



EASTERN PARTNERSHIP 'BEYOND WESTLESSNESS': A NEW MOMENTUM FOR THE EUROPEAN INTEGRATION

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An impasse of integration and the wake-up call

Recently Estonian President Kersti Kaljulaid while visiting Ukraine twice repeated her harsh statements that Ukraine will not see its membership in the EU till 2040 and it will take several light years for Ukraine to fulfill the Copenhagen criteria.

Dmitro Kuleba, Foreign Affairs Minister of Ukraine, reacted to those statements of Estonian President with a clear message that problems are on the side of the EU, which has not enough political will to offer Ukraine a clear membership perspective as the one enjoyed by the Western Balkan countries. In his interview to a British magazine *the Independent*, he also made a comment that in Ukraine they do not trust anymore in the promises made by the West. The Kremlin propaganda was very happy to publicise that exchange of statements between Estonian and Ukrainian officials.

Personally we do not agree with the harsh statements of Estonian President Kersti Kaljulaid as we believe that progress of Ukraine and the other two countries, which belong to Association Trio (Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia), of their integration into the EU can be much more ambitious, dynamic and effective.

But also we consider that such a critical statement of one of the Heads of State of EU Member State is an effective wake-up call for all of us on the both sides. On one side, the Association Trio countries need to speed-up European reforms. On the other side, the EU institutions and the Member States in the nearest future need to come out with a much more ambitious agenda to provide a new momentum of EU integration process for the Association Trio.

We believe that during the next decade until 2030 a real progress of the EU integration can be made by the Association Trio, but for that purpose, first of all, the EU side needs to move forward with the new ideas to accelerate that process.

This paper evaluates what are the major obstacles in the Association Trio EU integration process and proposes new ideas what is needed to be done by the EU to unlock a new momentum of EU integration for the Association Trio.

The conclusions made in 2020 Munich Security Conference (MSC) report¹ on the westlessness phenomena observed in the West and the global world have become very much relevant to our assessment of the recent developments in the EU's Eastern neighbourhood countries and of the EU's geopolitics in general. The 2021 MSC report kept this narrative and made one step forward saying that not only the world is becoming less Western; the West itself is becoming less Western, too.²

Can we overcome such westlessness in the European continent? Different regions in the EU's neighbourhood may have different EU geopolitical strategies, however all these have to align to the same principle – the European policy should reinvent itself and overcome westlessness as soon as possible.

For the time being, it becomes obvious that the EU is losing fast a geopolitical edge in its Eastern Partnership initiative. The EU is losing advantage and does not have many political incentives to support reforms even in the most advanced countries of the Associated Trio. This kind of westlessness, on the other side, stalls the implementation of reforms by our Eastern partner countries distancing them further from a rapprochement with the EU. In return, the both sides rather choose to pursue a business as usual policy and pay a lip service to each other. However, the EU today more than ever is able to reverse this situation and to bring back the geopolitics to the Eastern Neighbourhood.

This paper sets out the ideas how the EU can overcome the westlessness in the longer-term policy towards its Eastern partners, and especially, towards the Association Trio countries of Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia. It elaborates in detail the proposals for the EU to build a New Momentum in the Eastern Partnership initiative and to employ 'everything but institutions' formula suggested by Mr Romano Prodi in 2002. The authors also propose to take into account the experience of the Berlin Process for the Western Balkans countries and to launch a similar architecture of the Association Trio Process to accelerate the European integration in the Eastern Partnership region. The establishment of an intermediate EU membership status for the EU Eastern partners will be contributing to incentivise the reform making in this process.

The hope of integration and motivation for reforms

The integration of the Eastern Partnership countries, at least the most ambitious ones, i.e., Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia (the Association Trio), into the EU is one of the EU's most important geo-political tasks, as it concerns not only these countries themselves, but also the entire EU's policy towards the East of the European continent, including its policy towards Russia.

