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THE FUTURE OF THE EASTERN PARTNERSHIP IN THE SOUTH CAUCASUS: SCENARIOS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR AZERBAIJAN, GEORGIA, ARMENIA, AND THE EU

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The Eastern Partnership (EaP), launched in 2009 to strengthen political association and economic integration between the European Union and its eastern neighbours, has undergone significant transformation amid shifting geopolitical realities in the South Caucasus. This paper examines the evolving trajectory of the EaP and its implications for Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia within the context of declining Russian influence, EU enlargement fatigue, regional conflicts, and emerging multipolar competition. After outlining the historical development and institutional architecture of the EaP, the study evaluates the divergent paths taken by the three South Caucasus states and assesses the program's current effectiveness. It then presents three future scenarios-complete cessation, continuation of the status quo, and comprehensive reform-and analyses their political, economic, and security consequences for the region and the EU. The findings suggest that while the EaP faces structural limitations and geopolitical constraints, a reformed and upgraded framework offers the most viable pathway for strengthening resilience, supporting democratic transformation, and enhancing regional stability. The paper concludes that differentiated engagement, strategic investment, and a renewed vision are essential for sustaining EU relevance and fostering long-term cooperation in the South Caucasus.

Keywords: South Caucasus, European Union, geopolitical competition, regional stability, EU integration.

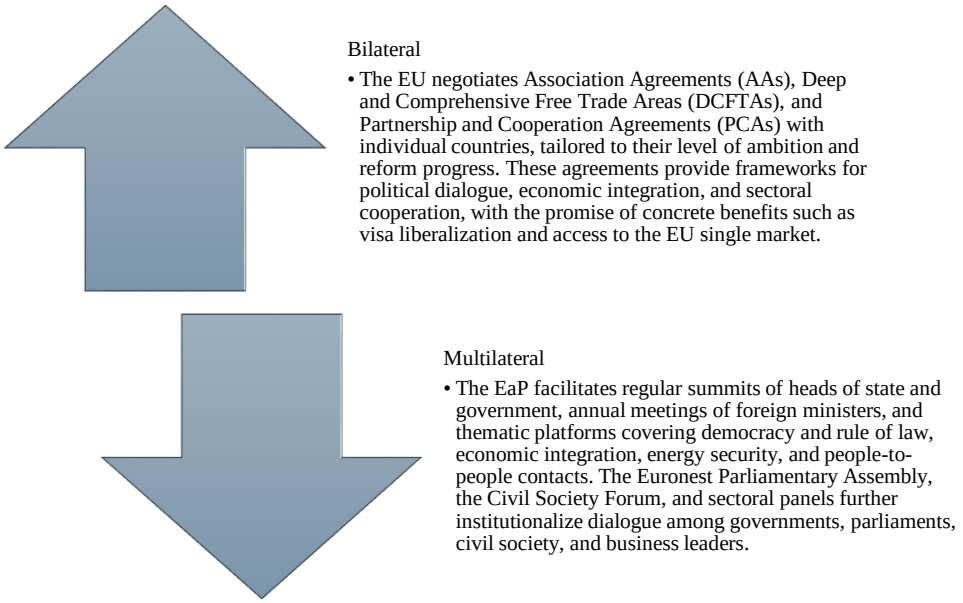
Introduction. The Eastern Partnership (EaP) program, launched in 2009, was conceived as a transformative initiative to bring the European Union (EU) and its eastern neighbours - Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine - closer together through political association, economic integration, and the promotion of shared values such as democracy, rule of law, and human rights. The South Caucasus, comprising Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia, has been a focal point of the EaP, reflecting both the region's strategic importance and its complex geopolitical realities. Over the past decade and a half, the region has witnessed dramatic shifts: Russia's assertive interventions, the EU's internal divisions and enlargement fatigue, the rise of new external actors, and the eruption and resolution of regional conflicts. These developments have fundamentally altered the context in which the EaP operates, raising pressing questions about its future relevance and effectiveness.

