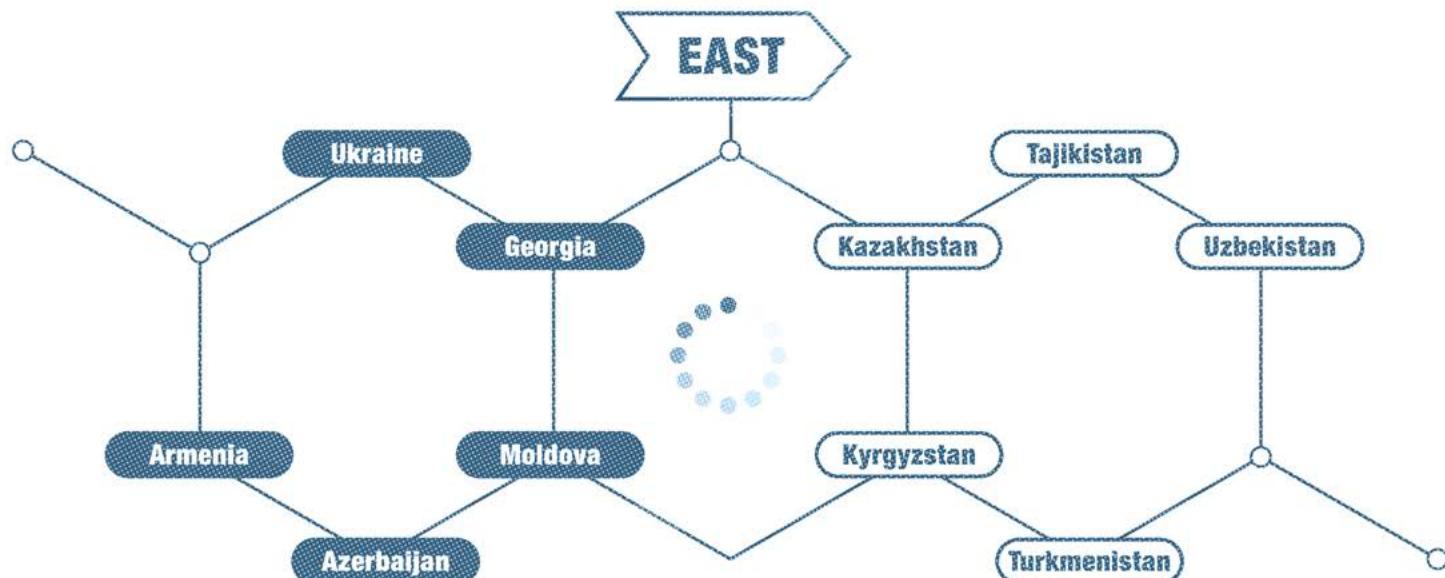




# Taking the Eastern Partnership to the East

Salome Samadashvili



# Credits

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**Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies**  
**Rue du Commerce 20**  
**Brussels, BE 1000**

**For more information please visit**  
[\*\*www.martenscentre.eu\*\*](http://www.martenscentre.eu).

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# About the Martens Centre



The Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies, established in 2007, is the political foundation and think tank of the European People's Party (EPP). The Martens Centre embodies a pan-European mindset, promoting Christian Democrat, conservative and like-minded political values. It serves as a framework for national political foundations linked to member parties of the EPP. It currently has 30 member foundations and two permanent guest foundations in 25 EU and non-EU countries. The Martens Centre takes part in the preparation of EPP programmes and policy documents. It organises seminars and training on EU policies and on the process of European integration.

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# About the author



**Dr Salome Samadashvili** is a member of the Political Council and Political Secretary of the 'Lelo for Georgia' party and Senior Fellow at the Robert Schuman Center for Advanced Studies, European University Institute, Florence, Italy. She served two consecutive terms in the Parliament of Georgia from 2016 to 2024. She was re-elected in 2024 but resigned her seat, along with the rest of the opposition MPs, as a political act of protest against the violations of democratic standards in the 2024 parliamentary elections. Between 2005 and 2013, Ambassador Samadashvili served as the Head of Georgia's Mission to the European Union and as Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary to the Kingdom of Belgium and the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg. As the head of Georgia's mission to the EU, she oversaw successful negotiations of the Association and Free Trade Agreements between Georgia and the EU. In 2014, she was a visiting fellow at the Wilfried Martens Center for European Studies in Brussels, a global think-tank associated with the European People's Party. She is a member of the academic council of the WMCES. In 2015, she served as an interim resident governance director of the National Democratic Institute for Libya, she has previously worked for NDI in Kyrgyzstan and Georgia.

Ambassador Samadashvili has been awarded Presidential Decoration of Splendor for her outstanding service to Georgia. She holds a BA degree in Political Sciences from Allegheny College, Pennsylvania, USA, as well as an LL.M with Merit in Comparative Constitutional Law from the Central European University in Budapest and a Masters in Public Policy from the School of Public Affairs, American University, Washington DC and PhD in Political Sciences from the University of Georgia. She teaches graduate and undergraduate courses in the field of European Studies at the University of Georgia and is the author of numerous publications on the subject.

# Executive summary



This paper explores possible ways to restructure the Eastern Partnership (EaP) initiative, the EU's 2009 policy designed to engage with six countries—Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine. It advocates for radical changes, both to the geography of the EaP's strategy and to its strategic focus, by taking an innovative approach to the EaP's multilateral framework of cooperation.

A look at the map of what constitutes the former USSR—from the Black Sea to the Caspian Sea—shows a clear division between those countries that have embarked on the European path and those which remain in the political and geopolitical grey zone of 'Eurasian' identity. Currently, the EaP embraces countries from both of these subgroups. *This paper argues that this approach no longer works.* Instead the EaP should be reshaped to make EU policy more relevant to both groups, to the EU's strategic interests in the region and to the new realities on the ground by strengthening and expanding its multilateral formats of cooperation to include the Central Asian countries in addition to the current EaP partners.

In the 1990s the EU's policy towards the 11 countries in question—the 6 EaP partners and the 5 Central Asian states—was homogenous and took the shape of the EU's Technical Assistance to the Commonwealth of Independent States. Since then, these countries have travelled along diverging development paths. Today some of the EaP countries have more in common with the Central Asian states in terms of their economic and political frameworks, while others, such as Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine, have been granted candidacy for EU membership. Since the outbreak of the Russo-Ukrainian war, the Central Asian countries have demonstrated their interest in developing stronger relationships with the EU, hoping to counterbalance the influences of Russia and China on their political and economic systems. The reasons for the EU's interest in strengthening the relationships with these countries are obvious: they enjoy vast natural resources and are in geopolitically important locations. The 'mission letters' from European Commission President Ursula Von Der Leyen to the new members of her Commission clearly outline the advancement of relationships with the Central Asian countries and the EaP states as being one of the priorities of the EU's common foreign policy. As the EU decides on the policy tools for achieving these goals, this paper argues that reshaping the EaP might be the way forward. Focusing on the shared interest in enhancing connectivity, security, trade and people-to-people contacts among all the involved parties—the EU, the EaP and the Central Asian countries—this paper offers recommendations for taking the EaP further east, to cover Central Asia.

**Keywords** Eastern Partnership – Central Asia – EU Global Strategy – Middle Corridor – East-West connectivity – Strategic competition – EU – Russia – China

# Introduction



The Russo-Ukrainian War, which has already been ongoing for three years, has triggered a strategic shift in the geopolitical thinking of Russia's immediate neighbours and has influenced EU policy towards them. Three Eastern Partnership (EaP) countries,<sup>1</sup> Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine, have become of candidates for EU membership, with both Moldova and Ukraine moving forward in the accession process. The latest parliamentary elections in Georgia in October 2024, heavily criticised by both domestic and international election monitors for not being free and fair, have called into question the legitimacy of the government led by the Georgian Dream, which has, in any case, chosen to put the EU accession process on hold until 2028. Pending new elections and a change of government, any advancement towards the goal of EU membership is unlikely.<sup>2</sup> Armenia, meanwhile, clearly signalled its intention to seek the eventual goal of EU membership when, on 9 January 2025, its government approved a draft bill on pursuing the path to EU accession and submitted it to the parliament.<sup>3</sup>

In the coming years, it is thus likely that two of the EaP partners—Moldova and Ukraine—will pursue EU membership within the framework of enlargement; Georgia will, at least formally, remain a candidate country; and Armenia will try to move closer to candidate status. Conversely, Belarus's alliance with Russia has deepened, shrinking the EU's influence in that country's political and economic development. Azerbaijan has developed an independent policy and strengthened its ties with Türkiye to counterbalance the Russian influence. It has also chosen to maintain a functional relationship with Moscow, while desiring strategic cooperation with the EU.

The question facing EU policymakers over the next few years is what the future of the EaP should look like, given the divergent paths taken by the various EaP partners. Should the EaP continue in its current form, be redesigned to match the new realities in the region or be phased out gradually? All are options on the table. The EaP, as an initiative launched by the EU in 2009 to strengthen ties with 6 Eastern European and South Caucasus countries, made sense 15 years ago. It no longer makes sense today unless the EaP's *raison d'être* is redefined for the new geopolitical context. *The EaP is facing the possibility of becoming obsolete.* Discussions about phasing out the partnership by 2027, with a concluding EaP summit to be organised during Lithuania's EU Presidency, are already ongoing.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The EaP initiative comprises the following countries: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine; see EU External Action, 'Eastern Partnership' (17 March 2022).

<sup>2</sup> Civil Georgia, 'GD Aborts EU Accession', 28 November 2024.

<sup>3</sup> S. Ghazanchyan, 'Armenian Government Greenlights Bill on Launching EU Membership Process', Public Radio of Armenia, 9 January 2025.

<sup>4</sup> Information gained from author's private discussion with European External Action Service officials working on the EaP policy, Brussels, March 2024.



