

THE “BREAKING” OF THE EASTERN PARTNERSHIP STATES INTO TWO BLOCKS AS A MATTER OF PRIORITY FOR THE SECURITY OF NEIGHBOURING STATES

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Abstract

Beginning with the years of Eastward expansion and intensifying threats issued by Russia, the EU's foreign policy has prioritized the creation of a stable and secure territory in its Eastern neighbourhood. Western countries have tried to solidify this union by means of developing a varied palette of regional cooperation instruments, such as: The European Neighbourhood Policy, The Eastern Partnership/EaP, Free Trade and Association Accords.

This article brings to the forefront the issue of the current effectiveness of European policies, especially the Eastern Partnership, considering that the war in Ukraine generated major regional changes and different positions of the EaP member states towards the EU. And here I refer to the suspension of Belarus as a EaP member, Armenia and Azerbaijan, states used by Russia to evade international sanctions. Also, the EU's acceptance of the EU accession applications of the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine forces a change in the objectives of the EaP.

In this context, starting from the assumption that the EaP, in the current regional context, is no longer a realistic project in its current form, the question remains: is it realistic and sustainable solution for the EU to continue developing new projects for EaP states or is it more efficient for the EU to redirect its attention to rethinking already existing projects, namely the allocation of EaP resources

exclusively for the Republic of Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine, with the aim of supporting and accelerating the EU accession process?

Keywords:

Eastern Neighbourhood; Eastern Partnership; efficiency; EU accession; inefficiency; Russia.

1. INTRODUCTION

The multitude of studies and research carried out in recent years on the subject of the effectiveness of the Eastern Partnership/EaP in the face of Russian threats and on the evolution of democratic principles in the EaP member states, show us that the project is being approached by more and more analysts, academics, researchers (Bosse, Korosteleva, Popov, Sushko, Chkhikvadze etc.) from a negative perspective. Why? Even if the EaP offered reform processes to the member states (visa liberalization, development of economic and judicial cooperation with the EU etc.), which initiated and promoted internal transformations, the deep-rooted problems were not irreversible. For example, at the level of institutions and society in each partner country, corruption still an issue, respectively the presence of policies that do not conform to EU values, against the background of the ever-increasing threat of the Russian influence factor inside these states.

Of course, it is the war in Ukraine which intensified the debate among academics and analysis who question the perspectives offered by the continuation of the EaP in particular its role in ensuring the security of the eastern region. In this sense the global intelligence community witnessed the launch of the Russian's so-called "special operation" in Ukraine (an alternative term used by Russia to define and minimize the war in Ukraine, launched by the Russian side on February 24, 2022) sustained by an unprecedented level support from Russia's military and intelligence complex.

The events, which followed, brought into focus the ineffectiveness of the measures proposed by the EaP, which were originally planned to facilitate self-

sufficiency among its partners in hopes of avoiding direct military conflict with Russia and continued economic relations in the region. The fact that, in their directly military intervention, Russian troops used Belarus as a proxy for their assault against the well-motivated but scarcely prepared Kiev, made two things apparent: that the EU had little handle on Belarus and that Ukraine would ultimately fully rely on NATO and the EU to have any chance of continued independent existence.

The EU's woes were further deepened when the hastily implemented international sanctions levied against Russia, which came at great cost to its block's own economy had a dampened effect, as Russia looked to its traditional non-Western economic partners for trade solutions (e.g. the purchase of drones from Iran, China's request for the purchase of military-grade technologies, the intensification dialogue with North Korea).

Indeed, consideration needs to be given to the cost incurred by the EU, both in simple economic terms, especially with regards to its dependence on Russian prime resources, and in political terms as member states continue to suffer the effects of the disinformation campaigns and propaganda being generated by Russia against the West, facing issues both among its political class and the broader citizenship that is now bearing the cost of inflation and raising interest rates.

What is clear is that the offensive caused almost immediate and complete collapse of economic and diplomatic relations between the West and Russia and that we are now facing, for the first time since the end of the cold war, threats of nuclear weapons being directed towards EaP states, for which there is no real answer outside of the US's own nuclear presence. Thus, in fulfilling the objective of this paper, three main indicators were identified - *the Russian factor in the region, the principles underlying the EaP, concrete measures of the EaP member states regarding the European accession path* - based on which, arguments were brought, at the level of the academic community and political scientists, regarding the inefficiency of the EaP, perhaps from the very beginning of its launch. The debates also shed light on arguments regarding the transformation process of the EaP, from a project aimed at ensuring the assimilation of democratic values in the region, into a determinant of the foreign policy of the

Russian Federation for the Eastern Neighbourhood and the halting of Russian values in the member states. Of course, I also chose to present, in parallel, the perspectives of analysts who come to the defence of the Eastern Partnership and who dismantle the arguments invoked by the critics.

The final goal of this reflection is to arrive at a conclusion, consisting of the convergence/common point of the two pro-counter approaches, which can serve as a starting point for the academic community in the formulation of future analyses regarding the EaP perspectives. Thus, the middle ground conclusion that I have identified is that, regardless of the side chosen (supporting the ineffectiveness or efficiency of the EaP), in the current regional context it is more than obvious that the EaP, in its current form, is no longer a realistic construct. And here I mean both from the perspective of its format (the war in Ukraine caused Belarus to suspend its membership of the EaP) and as objectives, as long as we are currently talking about the submission of applications for the EU accession by the Republic of Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia, in March 2022, respectively the acceptance of the status of Ukraine and Moldova as candidate states for EU accession. Thus, the deliverables that the project offers are relevant only in the context of redefining the EaP and distributing its mechanisms where they can still be assimilated, in states that have an obvious openness to cooperation with the EU and that have made visible progress towards a closeness to it and its values.

In order to formulate a comprehensive conclusion on the effectiveness of the current EaP and its need of official reformation, I conducted 20 semi-structured interviews with Moldovan citizens, some of them from the Republic of Moldova, and others settled/moved in Europe. The purpose of the interviews and their results, which I will develop in the methodological chapter, is to expose a vision from the field on the hypothesis of this article, especially in the new context in which the Republic of Moldova has a real chance of joining the EU.