The Association Trio recently established by Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia is an important step forward, which clearly shows that those countries want more ambitious integration agenda and that demands from EU a proper reaction.

So why the integration of the Association Trio into the EU is so important? The accelerated European integration of these countries is important, because it is the only way in which democracy, economic and social success and a European order can be created and established

¹ Westlessness, Munich Security Report 2020, <https://securityconference.org/en/publications/munich-security-report-2020/>

² Concluding remarks by Mr Wolfgang Ischinger, Beyond Westlessness: Report from the MSC Special Edition 2021, <https://securityconference.org/en/news/full/beyond-westlessness-a-report-from-the-msc-special-edition-2021/>

in Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia. There is not a single historical example on the European continent of a post-totalitarian state, which being a neighbour of the EU, has managed to become a successful state on its own, without integration into the EU. The choice in the East of European continent is clear – either to support the European integration reforms necessary for a functioning democracy, or to abandon them and keep establishing the authoritarian regimes with an ever-deepening backwardness.

The build-up of the Association Trio's success thus depends not only on the ability of the countries to reform and change themselves, but also on the ability of the EU to pursue an ambitious integration policy towards them.

The European integration requires reforms, and the reforms require a clear goal of integration and a belief that this integration goal can be achieved. It is an obvious axiom: from one side, no country will be able to reform itself and implement painful changes if it does not believe in the possibility of further integration with the EU; from another side, no integration will take place if a country is not able to carry out fundamental reforms. The egg and the chicken question has a clear answer here: both factors are needed in the country at the same time, i.e., the belief in the possibility of integration and the ability to implement reforms.

Belief in the possibility of integration depends not only on those who seek to integrate, not only on their willingness and capacity to reform themselves, but also on those (the EU) into whom they seek to integrate and their (the EU) willingness to integrate someone. If the EU continually demonstrates that it does not want to integrate anyone, either now or in the future, then eventually those who once wanted to integrate closer with the EU will lose faith that such integration can happen. Then the motivation for the necessary EU integration reforms also disappears.

As the President of the European Commission Romano Prodi said back in 2002, when speaking about integration of Central European countries: 'By holding up the goal of membership we enabled these governments to implement the necessary reforms. Only this prospect sustained the reformers in their efforts to overcome nationalist and other resistance and fears of change and modernisation. /.../How does a country envision its future when it is lacking direction or confidence? Hope gives direction and so inspires confidence. But the future must be attractive to inspire hope³'.

Today, the current leadership of the European Commission should repeat the same words to Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia, showing the real and achievable next goal of integration. We shall elaborate later in this paper, that this time it should be the objective of an intermediate status for integration of Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia.

The EU's geopolitical formula for the European continent's Eastern neighbourhood should therefore be bold and clear. The EU must offer those eastern neighbours who want to integrate a clear, understandable and practical path for integration possibly with an intermediate status, which the eastern neighbours can trust in, and, once they have trusted in it, they will be inspired with renewed vigour to undertake the necessary reforms.

³ Romano Prodi President of the European Commission, A Wider Europe - A Proximity Policy as the key to stability. Peace, Security And Stability International Dialogue and the Role of the EU, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/SPEECH_02_619

In order to achieve this, the EU itself must first adopt a common approach to how the EU can help the countries in the neighbourhood to implement the necessary reforms. In 2002, Romano Prodi identified this with the obligation of EU to provide to the neighbours the goal of integration, which needs to be attractive to inspire hope, and in 2020, the European Commission reiterated it in its communication on “Enhancing the accession process – A credible EU perspective for the Western Balkans”⁴, where, in relation to the Western Balkans, it is said: ‘A credible accession perspective is the key incentive and driver of transformation in the region and thus enhances our collective security and prosperity. This is a key tool to promote democracy, rule of law and the respect for fundamental rights, which are also the main engines of economic integration and the essential anchor for fostering regional reconciliation and stability. Maintaining and enhancing this policy is thus indispensable for the EU’s credibility, for the EU ‘success and for the EU’s influence in the region and beyond – especially at times of heightened geopolitical competition.’

