

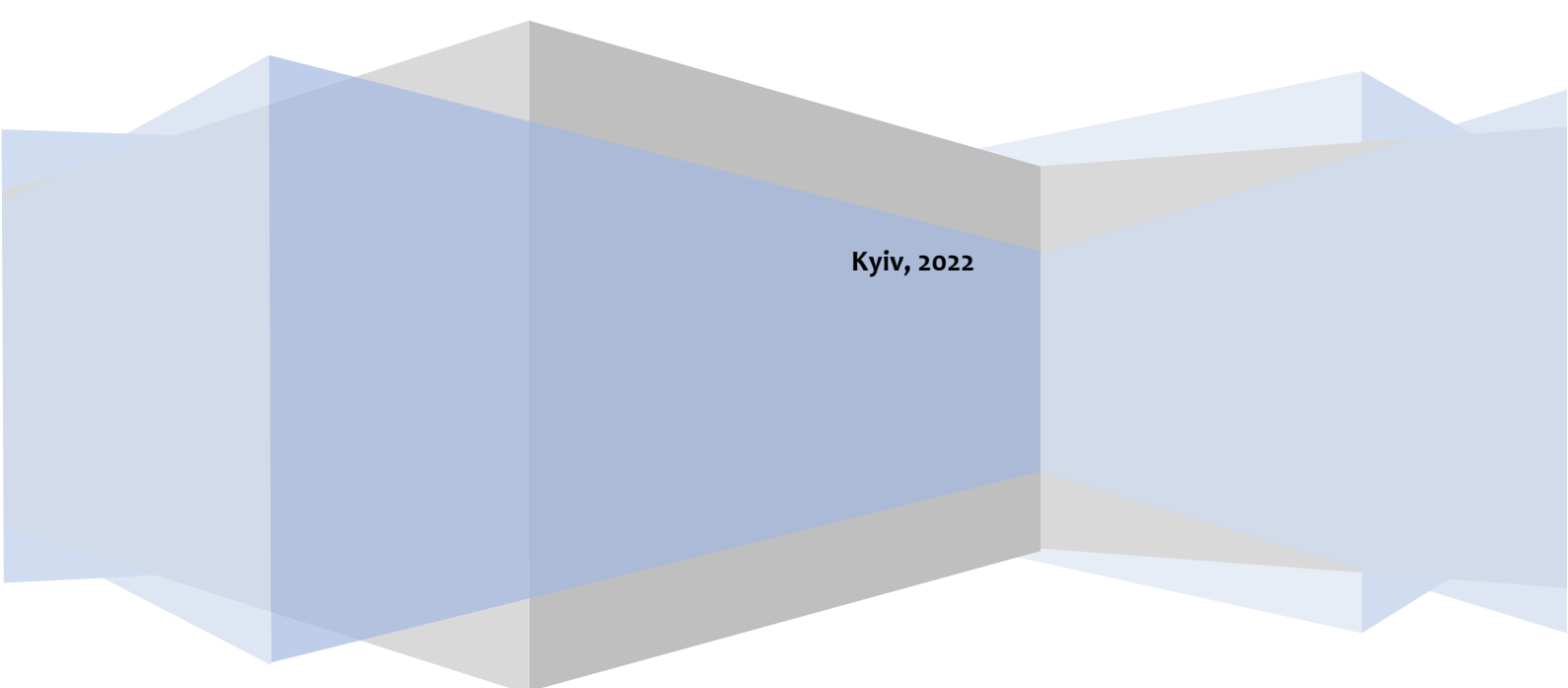
Experts for Security and Global Affairs

**The Associated Trio and Romania: in Search of Cooperation
Dimensions**

Policy brief

Hennadiy Maksak

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An abstract graphic at the bottom of the page consists of several overlapping, semi-transparent geometric planes in shades of blue and grey, creating a 3D effect. The planes are arranged in a way that suggests depth and movement, with some planes appearing to recede into the background while others come forward.

The Associated Trio and Romania: in Search of Cooperation Dimensions

Hennadiy Maksak¹

Troubled Associated Trio: expectations and realities²

Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia represent a more advanced track of cooperation with the EU within the Eastern Partnership policy. Having signed the Association agreement (AA) bilaterally with the European Union, these three partner states embraced the reforms track and rapprochement with the European norm and standards. Although, each of the partners has elaborated its own implementation plan in terms of commitments and timeline, more or less similar structure of the Association agreements, has prompted launching of the informal coalition of so-called Trio in communication with the EU institutions. The main message is that these countries deserve a more profound cooperation and membership perspective due to the advanced level of the commitments taken by three partners in domain comprehensive administrative and economic reforms, covered by the political association and economic integration. One of the first attempts to solidify a joint position was demonstrated at the EaP Summit back in 2017. Although the result of this trilateral lobbying was uncertain, some of the initiatives were included in the EaP Declaration, namely, joint consultations with the EU institutions on the issues, related to the AA implementation.