Meanwhile, Russia's neighbours to the east—the five Central Asian countries—have signalled their intent to boost their geopolitical independence from Russia. They are increasingly looking to the EU as a strategic ally to counterbalance the political and economic influences of both Russia and China. Their security concerns have also increased considerably following the Western withdrawal from Afghanistan. With the Russo-Ukrainian War changing energy, supply-chain and transportation priorities for the EU, the region has also acquired a new strategic importance for Europe. While the EU established relationships with these countries under the framework of the Technical Assistance Program to the Commonwealth of Independent States (TACIS)<sup>5</sup> soon after they gained their independence in the 1990s, these relationships have acquired increased strategic depth over the years. The latest framework of cooperation was established in 2019 with the publication of the EU–Central Asia Strategy.<sup>6</sup>

Following the 2024 European elections, the EU, with its new Parliament and Commission, has a chance to take a fresh look at its policy framework for both the EaP and the Central Asian countries. Setting the strategic priorities for the new Commission, President von der Leyen's mission letter to the EU high representative for foreign affairs and security policy/vice-president of the European Commission (HR/VP) mentions that,

From Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine and a systematic attack on the rules-based international order and our common values, to a weaponisation of all types of policies, we are in an era of geostrategic rivalries.

Our foreign and security policy must be designed with this reality in mind. Europe needs to be more strategic, more assertive and more united in pursuing its strategic interests in shaping the global system.<sup>7</sup>

In this context, the mission letter recommended that the HR/VP take the lead in adopting a more strategic approach to the EU's neighbourhood, working closely with the commissioner for enlargement on relations with candidate countries and the Eastern neighbourhood, and strengthening the EU's partnership with Central Asia. Furthermore, 'work[ing] . . . on a Black Sea strategy, bringing all of the EU's policies and actions in this area together' and 'develop[ing] a coordinated approach to supporting the countries of the

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<sup>5</sup> CORDIS, 'What Is TACIS?' (21 June 1995).

<sup>6</sup> Council of the European Union, 'Central Asia: Council Adopts a New EU Strategy for the Region', Press release, 17 June 2019.

<sup>7</sup> European Commission, 'Kaja Kallas – Mission Letter' (Brussels, 17 September 2024), 5.



Southern Caucasus, including on regional connectivity', are outlined as priorities in the mission letter to the new commissioner for enlargement.<sup>8</sup>

The EU has already moved forward with a new approach to strengthening the relationship with the Central Asian countries. Following the first ever EU–Central Asia Summit, held in April 2025,<sup>9</sup> in October the EU invited the Central Asian states to attend the Foreign Affairs Council, together with other Black Sea and South Caucasus regional partners (with the exception of Georgia, due to the current freeze on political contacts between the EU and the Georgian Dream–led government).<sup>10</sup> The Council Conclusions from 20 October 2025 clearly articulate the strengthening of cooperation between the Black Sea countries and the Central Asian states as a priority for the EU's future policy.

The initiative aims at coordinating strategic investments to boost trade, and socio-economic development through resilient and efficient transport, energy, and digital connections linking Central Asia to the Southern Caucasus and onwards to the European Union – with sustainability and the green transition at its core. In the area of transport, the discussion focused on strengthening the Trans-Caspian Transport Corridor and opening a dialogue to bolster and extend transport connections between the EU, Black Sea countries, Türkiye, the South Caucasus and Central Asia. In the area of digital connectivity, the Agenda will seek expanding high-speed internet access to enhance digital connectivity, trade, innovation, and secure critical infrastructure. In the area of energy, advancing renewable energy links will fortify energy security through diversification and accelerate the deployment of green energy resources. Cooperation on regional trade facilitation will allow harmonising, simplifying and digitalising customs procedures to ease cross-border trade, attract private sector financing and enhance market integration.<sup>11</sup>

Meanwhile, the EU is not alone in recognising the increasing importance of the region: the current US administration has also given new momentum to its policy for the region. President Trump hosted a historic

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<sup>8</sup> European Commission, 'Marta Kos – Mission Letter' (Brussels, 17 September 2024), 6.

<sup>9</sup> Council of the European Union, 'Joint Declaration Following the First European Union–Central Asia Summit', Press release, 4 April 2025.

<sup>10</sup> EU Neighbours East, 'EU Strengthens Cross-Regional Cooperation With Black Sea Countries, South Caucasus and Central Asia' (21 October 2025).

<sup>11</sup> Council of the European Union, 'Co-Chairs Conclusions on Strengthening Cross-Regional Security and Connectivity', Press release, 20 October 2025. Bold type and paragraph breaks have been omitted.



summit between the presidents of Armenia and Azerbaijan in Washington, at which the parties signed a peace agreement and committed to building, with US participation, the ‘Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity’—a major transportation route connecting the two countries to Türkiye and the Western markets.<sup>12</sup> In November 2025 President Trump hosted five Central Asian leaders in the White House. The subject of critically important mineral materials in the region was identified as the US’s key reason for hosting the summit, confirming the strategic significance of the region to the US.<sup>13</sup>

With the EU’s strategic interests in both the EaP countries and Central Asia established as foreign policy priorities, this paper aims to offer solutions to realise the EU’s objectives. It suggests changing the geo-graphic reach of the EaP initiative and adapting its content to the new geopolitical realities in what Russia views as its ‘near abroad’ and, hence, as its natural sphere of strategic influence.

A new geopolitical window of opportunity for the EU in Central Asia has opened. The weaker Russia’s position looks, or the more it threatens their sovereign interests, the more likely it is that the countries in Central Asia will seek closer cooperation with the EU. Closer EU ties are instrumental for them, irrespective of the outcome of the Russo-Ukrainian War, since gaining strategic independence has moved very high up on their national agendas. China is looking increasingly less attractive for counterbalancing the Russian influence, since it is also perceived as a threat.

Detailed descriptions of the statuses of the bilateral relationships between the EU and the 11 countries covered by the EaP and Central Asia form an appendix to this paper. They give a picture of vast divergence—both in the level of ambition of these countries and in their capacities for advancing their relationships with the EU. Thus, building a single unified framework for bilateral relations between them and the EU is not realistic. The bilateral relationships with these 11 countries will have to remain custom-made for their individual capacities. This does not, however, preclude developing a multilateral framework that is focused on their joint interests as part of a new EaP. The EaP initiative, despite the EU’s insistence at the time of its inception in 2009 to the contrary, has had immense geopolitical consequences for the European Continent. Russia’s attempt to prevent Ukraine from signing an Association Agreement and forming a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) with the EU in 2013 defined the course of history over the

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<sup>12</sup> *Guardian*, ‘Armenia and Azerbaijan Sign a Peace Deal at White House that Creates “Trump’s Route in the Region”’, 9 August 2025.

<sup>13</sup> *Reuters*, ‘Trump Meets Central Asian Leaders to Boost Critical Minerals Ties’, 7 November 2025.



next decade. And Russia's decision to invade Ukraine in 2022 served as the trigger for turning the EaP into an antechamber for enlargement. This was contrary to the wishes that had been expressed by some EU member states at its launch 15 years ago; these states preferred to offer enhanced cooperation rather than a commitment to EU membership and sought to maintain carefully balanced relations with Russia.

Rather than phasing out the EaP, the EU should now transform the policy framework, building on its positive geopolitical impact so far and constructing a policy bridge between the EaP and the EU's Central Asia policy, focusing on the multilateral dimension. This paper addresses the possible ways in which this could be achieved by making connectivity/the 'Middle Corridor' the central theme of a new multilateral approach to the EaP that focuses on security, trade, sustainability, energy-sector cooperation, connecting civil society, strengthening people-to-people contacts, and revamping the relevant political and institutional frameworks. The areas of cooperation for the new EaP should reflect the shared interests of the EU and its partner countries. While the EU is interested in the region's natural resources, the partner countries are interested in making their economies less dependent on Russia and China. They also wish to strengthen their independent security infrastructure, enhance the technologies used to manage their natural resources, and offer their citizens the prospect of closer cooperation with and easier access to Europe.

By focusing on the interests that drive the EaP member states and the Central Asian countries and finding mutually beneficial frameworks for cooperation, the revitalised EaP could have major geopolitical consequences in the region, which has become a stage for the strategic rivalries between Europe, Russia and China. This will turn the vision of a more strategic EU foreign policy, as outlined in the new Commission's mission statement, into reality.



# **An institutional framework to overcome the diverging political and economic realities in the partner countries**

The Central Asian and EaP countries share many common interests, and these offer significant potential for developing joint cooperation frameworks that benefit the EU, Central Asia and the EaP. However, it is clear that those EaP partners which have ambitions with regard to their relationships with the EU believe that any geographical revamping that brings EaP policy more closely in line with the EU's Central Asia policy would be detrimental to their interests. These partners believe that they have a more advanced relationship with the EU than the Central Asian countries and that being incorporated within the same EU policy framework as them would be a backwards step. Furthermore, the Central Asian countries have concerns about making a bold move towards closer cooperation with the EU. They are well aware of the suspicions held by the other geopolitical actors in the region, Russia and China, regarding their strengthening of ties with the EU. Thus, balancing their foreign policy priorities will remain a legitimate concern. There are also limitations on the EU in terms of its greater engagement with the Central Asia region. The EU member states and the European institutions are under pressure from democracy and human rights watchdog organisations regarding the steps they can take to build closer relationships with the countries in Central Asia. The question of how much leeway can be given to the Central Asian countries on issues of human rights, the rule of law and democracy in order to advance the relationships, which are strategically important to the EU in terms of access to resources, dominates the EU's internal discussion. For example, some EU officials feel that if a review of the EU Central Asia Strategy were to begin now, it would be difficult for the EU to agree on even the current language used, let alone on adding new incentives for Central Asian countries to strengthen cooperation with the Union.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Author's discussion with the European External Action Service officials working on the Central Asia Strategy, Brussels, March 2024.



The reform of the EaP to include the Central Asian countries should be undertaken in view of these limitations. This is why the new EaP should be chiefly focused on multilateral frameworks of cooperation, and the individualised approach to the EU's bilateral relationships with each partner should be maintained. The EaP should be redesigned as a multilateral format focused on connectivity and the realisation of the objectives of the Middle Corridor. Under the overarching umbrella of strengthening connectivity with the EU and addressing security challenges, *the EaP should be reinvented as a broad policy framework for building connectivity between the Black Sea region and the Caspian Sea region*. In essence, this requires abandoning the current reference framework for the EaP and developing a new one.

