitute for domestic political commitment, institutional integrity and public support. Sustainable transformation ultimately depends upon the capacity of national institutions to implement reforms consistently and independently of changing political circumstances.

Recent geopolitical developments have introduced a new stage in the evolution of the “More for More” principle. The granting of EU candidate status to the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine has expanded the significance of differentiated integration beyond neighbourhood policy. Increasingly, differentiation reflects not only different levels of cooperation but also different stages of the accession process.

The future relevance of the Eastern Partnership will therefore depend upon its ability to combine the flexibility of differentiated cooperation with the strategic objectives of the European Union’s enlargement policy. Rather than representing alternative policy frameworks, neighbourhood policy and enlargement are becoming increasingly complementary instruments supporting democratic transformation, institutional resilience and sustainable European integration.

Key Takeaways

- The “More for More” principle transformed the Eastern Partnership from a uniform regional initiative into a differentiated framework based on reform performance.
- Positive conditionality proved most effective where domestic political commitment, institutional capacity and public support reinforced European incentives.
- The associated countries achieved substantially deeper political and economic integration through Association Agreements, DCFTAs and comprehensive legislative approximation.
- The granting of candidate status to the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine has fundamentally altered the logic of differentiated integration, connecting neighbourhood policy with the EU enlargement process.

- The future of the Eastern Partnership depends on preserving differentiation while ensuring that it supports both regional co-operation and accession-related reforms.

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PART II. UNDERSTANDING THE NEW CHALLENGES

The second thematic block of the Scientific and Analytical Seminar shifted the discussion from the historical evolution of the Eastern Partnership towards the strategic challenges that increasingly shape its future development. While the introductory session examined the achievements and institutional foundations of the initiative, this part focused on the capacity of the Eastern Partnership to respond to new political, economic and security realities.

The discussion recognised that the geopolitical environment surrounding the European Union has changed fundamentally over the past decade. Russia's full-scale aggression against Ukraine, growing hybrid threats, democratic backsliding, energy insecurity and the accelerating green and digital transitions have created new conditions that could not have been fully anticipated when the Eastern Partnership was originally designed.

Against this background, participants analysed whether the existing policy instruments remain sufficient to promote sustainable democratic reforms and regional resilience. Particular attention was devoted to democratic governance, the rule of law, corruption, institutional resilience, the European Green Deal, the Digital Agenda and the role of regional cooperation in strengthening the long-term stability and competitiveness of the Eastern Partnership countries.

The analytical materials presented in this section examine these issues from complementary perspectives. The first contribution explores democratic resilience and the persistence of reform fatigue, while the second analyses how the European Union's new strategic priorities may influence the future evolution of the Eastern Partnership and the modernization of partner countries.

MAIN BLOCK

STRATEGIC CHALLENGES AND NEW PRIORITIES

DEMOCRATIC RESILIENCE, RULE OF LAW AND REFORM FATIGUE IN THE ASSOCIATED COUNTRIES

Vitalie Cazacu, PhD, Associate Professor

Abstract

The transformation of the European Union's Eastern Partnership after 2020 has placed democratic resilience at the centre of relations between the European Union and its associated partner countries. While previous stages of the Eastern Partnership primarily focused on legislative approximation, economic integration and institutional reforms, the current geopolitical environment requires a broader understanding of democratic sustainability. Russia's full-scale aggression against Ukraine, increasing hybrid threats, disinformation campaigns, energy insecurity and political polarisation have demonstrated that democratic reforms cannot be assessed solely through the adoption of legislation. Their long-term success depends on the resilience of institutions, the effectiveness of the rule of law and the capacity of societies to withstand internal and external pressures.

This analytical paper examines democratic resilience as one of the principal determinants of successful European integration in the Republic of Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia. It analyses the relationship between institutional capacity, judicial independence, anti-corruption policies and the growing phenomenon of reform fatigue. Particular attention is devoted to the changing approach of the European Union, which increasingly links democratic governance with resilience, security and enlargement policy. The paper argues that democratic resilience should be understood not only as the protection of democratic institutions but also as the ability of states to preserve the continuity of reforms despite political instability, economic crises and geopolitical challenges. Finally, the paper outlines several policy implications for strengthening democratic resilience within the future evolution of the Eastern Partnership.

Keywords: democratic resilience; rule of law; Eastern Partnership; reform fatigue; associated countries

1. Introduction

Since the establishment of the Eastern Partnership in 2009, democratic governance and the rule of law have constituted the normative foundations of cooperation between the European Union and its Eastern neighbours. Through Association Agreements, Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas (DCFTAs), financial assistance and technical cooperation, the European Union has encouraged partner countries to modernise public administration, strengthen democratic institutions and align their legislation with the EU acquis.

For many years, progress was measured primarily through legislative approximation and the implementation of institutional reforms. Considerable attention was devoted to judicial reform, anti-corruption strategies, public administration reform and regulatory convergence with European standards. Although these reforms generated significant achievements, experience gradually demonstrated that legislative change alone was insufficient to ensure the sustainability of democratic transformation.

Political instability, frequent changes of government, institutional capture, corruption, declining public trust and external geopolitical pressures repeatedly interrupted reform processes in several partner countries. Periods of substantial progress were often followed by stagnation or partial reversal. Consequently, the European Union increasingly recognised that democratic governance should be assessed not only through formal institutional indicators but also through the capacity of democratic systems to preserve their essential functions under conditions of crisis.

This shift became particularly evident after the publication of the EU Global Strategy (2016), the Joint Communication Reinforcing Resilience – an Eastern Partnership that Delivers for All (2020), and subsequent policy documents adopted in response to the changing European security environment. Democratic resilience gradually emerged as one of the principal concepts guiding the European Union's external action.

The concept gained even greater importance following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. The war fundamentally transformed the strategic environment of the Eastern Partnership and demonstrated that democratic institutions, economic governance, energy security and societal resilience are inseparable components of national security. States possessing stronger institutions proved more ca-

pable of maintaining public services, preserving democratic legitimacy and continuing the implementation of reforms despite unprecedented external pressure.

Against this background, the associated countries of the Eastern Partnership—the Republic of Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia—face a dual challenge. On the one hand, they must continue implementing the comprehensive reforms required by their Association Agreements and, for candidate countries, the EU enlargement process. On the other hand, they must simultaneously strengthen the resilience of democratic institutions against political instability, hybrid threats, disinformation, cyberattacks and external interference.

This chapter analyses democratic resilience as one of the key determinants of successful European integration. Particular attention is devoted to the relationship between democratic resilience, the rule of law and reform fatigue, as well as to the implications of these concepts for the future evolution of the Eastern Partnership.

2. Conceptual framework

2.1. Democratic resilience: from democratic transition to democratic sustainability

During the first two decades following the end of the Cold War, European neighbourhood policies concentrated primarily on democratic transition. The prevailing assumption was that adopting democratic constitutions, strengthening public institutions and approximating national legislation to European standards would gradually consolidate democracy and market economies.

However, developments during the last decade demonstrated that democratic transition does not necessarily guarantee democratic sustainability. Democratic institutions may remain formally intact while becoming vulnerable to political capture, corruption, disinformation, external influence and declining public confidence. Consequently, the focus of European policy shifted from the creation of democratic institutions towards their long-term resilience.

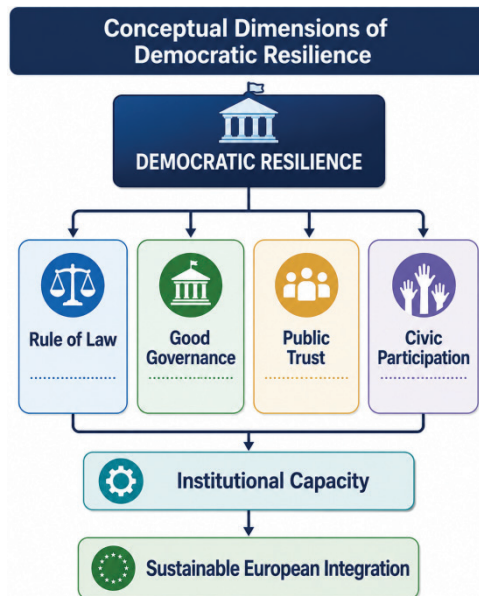
Within contemporary European policy discourse, democratic resilience refers to the capacity of democratic institutions, public administrations and societies to anticipate, withstand, adapt to and recover from political, economic and security shocks while preserving democratic governance, the rule of law and fundamental rights.

Unlike earlier approaches that evaluated democratic progress mainly through legal approximation, resilience places equal emphasis on implementation capacity, institutional independence, administrative professionalism, civic participation and societal trust.

In this context, democratic resilience is not a static condition but a dynamic process requiring continuous adaptation to changing internal and external environments. Countries demonstrating high levels of resilience are better able to maintain policy continuity, protect constitutional order and sustain reform momentum despite political crises or geopolitical instability.

Figure 1.

Conceptual Dimensions of Democratic Resilience



2.2. Rule of law as the cornerstone of democratic resilience

Among the various components of democratic resilience, the rule of law occupies a central position. It represents both a fundamental value of the European Union and a practical mechanism through which democratic governance is maintained.

The European Commission consistently emphasises that the rule of law extends beyond judicial independence. It encompasses legal certainty, equality before the law, effective judicial protection, accountability of public authorities, transparency of decision-making and the protection of fundamental rights.

For the associated countries, strengthening the rule of law is not only a political obligation arising from the Association Agreements but also a prerequisite for successful economic development. Investors require predictable legal systems; citizens require confidence in public institutions; democratic governments require independent courts capable of limiting abuses of power.

Experience within the Eastern Partnership demonstrates that countries achieving stronger progress in judicial reform and anti-corruption policies have generally been more successful in implementing broader institutional reforms and maintaining public confidence during periods of political uncertainty.

Table 1.

From democratic transition to democratic resilience

Traditional approach	Contemporary resilience approach
Adoption of legislation	Effective implementation of legislation
Institutional creation	Institutional performance
Democratic transition	Democratic sustainability
Political reforms	Whole-of-society resilience
Governance	Governance + security
Conditionality	Conditionality + institutional resilience

The comparison illustrates the evolution of the European Union's policy thinking. Whereas earlier neighbourhood policies concentrated primarily on legislative convergence, contemporary policy increasingly evaluates the capacity of democratic institutions to function effectively under conditions of prolonged political and geopolitical pressure.

2.3. Democratic resilience within the future of the Eastern Partnership

The transformation of the Eastern Partnership after 2020 has considerably expanded the meaning of resilience. Initially associated main-

ly with democratic governance and public administration reform, resilience is now understood as an integrated concept encompassing democratic institutions, economic stability, energy security, cybersecurity, information integrity and societal cohesion.

This broader understanding reflects the reality that modern threats rarely occur in isolation. Energy crises may generate political instability; cyberattacks may undermine public administration; disinformation campaigns may weaken electoral legitimacy; corruption may reduce the effectiveness of crisis management. Consequently, strengthening democratic resilience requires coordinated action across multiple policy sectors.

For the associated countries, this transformation also coincides with the European Union's renewed enlargement policy. Democratic resilience increasingly functions as an indicator of preparedness for deeper integration. Candidate countries are expected not only to adopt European legislation but also to demonstrate that democratic institutions possess sufficient capacity to preserve reforms over the long term, regardless of electoral cycles or external pressures.

The evolution of the concept therefore illustrates a broader shift in European integration policy—from measuring compliance with legal standards towards assessing the overall capacity of democratic systems to remain stable, accountable and effective under rapidly changing geopolitical conditions.

3. Democratic resilience in the associated countries: a comparative assessment

The concept of democratic resilience acquires its practical significance only when translated into institutional performance. While the European Union has established democratic resilience as a strategic objective of its external policy, the associated countries of the Eastern Partnership have demonstrated different capacities to transform European standards into sustainable governance practices.

The Republic of Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia share a common legal framework through their Association Agreements and Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas (DCFTAs). All three countries have undertaken extensive commitments concerning judicial reform, anti-corruption policies, public administration, decentralisation and regulatory approximation. Nevertheless, the implementation of these

commitments has followed different trajectories, reflecting variations in political leadership, institutional maturity, administrative capacity and external security conditions.

The comparative analysis presented below illustrates that democratic resilience should not be measured exclusively by the adoption of legislation. Rather, it depends upon the interaction of institutional effectiveness, political accountability, public trust and the capacity of democratic systems to withstand internal and external shocks.

Table 2.
Comparative assessment of democratic resilience in the associated countries

Dimension	Republic of Moldova	Ukraine	Georgia
Judicial Reform	Significant progress, ongoing implementation	Comprehensive reform under wartime conditions	Important reforms with recent political challenges
Anti-Corruption Institutions	Strengthened institutional framework	Highly developed specialised institutions	Institutional progress with implementation concerns
Public Administration Reform	Continuous approximation to EU standards	Accelerated reforms supporting accession	Administrative modernisation underway
Civil Society Participation	Active and increasingly influential	Strong mobilisation during wartime	Well-developed but politically polarised
Media Environment	Generally pluralistic	Resilient despite wartime restrictions	Increasing concerns regarding media independence
Overall Democratic Resilience	High and improving	High despite security challenges	Moderate, requiring renewed reform momentum

The comparison demonstrates that democratic resilience is not determined by a single institutional indicator. Countries may achieve considerable progress in one policy area while remaining vulnerable in

others. Consequently, resilience should be regarded as a multidimensional characteristic encompassing legal, political, institutional and societal components.

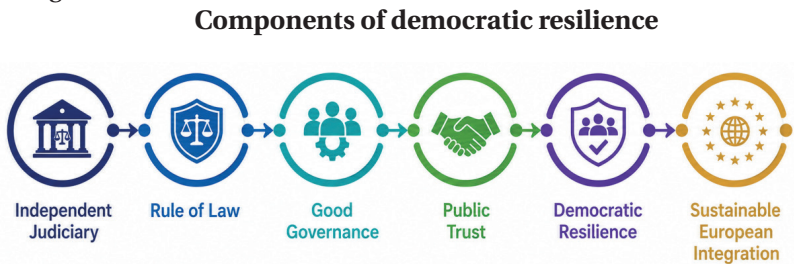
The Republic of Moldova has made significant progress in aligning its governance framework with European standards. Judicial reform, anti-corruption measures and public administration modernisation have advanced considerably, particularly following the granting of EU candidate status. Continued reform implementation, however, remains essential to consolidate institutional credibility and public confidence.

Ukraine presents a distinctive case. Despite the unprecedented challenges created by Russia's full-scale invasion, Ukrainian democratic institutions have demonstrated remarkable resilience. Public administration, local governance, digital public services and anti-corruption institutions have continued functioning under wartime conditions while simultaneously implementing reforms required by the accession process. This experience illustrates that democratic resilience cannot be assessed solely through political stability but must also consider institutional adaptability during crises.

