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STUDY GUIDE

Topic: The Eastern Partnership:
Reinstating EU's Relations with
Armenia, Azerbaijan and Belarus

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**Council of the European Union, “The Eastern Partnership: Reinstating EU’s
Relations with Armenia, Azerbaijan and Belarus”**
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Greeting of the Board

Distinguished Members of the European Parliament,

Words are inadequate to describe our gratitude for all of you being here as part of this year’s EUropa.S. Conference. It is our pleasure to welcome you to the European Parliament’s AFET Committee, and we hope to make the most of this wonderful experience. As your board, we’re extremely honored to explore this year’s topic with you and guide you throughout the whole procedure. We highly urge you to share your concerns with us and do not hesitate to contact us at any point of this journey. The European Eastern Partnership and its particular aspects, which this year’s issue addresses, constitute a new EU approach to a crucial strategic area; the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and the political backsliding in Belarus, combined with the latter’s connection to the Russian Federation, have led the international community and especially the neighboring European bloc to develop concrete policies.

Under these circumstances, you’re all challenged to propose specific and effective solutions, taking into consideration your country’s and political party’s interests, in one of the most critical committees in the EU for 2023. European affairs are extremely sensitive, and the EU’s legislation is really detailed, so we propose that you prepare well, understand your position in the Parliament, and thrive in the debates. Don’t forget that crises are meant to happen at any time, so be alerted.

Another quick remark has to be made regarding the rules of procedure. Please keep in mind that diplomatic courtesy is required throughout every official and unofficial discussion. Our top priority remains the unconditional respect between each other, so that every single one of you has an unforgettable experience in the conference, a lot of stories to tell, much fun and skills obtained at the end of the conference. Last, but not least, we totally believe that you are more than capable of achieving the set goals, addressing major challenges, and proposing groundbreaking and ambitious solutions. Believe in yourself, in your skills, and in your knowledge. Be confident and enjoy the debates.

*Kind regards,
The Board of AFET*

Introduction to the Topic

This year's foreign affairs committee addresses a number of problems concerning the Eastern Partnership connections, notably the European Union's relations with Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Belarus. In particular, the relationships of these countries with the European Union are examined in depth in this study guide. Their political, economic, and commercial interactions are especially examined, but they are also analyzed in terms of human rights, the legal system, and civil society. Furthermore, the energy ties of the three countries with the union have been thoroughly examined, owing primarily to the phenomenon of climate change. The legal framework of the commission, in conjunction with the legal framework of Eastern Partnership relations, is used to examine Eastern Partnership ties. Simultaneously, the positions of the European Parliament's parties on the agenda are examined.

Introduction to AFET

The Committee on Foreign Affairs, known as AFET, after the French name “Affaires étrangères,” is a driving force behind multilateralism and the global rules-based international order, advocating for openness, fairness, and the necessary reforms all over the world. Strong EU external action is critical for the continent's democracy, prosperity, and security.

Today, David McAllister serves as the president of the AFET Committee. The 79 members of this committee contribute to its demanding mandate. One of the most important achievements of the Committee so far has been obtained via frequent trips and meetings, through which the Committee on Foreign Affairs has developed a close relationship with Kazakhstan, the most prosperous nation in Central Asia. Annual sessions of the Parliamentary Cooperation Committee are held between the European Parliament and Kazakhstan.

There are specific areas for which AFET is responsible. Firstly, assisted by a subcommittee relevant to the topic areas, the committee is dealing with the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) as well as the European Security and Defense Policy (ESDP). Secondly, it is highly involved in the EU's

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relations with internal (other EU bodies and institutions) and external (UNO) actors. Third, it is working towards the establishment and strengthening of political relations with other countries, especially with countries that directly affect the EU’s interests, using means of cooperation and assistance programs as well as international agreements such as association and partnership agreements. Fourth, conducting the negotiations regarding the accession of new members into the EU from the initial steps until the conclusion is another important duty of the AFET Committee. Lastly, the protection of human rights and minorities, as well as the promotion of democratic values in foreign countries, fall under its responsibility, while a subcommittee is assisting in the whole effort, and persons from other committees and bodies relevant to the issue are invited to participate in its meetings.¹

The AFET Committee is in charge of promoting, implementing, and monitoring the Union's foreign policy in the areas of:

1. the common foreign and security policy (CFSP) and the common security and defense policy (CSDP); in this regard, the committee is aided by a security and defense subcommittee.
2. relations with other Union institutions and bodies, the United Nations, and other international organizations and interparliamentary assemblies for matters under its jurisdiction;
3. oversight of the European External Action Service;
4. strengthening of political relations with third countries through comprehensive cooperation and assistance programs or international agreements such as association and partnership agreements; and
5. the establishment, monitoring, and evaluation of the European External Action Service.
6. all legislation, programming, and oversight of actions carried out under the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights, the European Neighbourhood Instrument, the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance, the Instrument for Stability and Peace, and the Partnership Instrument for Third-Country Cooperation, as well as the policies underlying them;

¹ EU MONITOR, n.d. Committee on Foreign Affairs (AFET).

