

## Exploring EU Culture Policy towards Eastern Partnership Countries



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**ABSTRACT:** This article delves into the intricate interplay of culture, soft power, and international relations, with a particular focus on the European Union's (EU) cultural diplomacy efforts within Eastern Partnership countries. It illuminates how culture serves as a potent force in shaping societal development and influencing international perceptions and relationships, drawing on Joseph Nye's conceptualization of soft power. Through a comprehensive historical analysis and examination of case studies, the research unveils the nuanced role of cultural diplomacy within the broader framework of soft power and public diplomacy. Specifically, it scrutinizes the EU's cultural diplomacy initiatives in Eastern Partnership countries: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine - highlighting their significance in diplomatic relations and regional cooperation, particularly within the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) and Eastern Partnership context. The study advocates for strategic enhancements in funding mechanisms, support for local institutions, and alignment with EU values to bolster the effectiveness of cultural diplomacy initiatives. Ultimately, it emphasizes the importance of an adaptive and inclusive approach to cultural policy, underscoring the need for continuous collaboration to foster resilient and mutually beneficial EU-Eastern Partnership relationships.

**KEYWORDS:** Culture Policy, Diplomacy, International Relations, European Union, Eastern Partnership Countries.

### I. INTRODUCTION

In the realm of international relations, the role of culture and soft power has become increasingly significant, particularly in shaping diplomatic ties and fostering cooperation among nations. The European Union (EU), recognizing the potency of cultural diplomacy, has actively engaged in cultivating relationships with its Eastern Partnership (EaP) countries, namely Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine. This introductory section sets the stage for a comprehensive exploration of the EU's cultural policy initiatives within the Eastern Partnership, aiming to decipher their impact on diplomatic relations and regional dynamics.

The research at hand embarks on a journey through the theoretical underpinnings and practical manifestations of EU cultural policy within the Eastern Partnership context. Divided into distinct sections, this study endeavors to unravel the complexities of cultural diplomacy, soft power theory, and the EU's engagement strategies with its Eastern neighbors.

### II. THE ROLE OF CULTURE IN EUROPEAN UNION FOREIGN POLICY

In a broad context, the concept of culture highlights the distinction between humans and other biological entities. Culture isn't confined to a singular creative act but is instead viewed as a universal outlook of individuals toward the world, a process through which they shape a "new world" and themselves. Each culture constitutes a distinctive realm embodying a particular perspective of individuals (or people) towards their surroundings and themselves (Chikovani, 2006, p. 116).

Despite the varied interpretations of culture, a synthetic and contemporary understanding of this concept has evolved in recent decades. It encompasses not only "a specific way of life for an individual, era, or group" or "practices and patterns of intellectual and especially creative activity" but also represents "an independent and abstract noun describing a general process of intellectual, spiritual, or aesthetic development" (Williams, 1976, p. 80).

In the modern sense, the term "culture" signifies the state of spiritual development of a society and the existence of a nation as a cohesive cultural phenomenon. It denotes a social unity characterized by a shared language, memory, and idea (Firalishvili et al., 2012, p. 3).

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Culture is increasingly recognized for its pivotal role in the social and economic development of nations (Harrison & Huntington, 2000, p. 15). In the contemporary world, culture assumes a special significance not only for its social and economic benefits but also as a crucial resource on the international stage and a significant component of soft power. Nye asserts that soft power is as influential as hard power in international relations, emphasizing that if culture and ideology hold appeal, others will willingly embrace them (Nye, 2004, p. 11).

The term "soft power" was initially introduced by the American political scientist and researcher Joseph Nye in his work "The Changing Nature of American Power." As per his definition, "soft power" denotes a state's capacity to influence other actors in the international system by fostering positive attitudes without resorting to hard power. It operates as a cultural force through which states achieve their foreign policy objectives, relying on three primary sources: culture, political values, and foreign policy. Crucially, soft power is characterized by its cultural nature, as its application results from the mutual consent of involved parties rather than through violent or arbitrary means (Nye, 2006).

Since its introduction, the soft power theory has gained significant traction among scholars and policymakers in international relations, particularly focusing on culture and public diplomacy. Nations increasingly integrate soft power theory into their international relations strategies, recognizing its pivotal role in shaping global perceptions and relationships (Hall, 2010, p. 198).

The utilization of soft power has assumed an expanding role in international relations, becoming an integral aspect of the foreign relations of various countries. In recent decades, the European Union has consistently emphasized that soft power stands as its primary resource in international relations.

Herman Van Rompuy, the Former President of the European Council, highlighted on November 9, 2011: "While the range of our 'hard power' is limited, our 'soft power' should not be underestimated. The implementation of soft power is quite complex and cautious because the effective use of soft power requires a consistent and comprehensive approach that must respond to our goals, means, and ways of using them".