Georgia has historically been regarded as one of the leading reformers within the Eastern Partnership. Nevertheless, recent political developments have demonstrated that democratic achievements require continuous protection. Political polarisation, concerns regarding judicial independence and tensions surrounding electoral reforms illustrate that resilience is a dynamic rather than permanent condition.

Collectively, these experiences demonstrate that democratic resilience is best understood as the capacity of institutions to preserve democratic governance despite changing political environments rather than simply the existence of formal democratic structures.

Figure 2.



The figure illustrates that democratic resilience develops through a cumulative process. Weakness in any component may reduce the overall capacity of democratic institutions to withstand political or external pressures.

4. Rule of law and reform fatigue

Although democratic reforms have generated substantial progress across the associated countries, their implementation has also revealed a persistent phenomenon commonly described as reform fatigue. The term refers to the gradual decline in political momentum, institutional commitment and public enthusiasm following prolonged periods of intensive reform.

Reform fatigue should not be interpreted simply as resistance to European integration. Rather, it reflects the growing complexity of successive reform waves. Initial reforms often produce visible institutional changes and enjoy broad political support. Subsequent reforms, however, typically require deeper structural transformation affecting judicial systems, political accountability, public administration and established economic interests. Such reforms are inherently more difficult to implement and frequently encounter stronger domestic resistance.

The associated countries illustrate different manifestations of reform fatigue.

In the Republic of Moldova, successive governments have pursued ambitious judicial and anti-corruption reforms while simultaneously responding to economic pressures, energy insecurity and the challenges associated with candidate status. Maintaining public confidence throughout this prolonged reform process requires continuous demonstration of tangible improvements in governance and public services.

Ukraine faces the unique challenge of conducting comprehensive reforms during an ongoing military conflict. Although wartime conditions have accelerated institutional innovation and strengthened public solidarity, they also impose exceptional administrative and financial burdens upon public institutions.

Georgia demonstrates how political polarisation may weaken reform momentum even where institutional frameworks remain relatively advanced. Democratic resilience therefore depends not only on formal legislation but also on constructive political dialogue, independent institutions and broad societal consensus concerning the direction of reforms.

Table 3.

Factors contributing to reform fatigue

Political factors	Economic factors	Institutional factors	Societal factors
Government instability	Inflation	Limited administrative capacity	Declining public expectations
Political polarisation	Energy crises	Slow judicial reform	Reform fatigue
Electoral cycles	Budgetary constraints	Corruption	Emigration
Changing political priorities	External economic shocks	Weak implementation capacity	Reduced trust in institutions

The analysis demonstrates that reform fatigue results from the interaction of multiple factors rather than from deficiencies in any single policy area. Addressing this challenge therefore requires integrated approaches combining institutional strengthening with economic resilience, effective public communication and sustained political commitment.

5. Strengthening democratic resilience: strategic priorities for the Eastern Partnership

The experience of the Eastern Partnership demonstrates that democratic resilience cannot be strengthened through isolated reforms. Instead, it requires a comprehensive approach integrating institutional development, effective governance, public participation and long-term political commitment. Democratic resilience should therefore be understood as a systemic characteristic of the state rather than the outcome of individual policy measures.

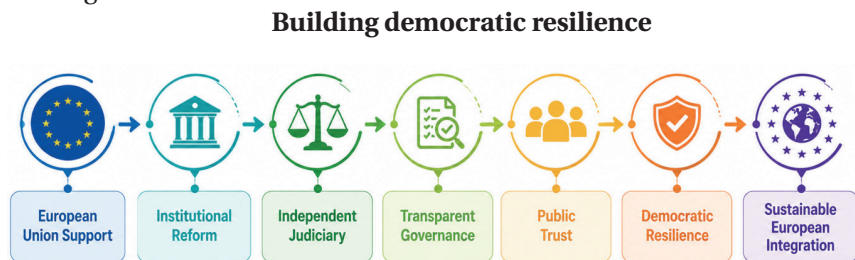
For the associated countries, strengthening democratic resilience has become increasingly important as European integration advances towards the accession stage. The implementation of the Association Agreements and the requirements associated with candidate status demand not only legislative approximation but also institutions capable of maintaining reform continuity under changing political and geopolitical conditions.

A resilient democratic system is characterised by several interrelated features. Independent courts ensure equal application of the law and protect constitutional order. Professional public administration guarantees policy continuity despite changes in political leadership. Transparent governance strengthens public confidence, while active civil society contributes to democratic accountability and social oversight. Together, these components create institutional stability that enables reforms to become sustainable rather than temporary political initiatives.

Recent experience has also demonstrated that democratic resilience extends beyond traditional governance reforms. Energy security, digital governance, cybersecurity, strategic communication and protection against disinformation have become integral elements of democratic stability. Public institutions that cannot withstand hybrid threats or maintain public trust during crises remain vulnerable regardless of the quality of their legal framework.

Accordingly, strengthening democratic resilience should be regarded as a long-term investment in institutional quality rather than a short-term political objective.

Figure 3.



The figure illustrates that democratic resilience develops progressively through the interaction of institutional reform and public confidence. Sustainable European integration becomes possible only when democratic institutions are capable of maintaining reforms independently of political cycles.

Table 4.

Strategic components of democratic resilience

Strategic component	Main objective	Expected long-term outcome
Independent Judiciary	Ensure equal application of the law	Strong rule of law
Public Administration	Improve institutional effectiveness	Policy continuity
Anti-Corruption System	Increase accountability and transparency	Public confidence
Civil Society	Strengthen democratic participation	Social resilience
Digital Governance	Improve efficiency and transparency	Better public services
Strategic Communication	Counter disinformation	Democratic stability
Energy and Cyber Resilience	Reduce external vulnerabilities	National resilience

The table illustrates that democratic resilience should be approached as a multidimensional policy framework rather than as a single institutional reform. Weakness in one component inevitably affects the effectiveness of the entire governance system.

Policy Box 1**Democratic resilience as a new benchmark of European integration**

The evolution of the European Union's external policy demonstrates a significant conceptual shift. Whereas earlier assessments focused primarily on legislative approximation, contemporary evaluation increasingly emphasises the resilience of democratic institutions.

Today, successful European integration requires partner countries not only to adopt European legislation but also to demonstrate that democratic institutions are capable of implementing reforms consistently, resisting political interference and maintaining public confidence under conditions of crisis.

Democratic resilience has therefore become an essential indicator of preparedness for deeper political integration and, for candidate countries, an increasingly important element of the accession process.

6. Policy Implications for the Associated Countries

The comparative analysis presented in this chapter suggests several strategic priorities for the future development of the Eastern Partnership.

First, reform assessment should increasingly focus on implementation rather than legislative adoption. While legal approximation remains essential, institutional effectiveness provides a more accurate indicator of democratic sustainability.

Second, greater emphasis should be placed on strengthening independent institutions. Judicial systems, anti-corruption agencies, constitutional bodies and public administrations require stable legal frameworks, adequate resources and protection from political interference.

Third, resilience-building should extend beyond government institutions. Universities, research centres, independent media, local authorities and civil society organisations contribute significantly to democratic stability by promoting informed public debate, policy evaluation and civic participation.

Fourth, the European Union should continue adapting differentiated integration to reflect the changing relationship between neighbourhood policy and enlargement. Candidate countries require increasingly sophisticated forms of institutional cooperation that support the implementation of accession-related reforms.

Finally, resilience indicators should become more prominent within future monitoring mechanisms. Evaluating public trust, institutional performance, governance quality and societal resilience would complement traditional assessments based primarily on legislative approximation.

7. Policy Implications for the Republic of Moldova

For the Republic of Moldova, democratic resilience represents not only a governance objective but also a strategic requirement for successful European integration.

Continued judicial reform should remain a national priority, ensuring that judicial independence is reinforced through transparent appointment procedures, professional evaluation mechanisms and effective institutional safeguards.

Public administration reform should increasingly focus on administrative professionalism, strategic planning and evidence-based poli-

cymaking. The sustainability of reforms depends upon institutions capable of implementing European legislation consistently regardless of changes in political leadership.

Further efforts should also strengthen cooperation between central government, local authorities, universities and civil society organisations. Broad societal participation contributes to greater public ownership of reforms and increases confidence in democratic institutions.

The Republic of Moldova should likewise continue investing in digital governance, cybersecurity and strategic communication. These areas have become indispensable components of democratic resilience, particularly within the current regional security environment.

Ultimately, democratic resilience should be integrated into national development planning as a cross-cutting objective supporting governance reform, economic development and the accession process simultaneously.

8. Concluding Remarks

The transformation of the Eastern Partnership after 2020 has significantly expanded the understanding of democratic governance within European Union external policy. Democratic resilience has emerged as a central concept linking institutional reform, the rule of law, public trust and societal stability.

The comparative experience of the Republic of Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia demonstrates that sustainable democratic transformation depends not only on legislative approximation but also on the capacity of institutions to preserve reforms under conditions of political uncertainty and geopolitical pressure. While each associated country has followed a distinct reform trajectory, all illustrate that institutional effectiveness, democratic accountability and societal participation are indispensable prerequisites for successful European integration.

The phenomenon of reform fatigue further highlights the importance of resilience. Democratic reforms cannot rely indefinitely upon political momentum alone. Their sustainability requires institutions capable of maintaining reform continuity, communicating tangible benefits to citizens and adapting to evolving domestic and international challenges.

Recent geopolitical developments have further reinforced the strategic significance of democratic resilience. Hybrid threats, cyberattacks,

disinformation campaigns and energy insecurity demonstrate that democracy today must be capable not only of governing effectively but also of protecting itself against increasingly complex external pressures.

For the European Union, democratic resilience is becoming a defining criterion of future enlargement policy. For the associated countries, it represents the institutional foundation upon which successful accession, sustainable development and long-term political stability will depend.

The future of the Eastern Partnership will therefore be determined not only by the adoption of European standards but by the capacity of democratic institutions to transform those standards into durable political, legal and societal realities.

Key Takeaways

- Democratic resilience has become a central objective of the European Union's policy towards the Eastern Partnership.
- Sustainable reforms depend upon institutional effectiveness rather than legislative approximation alone.
- Independent courts, professional public administration and public trust constitute the principal foundations of democratic resilience.
- Reform fatigue represents a structural challenge that requires long-term institutional and societal responses.
- Democratic resilience increasingly functions as an indicator of preparedness for deeper European integration and the accession process.

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INTEGRATING THE EUROPEAN GREEN DEAL AND THE DIGITAL AGENDA INTO THE EASTERN PARTNERSHIP: NEW DRIVERS OF MODERNISATION AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

The transformation of the European Union's policy priorities over the past decade has significantly influenced the future development of the Eastern Partnership. While the initiative was initially centred on democratic governance, economic integration and institutional reform, contemporary cooperation increasingly reflects broader strategic objectives associated with sustainable development, climate neutrality, digital transformation and economic resilience. The European Green Deal and the Digital Agenda have therefore become essential components of the European Union's external action, extending their influence beyond Member States to neighbouring countries participating in the Eastern Partnership.

This chapter examines how these two strategic priorities are re-shaping cooperation between the European Union and the associated countries of the Eastern Partnership. It analyses the opportunities created by green and digital transformation while assessing the institutional, financial and socio-economic challenges associated with their implementation. Particular attention is devoted to the Republic of Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia, where European integration increasingly requires the simultaneous implementation of environmental, digital and governance reforms. The chapter argues that the Green Deal and the Digital Agenda should not be viewed solely as regulatory obligations but as strategic instruments capable of accelerating economic modernisation, increasing competitiveness and strengthening democratic and economic resilience. Their successful implementation will play an increasingly important role in supporting sustainable development and preparing associated countries for deeper integration into the European Union.

Keywords: European Green Deal; Digital Agenda; sustainable development; digital transformation; Eastern Partnership

1. Introduction

The strategic priorities of the European Union have undergone profound transformation during the last decade. While economic integration, democratic governance and institutional reforms remain central objectives of European policy, increasing attention has been devoted to climate neutrality, environmental sustainability, digital innovation and technological competitiveness.

These changes are largely reflected in two flagship initiatives: the **European Green Deal** and the **Digital Agenda for Europe**. Although initially designed to support the internal development of the European Union, both strategies have progressively acquired an external dimension, influencing relations with neighbouring countries, candidate states and strategic partners.

For the Eastern Partnership, this evolution represents a new stage of cooperation. Whereas earlier reforms concentrated primarily on legislative approximation, judicial reform and public administration, associated countries are now expected to align themselves with increasingly complex European policies concerning environmental protection, renewable energy, circular economy, digital governance, cybersecurity and technological innovation.

This transformation presents both opportunities and challenges. On the one hand, alignment with European environmental and digital standards can stimulate investment, improve competitiveness, modernise infrastructure and strengthen institutional capacity. On the other hand, implementation requires substantial financial resources, administrative capability and long-term political commitment—resources that remain unevenly distributed among partner countries.

Consequently, the successful integration of the European Green Deal and the Digital Agenda into the Eastern Partnership depends not only on regulatory approximation but also on the capacity of associated countries to transform these strategic priorities into practical instruments of economic and institutional modernisation.

2. Conceptual Framework

2.1. The European Green Deal: From Environmental Policy to a New Development Model

The adoption of the **European Green Deal** in 2019 marked one of the most ambitious transformations in the history of European inte-

gration. Rather than functioning solely as an environmental strategy, the Green Deal established a comprehensive framework for economic modernisation based upon climate neutrality, sustainable growth and resource efficiency.

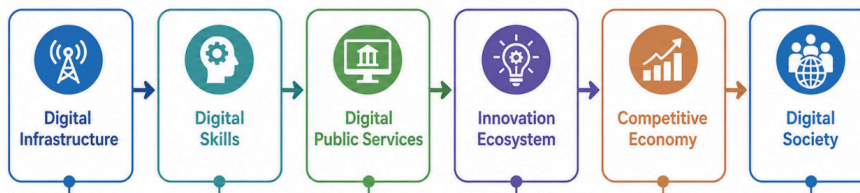
Its strategic objective is to transform the European Union into the world's first climate-neutral economy by 2050 while simultaneously strengthening industrial competitiveness, technological innovation and social cohesion.

Unlike earlier environmental initiatives, the Green Deal integrates multiple policy domains, including energy, agriculture, transport, industrial policy, finance, research and innovation. Sustainability is therefore no longer treated as a separate policy sector but as a cross-cutting principle influencing virtually every aspect of economic development.

For the associated countries of the Eastern Partnership, this transformation has profound implications. Legislative approximation increasingly extends beyond traditional governance reforms to encompass environmental regulation, renewable energy, circular economy principles, carbon emissions reduction and sustainable production systems.

Figure 1.

The European Green Deal as an Integrated Development Strategy



The European Green Deal therefore represents not merely an environmental agenda but a comprehensive strategy linking ecological sustainability with long-term economic growth and technological modernisation.