This article provides a comprehensive analysis of the EaP's trajectory in the South Caucasus, beginning with its historical origins and institutional architecture, before assessing the evolving geopolitical landscape and the distinct paths taken by Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia. It then explores three plausible future scenarios for the EaP in the region: (1) complete cessation of the program, (2) continuation in its current, limited form, and (3) a reformed and upgraded EaP with renewed strategic vision. For each scenario, the article analyzes the implications for the three South Caucasus countries and for the EU's broader neighborhood policy, drawing on recent policy shifts, expert analyses, and the latest monitoring data. A comparative table summarizes the projected outcomes, providing a clear reference for policymakers and stakeholders.

Background. After the 2004 enlargement many within the EU started to sound dissatisfaction that further enlargement may jeopardize the future of the union. Though many supported that according to Copenhagen criteria states situated in Europe and meet those requirements can join the union, on

the other hand, various centres defended deepen integration rather than extending its physical border referring to enlargement fatigue. So, the new program European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) was introduced which aimed to circle the EU with friendly countries. However, The ENP grouped together countries with vastly different political, economic, and social realities - ranging from the Mediterranean to Eastern Europe - and failed to offer a credible path to EU accession, thereby limiting its transformative potential. Thus, to mitigate this shortcoming Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk, with strong backing from Sweden, proposed a new initiative focused specifically on the EU's eastern neighbours. This proposal, presented in May 2008, aimed to deepen cooperation with Ukraine, Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Moldova, while not excluding the possibility of future accession (1). The Eastern Partnership (EaP) Program was officially launched at the Prague Summit in May 2009, with the explicit goal of fostering closer political and economic ties, supporting democratic reforms, and enhancing regional stability. The program was designed to provide a differentiated approach, recognizing the unique aspirations and challenges of each partner country, and to separate the eastern neighbours from the broader "ring of friends" under the ENP. The EaP's institutional architecture is characterized by a dual-track approach: bilateral and multilateral cooperation (see figure 1).

Figure 1. The EaP's institutional architecture.



Source: based on analysizs

The EaP's objectives have evolved over time, with the 2021 summit identifying five long-term policy priorities: resilient, sustainable, and integrated economies; accountable institutions and rule of law; environmental and climate resilience; digital transformation; and fair and inclusive societies. The current agenda is supported by a €2.3 billion investment plan, aiming to leverage up to €17 billion in public and private investments across the region (see Table 1).

Table 1.

Eastern Partnership 2025 Targets and Status

Target	***2025 Goal***	***Current Status (as of late 2025/early 2026)***
SMEs supported	500,000 SMEs	Ongoing – EU/EIB financing packages (esp. Ukraine) are expanding SME access, but full figures not yet published.
Rule of law	Asset declarations verified for all high-level officials	Partial – reforms underway, but implementation varies by country; Ukraine and Georgia have advanced, others lag.

Connectivity	3,000 km of roads/rail upgraded	Progress – infrastructure projects funded, but war in Ukraine disrupted completion.
Mobility opportunities	70,000 exchanges for students, staff, youth	Achieved/close – Erasmus+ and EaP mobility schemes have been widely implemented.
Cyber resilience	Stronger frameworks against hybrid threats	Strengthened – EU support has built partner capacity, especially in Ukraine's cyber defence.
Energy efficiency	250,000 households cut energy use by 20%	Partial – energy projects ongoing, but full target not yet confirmed.
Environment & climate	3 million more people with safe water; air quality improved in 300 cities	Mixed – water access expanded, but air quality monitoring uneven.
Health resilience	850,000 health workers vaccinated & supported	Progress – vaccination campaigns and EU health aid delivered, but war zones hinder full coverage.
Civil society & media	2,500 CSOs, 120 media outlets, 2,000 journalists supported	Achieved – EU funding has reached these numbers.
Digital transformation	80% households with affordable high-speed internet	Partial – broadband expansion ongoing, but rural/remote areas still underserved.

