

# EURACTIV

## THE ASSOCIATED TRIO IN ACTION

SPECIAL REPORT | JULY 2021

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*For Georgia, who last April initiated the Associated Trio format with Ukraine and Moldova, the presence of Charles Michel at a summit of the three countries in Batumi on 19 July is perceived as a milestone.*

*Until now the Trio initiative was met with suspicion in Brussels, because it changes the format of relations with the six former Soviet republics in the EU neighbourhood – Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, Armenia, Georgia and Azerbaijan.*

*The six are packed together in the so-called Eastern Partnership, despite the fact that Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia have Association agreements with the EU and are much more ambitious in terms of integration and even future membership of the Union.*

*EURACTIV takes a closer look at the messages from Batumi.*

# Contents

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Charles Michel heralds more EU involvement in the South Caucasus	4
Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova seek acceptance of their EU membership perspective	7
Georgia FM: We need a post-2020 Eastern Partnership agenda perspective	10
Associated Trio to ramp up cooperation on Black Sea security	12
Newer EU members support Associated Trio as 'champions'	14

# Charles Michel heralds more EU involvement in the South Caucasus

By Georgi Gotev | EURACTIV.com



Council President Charles and the President of Georgia Michel Salome Zourabishvili in Batumi on 19 July 2021. [Council Newsroom]

European Council President Charles Michel will attend a regional summit in the Georgian Black Sea city of Batumi on Monday (19 July), after a weekend visit of Armenia and Azerbaijan, in what appears as an attempt to keep the region closer to the EU. EURACTIV reports from Batumi.

After [his personal efforts to help solve the internal political crisis in Georgia](#), described by some as risky, Michel took another challenge by involving the EU in new mediation efforts between Armenia and Azerbaijan to settle the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

Azerbaijan and Armenia fought a war last autumn over Nagorno-Karabakh which claimed some 6,500 lives and ended with [a Russian-brokered ceasefire](#) under which Yerevan ceded territories it had controlled for decades.

Tensions have been running high again since May — when Armenia accused Azerbaijan’s military of crossing its southern border — with both countries reporting occasional shootouts along their shared border.

Michel, who [was in Armenia on Saturday](#), called on the so-called [Minsk Group](#) “to assume its responsibilities and address different topics” of the

post-conflict settlement. The OSCE Minsk Group was created in 1992 by the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe and is co-chaired by France, Russia and the United States.

But the Minsk Group has been largely inactive since the ceasefire. Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev had insisted that “the Karabakh conflict has been resolved for good” and has rejected Yerevan’s calls to negotiate on the region’s political status.

## HONEST BROKER

Previous EU positions have always been that no duplication was needed

Continued on Page 5

Continued from Page 4

and that the proper body to manage the conflict was the OSCE.



Speaking alongside Azeri President Ilham Aliyev, Michel said that among the issues on which the EU could provide expertise are the exchange of prisoners and the availability of mine maps, which were partly resolved, but also the delimitation of borders, for which he said “we are ready to provide European expert assistance and, if necessary and desired, European monitoring”.



He added that there was also the issue of the armed forces located close to the disputed areas, which in his words should also be discussed.

From Baku Michel flew to Batumi where he is expected to attend a meeting of the Presidents of Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova later on Monday. The meeting marks a rapprochement between the three countries, which share a common desire to join the EU.

The summit, hosted by the President of Georgia Salome Zourabishvili, coincides with the annual Batumi International Conference, a high point in Georgia's foreign affairs agenda.

According to diplomats, what made the Trio summit possible was the outstanding victory of the pro-European forces in Moldova last Sunday.

For Georgia, who last April initiated the Associated Trio format, the presence of Charles Michel at such gathering would be a major blessing, diplomats told EURACTIV.

Until now the Trio initiative was met with suspicion in Brussels, because it changes the format of relations with the six former Soviet republics in the EU neighbourhood – Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, Armenia, Georgia and Azerbaijan.

The six are packed together in the so-called Eastern Partnership, despite the fact that Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia have Association agreements with the EU and are much more ambitious in terms of integration and even future membership of the Union.