2.2. The Digital Agenda: Building a Competitive and Innovative Economy

Digital transformation has become one of the principal drivers of economic growth, institutional modernisation and international competitiveness within the European Union. Initially formulated through

the **Digital Agenda for Europe** and subsequently strengthened by the **Digital Decade Policy Programme 2030**, the European Union has progressively developed a comprehensive strategy aimed at creating a secure, innovative and human-centred digital society.

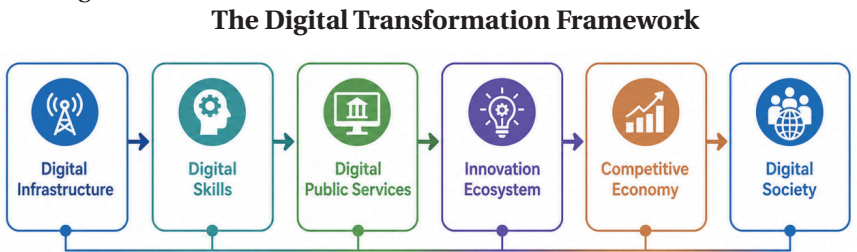
Unlike earlier approaches that viewed digitalisation primarily as the introduction of new technologies, the current European strategy considers digital transformation as a structural process affecting economic development, public administration, education, healthcare, research, industrial production and democratic governance. Digital technologies are increasingly recognised not merely as technical tools but as strategic assets capable of improving productivity, strengthening institutional efficiency and increasing resilience against future crises.

For the associated countries of the Eastern Partnership, alignment with the Digital Agenda represents both a challenge and a strategic opportunity. The digital transformation of public administration can improve transparency, reduce administrative burdens and strengthen public trust through more efficient delivery of public services. Digitalisation also supports business development by facilitating access to European markets, encouraging innovation and improving the competitiveness of small and medium-sized enterprises.

At the same time, digital transformation requires significant investments in broadband infrastructure, cybersecurity, digital skills, innovation ecosystems and institutional capacity. Countries that fail to modernise their digital infrastructure risk widening the technological gap separating them from the European Union, thereby limiting the benefits of deeper economic integration.

Digital transformation should therefore be regarded as a long-term investment in national competitiveness rather than solely as compliance with European regulatory requirements.

Figure 2.



The Digital Agenda demonstrates that technological development and institutional modernisation are mutually reinforcing processes. Investments in digital infrastructure generate broader economic and social benefits only when accompanied by improvements in governance, education and innovation capacity.

Table 1.

Strategic Priorities of the European Green Deal and the Digital Agenda

European Green Deal	Digital Agenda
Climate neutrality	Digital transformation
Circular economy	Digital public services
Renewable energy	Artificial intelligence
Sustainable transport	Cybersecurity
Energy efficiency	Digital skills
Green finance	Innovation and research
Biodiversity protection	High-speed digital connectivity

Although often presented separately, both strategies pursue a common objective: strengthening the long-term competitiveness, sustainability and resilience of the European economy.

3. Integrating New EU Priorities into the Eastern Partnership

The adoption of the European Green Deal and the Digital Agenda has fundamentally expanded the policy agenda of the Eastern Partnership. While earlier cooperation focused primarily on democratic governance, institutional reform and economic integration, current cooperation increasingly incorporates environmental sustainability, climate adaptation, energy transition and digital innovation.

This transformation reflects the broader evolution of European Union external policy. The Eastern Partnership is no longer limited to supporting regulatory approximation. Instead, it increasingly serves as a platform through which partner countries prepare for participation in emerging European economic, technological and environmental policies.

The integration of these new priorities offers several strategic advantages.

First, green transition provides opportunities for reducing energy dependence, increasing energy efficiency and expanding renewable energy production. These objectives have acquired particular importance following the recent energy crisis in Europe and the growing emphasis on energy security.

Second, digital transformation strengthens institutional effectiveness by simplifying administrative procedures, increasing transparency and improving access to public services. Digital governance contributes simultaneously to better public administration and stronger democratic accountability.

Third, innovation has become a common denominator linking environmental sustainability with digital transformation. Green technologies, smart energy systems, digital manufacturing and circular production models increasingly determine the international competitiveness of modern economies.

The Eastern Partnership therefore provides an important framework through which associated countries may gradually integrate these strategic priorities into national development policies while simultaneously advancing European integration.

Table 2.

Opportunities Created by Green and Digital Transformation

Policy Area	Expected Benefits
Renewable energy	Greater energy independence
Circular economy	More efficient use of resources
Green technologies	Increased competitiveness
Digital governance	More transparent public administration
Artificial intelligence	Higher productivity and innovation
Digital public services	Better access to government services
Research and innovation	Stronger knowledge economy

The table demonstrates that environmental and digital policies generate benefits extending far beyond their immediate policy objectives. Together they contribute to broader economic modernisation and institutional development.

4. Opportunities and Challenges for the Associated Countries

For the Republic of Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia, implementation of the European Green Deal and the Digital Agenda presents a unique opportunity to accelerate structural transformation. Nevertheless, this process is accompanied by significant financial, institutional and social challenges.

One of the principal opportunities concerns investment. Alignment with European environmental and digital standards improves access to European financial instruments, international development assistance and private investment. Sustainable infrastructure, renewable energy projects and digital innovation increasingly attract substantial European support.

Another important opportunity relates to competitiveness. Enterprises capable of complying with European environmental and digital standards gain improved access to the EU internal market while simultaneously increasing productivity through technological innovation.

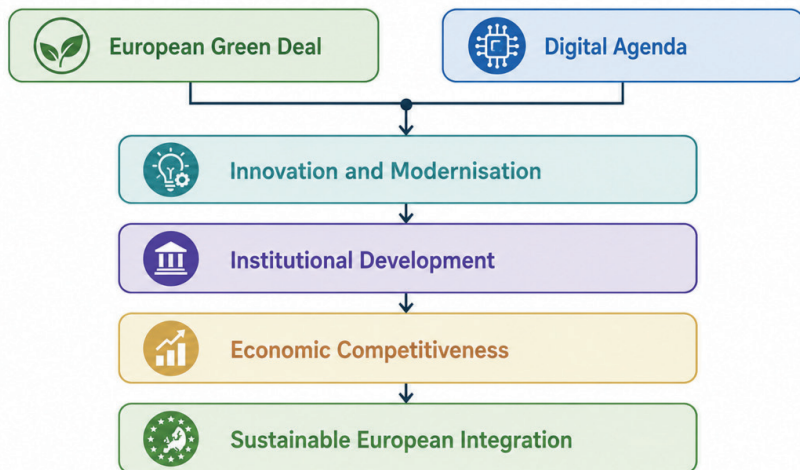
However, implementation also requires considerable institutional capacity. Environmental regulation, digital governance and innovation policy involve complex administrative responsibilities that frequently exceed the capabilities of under-resourced public institutions. Building professional administrative capacity therefore becomes a prerequisite for successful policy implementation.

Financial constraints represent an additional challenge. Green transition requires substantial investments in energy infrastructure, transport systems, industrial modernisation and environmental protection. Similarly, digital transformation depends upon continuous investments in telecommunications infrastructure, cybersecurity, education and technological innovation.

Social adaptation should not be underestimated. Successful implementation requires widespread public acceptance of new technologies, environmental standards and administrative reforms. Without effective communication and inclusive policymaking, even well-designed reforms may encounter resistance.

Figure 3.

Green and Digital Transformation as Drivers of Modernisation



The figure illustrates the complementary relationship between environmental sustainability and digital transformation. Rather than representing separate policy agendas, both strategies contribute simultaneously to stronger institutions, greater competitiveness and long-term sustainable development.

5. Comparative Assessment of Green and Digital Transformation in the Associated Countries

Although the Republic of Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia share common strategic commitments arising from their Association Agreements with the European Union, the implementation of green and digital policies has progressed at different speeds. These differences reflect variations in institutional capacity, economic development, investment potential and, increasingly, the impact of geopolitical challenges.

The Republic of Moldova has accelerated the alignment of its environmental and digital policies following the granting of EU candidate status. Particular progress has been achieved in digital public services, e-governance and energy diversification. Nevertheless, the country continues to face significant challenges related to limited financial resources, ageing infrastructure and the need for large-scale investments in renewable energy and environmental protection.

Ukraine represents a unique case. Despite the devastating consequences of Russia's full-scale aggression, the country has continued implementing ambitious digital reforms. Ukraine has become internationally recognised for the rapid development of digital public services and e-governance solutions, demonstrating that digital transformation can strengthen institutional resilience even under wartime conditions. At the same time, reconstruction creates unprecedented opportunities to integrate Green Deal principles into the rebuilding of infrastructure, transport and energy systems.

Georgia has historically been among the most advanced reformers within the Eastern Partnership in areas such as business regulation, digital governance and public administration. However, recent political developments have affected the overall dynamics of European integration, illustrating that technological progress alone cannot compensate for broader governance challenges.

Despite these differences, all three associated countries increasingly recognise that green and digital transformation should not be treated as separate policy sectors. Their successful implementation depends upon integrated strategies combining environmental sustainability, technological innovation and institutional reform.

Table 3.

Comparative Assessment of Green and Digital Transformation

Dimension	Republic of Moldova	Ukraine	Georgia
Renewable energy transition	Developing rapidly	Major reconstruction opportunity	Moderate progress
Energy diversification	High priority	Strategic necessity	Ongoing
Circular economy	Initial implementation	Emerging during reconstruction	Gradual development
Digital public services	Significant progress	Advanced digital ecosystem	Well-developed
Digital skills	Expanding through education reforms	Strong innovation sector	Moderate progress
Innovation ecosystem	Developing	Dynamic despite wartime conditions	Developing
Overall readiness	Moderate–High	High potential	Moderate

The comparison demonstrates that implementation capacity depends upon considerably more than economic resources. Political commitment, institutional continuity and strategic planning remain decisive factors influencing the pace of green and digital transformation.

Policy Box 1

Green and Digital Transformation: Complementary, Not Competing Priorities

A recurring misconception is that environmental sustainability and digitalisation represent separate policy agendas competing for limited public resources.

The experience of the European Union demonstrates the opposite.

Digital technologies improve energy efficiency, optimise transport systems, support precision agriculture, facilitate environmental monitoring and strengthen public administration.

Similarly, the transition towards a greener economy creates demand for digital innovation, artificial intelligence, smart infrastructure and advanced technological solutions.

Consequently, green and digital transformation should be designed as mutually reinforcing processes supporting a common objective: sustainable economic modernisation.

6. Policy Implications for the Republic of Moldova

The European Green Deal and the Digital Agenda provide the Republic of Moldova with an opportunity not only to comply with European standards but also to accelerate structural economic transformation.

First, environmental policy should increasingly focus on investment rather than regulation alone. Renewable energy, energy efficiency and sustainable transport should be promoted as drivers of economic competitiveness capable of reducing dependence on imported energy while stimulating domestic innovation.

Second, digital transformation should continue extending beyond public administration into education, healthcare, business development and research. Expanding digital public services has already improved institutional efficiency; the next stage should strengthen digital entrepreneurship, artificial intelligence applications and innovation ecosystems.

Third, greater policy coordination is required. Green transition, industrial policy, digitalisation, education and regional development should be planned within a single strategic framework rather than as separate sectoral policies.

Fourth, universities should play a more prominent role in supporting the implementation of both European priorities. Higher education institutions contribute not only through teaching and research but also by developing innovation partnerships, promoting digital skills and supporting evidence-based policymaking.

Finally, successful implementation requires broad societal participation. Businesses, local authorities, civil society organisations and citizens should become active partners in the green and digital transition rather than passive recipients of government policies.

Table 4.

Strategic Priorities for the Republic of Moldova

Priority area	Strategic objective
Renewable energy	Greater energy independence
Energy efficiency	Lower energy consumption
Circular economy	Sustainable production and consumption
Digital public administration	Better governance and transparency
innovation	Higher productivity and competitiveness
Digital education	Improved digital skills
Research cooperation	Stronger integration into the European Research Area

The implementation of these priorities would contribute simultaneously to economic modernisation, institutional development and successful preparation for deeper European integration.

7. Concluding Remarks

The European Green Deal and the Digital Agenda have fundamentally expanded the strategic scope of the Eastern Partnership. What initially emerged as internal policy initiatives of the European Union have progressively become important dimensions of cooperation with neighbouring countries and, increasingly, with candidate states.

The analysis presented in this chapter demonstrates that environmental sustainability and digital transformation should not be regarded

merely as regulatory obligations associated with European integration. Rather, they constitute comprehensive development strategies capable of stimulating innovation, strengthening institutional capacity and increasing long-term economic competitiveness.

For the associated countries, successful implementation requires much more than legislative approximation. It demands coordinated public policies, sustained investment, institutional effectiveness, technological innovation and active societal participation. Countries capable of integrating green and digital priorities into broader development strategies will be better positioned to strengthen economic resilience and advance their European integration objectives.

The Republic of Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia have already made important progress in this direction. Nevertheless, significant challenges remain, particularly regarding financing, administrative capacity and infrastructure modernisation. Continued European support, combined with sustained domestic commitment, will therefore remain essential.

Ultimately, the European Green Deal and the Digital Agenda illustrate the broader transformation of the Eastern Partnership itself. Co-operation is no longer limited to democratic reforms and market integration but increasingly encompasses innovation, sustainability, technological development and resilience. These priorities will shape not only the future of the Eastern Partnership but also the preparedness of associated countries for deeper participation in the European Union.

Key Takeaways

- The European Green Deal and the Digital Agenda have become central pillars of the European Union's cooperation with the Eastern Partnership.
- Green and digital transformation should be understood as complementary strategies driving sustainable economic modernisation.
- Successful implementation depends upon institutional capacity, investment, innovation and policy coordination rather than legislative approximation alone.
- The Republic of Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia have made significant progress but continue to face challenges related to financing, infrastructure and administrative capacity.
- Integrating environmental sustainability with digital innova-

tion will strengthen competitiveness, resilience and preparedness for deeper European integration.

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PART III. UNDERSTANDING THE FUTURE

POSITIONING BLOCK

The third part of this publication examines the strategic future of the Eastern Partnership in the context of profound geopolitical transformation taking place across Europe. Following the granting of EU candidate status to the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine, the Eastern Partnership has entered a fundamentally new stage of development. The analytical papers included in this section explore whether the initiative should continue functioning primarily as a neighbourhood policy or gradually evolve into a differentiated framework supporting future EU enlargement. Particular attention is devoted to the role of the Associated Trio, the implications of candidate status and the debate surrounding the European Union's strategic approach towards future enlargement.

THE ASSOCIATED TRIO AND THE FUTURE OF THE EASTERN PARTNERSHIP AFTER 2022

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Abstract

The geopolitical changes that have occurred since 2022 have fundamentally transformed the strategic environment of the European Union's Eastern Partnership. The granting of EU candidate status to the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine, together with Georgia's European aspirations, has significantly altered the political logic upon which the initiative was originally established. Whereas the Eastern Partnership initially functioned as a differentiated framework of neighbourhood cooperation, it increasingly serves as an instrument supporting accession-related reforms for associated countries.