2.INSIDER PERCEPTIONS REGARDING THE EAP - METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

a) Research Methods

As I mentioned in the introduction, in order to formulate a conclusion regarding the effectiveness of the EaP, I made an analysis not only from a theoretical point of view, as I will describe in the following chapters, but also from a practical point of view. I considered it important to track the level of perception of the citizens of the EaP member states towards what the project currently represents and what it should offer to its members in the new context in which, three of them (the Republic of Moldova, Georgia, and Ukraine) have taken concrete steps towards joining the EU.

Thus, I approached the qualitative methodology and I conducted 20 semi-structured interviews (Annex 1), consisting of 6 open and 4 closed questions, with citizens of the Republic of Moldova, who live both in their own state and outside the country / in European states, where they have direct contact with the EU and a democratic society, where the experience of EU membership is indirect, without Russian influences in terms of propaganda and disinformation. The chosen sample consists of both women and men (12 women and 8 men), aged between 25 and 45, established in the urban environment, with higher education and working in EU member states such as Romania and the Czech Republic and in the Republic of Moldova. The period in which I conducted the interviews was between October 24 and November 2, 2022, more than half a year after the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, when we can already draw conclusions regarding regional instability.

I conducted the interviews only with persons with Moldovan citizenship for the following reasons: a) Armenia, Azerbaijan and Belarus are presented in this article as being still trapped in the Russian area or even outside the EaP (the case of Belarus), which excludes the choice them to draw non-propaganda conclusions about the EU; b) access to Ukrainian citizens is limited in the context of the war; c) The Republic of Moldova is the state that has a real chance of

joining the EU, the leadership of Maia Sandu having as its objective the integration of Moldova into the EU.

It is also important to note that the choice of semi-structured interview is not accidental. This research method offers the possibility to analyse data beyond numbers and patterns, perhaps pre-defined unions. Through the semi-structured interview, which contains closed and open questions, we can find out not only what the subject says, the raw answer, as such, but we can find out what is the motivation and conviction behind the answer obtained (Brock and McGee 2002). Therefore, I formulated the questions in such a way as to bring the interlocutor to the point where they share their own conclusions, following personal beliefs and experiences that are not public or measured.

b) Data Analysis/ Results

At a first analysis from the online environment, which I have minimally exposed in a previous article published in the EURINT magazine (Ambruş 2021), it would be understood that the reactions regarding the EaP are not negative. Confidence in the effectiveness of the project is expressed annually by the citizens of the EaP member states through surveys carried out by the EU NeighborsEast project (EU NeighborsEast Website), which consistently show a positive position towards the EU and the existing partnerships with the Eastern neighbours. For example, in 2016, when the figures should have conveyed negative conclusions regarding citizens' trust in the EU after the annexation of Crimea and the ineffective sanctions applied by the West to Russia, polls showed that almost half of the citizens of the EU's Eastern Neighbourhood, on average 45% have a positive attitude towards the EU and believe that the EU's relations with their country are beneficial (EU NeighborsEast Website 2016). Also, in 2020, after 10 years of the existence of the EaP, but with an increasingly aggressive Russia, the result in the polls increased by a percentage of 4%, with 49% of the citizens of the Eastern states expressing their support for it by the EU and its projects (EU NeighborsEast Website 2020). In the case of the Republic of Moldova, the EaP member state that I chose as the case study for this article, the perception towards the EU is generally positive, registering a percentage of 52% in 2016 and increasing to 61% in year 2020. However, in 2022, the year when the

EU granted candidate status to the Republic of Moldova, the percentage is decreasing, registering at 60% (fig. 1).

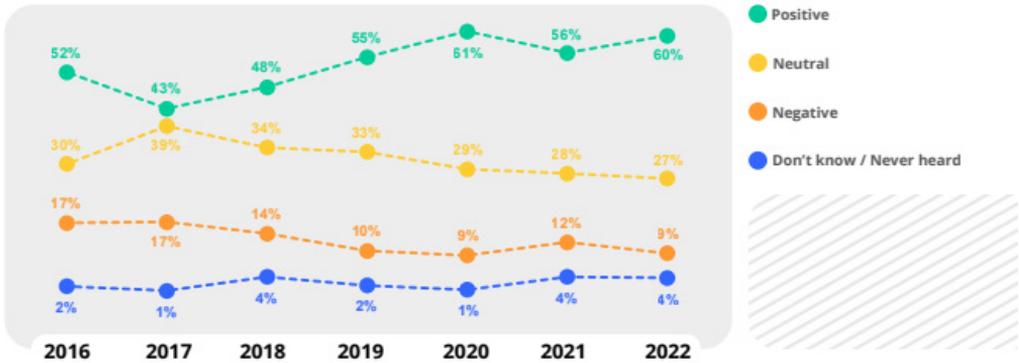


Figure 1. Annual Survey – Republic of Moldova

Source: EU NeighborsEast Website,

<https://euneighbourseast.eu/news/publications/annual-survey-2022-republic-of-moldova/>

From the analysis of the interviews, I extracted several conclusions which show, in an indirectly way, the fact that in informal settings many citizens tend to express dissatisfaction with the projects developed by the EU for cooperation with the Eastern region, as well as with the multitude of constraints and terms that the EaP states must apply in order to have real access to the EU, even if they are beyond their powers. On the other hand, the answers show that, even if the EaP is a project contested by the majority of respondents, it is nevertheless desired/considered as an alternative until the effective accession of the Republic of Moldova to the EU. I will assign coded names to the interviewed citizens (C1, C2, C3, etc.) to be able to present in this article the individual answers of each one.

Thus, to the question no. 4 - "How do you evaluate the statement according to which the membership of the EaP of the Republic of Moldova accelerated the process of acceptance by the EU of Moldova's EU accession request?", the conclusion of the answers (18 out of 20 answers) was that the EaP never offered

a clear perspective of the accession of the Republic of Moldova to the EU (C2-C6; C8-C20). The EaP wanted more to be a project through which the EU would ensure a stable neighbourhood, "which does not have expansionist or invasion tendencies like Russia" (C6). The war in Ukraine was a trigger/pressure on the European leaders, who were forced to accept the accession requests of Moldova and Ukraine.