### NOT A BRUSSELS INVENTION

Another reason why the EU was suspicious of the Trio initiative is

that it was not a Brussels invention, a diplomat said. In his words, initiatives to keep pro-EU attitudes alive in the region appear once every five years, the latest one being the visa liberalisation scheme. But in the lack of new initiatives from Brussels, the region came up with its own plan, the diplomat said.

However, the Trio initiative also has its internal problems. Probably the biggest is [Ukraine's agreement to host Mikheil Saakashvili](#), the former President of Georgia and leader of the country's major opposition force, the United National Movement (UNM) of Georgia.

Saakashvili left Georgia in 2013 a year after his party lost a parliamentary election, and was charged and sentenced in 2017 in absentia, on charges of abuse of public office and corruption. He now lives in Ukraine, which has no extradition agreement with Georgia. There, Saakashvili is popular and is still seen as a pro-Western reformer.

UNM keeps boycotting international efforts at solving the internal Georgian crisis, spearheaded by Charles Michel.

Diplomats said that a lot of work had been needed to prepare the visit of Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelenskiy to Batumi, and that details of the programme kept changing by the hour.

As an example, instead of a discussion between the Presidents moderated by journalist Rikard Jozwiak, the Presidents will only pronounce speeches.

A high point of the meeting of the three Presidents and Charles Michel is expected to take place in the Petra

Continued on Page 6

Continued from Page 5

fortress, south of Batumi.

In the 6th century, under the Byzantine emperor Justinian I, the Petra fortress served as an important Eastern Roman outpost in the Caucasus and, due to its strategic location, became a battleground of the 541–562 Lazic War between Rome and Sasanian Persia, the ancient version of today's Iran.



# Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova seek acceptance of their EU membership perspective

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By Georgi Gotev | EURACTIV.com



The signature of the Declaration of the Associated Trio at the fortress of Petra, on 19 July 2021. [Council Newsroom]

A summit between Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova in the Georgian Black Sea city of Batumi culminated on Monday (19 July) with the signature of a declaration calling for the EU to acknowledge the perspective of these countries to become full EU members one day. EURACTIV reports from Batumi.

[The summit declaration](#), signed by the Presidents Salome Zourabichvili (Georgia), Volodymyr Zelenskiy (Ukraine) and Maia Sandu (Moldova), is a further step in the emancipation of the three associated members of the Eastern Partnership (EaP).

Launched in 2008, the Eastern Partnership governs the EU's relationship with six post-Soviet states, including Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine.

But the Trio doesn't want to be held back by the other three members of the EaP, which they perceive as having different agendas: Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Belarus.

One of the highlights of the summit was the speech given by European Council President Charles Michel, in which he saluted the Trio summit as "an important milestone".

"We welcome the Trio's initiative to foster coordination between the associated partners and with Brussels. This can lead to the sharing of best practices on reforms, on



Continued on Page 8

Continued from Page 7

implementation, and on broader agenda for the future,” said Michel, to the delight of his hosts.

Up to now, the EU was wary of endorsing an initiative which did not come from Brussels. But the EU now no longer avoids using the “Trio” expression, despite ongoing tensions in Georgia and Ukraine where Michel acts as a mediator.

In his speech at the summit, Michel, who appears to have developed a personal affinity for the region, saluted the fact that Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine are celebrating 30 years of independence from the former Soviet Union – in his words, “one generation of hard-won progress and sometimes painful setbacks”.



“It has not been an easy journey with your countries facing interference or aggression,” said Michel referring to the conflict zones created by Russia: Transnistria in Moldova, Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Georgia, as well as the annexation of Crimea and the conflict in Donbas in Ukraine.

Michel reminded that the EU created the EaP 12 years ago, saying the partnership is now a reality that benefits all citizens of the countries concerned and of the EU.

Regarding the upcoming EaP summit in December in Brussels, he said the EU would remain a strong and reliable partner for the region, but that it counts on the countries’ commitment to advance reforms – “not to please Brussels, but in the interest of your own people and your own societies”.



Michel reminded that when the COVID-19 pandemic struck Europe, the EU reacted to the needs of the six EaP partners and together with the EIB, mobilised €2.5 billion to support them in tackling the health crisis and recover from the economic recession.

