

Weak but stable: The future of the EU's Eastern Partnership ahead of the 2017 summit



On 24 November, leaders from the EU's member states and the six Eastern partner countries will gather in Brussels for the 2017 Eastern Partnership summit. [Max Fras](#) previews the summit and assesses what the future might hold for the Eastern Partnership given the delicate situation between the EU and some of its Eastern neighbours.

The upcoming Eastern Partnership (EaP) summit in Brussels on 24 November will mark another two years of uneasy relations between the EU and its Eastern neighbours. Whilst the most EU-minded states (Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine) have reached the most important milestones (association agreements and visa liberalisation), the outer circle (Armenia, Azerbaijan and Belarus) seems set to stabilise its weak relationship with the bloc through other types of agreements.

Despite the overall weak character of mutual relations, the prospects for EU-EaP co-operation look stable with reasons for cautious optimism. On the other hand, as both internal EU pressures and external challenges emerge, the initiative needs to adapt in order to regain momentum.

The AA Club

The three EaP countries most eager to strengthen ties with the EU concluded their association agreements in 2014 (all have now entered into force). For Georgia and Moldova, this was achieved with relative ease. The Ukrainian path to association was not without controversy, but since the agreement's signing the country has kept a steady pro-European course in its foreign policy. On top of the association agreements, but through an independent process, all three countries now benefit from visa-free access to the EU.

It should be noted that all three visa liberalisation processes took longer than anticipated and were accompanied by alarmist forecasts of mass migration and a potential 'crime wave' from the East. Since entering force, however, there has been remarkably little media coverage in the EU. Indeed, it is questionable whether many EU citizens (beyond countries neighbouring the EaP region) are aware of the existence of visa-free regimes with Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine.



Eastern Partnership Youth Forum, Warsaw, June 2017, Credit: Max Fras

Unfortunately for both the AA Club and the EU, there are no strategic landmarks for these states in the foreseeable future. A [recent study](#) on the prospects for Western Balkan EU candidate countries reveals that most of them, despite a markedly closer relationship with the EU, will not be in a position to accede to the bloc before 2050. This means that the AA Club faces years of painstaking reform and incremental integration using the instruments already at hand. Rapid convergence or 'big bang' expansion similar to 2004 is extremely unlikely.

The outer circle

For the outer circle, including Armenia, Azerbaijan and Belarus, relations with the EU have been patchy at best, but there are reasons for cautious optimism. After Armenia's [sudden withdrawal](#) from EU association agreement negotiations in 2013, following its decision to join the Eurasian Union, there was little hope for any improvement, and yet since 2015 the EU and Armenian government have managed to put together a new Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA), the [draft](#) of which has recently been released, suggesting that the parties expect to sign it in the near future.

Relations with Azerbaijan are also likely to improve a notch. According to sources at the EEAS and European Commission, Azerbaijan has been making more positive noises lately about the future of the Partnership with a view to increasing its involvement in some areas, notably with respect to economic and development co-operation – a clear echo of the country's weakening local currency, decreasing oil and gas revenues and overall [bleak economic prospects](#).

Last but not least, in the context of the renewed European Neighbourhood Policy, the EU has [doubled](#) its package of bilateral assistance to Belarus to support private sector development and help strengthen institutions in 2016. Following President Tusk's surprise [invitation to President Lukashenko](#) for the 2017 summit, rumours of his participation have neither been confirmed nor denied by Minsk. Whatever the final decision may be, Belarus is likely to continue its participation in the EaP in the near future.

The summit

Although the general expectations for the summit are modest, some signs indicate that the initiative's weak yet stable status is about to be confirmed. The final declaration is likely to be a rather bland mixture of general reassurances of mutual respect and EU support for a limited number of areas of reform. Due to political opposition in EU capitals and a lack of funding, especially with 'budgetary Brexit' looming post-2020, none of the [ambitious ideas](#) tabled by the European Parliament (including a trust fund and an EaP+ model for most advanced members) have been considered by EU leaders.

The most heated discussions between EU and EaP diplomats concern Kyiv's continued insistence on the EU acknowledging its European aspirations, a pledge that does not warm hearts in EU capitals. Most recent reports from Brussels suggest that it is most likely to become a unilateral declaration by the Ukrainian government.

On the other side of the Black Sea, Yerevan and Baku continue to clash over the inclusion of a reference to the territorial integrity of all EaP countries – Baku has sought to make the inclusion of such wording a red line for its participation in all multilateral forums. In a sign of an apparent softening in Baku's principled stance, the declaration may skip the clause altogether.

In the absence of a more ambitious agenda, youth issues and education are likely to gain more prominence. The EU is about to launch a new Youth Package for EU-EaP youth co-operation, with a potential promise to go as far as doubling its funding for cross-border youth mobility, volunteering and training as well as other minor initiatives such as the [European School](#).

Last but not least, the declaration will include a reference to the next summit taking place in 2019, a modest yet important improvement on earlier speculation on the possible winding up of the whole EaP initiative.

The way forward

For the partnership to regain momentum, EU political actors need to adapt to the changing environment. First, the EU's member states, notably those most eager to see the EaP continue, will need to come together and jointly push for a more ambitious reform agenda, especially in Moldova and Ukraine – this will require a significant change in [Poland's increasingly anti-Ukrainian rhetoric](#) and the rebuilding of links between the Visegrád four and their Baltic and Scandinavian allies (the recent [joint op-ed](#) by Poland's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Witold Waszczykowski, and Sweden's Margot Wallström is a good sign).

Second, EU governments should focus on highlighting and strengthening [the benefits of internal reform](#) in all EaP member states instead of moving goalposts and offering only token rewards and declarations. The European Commission should also stay the course in implementing the EaP's technical assistance and development co-operation, continuing to identify [tangible deliverables](#) and outcomes for local populations in the EaP.

Finally, to limit Brexit-related damage to the EaP and its own foreign policy in Eastern Europe, the British government should seek ways of continued co-operation with EU member states and EU institutions in the EaP, especially in areas where its expertise is most valued such as legal and economic reform and the increasingly important [strategic communications](#) field that includes countering Russian propaganda efforts, where sustainable impact can only be achieved through international co-operation. Signalling continued willingness to work with such programmes would be a low-cost way to build goodwill with a number of EU member states (especially those keen on the Eastern Partnership) and reassure EaP countries of the UK's continued engagement.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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