Sources: (2) (3), (4).

After launching the program the major milestone for the region was the agreement on Association Agreements (AA) and Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas (DCFTAs) with Georgia (5). These agreements marked a shift from cooperation to integration. With that also Georgia got visa free travel for its citizens. Armenia initially negotiated an AA but withdrew in 2013 under Russian pressure, later signing a Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA) in 2017. Yet the major shift happened between 2017-2020 with the adopting "20 Deliverables for 2020" in Brussel Summit in 2017 aiming for further stronger economies, governance, connectivity, and society. Moreover, the program started to consider the needs of each South Caucasus republic rather than treating them as whole. In order to assess the effeteness of reforms "The Eastern Partnership Index", produced by the Civil Society Forum with EU support, aimed to provide a comprehensive, data-driven assessment of reform progress and setbacks across the six EaP countries (6).

The EU's approach to the EaP has been shaped by internal divisions and a growing sense of "enlargement fatigue." While some member states-particularly the Visegrad Group, the Baltics, and Sweden-have championed deeper engagement with the eastern neighbors, others, led by France and southern EU countries, have prioritized relations with the Mediterranean and expressed ambivalence toward further eastern integration (7). The lack of clear membership prospects, plus other shortcomings like decorative meetings, unkept words symbolic gestures, and a failure to deliver on promises of deeper integration, as seen in the stalled accession processes for Georgia (8).

Russia has consistently viewed the South Caucasus as part of its sphere of influence, employing a range of tools-military intervention, economic leverage, energy dependence, and information operations-to maintain its dominance and deter closer alignment with the West. The 2008 war with Georgia, the annexation of Crimea in 2014, and the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 have underscored Moscow's willingness to use force to prevent the erosion of its regional position (9).

In Armenia, Russia's role as security guarantor has been deeply undermined by its failure to intervene during the 2020 and 2023 Karabakh conflicts, prompting Yerevan to seek alternative partnerships and reduce its dependence on Moscow (10). In Georgia, Russia continues to occupy Abkhazia and South Ossetia, maintains a significant military presence, and exerts hybrid influence through media, NGOs, and economic ties (11). Azerbaijan, while maintaining pragmatic relations with Russia,

has increasingly asserted its autonomy, leveraging its energy resources and strategic partnerships with Turkey and China.

The decline of Russian influence, accelerated by the war in Ukraine and Moscow's preoccupation with its own security challenges, has created new opportunities for the EU, the US, and regional actors, but also risks a destabilizing vacuum and renewed competition among external powers.

Three Scenarios for the EaP. Since the establishment of the EaP it has been both praised and criticized for its role, yet its contribution is undeniable. When it came to 2026 its existence is shadowed by on going geopolitical such as war in Ukraine, Georgia's first candidate status later anti-EU development in Georgia, Armenia's distancing from Russia and Azerbaijan's victory in 2020 war. Hence, a new question is being circulated both in civil society and official circles. What will be the future of EaP? Thus, in order to find an answer, tot his question, we will analyse three scenarios and their implications for the EU and all South Caucasus states.