## A multilateral framework focused on connectivity as its central theme

Though at its inception the EaP was not designed as a policy that would prepare its partners for EU membership, its policy instruments closely mirror the tools used in the framework of the enlargement policy. The EaP places a strong emphasis on reforms in areas such as democracy and the rule of law, and a high level of harmonisation was expected as part of the negotiations for the DCFTA agreements. For the three countries (Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine) which had the ambition of using the EaP to further their aim of moving to the enlargement framework, the EaP has turned out to be an antechamber for membership candidacy, and Armenia seems to be intent on following their lead.<sup>15</sup>

*The new EaP policy should not have the same framework.* Its redesign should take into consideration the fact that none of the Central Asian countries aspires to move to that level of economic integration with the EU or is ready to implement the democratic reforms that were envisaged for the EaP partners. It seems that at least two out of the six EaP countries—Azerbaijan and Belarus—have also exhausted the possibilities offered by the current EaP, as Azerbaijan is not moving forward on political reforms and Belarus has

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<sup>15</sup> S. Samadashvili, 'Building a Lifeline for Freedom: Eastern Partnership 2.0', *European View* 13/2 (2014).



withdrawn from the framework altogether. Given the energy potential of some Central Asian countries—such as Turkmenistan, which has enormous gas and oil reserves (estimated at 13.4 trillion cubic metres and 600 million barrels, respectively)<sup>16</sup>—Azerbaijan might view them as potential rivals, but despite this, the country is still likely to be inclined to continue cooperation with the EU in the areas of energy and connectivity. Therefore, if the EaP in its current form is phased out and replaced with a new framework focused on connectivity and security, Azerbaijan will have a strong motivation to participate. Azerbaijan also has unresolved security issues, and the EU's contribution to the stabilisation of its relationship with Armenia, in terms of its involvement in border monitoring and the reinforcement of security, will potentially remain of interest to the country as well.

With their wide-ranging bilateral relationships with the EU, varying levels of socio-economic development and differing political agendas, the question is, what framework could possibly bring all these countries together as the backbone for an integrated EU strategy? One focus could be the shared interest of at least 10 of these countries (with the current exception of Belarus) in *strengthening their independence from Russia*. The second strategic focus, which is in the EU's geopolitical interest as well as being a goal shared by all of the partner countries, is *improving connectivity with the EU*. Future EU policy with regard to both regions could be built on these interests and addressed through a renewed EaP policy.

The EU has already recognised that the Central Asian region will be instrumental in strengthening the Union's strategic independence from Russia. Former HR/VP Josep Borrell stated that Central Asia is at the centre of events, in both geostrategic and geo-economic terms.<sup>17</sup> Access to the vast energy reserves of the Caspian Sea region is not the only reason the EU is interested in strengthening its relationship with Central Asia. The area is also of key interest due to its critical raw materials and transport corridors, as well as its, albeit limited, capacity to neutralise the security threats emanating from the regions to the east and south of its borders. The *Joint Roadmap for Deepening Ties Between the EU and Central Asia*<sup>18</sup> outlines an ambitious agenda for cooperation in key areas of interest. It particularly focuses on recent EU strategies such as the EU's Global Gateway and Green Deal, with spotlights on trade, investment and connectivity.<sup>19</sup> As the

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<sup>16</sup> M. Brill Olcott, 'Turkmenistan: Real Energy Giant or Eternal Potential?', *Carnegie Endowment*, 10 December 2013.

<sup>17</sup> J. Borrell, 'Central Asia's Growing Importance Globally and for the EU', European External Action Service, 20 November 2022.

<sup>18</sup> Council of the European Union, *Joint Roadmap for Deepening Ties Between the EU and Central Asia*, 14587/23 (23 October 2023).

<sup>19</sup> Council of the European Union, 'Proposal for a Regulation on the protection of vulnerable adults in the Union, and repealing Directive 2000/78/EC', COM (2023) 420 final (23 October 2023).



blueprint for the EU's relationship with the region, the roadmap expands the Union's strategic objectives in the Central Asian countries with a view to developing the Middle Corridor as a way to counterbalance both China's Belt and Road Initiative and Russia's influence, gain access to the strategic raw materials there and address security concerns. The roadmap marks out the region as a strategically more important target for the EU than ever before.

Since the adoption of the strategy, the most important policy document to have been produced is the declaration adopted by the first EU–Central Asia Summit in Samarkand on 4 April 2025.<sup>20</sup> The declaration outlines major areas of cooperation, focusing on security, economic ties, trade and investment, energy, collaboration on critically important minerals, connectivity under the Global Gateway initiative, cooperation on the European Green Deal, and strengthening people-to-people contacts and mobility. The summit declaration represents a major political upgrade to EU–Central Asia relations.

Before the Russian war on Ukraine, Russia was the main transit point for all the land trade between Europe and China. The railway network connecting China to Belarus and then Europe constituted the 'Northern Route'. The full Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and consequent sanctions regime have closed off this route and created a need for alternatives. As a result, regional connectivity has been identified as a crucial point of interest in the EU's policies for both Central Asia and the EaP. At the EU–Central Asia Connectivity Conference of November 2022 in Samarkand, Uzbekistan, the participating sides confirmed their readiness to cooperate closely in all aspects of connectivity and their strong interest in developing concrete projects in this regard.<sup>21</sup> A European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) study,<sup>22</sup> conducted to find the optimal way to advance the EU's Global Gateway strategy (2021), assessed the existing and potential transport corridors that could connect the five Central Asian countries to the Trans-European Transport Network, which was extended to cover the EaP countries in 2019. The study concluded that the development of a transport corridor through southern Kazakhstan—the Central Trans-Caspian network—was the most sustainable option. This would cover all five Central Asian states and connect them to what used to be known as the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route—that is, the Middle Corridor. The route, which would connect Central Asia, Azerbaijan, Georgia and Türkiye and then cross into South-East

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<sup>20</sup> Council of the European Union, 'Joint Declaration Following the First European Union–Central Asia Summit'.

<sup>21</sup> Council of the European Union, *Joint Roadmap for Deepening Ties Between the EU and Central Asia*.

<sup>22</sup> EBRD, *Sustainable Transport Connections Between Europe and Central Asia* (30 June 2023).



ern Europe, would initially reduce delivery times from China to Türkiye from 53 days to 19–23 days, with the potential to reduce this further still, to 14 days. The study identified concrete recommendations for both infrastructure investments and the policies needed to strengthen soft connectivity. The EU used the study as the basis for organising an investment forum to raise funds to develop the Middle Corridor. The Global Gateway Investors Forum for EU—Central Asia Transport Connectivity, which took place on 29 January 2024 in Brussels, pledged a €10 billion commitment from European and international financial institutions to invest in the development of the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route. This is a quarter of the total estimated cost of €40 billion that will be needed to implement all the projects identified by the EBRD study.<sup>23</sup> The forum stated that its objective was to make the Trans-Caspian Transport Corridor a multimodal, modern, competitive, sustainable, predictable, smart and fast route, linking Europe and Central Asia in 15 days or fewer. The forum aimed to demonstrate the EU's political and operational commitment via the Global Gateway initiative to strengthening connectivity with Central Asia through its investment in concrete projects along the Corridor.<sup>24</sup>

Connectivity and the Middle Corridor have been identified as absolute priorities for all interlocutors, both those from the region and the EU's policymaking institutions.<sup>25</sup> The Central Asian countries perceive the development of the Middle Corridor as a way to bring their region logically closer to Europe. The strategic importance of the route is highlighted by the fierce competition between Russia and China for control of its infrastructure, with both showing a significant interest in securing access to key assets along the Middle Corridor. This is well illustrated by the circumstances surrounding the deep-sea port project in Anaklia, Georgia, which is a critical piece of infrastructure and a linchpin of the Middle Corridor. Several years ago, the government of Georgia, likely under pressure from Russia, undermined the project when it was in the critical stage of raising funds from Western investors. The ruling party, which is increasingly openly following the Russian lead in its foreign policy choices, has recently given China a stake in the project, granting it the government contract to construct the port and a 49% ownership stake, as well as the rights to operate it.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> A. Assaniyaz, 'EU—CA Investors Forum Announces €10 Bln Commitment for Development of Trans-Caspian Transport Corridor', *Astana Times*, 29 January 2024.

<sup>24</sup> EU International Partnerships, 'Investors Forum for EU—Central Asia Transport Connectivity'.

<sup>25</sup> Author's meeting with EU Special Representative for Central Asia, Ambassador Teri Hakala at the European External Action Service, Brussels in March 2024, at which connectivity was identified as the number-one priority for the EU. The ambassadors to the EU from Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have also named connectivity as the number-one priority in meetings with the author.

<sup>26</sup> Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 'China, Georgia Companies Sign Memorandum on Anaklia Port Project', 19 June 2024.



The new EaP would create space for the EU to address issues of strategic interest in a framework that would include the participation of the five Central Asian countries and at least five out of the six current EaP partners, assuming that Belarus stays on its current political course. Some of the institutional elements of the new EaP setup could be organised around multilateral fora of cooperation. High-level summits of the heads of state and the top EU officials—the presidents of the European Council and the Commission, the HR/VP and the relevant EU commissioners—would secure the political momentum needed to push forward policy initiatives in those countries, such as Azerbaijan, which value high-level access and the prestige of the relationship with the EU. Foreign ministerial meetings would help to steer the political process, while a structured framework of sectoral ministerial and lower-level bureaucratic meetings built on the four platforms of connectivity, security, trade and sustainability would help to advance concrete projects in the relevant areas and build a bureaucratic relationship between the countries.

The Middle Corridor project should become the backbone of the new EaP strategy. Enhancing both hard and soft connectivity along the route needs to be identified as the number-one priority for the EU in its overarching policy. *The project needs to receive both high-level political support and a position at the top of the EU's financial priorities.*

## **Financing**

The new EU budget structure needs to reflect the importance of funding for the EaP. Time is of the essence—when fundraising for projects falters or takes substantial time, the EU is racing against the geopolitical interests of Russia and China, both of which are pushing interlocutors in the relevant countries to resist the Union's involvement. While many of the national governments express substantial political goodwill vis-à-vis greater EU involvement, they are also exposed to external political, economic and security pressures from both Russia and China, and have identified the speed and scale of the EU's financial involvement as key to countering those pressures.