In this context, cultural diplomacy, identified as a key element of soft power, has become a significant term in international relations. The widely cited definition by Milton Cummings characterizes cultural diplomacy as "the exchange of ideas, information, art, and other aspects of culture among nations and their people to foster mutual understanding." Over time, the term has evolved to encompass any intentional cultural cooperation among nations or groups, inherently linked to and often intersecting with the realms of soft power and public diplomacy (Donelli, 2019, p. 114).

Milton Cummings suggested a characterization of cultural diplomacy as the "sharing of ideas, information, art, language, and various elements of culture between nations and populations with the aim of promoting mutual comprehension." (UNESCO, 2023).

Meanwhile, in the latter half of the twentieth century, European countries began delineating the concept of cultural policy as a specific obligation on the part of the states. This did not imply the creation of a universal cultural policy at the European level; rather, it served as a set of guiding principles, administrative procedures, and budgetary practices in the cultural domain. These were intended for the state to use as the foundation for actions to be implemented. In the 1970s, under the auspices of UNESCO, a study of existing cultural practices in various countries commenced. This study aimed to be a valuable resource for information exchange and cooperation in the cultural domain, shedding light on challenges, practices, and achievements in individual countries.

Observing the stages of cultural policy development in various European countries reveals a common emphasis on recognizing the economic value of culture and fostering international relations. This is particularly evident in the concerted efforts to develop international cooperation in the field of culture, both within the European Union and with other countries. Over the years, these countries have established and strengthened mechanisms for international cooperation in culture, facilitated by the acknowledgment of the pivotal role of culture in international relations at the central level of the European Union.

As previously noted, the utilization of soft power in international relations has gained prominence and plays an increasingly significant role in the foreign relations of various countries. In recent decades, the European Union (EU) has consistently underscored soft power as its primary resource in international relations (Nielsen, 2013, p. 724).

The European Union stands out as a prominent example of effective soft power application. The basis of its integration lies in efficient cooperation, underpinned by significant shared values. According to Nye, this cooperation is reflected in common cultural and political values, shared foreign policies among member states, and in the foreign policy of each individual state. Gallarotti (2022, p. 384) also highlights that soft power propels diplomacy, playing a crucial role in the EU's foreign affairs, whether by serving as a positive role model or by earning the admiration and trust of other nations.

The EU, being an international regional organization, determines its success by the willingness of non-member countries to engage in the European integration project, as it has proceeded several enlargement stages, and the EU continues on its path to

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further expansion. The soft power wielded by the EU determines its attractiveness to become a member for non-member countries, as integration implies a place at the decision-making table (Cooper 2004, pp. 179-180, cited in Wagner, 2014).

Since its inception, soft power has remained a pivotal mechanism driving cooperation, unification, and enlargement policies among EU member states. The primary goal of the EU's foreign policy is to ensure security, stability, democracy, and respect for human rights, not only in its immediate neighborhood (e.g., the Balkans) but also in other global hotspots such as Africa, the Middle East, and the Caucasus. Soft power, involving non-military methods like development assistance, serves as the main tool for this policy (Fontaine, 2014, p. 48).

The creative and cultural sectors in Europe provide employment for approximately 8.7 million individuals and play a crucial role in showcasing the diversity of European culture globally (Gabriel, 2019, p. 2)<sup>1</sup>.

The European Union places a significant emphasis on promoting democracy and respect for human rights through its cultural policy toward partner countries. This involves encouraging political pluralism, transparent electoral processes, and the rule of law. The EU actively supports democratic institutions and civil society organizations, fostering inclusive political dialogue. The overarching goal is to contribute to the development of democracy and respect for human rights in partner countries. Culture, as a unifying force of shared cultural and political values, plays a crucial role in this endeavor. Cooperation aims to strengthen democratic governance and human rights through comprehensive reforms, advocating for minority rights, freedom of expression, and the right to assembly. Moreover, EU policy actively promotes the preservation and development of cultural traditions in various countries as a potent mechanism of soft power (European Union, n.d).

Since the 1990s, the EU's use of soft power has aimed at fostering democracy and economic development, peaceful conflict resolution, stability promotion, and the integration of countries into the international community through unified instruments of humanitarian, technical, and financial assistance. The signing of Partnership and Cooperation Agreements (PCAs) since 1994 has encompassed political cooperation, trade relations, and enhanced sectoral cooperation.

Another illustration of using EU soft power, together with its economic and security potential, is the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP), introduced in 2003. Virtually all Eastern European states voluntarily joined the ENP, committing to further their development in alignment with EU principles. In 2009, a new initiative, the Eastern Partnership, expanded this approach to include association agreements with six post-Soviet states, further exemplifying the EU's soft power influence. These nations voluntarily committed to aligning their development with EU standards (Gogolashvili, 2018, p.41).