1. ***Complete Cessation of the Program.*** The first scenario is revealing around the EU's internal struggles, enlargement fatigue, and geopolitical distractions, the EU could opt to end the EaP, redirecting resources to other priorities and leaving the region to navigate its own path amid competing external influences especially considering the ongoing war in Ukraine which requires immense resources. Then probably, the current financial assistance programs will be shut down, and the Union will engage in the states based on bilateral agreements rather than considering them as a part of Europe's eastern neighbour. For Azerbaijan, situation would be less detrimental in comparison with the rest since its relation is pragmatic and reveals around energy cooperation which is purely commercial. Azerbaijan, already pursuing a non-aligned, pragmatic foreign policy, would likely double down on its strategic partnerships with Turkey, China, and other regional actors. It will also relive pressure coming from the EU for further reforms in various sectors. Baku would have greater freedom to diversify its export markets and align with alternative blocs such as BRICS or the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (12). For Georgia, the cessation of the EaP would be a severe blow to its European aspirations and to the pro-European segments of society. The ruling Georgian Dream party, already moving away from EU integration, could accelerate its pivot toward Russia and other non-Western partners, further undermining democratic institutions and civil society (11). The loss of EU support would weaken Georgia's position as a transit hub for the Middle Corridor and could destabilize the country's internal politics. Armenia in the midst of a historic shift toward the EU, would face a strategic dilemma. The loss of the EaP would deprive Yerevan of a key platform for Europeanization, economic support, and security cooperation, potentially forcing it to reconsider its break with Russia and to seek alternative alliances. The normalization process with Azerbaijan and Turkey could stall, and domestic opposition to the government's pro-Western orientation could intensify, increasing vulnerability to Russian pressure and internal instability (10). For the EU, the termination of the EaP would signal a retreat from the EU's ambitions as a geopolitical actor in its eastern neighborhood, ceding ground to Russia, China, and Turkey. The EU's credibility as a promoter of democracy, rule of law, and regional stability would be severely damaged, and the risk of renewed conflicts and instability in the South Caucasus would rise. The EU would lose valuable leverage over energy security, connectivity, and migration management, with potential spillover effects for the wider region (9).

2. ***Continuation in Its Current, Limited Form.*** In this scenario, the EU maintains the EaP as a low-profile, routine program, preserving existing frameworks and financial support but without significant upgrades or new strategic commitments. The focus remains on technical cooperation, civil society engagement, and incremental reforms, with limited political ambition or security engagement (13). Azerbaijan would continue to benefit from energy cooperation and selective economic integration with the EU. The status quo would allow Baku to maintain its multi-vector diplomacy, balancing relations with the EU, Russia, Turkey, and China. The absence of deeper engagement would limit the EU's ability to influence governance or human rights, and Azerbaijan's role as a transit and energy hub would remain transactional rather than transformative (14). Georgia would remain in a state of limbo, with the EU accession process formally suspended but the institutional and financial frameworks of the EaP still in place. Civil society and pro-European actors would continue to advocate for reform, but the government's drift toward authoritarianism and Russian alignment could persist or deepen (15).

The EU's limited engagement would provide some stability but would be insufficient to reverse negative trends or to anchor Georgia firmly in the European orbit. Armenia would continue to pursue its European aspirations within the constraints of the existing EaP framework, benefiting from technical assistance, financial support, and the EUMA mission. However, the lack of a clear accession perspective or deeper integration would limit the transformative potential of EU engagement, and Armenia's vulnerability to Russian pressure and internal challenges would persist. And eventually, the continuation of the status quo would preserve the EU's presence and influence in the South Caucasus but would fall short of addressing the region's evolving challenges and opportunities. The EU would risk being perceived as reactive and risk-averse, with limited capacity to shape outcomes or to compete effectively with other external actors. The program's relevance and legitimacy could erode over time, especially if partner countries perceive the EU as disengaged or indifferent to their aspirations.