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7. the monitoring and follow-up of, inter alia, the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), in particular with reference to ENP Annual Progress Reports;
8. Participation in election observation missions by Parliament, if appropriate in collaboration with other relevant committees and delegations.

The committee oversees and coordinates the activity of joint parliamentary committees and parliamentary cooperation committees, as well as interparliamentary delegations and ad hoc delegations that fall under its purview.



1 Source: <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/committees/en/afet/home/highlights>

Review of the Topic/ Introduction: Eastern Partnership

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Shortly after “Eastern’s Bloc” dissolution and USSR’s collapse in 1991, the West was brought before a historical challenge. What would have been Europe’s relations with its new eastern neighbors including Russia?

Following the European Council’s invitation to the commission to prepare a proposal for an eastern partnership in 2008, the latter was launched in 2009 as a joint initiative between the EU and its member states and the six Eastern European and South Caucasus partner countries. It was mainly the EU’s response towards the conflict that has broken out in Georgia, the disproportionate reaction of Russia, and its unilateral decision to recognise independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.²

The Eastern Partnership, as a part of the eastern regional dimension of the European Neighbourhood Policy, is described as a common EU policy between the latter and the eastern partners, so as to its legalization and acceptance to be reinforced. It is founded on the common commitment towards international law, and the fundamental values of democracy, rule of law, the respect of human rights, and fundamental freedoms, as well as market economy, sustainable development, and good governance. Its purpose is the reinforcement of the political association and economic integration between the six countries of the eastern Europe and South Caucasus; Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, the Republic of Moldova, Ukraine. It is vital to refer to the EU’s special relations with Russia and Turkey; neither of the two countries are integrated in the EaP framework, as Russia is considered as a strategic partner, while Turkey has been granted the status of an accession country.

2019 marked the 10th anniversary of the eastern partnership with high-level events organized, in which the six Eastern partner countries, EU member states and stakeholders participated. The EU high representative, Federica Mogherini, chaired the annual Eastern partnership Foreign Affairs Ministerial Meeting and stated: “in the European Union, we value Eastern partnership enormously. Notwithstanding difficulties and problems that we still face in the region, our partnership has managed to take forward our common work on trade, economic development, human rights, the role of civil society, visa liberalization, and in many other fields.”, marking in that way, the importance of the agreement.

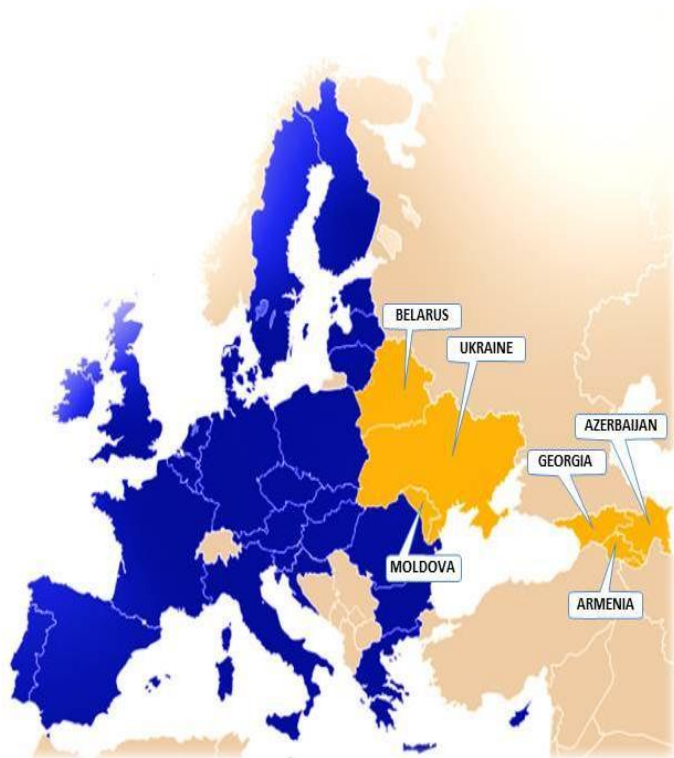
² *The Eastern Partnership countries* (no date). Available at: <https://eige.europa.eu/news/men-dominate-positions-power-eastern-partnership-countries>.

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In 2020, the European commission published the joint communication “Eastern partnership policy beyond 2020: Reinforcing Resilience - an Eastern Partnership that delivers for all.”, outlining five policy objectives; resilient, sustainable, and integrated economies, accountable institutions, the rule of law and security, environmental and climate resilience, digital transformation, fair and inclusive societies. These policy objectives were accompanied by an ambitious €2.3 billion regional economic investment plan with the aim of supporting the involved countries after the recent sanitary crisis and their green and digital transformations.