Since the subject of our research is the analysis of EU policy and implemented activities in the field of culture, specifically in relation to the countries of Eastern cooperation, we will focus on this specific format of cooperation and on the specific countries that are members of this dimension, namely: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. Our primary objective is to analyze the implementation and impact of EU cultural policy in relation with eastern partners within the European foreign relations formats, such as European Neighborhood policy and Eastern Partnership, assessing its influence and outcomes.

### III. CULTURE POLICY TOWARDS EASTERN PARTNERSHIP COUNTRIES

#### A. *Culture as a Transformative Force in the European Neighborhood Policy*

The multifaceted relationship between culture and the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) unravels as a compelling narrative, transcending conventional diplomatic frameworks to emerge as a transformative force in international relations (Feridun, 2008, p. 3). Originating in response to the 2004 EU enlargement, the ENP has undergone an evolutionary trajectory, wherein culture ceases to be a mere diplomatic appendage and assumes a central role in shaping the intricate tapestry of diplomatic, political, and economic relations.

The pivotal juncture of 2015 marks more than a bureaucratic shift; it signifies a conscious acknowledgment of the diverse cultural dynamics within partner countries. The departure from generic annual packages to a more nuanced, country-specific approach underscores the ENP's commitment to engaging with the unique cultural contexts of each nation (European Commission, 2015). This shift is not a mere procedural adjustment but a profound recognition of culture as a fundamental influencer in shaping the socio-political landscapes of partner countries.

Zooming into the Eastern Partnership (EaP), a microcosm within the broader ENP, reveals a results-oriented approach that surpasses conventional economic and governance perspectives. Since 2016, the EaP has strategically emphasized culture and education as catalysts for fostering resilience and societal cohesion (Żukrowska et al., 2017). Initiatives like EaP and the Culture

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<sup>1</sup> Since 2017, Mariya Gabriel has served as European Commissioner for Digital Economy and Society. She was elected a Member of the European Parliament in 2009.

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and Creativity Programme transcend traditional diplomatic tools, positioning culture as a dynamic force for enhancing understanding, collaboration, and cultural vibrancy.

The signing of Association Agreements with Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia goes beyond economic cooperation; it signifies a commitment to leveraging culture as a vehicle for stability and modernization. The post-2015 ENP revisions, guided by the ethos of "principled pragmatism," showcase an adaptability that responds to crises, conflicts, and the ever-evolving geopolitical canvas (Blockmans, 2017). Culture, in this context, is not a static element but a dynamic force for resilience and innovation.

Financial commitments through the European Neighborhood Instrument (ENI) are not transactional; they represent an investment in the transformative potential of culture (Hett, Kivic, and Meuer, 2015). The promotion of cross-cutting partnerships through the ENI goes beyond conventional boundaries, envisioning a collaborative space where culture becomes a catalyst for growth, employment, and economic modernization (European Commission, 2017).

The ENP transcends bureaucratic processes in its vitality, finding resonance in consultations, recommendations, and parliamentary endorsements. Structured dialogues, democratic accountability, and societal development, inclusive of cultural promotion, form the essence of these endorsements. They underscore the EU's commitment to shared values and highlight the intrinsic role of culture in shaping the destinies of nations.

In navigating the complex terrain of international relations, the ENP emerges not merely as a diplomatic instrument but as a testament to the transformative potential of cultural collaboration. It envisions a diplomatic landscape where culture is not relegated to the realm of soft power but is acknowledged as a dynamic force driving meaningful connections, fostering mutual understanding, and celebrating the rich tapestry of human diversity. The ENP, at its core, paints a vivid picture of a diplomatic world where culture is not just an instrument but a force shaping the narrative of global relations.

As the ENP unfolds, it becomes evident that culture is a fundamental thread woven into the very fabric of diplomatic engagement. The acknowledgement of culture's transformative potential is not merely rhetorical; it is reflected in the tangible policy shifts and strategic initiatives undertaken by the EU.

The 2015 ENP Review marked a paradigmatic shift by moving away from a one-size-fits-all approach to a more tailored and context-specific strategy. This shift recognizes that culture is not homogeneous across partner countries; it is diverse, dynamic, and deeply rooted in historical contexts. By acknowledging this diversity, the ENP demonstrates a commitment to engaging with the unique cultural landscapes of each nation.

Within the EaP, the emphasis on culture is not a mere symbolic gesture but a strategic move. The results-oriented approach adopted since 2016 underscores the belief that culture and education can be powerful agents of change and resilience. EaP and the Culture and Creativity Programme exemplify initiatives that go beyond traditional diplomatic tools, leveraging culture as a dynamic force for fostering understanding and collaboration.