Turning to other challenges – economic growth, climate change, the digital transition and promoting fair and inclusive societies – he said the EaP should be a launchpad for greater cooperation in all these areas, and serve as a catalyst for democracy, good governance and the rule of law.

He said that the Associated agreements with the three countries had boosted trade for as much as 45% in some cases, and that the free trade area they create can deliver more, making them able to compete on the global market.

Michel described as “impressive” the results of visa liberalisation between Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova. He said that more than half a million of their citizens have benefitted from visa-free travel so far, and that their young generation have benefitted from 80,000 exchanges under the Erasmus+ programme.

The European Council President mentioned good governance as a keyword to convey the message that the countries’ elites owe it to their nationals.

“Good governance is the key to unlock the benefits that liberal democracy can bring,” he stressed.

The summit was held in the afternoon, while during the entire morning Michel was mediating between the Georgian opposition and the Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili, following new setbacks in the process of defusing a deep internal political crisis.



Continued on Page 9

Continued from Page 8

Michel made suggestions on how to foster closer cooperation between the three associated partners, by introducing competitive benchmarking on key reforms. In his words, this would help galvanise reform momentum and increase mutual support among partners and help secure the countries' ever closer ties with the EU.

The host of the summit, Salome Zourabishvili, said that despite the polarisation in her country, Georgia's European future was one area of undisputed consensus between political parties.

Despite the many challenges, including Russia's occupation of part of the country, Georgia's EU aspiration has never faltered, she stressed. She thanked Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskiy for having visited earlier the same day the administrative boundary line with Abkhazia, a vast Georgian region occupied by Russia following a brief war in 2008.

Zourabishvili said the Batumi conference offered further proof that her country was supported and encouraged. "This also means that we have to do much more and much faster," she added.

"The Batumi conference is a moment to take stock of the re-engagement of the EU in the region," Zourabishvili continued. "The personal involvement of President Michel in Georgia's internal political processes, but also his most recent visits to our two Caucasian neighbours, also partners in EaP, and the discussion of important projects in the region, mark the importance for the EU of a neighbouring region

that would be democratic, stable and secure," she said.

[Michel visited Armenia and Azerbaijan before arriving in Georgia](#), promising more EU involvement in finding a solution for the disputed region of Nagorno-Karabakh.

Some of Zourabishvili's messages were directed to the domestic audience. "Any internal divisions can only weaken our aims, the determination of our partners, and we should avoid it at all costs," she warned.

Moldova's President Maia Sandu impressed the audience with her modesty. She arrived with a small delegation and spoke briefly at the conference, without removing her mask.

Ukraine's Zelenskiy was the only leader who spoke in his native language. He focused on the Russian aggression against his country and on his visit to the delimitation line in Abkhazia.

"If Brussels and the EU do not show iron support for the European aspirations of our three countries, then someone will show the iron muscles of their weapons near our three state borders. And this, in my opinion, is a threat not only to our three countries, but also to the entire continent," Zelenskiy said.

"Russia is a threat for all the continent and this is why we don't understand why the voice of our countries is not heard at the conference for the future of Europe," the Ukrainian President continued. If some countries are seen as less important, then it is not a conference

on the future of Europe, Zelenskiy said, speaking through an interpreter.

The summit ended with a visit of the four Presidents to the Petra fortress, south of Batumi, built in the 6th century, under the Byzantine emperor Justinian I.

## INTERVIEW

# Georgia FM: We need a post-2020 Eastern Partnership agenda perspective

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By Georgi Gotev | EURACTIV.com



David Zalkaliani in Batumi on 19 July 2021. [Georgi Gotev]

In an exclusive interview, the foreign minister of Georgia, David Zalkaliani, discussed this week's Associated Trio summit in Batumi, relations with Ukraine, the internal political process and the country's EU ambition.