It should be stressed, here, that the European Union reacted quite reluctantly to the initiatives of the three partner states. It was rooted in the desire of Brussels not to split the six partner states into different tracks, as well as in unpreparedness to grant membership perspective to those more advanced partners in delivering on their commitments

In recent turbulent times, caused by the COVID-19 restrictions, the dynamics of the political interaction slowed down in the EaP region. The summit of leaders of the states and governments of the EU and EaP has been postponed several times in 2020-2021, shifting it from one EU presidency to another. On the one hand, there was a lack of political will of the EU members states to propose enhanced agenda for advanced states among 6 partners. On the other hand, negative political transformations in the region reoriented the European institutions to adopt a crisis-management approach in the EaP rather than well-thought stable policy. The EU had to react to domestic political crisis in Georgia, deep political crisis and massive abuse of human rights in Belarus, renewed military hostilities between Azerbaijan and Armenia, as well as many challenges

¹ **Hennadiy Maksak** is the Foreign Policy Council “Ukrainian Prism” Executive Director. Studied economics (Chernihiv state institute for economics and management), political sciences (Warsaw University, Center for East European Studies). In 2006-2015 he was the president of the Polissya Foundation for International and Regional Studies. In 2012-2014 was a member of Steering Committee of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum. From 2016 he is a member of SC of Ukrainian national platform of the EaP Civil Society Forum. Head of the Civic Council under the Parliamentary Committee on Foreign Affairs. Fields of interest: International relations and foreign policy of Ukraine, security in the Eastern Europe, Eastern partnership policy, European and Euro-Atlantic integration of Ukraine, diplomatic service, economic diplomacy.

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related to the political and security developments in Ukraine and Moldova. Against this backdrop, the rescheduled EaP Summit in the second half of 2021 was not very promising in terms of ambitious outcomes and deepened integration initiatives for the three partners.

Although, as it was already stated, some of the joint initiatives appeared earlier in the run-up to some important EaP multilateral events, yet in 2021 one could observe the highest point of the Trio endeavours, aimed at advocating on the EU level a merit-based policy towards associated partners.

This period is very illustrative for joint political and diplomatic steps. Such enhanced common activity, partly, might be attributed to the Ukrainian search for effective toolkit on the international arena. At that time, Ukraine declared a strategy of small coalitions on regional scale to promote specific foreign policy aims. In July 2021 Dmytro Kuleba named the Associated Trio as one of the positive cases for small coalitions along with the Lublin Triangle (Ukraine, Poland and Lithuania).

Additionally, here it is worth of mentioning that domestic political changes in Moldova in 2020-2021 as a result of presidential and preterm parliamentary elections brought into offices representative of pro-European political parties. In its turn, it has created a conducive environment for trilateral cooperation format. Despite some bilateral political tensions of Ukraine with Moldova and Georgia, all sides agreed to pursue a common cause of European perspective for three states and intensification of the sectoral cooperation with the EU.

The start of formalized and diplomatically enforced initiative was laid with the Association Trio memorandum signed by the Ministers of foreign affairs of Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia in Kyiv in May 2021. High level political engagement was manifested during the joint meeting of the Heads of State of Ukraine, Georgia and the Republic of Moldova in Batumi in July 2021. The Batumi Summit Declaration has outlined core areas of mutual interest for Trio.

In the run-up to the EaP Summit, there were many joint statements and advocacy visits undertaken by high level representatives of the three states. At the same time, the EU was not ready to listen to Trio expectations and, as a matter of fact, there was a strong diplomatic fight to include a mentioning of the Associated Trio in the final text of the EaP Declaration. If to assess the EaP Summit Declaration through the lenses of Trio interested, one may find out a very moderate result. On the positive side, there is an official acknowledgement of the Associated Trio by the EU, which is in fact a big diplomatic breakthrough. Along with post-2020 EaP deliverables till 2025, the Declaration also endorsed the Economic and Investment Plan for the Eastern Partnership, including state-tailored flagship initiatives for partners. But this may be considered as the only positive moments in terms of essence, provided that there were no clear proposals and initiatives as European perspective of the three partners.

Symbolically, it prompted these three countries to issue the joint statement following the 6th EaP Summit. It shed the light on major differences between the demand of the three partner states and the proposal from the European Union³.