The Association Agreements with Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia signify a departure from conventional economic partnerships. They are a testament to the EU's recognition that culture is not just an instrument for economic cooperation but a fundamental driver for stability and modernization.

The financial commitments made through the ENI are strategic investments in the transformative potential of culture. The promotion of cross-cutting partnerships through the ENI envisions a collaborative space where culture becomes a catalyst for growth, employment, and economic modernization. It recognizes that culture is not confined to silos but permeates various sectors, contributing to a holistic and integrated development.

The vitality of the ENP extends beyond bureaucratic processes and institutional frameworks. It finds resonance in consultations, recommendations, and parliamentary endorsements. The structured dialogues, democratic accountability measures, and societal development initiatives, which include cultural promotion, underscore the EU's commitment to shared values. This commitment goes beyond rhetoric; it recognizes that culture is not just a soft power tool but an intrinsic element that shapes the destinies of nations.

The ENP's recognition of the transformative potential of cultural collaboration is not limited to words; it is translated into actions. The policy shifts, strategic initiatives, and financial commitments all point to a diplomatic landscape where culture is not relegated to the periphery but occupies a central role in shaping global relations.

### ***B. The Eastern Partnership: Cultivating Collaboration and Cultural Cooperation***

The Eastern Partnership has evolved into a foundational pillar of the European Union's (EU) foreign policy, strategically designed to address shifting geopolitical landscapes and deepen collaborative ties with its Eastern neighbors. Originating in response to the 2008 events in Georgia, notably the Russian invasion and territorial occupation, the European Council mandated the European Commission in June 2008 to formulate a more nuanced proposal tailored to the unique circumstances of the region.

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Formally endorsed in March 2009, the EaP aimed to intensify cooperation with six Eastern neighbors: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine. Employing bilateral cooperation mechanisms such as Association Agreements<sup>2</sup>, Comprehensive Free Trade Areas, and sectoral collaboration, the EaP sought to fortify relationships, streamline visa procedures, and encourage long-term visa liberalization. The initiative also introduced institution-building programs designed to enhance the administrative capacities of these Eastern partners, facilitating their integration into the broader European framework.

The EaP's multilateral cooperation framework comprises four thematic platforms: Democracy, Good Governance, and Stability; Economic Integration and Convergence with EU Policies; Energy Security; and Contacts between People. From which 'Democracy' and 'Contacts between People' are the most relevant to our discussion. These platforms serve as strategic arenas for discussions and collaborative efforts involving high-ranking officials, representatives of international organizations, and stakeholders from the private sector. This comprehensive and inclusive engagement approach underscores the EaP's commitment to fostering well-rounded partnerships.

Within the overarching context of the ENP, the EaP has emerged as an essential instrument since its establishment in 2009. The renewed emphasis on culture from 2021 within the EaP has elevated its significance, transforming it into a platform for intensified collaboration in sectors such as education, youth, culture, creativity, research, innovation, audiovisual policy, and the development of an informed society.

The thematic platform 'Contacts between People' signifies a commitment to enhancing interactions between EU citizens and their counterparts in partner countries. This platform emphasizes the development of the information society, media support, youth engagement, cultural cooperation, and support for education and research. Initiatives like Creative Europe play an essential role in promoting the role of culture as a driver of reforms, fostering tolerance, and facilitating economic development, social inclusion, conflict resolution, and intercultural dialogue.

Additionally, the EaP Civil Society Forum (CSF) serves as a crucial mechanism fostering collaboration and dialogue between non-governmental organizations and governmental authorities. Playing an important role in monitoring activities, providing insights, and encouraging multilateral thematic platforms, the CSF ensures a more inclusive and participatory approach to EaP initiatives.

The Eastern Partnership Summit in November 2017 ushered in a transformative agenda, "20 deliverables for 2020," aligned with the European Commission's Political Guidelines 2019-2024. This comprehensive agenda underscores resilience, sustainable development, and tangible outcomes across sectors, addressing economic, governance, connectivity, and community empowerment aspects. It also addresses gender issues, civil society involvement, media, and strategic communication.

The subsequent document, "Eastern Partnership policy beyond 2020: Reinforcing Resilience – an Eastern Partnership that delivers for all," stands as evidence of the EU's dedication to maintaining progress. This document aligns seamlessly with relevant Commission strategies, reflecting an inclusive and extensive consultation process involving EU member states, partner countries, the European Parliament, the European Economic and Social Committee, and the Committee of the Regions.