Also, to the question no. 5 - "Do you think your country is ready for EU accession in the near future? What is the role of the EaP in this process?", the answers were negative, the arguments being attributed to the EU's lack of awareness of the reality in these states and the lack of trust in the European leaders, who "do not really want the Republic of Moldova to be an EU member state because it would mean that the EU would bring its borders closer to Russia" (C6). In other words, "the strip of land that separates the EU from Russia would disappear" (C3). Also, the perception is that, even if the states were prepared or accepted an immediate accession to the EU, as we see that it has happened at present, the actual process will drag on and serve only as an appeasement of social grievances, not giving real chances of obtaining EU membership.

The negative perception about the EaP is also generated by the citizens' lack of knowledge about the project and what it offers (a conclusion that I drew following the answers to question 1 - "What knowledge do you have about the Eastern Partnership? I am particularly interested in what the partnership proposes/what are its goals?" and question 2 - "What is your perception - positive/negative - when you hear about the Eastern Partnership?"). To the first question, more than half of the respondents (13 out of 20) answered that they had previously documented about the EaP, in order to be able to understand the questions that I will ask them. They emphasized that the EaP is not high promoted in the Moldovan mass media, "being discussed only in a narrow circle and at the level of state institutions" (C16). Also, a first search online shows that the EaP is presented by certain pro-Russian publications (eg. Sputnik Moldova, NTV Moldova) as a tool developed by the EU to threaten Russia. And this fact only disadvantages the EaP member citizens because they are perceived by Russia as a direct threat to its own security, alongside the EU. In other words, "if

EaP is not promoted by the leaders and organizations responsible for this in the Republic of Moldova, the propaganda of the Russian Federation will continue to win" (C16).

From those analysed above, the general conclusion is that the perception of the interviewed Moldovan citizens on the EU, respectively the EaP is negative. However, by analysing each answer in detail, I also identified positive nuances in the answers to the EaP. To questions no. 4 and 5 about the correlation between the accession of the Republic of Moldova to the EU and the status of the EaP member, there were also answers such as "the EaP can be revalued to offer the candidate states a framework for implementing the measures imposed for accession, which are not at all simple" (C1) and "the measures imposed by the EU for accession could be implemented more easily with the help of the EaP" (C7).

Also, even if the answers showed that currently the project does not enjoy the support of the citizens, some answers expressed confidence in the perspectives of EaP, giving it positive chances. To question no. 6 - "How do you evaluate the effectiveness of maintaining EaP as a project dedicated to the development of the eastern neighborhood?", the answers showed that if the EaP would have as members only states that are pro-European and not pro-Russian, such as Belarus, it could be a signal by which EaP member citizens would be more confident in this project. Because "the EaP would become an EU outside the EU, made up of democratic and pro-European states" (C13).

Thus, even if the EaP is currently criticized, it is still important that there is an openness and desire of the citizens for the reform of the project and the granting of the role of binder for EU accession/ platform for the implementation of the measures imposed by the accession process. And I will develop this aspect in the theoretical framework and the conclusions part of this article.

3.THE EVOLUTION OF THE EASTERN PARTNERSHIP IN THE CONTEXT OF THE PRESENCE OF THE RUSSIAN FACTOR IN THE EASTERN REGION

Concluded between the EU and the Republic of Moldova, Ukraine, Georgia, Belarus, Armenia and Azerbaijan, the Eastern Partnership/EaP (2009), considered by many to be a brave project, represented from the beginning an additional instrument offered by the EU to the states of the Eastern Neighbourhood in order to ensuring an in-depth economic, political and social cooperation not only with it, but also with the EU member states on a bilateral basis (Cristal 2009). The results were easily felt, the project offering member states benefits from the beginning (e.g. visa liberalization, increased trade and foreign investments) (Manoli 2012), as well as prospects for the development of some future sectoral objectives assumed during the EaP Summits. In other words, the EaP has developed a new form of cooperation with the EU's neighbours, based on common ownership and common values, which complements the EU's perspective on its expansion.

However, even if the EaP offered reform processes that initiated and promoted internal changes in the member states, they unfortunately failed at changing key structures, at the level of institutions and society in each of the partner country, problems such as corruption and namely the presence of Russian policies, which are inconsistent with EU values are still being felt. The biggest problem in these partner countries was at a leadership level, which offered mixed responses in practical terms to the initiatives developed, changing their position towards the EaP over time depending on the political and security events recorded at the national level, the main factor that influenced their mood swings being the Russian Federation (Korosteleva 2012). In other words, the actual applicability of the provisions established through various initiatives was at a low level, because most of the European decisions were stuck in the political, social and economic impotence of the countries located in Eastern Europe, where the authoritarian and hybrid regimes have not completely transitioned (Gregor and Thaidisgmann 2014). Thus, for the EaP states, the EU measures did indeed allow

for the inception of what was envisioned to become a beneficial economic framework. Some progress was made in terms of the assimilation of democratic practices at the level of institutions, as well as the development of democratic sentiment among citizens.

Notable among these results were progressive steps towards justice reforms and the elimination of corruption at the level of certain institutions (Renz and Smith 2016). Ultimately however, it was the unevenness and dispersion of the effects across the member states which was ultimately the weakness that Russia exploited, by conventional and hybrid aggression, minimizing the overall effectiveness of the programme, and arguably nullifying many of the tangible results achieved.

We know that, in order not to lose control in its so-called "zone of influence", with the development of the EU policies in the Eastern region, Russia has taken steps to strengthen its presence in the political, economic and energy plan of the states that expressed openness to intensifying cooperation with the EU by signing the "Associated Trio" (with reference to the Republic of Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine). At the same time, Russia developed or resuscitated projects such as the Russia-Belarus-Kazakhstan Customs Union/UV RBK, the Russia-Belarus State Union, Russia made permanent the military presence in Belarus by developing military bases (e.g. in the Grodno region) to keep the rest of the EaP states dependent, especially economically, on Moscow. All this led to the weakening in some places of the policies initiated by the EU for the Eastern Neighbourhood, making the process of "de-Russification" (Armand 2022) of the region more difficult. Moreover, the invasion of Ukraine by Russia on February 24, 2022 showed very clearly that the priority of the Kremlin's foreign policy is the reunification of "Imperial Russia", which includes the annexation not only of Ukraine, but also of the rest of the ex-Soviet states, a fact also announced at level of official documents through the National Security Strategy adopted in 2021 (where the West is described as the main destabilizing factor and enemy to Russia's security, including on a cultural/historical level, and the Eastern Neighbourhood is part of the "Russian world") and through the "Putin's Memorandum" (the website of the Russian Presidential Administration 2021),

through which the Eastern Neighbourhood is assimilated into the map of future Russia.