One of the possible ways to address this is by restructuring the funds which are currently allocated to the EaP and the Central Asian countries to a new Middle Corridor financial support mechanism. Wielding its capabilities, the EU could thus move forward quickly with top-priority projects for the development of the Middle Corridor, such as a new railway connection between Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, helping ports such as Aktau to increase berth capacity, increasing the rolling stock available in Georgia and enhancing the Georgia–Türkiye border rail connection at Akhalkalaki.<sup>27</sup> It may also be worth exploring the possibility of the EU issuing infrastructure bonds for larger Middle Corridor projects to help the EaP countries raise investment where EU loans and development funds run short. The funding structure of the new EaP should be focused on both infrastructure support and flexibility and speed if the EU wants to outrun its competitors, such as China, in the region.

## Connectivity summits

An annual summit of the heads of state could bring together the EU member states, relevant institutions and the heads of government of the 11 partner countries. A business forum, attached to the summit, could bring officials, business and industry together to take stock of achievements and plan the way forward. Institutional linkages between the Central Asian states and the EaP countries could be developed by setting up a Middle Corridor cooperation committee for the EU and the partner countries, which would meet at least biannually in the various partner countries to oversee progress. Subcommittees could be developed as needed to foster as much contact and cooperation between the bureaucratic and business communities as possible.

In parallel, the EU needs to *develop strategic pressure points*—the EU’s participation in the infrastructure development projects of the Middle Corridor should be conditional on the advancement of cooperation between the EU and the partner countries in other fields, based on the interests and situations of the specific countries. Designing strategic pressure points will require the careful crafting of individual approaches to create the right balance of incentives and costs for each country. The clear availability of funding based on

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<sup>27</sup> World Bank, ‘10 Priority Actions That Can Triple Trade in the Middle Corridor By 2030’ (17 April 2024).



a conditionality approach would limit the scope of opportunity to use a lack of EU financial resources as an excuse, as in the case of the Anaklia deep-sea port in Georgia, for example. No mention of the governing Georgian Dream party's move away from Western investment in the project in favour of Chinese participation was made by the EU when the possibility of offering Georgia candidate country status was considered. This was a mistake, and a conditionality approach needs to be developed to ensure access to the Middle Corridor infrastructure projects for Western financial interests.

## Strengthening security

Another priority identified by the EU that is driving the need for the greater involvement of the Union in Central Asia is the security concerns of these countries, which are multifaceted and the result of a complex web of interlinking and cross-cutting currents among various regional players. Strengthening cooperation on security-related issues is identified as a priority in both EaP policy and the EU's roadmap for Central Asia. The EU is already playing an important role through its Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) missions in four EaP countries—Armenia, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine—where it has deployed civilian and military missions to enhance stability, support the rule of law and improve security-sector governance. Through its capacity-building programmes in Central Asia, it is assisting with border management and combating terrorism and drug-related crime through the provision of training, resources and expertise in law enforcement and judicial cooperation.

Addressing the security threats related to the spillover effects of the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan has been given top priority by Central Asian officials in terms of the need for more EU assistance. In particular, the Central Asian states stress the need for greater assistance in border management and countering Islamic radicalism.<sup>28</sup> Three Central Asian countries—Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan—are members of the Collective Security Treaty Organization dominated by Russia. The same three and Uzbekistan are also members of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, established by Russia and China. Turkmenistan, while

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<sup>28</sup> Interviews carried out by the author with the representatives of Central Asian officials. The official at the Mission of Tajikistan to the EU expressed particular concern about the need for more EU assistance in this area.



choosing a position of neutrality, still cooperates with both China and Russia through bilateral formats. However, over the last several years, all the Central Asian countries have also demonstrated the political will to build more regional cooperation, independent of the Russian- and Chinese-dominated security frameworks.

Since the beginning of the Russo-Ukrainian War, and having witnessed the impotence of the Russia-dominated collective security arrangement to protect Armenia from Azerbaijan during the renewed conflict in 2021–2, the concern expressed by some Central Asian states about having a security umbrella dominated by Russia has become more pronounced. Some in Central Asia increasingly think that the region should be more closely aligned with the broader Euro-Atlantic security architecture in order to counterbalance Russia.<sup>29</sup> Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, greater interest in strengthening strategic autonomy in the area of security was indicated by a declaration by the heads of state at a meeting in Cholpon-Ata, where the five leaders signed important cooperation agreements.<sup>30</sup> While each Central Asian country has a different level of vulnerability vis-à-vis Russia, and all chose to take a neutral position when Russia invaded Ukraine, discussions with Central Asian interlocutors indicate that the two leading economies in the region—Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan—increasingly view the need to develop more strategic autonomy from Moscow as urgent.<sup>31</sup> As early as 2014, after the Russian annexation of Crimea, the notion that independence cannot be taken for granted entered the political discourse in the Central Asian countries, most notably voiced by former President of Kazakhstan, Nursultan Nazarbayev.<sup>32</sup> This change in attitude has been accompanied by a policy of resistance to Russia's attempts to increase integration via both the Collective Security Treaty Organization and the Eurasian Customs Union. Over the course of the last decade, the responses of the large Central Asian countries to Russia's attempts to deepen institutional integration have made it clear that they view cooperation with Russia as a matter of necessity rather than choice.<sup>33</sup> While not publicly outspoken about it, since 2022 these countries have engaged in active diplomacy to strengthen cooperation with the EU in security-related areas.

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<sup>29</sup> N. Kassenova, 'Remarks by Nargiz Kassenova, Director of the Program on Central Asia at Davis Center, Harvard University', at the Rondeli International Conference, Tbilisi, March 2024.

<sup>30</sup> A. Satubaldina, 'Cholpon-Ata Meeting Opens up Opportunities for Central Asia Amidst Increasing Geopolitical Tension', *Astana Times*, 22 July 2022.

<sup>31</sup> Author's interview with Nargiz Kassenova in Tbilisi in March 2024; author's interview with the head of the Europe–Uzbek Association for Economic Cooperation, Oybek Shaykhov, in Brussels, March 2024.

<sup>32</sup> N. Nazarbayev, 'Address of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan N. Nazarbayev to the Nation', Republic of Kazakhstan (17 January 2014).

<sup>33</sup> A. Jarosiewicz, 'Kazakhstan's Attitude Towards Integration With Russia: Less Love, More Fear', *Centre for Eastern Studies*, 26 May 2014.



China has its own interest in regional security and is stepping up to provide a counterbalance to Russia's involvement if there is the opportunity. However, mistrust of China, due to its attempts to undermine the independent interests of the Central Asian countries, is not making it easy for the country to advance its interests. Therefore, if the EU can take a proactive approach and respond with a strengthened framework for cooperation in security, especially in border-management issues, it stands to gain crucial ground in the region.

The five Central Asian countries are not equally enthusiastic about developing a more independent strategy from Russia. In this regard, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan have emerged as the leaders in promoting greater regional cooperation in the field of security, and not just in the economy and trade. This inclination to achieve greater autonomy in security-related issues should be used to foster closer cooperation between the Central Asian countries and the EaP states on matters of security, border management and drug trafficking, among others.

## High-level political and security dialogue

The EU has developed an institutional framework for dialogue with the Central Asian countries on political and security issues. It could consider reshaping this dialogue to include both the Central Asian and the EaP countries, possibly developing a two-track approach, with one focused on Central Asia and the other on the Middle Corridor, which would include the EaP partners.

Exchanges of best practice should be fostered between the various CSDP missions that are operating in the EaP countries, particularly those with a border-assistance mandate, and the relevant institutions in Central Asia. While security is a highly sensitive issue, fostering greater cooperation between the Central Asian and the EaP countries on questions of border management and drug trafficking would be a soft way to assist the Central Asian countries with strengthening their autonomous management of security issues, while also building links among the EaP partners. CSDP missions to help the Central Asian countries address issues such as border security and customs, with the participation of personnel from countries such as Armenia, Georgia and Moldova, could promote cooperation between these countries and increase the EU's participation in security-related matters.



## An EaP security forum

To help develop security-related cooperation, the EU could organise an annual EaP security forum, hosted by one of the partner countries, to review progress achieved and look at the way forward. This would be beneficial not only from the standpoint of providing a chance to exchange experiences with regard to EU-related activities in this sector, but also in terms of bringing together officials from these countries to address security-related challenges in one space. Currently there is no forum that offers them the opportunity to meet.

## Enhancing trade

Trade has been the key focus of the EU's relationships with the countries in both Central Asia and the EaP. The framework for trade relations differs from country to country, ranging from enhanced trade relations and the Generalised Scheme of Preferences Plus (GSP+) framework to DCFTAs. However, the general goal—promoting stronger economic ties with the EU through trade—is an overarching one that bridges these differences. The EU has been a leading advocate of the EaP and Central Asian countries joining the WTO. Trade has been a particular focus of the EU's policy with regard to Central Asia, and enhancing economic ties is a key aim, as outlined in the EU's *Joint Roadmap for Deepening Ties Between the EU and Central Asia*. The document envisages the establishment of additional formats for consultation, going beyond the current frameworks of Partnership and Cooperation Agreements (PCAs) and Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreements (EPCAs).<sup>34</sup>

EU trade with Central Asia has grown and the EU is now the region's main trade partner (chiefly because the EU forms a large share of Kazakhstan's trade balance), accounting for about a third of its overall external trade and putting it on a level with Russia and China.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Council of the European Union, *Joint Roadmap for Deepening Ties Between the EU and Central Asia*, 14587/23 (23 October 2023), 2.

<sup>35</sup> M. Poplawski, 'Crisis as Opportunity, New Stage in EU–Central Asia Relations', *Centre for Eastern Studies*, 26 April 2024.



The EU is one of the region's main trading partners overall, accounting for 24.7% of Central Asian countries' combined foreign trade in 2024. 2024 figures show that EU goods imports from Central Asia continue to increase (by 68% in 2024), but exports from the EU to Central Asia decreased slightly (by 5%).

Negotiations for non-preferential enhanced bilateral partnership and cooperation frameworks (EPCAs) also support overall cooperation between the EU and Central Asia.

- Central Asian exports to the EU largely focus on a few commodities, particularly crude oil, gas, metals and cotton fibre.
- EU exports are dominated by machinery and transport equipment, and other manufactured goods. Such products account for more than half of EU exports to the region.<sup>36</sup>

Trade with the EU's economies has been instrumental in the economic and institutional development of the EaP countries.