The EU's commitment to optimizing the cultural and creative sectors as drivers for sustainable social and economic progress is evident in its foreign policy. This commitment underscores the critical role of culture in fostering openness, advancing European values, and promoting intercultural dialogue, contributing to harmonious community relations.

The post-2020 agenda, outlined in the Joint Staff Working Document, emphasizes ten main investment directions by 2025. Notably, the direction "Together for resilient, gender-equal, fair, and inclusive societies" underscores cultural cooperation and intercultural dialogue, emphasizing participation in initiatives like Creative Europe and EU4Culture.

ENP and the EaP, with their renewed emphasis on culture, stand as dynamic frameworks within the EU's foreign policy. Through strategic action plans, collaborative initiatives, and financial instruments like ENPI and Creative Europe, the EU fosters cultural cooperation, contributing to stability, prosperity, and mutual understanding.

The commitment to adapting policies, as evident in the post-2020 agenda, underscores the EU's dedication to cultivating a vibrant cultural landscape within the Eastern Partnership. This multifaceted approach not only addresses economic and political dimensions but also recognizes the fundamental role of culture in building resilient and inclusive societies, fostering cooperation, and enhancing global dialogue.

In essence, the EaP represents a flexible and adaptive framework that aligns with the ever-evolving dynamics of EU foreign policy, particularly in the context of its Eastern neighbors. The commitment to culture as a driving force for positive change

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<sup>2</sup> Following over three years of negotiations, Moldova and Georgia marked the initiation of their respective AAs/DCFTAs with the EU during the EaP summit in Vilnius in November 2013. Preceding the summit, the Armenian and Ukrainian Presidents, facing considerable pressure from Russia, unilaterally withdrew their plans to sign similar agreements. Blockmans - Obsolence of the European Neighbourhood Policy.

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underscores the EU's recognition of the transformative power of cultural cooperation, ensuring a comprehensive and inclusive approach to partnerships. As the EaP continues to evolve, it stands as a testament to the EU's dedication to building resilient, inclusive, and culturally vibrant societies in collaboration with its Eastern neighbors.

### **C. Creative Europe and Other Initiatives Fostering Global Cultural Cooperation and Inclusivity in Eastern Partnership Countries**

Creative Europe, as the European Union's flagship cultural program, embodies the EU's commitment to fostering global cultural cooperation and inclusivity. Evolving through various cycles, from 2000-2006 to its current phase, Creative Europe has embraced a transformative shift towards inclusivity by extending its reach to non-European countries. Notably, on February 24, 2015, a landmark agreement in Brussels welcomed Georgia as the first Eastern Partnership country to join Creative Europe, followed by subsequent memberships from Moldova, Ukraine, and Armenia, cementing the program's role as a driver for global cultural exchange.

Creative Europe serves as more than just a platform for policy development; it catalyzes creative projects and fosters cultural advancement on a global scale. With each cycle, including the 2021-2027 phase with a budget allocation of 2.44 billion euros, Creative Europe addresses the multifaceted needs of the cultural and creative sectors, positioning itself as a pivotal force in promoting cultural diversity and cooperation. Structured into three key directions—Culture, Media, and Multi-sector—Creative Europe articulates ambitious objectives aimed at protecting, developing, and promoting European cultural heritage while enhancing competitiveness and economic potential, particularly in the audiovisual domain.

Eastern Partnership countries like Georgia, Moldova, Armenia, and Ukraine have access to Creative Europe's Culture sub-programme, with opportunities for participation in specific MEDIA sub-programme schemes contingent upon alignment with EU audiovisual legislation. Azerbaijan and Belarus, while not explicitly mentioned in the Culture sub-programme, may participate in MEDIA sub-programme schemes if their legislation aligns with EU standards. Other Eastern Partnership countries can engage in Culture sub-programme Consortiums, capped at 30% of the project budget.

Beyond Creative Europe, the EU extends its cultural initiatives through programs like EU4Culture and EU4Dialogue, providing additional avenues for Eastern Partnership countries to participate in broader cultural cooperation frameworks. EU4Culture, spanning from 2021-2024, supports cultural and creative sectors at the city level in Eastern Partnership countries, aiming to bolster social and economic development while fostering mutual understanding and cooperation. On the other hand, EU4Dialogue focuses on enhancing mobility through education and culture, promoting dialogue initiatives and people-to-people contacts to strengthen relations and promote projects in education and culture.

These cultural initiatives underscore the EU's commitment to leveraging culture as a driver for positive change and cooperation, fostering meaningful connections and collaborations across borders. By facilitating cultural exchange and dialogue, these programs contribute to building resilient, inclusive, and culturally vibrant societies, aligning with the EU's vision of promoting shared values and cooperation with its Eastern neighbors. Through engagement in cultural exchange initiatives, individuals become active participants in shaping the narrative of international relations, transcending linguistic and geographical barriers to foster mutual understanding and appreciation.