Trio and Russian-Ukrainian war

February 24th became a watershed moment both for the Eastern Partnership policy and Associated Trio itself. Generally, the EaP as a core instrument of the EU for building relations with

³ Joint Statement issued by the Heads of State/Government of Association Trio – Georgia, Republic of Moldova and Ukraine following the 6th Eastern Partnership Summit, 15 December 2021, <https://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/spilna-zayava-glav-derzhavuryadiv-asocijovanogo-trio-gruziyi-72097>

neighbouring states in the Eastern Europe and South Caucasus, appeared to be irrelevant to the level of ambitions and challenges in the region.

At the same time, the full-scale Russian assault on Ukraine also opened the weak chains in this trilateral format. Bilateral relations between Ukraine and Moldova and Ukraine and Georgia were far from cloudless in the pre-war time, but now the situation was aggravated by the fact that Russia has profound economic and energy leverages in every partner state. Provided their own political and economic dependency on Russia, both Moldova and Georgia had to adapt their own approaches to the dilemma of joining EU-backed sanctions on Russia and seeking to minimize possible short-term and long-term negative impact on their economies and security environment. Naturally, in Kyiv it was met negatively, provoking direct public accusations in double standards' policy. Ukraine as a victim of the aggression adopts a straightforward approach to partners, calling for solidarity and assistance in fighting the aggressor and consequences of the aggression. Under such circumstances, at this moment, it is difficult to envisage any viable joint trilateral initiative.

But it must be kept in mind that the common denominator for three states was not a bilateral or even trilateral agenda, but rather the shared feeling of European future and prospect of the EU membership. In this regard, one may also witness some divergences between the members of Trio. The war has triggered the special momentum for Ukraine to apply for EU membership and expect some positive decision to be granted. Kyiv applied for the EU membership in February, just a couple of days after the war started. Moldova and Georgia followed suit. Although the application to become a member of the European Union was part and parcel of many Trio's joint statements and declarations, the Ukrainian authorities showed quite a restraint if not negative reaction. Partly, because of the fear that "package application" might affect negatively the final decision of granting the candidacy status to Ukraine. If applications are to be considered at the same meeting of the European Council, there is a possibility to have a collective generalized attitude from member states. This is not widely expressed in public domain, but Ukraine actively advocates its own separate track for obtaining status of candidate. This position makes sense to some extent, as the main assessment will be made on the basis of the Ukrainian answers to the EU questionnaire.

Yet another reason for pushing for bilateral track is the level of the EU support needed to keep Ukraine in relevant shape. Kyiv is fully focused on the war-related fields of cooperation and stands as major receiver of external assistance. In May 2022 the European Commission earmarked 9 billion Euro for macro-financial assistance of Ukraine till the end of 2022. It comes in addition to recent disbursement of 600 million Euro macro-financial assistance and 2 billion of Euro for military assistance under the EPF. Therefore, Ukraine is not interested in putting efforts and energy in propelling Trio initiative.

At the same time, it would be unjustified to claim that there is no shared interest in some areas of cooperation with the EU for three countries, namely, digital services, cybersecurity, energy and so on. But it is highly likely that some initiatives will be explored bilaterally by each of these partner states and the EU. As for specific areas of shared interest of the Associated Trio one may look at the Batumi declaration and the Statement following the EaP Summit. These documents may outline a mapping of potential areas for fostering further activities with the European Union and potentially with some member-states.

It is noticeable that apart from different options of stressing aspirations for the European perspective and membership in the EU, three partners see prospects in:

- Approximation of domestic legislation with the EU acquis;

- Flexible approach to the update and upgrade of the Association Agreements;
- Gradual integration into the EU Internal Market;
- Integration into the EU Digital Single Market
- Road transport market liberalization
- Enhanced sectoral integration with the EU in the areas of green economy, justice and home affairs, strategic communications and health care.
- Cooperation on common security and defense policy (CSDP) in the realm of countering hybrid threats and disinformation, boosting cyber resilience;
- Strengthening European energy security;
- Access to alternative funds and resources at EU disposal⁴.

Trio and Romania: where the interests meet?

For holistic picture of possible dimensions in cooperation between Romanian and the Associated Trio we have to project current and future trends in the region.

Unfortunately, the outcome of the Russian-Ukrainian war is still very far from being decided in terms of time and conditions of ending the hostilities and post-war recovery of Ukraine. Ukrainian authorities, naturally, are fully preoccupied with fighting Russian aggression as well as coping with deep economic crisis, brought by the war. Both military dimension and economic resilience is impossible without strong international support. While solidarity is large-scaled at the moment, at this stage one cannot foresee its continuity in the long run. In this paper, we assume that Ukraine prevails in the war and wide international coalition, including the EU, is stable over the long-term period. If the situation unfolds otherwise, it would difficult to deliver any vision of the future of all the European continent.