In 2021 the EU was the main trading partner for four out of the six EaP states: Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. In the remaining economies, Armenia and Belarus, the EU was the second biggest trade partner, with between 18.9% and 19.9% of the share in total trade. The EU had the biggest share of total trade in Moldova, reaching 49.1%; while in Azerbaijan, Ukraine and Georgia it was 44.8%, 39.6% and 21.1%, respectively.<sup>37</sup>

Following the Russian invasion of Ukraine it has become difficult to produce accurate estimates of trade relations with the EaP countries, but due to the advancement of some EaP countries along the EU membership path, trade relations continue to deepen for those in the framework. The majority of the EaP countries have also established more advanced frameworks for trade cooperation with the EU, and signing DCFTA agreements has accorded them greater access to the EU's internal market.

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<sup>36</sup> European Commission, 'EU Trade Relations With Central Asia. Facts, Figures and Latest Developments'.

<sup>37</sup> T. Rodzicki, 'Trade Flows Between the European Union and the Eastern Partnership Countries: Dynamics and Prospects', *Nowa Polityka Wschodnia* 35/1 (2022).



Deepening cooperation by improving adherence to the EU's sanctions on Russia has become an important item on the EU's trade and economic relations agenda for both the Central Asian and the EaP countries. Imposing a sanctions regime on Russia has, by default, created ample economic opportunities to develop infrastructure to circumvent it. Trade restrictions triggered by the sanctions on Russia have created opportunities for the re-export of sanctioned goods from countries in close proximity to Russia. Both the geography and the close economic and trade relations between Russia and the Central Asian and EaP countries make the latter especially attractive locations for the development of such infrastructure. The unprecedented boom in EU trade with some of the Central Asian and EaP countries—such as the increase in exports of German cars and automotive parts to Kyrgyzstan by 5,500%, to Kazakhstan by 720%, to Armenia by 450% and to Georgia by 340%—raises a red flag that these countries are being used to circumvent the sanctions regime. These countries have also considerably increased trade with Russia since the beginning of the war—for example, the export of electronic equipment from Kazakhstan to Russia has increased 18-fold compared to pre-war volumes.<sup>38</sup> The political positioning of these countries with respect to the EU sanctions regime is that while they refuse to join the regime, they pledge to adhere to its requirements.<sup>39</sup> Thus, the EU should develop a consultative process that includes all EaP and Central Asian partners to address the enforcement of the EU-imposed sanctions regime, and should conduct integrated training and assistance programmes for the relevant agencies to ensure the adoption of risk-mitigation measures. It seems that the capacity of the Central Asian countries to understand and adhere to the sanctions regime is limited and they require greater assistance. When pressed on questions regarding unnatural patterns of trade in sanctioned goods with Russia, as described above, they often use the excuse of having limited technical capacity to enforce the EU sanctions regime in their territories.<sup>40</sup> Offering the technical capacities of the CSDP missions to assist in developing streamlined enforcement procedures might be a way forward.

The EaP countries have a more advanced framework of trade relations with the EU and have progressed further in addressing the challenges associated with developing DCFTA agreements with the EU. Sharing their experiences with the Central Asian countries and including them in the relevant consultative formats would be one way to help build bridges between the EaP and Central Asia. The EU could also

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<sup>38</sup> R. M. Cutler, 'Central Asia: A Lucrative Back Door to Russia', *Center for European Policy Analysis*, 9 August 2023.

<sup>39</sup> Joining a sanctions regime means adopting the necessary legislative framework, while a declaration to observe the sanctions is a declaration of goodwill and not of legislative intent.

<sup>40</sup> Author's interview with the head of mission of Uzbekistan to the EU, March 2024.



invite experts and officials from the EaP countries to assist the Central Asian countries with implementing PCAs and EPCAs. Overcoming non-tariff barriers for expanding trade with the EU and increasing exports are major obstacles for several of the Central Asian countries.<sup>41</sup> Officials and business associations in the Central Asian countries often stress the need for greater support with satisfying the EU's product standards, technical requirements, customs regulations and other non-tariff barriers in order to take advantage of the liberal trade regime with the Union. Given that some EaP countries still need technical support themselves to fulfil EU regulations and requirements for exports and to overcome non-tariff barriers, integrated programmes could help to build links between the EaP and the Central Asian states. An integrated approach could also be taken to support areas such as information-technology capacity building and the creation of free economic zones, which are of interest to the transit countries of the Middle Corridor in both the EaP and the Central Asian region.

Taking a more integrated approach to trade relations with these countries would support the EU's efforts to achieve both greater connectivity and the Middle Corridor project, as it would promote the expedient and easily managed transit of goods. Bearing in mind that some of the Central Asian countries are members of the Russia-dominated Eurasian Customs Union, it is not yet realistic to think that the same level of economic integration with the EU as envisaged by the DCFTAs could be achieved with them. However, closer integration between the EaP and the countries of Central Asia, with a focus on making the best of the transit potential and building export capacity for the EU market, is plausible. Some practical steps in this direction could involve helping the Central Asian countries to develop a system for integrated customs management along the route, which would considerably shorten delivery times for goods, and providing assistance with improving the technical capabilities of their customs services. EaP countries that have successfully implemented customs reform initiatives—such as Georgia—could share their experiences with the Central Asian countries and be involved in drafting and implementing the relevant reforms.

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<sup>41</sup> Author's interview with the deputy head of the Mission of Tajikistan to the EU; author's interview with the head of the EU–Uzbekistan Association for Economic Cooperation, Brussels, March 2024.



# Sustainability and energy

Sustainability is one of the key areas of focus for the EU's relationship with the countries of Central Asia. Cooperation with the EU on access to better technologies to address the negative impacts of environmental degradation and climate change, as well as to better manage water resources, has been mentioned as a top priority by interlocutors from the Central Asian countries. In this regard, the EU is a far more desirable partner for the Central Asian countries than any other actor because of its competitive advantage in technologies and know-how.

Water-resource development is a challenge across the region. The EU roadmap for Central Asia singles out important priorities for cooperation in this area within the framework of the European Green Deal. In particular, the document outlines the importance of

boosting the efficient use of resources by moving to a climate neutral and circular economy and mitigating the negative effects of climate change . . . Enhanced cooperation should focus on climate neutral energies and hydrogen, critical raw materials, the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions, particularly methane emissions and venting and flaring in the oil and gas sector, energy efficiency, energy security, and regional integration of energy systems.

The rehabilitation of uranium tailing dumps, the integration of water-resource management, the development of a water infrastructure that is resilient to climate change and the introduction of water-saving technologies are also identified as key priorities.<sup>42</sup>

The EU has increased its use of 'blending' to leverage additional public and private investment for sustainable development in Central Asia. Funding comes via the Investment Facility for Central Asia, using the EU's Global Gateway strategy as a framework, and takes a coordinated 'Team Europe' approach, which

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<sup>42</sup> Council of the European Union, *Joint Roadmap for Deepening Ties Between the EU and Central Asia*, 4–5.



brings together the activities of the European Investment Bank, the EBRD and the member states.<sup>43</sup> For example, the EU-funded Regional Transport Programme<sup>44</sup> offers technical assistance to advance existing and future transport-related projects. This is funded from the €1.5 billion devolved by the European Commission and the European Investment Bank to support the transport infrastructure agenda in Central Asia. A coordination platform<sup>45</sup> to monitor progress, enhance cooperation and ensure that development of the Trans-Caspian Transport Corridor stays on track is also an important new step towards enhancing connectivity. A regional prosperity-focused programme,<sup>46</sup> introduced in 2024 and implemented by the International Trade Centre and the OECD, is geared towards the practical operationalisation and usage of the trans-Caspian transport networks. A senior resident twinning advisors<sup>47</sup> instrument, embedded in the ministries of transport of all five Central Asian countries since 2024, is another measure that has been adopted to enhance soft connectivity.<sup>48</sup>

Despite the fact that sustainability is an important area of cooperation with the EU for the EaP countries, and the relevant objectives are integrated into their Association and DCFTA agreements, progress in this area is slow. In particular, monitoring concerns include the lack of institutional capacity available to implement the laws and regulations which have been introduced to meet harmonisation requirements. The EaP countries might be more advanced than those in Central Asia with regard to passing the relevant legislation, but they still need support and pressure applied to ensure its implementation.<sup>49</sup> The countries in Central Asia are impressively rich in natural resources, including oil, gas and other materials, which could help the EU to diversify its energy supply, while also having the significant potential to achieve greater energy efficiency and increase energy production from renewable sources. Recognising this potential, the EU has activated channels for energy cooperation by signing Memoranda of Understanding with Kazakhstan (renewed in 2022), Turkmenistan (2008) and Uzbekistan (renewed in 2024, with cooperation on critical raw

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<sup>43</sup> R. Shreeves, A. Delivoras and A. Caprile, *The Eastern Partnership: A Revised Policy Framework for a Region in Transition*, European Parliamentary Research Service, Briefing PE 762.300 (April 2024).

<sup>44</sup> European Commission, 'Global Gateway: EU and Central Asian Countries Agree on Building Blocks to Develop Trans-Caspian Transport' (30 January 2024).

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum, *EaP CSF Policy Paper on Environment*.



materials added), which are periodically followed up through bilateral consultations. At the regional level, energy cooperation is also promoted in the EU Strategy for Central Asia,<sup>50</sup> including through synergies with other international bodies and institutions (international financial institutions, the International Renewable Energy Agency, the International Energy Charter etc.). The EU also cooperates with the 11 countries of Central Asia and the EaP in the EU4Energy programme. This programme continues the work of the former Interstate Oil and Gas Transportation to Europe programme and aims to help all partners reduce their dependence on fossil fuels and energy imports, improve security of supply and fight climate change. The Central Asian countries benefit from the data, statistics and policy recommendations of the programme, and the recommendations are carried out by the International Energy Agency.<sup>51</sup>

Central Asia holds vast reserves of strategically important materials, including 38.6% of the world's manganese ore, 30.1% of its chromium, 20% of its lead, 12.6% of its zinc, 8.7% of its titanium, 5.8% of its aluminium, 5.3% of its copper and cobalt, and 5.2% of its molybdenum. The region is also rich in other valuable minerals such as monazite, zircon, apatite, xenotime, pyrochlore, allanite and columbite. These resources are primarily concentrated in specific areas, notably the Kazakh steppe. Critically, all of these materials are essential components in a wide array of clean-energy technologies. Several Central Asian countries rank among the world's top 20 producers for many of these key materials.<sup>52</sup> Until recently, the EU purchased an insignificant share of Central Asian exports and did not see the region as strategically important to its critical materials needs. However, the Union has recently become aware of both the region's resource base and its rapidly strengthening ties with China. This has led it to change its approach, with both the Central Asian states and the EU developing more interest in cooperation in this area. For example, the 2025 EU–Central Asia Summit Declaration clearly outlines critical materials as a priority and endorsed a roadmap for cooperation in this regard for 2025–6.<sup>53</sup>

Considering that the environmental degradation and infrastructural challenges associated with overcoming the legacy of the past are shared problems for the countries of Central Asia and the EaP, the EU could develop a more integrated approach to addressing the environmental concerns of these countries.