## **IV. BILATERAL COOPERATION BETWEEN THE EU AND EASTERN PARTNERSHIP COUNTRIES**

Bilateral cooperation between the EU and the countries of the Eastern Partnership, as mentioned above, is primarily expressed through the association agreements signed between the EU and these countries. The nature of these arrangements varies between the six EaP countries.

While each Eastern Partnership country more or less shares a common aspiration for closer ties with the EU, the nature and pace of their integration vary. The EU employs association agreements, candidate statuses, and tailored support packages to foster political, economic, and societal collaboration, adapting its approach to the unique circumstances and challenges faced by each partner.

Belarus suspended its Eastern Partnership participation in June 2021 (European Council, n.d.). The EU, responding to Belarus' involvement in Russia's military invasion of Ukraine, imposed sanctions, condemning its actions. Even from the biggining Belarus exhibited minimal responsiveness to the European Union's calls for political reform, leading to a significant stagnation in bilateral cooperation. The recent interest in trade cooperation notwithstanding, the negotiations for further deepening European cooperation with Belarus came to an abrupt halt due to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The geopolitical developments resulting from the invasion have disrupted diplomatic and economic discussions, casting a shadow over the prospects of enhanced collaboration between Belarus and the European Union.

Azerbaijan's relations with the European Union are founded on the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement, which has been in force since 1999. The Partnership priorities emphasize governance, economic development, environment, and people-to-

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people contacts. Despite the strengthening of cooperation through the EU-Armenia Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA) since March 2021, both Azerbaijan and Armenia have been unable to establish deep and comprehensive free trade areas with the EU. Consequently, negotiations on Association Agreements with these countries have not progressed.

In the early 1990s, the European Union engaged in negotiations with all three South Caucasus countries, resulting in the signing of "Partnership and Cooperation Agreements" in 1996 and subsequent ratification in 1999. Each of these agreements established a formal structure known as the Parliamentary Cooperation Committee, providing a forum for members of the partner countries' parliaments and the European Parliament to convene and exchange views.

While all three South Caucasus countries - Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia were initially included in the EU's Eastern Neighbourhood policy alongside Belarus, Moldova, and Ukraine, their trajectories diverged over the years.

In this divergence, Georgia stood out as the sole South Caucasus country to sign its Association Agreement. The EU-Georgia agreement came into force in July 2016, highlighting the distinct paths taken by these nations in their relations with the European Union (European Parliament, n.d.).

Recognized as advanced nations within the Eastern Partnership, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine jointly expressed their willingness to sign the Association Agreement in 2015, initiating implementation. The EU-Moldova Association Agreement has been in force since July 2016, while in Ukraine, the association agreement took effect on 1 September 2017.

The Association Agreements with these countries prioritize people-to-people contacts, and culture holds a significant position within the specific articles of the agreements. A comparative analysis of the reports on Association Agreements for Moldova, Ukraine, and Georgia reveals various issues, ranging from legislative alignment and policy document creation in the cultural sector to their active participation in Creative Europe programs.

Evaluations of the implementation of Association Agreements from 2019 underscore both achievements and challenges faced by these countries, offering insights into the ongoing efforts and areas that may require further attention.

In the context of Georgia, efforts are underway to initiate legal changes in the audiovisual sector, enabling the country's full participation in the Creative Europe media program. Georgia actively engages in the program and stands out as one of the leading Eastern Partnership countries with a substantial number of implemented projects. However, administrative changes in the Ministry of Culture have posed challenges to the approval of further plans for implementing the country's cultural strategy, putting its successful implementation at risk.

Meanwhile, Moldova is placing significant emphasis on preserving cultural heritage. The country is currently in the process of revising the Law on the Protection of Historic Monuments to align with minimum standards in Europe. Despite these efforts, the benefits of Moldova's participation in the Creative Europe program are acknowledged to be limited at this point.

In the meantime, the Ukrainian government has implemented several strategies to promote culture, including the development of physical culture and sports until 2028 and an overarching National Economic Strategy until 2030, which encompass strategic measures for the overall development of Ukraine's economy, including the creative industries and services sector. The Ukrainian Cultural Fund has actively pursued reforms for further development, and Ukraine's participation in Creative Europe is commendable. However, the cultural sector has faced new and urgent challenges due to the war unleashed by Russia against Ukraine, leading to shifts in cultural policy priorities of the Ukraine (Compendium of cultural policies, 2024).

Recent developments in Ukraine have had a profound impact, not only on Ukraine but also on the entire region and the European Union's approach to Eastern partner countries. The conflict and its unfolding course have necessitated crucial adjustments in the EU's stance and strategies towards its partner nations, prompting significant geopolitical considerations.

