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# **Insights on EaP's 10 years anniversary**



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Ten years since the launch of the Eastern Partnership, Georgia has come closer to the EU than ever before, becoming a key ally and strategic partner. Despite some bumps on the road, Georgian public and particularly its youth<sup>1</sup> continues to be an ardent supporter of the European integration process. All key stakeholders in Georgia agree that the EaP cannot be the final stop and that the country should seek deeper integration with the EU<sup>2</sup>. While opinions in Brussels and indeed the member states' capitals vary on whether this enthusiasm ought to be embraced, the overwhelming pro-European public opinion presents considerable leverage to advance the reform process and bring Georgia closer to the EU.

The Association agreement (AA), including the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) and visa-free travel, are clearly prime achievements, having accelerated political association, economic integration and enhanced partnership between the EU and Georgia. New opportunities through projects such as EU4business, ENPARD<sup>3</sup>, Erasmus+, Horizon 2020, etc have also delivered tangible benefits to different social and age groups, including students, academicians, farmers, entrepreneurs, etc. The numbers give a clear testimony: Since 2009, the EU has provided financial and technical support to 1,600 cooperatives and has helped to establish 59 information and consultation centres through the ENPARD programme; 40,000 small and medium enterprises (SMEs), microenterprises and farmers have received loans; and a total of €130 million in loans are available for innovative SMEs and small midcap companies under Horizon 2020<sup>4</sup>; EaP has provided some life changing experience particularly for the youth - under Erasmus+, over 5,500 students and academic staff exchanges have taken place between Georgia and the EU; over 9,300 young people and youth workers from Georgia have been involved in joint exchanges, training and volunteering projects<sup>5</sup>. These benefits have helped some of those programmes' visibility to surpass that of EaP itself.

In those ten years, Georgians have increasingly become aware that the European integration process constitutes a long-term project which brings increased mobility, trade, and better quality of life gradually. Though many have hoped for swifter reforms and changes, Georgians continue to demonstrate resilient support for the country's European goal, with 82 percent approving EU

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<sup>1</sup> 83% of respondents aged 18-34 support Georgia's declared goal of joining the EU. The Caucasus Research Resource Centers. NDI: Public attitudes in Georgia. November-December 2019. Available at <https://www.caucasusbarometer.org/en/nn2019ge/JOINER-by-AGEGROUP/>

<sup>2</sup> All major political parties supported inclusion of Euro-Atlantic aspirations in the Georgian Constitution and urges Constitutional organs to take all measures within the scope of their competences to ensure full integration of Georgia into the European Union. <https://matsne.gov.ge/en/document/view/30346?publication=35>

<sup>3</sup> The European Union provides support to rural development and agriculture in Georgia through ENPARD, the European Neighbourhood Programme for Agriculture and Rural Development. Implemented since 2013, the main goal of the ENPARD programme is to reduce rural poverty. Programme assistance is provided to the government and also to NGOs working directly with communities on the ground. More available at <http://enpard.ge/en/>

<sup>4</sup> EU Neighbours East. *Facts and figures about EU-Georgia relations*. Available at <https://www.euneighbours.eu/en/east/stay-informed/publications/facts-and-figures-about-eu-georgia-relations-0>

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.



membership<sup>6</sup>. Particularly the youth sees the European integration process as the strongest mechanism for the country's democratic development and economic prosperity.

While the EaP continues to be a relevant foreign policy project, it does not represent a finish line for Georgia. As stressed by Georgia's foreign minister, David Zalkaliani "for the EaP to remain effective and successful in the next ten years, it needs to stay flexible, dynamic and forward-looking<sup>7</sup>." Likewise, Ukraine and Moldova, which have exerted comparable reform efforts and signed Association Agreements with the EU, have been increasingly pushing for more differentiation that would provide more instruments for the associated partners to deepen economic and political cooperation, eventually facilitating their full EU membership. Some sceptic EU capitals have been fast to exclude "all prospects or all mechanisms of EU integration or membership" from the EaP.<sup>8</sup> This happens in contrast to the 2017 EaP Summit declaration in which the EU Council itself recognized the need for the differentiation principle within the policy<sup>9</sup>.