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<sup>50</sup> Council of the European Union, *Joint Roadmap for Deepening Ties Between the EU and Central Asia*.

<sup>51</sup> European Commission, 'Central Asia: EU Cooperation With Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan'.

<sup>52</sup> R. Vakulchuk and I. Overland, 'Central Asia Is a Missing Link in Analyses of Critical Materials for the Global Clean Energy Transition', *One Earth* 4/12 (2021).

<sup>53</sup> Council of the European Union, 'Joint Declaration Following the First European Union–Central Asia Summit', 9.



The Union could not only facilitate a greater exchange of experience, as the EaP countries are more advanced in their progress than the Central Asian states, but also develop a joint framework to address some of the shared problems—for example, the environmental impact of the infrastructure development along the Middle Corridor. Regional cooperation in Central Asia could best be bolstered by focusing on water management, since the scarcity of water resources is one of the potential sources of conflict among the various countries.

EU–Central Asia cooperation in securing access to critically important materials, bolstered investment in infrastructure to develop the potential of Central Asia as an important supplier of those materials for the EU and bringing the EaP countries into the framework of policy development should be important elements of the EU’s policy for the region. The EU’s involvement in developing regional water-management schemes also offers a potentially important opportunity for the Union to strengthen its strategic footing in the region. The aforementioned EU4Energy framework provides the foundations for strengthening the overarching policy. Expanding on the framework by providing higher-level political visibility and developing more regular and active consultative formats for cooperation could form a strong basis for the EU’s new vision for its Eastern Neighbourhood policy. Furthermore, an EaP Energy Forum could upgrade the possibilities offered by the EU4Energy framework and give it a more institutional approach.

## Connecting civil society and improving people-to-people contacts

The political framework of the new EaP obviously cannot exclude the issues of democracy, human rights and the rule of law. However, out of the 11 countries covered by the current EaP and the Central Asia strategy, only 3 (Armenia, Georgia and Moldova) are ranked as electoral democracies by the World Democracy Report 2024,<sup>54</sup> with the rest ranging between being electoral autocracies and closed autocracies. With the

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<sup>54</sup> A. Lührmann et al., *Autocratization Turns Viral: Democracy Report 2024*, V-Dem Institute, Report no. 44.



current political deadlock in Georgia, it is likely that the country will move further away from the status of an electoral democracy. Under these circumstances, the development of a uniform approach is unlikely to be productive and the expectation of major democratic breakthroughs is low. The leverage of the EU in Central Asia to secure reforms in the areas of democracy and the rule of law is weak. *Considering the strategic competition in the region, it is in the EU's interests to find a balance between supporting democratic reforms where possible and avoiding being taken hostage by a values-based approach to policy.* This will require a certain shift in thinking with regard to what the new EaP policy should look like.

To address concerns related to democracy and human rights, one possible approach would be to establish a dedicated format focused exclusively on these issues. This would not imply that outcomes from the dialogue would fall outside the broader cooperation framework, but rather, by creating a separate space for discussion, that each process could be streamlined and structured more effectively.

The proposed Civil Society Partnership for the East could also advance two other key priorities for strengthening ties between the EaP and the Central Asian countries: fostering people-to-people connections and enhancing civil society cooperation. Such a framework could provide a platform for Belarusian participation as well. The existing EaP Civil Society Platform could be adapted and expanded to include Central Asian countries, offering a practical foundation for this initiative. This platform would only be open to non-governmental actors and could potentially also include pro-democracy groups or organisations that are working to promote the idea of a democratic Russia. As it stands today, all the pro-democracy actors from Belarus and Russia are operating outside of their countries, but they have shared challenges and obstacles. Unfortunately, with the adoption in both Kyrgyzstan and Georgia of 'foreign agent' laws, which require foreign-funded organisations to register as agents of foreign influence, it is possible that some non-governmental actors in these countries may also have to find a more creative way to carry out their activities. Creating a broad-based platform for civil society actors in the framework of a renewed EaP would be a productive way to pull EU resources together, take a regional approach to the promotion of democracy and human rights, and help create synergies between actors from different countries. It would also assist the EU in creating 'demand' for the reforms that it expects in the countries of Central Asia and the EaP. This could be achieved through the use of the platform to facilitate people-to-people contacts and exchanges, not only for non-governmental organisations (NGOs), but also for professional groups, educators and business associations, thus building a strong network across the region.



Taking a regional look at democracy assistance across the countries in Central Asia and the EaP would also be beneficial for countering the Russian strategy of undermining democracy. Russia takes a coordinated approach in its political and propaganda operations across these countries. For example, the requirement to register foreign-funded NGOs as agents of foreign influence, as has been implemented in Georgia and Kyrgyzstan, is taken from the Kremlin's playbook. Messages intended to undermine Western and European influence in the region are also often coordinated, as is the means of their distribution. Thus the challenges facing pro-democracy actors in the region, such as countering these propaganda operations, are similar. Working with these actors and taking a coordinated approach would help them to build networks that could be used more effectively, for example, to counter the Russian information-warfare propaganda operations in those countries.

Civil society has played a crucial role in the EU integration processes of the countries emerging from the former USSR, including those in both the EaP and Central Asia. However, as the political frameworks governing NGO participation in policymaking differ across countries, so too does the scope and effectiveness of their influence.

The EaP's Civil Society Forum provides an important structure for the participation of civil society.<sup>55</sup> The forum has a secretariat and steering committees, and its policy is administered through meetings of its general assembly. Through its national platforms, several hundred organisations, ranging from think tanks to issue-based advocacy groups, are brought together. The EU has also developed a platform of cooperation for civil society in the Central Asian countries, but on a more modest scale. Since the launch of the EU's roadmap for cooperation with Central Asia in 2019, the EU has facilitated the convening of an annual EU–Central Asia Civil Society Forum. Hosted in the various countries of Central Asia, it brings together representatives of civil society from across the region to address the implementation of the key priorities for EU–Central Asia cooperation.<sup>56</sup>

Civil society organisations face different regulatory and political challenges in each of the EaP and Central Asian countries. However, it seems that their existence and their funding have been particular targets for the governments of their states. Most notably, in 2024 Kyrgyzstan and Georgia almost simultaneously

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<sup>55</sup> Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum, 'Our Structure'.

<sup>56</sup> Commonspace.eu, 'Tashkent Hosts 4th EU–Central Asia Civil Society Forum', 17 November 2023.



adopted restrictive legislation on the funding of NGOs by foreign sources under the pretext of greater transparency. Some other countries in the EaP and Central Asian regions—Azerbaijan, Belarus and Kyrgyzstan—had already adopted similar laws, while Kazakhstan started deliberations on such a bill in February 2025. This is a disturbing development as it seems that the free space for civil society is shrinking, even in those countries which were previously believed to be more open, that is, Kyrgyzstan in Central Asia and Georgia in the EaP. Adopting this restrictive legislation that requires NGOs to register as the representatives of foreign states stigmatises them and their activities. The burdensome reporting requirements open up the organisations to undue financial interference by the state in those programmes which the authorities do not welcome, such as those that support democracy promotion, the rule of law, electoral observation and the fight against corruption. Both the Council of Europe and the EU have voiced their concerns regarding this new legislative framework for NGOs.<sup>57</sup>

Given the common challenges facing civil society in the EaP and Central Asian countries, it would be beneficial to develop a joint platform for consultation between the EaP Civil Society Forum and the EU–Central Asia Civil Society Platform. A new EaP Civil Society Platform could develop a two-track approach, organising its work into subgroups that group the countries not by their geography, but by their political structure in terms of the operation of civil society organisations. For example, while Azerbaijan is part of the EaP framework, civil society today in this country has more in common in terms of its challenges with its counterparts in Kazakhstan and other Central Asian countries than with those in the other EaP countries. Having one umbrella platform that covers both those countries with more liberal environments for civil society and those which operate in more restrictive environments would be beneficial, as the stronger civil society groups could support the less-fortunate organisations. This would foster the sharing of experiences, the development of joint initiatives and the possibility of organising projects administered jointly from abroad in the countries where civil society activities are restricted. It could also offer an opportunity for the organisations to lobby the EU together and have more impact. Under the umbrella of the EaP Civil Society Platform, various thematic platforms—on political participation and elections, gender, the environment and so on—could offer the opportunity for civil societies from across the region to share experiences and develop common initiatives.

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<sup>57</sup> European Commission for Democracy Through Law (Venice Commission), *Report on the Role of Opposition in a Democratic Parliament*, CDL-PI(2024)013 (Strasbourg, 21 May 2024).



One of the greatest assets of the EU's strategic relationship with the countries in both the EaP and Central Asia is the investment in their citizens. Several of the EaP countries enjoy visa-liberalisation schemes with the EU and access to the EU's educational, exchange and training programmes. The Central Asian countries have repeatedly expressed their interest in gaining better access to the EU—securing visa-facilitation agreements with the Union is a clear priority for them.<sup>58</sup> Strengthening people-to-people contacts and mobility has also been highlighted as a priority in the EU's strategy for Central Asia, which mentions actions to promote tourism to the Central Asian countries and to raise their cultural profiles within the EU. The strategy also mentions building on the Erasmus+ Mobility partnership and the Horizon Europe programme to further promote cooperation education, and supporting exchanges through twinning and other programmes, along with other steps to promote people-to-people contacts. With very young demographics—for example, 50% of the population of Kazakhstan has been born since the country became independent from Russia<sup>59</sup>—developing policies to open up opportunities for education is important.