*David Zalkaliani is a Georgian career diplomat serving as the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Georgia since 21 June 2018. He spoke to EURACTIV's Senior Editor Georgi Gotev.*

**Was it easy to bring the presidents for this Trio summit in Batumi? For example, for bringing Mr Zelenskiy, it took a presidential pardon and [three](#)**

**[Ukrainian nationals accused of having crossed illegally the Georgian border were released from a Georgian jail just before he arrived.](#)**

There are a lot of speculations about this issue, but I can assure you that this was not connected to this conference, because the idea of this conference was presented by the president of Georgia [Salome Zourabishvili], some time ago, during Charles Michel's last visit to Georgia where he was mediating the internal process with the different political parties in Georgia. And this was the idea of the president of Georgia to invite the associated partners,

Ukraine and Moldova, to the Batumi International Conference.

And this was also agreed later on when I met with my colleagues, the foreign ministers of Ukraine and Moldova in Kyiv, when we signed a memorandum of understanding on establishing the Associated trio. So, I can assure you that there is no connection with regard of this speculation, which we heard from the former president of Georgia [Mikheil Saakashvili], he somehow gave this narrative that President Zelenskiy was reluctant to come to Georgia, which is absolutely false information and has nothing to do with reality. We are strategic partners and we decide

Continued on Page 11

Continued from Page 10

all the issues in a spirit of strategic partnership, so there was no obstacle or impediment.

**But Mr Saakashvili is an irritant in the Georgia-Ukraine relations. Does the Ukrainian side, which hosts him, understand your concerns?**

Yes, we have very frank and open discussion with our Ukrainian colleagues. Way back during the parliamentary elections of last year in Georgia, there was an issue of foreign citizen Saakashvili, citizen of Ukraine, interfering into the Georgian electoral process. So we made it clear to our partners: this is not acceptable. This is a violation of Georgia's internal procedures and legislation. But since then, the situation is back to the spirit of our strategic partnership.

**Coming back to the issue of the Batumi conference and the Associated Trio, what would you like to highlight?**

I would like to highlight the importance of the differentiation principle. We are three countries with Association agreements, DCFTA [Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreements], visa liberalisation. And it is obvious that compared to the other Eastern Partnership countries [Armenia, Azerbaijan and Belarus] we demonstrate significant progress towards membership. That's why one of the main objectives for us is to reflect the progress which the three of us have made towards our goal, which is full integration to European Union, and also to figure out what is the after-2020 agenda for the Eastern Partnership, because it's obvious that against the background of the geopolitical changes in the region we need a creative approach, how to revitalize the Eastern partnership, and how to adapt it to the current realities.

**Charles Michel mentioned the issue of good governance and in each of the Associated countries there are such issues. In Georgia in particular, the political reconciliation is not yet achieved. How do you think the situation will evolve?**

First of all let me express my personal and my government's deepest gratitude to President Michel for his personal engagement. It also demonstrates how important is his agenda, in the agenda of our European partners, the situation in Georgia. That's why the mediation process which was finalized by the agreement of 19 April was really important, and now it's time to fully implement it, in order to move forward and in order to solve all this artificial crisis which was created right after the parliamentary elections in Georgia.

It's now important that all parties which have signed this agreement implement it, but unfortunately the biggest opposition party [Saakashvili's UNM], is still refusing to sign this agreement, and we do not have signature of the biggest opposition party to this important agreement. So from our side, the government is fully implementing this agreement because you remember the one of the important aspects of this agreement was all political parties to enter the parliament and continue the process of a fully functioning parliamentary republic in Georgia. Unfortunately, the biggest party UMM is still refusing to sign this agreement. But other areas of this agreement like the reform of the electoral system, and the electoral court is very successfully accomplished.

**Charles Michel spoke of problems regarding the judiciary. He said the recent fast-track confirmation of**

**Supreme Court judges did not fully reflect the results of consultations with international and domestic stakeholders, calling it "a missed opportunity".**

Of course there are some problems with regard to this reform process, because there are different readings, and different perceptions from both sides. From our side we consider that the agreement is fully implemented, even in the context of judicial reform, we think we already implemented this agreement also taking into consideration the recommendations coming from the Venice commission, OSCE and ODIHR.

There is a different reading on the other side, on the implementation of this particular part of this agreement, but we believe that there is still some room for further continuation of the dialogue in order to come to the final agreement about the substance of this important aspect, which is the continuation of the reform process in the judiciary sector, because we understand that it's important part of our reform process for our democracy, for strengthening our democratic institutions, it's really important to have this agreement implemented because this is also important part of our European integration agenda.

