

The Future of Eastern Partnership Policy
Policy paper for Stockholm Center of Eastern Europe Studies

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The EU needs to have a very clear and simple understanding of the strategic goals of its neighborhood policy: it is better for the EU to export stability into those regions, than to import instability from them. When discussing about strategic autonomy of the EU, first of all we need to understand that EU's strategic autonomy starts with a strategic responsibility for development and stability in the EU's neighborhood. Development and stability in EU neighborhood can be achieved only if there is a possibility for the region to integrate itself with the EU. Since 1990, there isn't a single example of a post-communist and post-totalitarian country in EU's neighborhood, which was able to create its stability and prosperity on its own, without an integration towards the EU.

Success of Central Europe and Baltic countries back in 1990 was possible mainly because those countries went through rapid process of integration towards the EU. Clear perspective of EU integration for those countries, available since 1993 when the EU announced the so-called Copenhagen criteria, was permanently keeping the newly democratic countries of Central Europe on high level of motivation for necessary reforms.

Due to different reasons the regions of Western Balkans and Eastern Partnership were not able to follow the same path of European integration from the very beginning of 1990's. The Western Balkan region was able to join this path only when the Balkan war was stopped and the EU Thessaloniki Declaration stating the goal of the Western Balkan EU integration was adopted in 2003. The EU Eastern Partnership policy for its 6 Eastern neighbors, quite divergent in their development of democracy institutions and in their integration ambitions, was announced in 2011.

Three countries from the Eastern Partnership region (Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia) declared their ambition to seek for the goal of European integration. A lot of progress was achieved by those countries with the implementation of Association Agreements and Free Trade Agreements signed in 2013. Armenia is attempting to follow their example. The leaders of Democratic Belarus are declaring that they will follow the same way, when democratic transition will be concluded in Belarus. Authorities of Azerbaijan are showing less interest and ambitions in pursuing integration agenda.

Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia, despite their declared ambitions to seek integration with the EU, until now are not getting a clear answer from the EU about their possibility to become EU members. This is what makes them different from the Western Balkan countries, which were promised such a perspective by the EU. Despite this difference in EU's approach towards the two similar regions, the development of those regions is not much different. Until recently, Georgia was considered a frontrunner of integration not only among the Eastern Partnership countries, but even if to compare with the Western Balkan countries¹.

This summer, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine declared a creation of the Associated Trio format. Its goal is to pursue a more ambitious integration agenda. This shows that these countries have bigger ambitions and that they are not satisfied with Eastern Partnership policy instruments and perspectives, which until now the EU is providing for those countries.

¹ <https://www.ceps.eu/download/publication/?id=32341&pdf=Balkan-and-Eastern-European-Comparisons.pdf>

Despite all the progress achieved by all Associated Trio countries during the recent decade, the situation with the EU membership perspective for them remained unchanged - the EU was not providing such a clear perspective 10 years ago, it is not clear also now.

Such a perspective depends not only on the progress of the Associated Trio in the implementation of reforms, but also on the deficit of political will inside EU to give more clear perspective to those countries.

Without a much clearer perspective from the EU side on what is the next big thing on the integration road, motivation for reforms in the Associated Trio countries will start to erode, political polarization in those countries will be increasing, less attention will be paid for real integration issues. We can only guess how this erosion of motivation will look like but this erosion will increase significantly if EU institutions will continue the current EU Eastern Partnership policy for the next 10 years without giving the Associated Trio a more clear integration perspective.

That is why when we are talking about post-2020 Eastern Partnership policy, we need to see that not only EaP countries need to speed-up their reforms, but also the EU needs to reform its policy towards the Eastern Partnership region and especially towards the Associated Trio countries.

In order to better understand how the EU EaP policy should be reformed, we need to have in mind that the most important strategic goal of this EU policy should be giving the Associated Trio countries next ambitious and strategic goal on their integration road which would be attractive and practically achievable for both sides: for the EU itself and for the Associated Trio countries also.