This paper examines the emergence of the **Associated Trio** as a distinct political and institutional format within the Eastern Partnership. Particular attention is devoted to the changing relationship between neighbourhood policy and enlargement policy, the strategic significance of candidate status and the implications for future regional cooperation. The analysis argues that the Associated Trio has become one of the principal drivers of differentiation within the Eastern Partnership while simultaneously strengthening the European Union's capacity to

promote democratic governance, institutional resilience and sustainable reforms. The paper concludes that the future effectiveness of the Eastern Partnership will depend upon its ability to reconcile regional inclusiveness with differentiated pathways towards European integration.

Keywords: Associated Trio; EU enlargement; Eastern Partnership; candidate status; differentiated integration

1. Introduction

The granting of candidate status to the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine in June 2022 represents one of the most significant political developments in the history of the Eastern Partnership. For the first time since the initiative was launched in 2009, two participating countries received an official European perspective based upon Article 49 of the Treaty on European Union. This decision fundamentally changed the strategic context within which the Eastern Partnership operates.

Originally, the Eastern Partnership was designed as a component of the European Neighbourhood Policy, aiming to strengthen political association, economic integration and regional cooperation without providing explicit commitments regarding future membership. The initiative was deliberately structured to accommodate countries with different political ambitions and varying levels of engagement with the European Union.

However, the progressive differentiation among partner countries, the conclusion of Association Agreements and the establishment of the **Associated Trio** have gradually transformed the initiative into a far more dynamic framework. Increasingly, associated countries cooperate not only within the general structures of the Eastern Partnership but also through dedicated political coordination aimed at accelerating their European integration.

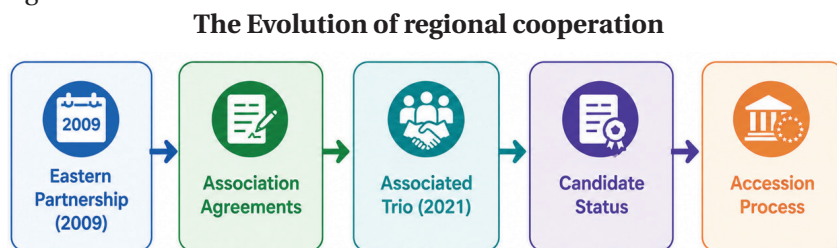
The emergence of the Associated Trio therefore represents more than an additional regional initiative. It reflects the institutionalisation of differentiated integration within the Eastern Partnership and illustrates the growing convergence between neighbourhood policy and enlargement policy. Against this background, this paper analyses the evolution of the Associated Trio, its strategic significance for the future of the Eastern Partnership and its implications for the European Union's evolving enlargement agenda.

2. The emergence of the Associated Trio

The concept of the **Associated Trio** formally emerged in 2021 through the establishment of enhanced political cooperation between the Republic of Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia. Unlike the broader Eastern Partnership, which includes six countries with different political orientations, the Associated Trio brings together those partners that have concluded Association Agreements and Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas with the European Union. The establishment of this format reflected several common characteristics shared by the three countries. First, all had undertaken extensive legislative approximation with the EU acquis through their Association Agreements. Second, each had identified European integration as a strategic national objective and implemented comprehensive institutional reforms aimed at strengthening democratic governance, the rule of law and market economy principles. Third, all three countries sought closer political coordination in order to exchange reform experience, strengthen regional cooperation and present common positions within their dialogue with European institutions.

Consequently, the Associated Trio should not be viewed as an alternative to the Eastern Partnership. Rather, it represents a specialised mechanism of enhanced cooperation operating within the broader regional framework.

Figure 1.



The evolution illustrated above demonstrates the progressive institutional differentiation that has characterised the Eastern Partnership over the past decade.

Table 1.

Common characteristics of the Associated Trio

Strategic dimension	Moldova	Ukraine	Georgia
Association Agreement	✓	✓	✓
DCFTA	✓	✓	✓
Comprehensive legislative approximation	✓	✓	✓
Strategic objective of EU membership	✓	✓	✓
Regional coordination within the Associated Trio	✓	✓	✓

The comparative overview illustrates that the Associated Trio is based upon shared legal commitments, common strategic objectives and a similar trajectory of European integration. These common characteristics distinguish the three associated countries from the broader and more heterogeneous framework of the Eastern Partnership.

3. Candidate status and the transformation of the Eastern Partnership

The decision of the European Council in June 2022 to grant candidate status to the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine represented a watershed moment in the evolution of the Eastern Partnership. Although the initiative formally remains part of the European Neighbourhood Policy, the political and institutional implications of candidate status have substantially altered its strategic orientation.

For more than a decade, the Eastern Partnership functioned primarily as a framework promoting political association, economic integration and sectoral cooperation without establishing a direct link to EU membership. Progress was measured through legislative approximation, implementation of Association Agreements and participation in European programmes. The granting of candidate status introduced a fundamentally different dimension. Reform efforts are now increasingly assessed within the context of accession preparedness, requiring partner countries to demonstrate not only regulatory convergence but also institutional capacity to fulfil the obligations of membership.

This development has created a dual dynamic within the Eastern Partnership. On the one hand, the initiative continues to provide an inclusive regional platform for dialogue, cooperation and knowledge ex-

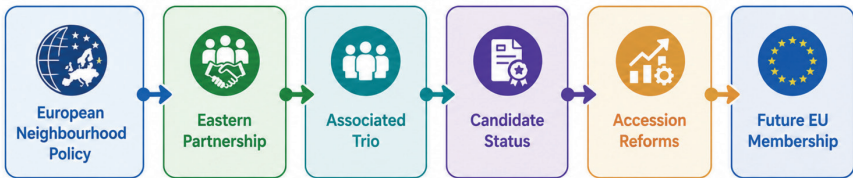
change among all participating countries. On the other hand, candidate countries increasingly follow a distinct trajectory aligned with the enlargement methodology of the European Union. Consequently, differentiation has evolved from a principle of neighbourhood cooperation into a mechanism reflecting different stages of European integration.

The transformation also affects the strategic role of the Associated Trio. Rather than functioning solely as a political coordination mechanism, it increasingly serves as a platform for exchanging experience related to accession negotiations, implementation of the European Commission's recommendations and alignment with the EU acquis. This creates opportunities for policy learning, institutional cooperation and coordinated responses to common challenges.

The evolution of candidate status therefore illustrates a broader shift in European policy. The Eastern Partnership is no longer confined to promoting closer relations with neighbouring countries; for some partners, it has become an integral component of the enlargement architecture.

Figure 2.

Transformation of the Eastern Partnership after 2022



The figure illustrates the gradual convergence between neighbourhood policy and enlargement policy. While the Eastern Partnership remains the overarching regional framework, candidate status introduces a new institutional pathway leading towards accession.

4. Opportunities and challenges for the Associated Trio

The emergence of the Associated Trio has created new opportunities for regional cooperation while simultaneously exposing several strategic challenges that will shape the future of the Eastern Partnership.

One of the most significant opportunities lies in enhanced policy coordination. The three associated countries face similar requirements

concerning judicial reform, public administration, anti-corruption measures, environmental legislation, digital transformation and economic governance. Regular exchange of experience enables governments to identify successful practices, avoid implementation failures and accelerate alignment with European standards.

Regional cooperation also strengthens the collective visibility of the Associated Trio within the European Union. Coordinated political dialogue allows the three countries to present common priorities regarding enlargement, regional security, transport connectivity, energy integration and participation in European programmes. Although accession negotiations remain strictly merit-based, closer cooperation increases opportunities for coordinated initiatives in areas of shared strategic interest.

Economic cooperation represents another important opportunity. Improved transport corridors, energy interconnections, digital infrastructure and cross-border trade can contribute simultaneously to economic development and regional resilience. Such projects are increasingly consistent with the European Union's priorities concerning connectivity, sustainability and strategic autonomy.

However, the Associated Trio also faces important challenges.

First, each country progresses through the accession process at its own pace. Differences in institutional capacity, domestic political developments and reform implementation may gradually increase asymmetry among the three partners. Maintaining political cohesion while respecting the principle of individual merit will therefore require careful coordination.

Second, geopolitical instability continues to influence regional cooperation. Russia's military aggression against Ukraine, hybrid threats, disinformation campaigns and energy security concerns impose additional pressures on democratic institutions and economic development. These challenges reinforce the importance of resilience as a shared strategic objective.

Third, the enlargement process itself has become increasingly demanding. Candidate countries must demonstrate sustained implementation of reforms over extended periods rather than relying solely on legislative approximation. Administrative capacity, institutional effectiveness and public trust are therefore becoming decisive factors influencing future progress.

Table 2.

Opportunities and challenges for the Associated Trio

Opportunities	Challenges
Coordinated European integration	Different speeds of accession
Exchange of reform experience	Uneven institutional capacity
Regional infrastructure projects	Geopolitical instability
Stronger political dialogue with the EU	Reform sustainability
Joint participation in EU programmes	Administrative burdens
Enhanced regional resilience	Maintaining public support for reforms

The comparative overview demonstrates that opportunities and challenges are closely interconnected. The success of the Associated Trio will depend on its ability to transform shared challenges into coordinated policy responses.

5. Future scenarios for the Eastern Partnership

The evolution of the Associated Trio raises broader questions concerning the future architecture of the Eastern Partnership. Several potential scenarios may be envisaged, each reflecting different assumptions regarding EU enlargement, regional cooperation and differentiated integration.

The first scenario envisages the continuation of the current model. The Eastern Partnership remains an inclusive regional initiative while differentiation gradually increases according to each country's progress towards European integration. Under this scenario, the Associated Trio continues functioning as a specialised coordination mechanism without fundamentally altering the structure of the initiative.

A second scenario anticipates a closer integration of the Eastern Partnership into the enlargement process. Candidate countries progressively transition from neighbourhood instruments towards pre-accession mechanisms, while non-candidate countries continue participating through more flexible partnership arrangements. This would create a more explicit institutional distinction between different categories of partner countries.

A third scenario envisages a more comprehensive transformation of the Eastern Partnership into a multi-speed framework combining neighbourhood cooperation, accession preparation and regional policy

coordination. Such a model would preserve inclusiveness while recognising the increasing diversity of political ambitions among participating countries.

Among these alternatives, the second and third scenarios appear most consistent with current developments. The granting of candidate status has already introduced a qualitative distinction that is likely to become more pronounced as accession negotiations progress.

Table 3.

Possible future scenarios for the Eastern Partnership

Scenario	Main characteristics	S t r a t e g i c implications
Continuity	Existing EaP framework maintained	Gradual differentiation
Enlargement-Oriented EaP	Candidate countries move closer to accession instruments	Stronger link with enlargement policy
Multi-speed Partnership	Different levels of integration within one framework	Greater flexibility and institutional adaptation

The analysis suggests that the future of the Eastern Partnership will depend upon its capacity to accommodate increasing differentiation without undermining regional cooperation and political cohesion.

Policy Box 1

The Associated Trio as a strategic innovation

The creation of the Associated Trio represents one of the most significant institutional innovations within the Eastern Partnership since its establishment in 2009.

Rather than replacing the Eastern Partnership, the Associated Trio complements it by providing an additional level of political coordination among countries pursuing the most advanced forms of European integration.

Its long-term significance lies not only in facilitating cooperation among the three associated countries but also in demonstrating how differentiated integration can strengthen, rather than weaken, the overall effectiveness of the European Union's neighbourhood policy.

6. Policy implications for the Republic of Moldova

The transformation of the Eastern Partnership and the emergence of the Associated Trio create new strategic opportunities for the Republic of Moldova. Candidate status has substantially strengthened the country's relationship with the European Union, while simultaneously increasing the responsibilities associated with the accession process. In this new context, participation in the Associated Trio should be regarded not merely as an additional diplomatic format but as an important mechanism for accelerating institutional learning, policy coordination and regional cooperation.

First, the Republic of Moldova should continue to strengthen cooperation with Ukraine and Georgia in areas where common reform priorities already exist. Judicial reform, public administration, anti-corruption policies, digital governance, environmental legislation and approximation to the EU *acquis* provide numerous opportunities for the exchange of experience and coordinated policy development. Such cooperation reduces duplication of effort and facilitates the adoption of effective institutional practices.

Second, greater attention should be devoted to regional connectivity. Transport corridors, electricity interconnections, renewable energy infrastructure and digital networks represent strategic investments capable of simultaneously strengthening economic development, energy security and regional resilience. Closer cooperation among the Associ-

ated Trio in these sectors would also contribute to the implementation of broader European strategies related to sustainable development and strategic autonomy.

Third, universities and research institutions should become more actively involved in supporting the accession process. Academic cooperation within the Associated Trio may contribute to comparative policy research, evidence-based decision-making and the development of professional expertise required for the implementation of European legislation. Higher education institutions can therefore play an important role in strengthening institutional capacity through research, training and international academic partnerships.

Fourth, public communication should remain a strategic priority. The complexity of the accession process requires continuous dialogue with citizens regarding both the opportunities and responsibilities associated with European integration. Transparent communication strengthens public trust and contributes to the long-term sustainability of reforms.

Finally, the Republic of Moldova should continue viewing the Eastern Partnership as a complementary framework rather than an alternative to accession. Regional cooperation within the Eastern Partnership remains valuable even as candidate countries progressively integrate into the enlargement process.

Table 4.

**Strategic priorities for the Republic of Moldova
within the Associated trio**

Strategic area	Priority objective
Judicial reform	Exchange of best practices and implementation experience
Public administration	Institutional modernisation and professionalisation
Energy cooperation	Regional energy security and diversification
Digital transformation	Interoperability and digital public services
Transport connectivity	Development of regional transport corridors
Academic cooperation	Joint research and capacity building
Strategic communication	Public support for European integration

The strategic priorities presented above illustrate that cooperation within the Associated Trio extends beyond political dialogue. It increasingly encompasses practical dimensions of institutional development, infrastructure modernisation and knowledge exchange that directly support the accession process.

7. Concluding remarks

The evolution of the Eastern Partnership since 2022 demonstrates that the initiative has entered a fundamentally new stage of development. While its original objectives remain relevant, the granting of EU candidate status to the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine has significantly altered the strategic environment within which regional cooperation takes place.

The emergence of the Associated Trio represents one of the clearest manifestations of this transformation. By bringing together the three countries most advanced in their European integration, it has introduced an additional layer of political coordination and institutional cooperation within the broader framework of the Eastern Partnership. This development reflects the increasing differentiation of relations between the European Union and its Eastern partners while preserving the overall inclusiveness of the initiative.

The analysis presented in this chapter demonstrates that the Associated Trio should not be interpreted as a substitute for the Eastern Partnership. Instead, it complements the existing framework by addressing the specific needs of countries pursuing the most advanced forms of political association and accession-related reforms. Through coordinated implementation of reforms, exchange of institutional experience and joint participation in European initiatives, the Associated Trio strengthens the capacity of its members to advance towards deeper European integration.