**It's highly unusual for a Council president to mediate like Charles Michel has been doing in Georgia. How do you assess this experience?**

Very positively. Once again, we're deeply grateful to him for his personal devotion and engagement. It once again demonstrates how important is the situation in Georgia for our European partners, and how important is the irreversibility of our path towards the European Union.

# Associated Trio to ramp up cooperation on Black Sea security

By Alexandra Brzozowski | EURACTIV.com



A handout picture made available of Georgian Interior Ministry shows British destroyer HMS Defender arriving at the Batumi sea port in Georgia, 26 June 2021. [Handout photo/EPA/EFE]

The confrontation between Russia and the West is coming to a head, experts say. In consequence, the Associated Trio – Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova – has declared its aims to step up cooperation to strengthen security in the Black Sea region.

“If the Black Sea countries and NATO members plus Ukraine, Georgia – and a place for Moldova can be found in that mechanism as well – do not team up, Russia will turn the Black Sea into its inner lake, split it into two halves and start to dominate its zone completely,” Ukraine’s foreign minister Dmytro Kuleba said after leaders of the

three Associated Trio countries met in Batumi on Monday (19 July).

Kuleba added that Russia has followed a similar strategic playbook in all three countries, which is why they should aim to work together to counter Moscow’s intentions in the region.

His comments came as 2,000 forces and 30 ships from 14 NATO members and partners took part in a Bulgaria-led maritime exercise, dubbed Sea Breeze 2021, exercised in the Black Sea on Monday.

The exercise followed a rise in

tensions between NATO and Russia, which In June [had fired warning shots](#) and dropped bombs in the path of the British destroyer *HMS Defender* to chase it out of Black Sea waters off the coast of Crimea.

Russia traditionally claims political and military sovereignty in the Black Sea region and considers the territorial waters of the annexed Crimea as its own, unlike the Western countries.

Moscow is also worried that large parts of European Russia would be exposed to the danger of Western sea- and land-based medium-range missiles if NATO were to increase their

Continued from Page 12

presence in the region.

Last month's incident was the first time since the end of the Cold War that Russia deliberately used armed force against a NATO asset.

"The Black Sea is of strategic importance to NATO. The Alliance remains strongly committed to Black Sea security," NATO deputy spokesperson, Piers Cazalet, said.

Since Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014, NATO has gradually increased its presence in the Black Sea. NATO ships regularly operate in the Black Sea, patrolling the waters for around two-thirds of the year.

However, according to the Montreux Treaty, which, among other things, regulates the free movement of ships through the waters, ships from non-bordering countries are allowed to stay in the Black Sea for a maximum of 21 days.

NATO maritime manoeuvres thus have been intended to send a clear signal towards Moscow against Russia's claim to Crimea or its attempted supremacy in the Black Sea region.

"We need to think seriously about what the NATO role is in the Black Sea, especially as we've seen the recent provocative actions by Russia," Philip Breedlove, former Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR) of NATO Allied Command Operations, told an audience in Batumi.

Breedlove called the [alliances' aim to update](#) its decade-old Strategic Concept, a master strategy document which after the revamp will outline NATO's objectives and key security tasks with an eye toward 2030, a

positive development in this context.

"NATO has been fairly soft on what Russia is doing in the Black Sea region, that's the bad news. The good news is, that you see these attitudes changing," he said, adding that especially the US-led 'freedom of navigation' exercises and others have proven that.

Security experts worry that the range of Russia's S-400 air defence systems stationed in Crimea makes not only the south of Ukraine but also the coast of Romania vulnerable.

"As our current military engagements are beginning to wind down, so we need to develop the next series of enduring military engagements between the United States in Georgia, and between NATO and Georgia (...) as well as what the next step in our military engagement with Ukraine is to help it be more able to defend itself," the former NATO general said.

Breedlove said alliance members like Turkey and Romania, which recently stepped up in bringing more military capabilities to the region, could lead the way into such a new strategy.

However, of Russia's Black Sea neighbours, only the Turkish Navy can counter Russia. The Ukrainian navy lost most of its ships after the annexation of Crimea, Georgia has limited its navy to the coast guard for financial reasons, and Romania and especially Bulgaria have so far little to offer as deterrent against Russia.