Representatives of civil society from the region have also highlighted the importance of focusing on the 'demand' side of reforms and working with citizens in the countries of Central Asia to bolster support for the reforms advocated by the EU.<sup>60</sup> As the EaP countries have already taken steps to secure visa-facilitation agreements with the EU and have broader access to programmes such as Horizon Europe and Erasmus+, it would be highly beneficial for the EU to involve them in cooperation with the Central Asian countries. Including the EaP partners in advancing collaboration in these fields would strengthen the process. A regular format for cooperation and consultation would present interesting opportunities for both sides, fostering cooperation across institutions of higher learning. Designing a triangular partnership—between the EU, the EaP and Central Asia—could foster the development of new opportunities in this regard. Twinning programmes could also take a similar approach, with participants selected from the EaP region as well, thus further fostering cooperation between the EaP countries and the Central Asian partners.

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<sup>58</sup> In interviews with the author, the heads of missions to the EU from all the Central Asian countries stated that this was their number-one priority vis-à-vis the EU.

<sup>59</sup> *Macrotrends*, 'Kazakhstan Population 1950–2024' (2024).

<sup>60</sup> E. Dzhuraev, 'Remarks by Emil Dzhuraev', Rondeli International Conference, Tbilisi, 5–6 March 2024.



# Recommendations

## Recommendation one: improve connectivity via the Middle Corridor

The funds which are currently allocated to the EaP and the Central Asian countries should be restructured under a new Middle Corridor financial support mechanism. The EU should consider issuing infrastructure bonds to raise funding for larger Middle Corridor projects to help the EaP countries where EU loans and development funds run short. EaP connectivity summits should be held: an annual summit of the heads of state could bring together the EU member states, relevant institutions and the heads of government of the 11 partner countries. A business forum, attached to the summit, could bring officials, business and industry together. A Middle Corridor committee for the EU and these countries should be set up, meeting at least bi-annually in the partner countries to oversee progress. Various subcommittees could be set up as needed to foster as much contact and cooperation between the bureaucratic and the business communities as possible.

## Recommendation two: establish a high-level political and security dialogue

The EU should consider reshaping existing security dialogues to include both the Central Asian and the EaP countries, possibly developing a two-track approach in which one track would focus on Central Asia and the second on the Middle Corridor, including the EaP partners. Opportunities should be provided for the CSDP missions operating in the EaP countries, particularly those with a border-assistance mandate, to exchange experiences with the relevant institutions in Central Asia. To help develop security-related cooperation, an annual EaP security forum should be organised, hosted by one of the partner countries, at which progress achieved and the way forward should be reviewed.



## Recommendation three: enhance institutional cooperation and sanction compliance

EaP countries' experts and officials should assist the Central Asian countries with fully implementing their PCAs and EPCAs. An integrated approach should be taken to support information-technology capacity building and the development of free economic zones, which are of interest to the transit countries of the Middle Corridor in both the EaP and the Central Asian region. The EU should develop a consultative process for all EaP and Central Asian partners to address enforcement of the EU-imposed sanctions regime, and it should conduct integrated training and assistance programmes for the relevant agencies to enable them to adopt risk-mitigation measures. The technical capacities of the CSDP missions should be utilised to assist with the development of streamlined procedures for enforcement of the sanctions regime.

## Recommendation four: improve sustainability

A greater exchange of experiences should be facilitated, as the EaP countries are more advanced than the Central Asian states in sustainability matters, and a joint framework developed to address some of the shared problems—for example, the environmental impact of the development of the Middle Corridor. The involvement of the EU in developing local water-management schemes also offers a potentially important opportunity for the EU to strengthen its strategic footing in the region. Expanding the EU4Energy framework, by providing high-level political visibility and developing more regular and active consultative formats of cooperation, could form a strong basis for the EU's new vision for its Eastern Neighbourhood policy. Establishing an EaP Energy Forum could upgrade the possibilities offered by the EU4Energy framework and give it a more institutional approach.



## Recommendation five: develop civil society and people-to-people contacts

A new EaP Civil Society Platform with a two-track approach could organise its work into subgroups, grouping the countries not by their geography, but by the political structures under which the civil society organisations operate. The EU should consider enhancing mobility through visa-facilitation agreements, strengthening people-to-people contacts, and promoting tourism to Central Asian countries and raising these countries' cultural profiles within the EU. Building on the Erasmus+ Mobility partnership and the Horizon Europe programme would further promote cooperation in the field of education. Exchanges through twinning and other programmes should also be established to promote people-to-people contacts.

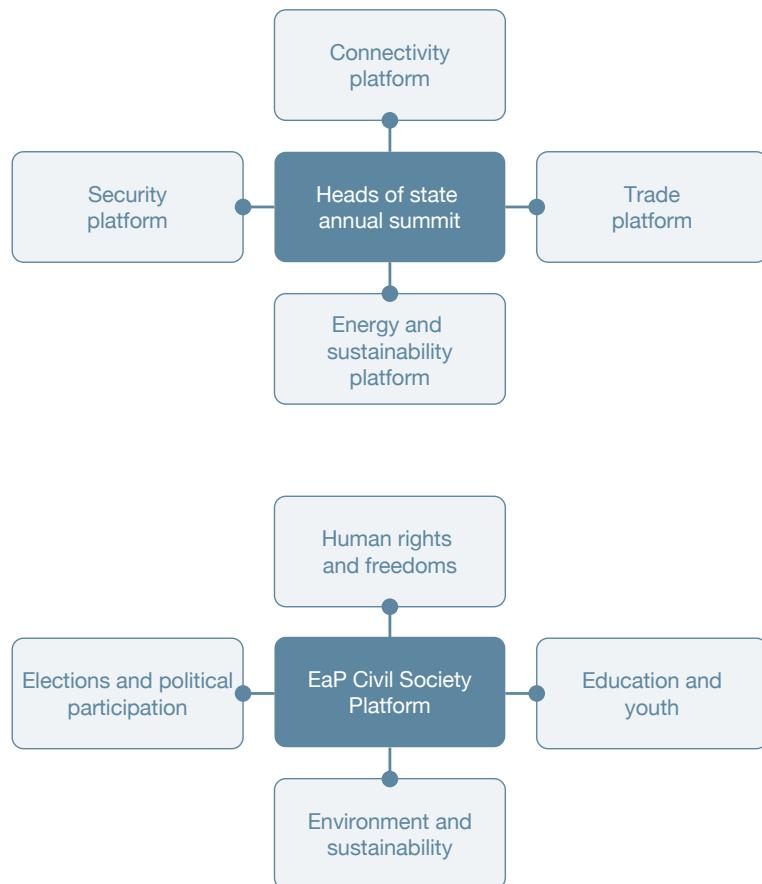
## Recommendation six: change the political and institutional framework

The new EaP should be redesigned as the Eastern Connectivity Partnership, with an institutional framework that addresses the issues of connectivity, trade, security, and energy and sustainability through multilateral platforms connecting the EaP countries and Central Asia. The Eastern Connectivity Partnership would take the form of a joint institutional framework, working at every level from the national leadership down to working groups focused on those areas above that have been identified as priorities for the renewed EaP. With four policy pillars, the EU could replicate the institutional framework of the EaP in terms of the design of the multilateral cooperation platforms.

The new structure should create the appropriate structures for each platform, for instance, committees to promote cooperation at the governmental and civil society levels.



**Figure 1 A multilateral EaP framework for the EU's partner countries**



# Conclusion



What this paper has attempted to do is present a possible way forward for the EU's policy for both the countries that are today covered by the EaP and the five countries in Central Asia. The momentum for change is building as the EaP in its current form has largely exhausted its potential. In addition, the countries in Central Asia have become strategically more important to the EU and its future, while the geopolitical competition from Russia and China in the region is not going away. Access to the vast energy resources and critical raw materials of the region, the strategic importance of the transportation networks, and the security challenges that are looming from across the border with Afghanistan and beyond, all make Central Asia of vital geopolitical importance for the EU. Under the circumstances, time is of the essence, and the EU needs to seize the momentum with a new geopolitical strategy for the region.

After reviewing the state of play between the EU and the 11 countries of the EaP and the Central Asian region, as well as the strategic interests identified by the EU and the political actors in those countries, this paper offers a new way forward.

Focusing on four strategically important platforms for cooperation—connectivity, security, trade, and sustainability and energy—the new EU strategy, which should be called the Eastern Partnership for Connectivity, would build a policy framework through which the EU and the governments in those countries could coordinate efforts to deepen cooperation. This partnership would help to develop a stronger multi-lateral and regional approach to implementing projects that are of strategic importance to the EU. These include developing the transit and energy potential of this region to counter China's Belt and Road Initiative, gaining access to the energy resources and strategically important materials located there, and building connectivity between the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea regions. It would, in effect, make Central Asia the neighbour of a neighbour of the EU, and geographically and politically diminish the great distance which currently exists between the EU and the Central Asian countries. This would also send a strong message about the EU's role as a geopolitical player to Russia and China, as well as to Iran, which has also shown some interest in becoming a more influential actor in the region, having recently become a full member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.

Another dimension where the EU's policy with regard to these countries should be better integrated is in support for people-to-people contacts and civil society. Through the proposed Civil Society Partnership for the East, the EU could develop a strong platform of cooperation for non-governmental actors in the coun-



tries of Central Asia and the EaP, many of which, albeit to differing extents, share the challenges of dealing with restrictive political regimes.

Dividing the policy into two separate tracks would make it easier for the EU to address the challenges of implementing its strategic objectives in the region. It would also improve the likelihood of finding a framework that covers all the countries, from ones that are candidates for EU membership, such as Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine, to those that have not even signed PCAs with the EU, such as Turkmenistan. Establishing such a framework is necessary to move the EU's agenda for these countries forward, and this paper offers one way of approaching this challenge.