In this important quote, the European Commission rightly stresses that for the Western Balkans a clear perspective of European integration is a key instrument for bringing about a fundamental transformation in the region and strengthening the fundamental values of democracy, the rule of law and human rights. The European Commission is right. The reforms in the neighbourhood countries need not only EU support with finances or expertise, but above all, it needs from EU a clear integration perspective. What is important for the success of reforms in the Western Balkans is equally important for the Eastern Partnership region. A clear integration perspective is a prerequisite for the success of reforms in the Eastern Partnership region.

Unfortunately, more than 10 years after the EU launched the Eastern Partnership policy, which sounded promising at the time, the prospects for the European integration of the Eastern Partnership countries have not become any clearer. The signing of the Association Agreements with Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova has given a good impetus to the progress of these countries, but over the whole previous decade uncertainty in further integration and membership prospects has not diminished in the slightest, and is causing a growing frustration. Some ministers in these countries are saying loudly that they no longer want to knock on the 'closed door' and will therefore only implement reforms that are not painful, because even if the most painful reforms are implemented, the closed door will still not open.

The Association Trio and Western Balkans: similarities and differences

The EU has so far adopted a distinctive, and at the same time difficult to explain, differentiation of its integration policy when it comes to the two similar regions of the Western Balkans and the Association Trio countries. In case of the Western Balkans, the EU boldly declares that these countries need to be integrated into the EU much more quickly by keeping for them the prospect of a full EU membership. The EU leaders justify this position with the correct geopolitical argument that if the EU does not offer these countries full integration, the situation in these countries will be destabilised very quickly by the efforts of Russia, China or Turkey.

Unfortunately, despite the fact that the situation in Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia could be destabilized even more quickly by Russia’s efforts, the EU leaders do not dare to repeat the same words that they are saying to the countries of the Western Balkans and the countries of the Eastern Partnership continue to be left with no clear further integration steps, let alone prospects

⁴ Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, Enhancing the accession process - A credible EU perspective for the Western Balkans, https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/enlargement-methodology_en.pdf

of membership. This divergence in EU rhetoric and policy creates additional geopolitical security challenges to our Eastern partners, as it gives an impression to someone in the Kremlin that the EU is less committed to these countries than it is to the Western Balkans.

This differentiation of the EU strategy towards the Western Balkans and the Eastern Partnership countries has a little factual basis when considering the level of integration readiness of the countries in both regions. As it is stated in the recent study⁵ by the influential Brussels think-tank CEPS, the difference between the level of pre-integration readiness of the Western Balkans and the most advanced countries of the Eastern Partnership (the Association Trio countries) is minimal, and Georgia, according to its achievements, can also be placed in the group of the leading countries of both regions.

It is clear that this difference in the EU's strategies for the integration of the Western Balkans and the Eastern Partnership countries is not due to the different levels of integration readiness of these regions. This might be due to the geopolitical attitudes prevailing in some EU capitals, such as 'let's not provoke Kremlin'. However, this situation is even more influenced by a scepticism of some EU capitals about a non-readiness of the EU to enlarge, which is linked with institutional architecture and the EU's decision-making mechanism that has not yet been fully transformed into a qualified majority voting and makes many procedural problems even with all 27 EU Member States. The institutional architecture of EU and its decision-making procedures deserves to be addressed by the Conference on the Future of Europe, because without those changes next wave of enlargement can be very problematic to be realised.

The Kremlin's recent aggressive policies, both internally and externally, are encouraging the West to rethink its policy towards Russia, and there is a growing realization in the West that the integration successes of Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova will eventually help Russia to transform itself. The Kremlin's opposition to European integration of the Association Trio is therefore slowly losing its influence in the West.