In order to see how these developments influenced the perception of the EaP, below I will expose the debates of those who study regional dynamics both in terms of the effects of the EU's approach to Russia's "perimeter" through the EaP, as well as the perspectives of the EaP and its effectiveness in present.

4. DEBATES REGARDING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THE EASTERN PARTNERSHIP - THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Considered as "an artificial political construction" (Bosse 2009), the EaP started from the premise of assimilation by the partner countries of European norms and standards in order to intensify economic, political and social cooperation with the EU. Despite the initial benefits given especially by trade opportunities, in the end the countries that took part in the project were forced to continue to consider Russia as an important partner (e.g. in trade and as a vital energy supplier), as the blackmail and pressure were not equaled by the European aid offered to the EaP member states (Bosse 2009). In context, the EaP is today a contested project as it has shown many of the EU's vulnerabilities, namely the speed with which the EU can provide support to non-member states vs. the quickness of Russian interference in their policies.

Starting from three indicators identified and mentioned in the introduction - *the Russian factor in the region, the principles underlying the EaP, concrete measures of the member states regarding the European path* - in this article I have presented a series of pro-con arguments of those who analyse the evolution of the EaP, showing the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of the EaP project until now. The objective of this brainstorming on the EaP is to bring into light the common conclusion of the two approaches, as mentioned above, which can serve the academic community as a starting point in future analyses of EaP perspectives: in the current regional context, the EaP requires a new design in terms of format as

well as objectives, so that the project provides support for the EU accession process of the aspiring states, currently EaP members.

a) The Eastern Partnership and Russian foreign policy towards the Eastern Neighbourhood

From the short evolution of the EaP we can see that from 2009 until now, Russia has adopted a special foreign policy for the former CIS states, through the development of integrationist projects (e.g. the Customs Union), as well as clear policies to deter the West (the publication National Security Strategy, 2021). A concrete example is the Memorandum for the creation of the "Associated Trio" (the website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and European Integration of the Republic of Moldova 2021), which mirrored the Russian propaganda manifesto entitled "On the historical unity of Russians and Ukrainians" (the website of the Russian Presidential Administration 2021), where Romania is also mentioned as part of the "Russian world". The last mentioned document was published on the website of the Russian Presidential Administration, from which it appears that President Vladimir Putin/Russia is prepared to act both symmetrically and asymmetrically in the face of the EU measures to secure the Eastern flank and in relation to the EU member states, as he later demonstrated by the invasion of Ukraine. In other words, the evolution of the EaP was from the beginning a determining factor in the formulation of Russian policies for the Eastern Neighbourhood and in establishing the objective of the Russian Federation in relation to the West.

In this context, the consensus among researchers (Svoboda 2019, Karaganov 2018, Agh 2016, Bosse 2014) is that the reason for Russia's approach towards the states in the Eastern Neighbourhood is a direct reaction to the EU's ingress into the Eastern flank through the Eastern Neighbourhood Policy and The Eastern Partnership in conjunction with the threat posed by NATO enlargement. More precisely, in response, the Russian Federation increasingly developed its integration mechanisms in the states of Eastern Europe, respectively the former CIS states, in order to regain control in the region. The undeclared enemy of Russia (Svoboda 2019), identified by the Russian side as the bloc of European states, increased Russian initiatives in the direction of protecting its "living"

borders (Vice 2017), as the neighbouring countries of the Kremlin turned their "gaze"/ rhetoric increasingly towards the "dream" called Europe. Thus, from a simple strategic partner, the EU gradually turned into a competitor of Russia (Pop 2016), right at its borders. The influence of not only Western policies in Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova, but also their openness to access projects promoted by the EU, at the expense of the Russian factor, made Russia's actions in the neighbouring countries much more aggressive, anti-democratic (Svoboda 2019) and violent. And here we remember the military action of 2014 in Ukraine, regarding its perpetuation today through the "special operation", which take us back in time, to the 20th century, when the annexation of territories was a global practice (Svoboda 2019).

The debates about the EaP and the idea of its economic and political fragmentation are also formulated on the side of the theory of institutionalism, supported by Bosse (2014). First of all, we are talking about a tangential involvement of the European states that assumed the EaP in 2009, but also about a continuous presence of Russia in the territory (Bosse 2014). In exerting its influence, Russia has seen significant success in its economic and commercial policy of maintaining dependence of pro-Russian governments on Russia's aid and resources, especially after the Crimea moment, which has solidified its de-facto hold of many of its former USSR territories to an undisputable degree. So then, the fact that there is talk of an EaP Europeanization, while we are witnessing Russia's continued success highlights a known, or perhaps unknown, impotence of the European Union, but one which must be assumed in the end (Agh 2016).

What is known for sure is that during all this time we witnessed the creation of new dependencies of the six EaP states towards the EU, but also still towards Russia. For this reason, at this moment we cannot talk about an EaP country that is a relevant trade partner in relation to the EU member states (Karaganov 2018) and that does not share the trade process with the Russian side as well, even if not at the official level (e.g. companies run by Ukrainian oligarchs or from Republic of Moldova, which are still dependent on the Russian side in terms of business). Could it be that the EaP was only a way to secure a market for the EU partners and member states? This question is raised not only by Bosse, but also

by Christoiu (2013), who emphasizes the lack of pragmatism and vision of the Union in order to actually implement a coherent program and project, which would serve the purpose initially proposed by the states of the EU through the much-discussed EaP. The project, in the form in which it is presented now, after more than ten years, proves to be an "attempt" that benefits the European states, Russia, and the realist perspective carried on the edge of liberal institutionalism, and so on.

There are, however, numerous analysts (e.g. Troncotă and Rotaru, 2018, Umland 2016, Douglas 2016, Hug 2015 etc.) who, even if they do not directly combat the views of the ones above, support the idea that there is indeed an increasing proximity of Russia to the Eastern flank, but this process did not start with the emergence of EU mechanisms developed for the region. According to Russian culture and politics found since the Testament of Peter the Great, elaborated in 1725, the ex-communist states of today are considered by the Kremlin to be part of the map of "Imperial Russia", which is in the process of being restored, and this objective is still pursued since 2015, with the annexation of Crimea (Troncota 2016). And the idea of expanding NATO or the EU is just a good context used by the Russian side to justify its actions of interference in the states of the region, but especially the military ones in Georgia and Ukraine (Rotaru and Troncota 2018).