The last foreign ministers meeting took place on 12 December 2022, bringing together the EU foreign ministers and their counterparts from 5 out of 6 eastern partnership countries (given Belarus’ suspension from the agreement) as well as EU officials such as the high representative for foreign affairs and security policy, Josep Borrell and the EU commissioner for Neighborhood and Enlargement Olivér Várhelyi 2. The EU's commitment to the Eastern was confirmed and showed its willingness to make



it more flexible and tailored to the needs of partners. The EU is committed to assisting eastern partners who want to strengthen their security by offering various types of cooperation and engagement, including cyber, hybrid, and other non-military means.³

³ Εξωτερικές σχέσεις της ΕΕ (2019), Σ.Μπλαβουκος, Δ. Μπουραντωνης, Π. Τσακωνας (επιμέλεια), εκδόσεις Σιδέρης

EU-EaP States’ Relations

i) Armenia

Political Relations

The EU’s relations with Armenia were first established with the EU-Armenia Partnership and Cooperation Agreement in 1999. 18 years later, the EU-Armenia Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA), signed on November 24, 2017, and entering into force on March 31, 2021, represents an important milestone for their bilateral relations.

CEPA provides a concrete framework of a wide range of areas where the EU and Armenia work together; strengthening democracy, the rule of law, and human rights, creating more jobs and business opportunities, improving legislation, public safety, a cleaner environment, as well as better education, and opportunities for research. Of course, this agenda contributes to the general EU, Eastern neighborhood policy, and more precisely in the eastern partnership framework.

This agreement has been contributing a lot to the modernisation of Armenia through a legislative approximation to EU norms in many sectors such as the rule of law, their respect of human rights, and accountable and efficient justice system, reforms aimed at enhancing the responsiveness and effectiveness of public institutions, and at favoring the conditions for sustainable and inclusive development. The CEPA provides a solid basis to further cooperate in areas of mutual interests, taking into consideration the compatibility with Armenia’s new obligations to the Eurasian economic union.

Certain bodies have been created under the CEPA in order to facilitate the proper function of the agreement. The partnership Council, in which ministers of the EU and Armenia participate, meets at least once a year, supervises and regularly reviews the agreement’s implementation. Assistance is provided by the partnership committee as far as the councils performance of its duties and functions are concerned. A forum for both parties to meet and exchange aspects is created as well with the Parliamentary partnership committee. Civil society platform aims to involve representatives of civil society, including members of the European economic and social committee and Armenian National Platform in the

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decision-making procedure via an advisory role to the council to the partnership committee and the parliamentary partnership committee.

At this point, it is vital to stress the difficulties that the EU has been facing well, intending politically stable and economically prosperous southern Caucasus. The unresolved conflict in and around Nagorno-Karabakh retard significantly the Armenian socio-economic development. To that purpose, the EU supports the efforts of the OSCE Minsk group Co-Chairs in order to achieve a peaceful and comprehensive Nagorno-Karabakh conflict settlement. At the same time an EU special representative for the South Caucasus crisis in Georgia is contributing to the efforts of existing institutions towards preventing conflicts in the region, and achieving a peaceful settlement of conflicts in the region, including the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, by promoting the return of refugees, and internally displaced persons, and through other appropriate means, and to support the implementation of such a settlement in accordance with the principles of international law. Actively involved in a safe postwar environment as well, the EU has come up with a number of programs (EU4Peace, EU4Dialogue, EU4Culture), while covering the most urgent needs via rapid reaction mechanism projects⁴.

5



⁴ European Commission, n.d. The EU and Armenia Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement enters into force [WWW Document]. An official website of the European Union. URL https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_21_782

⁵ *The Comprehensive & Enhanced Partnership Agreement between the European Union & Armenia (CEPA)* (no date). Available at: https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/comprehensive-enhanced-partnership-agreement-between-european-union-armenia-cepa_en.

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Economic/Trade Relations

The economic relations between the EU and Armenia were firstly initialized once the latter gained its independence, with the EU being nowadays, the largest development Corporation donor in Armenia. The EU is aiming for the effective implementation of the CEPA, via increasing its financial assistance over €211 million for the period 2017-2020. The bilateral trade relations fall under the responsibility of the trade partnership committee, which has so far had two meetings, the first in 2018 in Yerevan, while the second one in 2019 in Brussels. Both have been working towards implementing the CEPA agenda and stressing the important structural adjustments that are ongoing in almost all areas of the Armenian economy.

The economic cooperation between the EU and Armenia supports firstly, the political objectives of the CEPA; the country’s reform commitments, the improvement of the quality of life of Armenian citizens, the government’s efforts to strengthen the rule of law, the justice reform, and the improvement of access to justice. The European Union also intends to improve the business climate, rural development and agriculture as well as supporting connectivity, including in the areas of energy and transport, as well as fighting anti-corruption. The EU assistance is funded through the European neighborhood instrument for the period of 2014-2020.