However, the reluctance to enlarge and increase the number of EU members until its decision-making has been reformed remains a poignant and topical argument in some influential EU capitals. As the EU's decision-making mechanism is defined in the EU Treaty guaranteeing the EU member states a veto it is difficult to expect that a change to a qualified majority mechanism could be easily realized in the near future if not properly addressed by the Conference on the Future of Europe.

This means that without changes to some of the key provisions in integration process, the demand by the Association Trio countries for a clearly defined perspective on EU membership may continue to be unanswered by the EU institutions. This adds to the frustration and loss of motivation for reforms in the Association Trio countries and makes the EU to look as an example of Westlessness and being not able to explain why it is keeping two different policies for European integration of the Western Balkan and the Association Trio countries.

⁵ CEPS study on Balkan-East European Comparisons. Building a New Momentum for the European integration of the Balkan and Eastern European associated states
<https://www.ceps.eu/download/publication/?id=32341&pdf=Balkan-and-Eastern-European-Comparisons.pdf>

How to stop 'kicking the can down the road' in Association Trio integration? Romano Prodi formula

Today there is the only one key strategic issue or problem regarding the integration prospects of the Eastern Partnership countries. The main question in this equation is how to break through the EU inaction *status quo* deadlock in which on the one hand the countries of Association Trio do not stop asking for the prospect of EU membership and at the same time no longer believe that they will ever get it; while on the other hand the EU in response to such requests can only kick the can down the road once again by repeating unconvincing phrases and suggesting to keep up with the reforms.

The habit of repeating for a decade the same phrases about the integration and reforms is becoming a comfortable habit for the both sides. One side traditionally demands clearer membership prospects and does not look for any other way to break through the deadlock of status-quo, while the other side does not look for any new answer or solution and tries to hide its deficit of geopolitical decisions under useful but only technical solutions, such as the proposal to abandon the telecommunications roaming.

As it is said above, such a position is determined by the fact that the EU is not ready to talk about new members until it has found a way to solve its internal decision-making problems. The excuse given by EU politicians is that their electorate has no appetite for further enlargement and in such a way politicians avoid any serious debate on this subject.

At the same time, there are no attempts to regain that appetite. This approach is applied by the EU not only to the Eastern Partnership or Association Trio countries, which have not yet been promised EU membership, but also to the countries of the Western Balkan region, which have been given the prospect of EU membership, but have no certainty whether and when the EU will be ready to take the corresponding decisions regarding their membership.

Compared to the previous decades, it is clear that the EU has lost its appetite for geopolitics despite the fact that this European Commission has ambitiously considered itself 'geopolitical'. Unfortunately, this contributed to the westlessness on the EU side and opened the gates for the other geopolitical actors, especially the authoritarian ones, aiming to influence and destabilise the countries in the EU's neighbourhood. As it was said many times, if the EU is not able to export stability, than at the end, it will be importing instability. This is the price of the EU's westlessness.

It is time to realise that this stagnation in the EU's Eastern Partnership policy cannot continue. Both, the Association Trio countries and the EU, need to agree on a further integration process and objectives that will help to get us out of this ongoing 'kicking the can' process.

The unpromising *status quo* discussed above can only be broken if the EU offers the Association Trio countries something that is attractive to them as an intermediate status or a stepping stone towards a full EU membership, but which does not at the same time create additional problems for the EU in terms of decision-making. According to the same CEPS study, the renewed interest could be paid to the formula that Romano Prodi, the former head of the European Commission, put forward back in 2002.

The formula says that the EU can offer its neighbours an intermediate status in which they would get 'everything but institutions', that is to say they would get all the benefits of genuine EU

membership, but would not yet be able to take part in the work of the EU institutions and their decision-making.

The proposals made by Romano Prodi regarding the formula of 'everything but institutions' (see: Box 1) can provide a good working basis for the next stage of Association Trio integration process. This model may define the next and a more ambitious framework of EU *acquis* implementation and keep the doors open for the EU membership in the near future. It may also include the elements proposed in the recent CEPS study⁶, such as the stages with conditionality for a progressive participation in the EU institutions, voting rights or the EU financial support.