In turn, speaking about EU and NATO approaches to the Black Sea region, Bruno L  t  , senior fellow of security and defence at the German

Marshall Fund of the United States (GMFUS) in Brussels, said he is "most concerned about the internal unity of Europeans and NATO" in this regard.

According to him, "EU institutions in Brussels have finally understood that the Black Sea is an area of priority, more and more than ever before".

"However, we still see – and we have to be honest about that – that not all EU countries think alike when it comes to the importance of the Black Sea as a region where we need to increase efforts and be presence," L  t   said.

Eastern Europeans, especially in the framework of the US-led Three Seas Initiative, have for long made attempts the Black Sea doesn't become a 'geopolitical black hole'. One idea is to extend the initiative to non-EU members like Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova.

This, however, according to L  t   does not mean there should be a military solution.

"The strategy here should be more about avoiding incidents and risk management while doing deterrence, I think those are two pillars of how security should be addressed in the Black Sea region," L  t   added.

# Newer EU members support Associated Trio as 'champions'

By Vlagyislav Makszimov | EURACTIV.com



Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine have recently formally joined forces in a push for a deeper relationship with Brussels and eventual accession. [European Council/Copyright: European Union]

**T**hough vast majority of EU countries welcome deeper integration with Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine, their “Associated Trio” initiative finds more support within Eastern and Central Europe, while the Commission and Western member states remain hesitant to adopt the term.

“We welcome the Trio’s initiative to foster coordination between the associated partners and with Brussels. This can lead to the sharing of best practices on reforms, on implementation, and on broader agenda for the future,” said European Council President Charles Michel during his opening speech at the Batumi International Conference on Monday (19 July).

This was the first time a high-level EU official used the self-ascribed “Trio”

term to reference Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine, which have recently formally joined forces in a push for a deeper relationship with Brussels and eventual accession.

“These three countries – sometimes referred to as ‘trio’ – are close neighbours of the European Union and partners within the Eastern Partnership,” a European Commission spokesperson told EURACTIV, in what appears to be the first time the EU executive using the term.

The Trio is packed together within the Eastern Partnership (EaP) with Belarus, Armenia and Azerbaijan, who have no intentions of joining the bloc.

The spokesperson said the EaP “will continue to be an inclusive and flexible policy” for all EaP countries, “allowing for substantial differentiation and

tailor-made approaches.”

“All of our neighbours are sovereign and independent. We respect their choices, foreign policy priorities and strategic objectives. In this respect we welcome the initiative for enhanced coordination between them and with the EU,” the spokesperson added.

## GOOD WINDS IN THE EAST

However, signs are emerging that the Commission is under pressure from some member states, especially Eastern and Central European countries, who have long been the main proponents of closer EU ties with its Eastern neighbours.

Several diplomats from the region supported the initiative when asked by EURACTIV, though emphasised that it should remain within the current

Continued from Page 14

parameters of the EU's relationship with its Eastern neighbours.

"Lithuania welcomes Trio format which clearly states their common goals and allows to coordinate the efforts," Lithuanian Foreign Affairs Minister Gabrielius Landsbergis told EURACTIV in exclusive comments.

"We believe that within the Eastern Partnership policy principles of differentiation and 'more for more' should be applied in a non-discriminatory manner and in this context, Associated Trio should be treated as champions," he added.

Asked about a of a long-term vision of joining the bloc, he said "the process of joining the EU is complicated, but Trio proved their willingness by implementing difficult and costly reforms. We believe that we have to reciprocate by granting them a membership perspective."

Poland's top diplomat in Brussels, Andrzej Sadoś, told this website his country welcomed the Trio initiative as "a timely and well-voiced proposal for their deeper engagement with the EU within the existing" Eastern neighbourhood policy framework.

At the EaP summit scheduled for December, Warsaw expects that the EU "will demonstrate an ambitious approach towards the future of the EaP policy offering the adequate mix of differentiation", the permanent representative said.

Asked if the EU should offer a membership perspective to the Trio, Sadoś said that the three associated countries' expectations "should be taken into account," stressing that the rapprochement with Europe lies through the implementation of existing commitments and continued

reforms.