At the same time, it is worth noting that European leaders have never undermined or denied the rise of the Russian threat, and they have not blamed it only on the oppressive Russian culture, but also on the EU's eastward expansion process. However, the solution was not to stop the support offered to the Eastern neighbourhood, but on the contrary, the leaders relied on the development of much stronger measures and objectives, which would counter Russia's actions in a strategic manner, by using less coercion and rather more of a "soft power" (Nye 2008). Even in 2015, when the High Representative of the EU, Federica Mogherini, showed herself open to embrace, in the case of the EaP-EU, a new strategy that stands under the sign of *realpolitik*, a concept synonymous with "power politics" (Bew 2015), more precisely with the approach of a realistic view of international politics, the measures taken within the framework of the EaP did not bring direct threats to Russia. From birth the

EaP, has assumed a gradual, safe and irreversible increase in cooperation on the economic and political level with the member states (EU Joint Communication 2020), but without bringing, as an argument, the need to directly counter Russia, but instead developing democratic values in the region and establishing a mutually beneficial trade area.

b) Europeanization, external governance and resilience - fundamental principles of the EaP

In the researchers' debates (Agh, Korosteleva, Rittberger, Ganzle, Borzel etc.) regarding the inefficiency of the EaP today, we find arguments related not only to the effects of the project vis-à-vis the Russian Federation, as I have presented it above, but also related to the principles/foundations on the basis on which the EaP was created. Those who come to the defence of the project bring to the forefront the idea that the importance of the EaP is given by the powerful instruments it is based on, respectively: Europeanization, external governance and resilience. In this context, the EaP cannot be seen as a failed project since, first of all, it is still an undefined construct and in the process of assimilation of these three EU instruments.

Europeanization offers aspiring EU states a favourable framework for the assimilation of democratic values and norms, intended to pave the way for rapid EU integration. Claudio Radaelli defines Europeanization as "the process of construction, diffusion and institutionalization of formal and informal rules, of political procedures and paradigms, of ways of doing things, as well as of common norms and beliefs that are first defined and consolidated in the formation of politics of the European Union and then are incorporated into the internal political discourse logic (national and subnational) of political structures and public policies" (Radelli 2003). In other words, this definition highlights the independence of EU aspiring states to start an internal process of assimilation of EU values, at their own pace, with the EaP providing the most suitable framework for adapting them to the community norms, while also opening the way to joining the EU. At the same time, external governance comes as a complement to the above instruments, as it represents the platform through which the Europeanization process can take place. Resilience is also involved in

supporting these two instruments, a paradigm placed at the centre of the EU's actions and which represents a strategic priority of its foreign policy. The operationalization of resilience building in the EaP member states undergoing a process of democratic transition is a long-term objective of the EU, the effects of which will come with time, which is why we cannot yet conclude that the EaP is an ineffective and fruitless project.

However, as I mentioned above, certain scholars see each tool in a different light than those who support EaP and implicitly its foundations. Referring to the process of Europeanization, even if this process, through the EaP, offers levers for the internal fight against corruption and the strengthening of the rule of law, the external pressure coming from the Russian Federation has gained over time a much greater influence on the project's results and efficiency. Agh (2016) has been drawing attention since 2016 to the fact that the regional instability, the security challenges that arose with the annexation of Crimea by the Russian side led to the freezing of the process of external Europeanization and implicitly to the increase of slippages from democratic principles in the EaP member states. Thus, the association of the EaP with this process of europeanization should no longer be present in a context where crises are rampant in the region, and internal instabilities, generated by the Russian presence, overshadow the process of integration and europeanization of the states. And even if currently there are requests for EU membership for the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine, already accepted by EU, Russia still continues to be present in field, diminishing the power of the europeanization process.

Elena Korosteleva exposes europeanization as an incentive for increasing Russia's hostility towards states in the Eastern region, an indirect challenge, as it forces states to choose between East and West, in exchange for "tangible promises of economic integration for the future" (Korosteleva 2011), which they could not even be realized at the level of the initial promises. We know that the Russian Federation has responded to every move by these states to move closer to the EU, trying to block every step on the way to changing/assimilating EU values. The most recent example is the war in Ukraine, which generated major implications for these states not only from a security perspective, but also from an economic perspective, as the Russian side did not delay in responding to the

sanctions imposed by the West. The Kremlin took retaliatory measures in the energy/gas and banking sectors and restricted exports, particularly in the agri-food sector, to states traditionally served by Russian producers. All this favoured the triggering of a domino effect on the economies of these states and the supply of raw materials. In this scenario, at the level of the Republic of Moldova and Georgia, a difficulty was felt in the banking flows resulting from the remittances of citizens working in Russia, and commercial entities that have connections with Russia encountered problems in transactions (Troncotă and Ambruş April 25, 2022). Through these measures, Russia demonstrates that the EU has no way to remedy/come to the aid of these states, the only option in avoiding these related effects is the choice of offering loyalty to the Russian side, at the expense of the West.

Also, the arguments of the critics are also based on the idea that, even if it is an internal process of states assimilating EU principles, both europeanization and resilience still have a unilateral character. Firstly, because states are forced to adapt to the EU requirements, which impose a clear and firm demarcation on the Russian side, which triggers tensions in the region, as I mentioned earlier, and secondly, because the measures are not adapted to the level and internal possibilities of the states in question, which makes the EU accession process, in fact, a continuous illusion, regardless of whether the status of a candidate state is currently recognized. In this context, the critics argue that europeanization and resilience are tools used by the EU in projects such as the EaP, as a measure to ensure a stable and safe neighbourhood for the community bloc, with principles based on the EU values, secure borders, and not the development of equal partnership relations, namely the construction of a safe framework for the integration of new members in the EU.