Box 1. Romano Prodi formula

European Commission president Mr Romano Prodi noted that the idea of 'sharing everything but institutions' does not exclude the possibility of developing a new structures with our neighbours at a later stage. Furthermore, he believed, that enlargement is the greatest contribution to sustainable stability and security on the European continent, which was one of the most successful and impressive political transformations of the twentieth century.

On the other hand, Mr Prodi was convinced, that we cannot water down the European political project and turn the EU into just a free trade area on a continental scale, therefore, he claimed, that the EU has to develop a blueprint for future actions towards its neighbours with the elements taken from the enlargement process.

According to him, this blueprint should include clear benefits, which can only be obtained if the process is well structured and its goals are well defined in the framework, which is legally and politically binding. According to him, this blueprint, therefore, should be based on a structured, step-by-step approach and on the benchmarks to measure what we expect our neighbours to do in order to advance from one stage to another. Mr Prodi called it 'Copenhagen proximity criteria'.

According to Romano Prodi, the European Economic Area, based on the EEA Agreement, which brings together the EFTA countries and the EU under a single roof, could be one of the ways forward. He argued that the EEA model does not presuppose accession as prerequisite, but as history shows, being member of the EEA does not exclude membership of the EU later.

Benefits of introducing an 'intermediate status' model for the Association Trio

What could be the advantages of such an intermediate status for the Association Trio countries?

There are two major sets of benefits for the Association Trio countries and for the EU itself linked with an introduction of an intermediate status as defined in the Romano Prodi formula. One part of those benefits will be due to an intermediate status itself as these are the ones the Association Trio countries will get when they will obtain that status ('status' benefits). The other part of these benefits would be related to the process of achieving that status ('process' benefits) using the

⁶ *ibid.*, <https://www.ceps.eu/ceps-publications/balkan-and-eastern-european-comparisons/>

same methodology and benefits stemming from a process the EU has established for the integration of the Western Balkan countries (Berlin process, evaluation and negotiation process, etc.).

The benefits related to an intermediate status as based on Romano Prodi formula may include a comprehensive participation in the EU common policies, coordination initiatives and programmes, EU jurisdiction and a fully-fledged EU administration support, a full access to the EU internal market, free trade and investment benefits, a full access to the EU multiannual budget funds and fiscal discipline policies, progressive participation in the EU decision-making, as well as many other greater or lesser advantages which can be derived from a genuine EU membership.

In other words, all practical rewards of integration into the EU enjoyed by the EU Member States would also accrue to the countries of the Association Trio that have acquired an 'intermediate status'. At the same time, it would allow these countries to take a major geopolitical step forward, which is to break through the European geopolitical stagnation of the past and to open the door for next stage of integration towards an intermediate status and to stand on the stepping stone towards full membership.

One would hope that in the circumstances of today such an intermediate status could be acceptable to both sides. This would allow the Association Trio countries to pursue a status that will grant them all attractive and practical advantages of EU membership. On the other hand, it would reassure the EU that decision-making of its institutions would not become more complicated.

Such a clear perspective for the Association Trio can and must be defined, even if the EU is not yet in a position to decide on the full membership perspective or candidate status of the Eastern Partnership countries. This can be done with a help of applying the Romano Prodi formula, which provides for an integration model offering a prospect of intermediate status for aspiring countries at an initial stage. A prospect of an accelerated integration phase would be attractive to the Association Trio, as it would restore a real hope for them that the current stagnation in the geopolitical process will be overcome and ensure that the pace of reform in the Association Trio countries can gain a new momentum.

The Association Trio integration: the next steps and 'process' benefits

The next stage of Association Trio integration process towards achieving an intermediate status can combine the Romano Prodi formula and EU cluster methodology currently applied in the EU membership negotiations with the Western Balkan countries. That would bring tangible 'process' benefits for integration of the Association Trio countries, which for now do not have a clear set of benchmarks, regular evaluation and negotiation, which are the features of the Western Balkan integration process.