Now that the EaP recently reached its 10-year milestone, the EU and its partners need to refine a forward-looking and ambitious agenda that will enable partners to engage with the EU in accordance with their own capabilities and interests. EaP's associated countries have already declared their ambitions of "gradual integration aimed at achieving full access to the EU single market" as well as "opening new horizons in implementing four freedoms."<sup>10</sup> Now the EU needs to acknowledge that the partnership between Georgia, as well as other associated countries, and the EU can only last and endure if there is a shared future wherein the EaP represents a facilitating instrument for partners to deepen their integration with the EU and to come closer to the full membership. Therefore, the EU must embrace its leverage to push reforms and get the AA countries to deliver on these in their complex region rather than overemphasising that the EaP ultimately excludes a membership perspective. Without the latter, the EU may endanger its own policy goals in the region.

In December 2019, the Euronest Parliamentary Assembly<sup>11</sup> has presented a new flagship initiative – the Trio Plus Strategy<sup>12</sup> - that paves the way to establishing the European Trio Process with deeper integration instruments for the EU and its associated countries. The initiative is comparable

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<sup>6</sup> The Caucasus Research Resource Centers. NDI: Public attitudes in Georgia. November-December 2019. Available at <https://bit.ly/3d3VV8A>

<sup>7</sup> The minister of foreign affairs of Georgia. "What is the Eastern Partnership and what it's not". July, 2019. Available at <https://bit.ly/33jPwlt>

<sup>8</sup> Radio Liberty, "France: Eastern Partnership Doesn't Mean EU Membership". January, 2020. Available at <https://bit.ly/2xOmXkq>

<sup>9</sup> Joint Declaration of the Eastern Partnership Summit. Brussels, 24 November 2017. Available at <https://bit.ly/2WjrtSi>

<sup>10</sup> Civil.ge, "Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine Unveil "Ambitious Agenda" for Further Integration into EU". December, 2019. Available at <https://civil.ge/archives/330481>

<sup>11</sup> The Euronest Parliamentary Assembly is the inter-parliamentary forum in which members of the European Parliament and the national parliaments of Ukraine, Moldova, Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia participate and forge closer political and economic ties with the European Union. <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/euronest/en/home.html>

<sup>12</sup> 8th Ordinary Session of the Euronest PA - 8-10 December 2019. The future of the Trio Plus Strategy 2030: building a future of Eastern Partnership. Full resolution text available at <https://bit.ly/2lPetvJ>



to the Berlin Process that was launched in 2014 and aimed at bringing the Western Balkan countries closer to the EU<sup>13</sup>. The initiative, if taken up by the EU, would also increase appetite of the partner countries to undertake necessary reforms aimed at building a common area of shared democracy, prosperity, stability and increased cooperation.

The positive impact of the EaP is undeniable in Georgia. However, in order for the policy to maintain its transformational impact, the EU and its partners need to embrace an enhanced and future-oriented vision for the next decade of the EaP. To this end, the Trio Plus Strategy represents a new starting point for the EaP to ensure lasting and irreversible achievements and deepening cooperation between the EU and its partners.

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<sup>13</sup> Euronest Parliamentary Assembly. Resolution on the future of the Trio Plus Strategy 2030: building a future of Eastern Partnership. [http://www.epgencms.europarl.europa.eu/cmsdata/upload/439b3edc-e523-4a0e-a9bc-e6c8db51ed75/NEST\\_8th\\_urgency\\_resolution\\_EN.pdf](http://www.epgencms.europarl.europa.eu/cmsdata/upload/439b3edc-e523-4a0e-a9bc-e6c8db51ed75/NEST_8th_urgency_resolution_EN.pdf)