# Appendix



# Current status of the bilateral relationships between the EU and the partner countries

## EaP countries

### *Armenia*

Armenia was not initially interested in pursuing an Association Agreement or a DCFTA with the EU when it was proposed in 2013. The Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement it signed on 24 November 2017 represented a weaker form of cooperation compared to the agreements that Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova had formed with the EU within the EaP framework. The agreement offered Armenia a broad framework for partnership with the EU, including the possibility of free trade and enhanced cooperation. However, since then Armenia has experienced a shift in perspective towards the EU, driven by both internal political changes and a growing dissatisfaction with the Eurasian Economic Union, which is reflective of a broader desire to diversify its partnerships and reduce reliance on Russian-dominated structures. The EU has deployed two CSDP missions to Armenia since 2022 to help stabilise the security environment following its conflict with Azerbaijan.<sup>61</sup> Armenia has simultaneously strengthened its relationship with the EU by withdrawing from Russian-dominated frameworks of cooperation—the president of Armenia announced the decision to leave the Russian-led Organization for Collective Security on 12 June 2024.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Council of the European Union, 'Eastern Partnership – Armenia'.

<sup>62</sup> Stratfor, 'Armenia: Prime Minister Pashinian Says Armenia Will Leave CSTO', 12 June 2024.



### *Azerbaijan*

EU–Azerbaijan relations are based on the EU–Azerbaijan PCA, which has been in force since 1999. Negotiations on a new and upgraded framework agreement are at an advanced stage, with the changes designed to enhance and reflect the deepening cooperation in various sectors, strengthen policy dialogue and boost trade. Cooperation between the EU and Azerbaijan is also guided by the joint Partnership Priorities, established in 2018. Azerbaijan, a strategic energy partner for the EU, plays a crucial role in the Southern Gas Corridor and provides 4.3% of the EU’s oil supply.<sup>63</sup> However, within the EaP, Azerbaijan has only selectively engaged in political, economic and sectoral cooperation with the EU, often bypassing reforms that it deems contrary to its national interests.

### *Belarus*

Belarus is part of the EaP in name more than practice. Before the fraudulent elections in August 2020, relations between the EU and Belarus had improved slightly. Belarus had engaged with the EU briefly and implemented a few of its proposed reforms. However, this period of progress came to a halt and the improved relations were effectively severed due to democratic backsliding in Belarus in the run up to, conduct and aftermath of the August 2020 elections. In June 2021 Belarus announced its withdrawal from the EaP and suspended its readmission agreement with the EU, along with other arrangements such as the EU–Belarus human rights dialogue. The EU suspended its visa-facilitation agreement with Belarus in November 2021.<sup>64</sup> Currently, the EU’s policy towards the country is based on a two-fold approach: individual and targeted restrictive measures against the government, and support for democracy-promoting organisations.

### *Georgia*

Georgia was granted the status of EU candidate country in December 2023 and has historically been an advanced EaP partner. However, the decision of the governing party to adopt a law requiring foreign-funded organisations to register as the representatives of foreign powers in June 2024, along with democratic backsliding, has set back the country’s progress. Following parliamentary elections in October 2024, which were not recognised as free or fair by election-monitoring organisations including the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, in November the ruling Georgian Dream party declared its intention to

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<sup>63</sup> European External Action Service, ‘European Union and Azerbaijan’ (22 July 2021).

<sup>64</sup> Council of the European Union, ‘Eastern Partnership – Belarus’.



freeze the accession process until 2028. Since the 2008 Russo-Georgian War, the EU has stepped up as a security actor in Georgia by providing a CSDP monitoring mission—the EU Monitoring Mission in Georgia; as yet Georgian Dream has not requested its withdrawal from Georgia.

#### *Moldova*

In December 2023 the EU agreed to start accession talks with Moldova. While the country is facing security challenges in the breakaway region of Transnistria and tensions are simmering in Gagauzia, a region dominated by a Turkic-speaking ethnic minority, Moldova has managed to move forward with its reform agenda. The EU's conditions for opening accession negotiations were set out as nine key requirements for reforms in anti-corruption, the judiciary and other areas. Today Moldova is deemed a successful candidate country, having opened accession negotiations with the EU just two years after applying for EU membership. Since June 2024 its relationship with the EU has been structured through the framework of the accession negotiations.<sup>65</sup> The EU is also playing an important role as a security actor in Moldova through a CSDP mission launched in April 2023—the EU Partnership Mission in the Republic of Moldova.<sup>66</sup>

#### *Ukraine*

Despite the immense pressure facing Ukraine, the reform agenda is moving forwards and, like Moldova, Ukraine is advancing in its accession negotiations with the EU, having managed to satisfactorily complete reforms in seven key areas. While both countries started accession talks in December 2023, the EU did not begin the formal process of accession negotiations with Moldova and Ukraine until after the European Council decision of June 2024. Through its Peace Facility, as well as the CSDP framework, the EU has considerably strengthened its role as a security actor in Ukraine, providing a total of €88 billion in economic, military and humanitarian assistance to the country since the 2022 Russian invasion.<sup>67</sup> The EU has emerged as a key geopolitical actor since the outbreak of the Russo-Ukrainian War, and its political positioning has played a decisive role in the ongoing conflict.

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<sup>65</sup> Council of the European Union, 'EU Opens Accession Negotiations With Moldova', Press release, 25 June 2024.

<sup>66</sup> Council of the European Union, 'Eastern Partnership – Moldova'.

<sup>67</sup> EU External Action, 'EU Support to Ukraine'.



## The Central Asian countries

The EU's engagement with the Central Asian countries that emerged after the collapse of the USSR initially took place through the multilateral TACIS programme. This initiative, launched in 1991, aimed to support the newly independent states in their efforts to achieve economic liberalisation, political reform, market development and democratic governance. TACIS remained in place until 2006, when it was succeeded, in 2007, by the EU's first Central Asia Strategy, which was renewed in 2019.<sup>68</sup> The 2007 strategy envisaged a wide range of cooperation areas, from security, human rights and the rule of law to the environment and energy, and regional cooperation.<sup>69</sup> The strategy introduced formal mechanisms for dialogue and cooperation, including annual EU–Central Asia ministerial meetings, which now serve as key platforms for regular updates and co-ordination. It also established the ongoing EU–Central Asia Human Rights Dialogues, providing a dedicated forum for addressing human rights issues in the region. In addition, the EU has made notable progress in supporting Central Asian countries to improve their border-management systems. However, in more substantive areas, such as the rule of law and human rights, wider regional cooperation among the Central Asian states and EU–Central Asia energy-sector cooperation, there have been no significant successes.

### *Kazakhstan*

In December 2015 the EU and Kazakhstan signed an EPCA. This new agreement was the first of its kind with a Central Asian partner. It enables the EU and its member states to advance and strengthen cooperation with Kazakhstan in key policy areas such as trade and investment, justice and home affairs, and economic and financial matters, as well as to collaborate on matters of energy, transport, environment and climate change, employment and social affairs, culture, and education and research. On 7 November 2022 the European Commission and Kazakhstan signed a Memorandum of Understanding on a strategic partnership in sustainable raw materials, batteries and renewable hydrogen.<sup>70</sup>

### *Kyrgyzstan*

In July 2019, reflecting the progress in bilateral relations and the emergence of new areas of cooperation, the EU and the Kyrgyz Republic launched negotiations on an EPCA. The agreement was signed in

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<sup>68</sup> M. Russell, *The EU's New Central Asia Strategy*, European Parliamentary Research Service, Briefing PE 633.162 (January 2019).

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>70</sup> European External Action Service, 'European Union and Kazakhstan' (19 October 2023).



2024. Currently, Kyrgyzstan benefits from the EU's GSP+ trading regime, which 'allows the Kyrgyz Republic to strengthen its economy by exporting 6200 products to the European Union without any tariffs/with no tax duties regime'.<sup>71</sup>

#### *Tajikistan*

The EU's engagement with Tajikistan has grown considerably since the country gained independence in 1991. The partnership is currently governed by a PCA, which has been in effect since 2010. In early 2023 the EU and Tajikistan launched negotiations for an EPCA, which were concluded in 2024. The priority areas for cooperation are the Trans-Caspian Corridor, digital connectivity, energy, water, education and skills, migration, the rule of law and civil society.<sup>72</sup>

#### *Turkmenistan*

Bilateral relations between the EU and Turkmenistan are currently governed by an Interim Trade Agreement, in place since 2010, while the ratification of a PCA by the European Parliament remains pending. Within the framework of this agreement, 'the EU and Turkmenistan hold annual meetings to discuss key aspects of bilateral relations, notably in: (i) trade and economy; (ii) the EU–Central Asia Strategy implementation; (iii) political and economic developments; (iv) and key aspects of EU development cooperation programs'.<sup>73</sup>

#### *Uzbekistan*

In 2022 the EU and Uzbekistan concluded negotiations on an EPCA which advances their cooperation, particularly in the areas of trade and economic relations, and the agreement was signed in October 2025. The EU's priority areas of cooperation with Uzbekistan include support for democracy, the digital transformation, the development of an eco-friendly food sector, inclusive and green growth, and improvements to labour conditions and the general climate for business. The EU has a particular focus on helping to integrate the country into the global economy: it has therefore supported Uzbekistan's efforts to join the WTO and trades with it under a GSP+ regime.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> European External Action Service, 'European Union and Kyrgyz Republic' (27 July 2021).

<sup>72</sup> European Commission, 'Tajikistan' (23 June 2025).

<sup>73</sup> European External Action Service, 'European Union and Turkmenistan' (22 July 2021).

<sup>74</sup> Global Sustainable Partnerships Hub, 'Uzbekistan: Country Information'.

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This paper argues that the Eastern Partnership (EaP) must be restructured fundamentally to reflect the diverging political trajectories of its members and the EU's expanding strategic interests, which extend from the Black Sea to Central Asia. While some EaP countries are pursuing EU integration, others remain in a geopolitical grey zone similar to that of the Central Asian states. This means that the existing framework no longer fits regional realities. As Central Asian countries increasingly seek stronger ties with the EU to counterbalance Russia and China, and as the EU prioritises deeper engagement with both the Eastern Partnership and Central Asian countries, the paper proposes expanding and redesigning the Eastern Partnership's multilateral formats to include Central Asia. By focusing on shared priorities such as connectivity, security, trade, and societal links, the EU could develop a more coherent, relevant, and strategically aligned policy for the 10 countries spanning the former Soviet space.



Wilfried  
**Martens Centre**  
for European Studies