The European Union is Armenia, second trading partner, the first and an important export destination for Armenian products, and one of Armenia’s main trading partners. Armenian exports to the EU consist of manufactured goods, raw materials, beverages, and tobacco, well, Armenia, imports from the European Union, machinery, and transport, equipment, manufactured goods, and chemicals. Given the Armenian economic growth record in 2020, and its classification by the World Bank as an upper middle-income country, Armenia will stop benefiting from the generalized scheme of preferences. This means that Armenia no longer benefits from the EU’s preferential import tariffs as from January 2022, and these will be replaced by the most favored nation duties, as foreseen under the world trade organization⁶.

⁶ Delegation of the European Union to Armenia, 2021. The European Union and Armenia [WWW Document]. An official website of the European Union. URL https://www.eas.europa.eu/armenia/european-union-and-armenia_en?s=216#1311

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Human Rights/Rule of Law/Civil Society

The respect of human rights and the civil society as well as the rule of law, along with other democratic values has been the basis of the bilateral relations between EU and Armenia, guaranteed by the U.N. Charter and other relevant instruments. Clearly referring to this commitment, CEPA has established the above-mentioned principles and considered them as an essential element of the agreement. More specifically, both parties are meant to cooperate in developing, consolidating, and increasing the stability and effectiveness of democratic institutions, and the role of law, ensuring respect for human rights, and fundamental freedoms, making further progress and judicial and legal reform, strengthening the administrative capacity in guaranteeing impartiality and effectiveness of law-enforcement bodies. This field of cooperation falls under the responsibility of the subcommittee on Justice, Freedom and Security, which has had its most recent session remotely in 2021.

Along with the CEPA, the new National human rights strategy 2020-2022, and the action plan were adopted in 2019. Both outline strategic directions, and specific activities for the implementation of the rights included in the national constitution and international commitments and were prepared with open and constructive consultations with civil society.

Dealing with gender inequality for example, the country level implementation plan has been approved by the EU and its member states. It consists of the multi annual indicative program 2021-2027, the human rights country strategy 2021-2024, and gender country profile of the Republic of Armenia, 2021. This domestic policy is fully aligned with the country’s political commitments and promotes concrete actions and initiatives in order to promote gender equality in the Republic of Armenia until 2025. Taking into consideration the Armenian progress in the global gender gap index, (114th place) as well as other rankings, such as the eastern Europe and Central Asia (25th place out of 26 countries), the Armenian government addresses the issue through a number of policy instruments as well as the range of national mechanisms, such as the council and the provision of equal rights and equal opportunities for women and men, the equal opportunity Department under the Ministry of labor and social affairs, and the permanent commissions and gender issues established in each marzpetaran (regional governing body). The whole plan was developed in consultation with Armenian authorities, EU member states, women’s NGOs

and other civil society actors. Lastly, the country gender profile of the Republic of Armenia, was developed in the framework of the EU4 gender equality reform, helpdesk project. It collaborates with the European delegation to Armenia via the provision of information and recommendations in order to guide the decision-making process on the development of the country level implementation plan and contribute to the government's efforts to address gender inequality.

In the fields of justice, democracy, and the rule of law, a comprehensive package of assistance has been provided to Armenia in order to strengthen the integrity and accountability of the justice system and improve access to it while supporting the government and its anti-corruption reform agenda. As stated in the CEPA, respect for the rule of law is one of the core values of the EU, which encompasses an independent, accountable, and efficient judiciary. Therefore, the block closely monitors the functioning of key judicial institutions such as the Supreme Judicial Council and stands ready to assist the Armenian authorities when facing challenges⁷.

ii) Azerbaijan

Since 1991, the Republic of Azerbaijan and the European Union (EU) have maintained a positive relationship. Azerbaijan is currently a member of the European Neighborhood Policy, the Eastern Partnership, and the Council of Europe. Since 1992, the EU has been the main foreign grant giver and investor in Azerbaijan, both in the government sector and civil society, providing over 600 million EURO in bilateral EU support.

Opinions on Azerbaijan's enhanced ties with the European Union and the West are generally positive, but there are some reservations.

Azerbaijan and the European Union agreed an energy agenda in 2008, and both favor the construction of a pipeline to carry Azeri oil to Europe. On November 7, 2008, Andris Piebalgs, European Commissioner for Energy, stated that "recent events in the Caucasus have demonstrated once again that this is a vital period for energy concerns in the region and that EU-Azerbaijan energy cooperation should be expanded now more than ever."

⁷ COUNTRY GENDER PROFILE ARMENIA, EU4GENDEREQUALITY REFORM HELPDESK, 2021.

Moreover, they both hold similar views on most subjects and are currently collaborating to advance their mutual interests. The European Community created the National Indicative Program (NIP) for Azerbaijan, which has a three-year budget of €92 million (2007–2010). The primary goals of this program are to expand government agencies, improve their efficiency, and assist Azerbaijan in developing its internal infrastructure in order to attract foreign investment and enterprise. The EU has also established a European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR) office in Baku to advise Azerbaijan's government and ensure the protection of human rights.