At the same time, important challenges remain. Maintaining policy coordination despite different speeds of accession, strengthening administrative capacity and ensuring the sustainability of democratic reforms will require continued political commitment at both national and European levels. The success of the Associated Trio will therefore depend not only on European support but also on the ability of participating countries to preserve reform momentum, reinforce democratic institutions and respond effectively to evolving geopolitical challenges.

The future of the Eastern Partnership is likely to be characterised by increasing differentiation rather than institutional fragmentation. The initiative can continue serving as a valuable regional framework while simultaneously accommodating different levels of integration among partner countries. In this respect, the Associated Trio may be regarded as an important model illustrating how neighbourhood policy and enlargement policy can operate in a complementary and mutually reinforcing manner.

Key takeaways

- The granting of candidate status to the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine has fundamentally transformed the strategic context of the Eastern Partnership.
- The Associated Trio represents an institutional mechanism that complements, rather than replaces, the Eastern Partnership.
- Regional cooperation among the Republic of Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia strengthens policy coordination, institutional learning and implementation of accession-related reforms.
- The future effectiveness of the Eastern Partnership will depend on its capacity to combine regional inclusiveness with differentiated pathways towards European integration.
- For the Republic of Moldova, active participation in the Associated Trio should become an important instrument for strengthening institutional capacity, regional cooperation and preparedness for EU membership.

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SHOULD THE EUROPEAN UNION OFFER A CLEAR MEMBERSHIP PERSPECTIVE? STRATEGIC CERTAINTY VERSUS STRATEGIC AMBIGUITY

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Abstract

One of the most debated issues in the evolution of the European Union's Eastern Partnership concerns the future political perspective offered to its associated partner countries. Since the establishment of the Eastern Partnership in 2009, the European Union has pursued a policy characterised by strategic ambiguity, promoting political association, economic integration and democratic reforms without providing an explicit commitment regarding future membership. This approach enabled the European Union to preserve political flexibility while encouraging gradual convergence with European standards.

The geopolitical transformation of Europe following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has fundamentally altered this policy environment. The granting of EU candidate status to the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine, together with the recognition of Georgia's European perspective, has reopened the debate concerning the relationship between neighbourhood policy and enlargement policy. Consequently, the concept of strategic ambiguity requires critical reassessment.

This paper analyses the advantages and limitations of both strategic ambiguity and strategic certainty within the future development of the Eastern Partnership. It evaluates their implications for democratic reforms, institutional resilience, political credibility and regional stability. The analysis argues that although strategic ambiguity played an important role during the early stages of the Eastern Partnership, the current geopolitical context increasingly favours a policy based upon credible, differentiated and merit-based membership perspectives. The future effectiveness of the European Union's Eastern policy will therefore depend upon its ability to reconcile political credibility with rigorous conditionality and sustained institutional transformation.

Keywords: Eastern Partnership; EU enlargement; strategic ambiguity; strategic certainty; differentiated integration

1. Introduction

The future of the Eastern Partnership has become inseparable from one of the most important strategic questions confronting the European Union: should associated partner countries receive a clear and credible perspective of future membership, or should the European Union continue relying upon the policy traditionally described as strategic ambiguity?

For more than a decade, the European Union deliberately avoided providing an explicit answer. The Eastern Partnership was designed as an ambitious framework of political association and economic integration without creating expectations of automatic accession. This approach enabled the European Union to promote democratic reforms while preserving flexibility in responding to changing geopolitical circumstances and differing levels of ambition among partner countries.

Strategic ambiguity therefore became one of the defining characteristics of the Eastern Partnership. It allowed the European Union simultaneously to encourage transformation, avoid premature enlargement commitments and maintain differentiated relations with six highly diverse partner countries.

However, the geopolitical environment that shaped this approach has fundamentally changed. Russia's aggression against Ukraine, the growing importance of European security, the granting of candidate status to the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine, and the renewed strategic importance of enlargement have significantly altered the assumptions underlying the original Eastern Partnership model.

These developments have generated an important policy dilemma. Continuing strategic ambiguity may preserve political flexibility but risks reducing the credibility of European conditionality and weakening reform incentives. Conversely, offering a clearer membership perspective may strengthen reform commitment while simultaneously increasing political expectations and institutional responsibilities for both the European Union and partner countries.

Against this background, this paper examines the evolution of strategic ambiguity within the Eastern Partnership, analyses its advantages and limitations, and assesses whether the current geopolitical context requires a transition towards greater strategic certainty in the European Union's relations with associated partner countries.

2. Strategic ambiguity as an instrument of European Union foreign policy

Strategic ambiguity has long been recognised as an important instrument of international diplomacy. Rather than providing definitive political commitments, it enables governments and international organisations to preserve flexibility while adapting their policies to changing circumstances. Within the context of European Union external relations, strategic ambiguity has frequently been employed where political objectives remain long-term, complex or dependent upon conditions that cannot be fully anticipated.

The Eastern Partnership provides one of the clearest examples of this approach. When the initiative was launched in 2009, the European Union deliberately refrained from defining it as a preparatory stage for future enlargement. Instead, cooperation was built around political association, economic integration and shared values without explicitly addressing the question of eventual membership.

This deliberate ambiguity reflected several strategic considerations.

First, the European Union sought to avoid creating unrealistic expectations among partner countries regarding the pace and likelihood of accession. At that time, enlargement fatigue remained a significant political concern within several Member States, making explicit membership commitments politically difficult.

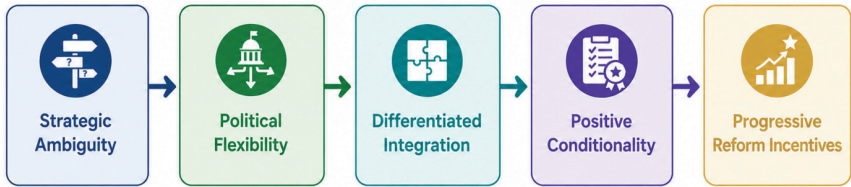
Second, strategic ambiguity preserved the flexibility necessary to accommodate considerable diversity among the six participating countries. Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine differed substantially in their political systems, foreign policy orientations and ambitions concerning European integration. A uniform membership perspective would therefore have been neither politically feasible nor strategically appropriate.

Third, ambiguity strengthened the effectiveness of positive conditionality. By leaving the ultimate outcome open, the European Union encouraged partner countries to pursue reforms on the basis of performance rather than predetermined political guarantees. Progress depended upon demonstrated commitment to democratic governance, the rule of law and institutional modernisation.

For more than a decade, this approach contributed to the gradual evolution of differentiated integration. Countries demonstrating stronger reform performance gained access to progressively deeper forms of

cooperation, including Association Agreements, Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas and visa liberalisation, without requiring the European Union to make immediate decisions regarding future accession.

Figure 1.
Strategic ambiguity within the Eastern Partnership



The figure illustrates the underlying logic of strategic ambiguity. Rather than replacing conditionality, ambiguity reinforced it by linking deeper cooperation to demonstrated reform performance while postponing decisions regarding final political outcomes.

Table 1.
Strategic objectives of ambiguity in the Eastern Partnership

Strategic objective	Expected policy effect
Preserve political flexibility	Avoid premature enlargement commitments
Accommodate diversity among partner countries	Support differentiated integration
Encourage reforms	Strengthen positive conditionality
Maintain EU unity	Reduce political disagreements among Member States
Respond to changing geopolitical circumstances	Allow gradual adaptation of policy

The application of strategic ambiguity therefore reflected a deliberate political choice rather than institutional uncertainty. It enabled the European Union to balance ambitious reform objectives with the political realities of enlargement policy during a period characterised by considerable uncertainty regarding the future development of the European neighbourhood.

3. Strategic certainty versus Strategic ambiguity: competing policy approaches

The evolution of the Eastern Partnership has gradually transformed the debate concerning the European Union's strategic approach towards its associated partners. What initially appeared to be a theoretical discussion regarding future enlargement has increasingly become a practical policy question with direct implications for democratic reforms, institutional resilience and regional security.

The concepts of **strategic ambiguity** and **strategic certainty** represent two fundamentally different approaches to managing relations between the European Union and countries aspiring to closer political integration.

Strategic ambiguity deliberately avoids definitive political commitments. It preserves flexibility, allowing the European Union to adjust its policy according to geopolitical developments, institutional preparedness and the performance of partner countries. Under this approach, the prospect of deeper integration remains open but undefined, enabling reforms to be encouraged without creating legally or politically binding expectations regarding membership.

Strategic certainty, by contrast, is based on transparency and predictability. It provides partner countries with a clear political objective while maintaining rigorous conditions concerning the pace and quality of reforms. Strategic certainty does not imply automatic accession; rather, it establishes a credible political horizon that reinforces the legitimacy and sustainability of domestic reforms.

The transformation of the European security environment after 2022 has considerably strengthened arguments in favour of greater strategic certainty. The granting of candidate status to the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine has already reduced the degree of ambiguity characterising EU policy towards the associated countries. Nevertheless, important questions remain regarding the future role of the Eastern Partnership and the extent to which strategic certainty should replace the flexibility that previously characterised neighbourhood policy.

Consequently, the debate should no longer be framed as a simple choice between two mutually exclusive approaches. Instead, it concerns the optimal balance between political credibility and institutional conditionality within a rapidly changing geopolitical environment.

Table 2.

Strategic ambiguity versus Strategic certainty

Strategic Ambiguity	Strategic Certainty
Preserves political flexibility	Provides long-term political predictability
Facilitates differentiated cooperation	Strengthens reform incentives
Reduces immediate enlargement pressures	Enhances credibility of EU commitments
Allows adaptation to changing geopolitical conditions	Encourages sustained institutional transformation
Suitable for heterogeneous partner countries	Appropriate for candidate countries pursuing accession

The comparison demonstrates that both approaches possess significant strategic advantages. Their effectiveness therefore depends largely upon the political circumstances in which they are applied.

4. Advantages and limitations of Strategic Ambiguity

During the first decade of the Eastern Partnership, strategic ambiguity provided several important advantages for both the European Union and its partner countries.

From the European Union's perspective, ambiguity reduced political tensions among Member States holding different views regarding future enlargement. It enabled the Union to promote democratic reforms without reopening politically sensitive debates concerning accession. At the same time, it preserved flexibility, allowing policy to evolve gradually in response to changing regional circumstances.

For partner countries, ambiguity provided opportunities for progressively deepening cooperation through Association Agreements, visa liberalisation, participation in European programmes and sectoral integration. Although no explicit membership perspective was offered, the continuous expansion of cooperation created incentives for democratic reforms and institutional modernisation.

However, the long-term application of strategic ambiguity also generated important limitations.

Perhaps the most significant limitation concerns political credibility. As partner countries implemented increasingly demanding reforms without receiving a clearer political perspective, questions emerged re-

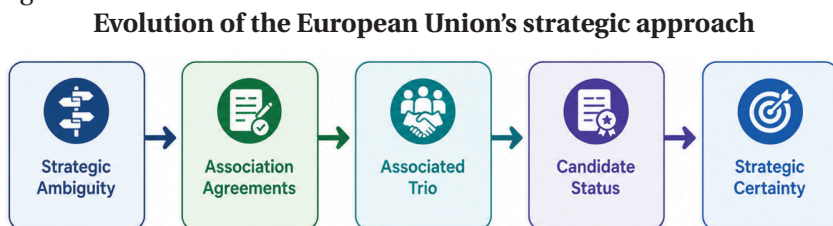
garding the ultimate objectives of European integration. The absence of a visible strategic horizon risked weakening public support for reforms and reducing the effectiveness of positive conditionality.

Another challenge relates to geopolitical competition. Competing external actors frequently exploited the uncertainty surrounding the European perspective of associated countries by promoting alternative models of regional cooperation and questioning the credibility of European commitments.

Furthermore, ambiguity became increasingly difficult to reconcile with the growing level of legal and institutional integration achieved through Association Agreements and Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas. As cooperation expanded, the distinction between neighbourhood policy and accession-related reforms gradually became less convincing.

Consequently, the advantages that initially justified strategic ambiguity have become progressively less evident in the contemporary geopolitical environment.

Figure 2.



The figure illustrates the gradual evolution of the European Union's strategic approach. Rather than representing an abrupt policy change, strategic certainty emerges as the cumulative outcome of successive stages of political and institutional integration.

5. Is strategic certainty becoming the new European paradigm?

The granting of candidate status to the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine has fundamentally altered the assumptions upon which the Eastern Partnership was originally established. For the first time, the European Union formally recognised that the future of at least some associated partner countries lies within the enlargement process.

This development suggests that strategic certainty is gradually replacing strategic ambiguity as the dominant principle governing relations with candidate countries. However, this transformation should not be interpreted as the abandonment of conditionality. On the contrary, strategic certainty appears to reinforce conditionality by linking a credible membership perspective with increasingly rigorous requirements concerning democratic governance, judicial independence, institutional effectiveness and implementation capacity.

The relationship between certainty and conditionality is therefore complementary rather than contradictory. A credible political perspective strengthens the willingness of governments and societies to undertake difficult reforms, while conditionality ensures that progress remains merit-based and objectively assessed.

Nevertheless, strategic certainty also introduces new responsibilities for the European Union. A clearer membership perspective increases expectations among partner countries and requires the Union to maintain consistency in applying accession criteria. Any perception of unequal treatment or politically motivated decisions could undermine the credibility of the enlargement process itself.

Consequently, the transition towards strategic certainty requires not only political commitment but also transparent evaluation mechanisms, consistent application of accession principles and sustained institutional dialogue.

Table 3.

Emerging characteristics of the new enlargement paradigm

Traditional neighbourhood policy	Emerging enlargement-oriented approach
Political association	Accession preparation
Strategic ambiguity	Credible membership perspective
Cooperation without accession commitments	Merit-based enlargement process
Legislative approximation	Institutional transformation
Positive conditionality	Conditionality combined with accession benchmarks

The comparison illustrates that the European Union is not replacing one policy with another. Rather, it is integrating neighbourhood policy and enlargement into a more coherent framework adapted to the realities of contemporary European geopolitics.

6. Which strategy better serves the future of the Eastern Partnership?

The preceding analysis demonstrates that the debate between strategic ambiguity and strategic certainty should not be interpreted as a choice between two opposing or mutually exclusive policy models. Both approaches have served important purposes at different stages of the European Union's relations with its Eastern partners.

Strategic ambiguity proved appropriate during the formative years of the Eastern Partnership. It enabled the European Union to establish an ambitious framework of political association without creating commitments that exceeded either the institutional readiness of partner countries or the political consensus among Member States. Within this context, ambiguity contributed to policy flexibility, encouraged gradual differentiation and supported the development of positive conditionality. The geopolitical and institutional environment has, however, changed profoundly.

The Eastern Partnership today differs fundamentally from the initiative launched in Prague in 2009. Three countries have concluded Association Agreements and Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas. The Republic of Moldova and Ukraine have obtained candidate status, while Georgia has moved substantially closer to the accession process. Democratic resilience, energy security, digital transformation and strategic autonomy have become central priorities of European policy.