"Implementing these bilateral agreements will make our partners fit to launch the official integration process once the EU is also ready to enlarge," he added.

Another EU diplomat from the region was more cautious. They said the Trio was a "step in the right direction" but stressed that the initiative must remain within the Eastern Partnership platform, which should stay the "backbone" of the bloc's relationship with its neighbours.

### CAUTION IN THE WEST

Western EU member states, on the other hand, so far appear to stick to the Commission line.

One EU diplomat – avoiding the term "Trio" – said their country supported "deeper cooperation guided by a 'more-for-more' approach" with the three countries without mentioning that the new format could also be used in their relationship with Brussels.

Along the same lines, while welcoming more cooperation "among the trio countries and a deepening of the countries' European integration through an incentive-based approach", the Swedish foreign ministry underlined "the importance of the Eastern Partnership as one inclusive and unified policy towards the EU's eastern neighbourhood."

Yet another diplomat said "the opportunities offered by the respective Association Agreements between the EU and each of these countries must be fully exploited before creating any new instrument or format, be it on a bilateral or multilateral level [within

the Eastern Partnership]."

While further differentiation was possible, it was "not through the creation of fixed groups that could jeopardise the inclusion of other partner countries," they added.

The idea of creating a tripartite format for the three associated countries has been floating around for a couple of years now.

The materialisation of the Trio idea took some time because the "EU is slow to change its geopolitical attitudes," MEP Andrius Kubilius told EURACTIV.

The former Lithuanian prime minister, who has been one of the biggest proponents of the Trio strategy within the European Parliament, expressed hope that now there is more understanding of the need to invest into the region's integration and success, which can serve as an "inspiration for Belarusian and Russian people, who are starting to demand a democratic change in their countries."

### BENCHMARKING

One area where there seems to be a cautious support between EU countries is the creation of a monitoring mechanism aimed at tracking progress on reforms.

While in Batumi, Michel suggested introducing a "competitive benchmarking on key reforms" within the associated partners, which in his view would help "galvanise reform momentum, increase mutual support among partners and help secure your ever closer ties with the EU."

None of the diplomats asked by EURACTIV opposed the idea, though

Continued on Page 16

Continued from Page 15

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some said they would have to see the details of any proposed system.

Acknowledging the differences between the three associated countries, Lithuanian Foreign Affairs Minister Landsbergis said his country believed that “competition leads to improvement.”

“We competed with Latvia and Estonia during our pre-accession, which lead to a considerable results,” he added.

“It is a good idea,” MEP Kubilius said, adding that “it would be even better to have a competitive benchmarking between the Trio countries and the Western Balkan countries,” which are currently in the waiting line to join the bloc.

“Of course the Commission should do this and has the means to do so,” said Michael Emerson, associated senior research fellow at the Brussels-based CEPS think tank.

According to the researcher, while the current reports of the Commission for both the Balkans and the Trio already contain the necessary information, they “need to be upgraded with a simple system of quantitative ratings based on the Commission’s knowledge of performance of the associated states on all ‘chapters’ of the acquis.”

However, he emphasised that the benchmarking should be done by the Commission, “since only they have the combination of knowledge and ‘disinterest’ in favouring this or that country.”

“If the Trio were to do it themselves the temptation for each country to push their own interest would be irresistible,” he added.

A Commission spokesperson said that “it is clearly legitimate to look into the similarities between the associated partners who have signed up to ambitious agreements with the EU as they strive to implement relevant reforms.”

The spokesperson added that the Commission expects “associated countries to lead by example” and stands ready to discuss “whether any further competitive benchmarking – for instance when it comes to the implementation of commitments under the Association Agreements – may be useful.”



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**Contact us**

**Georgi GOTEV**

*Senior Editor*

[georgi.gotev@euractiv.com](mailto:georgi.gotev@euractiv.com)

tel. +32 4 99 528 725

**Teresa DOMINGUEZ**

*EU Affairs Senior Manager*

[teresa.dominguez@euractiv.com](mailto:teresa.dominguez@euractiv.com)

tel. +32 (0) 47 601 78 26