It is a proper time to recognize political reality: for the time being the EU is not ready to give the Associated Trio countries a clear perspective for their full membership in the EU. There are different reasons of why the EU is not and for some period of time will not be ready, but one of the most important reasons is the need for deep reforms inside the EU and its institutions. With complicated decision-making procedure inside the EU when each member state has a veto right it is difficult to make decisions in the EU even now, with 27 Member States. It will be even more complicated or almost impossible to take decisions if EU will enlarge to six new Western Balkan countries and three Trio countries.

The issues with the rule of law in Poland and Hungary are making other EU Member States even more reluctant to open the doors for a full-scale enlargement.

On different occasions, President Emanuel Macron declared that without reforms of the EU there will be no possibility for future enlargement and for including new members in EU institutions.

Many experts [European Stability Initiative², CEPS³] warn that notwithstanding all the political promises coming from EU institutions, even countries from the Western Balkan region will not have a possibility to become members of the EU. It is very clear, that EU accession negotiations between the EU and the Western Balkan countries are in some kind of stagnation or impasse, which makes both sides increasingly dissatisfied and losing trust in the whole process. The underlying reason for such an unsatisfactory development is the same: despite good-willed political declarations on membership perspective from the EU side, the EU lacks real political will to push the process forward,

² <https://www.esiweb.org/sites/default/files/newsletter/pdf/ESI%20-%20Slovenia%20Serbia%20and%20an%20EU-Balkan%20breakthrough%20in%202021%20-%209%20March%202021.pdf>

³ <https://www.ceps.eu/ceps-publications/a-template-for-staged-accession-to-the-eu/>

hence the Western Balkan countries are starting to lose trust in the architecture of the process and possibility of progress.

The same is happening with the Eastern Partnership policy: if nothing will change in the EU policy towards the Eastern Partnership region, especially towards the Associated Trio countries, it can happen that also during the next decade nothing will change in the integration process of Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine - they will keep asking for a membership perspective and will keep getting the same answers from the EU institutions: make the reforms and then the EU institutions will decide.

However, this is simply kicking the can down the road and it frustrates both the Associated Trio countries and the EU politicians. As said before - the outcome of such a long-term impasse will be very negative - motivation for reforms in the Associated Trio countries will continue to erode, political instability in the region will continue to emerge more and more often, third countries (Russia, China) will use such a situation for the advantage of their strategic interests in the region, and that is how EU will fail with its strategic responsibility to take care about the development and stability in EU's neighborhood. The EU will start to import more and more instability if it will fail with integration policy, the only way to export stability into its neighborhood. Such a tectonic negative development in the region, which is possible to register only in a longer time perspective, will be a clear consequence and evidence of "Westlessness", the major problem of the West, if to use terminology of recent Munich Security Conference.

So, those are the arguments for the need of strategic reforms of the EU Eastern Partnership policy. That is why we hope that in the nearest future the EU institutions, while discussing the future of Eastern Partnership policy and especially its policy towards the Associated Trio countries, will look not only into technical elements and so-called "deliverables", but also take a deeper look into what needs to be changed from the EU side in "philosophy" of the Associated Trio integration.

Our proposal was laid out in our recent policy paper "Eastern Partnership "Beyond Westlessness"⁴ and is very simple - if for time being there is no realistic perspective for the Associated Trio countries to get a clear and ambitious full membership perspective from the EU, let's push for an intermediate but realistic and practically achievable status, which would allow the Trio countries to get majority of full membership benefits, but would also allow to avoid the stumbling question about their integration into EU institutions.

Here we need to bring back the Romano Prodi formula from 2002 - to offer the EU neighbors the possibility of getting a status, which is described as "everything but institutions". We can call it a Norwegian model, a model of the membership in the European Economic Area, or full integration into Single Market and Four Freedoms, - there is no essential difference. This is exactly what the European Parliament has asked for in its very important Resolution on the future of Eastern Partnership policy, adopted last year. In all these cases it means the same - full economic integration into Single Market (which demands implementation of more than 70% of *aqui communautaire*), functioning democracy, rule of law system and brings all the benefits from that integration. In 1999, before existence of joining the EU (and its single market), Lithuania's GDP/capita in PPP terms was 36%, now it reaches almost 85% EU average. Similar effect can be achieved by the Associated Trio countries, if integration into Single Market will become a clearly defined strategic intermediate priority.