These developments suggest that the original rationale for strategic ambiguity has become progressively less convincing in relation to the associated countries. Continued ambiguity may generate uncertainty regarding the long-term objectives of reform, weaken public confidence in the European integration process and reduce the credibility of conditionality.

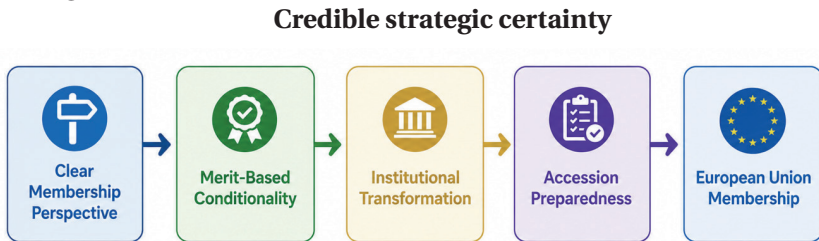
Nevertheless, replacing ambiguity with unconditional political commitments would create equally significant risks. Enlargement remains a merit-based process founded upon compliance with the Copenhagen criteria and the effective implementation of the *acquis communautaire*. A credible membership perspective must therefore remain inseparable from rigorous assessment of reform performance.

The future of the Eastern Partnership should therefore be based neither upon complete ambiguity nor upon unconditional certainty. Instead, the European Union should pursue what may be described as **credible strategic certainty**.

Under this approach, the political objective—European Union membership for eligible European states that fulfil the accession criteria—is communicated clearly. At the same time, the pace and outcome of the accession process remain fully dependent upon measurable progress in democratic governance, the rule of law, institutional capacity and implementation of the *acquis*.

Such an approach combines political credibility with institutional discipline. It strengthens reform incentives while preserving the fundamental principle that enlargement remains conditional upon demonstrated preparedness rather than political declarations alone.

Figure 3.



The proposed model illustrates that strategic certainty should not eliminate conditionality. Rather, it should reinforce the credibility of the accession process by linking a transparent political objective with rigorous and measurable institutional reforms.

Policy Box 1

From Strategic ambiguity to Credible strategic certainty

The future effectiveness of the European Union's Eastern policy depends not on choosing between flexibility and enlargement, but on combining both within a coherent strategic framework.

A credible membership perspective should provide political certainty regarding the final objective while maintaining strict conditionality concerning the pace and quality of reforms. In this sense, strategic certainty becomes not a political concession but a governance instrument that strengthens democratic transformation and enhances the credibility of European integration.

7. Policy implications

For the European Union

The analysis suggests several priorities for the future development of the Eastern Partnership.

First, the European Union should continue preserving differentiation as a fundamental principle of cooperation. However, differentiation should increasingly reflect objective progress towards accession rather than indefinite political uncertainty.

Second, enlargement policy and neighbourhood policy should be coordinated more closely. Candidate countries require policy instruments that support accession preparations while preserving the regional cooperation mechanisms established within the Eastern Partnership.

Third, the European Union should strengthen the transparency of its assessment mechanisms. Clear communication regarding reform benchmarks, evaluation procedures and accession requirements would increase the credibility of conditionality and reduce political uncertainty.

Fourth, greater investment should be directed towards institutional capacity building, particularly in judicial reform, public administration, digital governance and regulatory implementation. Sustainable enlargement depends upon the effectiveness of institutions rather than legislative approximation alone.

For the Republic of Moldova

For the Republic of Moldova, the transition towards greater strategic certainty creates both opportunities and responsibilities.

Candidate status should be understood as a new stage of European integration rather than as an achievement in itself. Continued progress depends upon the consistent implementation of reforms, strengthening democratic institutions and maintaining public confidence in the accession process.

Particular attention should be devoted to implementation capacity. Future assessments by the European Union are likely to focus increasingly on the effectiveness of institutions, administrative professionalism and the sustainability of reforms rather than on the formal adoption of legislation alone.

The Republic of Moldova should also continue strengthening cooperation within the Associated Trio. Coordinated exchange of experience, joint participation in European programmes and regional policy dialogue can contribute significantly to accelerating accession-related reforms.

Finally, communication with society should remain an integral component of the European integration strategy. Public understanding of both the opportunities and obligations associated with EU membership is essential for sustaining long-term political support.

8. Concluding remarks

The Eastern Partnership has undergone a profound transformation since its establishment in 2009. What began as a framework for neighbourhood cooperation has progressively evolved into a differentiated system accommodating countries at different stages of European integration. The granting of candidate status to the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine represents the clearest manifestation of this transformation and has fundamentally altered the strategic logic of the initiative.

This paper has argued that strategic ambiguity played an important and constructive role during the early development of the Eastern Partnership. It enabled the European Union to encourage democratic reforms while preserving political flexibility and accommodating the diversity of partner countries. However, the geopolitical realities that justified this approach have changed substantially.

Today, associated countries require greater strategic predictability. A credible membership perspective strengthens reform incentives, reinforces institutional resilience and enhances the legitimacy of the accession process. At the same time, strategic certainty should not weaken the principle of conditionality. On the contrary, political credibility and rigorous assessment should function as complementary rather than competing elements of European integration.

The future of the Eastern Partnership is therefore unlikely to be determined by a simple choice between neighbourhood policy and enlargement. Instead, it will increasingly depend upon the European Union's capacity to integrate these two policy frameworks into a coherent strategy capable of supporting democratic transformation, regional stability and sustainable development.

Ultimately, the long-term success of the Eastern Partnership will be measured not only by the number of reforms adopted but by the ability of those reforms to create resilient institutions, strengthen democratic governance and prepare associated countries for full participation in the European Union.

Key takeaways

- Strategic ambiguity was an effective instrument during the initial phase of the Eastern Partnership but has become less appropriate following the granting of candidate status to associated countries.
- The future development of the Eastern Partnership requires greater strategic predictability while preserving rigorous merit-based conditionality.
- A model of **credible strategic certainty** offers a balanced approach by combining a clear political objective with measurable reform requirements.
- Candidate status increases the importance of institutional effectiveness, implementation capacity and democratic resilience as key determinants of accession preparedness.
- The Eastern Partnership is evolving from a neighbourhood policy framework towards an increasingly differentiated instrument supporting European integration and future enlargement.

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DISCUSSION OUTCOMES

Main issues raised during the discussion

The discussion following the Positioning Block focused on the strategic evolution of the Eastern Partnership in the context of the European Union's changing geopolitical priorities and the ongoing enlargement process. Building upon the analytical contributions presented by Elena Mandaji and Ludmila Golovataia, participants examined whether the Eastern Partnership should continue functioning primarily as an instrument of the European Neighbourhood Policy or gradually evolve into a differentiated framework supporting accession-related reforms for associated partner countries.

Particular attention was devoted to the growing significance of the Associated Trio as a mechanism for regional cooperation among the Republic of Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia. Participants discussed whether this format should remain a complementary political platform within the Eastern Partnership or gradually assume a more prominent role in coordinating reforms associated with the accession process.

Another important issue concerned the implications of granting EU candidate status to the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine. Participants analysed whether this development represented a qualitative transformation of the Eastern Partnership or merely the continuation of its original objectives through more advanced forms of differentiated integration. The discussion highlighted that candidate status has introduced a new institutional dimension into the initiative, creating stronger links between neighbourhood policy and enlargement policy.

Considerable attention was also given to the relationship between strategic ambiguity and strategic certainty in the European Union's policy towards its Eastern partners. Participants debated whether maintaining a deliberately undefined membership perspective continues to provide sufficient incentives for democratic reforms or whether the current geopolitical environment requires a more explicit and credible European perspective for associated countries.

The discussion further addressed the future role of differentiated integration as the organising principle of the Eastern Partnership. Participants considered whether increasing differentiation strengthens the effectiveness of European policy by recognising the different ambitions

and capacities of partner countries or whether it risks weakening the regional coherence of the initiative.

A further topic concerned the balance between merit-based conditionality and political credibility. While participants broadly agreed that accession should remain conditional upon compliance with the Copenhagen criteria and effective implementation of reforms, they also emphasised that conditionality is most effective when accompanied by a transparent and credible political perspective capable of sustaining long-term reform efforts.

The strategic importance of democratic resilience, institutional capacity and effective governance was repeatedly highlighted throughout the discussion. Participants stressed that the future success of European integration will increasingly depend not only on legislative approximation but also on the ability of public institutions to implement reforms consistently, maintain public trust and withstand external political, economic and security challenges.

Finally, participants reflected on the broader strategic future of the Eastern Partnership. Rather than viewing neighbourhood policy and enlargement as separate or competing frameworks, the discussion suggested that both policies are becoming increasingly complementary. The Eastern Partnership was widely regarded as a flexible regional platform capable of supporting differentiated pathways towards European integration while preserving cooperation among all participating countries.

Areas of Broad Consensus

The discussion demonstrated broad agreement among participants regarding several strategic developments that are reshaping the future of the Eastern Partnership.

First, participants agreed that the Eastern Partnership has not lost its strategic relevance following the granting of candidate status to the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine. On the contrary, candidate status has introduced a new dimension into the initiative, requiring closer interaction between neighbourhood policy and the European Union's enlargement framework. Rather than becoming obsolete, the Eastern Partnership is increasingly perceived as a complementary mechanism supporting the implementation of accession-related reforms.

Second, participants broadly recognised that differentiated integration has become the defining organisational principle of the Eastern Partnership. The diversity of political ambitions, institutional capacities and reform achievements among partner countries requires flexible policy instruments capable of accommodating different levels of integration while preserving a common framework for regional cooperation.

Third, there was broad agreement that democratic resilience should become one of the principal benchmarks for assessing progress towards European integration. Participants emphasised that sustainable reforms depend not only on legislative approximation but also on the effectiveness, independence and long-term stability of democratic institutions. Judicial independence, public administration reform, anti-corruption policies and institutional accountability were identified as essential elements of accession preparedness.

Fourth, participants agreed that the European Green Deal and the Digital Agenda should be understood as integral components of future European integration rather than as separate sectoral policies. Environmental sustainability, digital transformation and innovation were recognised as strategic drivers of competitiveness, institutional modernisation and economic resilience for the associated countries.

Finally, participants shared the view that regional cooperation among the Republic of Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia should continue to expand. The Associated Trio was regarded as an important platform for exchanging reform experience, strengthening institutional cooperation and coordinating positions on issues of common strategic interest while remaining fully compatible with the broader framework of the Eastern Partnership.

Issues That Generated Different Perspectives

Although broad agreement emerged on many strategic questions, the discussion also revealed several issues on which participants expressed different analytical perspectives.

One of the most debated questions concerned the future political orientation of the European Union towards the associated countries. While many participants supported the idea of providing a clearer and more credible membership perspective, others argued that the European Union should continue exercising a degree of political flexibility

in order to preserve the merit-based nature of the enlargement process and to respond effectively to future geopolitical developments.

Different opinions were also expressed regarding the future institutional architecture of the Eastern Partnership. Some participants considered that the growing importance of the Associated Trio would naturally lead to a more differentiated structure within the initiative. Others emphasised that excessive institutional differentiation could weaken the inclusiveness of the Eastern Partnership and reduce opportunities for broader regional dialogue involving all participating countries.

Another issue concerned the relationship between neighbourhood policy and enlargement policy. While participants generally agreed that both frameworks are becoming increasingly interconnected, different views were expressed regarding the extent to which the Eastern Partnership should gradually evolve into a pre-accession instrument for candidate countries. Some argued that such an evolution reflects the natural progression of European integration, whereas others stressed the importance of preserving the distinct objectives and added value of neighbourhood policy.

Participants also discussed the balance between political ambition and implementation capacity. There was broad recognition that ambitious strategic objectives should be accompanied by realistic assessments of institutional preparedness, administrative resources and financial capacity. Several participants emphasised that maintaining public confidence in European integration depends not only on political declarations but also on the visible and effective implementation of reforms.

These different perspectives enriched the discussion and reflected the complexity of the strategic choices currently facing both the European Union and its Eastern partners.

Strategic Messages Emerging from the Discussion

The discussion generated several overarching messages that extend beyond the individual analytical papers and collectively define the strategic outlook emerging from the seminar.

First, the Eastern Partnership should be regarded as an evolving policy framework capable of adapting to profound geopolitical changes rather than as a static neighbourhood initiative. Its future relevance will depend upon its capacity to respond flexibly to new political realities

while preserving its original objectives of promoting stability, democratic governance and regional cooperation.

Second, differentiation has evolved from a policy instrument into a structural characteristic of the Eastern Partnership. Future cooperation should therefore continue to recognise the diversity of partner countries while ensuring that differentiation strengthens rather than fragments regional cooperation.

Third, democratic resilience has emerged as a central condition for successful European integration. Sustainable accession requires institutions capable not only of adopting reforms but also of implementing and preserving them under changing political, economic and security conditions.

Fourth, sustainable development, environmental transition and digital transformation should be integrated into the broader European integration agenda. Participants agreed that these priorities increasingly determine economic competitiveness, institutional effectiveness and long-term societal resilience.

Finally, the discussion highlighted the growing importance of **strategic credibility** in European Union external policy. While reform conditionality remains indispensable, its effectiveness depends upon the existence of a transparent, predictable and credible long-term political perspective capable of sustaining reform momentum and reinforcing public confidence in the European integration process.

The participants concluded that the future development of the Eastern Partnership requires an integrated strategic approach combining differentiated integration, democratic resilience, sustainable modernisation and credible political commitment. These conclusions provide the conceptual foundation for the synthesis of the seminar findings and the policy recommendations presented in the following sections of this publication.

SYNTHESIS OF THE SEMINAR FINDINGS: STRATEGIC OUTLOOK FOR THE EASTERN PARTNERSHIP

The Scientific and Analytical Seminar demonstrated that the Eastern Partnership has entered a fundamentally new stage of development. The discussions confirmed that the initiative should no longer be interpreted solely through the perspective of the European Neighbourhood Policy established in 2009. Instead, the Eastern Partnership has progressively evolved into a dynamic and differentiated framework that increasingly intersects with the European Union's enlargement policy while preserving its broader function as a platform for regional cooperation, democratic transformation and sustainable development.

The analytical papers and discussions revealed that this transformation has been driven by a combination of geopolitical, institutional and socio-economic factors. The signing of the Association Agreements, the implementation of Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas, the emergence of the Associated Trio, the granting of candidate status to the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine, and the growing importance of democratic resilience, environmental sustainability and digital transformation have collectively reshaped both the objectives and the instruments of the Eastern Partnership.

Rather than identifying isolated policy developments, the seminar highlighted the emergence of a coherent strategic trajectory. The future of the Eastern Partnership is increasingly characterised by differentiation, resilience, institutional quality and closer alignment between neighbourhood cooperation and accession-related reforms. These conclusions were consistently reflected across all thematic sessions despite the diversity of analytical perspectives presented by the speakers.