The geopolitical landscape underwent significant changes, particularly impacting Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia - the East European Trio. The escalation of the Russian war against Ukraine introduced a new reality, posing challenges and uncertainties for these countries.

The current challenges faced by Eastern Partnership (EaP) countries, exacerbated by external pressures and internal tensions, highlight the crucial importance of focusing on fundamental rights and the rule of law (RoL) (Havlicek, 2022), which guarantees the sustainability of any policy in any country. Since 2009, it has been evident that reforms, even in more progressive countries like Ukraine, Moldova, or Georgia, can be reversed and are not linear in development. Each country requires an individual and tailored approach. Despite significant EU investment, the results in the RoL area have been mixed across the region. Lack of accountability, especially in smaller countries.

Amidst emerging geopolitical challenges, the Commission presented the 2023 'Enlargement Package' in November. This proposal advocates the commencement of accession negotiations with Ukraine, Moldova, and Bosnia-Herzegovina. Additionally, it indicates the potential attainment of candidate status for Georgia, subject to specified conditions. Notably, the package incorporates a geopolitical rationale aligned with EU values (Havlicek 2022). The decision represents a historic opportunity for the trio to achieve a goal they have pursued for decades. This aspiration aligns not only with the expressed desires of their

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governments but also resonates with the longstanding efforts of their population, which have strived to demonstrate their alignment with European values and their readiness to safeguard them. Simultaneously, this decision marks a significant stride in Europeanization, signifying that the European Union must substantiate its commitment to its principles. The declared support for partner countries should transcend mere rhetoric and serve as tangible evidence to counter Euro-skeptic sentiments. It is crucial for the European Union to showcase that its proclaimed partnership is genuinely dedicated to enhancing the well-being of partner countries, particularly when the alternative could entail falling under the influence of Russia.

The European Commission's 2023 enlargement package is a comprehensive review, spanning approximately 1500 pages, evaluating the performance of all 10 accession candidates across 33 chapters of the accession process. The Commission suggests the initiation of accession negotiations with Ukraine and Moldova and recommends advancing Georgia to candidate status, emphasizing their potential to meet the conditions outlined in June 2022.

The 2023 reports on EU enlargement policy shed light on various aspects of the cultural sphere. Assessment's underscore diverse challenges and advancements in education and culture across Moldova, Ukraine, and Georgia. The reports emphasize the necessity for strategic enhancements, augmented funding, and improved dialogue in these areas.

According to the reports, Moldova faces challenges due to inadequate funding and limited public financing affecting opportunities for artists. Georgia, has made progress in policy development, and its 2020-2025 strategy broadly aligns with the new European agenda, however, limited information on implementation and civil dialogue is noted. Despite ongoing war, Ukraine has shown some progress in cultural policy reflecting European priorities, emphasizing internationalization and association with Creative Europe. However, challenges include suspended public funding, reported cuts by cultural entities, and difficulties in monitoring looted objects and preserving cultural heritage in occupied territories.

The Commission's key proposals still come with a significant caveat or an additional layer in the conditionality system (Blockmans, 2023, p. 36). In the case of Ukraine and Moldova, the recommendations for initiating accession negotiations are immediately followed by the suggestion that the Council should adopt the negotiating framework once these countries fulfill certain ostensibly 'technical' conditions. However, these conditions hold substantial political significance, particularly concerning the rule of law and reforms to the electoral code. Consequently, the practical commencement of negotiations is effectively postponed, at least until March 2024 when the Commission is set to report back to the Council.

As for Georgia, the potential attainment of the status of a candidate country is contingent on meeting a set of nine conditions, primarily addressing challenges related to oligarchy and foreign policy, as highlighted earlier. This implies that the conditions outlined in June 2022 have not been sufficiently satisfied, even though the Commission sought to avoid the adverse impact on public opinion that could arise from denying candidate status.

The latest Enlargement Package from the Commission marks a significant milestone, being the most crucial in several years. Notably, it represents the initial integration of the East European trio into the accession process, aligning them with the candidate countries from Southeast Europe. The package suggests substantial progress for the three East European states, outlining the conditional commencement of accession negotiations for Ukraine and Moldova, coupled with the recommendation for candidate status for Georgia. In the case of Ukraine, this aligns with the Commission's earlier proposition for a €50 billion financial support instrument.

The 2019 political guidelines underscore the importance of European leadership through collaboration with neighboring countries and partners, guided by shared values and respect for international law. In response to the Ukrainian crisis, the EU has implemented robust sanctions targeting Russia's financial system (Bassot, 2022, p.10).