The question of how the Associated Trio countries will participate in the work of EU institutions can be postponed until internal reforms of EU institutions will be implemented. Such reforms can take

⁴ <https://elpnariai.lt/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/EaP-Beyond-Westlessness.pdf>

quite a long period of time. In addition, there are proposals from think tanks [CEPS] on how new members could participate in activities of EU institutions in a progressive and conditional way, dependent on the implementation of reforms in those countries. However, that should be a separate discussion, not affecting decisions on integration of those countries into the Single Market.

The integration of the Associated Trio countries from the EaP region (also of the Western Balkan countries, if that would be their choice) into the Single Market and Four Freedoms can be fully realized during the next decade, or maybe even during a shorter period of time. There is absolute clarity on what needs to be done by both the EU and the Associated Trio in such case. For reference one can look up the Norwegian Foreign Ministry website containing detailed explications what kind of legal acts Norway needed to adapt to EU legislation in order to integrate into the EU Single Market (EEA). According to Norway, here are 22 areas which are covered by the Single Market legislation and which needs to be implemented by the countries aspiring to integrate into EU Single Market. It is possible to do it.

The goal of intermediate status of the EU “Single Market club” membership does not preclude the goal of full membership in the EU at a later stage. This is what Austria, Sweden and Finland did after achieving the integration into the Single Market. Norway and Iceland made a different choice at that time - they decided to stay in that intermediate status of membership in the EEA and not to seek full membership in the EU.

Now is the time to find a way how to move forward from that impasse of Trio integration, which we are witnessing for the last 10 years. For countries like Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova the biggest danger is to stay in that impasse for next 10 years.

I would urge both EU institutions and national governments of the Associated Trio countries to stop kicking the can down the road and to make a decisive move towards EU integration into the intermediate status as described above. Indeed, 70% of integration to the Single Market is less than 100% of full membership in the EU, but it is way more than 0% we have now.

It is achievable: in our paper we describe in detail the entire process, but it can be subtracted to a very simple logic: let’s move forward from today’s impasse, because if we will keep on going the same way as before - we all will lose at the end.

Both sides must change the gear now. The governments of Associated Trio countries need to move ahead and take the rational decision of asking the EU for clear possibilities of accelerated integration into the Single Market as an intermediate status for the time being. But also the EU needs to move forward and to provide the Associated Trio countries with such realistic perspective.

The realistic perspective, which both sides could trust, requires not only a clear agreement on what needs to be done to achieve the integration into the Single Market in the period of next five years, it also needs a clearly defined process of regular progress evaluations, negotiations and possibility to compete for best performance. There is also a need of clearly designed efforts to strengthen political will to support such process inside the EU and it can be done by repeating the experience of so-called “Berlin process”, which was established in 2014 in order to facilitate the Western Balkan integration process. It was accompanied by a special “Berlin process” coalition of like-minded EU Member States. The same should be done in order to facilitate integration of the Associated Trio countries into the Single Market: special coalition of like-minded EU Member States needs to be urgently created, which first of all will encompass the EU Presidencies of the forthcoming decade: the Czech Republic (2022), Sweden (2023), Poland (2025), Lithuania (2027), Latvia (2028). France and Germany are

also very much needed in that coalition, also other Nordic and Central European countries should be part of that coalition.

This is how the new EU Eastern Partnership policy should look like. The EU needs a strategic and effective policy towards Eastern Partnership region. This is the most significant item of the EU's geopolitical agenda. As rightly put by the European Parliament in its recent Report on EU policy towards Russia, success of the Associated Trio countries, which the EU can create with its ambitious integration policy, will have a major inspirational power also on ordinary Russian citizens for transformation of their country and returning it back on the democratic way of development. This should be the major strategic goal for the EU, because this is the only way to make the dream of Europe - whole, free and at peace a reality of the XXI century.