Lastly, more than ten European media groups have probed the Azerbaijani government, which has been accused of laundering money to the United Kingdom. The "Azerbaijani Laundromat" entailed delivering 2.5 billion euros to European politicians and Azerbaijani aristocracy; the money was also spent on luxury items. [14] One of the reasons for the laundering was that the Azerbaijani government sought to maintain a favourable image in Europe in order to garner support for the Southern Gas Corridor. The corridor is a major source of laundering, which may explain the government's aggressive lobbying at the European level.

Political Relations

The EU and Azerbaijan have collaborated to reach a number of political accords. The most important agreement is the EU-Azerbaijan Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (1999), which aims to improve⁸. More than ten European media groups have probed the Azerbaijani government, which has been accused of laundering money to the United Kingdom. The "Azerbaijani Laundromat" entailed delivering 2.5 billion euros to European politicians and Azerbaijani aristocracy; the money was also spent on luxury items. [14] One of the reasons for the laundering was that the Azerbaijani government sought to maintain a favourable image in Europe in order to garner support for the Southern Gas Corridor. The corridor is a major source of laundering, which may explain the government's aggressive lobbying at the European level.

Economic/Trade Relations

⁸ Delegation of the European Union to the Republic of Azerbaijan, 2021. The European Union and Azerbaijan [WWW Document]. An official website of the European Union.

The European Union is Azerbaijan's top trading partner, its largest export and import market, and the country's largest investor (with approximately €7 billion in direct investment). Through the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) and the Eastern Partnership program, the EU promotes greater economic integration with Azerbaijan. The EU is providing technical support to Azerbaijan in order for it to become a WTO member.

Energy/Climate change/Environment

Azerbaijan is a vital energy partner for the EU, accounting for around 4.3% of the EU's oil imports. The Southern Gas Corridor is a strategic endeavor to transfer gas from the Caspian Sea to European markets, and it is a critical instrument for improving Europe's energy security. The first commercial gas exports to Europe (Italy, Greece, and Bulgaria) were delivered on December 31, 2020, following the completion of the Trans Adriatic Pipeline, the final segment of the Southern Gas Corridor.

Azerbaijan joined the Eastern Europe Energy Efficiency and Environment Partnership (E5P) in 2019, and the EU has offered further help in the energy sector, especially energy efficiency, through the EU4Energy program.

Cooperation on environmental and climate goals has been bolstered by a number of regional programs, including Water Initiative+, Shared Environmental Information System II (SEIS II), EU4 Climate and EU4 Environment, as well as bilateral projects, most notably on-air quality and industrial emissions. These measures help Azerbaijan satisfy its nationally decided commitments to the Paris Agreement while also attaining the SDGs (SDGs).

Civil Society Dialogue

Civil society and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are critical for democracy and human rights, the rule of law, good governance, market economy principles, and long-term development. The European Union has long been enthusiastic in promoting civil society. It accomplished this in 1999, when it hosted the inaugural Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum in Brussels. The Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum (EaP CSF) is a one-of-a-kind multi-layered regional civil society forum aiming at advancing European integration and aiding reforms and democratic transitions in the six Eastern Partnership nations, including Azerbaijan.

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Cultural and Public Diplomacy

Cultural and public diplomacy is an important component of the EU's foreign policy efforts. So far, the EU Delegation in Azerbaijan has conducted a number of festivals. Since 2010, the European Union Delegation has organized annual European Film Festivals with the goal of strengthening and developing cultural ties between European Union nations and Azerbaijan, as well as contributing to a better understanding of European ideals through the European film industry. The other Festivals organized by the EU Delegation in Azerbaijan include the "Imagine" Euro Tolerance Festival to promote the values of the intercultural dialogue, diversity and tolerance; "Fantazia" Cultural Heritage Festival to raise awareness on the need to showcase and preserve cultural heritage; International Festival of Contemporary Art "MAIDEN TOWER. "To Be a Woman," which highlights the role of women in Azerbaijani culture and around the world. The EU Delegation has staged "EuroVillage" and "EU4You" outdoor events in Baku and Azerbaijan to raise awareness of the EU and its work in the country.

iii) Belarus

Political Relations (EaP Suspension)⁹

Following the political instability in Belarus and the EU's restrictive policies, Belarus began to organize flights and internal travel in June 2021 to aid the transit of migrants towards the EU, first to Lithuania, then to Latvia and Poland. The vast majority of migrants were Iraqis, Afghans, and Syrians.

In Lithuania in 2021, irregular arrivals were more than fifty times greater than in 2020. Poland has also witnessed a significant increase in irregular border crossings from Belarus, but Latvia has seen significantly lower levels. The number of daily irregular arrivals has decreased dramatically as a result of coordinated EU initiatives. However, the border's migration pressure remains considerable. On June 25, 2021, EU leaders condemned all attempts by foreign nations to use migrants for political gain.

Rule of Law/Democracy/Human Rights

⁹ European Council, Council of the European Union, 2022. EU relations with Belarus [WWW Document]. European Council Council of the European Union. URL <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/eastern-partnership/belarus/>

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The last presidential elections held in Belarus on 9th August 2020, were declared by the EU to be neither free nor fair. Even after the amelioration of the relations between the two parties for five years with the release of the political prisoners by the Belarusian authorities in 2015, there has been a significant political backsliding in the country.