1. The Eastern Partnership Has Entered a New Strategic Phase

One of the principal conclusions emerging from the seminar is that the Eastern Partnership has entered a qualitatively different stage of development. The initiative has moved beyond its original function of promoting political dialogue and approximation with European standards. It now increasingly supports the institutional preparation of associated countries for participation in the European Union's enlargement process.

This transformation does not imply that the Eastern Partnership has lost its original relevance. On the contrary, the discussions demonstrated that its role has expanded. Alongside promoting democratic governance and economic cooperation, the initiative now facilitates institutional learning, policy coordination and regional cooperation among countries following different pathways towards European integration.

Participants agreed that the future of the Eastern Partnership should therefore be understood in terms of transformation rather than replacement. Enlargement policy does not substitute the Eastern Partnership; instead, both frameworks are becoming increasingly complementary.

2. Differentiation Has Become the Organising Principle of the Eastern Partnership

Another major conclusion concerns the evolution of differentiation from a policy instrument into the defining organisational principle of the Eastern Partnership.

Initially, differentiation was introduced to accommodate the diversity of political ambitions among partner countries. Over time, however, it has become the principal mechanism through which the European Union manages increasingly diverse forms of political association, economic integration and accession preparation.

The seminar demonstrated that differentiation should no longer be interpreted as unequal treatment. Rather, it reflects objective differences in reform performance, institutional capacity and strategic orientation while preserving equal access to cooperation based on merit and voluntary commitment.

The establishment of the Associated Trio, together with the granting of candidate status to the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine, illustrates that differentiation has become institutionalised. The future development of the Eastern Partnership is therefore likely to depend upon increasingly flexible forms of cooperation capable of accommodating different stages of European integration without undermining regional cohesion.

3. Democratic Resilience Has Become the Principal Benchmark of European Integration

Across all thematic sessions, democratic resilience emerged as one of the most significant concepts defining the future relationship between the European Union and its Eastern partners.

Participants consistently emphasised that successful European integration can no longer be measured exclusively through legislative approximation or formal policy commitments. Sustainable progress increasingly depends upon the quality, independence and effectiveness of democratic institutions.

Judicial reform, the rule of law, transparent governance, accountable public administration and active civil society were identified as mutually reinforcing components of democratic resilience. Together they determine the capacity of partner countries to implement reforms consistently, maintain public confidence and respond effectively to political, economic and security challenges.

The seminar therefore concluded that democratic resilience should occupy a central position within future assessment frameworks applied by both the European Union and partner countries. Institutional performance, rather than legislative adoption alone, is likely to become the principal indicator of long-term accession preparedness.

4. Green and Digital Transformation Have Become the New Drivers of Modernisation

Another important conclusion emerging from the seminar concerns the growing role of environmental sustainability and digital transformation within the European integration process. The discussions demonstrated that the European Green Deal and the Digital Agenda should no longer be viewed as sectoral policy initiatives but as comprehensive development strategies influencing virtually every dimension of economic, institutional and social transformation.

Participants agreed that environmental sustainability, digitalisation and innovation have become integral components of the European Union's political and economic model. Consequently, successful approximation to the European Union increasingly requires partner countries to integrate green transition and digital transformation into their national development strategies rather than treating them as separate policy areas.

The seminar further highlighted that these priorities extend beyond environmental protection and technological innovation. Investments in renewable energy, circular economy, digital public administration, cybersecurity and digital skills contribute simultaneously to economic competitiveness, institutional effectiveness and societal resilience.

Green and digital transformation therefore reinforce democratic reforms by strengthening the capacity of institutions to deliver sustainable public policies and high-quality public services.

Participants also recognised that implementation remains uneven across the associated countries. Differences in financial resources, administrative capacity and technological infrastructure continue to influence the pace of transformation. Nevertheless, there was broad agreement that convergence with European environmental and digital standards represents not merely a regulatory obligation but a strategic investment in long-term competitiveness and sustainable development.

5. Strategic Credibility Has Become the Foundation of Future Cooperation

Perhaps the most important conclusion emerging from the seminar concerns the growing importance of **strategic credibility** within the European Union's policy towards its Eastern partners.

Throughout the discussions, participants repeatedly emphasised that democratic reforms require more than financial assistance, technical cooperation or legislative approximation. Sustainable transformation also depends upon the credibility of long-term political objectives. Reform processes extending over many years require governments, institutions and societies to maintain confidence that sustained efforts will ultimately produce meaningful political outcomes.

Within this context, the seminar highlighted an important evolution in the relationship between strategic ambiguity and strategic certainty. While strategic ambiguity played a constructive role during the initial stages of the Eastern Partnership, current geopolitical realities increasingly favour greater political clarity for countries that have demonstrated consistent commitment to European values and reforms.

At the same time, participants stressed that strategic certainty should not be interpreted as unconditional political commitment. Rather, a credible European perspective should remain inseparable from merit-based conditionality, objective evaluation and effective implementation of reforms. Political credibility and institutional conditionality should therefore function as mutually reinforcing principles supporting a transparent and predictable accession process.

The seminar concluded that **credible strategic certainty** provides the most appropriate conceptual framework for the future relationship between the European Union and the associated countries. Such an approach combines a clearly communicated political objective with rigorous evaluation of reform performance, thereby strengthening both the legitimacy and effectiveness of the enlargement process.

6. Strategic Outlook for the Eastern Partnership

Building upon the analyses presented throughout the seminar, participants identified several long-term trends likely to shape the future evolution of the Eastern Partnership.

First, differentiation is expected to deepen further as partner countries continue progressing at different speeds within the European integration process. Rather than weakening regional cooperation, differentiated integration is likely to become the principal mechanism through which the European Union accommodates diverse levels of political association and institutional preparedness.

Second, neighbourhood policy and enlargement policy are expected to become increasingly interconnected. Candidate countries will continue participating in the Eastern Partnership while simultaneously moving towards accession-related cooperation. This convergence is likely to transform the Eastern Partnership into a more flexible framework capable of supporting both regional cooperation and differentiated accession pathways.

Third, democratic resilience will increasingly function as the principal benchmark for assessing reform progress. Future evaluations are expected to focus less on legislative approximation alone and more on institutional effectiveness, governance quality, public trust and implementation capacity.

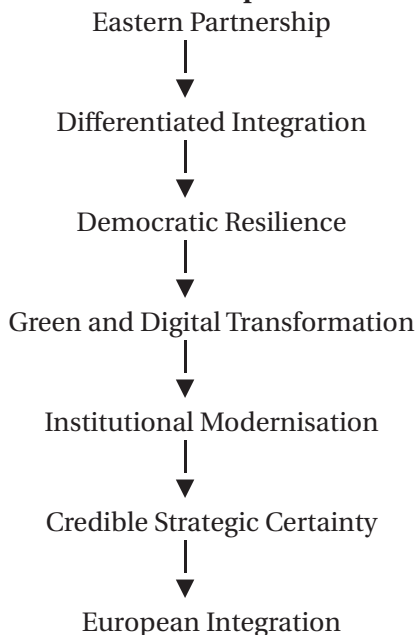
Fourth, environmental sustainability, digital transformation and innovation are likely to become indispensable components of future accession preparedness. The competitiveness of associated countries will increasingly depend upon their ability to integrate green and digital priorities into broader economic and institutional development strategies.

Finally, universities, research institutions and civil society organisations are expected to play a more prominent role in supporting European integration. Academic expertise, policy-oriented research and evidence-based dialogue will remain essential for strengthening institu-

tional capacity, informing public debate and facilitating the implementation of complex European reforms.

Figure.

Strategic Outlook for the Future Development of the Eastern Partnership



The figure summarises the conceptual framework emerging from the seminar. It illustrates the interdependence of the principal themes discussed throughout the publication and demonstrates that future European integration depends upon the interaction of political credibility, institutional quality, democratic resilience and sustainable modernisation.

Closing Synthesis

The Scientific and Analytical Seminar demonstrated that the Eastern Partnership is undergoing a profound strategic transformation. Rather than replacing its original objectives, recent geopolitical devel-

opments have expanded both its scope and significance. Democratic governance, institutional resilience, environmental sustainability, digital transformation and differentiated integration are no longer separate policy priorities but mutually reinforcing components of a comprehensive European integration agenda.

The seminar further confirmed that the future effectiveness of the Eastern Partnership will depend upon its ability to reconcile flexibility with predictability, differentiation with cohesion, and ambitious political objectives with rigorous institutional conditionality. The discussions consistently highlighted that sustainable reforms require not only technical assistance and legislative approximation but also credible long-term political commitments capable of maintaining public confidence and reform momentum.

Taken together, the analytical papers and discussions provide a coherent vision of the future development of the Eastern Partnership. They demonstrate that the initiative remains strategically relevant within the evolving European architecture and continues to offer an effective framework for supporting democratic transformation, regional co-operation and accession-related reforms.

The conclusions presented in this synthesis constitute the analytical foundation for the policy recommendations that follow. They translate the principal findings of the seminar into strategic directions aimed at strengthening the future development of the Eastern Partnership, supporting the European aspirations of the associated countries and reinforcing the effectiveness of the European Union's external action.

7. The Future Architecture of the Eastern Partnership

The discussions demonstrated that the future of the Eastern Partnership should not be assessed through the binary question of whether the initiative will continue or disappear. A more relevant question concerns the institutional architecture through which cooperation between the European Union and its eastern partners will be organised during the coming decade.

The original design of the Eastern Partnership assumed a relatively homogeneous framework of cooperation for six neighbouring countries. Contemporary realities no longer correspond to this model. The participating states differ substantially in their legal relationship with the European Union, political ambitions, reform performance and se-

curity environment. Maintaining a uniform institutional approach would therefore neither reflect political reality nor maximise the effectiveness of European policy.

Rather than replacing the existing framework, future development is likely to result in a **layered architecture of cooperation**. The Eastern Partnership may continue functioning as the common regional platform, while additional layers of cooperation address the specific needs of associated countries, candidate states and other partners. Such an approach would preserve regional dialogue without limiting the capacity of the European Union to deepen cooperation with countries progressing towards accession.

This evolution should not be interpreted as institutional fragmentation. On the contrary, a differentiated architecture may increase the flexibility, responsiveness and long-term sustainability of the European Union's engagement in the region.

Table 5.

Possible Architecture of the Eastern Partnership after 2030

Level of Cooperation	Strategic Function
Eastern Partnership	Regional political dialogue and multilateral cooperation
Bilateral Association Frameworks	Implementation of Association Agreements and DCFTAs
Associated Trio	Coordination of reforms and exchange of best practices
Candidate Country Framework	Preparation for accession negotiations
EU Membership	Participation in the institutions and policies of the European Union

The proposed architecture illustrates a gradual progression rather than separate institutional models. Each level complements the others and reflects increasing degrees of political and institutional integration.

8. From Policy Convergence to Governance Convergence

Another important trend identified during the seminar concerns the changing nature of European integration itself.

For many years, approximation to the European Union was primarily understood as the harmonisation of legislation. Future integration, however, is likely to depend increasingly on **governance convergence**.

Governance convergence extends beyond the formal transposition of European directives. It refers to the capacity of institutions to implement public policies effectively, coordinate complex reforms, deliver high-quality public services and maintain democratic accountability. In this context, institutional performance becomes as important as legal approximation.

This evolution has important implications for associated countries. Success will increasingly depend upon the quality of public administration, strategic planning, regulatory enforcement and evidence-based policymaking. Administrative competence, interinstitutional coordination and policy continuity will become decisive factors influencing both accession preparedness and long-term competitiveness.

Consequently, the future relationship between the European Union and its Eastern partners is likely to focus less on what reforms are adopted and more on how those reforms are implemented and sustained over time.

9. The Strategic Role of the Republic of Moldova

The seminar also highlighted the changing strategic position of the Republic of Moldova within the Eastern Partnership.

For much of the initiative's history, Moldova was primarily viewed as one of several participating countries pursuing closer political association with the European Union. Today, its position has evolved considerably. Candidate status, sustained implementation of Association Agreement commitments and active participation within the Associated Trio have increased both its visibility and its responsibilities.

The Republic of Moldova is now positioned at the intersection of three complementary policy frameworks: the Eastern Partnership, the enlargement process and regional cooperation among the Associated Trio. This combination creates opportunities that extend beyond domestic reform.

The country can increasingly contribute to regional policy dialogue by sharing practical experience in institutional approximation, digital public administration, energy diversification and alignment with the *acquis communautaire*. Universities, research institutions and civil society organisations are also well placed to support this process by generating policy expertise, strengthening administrative capacity and promoting informed public debate.

The seminar therefore concluded that the Republic of Moldova should not be regarded solely as a beneficiary of European policy. Increasingly, it has the potential to become an active contributor to the further development of the Eastern Partnership itself.

10. Looking Towards 2030

Looking ahead, the Eastern Partnership is likely to become less defined by its institutional boundaries and more by the strategic functions it performs.

Its future success will depend upon its capacity to facilitate cooperation among countries following different European trajectories while preserving a common framework for dialogue, knowledge exchange and regional stability. Flexibility will therefore become a defining characteristic of the initiative.

The enlargement process is also expected to evolve. Future accession is likely to be increasingly gradual, allowing candidate countries to participate progressively in selected European policies before full membership. Such an approach would reduce institutional discontinuity and strengthen administrative preparedness.

Technological transformation, climate adaptation and geopolitical resilience will likewise shape the future agenda. These priorities require cross-sectoral cooperation extending beyond traditional neighbourhood policy and call for stronger coordination between European institutions, national governments, regional authorities and academic communities.

Finally, the seminar highlighted that the long-term credibility of the European project in the Eastern neighbourhood will depend not only on the pace of enlargement but also on the consistency of European engagement. Stable partnerships, transparent evaluation procedures and predictable policy instruments will remain essential for sustaining reform momentum and strengthening confidence in the European integration process.

Final Reflection

The discussions held during the Scientific and Analytical Seminar demonstrated that the Eastern Partnership has reached a point where incremental adjustments are no longer sufficient. The initiative is entering a period of strategic adaptation in which institutional flexibility,

differentiated cooperation and long-term policy coherence will become increasingly important.

Rather than asking whether the Eastern Partnership has fulfilled its mission, the seminar proposed a different perspective. The initiative should be viewed as an evolving framework capable of adapting to successive stages of European integration and changing geopolitical realities.

Its future relevance will therefore be determined not by preserving its original institutional design, but by its capacity to generate practical solutions for an increasingly diverse neighbourhood, strengthen cooperation among European partners and support sustainable democratic transformation across the region.

11. Geopolitical Uncertainty and the Limits of Long-Term Forecasting

Any assessment of the future development of the Eastern Partnership must acknowledge the exceptionally high level of geopolitical uncertainty affecting the European continent. The course and eventual outcome of Russia's war against Ukraine will have major implications for the European security architecture, the political cohesion of the European Union and the European integration prospects of the associated countries.