Referring to external governance, critics (Kohler-Koch and Rittberger 2006, Ganzle 2009, Borzel 2010) place the EaP at the centre of the EU's governance ambition in the region, of the need to acquire influence in the common neighbourhood with the Russian Federation (Korosteleva 2016), the EaP becoming a currency in the EU-Russia relationship, especially in the current context of regional insecurity (Noyan 2022). The debates at the EU level regarding the importance of the EaP and the need to develop a much firmer

economic cooperation with the member states come as a response to the projects developed by Russia, such as the Customs Union Russia-Belarus-Kazakhstan/UV RBK, through which the Eastern European states are caught up in Russian economic policies, that offer the "advantages" of a single customs area, through which taxes are eliminated. Korosteleva points out that external governance, related to the EU, represents an effort to extend one's own practices/rules to other states, to develop a safe, predictable, manageable and even controllable neighbourhood (Korosteleva 2017). Moreover, it is the concept that shows European selfishness the most, as long as the EU is considered the only way forward for the assimilation of democratic principles, and its institutions are presented as the main model to follow, despite the visible shortcomings, data extracted including from those which define external governance in a positive sense (Lavenex 2004 and Schimmelfennig 2012). In other words, the EU seeks to expand its legal, economic and political borders, but its own borders, including the institutional ones in order to accelerate the accession of other states to the Union, are, in fact, closed, thus the EU shows that it oscillates between the inclusive approach and that of simultaneously excluding the close neighbourhood through the harsh criteria required of states willing to join (Lavenex 2004).

In combating these visions, Radaelli argues that europeanization must be seen, first of all, not as an instrument for joining the EU, but for the integration of EU principles within the states, which is what the EaP also does, namely the process of political, social and economic transformation, based on EU values, outside the Union, which helps internal development and brings mutual benefits. Radaelli emphasizes that the Europeanization process is not a one-sided one, as the EU offers, through its values and principles, a model of democratic development for the states that aspire to join, the community requirements also provide a framework for their correct implementation, avoiding their adaptation to internal politics which, most of the time we see that it is based on corruption. Complementing this point of view, we also find the opinion of authors such as F. Schimmelfennig and U. Sedelmeier, who see europeanization as a process of "complex modernization", based on the EU model and European institutions, which favour the internal development of the state of law and building

institutions based on democratic values and principles (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier 2005). Precisely due to the fact that europeanization causes an accumulation of changes in numerous fields - social, political, economic (Voinea 2005), it cannot have a negative character within a construction such as the EaP, since the benefits appear both for the member states of the project, which obtain financial and political-social aid in internal development, as well as for the EU, which ensures a stable neighbourhood based on democratic values. At the same time, Lavenex and Schimmelfennig argue that not only Europeanization should be considered according to the arguments above, but also the concept of external governance, as they are interconnected. Specifically, due to the concept of external governance, the europeanization process can take place (Schimmelfennig 2012). Adrian Pop supports external governance by referring to the regional security complex, by which we understand that the security of a state cannot ignore the security of its neighbours, the geographical proximity itself forcing that the problems of some become the problems of others (Pop 2016). Likewise, in the case of the application of external governance, the interdependence and the need to follow some common principles in the development of cooperation is urgent.

Referring to resilience, in the resolution of the European Parliament of June 1, 2017, it is defined as "the capacity of states and societies to reform, resisting internal and external crises and recovering from them" (Resolution of the European Parliament of June 1, 2017), and in the current context of the war in Ukraine, we can understand that states are sovereign, and the EU only offers support through cooperation and effective policies, even in times of crisis (Tocci 2022). This concept of resilience defines the way to implement the EaP policies, contrary to critics (Agh, Korosteleva), who perceive the project as intrusive, a lever of the EU through which it can intervene in the internal affairs of its neighbours. According to David Chandler (2013), resilience cannot be generated by external actors, in this case the EU, but by the states in question, for which projects based on this concept have been developed, since change comes from within, and the states are sovereign, with their own identity. In other words, the intention of the EU through the EaP was not to "model" the member states according to their own interests, to control their institutions and internal

policies, but to increase the resilience of the states in areas such as the economic, social, digital and legal sectors (EU Joint Communication march 2020), an approach that, of course, serves common geopolitical interests. Dionis Cenușă reinforces this idea by emphasizing three key words in the definition of resilience: "resistance", "recovery" and "return" of states in the face of external threats. In other words, we are talking about the capacity of the states anchored in EaP, in our case Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine, to strengthen institutions and sectors that support three fundamental pillars of the state: institutions of the rule of law, critical infrastructure, crisis management procedures (Cenușă 2021). Cenușă also mentions the equal benefits offered by the principle of resilience, such as the development of a predictable and safe/trustworthy neighbourhood for the EU, respectively offering a transition to the EaP member states towards a "society based on democracy and trusting institutions" (Cenușă July 28, 2020). Also, by offering tools for sustainable development, the goal of the EaP is not to isolate the EU states, but creates the optimal framework for them to be co-participants in the development of a model of democratic governance. Thus, an essential aspect in defining the role and importance of the EaP is to understand the concept of resilience not only by adhering to its definition, but also what it has offered to the states so far for their sustainable development. Resilience must be perceived, when it is brought into the discussions regarding the EaP, from a global and not specific perspective, because it has several dimensions, namely economic, social, digital resilience (Ashes 2020) etc.

c) "Associated Trio" and the new EU accession perspective - the result of the differences felt within the EaP

Ever since its launch, the EaP formulated political and economic objectives applicable to the member states in a unitary/common rhythm, a fact considered by certain analysts to be a disadvantage for the individual evolution of each state. In a context in which the states of the Associated Trio - Georgia, Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova, according to Freedom House, identify themselves as partially free countries, in which they try to maintain a democratic trajectory, even in the current context of the war in Ukraine, and Azerbaijan, Armenia and Belarus continue to be dominated by authoritarian regimes. This translates into

a difficulty of applying unitary political reforms in the region and the lack of any congruence in ensuring regional integrity and independence, respectively, the intensification of cooperation and dialogue with the EU (Karaganov 2018).