The forced diversion of Ryanair flight FR4978 to Minsk on 23 May 2021, has marked the relations between the parties. The plane, flying between two EU capitals was forced to land in Minsk by a Belarusian military aircraft. There were more than 100 passengers in the flight, and shortly after the forced landing, one of them, Raman Pratasevich, an independent journalist from Belarus, was retained by the Belarusian authorities and prevented from boarding the plane at the Minsk airport to its original destination. His partner, Sophia Sapiiega was detained too. This act stressed the important deficit in the freedom of speech in the country.

Lastly, Belarus has been creating a severe humanitarian crisis at the EU external borders via the instrumentalisation of refugees and migrants, aiming to jeopardize the stability and safety in the region. It is considered to be covering the grave ongoing violation of human rights and has significantly deteriorated the country’s relations with the EU¹⁰.

Trade/Economic Relations

In October 2016, a Trade Dialogue was formed to encourage expert-level talks on trade-related issues. Up until July 2020, the dialogue takes conducted twice a year in July and December. The debate has now been discontinued due to a substantial worsening in Belarus's human rights, democracy, and rule of law situation in the run-up, conduct, and aftermath of the 9 August 2020 presidential elections, which the EU ruled neither free nor fair. In 2021, the EU was Belarus' second most important trading partner, accounting for 19.9% of the country's total goods trade. Russia was Belarus' first commercial partner, accounting for 49.0% of its foreign commerce.

¹⁰ European Council, Council of the European Union, 2021. Belarus: Declaration by the High Representative on behalf of the EU on the forced diversion of Ryanair flight FR4978 to Minsk on 23 May 2021 [WWW Document]. URL <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2021/05/24/belarus-declaration-by-the-high-representative-on-behalf-of-the-eu-on-the-forced-diversion-of-ryanair-flight-fr4978-to-minsk-on-23-may-2021/>

The EU-Belarus bilateral commerce in products fell by 7.3% in 2020, owing mostly to the impact of the Covid-19 epidemic. The year 2021 saw a significant rebound. Bilateral commerce climbed by 27.0% to €12.9 billion, albeit this represents just a 13.3% gain over the previous ten years.

Before the current sanctions were imposed, Belarus' biggest exports to the EU were wood (23.2% of total exports), mineral goods (21.6%), and base metals (15.3%). The EU's largest exports to Belarus were machinery (31.2% of total exports), chemicals (15.4%) and transport equipment (12.3%).

Despite increased commerce between the EU and Belarus in recent years, the EU has paused measures toward tighter economic relationship with Belarus until political and civil conditions in Belarus improve. Belarus has also been granted an Outward Processing Trade regime by the EU. This regime provides for increased import quota amounts for textiles and clothing producers within the European Union so they can create garments in Belarus that will return to the EU after processing. In addition to the sanctions placed on Belarus, which include both import and export restrictions, the EU has imposed unilateral import limitations on Belarus since 2010. The unilateral quotas superseded the EU-Belarus textile agreement, which Belarus did not wish to extend following its membership in the Customs Union with Russia and Kazakhstan. EU sanctions presently severely hinder trade with Belarus (see news below; 18 March 2022)¹¹.

Legal Background

The Eastern Partnership

The EaP, which was established in 2009, is a strategic and ambitious partnership based on shared values and principles, mutual interests and commitments, as well as shared ownership and duty. It aims to strengthen and deepen the political and economic relations between the EU, its Member States and partner countries, as well as support sustainable reform processes in the countries of the Eastern Partnership. The Eastern

¹¹ European Council, Council of the European Union, 2022. EU relations with Belarus [WWW Document]. URL <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/eastern-partnership/belarus/>

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Partnership, as a special Eastern feature of the European Neighbourhood Policy, comprises bilateral and international tracks.

Neighbourhood Policy

The European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) was introduced in 2004 with the goal of avoiding the formation of new dividing lines between the larger EU and its neighbors and, instead, increasing everyone's prosperity, stability, and security. It is founded on democratic, rule-of-law, and human-rights principles. The ENP builds on the EU's and its neighbors' commitment to collaborate in critical priority areas. This collaboration is founded on common ideals such as the promotion of democracy, the rule of law, human rights, and social cohesion. The ENP builds on the EU's and its neighbors' commitment to collaborate in critical priority areas. This collaboration is founded on common ideals such as the promotion of democracy, the rule of law, human rights, and social cohesion. This gives for a sense of ownership and flexibility in adapting support to each partner country's aspirations. Member states' engagement and shared accountability are also among the core concepts of the ENP. The objective to strengthen interaction with civil society and social partners is central to the ENP. The ENP provides partner nations with increased access to the EU's market and regulatory framework, as well as standards and internal agencies and programs.