This stage of the Association Trio integration process as described above should be covering all the areas of the *EU acquis* and lead to a much deeper integration of the Association Trio countries into the EU, which can consist of full integration into EU internal market, common policies, programmes, rules and funds.

According to the EU methodology for the Western Balkan countries⁷, the EU can reward the progress made by the candidate countries by providing them with immediate benefits of 'accelerated integration'. The negotiations and rewards for the Western Balkan countries are grouped into six EU thematic clusters and 33 chapters (see: Box 2), which cover all the areas of *the EU acquis*. The successful implementation of reforms by these countries in a given cluster would lead to additional new possibilities for 'accelerated integration' and 'phasing-in' to individual EU policies, EU market and EU programmes, as well as to increased EU funding and investments. Otherwise, if the pace of cluster reforms is not sufficient, the benefits of 'accelerated' integration may be downgraded.

The EU can apply the same 'cluster and chapter approach' to the Association Trio integration process. This process would aim at the accession of Association Trio countries to intermediate status based on 'everything but institutions' model which could be applied in stages and guided by the EU system of cluster rewards. The accession to the each cluster may be carried out against the fulfilment of agreed EU benchmarks.

The EU Association Council together with EU institutions and the member states could be responsible for the way forward towards the Association Trio accelerated integration process. In its work, the Association Council could rely on the annual regular progress reports adopted jointly by the European Commission and the EEAS to monitor closely the progress of the Association Trio countries in their alignment with the benchmarks based on *EU acquis* chapters and clusters.

The EU Member States will be involved in the adoption of EU benchmarks identified in accordance with individual EU assessments made in the Screening Report for the Association Trio countries. In such a way, the next stage of the Association Trio integration process would acquire all the process related benefits as ones acquired by the Western Balkans integration.

⁷ https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/enlargement-methodology_en.pdf

Box 2: the six EU clusters of negotiating chapters:

A. Fundamentals

23 - Judiciary and fundamental rights
24 - Justice, Freedom and Security
Economic criteria
Functioning of democratic institutions
Public administration reform
5 - Public procurement
18 - Statistics
32 - Financial control

B. Internal Market

1 - Free movement of goods
2 - Freedom of movement for workers
3 - Right of establishment and freedom to provide services
4 - Free movement of capital
6 - Company law
7 - Intellectual property law
8 - Competition policy
9 - Financial services
28 - Consumer and health protection

C. Competitiveness and inclusive growth

10 - Information society and media
16 - Taxation
17 - Economic and monetary policy
19 - Social policy and employment
20 - Enterprise and industrial policy
25 - Science and research
26 - Education and culture
29 - Customs union

D. Green agenda and sustainable connectivity

14 - Transport policy
15 - Energy
21 - Trans-European networks
27 - Environment and climate change

E. Resources, agriculture and cohesion

11 - Agriculture and rural development
12 - Food safety, veterinary and phytosanitary policy
13 - Fisheries
22 - Regional policy & coordination of structural instruments
33 - Financial & budgetary provisions

F. External relations

30 - External relations
31 - Foreign, security & defence policy

These new elements will enhance the credibility of the Association Trio integration process, will boost a new momentum of reforms in those countries and will help yielding better results for the people who hope to have the European future. Upon the accession to all six EU thematic clusters, the Association Trio countries will be in a position to enjoy fully the potential EU benefits and to keep themselves as close as possible to the EU institutions. The new opportunities for the Association Trio countries will introduce more dynamism into the Eastern Partnership and will allow for a higher political engagement with best performing countries.

The creation of Association Trio Process for the accelerated integration into the EU

The implementation of the Romano Prodi formula during this decade is something that the EU, together with the Association Trio, is certainly capable of achieving. There is no need to reinvent the wheel on this path. The EU must apply to the integration of the Association Trio countries a similar process having a same methodology of accelerated integration applied to the Western Balkan countries. The only modification could be that for the time being the Association Trio countries should be offered an intermediate status towards EU membership, as it was suggested in the Prodi formula.