For this reason, the strategic outlook presented in this publication should not be interpreted as a definitive forecast. It identifies possible directions of policy development on the basis of the trends discussed during the Seminar, while recognising that these directions may be significantly affected by future security, political and economic developments.

Several broad scenarios remain possible. A sustainable settlement accompanied by credible security arrangements could create more favourable conditions for reconstruction, regional cooperation and the advancement of accession-related reforms. A prolonged or unresolved conflict could require the European Union and the associated countries to devote greater attention and resources to security, defence, energy resilience and crisis management. A further deterioration of the regional security environment could slow economic modernisation, increase political uncertainty and complicate the enlargement process.

The future of the Eastern Partnership will therefore depend not only on the quality of reforms implemented by partner countries, but also on the capacity of the European Union to respond collectively to security challenges and to maintain a consistent long-term policy towards its eastern neighbourhood.

In this context, the most realistic strategic objective is not to predict a single institutional outcome, but to strengthen the capacity of the Eastern Partnership and its participating countries to adapt to different geopolitical scenarios. Institutional resilience, flexible cooperation mechanisms, economic diversification and sustained political dialogue will remain important under any possible development of the regional situation.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE FUTURE DEVELOPMENT OF THE EASTERN PARTNERSHIP

Introductory Note

The policy recommendations presented in this section are derived from the analytical papers, expert discussions and strategic conclusions developed during the Scientific and Analytical Seminar Eastern Partnership Policy Beyond 2020: New Challenges and Opportunities for the Republic of Moldova and the European Union. They reflect the collective findings of the seminar rather than the views of individual contributors.

The recommendations are intended to support the future development of the Eastern Partnership by strengthening its capacity to promote democratic governance, sustainable development, institutional resilience and regional cooperation in an evolving European and international environment. They are addressed to the principal stakeholders involved in shaping and implementing policies related to the Eastern Partnership.

Recognising the considerable geopolitical uncertainty currently affecting Europe, the recommendations are not presented as fixed policy prescriptions. Instead, they identify priority areas in which coordinated action could enhance the effectiveness, flexibility and long-term sustainability of the Eastern Partnership while supporting the European aspirations of its associated partner countries.

1. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE EUROPEAN UNION

The seminar identified several priority areas in which further action by the European Union could contribute to strengthening the effectiveness and strategic relevance of the Eastern Partnership.

Recommendation 1. Preserve the Eastern Partnership as a Long-Term Strategic Framework

The Eastern Partnership should continue to function as a flexible regional framework that complements, rather than competes with, the enlargement process. Its institutional value extends beyond accession preparation by facilitating political dialogue, regional cooperation and the exchange of experience among partner countries with different levels of integration.

A differentiated regional framework allows the European Union to maintain constructive engagement with all partner countries while simultaneously supporting those progressing towards accession.

Recommendation 2. Maintain Differentiation as a Merit-Based Principle

Future cooperation should continue to reflect the different levels of political commitment, institutional preparedness and reform performance demonstrated by partner countries. Differentiation should remain transparent, objective and based upon clearly defined criteria.

A merit-based approach strengthens policy credibility, encourages reforms and recognises the diversity of development paths within the Eastern Partnership.

Recommendation 3. Strengthen Support for Democratic Resilience

Greater emphasis should be placed on strengthening judicial independence, public administration, anti-corruption institutions, electoral integrity and good governance through long-term institutional cooperation and capacity-building programmes.

Strong democratic institutions increase the sustainability of reforms and enhance resilience to political, economic and security challenges.

Recommendation 4. Enhance Support for Green and Digital Transformation

The European Union should continue assisting partner countries in implementing the objectives of the European Green Deal and the Digital Agenda through technical cooperation, investment instruments and knowledge-sharing initiatives.

Green and digital transformation contribute simultaneously to economic competitiveness, energy resilience, administrative modernisation and sustainable development.

Recommendation 5. Promote Regional Cooperation within the Associated Trio

The European Union should continue encouraging practical cooperation among the Republic of Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia in areas such as public administration reform, transport connectivity, energy security, digital governance and academic cooperation.

Regional cooperation enables partner countries to exchange experience, coordinate reform efforts and strengthen institutional capacity while respecting the individual pace of each country's European integration process.

Recommendation 6. Ensure Predictability and Transparency of the Accession Process

The European Union should continue communicating accession requirements, reform priorities and evaluation criteria in a clear and consistent manner. Transparent monitoring and regular policy dialogue contribute to maintaining public confidence in the enlargement process.

Predictability strengthens the credibility of conditionality and supports sustained reform efforts by partner countries.

Recommendation 7. Expand Support for Knowledge-Based Policy Development

The European Union should continue supporting research networks, Jean Monnet activities, universities, think tanks and evidence-based policy initiatives addressing the future development of the Eastern Partnership.

Academic expertise and policy-oriented research contribute to better-informed decision-making and strengthen cooperation between public institutions and the research community.

Recommendation 8. Preserve Flexibility in Responding to Geopolitical Developments

Given the continuing uncertainty affecting the European security environment, the Eastern Partnership should retain sufficient institutional flexibility to adapt to changing political and security conditions while preserving its long-term strategic objectives.

Adaptive policy frameworks are better equipped to respond to evolving regional circumstances without undermining the continuity of European engagement.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE GOVERNMENTS OF THE ASSOCIATED COUNTRIES

The discussions highlighted several priorities that could contribute to strengthening the effectiveness of reforms and supporting the long-term European integration of the associated countries.

Recommendation 1. Ensure Continuity of Reform Processes

Governments should seek to maintain the continuity of key reforms irrespective of changes in political leadership. Long-term institutional development requires stable implementation mechanisms and broad political commitment.

Sustainable reforms depend on institutional continuity rather than short-term political cycles.

Recommendation 2. Strengthen Institutional Capacity

Priority should be given to improving the effectiveness of public administration, strategic planning, policy coordination and implementation mechanisms at both national and local levels.

Strong institutions are essential for implementing European standards and ensuring the sustainability of reforms.

Recommendation 3. Promote Evidence-Based Policymaking

Greater use should be made of analytical research, policy evaluation and impact assessment when designing and implementing public policies related to European integration.

Evidence-based decision-making improves policy quality, transparency and public confidence.

Recommendation 4. Strengthen Regional Cooperation

The associated countries should continue expanding practical cooperation in areas of common interest, including transport, energy, digitalisation, environmental protection, education and research.

Regional cooperation facilitates the exchange of experience, strengthens institutional learning and increases the effectiveness of reforms.

Recommendation 5. Enhance Public Communication on European Integration

Governments should maintain transparent dialogue with citizens concerning both the opportunities and responsibilities associated with the European integration process.

Public understanding and trust are essential for maintaining long-term support for reforms.

Recommendation 6. Invest in Human Capital

Continued investment in education, professional training, research and innovation should remain a strategic priority.

Highly qualified human resources are indispensable for institutional modernisation and long-term competitiveness.

3. SPECIFIC PRIORITIES FOR THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA

Taking into account the country's current stage of European integration, the seminar identified several priorities of particular relevance for the Republic of Moldova.

Recommendation 1. Consolidate Administrative Capacity

Continue strengthening the professionalism, efficiency and coordination of public administration responsible for implementing accession-related reforms.

Effective institutions determine the quality and sustainability of European integration.

Recommendation 2. Maintain Reform Momentum

Preserve consistent progress in judicial reform, anti-corruption measures, public administration reform and the rule of law.

The credibility of the accession process depends upon the consistent implementation of reforms over time.

Recommendation 3. Strengthen Cooperation with the Associated Trio

Continue developing practical cooperation with Ukraine and Georgia through joint projects, exchange of experience and coordinated participation in European programmes.

Shared experience contributes to more efficient implementation of reforms and strengthens regional partnerships.

Recommendation 4. Expand Participation in European Research and Education Programmes

Encourage universities, research centres and public institutions to increase participation in Erasmus+, Horizon Europe, Jean Monnet and other European initiatives.

Academic cooperation supports institutional development, policy innovation and international networking.

Recommendation 5. Promote Strategic Communication

Develop effective communication strategies that explain the objectives, progress and practical implications of the European integration process for citizens.

Well-informed public debate strengthens democratic participation and societal support for reforms.

Recommendation 6. Support Local and Regional Authorities

Strengthen the involvement of local public authorities in implementing European standards and managing EU-funded projects.

Successful European integration requires effective governance at all administrative levels.

4. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR UNIVERSITIES AND RESEARCH INSTITUTIONS

The seminar confirmed the important contribution of higher education institutions and research organisations to the European integration process.

Recommendation 1. Strengthen European Studies

Expand interdisciplinary teaching and research on the European Union, European integration and public policy.

Recommendation 2. Promote Applied Research

Encourage research addressing practical challenges related to governance, sustainable development, digital transformation and European integration.

Recommendation 3. Strengthen International Academic Cooperation

Develop joint research projects, academic networks and exchange programmes with European universities and research institutions.

Recommendation 4. Support Evidence-Based Public Dialogue

Universities should continue serving as platforms for informed public debate involving policymakers, civil society and the academic community.

Recommendation 5. Encourage Student Participation

Increase opportunities for students to engage in research projects, policy simulations, academic mobility and European cooperation initiatives.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS

Civil society remains an important partner in supporting democratic governance and European integration.

Recommendation 1. Promote Civic Participation

Support initiatives encouraging citizens to participate actively in public consultations, community development and democratic decision-making.

Recommendation 2. Strengthen Public Awareness

Continue promoting public understanding of European values, democratic governance and sustainable development through educational and awareness-raising activities.

Recommendation 3. Foster Dialogue Between Society and Public Institutions

Encourage regular cooperation between civil society organisations, public authorities, universities and the private sector.

Recommendation 4. Support Independent Policy Monitoring

Continue monitoring the implementation of reforms and contribute to public accountability through evidence-based analysis and constructive policy dialogue.

Final Observation

The recommendations presented above are intended to support the continued evolution of the Eastern Partnership in a changing European environment. Their successful implementation will depend upon sustained cooperation among European institutions, national governments, universities, civil society organisations and other stakeholders. While future developments remain influenced by geopolitical uncertainty, the seminar confirmed that long-term commitment to democratic governance, institutional quality and regional cooperation provides the strongest foundation for advancing the objectives of the Eastern Partnership and supporting the European aspirations of its associated countries.

CONCLUSIONS

The Scientific and Analytical Seminar Eastern Partnership Policy Beyond 2020: New Challenges and Opportunities for the Republic of Moldova and the European Union provided an opportunity to examine the evolution of the Eastern Partnership from multiple academic perspectives and to assess its future role within a rapidly changing European environment. The analytical papers, expert discussions and policy reflections presented throughout this publication demonstrate that the Eastern Partnership continues to represent an important framework for cooperation between the European Union and its eastern partners, although its objectives, instruments and strategic context have evolved considerably since its establishment in 2009.

A central conclusion emerging from the seminar is that the Eastern Partnership should not be interpreted as a static policy initiative. Throughout its development, the framework has demonstrated a significant capacity for adaptation in response to changing political, economic and geopolitical circumstances. The establishment of Association Agreements, the emergence of differentiated integration, the creation of the Associated Trio and the granting of candidate status to the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine illustrate a gradual transformation of the initiative rather than a departure from its original principles.

The seminar further confirmed that democratic governance, the rule of law and institutional resilience remain fundamental prerequisites for sustainable European integration. At the same time, the discussions highlighted that contemporary European integration extends beyond traditional political and economic reforms. Green transition, digital transformation, innovation, energy resilience and effective public administration have become integral components of a broader process of institutional modernisation and societal development.

Another important conclusion concerns the growing importance of flexibility within European Union external policy. The diversity of political aspirations and institutional capacities among partner countries requires differentiated approaches capable of responding to varying national circumstances while preserving common principles and shared strategic objectives. In this respect, differentiation should be regarded as a mechanism for enhancing the effectiveness of cooperation rather than as a source of fragmentation.

The seminar also demonstrated that the future development of the Eastern Partnership cannot be analysed independently of the broader geopolitical environment. Ongoing security challenges in Europe, including the consequences of Russia's war against Ukraine, continue to influence regional stability, the European Union's external policies and the pace of European integration. Consequently, future policy choices will inevitably depend upon developments that remain difficult to predict with certainty. This reinforces the importance of institutional resilience, adaptive governance and sustained political dialogue as essential elements of long-term cooperation.

At the same time, the seminar confirmed that uncertainty should not lead to strategic passivity. Regardless of future geopolitical developments, continued investment in democratic institutions, effective governance, academic cooperation, sustainable development and regional dialogue remains valuable under all plausible scenarios. These priorities strengthen the capacity of partner countries to respond successfully to future opportunities as well as to emerging challenges.

For the Republic of Moldova, the discussions highlighted both significant opportunities and increased responsibilities arising from its current stage of European integration. Candidate status represents an important political milestone, but the long-term success of the accession process will ultimately depend upon the quality of institutions, consistency of reforms and the capacity to translate legislative commitments into effective public policies. The experience accumulated within the Eastern Partnership provides a valuable foundation for this continuing process.

The seminar likewise demonstrated the important contribution that universities and research institutions can make to European integration. Academic research, policy analysis and interdisciplinary dialogue strengthen evidence-based decision-making, encourage informed public debate and contribute to the development of professional expertise required for implementing complex European reforms. In this respect, Jean Monnet activities continue to play an important role in promoting knowledge about the European Union and supporting cooperation between academia, public institutions and society.

Overall, the seminar confirmed that the Eastern Partnership remains a relevant and adaptable framework for promoting cooperation, democratic transformation and European integration. Its future effec-

tiveness will depend not only on institutional developments within the European Union and partner countries but also on their shared capacity to respond constructively to an increasingly complex international environment.

The editors hope that the analyses, discussions and recommendations presented in this publication will contribute to further academic research, evidence-based policymaking and informed public dialogue on the future development of the Eastern Partnership and the European integration of the Republic of Moldova. While many questions remain open, the seminar demonstrated that constructive dialogue, critical analysis and international academic cooperation continue to provide an essential foundation for understanding the opportunities and challenges facing Europe and its neighbourhood.

This publication has been prepared within the framework of the Jean Monnet Centre of Excellence project Strengthening and Sharing Knowledge about the European Union, funded by the Erasmus+ Programme of the European Union. The editors express their sincere appreciation to all authors, speakers, participants and reviewers whose expertise, commitment and constructive dialogue made both the Scientific and Analytical Seminar and this publication possible.

It is our hope that this volume will serve not only as a record of the seminar discussions but also as a useful academic resource for researchers, university teachers, students, policymakers and practitioners interested in European Union studies, the Eastern Partnership and the future of European integration.

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The views and opinions expressed in this publication are those of the respective authors and do not necessarily reflect the official position of the European Union or the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA).

The Eastern Partnership has not reached its endpoint; it has entered a new stage of differentiated European integration under conditions of heightened geopolitical uncertainty.

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