Differentiation is a guiding concept of the EU interactions with its surroundings. This approach recognizes the partner nations' diverse goals for their engagement with the EU. As a result, the EU provides tailored relationships to its neighbors. Joint Documents (i.e. Partnership Priorities, Association Agendas, or equivalents) are developed in collaboration with each nation, with an emphasis on common interests.

Measures in Place

A new agenda beyond 2020

The EaP Summit of November 2017 marked a new approach with the adoption of the common reform agenda titled ‘20 Deliverables for 2020’. This new approach was mainly focused on delivering tangible results in the

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main areas of the cooperation; stronger economy, governance, connectivity and society¹².

The EU Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement with Armenia

It entered into force on 1st March 2021 and provides the main framework of the relations between the EU and Armenia. More specifically, it contains provisions regarding a wide range of areas in which the two parties are cooperating; strengthening democracy, the rule of law and human rights; creating more jobs and business opportunities, improving legislation, public safety, a cleaner environment, as well as better education and opportunities for research¹³.

Further Discussion

After more than a decade, the ambitious goals of the EU's Eastern Partnership program to bring "stability, security, and prosperity" to the region remain a pipe dream. In Georgia, Ukraine, and Moldova, vested interests have stymied democratic and good governance changes, while Azerbaijan and Belarus have remained outright dictatorial, with the latter facing internal demonstrations. The EaP is facing geopolitical repercussions from an increasingly assertive Russian Federation, and the region is further impacted by a number of protracted and ongoing wars, notably the recent harsh war over Nagorno-Karabakh. Despite its flaws, the EaP has had certain triumphs, particularly in the economic domain, but not solely. The EU has also managed to keep the door open for dialogue, promote lower-level reform, and provide support to civil society. As such, the EaP plays an important role in the Netherlands' regional policy, particularly in light of recent requests from the Dutch Parliament to develop an Eastern Europe plan. However, many unanswered questions remain in the run-up to the summit.

¹² European Commission, n.d. European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations [WWW Document]. URL https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/european-neighbourhood-policy/eastern-partnership_en

¹³ European Commission, 2021. The EU and Armenia Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement enters into force [WWW Document]. European Commission.

The Eastern Partnership contributes to the broader goal of enhancing the stability, prosperity, and resilience of the EU's neighbors, as outlined in the EU's Global Strategy for Foreign and Security Policy and the 2015 European Neighbourhood Policy Review. It helps to achieve numerous global policy goals, including the Paris Agreement on Climate Change and the UN 2030 Agenda and its Sustainable Development Goals. It is completely consistent with the European Commission's Strategic Agenda 2019-2024. Finally, it incorporates all relevant flagship plans adopted by the Commission.

The decade of the Eastern Partnership's history was distinguished by dramatic narrative twists, such as the Ukrainian Revolution of Dignity and the ouster of Viktor Yanukovich, or an unexpected decision by Armenian authorities to transfer from the EU alliance to Russia's Eurasian Economic Union. Nonetheless, the last decade has seen an increase in cooperation between the European Union and the EaP states, as well as coordination in several sectoral policies. So, what has been accomplished thus far, and how might future needs of EU neighbors be defined? Is it possible to combine the interests of EU member states with the aspirations of Eastern Partnership recipients?

Despite formal agreement on the importance of the Eastern Partnership's existence, there is no doubt that it is seen differently by EU countries. This is not surprising given the disparities in European perceptions of, say, political processes taking place in the region. Differences in perceptions of the international environment, notably the role of the Russian Federation in the former Soviet Union region, must influence governments' willingness to pay the costs (including political costs) of participating in the development of the Eastern Partnership. How do we avoid discouraging Eastern Partnership members in the face of the European Union's current lack of political will to expand to the east? What kind of political incentives should be sought to keep the EaP program appealing to "ordinary citizens" in countries like Georgia and Ukraine?

European Parties' Position

European People's Party (EPP)

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The EPP group desires to equip the EU with a successful reform agenda for Europe’s future that ensures the EU can meet the challenges ahead. The European Eastern stands as a European perspective for countries that border the EU and want to draw closer, including Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine and Belarus. The partnership is a unique opportunity for the Eastern neighbors which allows new Association agreements and provide to these countries the opportunity to be integrated in the EU economy, well at the same time, it increases the mobility for their citizens. The EPP group urges interested countries to advance their political and social economic reform processes in order for tangible results to be delivered as soon as possible. Dialogue, evaluation of the partnership’s successes, and challenges and promotion of democracy, prosperity, stability and security in the region, are top priorities¹⁴.

Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D)

Promoting democracy and stability in Europe’s neighborhood, especially where the EU can help resolve conflict and bring peace and prosperity, are issues that constitute an active interest for all Europeans. Under the circumstance of ongoing conflicts that endanger European security, only a diplomatic solution can bring lasting peace. In general, keeping the door open to its neighbors, gives the EU more political impact in visibility, and at the same time improves economic, social and political stability in Europe’s neighborhood. All neighboring countries associated with the EU via bilateral agreements, must fulfill all of their obligations, be judged on their own merits, implement real reforms, particularly in the areas of the rule of law, democracy, judicial independence, freedom of expression in the fight against corruption¹⁵.