3. Reformed and Upgraded EaP with Renewed Strategic Vision. In this scenario, the EU undertakes a comprehensive reform of the EaP, aligning it with the realities of multipolar competition, differentiated country trajectories, and the need for greater security and resilience. The program is upgraded to provide deeper engagement with willing partners, enhanced support for civil society, and a more proactive role in conflict resolution, connectivity, and regional cooperation (16) (17). A reformed EaP would offer Azerbaijan new opportunities for economic integration, green energy cooperation, and participation in regional connectivity projects, while linking these benefits to progress on governance, rule of law, and human rights (18). The EU could leverage its market access and investment to incentivize reforms and to support Azerbaijan's transition to a more diversified and sustainable economy. Enhanced dialogue on security and conflict resolution could also help to stabilize the region and to facilitate the normalization process with Armenia. For Georgia, a reformed EaP would provide a clear roadmap for renewed integration, linking progress on democratic reforms to tangible benefits in trade, investment, and mobility. Enhanced support for civil society, independent media, and judicial reform could help to reverse democratic backsliding and to restore public trust in the EU. A more strategic engagement with Georgia would also strengthen the EU's position as a security provider and as a key partner in the Middle Corridor and Black Sea connectivity initiatives (19). Armenia would benefit from a tailored integration agenda, including accelerated visa liberalization, increased financial assistance, and deeper sectoral cooperation in areas such as digital transformation, energy, and education. The EU could play a more active role in supporting Armenia's resilience, economic diversification, and security, while facilitating the normalization process with Azerbaijan and Turkey. Enhanced engagement would also empower civil society and democratic actors, reducing Armenia's vulnerability to external pressures. A reformed and upgraded EaP would restore the EU's credibility as a geopolitical actor, enabling it to compete more effectively with Russia, China, and Turkey in the South Caucasus. By aligning its strategic objectives with operational resources and differentiated country trajectories, the EU could foster stability, prosperity, and democratic transformation in its eastern neighborhood. Enhanced regional cooperation, connectivity, and security engagement would also strengthen the EU's resilience and strategic autonomy in a rapidly changing world.

The comparative analysis of the three scenarios underscores the critical importance of the EaP for the future of the South Caucasus and the EU's broader neighborhood policy. The region stands at a crossroads, with the potential for either renewed integration and stability or fragmentation and renewed conflict.

For Azerbaijan, the choice is between continued transactional engagement and the opportunity to leverage EU integration for economic diversification, green energy transition, and improved governance. The EU should link deeper cooperation to concrete progress on reforms, while respecting Azerbaijan's security concerns and strategic autonomy.

For Georgia, the stakes are existential. The EU must support civil society, independent media, and democratic actors, while providing a clear and credible path to renewed integration. Conditionality should be linked to tangible benefits, and the EU should be prepared to increase its security and connectivity engagement to anchor Georgia in the European orbit.

For Armenia, the EU has a historic opportunity to support a democratic partner seeking to break free from Russian dependence. Enhanced financial assistance, accelerated visa liberalization, and

deeper sectoral cooperation should be matched by support for resilience, economic diversification, and conflict resolution. The EU should also play a more active role in facilitating normalization with Azerbaijan and Turkey.

For the EU, the choice is between retreat and renewed ambition. A reformed and upgraded EaP, aligned with the realities of multipolar competition and differentiated country trajectories, offers the best prospect for restoring credibility, fostering stability, and advancing the EU's strategic interests. This will require greater political will, operational resources, and a willingness to take calculated risks in support of democratic transformation and regional integration.

Conclusion. The future of the Eastern Partnership in the South Caucasus is at a critical juncture. The region's evolving geopolitical landscape, the divergent trajectories of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia, and the EU's own internal challenges demand a bold and adaptive response. The three scenarios outlined in this analysis-cessation, status quo, and reform-offer distinct pathways, each with profound implications for the countries of the South Caucasus and for the EU's role as a geopolitical actor.

The evidence overwhelmingly supports the case for a reformed and upgraded EaP, tailored to the needs and aspirations of each partner country, and aligned with the EU's strategic objectives. Such an approach would not only enhance stability and prosperity in the South Caucasus but also strengthen the EU's resilience and influence in an increasingly contested neighborhood. To realize this vision, the EU must move beyond symbolic gestures and incrementalism, embracing a differentiated, ambitious, and forward-looking agenda. This will require sustained engagement with civil society, strategic investments in connectivity and green energy, and a willingness to confront the challenges of democratic backsliding and external interference.