Different formats of institutional stakeholders, processes, mechanisms, agendas as well as investment platforms that the European Commission has set up for the Western Balkans would also be used to implement the accelerated integration process of the Association Trio countries. This process would aim at the accelerated integration of the Eastern Partnership Association Trio countries into the EU and could follow a blueprint of the Berlin Process that the EU has created for the integration of the Western Balkans with a support of a coalition of EU Member States having a special interest in the Western Balkans region. The EU's Eastern partners need the same coalition of similarly minded EU countries, which are interested in EU's Eastern neighbourhood. The coalition would ensure that such a Trio Integration Strategy is successfully implemented.

The core of such a coalition could be made up of those countries that have a particular interest in the future of the Eastern Partnership and will hold the rotating presidency of the EU until 2030. These are in particular France (2022), the Czech Republic (2022), Sweden (2023), Poland (2025), Lithuania (2027) and Latvia (2028). Of course, such a coalition would also need countries such as Germany or Romania, as well as a transatlantic partnership with the US and Canada.

The EU's Eastern Partnership policy for the next decade will determine the future of the European continent for decades to come. The integration success of the Association Trio countries would also inspire Armenians to follow the example of the Trio. It is very likely that the Democratic Belarus would also decide to follow a similar path of reforms. Furthermore, this decade will be crucial for the eastern part of the European continent. The integration and reform success of the Trio countries will determine not only the direction of their further development, but also the one for Russia.

The opportunities of 'accelerated integration' towards intermediate status and inspiration for reforms will also provide the necessary means for the Association Trio countries and both EU institutions and Member States to accommodate themselves to an effective submission of the EU membership application, which is the intention of some Association Trio governments to do in 2024.

Strategic responsibility of the EU

We listed all the arguments why accelerated integration of the Association Trio in the Eastern Partnership region should be among the key priorities of EU's geopolitical agenda. Stability, prosperity and peace on the European continent come only through integration. This common interest should be important not only for the countries in the Eastern Partnership and in particular for the Association Trio, but also for the whole EU. The EU should stop kicking the can down the road when it comes to the European integration aspirations in EU's neighbourhood and the Eastern Partnership. The EU knew what was important for its neighbourhood in 2002; it

knows what is important for the Western Balkans today and will be even more important for the Eastern Partnership region tomorrow. This is a matter of strategic responsibility for the EU.

The EU needs to remember that such a responsibility to its own neighbourhood, including the Eastern Partnership region, is an EU obligation according to the EU Treaty, the Art. 8 of which speaks very clearly (see Box 3), that the EU has a strategic responsibility 'to establish an area of prosperity and good neighbourliness, founded on the values of the Union and characterized by close and peaceful relations based on cooperation.'

It is time for the EU to bring a new momentum into implementation of its strategic responsibility. This is how the EU can overcome its westlessness in at least one but very important region. After years of geopolitical stagnation, the EU has a unique opportunity to restore a real, tangible and attractive European hope to the Eastern Partnership countries, and the Association Trio countries in particular will be ready to respond with a new wave of enthusiasm for reforms needed to achieve that intermediate status. This kind of a stepping stone that comes from the Romano Prodi formula is achievable in the term of next decade.

Box 3. Provisions in the Treaty on the EU relationship with the neighbouring countries

TEU, Article 8.1: *The Union shall develop a special relationship with neighbouring countries, aiming to establish an area of prosperity and good neighbourliness, founded on the values of the Union and characterized by close and peaceful relations based on cooperation.*

TEU, Article 8.2: *For the purposes of paragraph 1, the Union may conclude specific agreements with the countries concerned. These agreements may contain reciprocal rights and obligations as well as the possibility of undertaking activities jointly. Their implementation shall be the subject of periodic consultation.*