Renew Europe (RENEW)

¹⁴ EPP GROUP, n.d. Eastern Neighbourhood [WWW Document]. URL <https://www.eppgroup.eu/how-we-make-it-happen/outside-eu/eastern-neighbourhood>

¹⁵ S&D, n.d. Committee on Foreign Affairs [WWW Document].

The EU has acknowledged the achievements made by the six countries of the eastern partnership, while it also highlights shortcomings. A deeper political dialogue and cooperation are a top priority in the discussions with Georgia, the Republic of Moldova, and Ukraine. It is important to further cooperate with the six countries in the area of economic and market integration, in order to address the high unemployment and immigration rates in all these countries. It is vital to stress the EU’s commitment to their sovereignty, territorial integrity and political independence. The role of the civil society in the reform processes has to be empowered along with the development of the capacities of local authorities. Lastly, the safety of journalists, opinion makers, and dissident voices form a major challenge that called for ways to support and strengthen the media landscape in the eastern partnership countries. The eastern flank of the neighborhood of the EU constitute an essential element of the union’s foreign and security policy. The European strategic vision should be inclusive, based on mutual interest and understanding¹⁶.

The Greens – European Free Alliance (Greens/EFA)

Apart from simply joining the EU institutions, the European integration process stands for sharing the European values. The EU’s Eastern partnership can be seen as a framework through the accession preparation process for participating countries. In the short-term, it must serve as a political tool in order to implement the high European standards and norms, especially the environmental ones, into the participating countries. Working in the area of peace, democracy, and human rights, must not be a factor that leads to the neglect of the European goals in environmental cooperation, even if the environment is not stated as the special area of joint activity of the EU and the participating states. Environmental protection, and in general climate and sustainability issues (economy, energy, transport, et cetera) must be mentioned as a special area within the partnership's activities. European commission is highly urged to facilitate the participation of the eastern countries in the European green deal¹⁷.

¹⁶ Renew Europe, 2020. RENEW EUROPE GROUP CALLS FOR DEEPER COOPERATION BETWEEN THE EU AND THE EASTERN PARTNERSHIP COUNTRIES [WWW Document]. URL <https://www.reneweuropengroup.eu/news/2020-05-20/renew-europe-group-calls-for-deeper-cooperation-between-the-eu-and-the-eastern-partnership-countries>

¹⁷ Greening the Eastern Partnership, 2020. European Greens [WWW Document]. URL <https://europeangreens.eu/content/greening-eastern-partnership>

European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR)

Apart from the ongoing conflict in Ukraine, it is vital to look at the broader image of the EU’s eastern flank. Russia is constantly threatening the eastern partnership countries with a hybrid war, using the threat of force to destabilize the region and bring all the six countries back into Moscow’s sphere of influence. The eastern countries are suffering severe pressure and act with fear, even when it comes to choosing their alliances. It is crucial to upgrade the capability of the East to respond to hybrid challenges but avoid duplication with NATO’s strategic planning¹⁸.

The Left in the European Parliament (GUE/NGL)

The European Union’s partnership with the countries in the east are considered good and mutually beneficial as they all are a very important part of the foreign activities of the EU. The European Union and Russia need a mechanism for mutual cooperation and collaboration with the eastern in partnership countries because no one can raise them from the map. What matters the most when talking about the eastern partnership project is not the financial assistance directed to the oligarchs, and definitely not the creation of an instrument against Russia, but a collective bridge that connects the members of the European Union with Russia, and thus connects the Eurasian continent. In order that to be achieved, we need a change in the mindset of the current political representation with concrete steps to this direction, and not just a stylistic exercise in the form of resolutions¹⁹.

¹⁸ European Conservatives and Reformists, 2022. Witold Waszczykowski: Eastern Partnership countries not to be forgotten! [WWW Document]. URL https://ecrgroup.eu/article/witold_waszczykowski_eastern_partnership_countries_not_to_be_forgotten

¹⁹ THE LEFT, 2015. Where is EURONEST headed? [WWW Document]. URL <https://left.eu/where-is-euronest-headed/>

Questions Raised

1. How can the EU deal with the Eastern partnership in the future?
2. What new opportunities arise from the closer cooperation with the Eastern partners?
3. What remains to be done in the economical and political area of the cooperation?
4. How can the EU answer to the challenges that Russia's soft power poses in the region?
5. What can the EU offer as an incentive for the partnership countries in order to partnership achieve closer cooperation?
6. How can the EU respond and effectively help the countries overcome their internal political problems (violation of human rights, conflicts)?
7. How can the EU help the Eastern countries maintain their security under the circumstance of the ongoing conflict in Ukraine?
8. Is there a possibility for the partnership countries to be fully integrated into the EU in the future? How can this be achieved?
9. What benefits can a broader partnership bring to both parties of it?
10. How do we avoid discouraging Eastern Partnership members in the face of the European Union's current lack of political will to expand to the east?

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