The stakes could not be higher. The choices made in the coming years will determine whether the South Caucasus becomes a zone of stability, integration, and shared prosperity, or a battleground for competing powers and unresolved conflicts. The EU, together with its partners in Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia, has the opportunity-and the responsibility-to shape a future worthy of the region's potential and its people's aspirations.

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ŞƏRQ TƏRƏFDAŞLIĞIN CƏNUBİ QAFQAZDAKI GƏLƏCƏYİ: AZƏRBAYCAN, GÜRCÜSTAN, ERMƏNİSTAN VƏ Aİ ÜÇÜN SSENARİLƏR VƏ NƏTİCƏLƏR

2009-cu ildə Avropa İttifaqı ilə onun şərq qonşuları arasında siyasi assosiasiyanı və iqtisadi inteqrasiyanı gücləndirmək məqsədilə yaradılan Şərq Tərəfdaşlıq (ŞT) proqramı Cənubi Qafqazda dəyişən geosiyasi reallıqlar fonunda ciddi transformasiya prosesindən keçmişdir. Bu məqalə ŞT-nin inkişaf trayektoriyasını, Ermənistan, Azərbaycan və Gürcüstanın müxtəlif istiqamətlərdə formalaşan siyasi kurslarını və proqramın regional effektivliyini təhlil edir. Tədqiqat ŞT-nin mümkün gələcək inkişafı üçün üç ssenari - proqramın tam dayandırılması, mövcud vəziyyətin olduğu kimi davamı və hərtərəfli islahatlarla yenilənmiş model üzrə siyasi, iqtisadi və təhlükəsizlik təsirlərini araşdırır. Analiz göstərir ki, ŞT mövcud məhdudiyyətlərə baxmayaraq, daha çevik, diferensiallaşdırılmış və strateji yanaşmalar tətbiq olunduğu halda regionda dayanıqlığın gücləndirilməsi və uzunmüddətli əməkdaşlığın inkişafı üçün ən səmərəli platforma olaraq qalır. Məqalə belə qənaətə gəlir ki, proqramın modernləşdirilməsi, strateji investisiya və ölkədən-ölkəyə fərqləndirilmiş qarşılıqlı fəaliyyət Şərq Tərəfdaşlığının Cənubi Qafqazda gələcək fəaliyyəti üçün əsas şərtlərdir.

Açar sözlər: Cənubi Qafqaz, Avropa İttifaqı, geosiyasi rəqabət, regional sabitlik, Aİ inteqrasiyası.

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БУДУЩЕЕ ВОСТОЧНОГО ПАРТНЁРСТВА НА ЮЖНОМ КАВКАЗЕ: СЦЕНАРИИ И ПОСЛЕДСТВИЯ ДЛЯ АЗЕРБАЙДЖАНА, ГРУЗИИ, АРМЕНИИ И ЕС

Программа «Восточное партнёрство» (ВП), созданная в 2009 году для укрепления политической ассоциации и экономической интеграции между Европейским союзом и его восточными соседями, претерпела значительные изменения на фоне трансформирующихся геополитических реалий на Южном Кавказе. В данной работе анализируется развитие ВП, различающиеся политические траектории Армении, Азербайджана и Грузии, а также оценивается эффективность программы в текущих условиях. Исследование рассматривает три возможных сценария будущего ВП - полная остановка программы, сохранение статус-кво и комплексная реформа - и анализирует их политические, экономические и безопасность-ориентированные последствия для региона и ЕС. Полученные результаты показывают, что несмотря на структурные ограничения, обновлённая и реформированная модель партнёрства представляет наиболее устойчивый путь к укреплению региональной стабильности, поддержке демократических преобразований и сохранению стратегической роли ЕС в регионе. Работа подчёркивает, что дифференцированный подход, стратегические инвестиции и обновлённое видение являются ключевыми факторами для будущей эффективности ВП на Южном Кавказе.

Ключевые слова: Южный Кавказ, Европейский союз, геополитическая конкуренция, региональная стабильность, интеграция с ЕС.

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