Moreover, in 2022, following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, The European Political Community (EPC) emerged as an intergovernmental forum facilitating political and strategic discussions regarding the future of Europe. Functioning as a pivotal platform, it addresses and alleviates challenges stemming from recent circumstances, extending an invitation to all European countries that align with the EU's values. The initiative for the European Political Community was proposed by French President Emmanuel Macron during his speech at the Future Conference's closing event in the European Parliament on May 9, 2022. The aggression in the Russian war underscored the necessity of a values-based, well-coordinated foreign policy for a Europe with geopolitical significance. The primary objective of the European Political Community is to enhance political dialogue and cooperation, tackling shared concerns to fortify the security, stability, and prosperity of the European continent (European Council, n.d.).

Analyzing past and present EU cultural policies towards Eap countries yields valuable insights. Acknowledging the diversity among these countries and their distinct cultural priorities is crucial. Providing ongoing assistance in developing tailored cultural policies that address each country's specific needs is essential. Emphasizing the integration of culture within the broader enlargement agenda and acknowledging its role in fostering understanding and collaboration are key considerations.

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Strengthening funding mechanisms to ensure sustainable support for cultural programs is vital, including establishing mechanisms to support artists, institutions, and projects contributing to overall development.

Consistent consideration should be given to promoting cultural diversity, including heritage, languages, and artistic expressions. Investing in skills development and capabilities of cultural professionals is necessary for a vibrant and knowledgeable cultural sector. Inclusive and participatory approaches that involve local communities and civil society in shaping cultural policies and encourage active citizen engagement strengthen a sense of belonging and identity. Alignment with European values is crucial, emphasizing shared values of democracy, human rights, and cultural cooperation.

Within the Eastern Partnership, enhancing the effectiveness of EU cultural policy should be further supported establishing permanent monitoring and evaluation mechanisms, using feedback to adapt and refine policies over time. Acknowledging the dynamic nature of cultural landscapes and being adaptable to changing circumstances is very important. Encouraging collaboration between cultural institutions, government bodies, and other sectors will be essential, recognizing the interconnectedness of culture with education, economy, and social development. Enhancing support of international cross-border collaboration, mobility, and experience-sharing will further contribute to a robust cultural domain.

Various and diverse frameworks to support these initiatives could be developed, not solely by centralized EU bodies but also through initiatives originating from private cultural institutions with the support of EU bodies. Valuable ideas may emerge not only from official channels but also through bottom-up approaches, which can be more concrete and efficient. Member countries have more practice in cross border cooperation, while non-member countries may have limited exposure. In some instances, this limitation may be attributed to the absence of relevant experience in these countries. However, in certain cases, it could be linked to formal meetings and formats where initiatives are predominantly voiced by government representatives. Often, these initiatives come from representatives of member states or international organizations, as non-member states may perceive themselves as unequal participants in similar negotiation formats.

## V. CONCLUSIONS

Navigating the intricate relationship between cultural policy and EU-EaP collaboration demands a nuanced and adaptive approach. This comprehensive exploration has illuminated the dynamics, challenges, and potential enhancements in their association, providing valuable insights into the multifaceted aspects of cultural policy influence and EU mechanisms. Cultural collaboration serves as a significant driver shaping the development of EU-EaP relationships, fostering understanding, shared identity, and values.

The EU's flexible approach, reflected in diverse mechanisms such as association agreements and support packages, prioritizes fundamental values like democracy, human rights, and cultural cooperation. However, challenges persist, with some countries facing stagnation and others encountering hurdles in establishing free trade areas.

Opportunities for elevated collaboration lie in strengthening funding mechanisms, supporting artists, and involving local communities, alongside continuous evaluation and adaptability. Lessons from ongoing initiatives underscore the importance of inclusivity and alignment with European values.

For Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia, aligning cultural policies with EU principles lays the groundwork for sustainable development, fostering stable legal frameworks, freedom of expression, and cultural diversity. Strengthening commitment to these principles can create vibrant cultural sectors that enrich citizens' lives and contribute to overall socio-economic development.

As the EU-EaP relationship evolves, whether within the Eastern Partnership framework or towards membership, interdependence and the will of these countries will be decisive. Expedited decision-making, guided by a commitment to shared values, is essential to protect populations from the destructive impacts of conflicts like the Ukraine-Russia war.

In conclusion, continuous collaboration and strategic enhancements in cultural policy are vital for building a resilient and cooperative relationship with the Eastern Partnership. Embracing cultural diplomacy as a powerful tool can increase understanding between different peoples and cultures, contributing to the success of diplomatic endeavors and advancing mutual goals. As President Charles Michel emphasizes, the Eastern Partnership remains a priority for the EU, aligned with its core values and commitments.

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