Leaving aside examples such as the existence of the Russia-Belarus State Union or the Customs Union, the relinquishment of the EaP membership is the example that most emphasizes the lack of cohesion of the six EaP member states and the need to disperse the states that are open to the EU from those that are still anchored in Russian policies. Starting from June 28, 2021, Belarus suspended its presence in the Eastern Partnership, in response to the EU sanctions imposed after the fraudulent presidential elections by Lukashenko/August 9, 2020 and the massive repressions dictated by him on the population, amid protests and anti-regime riots (Latushko 2021). Because of this, in December 2021 we witnessed the first EaP Summit held in an incomplete form, i.e. in the absence of Belarus. Also, mentioning the other two states, we note that Azerbaijan has not taken significant steps towards the EU, the negotiation process on signing a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement with the EU (DCFTA) has been going on since 2017 (European Council official website). And even though Armenia signed a comprehensive and enhanced partnership agreement with the EU in 2017, on the sidelines of the fifth EaP Summit (official website of the European Council), still the country is part of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), alongside Russia, and the leadership in Yerevan remains deeply anchored in Russian policies and is willing to apply the guidelines drawn by the Kremlin even in its own state, cooperation with the EU being only a backup solution in economic terms.

All these specific examples show that the three aforementioned EaP states "are distancing themselves from the European model towards authoritarianism or integration in the Eurasian political-economic space" (Cenuşa 2021) and have only made the evolution of the Republic of Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine difficult, keeping them in place with each new objective drawn up within the EaP meetings/Summits. Basically, this is the background behind which the "Associated Trio" appeared, the horizontal dialogue between the three states being essential in clarifying the downsides of the EaP and the need to launch a new geopolitical platform within it, which would serve common democratic

interests. On a theoretical level, the analysts emphasize the instinctive choice by the three states of the theory of democratic peace, one of the most influential throughout history, which brings to light good understanding and the vitality of collaboration between states that are guided by democratic principles, but also the impossibility of any type of cooperation between non-democratic countries, allied to hostile/totalitarian policies (Rummel 1997).

EaP critics (Agh, Korosteleva, Svoboda, Bosse etc.) argue that the timing of expressing dissatisfaction with the inefficiency of the project was expected, namely the dilemma of whether the project was carried out to "stun Russia" (Herszenhorn and Barigazzi 2017), to expand the export market of the EU member states or to favour, indeed, a rapprochement of neighbouring countries with the commercial, political, social and security principles of the West. In other words, the three states decided, by launching the "Associated Trio", to send a signal to the EU that the EaP can no longer function in its current format, and the choice of cooperation in a restricted form is a solution offered to the European Union to resuscitate the project and recovering the losses caused by the forced presence of Russia within the states.

Moreover, in the context of the war in Ukraine, the acceptance of the EU accession applications of the three countries and then the granting of the status of EU candidate countries to Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova, was the result of pressure from civil society, including the European one, on the European leaders, and not the effect of the EaP results on the member states or the voluntary will of the European leaders. If we look back to March 2022, although Ukraine had managed to obtain the necessary support in the European Parliament this time (eg: the resolution debated in the plenary on March 1 explicitly requested the granting of EU candidate state status), there was still a lack of consensus in Council at that time. France and Germany, states with major decision-making power in the EU, maintained their "traditional" position, that of supporting Ukraine, but not from the perspective of offering military assistance and unequivocal commitment to EU integration. Also, referring to the Republic of Moldova, even if the administration from Chisinau expressed its willingness to take radical measures to speed up the procedures and catch the "accession train", respectively to recognize the independence of Transnistria and its

decoupling from the Republic of Moldova, the main obstacle to joining the Euro-Atlantic structures, Ursula von der Leyen's position on the matter, was expressed cautiously, mentioning that EU candidates "have to do homework" before moving to the next stage (from CNN Siad and Liakos 2022). The European official signaled that she supports the approach, but that the member states will have the last say in the matter, states that were known to have a reluctance towards the idea of accession in the case of existent open crises on the territory of these states. More so, the Summits in Warsaw and Brussels brought together the conclusions of the main EU states regarding the impossibility of opening the accession procedure due to the current war, in the case of Ukraine, and the separatist conflicts in the Republic of Moldova and Georgia (Troncota and Ambruş April 25, 2022). In other words, the three acceding countries exploited the regional context and helped themselves in their European accession process, the EaP not being the reason of fulfillment of this long-awaited objective.

Following the same principle addressed in the case of the other arguments brought to the effectiveness of the EaP, from another perspective we can confirm that, indeed, the moment the war in Ukraine broke out, the "Associated Trio" saw an opportunity to force the hand of the European leaders, but we cannot dispute the effectiveness of the EaP and its role so far in providing a basic baggage to those three countries, which brought them benefits for an easier acceptance in the EU. And the EaP never sought to "force" their preparation for possible accession, each state assimilating benefits from the EaP at its own pace. A concrete example of this is Georgia. We know that the states have always approached cooperation with the EU in a collective form, "as a package deal", as we saw with the Association Agreements, but also with the "Associated Trio". However, in the context of the applications for accession in May 2022, the EU leaders offered the status of candidate countries for EU accession only to Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova (June 23, 2022), in a context in which even the "Associated Trio" can no longer be thought of as format, but only as a semantic/ way of relating to the three states at the same time. Why was Georgia left out? Georgia is a state still in the process of a democratic transition at the domestic political level, it is still caught in a pro-Russian government, which still

balances its interests between Russia and the West and against which the resources, and then the measures/requirements imposed by the EU would have no effect. However, the chances for accession are increased, with Georgia remaining a main beneficiary of EU accession, which may follow the path of Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova.

Not surprisingly, the EaP had mixed reactions from the start. From those mentioned above, we can see that critics claim that the project has only demonstrated its effectiveness in the short term because it offered the member states development mechanisms, but not real prospects for EU integration (Kerikmae and Chochia 2016). But it is essential to clarify from the beginning the fact that the Eastern Partnership was not designed with this goal in mind, no one mentioned the project as having the ultimate goal of states joining the EU, but their cooperation with the EU. Indeed, the mechanisms and principles on which the project is based offered a corridor towards EU accession, a framework for assimilation and realization of the criteria underlying the accession. But this fact must be treated as a "bonus" offered to the states and not as an objective of the project. In other words, the EaP aimed at bringing the states closer to the economic, political and social methods and practices used at the EU level, based on democratic values, respect for human rights, sustainability and economic growth, but in terms of assimilation and identification with these EU values outside the EU, and not through interference. For this reason, most likely the expectations for the future were different among the states, depending on the level of perception from which they started - states that hoped for aid/cooperation with the EU for their growth and development, and states that hoped that the project is the way to a safe and fast integration in the EU, immediately after the signing of the partnership.

Also, the idea that the Associated Trio is the result of the differences within the EaP is not supported by analysts such as Dionis Cenușă (Cenușă July 27, 2021), the lack of simultaneous evolution of the states being attributed to the political decisions of these states, respectively the influences and pro-Russian elections at the level of society. In other words, we refer to the de facto decision of the states in relation to the chosen interest environments - West or East. If we take a specific example, the proximity of the states to Turkey also weakens the effects

of EU mechanisms, not only the presence of Russia. We know that Azerbaijan enjoys the "two states, one people" format (Pelin 2022), maintained by the administration in Baku to benefit from the Turkish hydrocarbon market, but especially from Turkey's support in the Nagorno Karabakh conflict. So, we understand that this new geopolitical platform, this Trio, has nothing to do with the efficiency of the EaP or its evolution, but is a signal sent to the EU as a reaction to the opening of the three states to an EU accession, and not a message that the EaP did not fulfil this objective, otherwise not expressed in the founding document of the partnership or within the framework of the EaP Summits.

5. CONCLUSIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE ANALYSIS/ RESEARCH STUDIES

This paper emphasizes that the debates between those who study the regional dynamics and the Eastern neighbourhood regarding the effectiveness of the Eastern Partnership over time have focused around the three indicators I chose for the literature chapter: on the one hand the instruments and principles that were the basis of the project, and on the other hand the analyses were developed around Russia's presence in the member states and its influence in the region. By choosing the first indicator – the Russian factor in the region – and exposing the arguments of EaP critics, we can conclude that the regional dynamics, starting from 2014, indicate that the EaP was a surprise element for Russia, and the finding that it was a triggering factor in the development of a much tougher Russian foreign policy towards the West and the ex-Soviet states, which led implicitly to the gradual weakening of the project and the outline of its shortcomings, brought to the table of discussions those who study the dynamics of the eastern neighbourhood the problematic of the perspective of the EaP and the new role it can play in supporting the states of the region.

Where I chose to stop as an analysis for this article is the point of intersection of the two pro-con camps, more precisely the common point between them, which relates to the perspective of the EaP. Basically, both camps bring, through the

three indicators multiple arguments to support the hypothesis that the project is a construct that currently requires a redefinition, both from the point of view of the format and the objectives pursued. Even if the pro camp sees this approach from the perspective of an evolution, and the anti camp from that of the transformation of the EaP against the background of the lack of results in ensuring democratic stability in the region, the given goal is to divide the EaP into two blocs: the group of states that aspired to a fast and safe integration into the EU – the Republic of Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia, and on the other hand the group still subject to the guidelines drawn by Moscow – Belarus, Armenia, Azerbaijan.

This fact is imposed especially by the new regional context (Turchyn 2022), in which we have, on the one hand, the feeling of insecurity of the EaP member states, generated by the war in Ukraine and the risk of its perpetuation in the rest of the states, and on the other hand the granting of candidate status to Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova for EU accession, respectively the existence of Georgia's application for EU accession. Thus, it is more than obvious that the Eastern Partnership requires a new design, which focuses on the different dynamics of the project's member states (Bosse 2014) and gives priority to states that are open to EU values and principles and that are ready to implement the measures offered by the EU through the EaP, without consuming resources in favour of the Russian side throughout the other states. As we saw in the arguments presented by those who support the EaP, when I referred to the second indicator – the principles underlying the EaP, the problem is not in the principles on which the project is based or in its actual existence, but in the regional context marked by political and military crises, which have led to an oscillating behaviour of the states, favouring or constraining their juggling between Russia and the West, depending on the economic and political interests. In other words, the new regional dynamic does not require the development of new principles and objectives within the framework of the EaP, but the creation of a safe framework/format for the application of the already existing ones, since, as we have seen, the principles cannot be supported by the states in the Eastern neighbourhood in the context of imminent Russian threats

and its actual presence on the ground, including military and not just political/economic.

And these conclusions are also drawn from the interviews I collected. From the responses of the Moldovan citizens, I saw their openness and deep desire for EU integration, but which is blocked by the fear of the difficult accession process. Also, the EaP, with member states such as Belarus, Armenia or Azerbaijan, has stagnated the evolution of the other states, for reasons that I have explained in this article. In this context, maintaining the dialogue on the implementation of democratic values and the deepening of political and economic cooperation in the format of 6 states and not 3 states is unproductive. The post-war EU strategy for the Eastern neighbourhood must reaffirm the long-term commitment to the states that have a real and obvious openness to the EU, which have taken concrete steps to express their desire of accession to the EU. And this commitment can be expressed through the re-consolidation of the EaP as an initiative leading to the formation of a framework designed to ensure the stability, security and resilience of EU principles in the region. This need is all the more necessary as long as we can see that Russia is in the process of redrawing its borders, the main objective being to restore the integrity of the Russian people, constituted in the Kremlin's opinion from Russians, Belarusians, Ukrainians, as well as from the rest of the ex-communist territories (U.S. Department of States 2022).

Therefore, the need to launch a geopolitical platform to support the acceleration of the EU integration process of the states that are found on the complete map of Russia - Ukraine, Georgia, the Republic of Moldova, is urgent, as the Eastern Partnership has the potential to provide these needs, especially since it is currently demanding the formalization of its consolidation through a new format, made up of states prepared to unequivocally follow the established objectives.

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INTERVIEW GRID

Open questions:

1. What knowledge do you have about the Eastern Partnership? I am particularly interested in what the partnership proposes/what are its goals?
2. What is your perception - positive/negative - when you hear about the Eastern Partnership?
3. Can you list 3 sectors in the Republic of Moldova where improvements were felt due to PaE? Justify your choice.
4. How do you evaluate the statement according to which the membership of the EaP of the Republic of Moldova accelerated the process of acceptance by the EU of Moldova's EU accession request?
5. Do you think your country is ready for EU accession in the near future? What is the role of the EaP in this process?
6. How do you evaluate the effectiveness of maintaining EaP as a project dedicated to the development of the eastern neighbourhood?

Closed questions:

7. On a scale from 1 to 10, where do you place the relationship between the Republic of Moldova and the EU, in positive terms?
8. Is the EaP a project that helped its member states to get closer to the EU?
9. Has the development of the EaP influenced the foreign policy of the Russian Federation towards the EaP member states?
10. If the Republic of Moldova will join the EU, is PaE still viable?