But even under a positive scenario, the European Neighborhood policy needs to be not only revisited but rewritten. The EaP policy per se, which was the overall umbrella shaping ambitions of Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia, is in limbo. The new horizon for cooperation between the EU and the EaP partners till 2025, adopted at the Eastern partnership Summit in Brussels in December 2021, is no longer relevant. The European Union has to elaborate a new concept and road map for the region of the Eastern Europe and South Caucasus. It is indispensable to produce a more solid basis for cooperation, which reflects the geopolitical shifts in the region. A lot will depend on whether the EU is capable to go beyond the vicious circle of progressive paper work and reinstate itself as a major international actor with sufficient political will to act. Russian aggression prompted some sober changes in decision-making as for projecting normative power in the region. But the transformation process in the EU is far from being completed. What is clear already now is that there is a shift in leadership among the EU member-states. Readiness and resolve to act now belongs to the Central Europe and Baltic States, leaving hesitant governments of Germany and France far behind. It also provides a great chance for Romania to preserve this leadership and design a fair, value and merit-based approach to Ukraine, Moldova and other partner states.

Bucharest in coalition with other partners from Central Europe and Baltic region may introduce and advocate a more comprehensive and active approach to the security and defense policy. Expertise and experience of the Eastern Flank may lay foundations for more engagement of the European Union in Eastern Europe.

⁴ Batumi Summit Declaration Issued by the Heads of State of Association Trio - Georgia, Republic of Moldova and Ukraine, 19 July 2021, <https://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/deklaraciya-batumskogo-samitu-shvalena-glavami-derzhav-asoci-69609>

Special attention may be paid to regional coalitions with active participation of Romania. For example, regional perspective may be explored in such formats like Romania-Ukraine-Moldova or Romania-Moldova-Ukraine-Poland. Such formats also fit into the spirit of the small coalitions' strategy which is propelled by Kyiv in recent years. It is not the Associated Trio approach, but it may, at least, include two out of the three partner states.

In these formats, participants may tackle with some issues specific to economic and security environment in the region of the Central and Eastern Europe. It echoes with recent declarations of high level Romanian official that Romania cherishes the idea to become a main hub for stability and security in the region, which may positively shape the involvement of Bucharest in post-war reconstruction of Ukraine⁵. One of the priority directions for joint initiatives is support for Ukrainian economy, which is heavily affected by disastrous impact of war with Russia. Romanian sea transport infrastructure is very interesting to Ukraine, which suffers from blockade of main seaports which serve as core gateway for Ukrainian export deliveries worldwide. Transit potential of Moldova is also taken into consideration.

Besides, among the urgent initiatives in these formats the parties may touch upon the situation connected to the Russian threats to destabilize the situation in Transnistria and use its territory to launch additional offensive to the territory of Ukraine.

For wider regional scale, it is up to Romania and Poland to extend the activity of the Three Seas Initiative to the Eastern European dimension, looking for synergies with Ukraine and Moldova. It should be mentioned, that all three associated partners in joint declarations referred to the TSI and expressed their interest to participate in activities.

Security in the Black Sea region is also of common challenges for the three associated partners and Romania. To this end, Romania may keep high on the EU's agenda the issue of security and stability in the Black Sea area. Current deadlock, created by Russia in the Azov and Black Sea, drove the world to the brink of humanitarian crisis around the globe. It is important to reinforce the EU's commitment to bring in and preserve prosperity, stability, and resilience in the Black Sea region as stated in EU Council Conclusions (June 2019).

Conclusions and recommendations

Taking into consideration all the above said, one may conclude that at present, there are large constraints connected to continuous cooperation between the Associated Trio partner, connected to the Russian aggression in Ukraine and severe economic and security implications for Moldova and Georgia. Ukraine as a leading partner in Trio is neither capable, nor interested to keep coordination and mutual advocacy at this stage. But it does not preclude any ad hoc thematic or regional cooperation with Moldova or Georgia in other format and coalitions.

At the same time, the implication of the Russian-Ukrainian war will influence the future of global and regional order, as well as the long-term outlines of the EU's presence in the region. In this vein, partners of Ukraine, including Romania, have to undertake all possible efforts to secure the sufficient and stable level of international support for Ukraine.

Romania in concert with Poland, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia have to keep the lead in proactive presence of the EU in the Eastern Europe and South Caucasus. It is important to bring Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia into the fold of Enlargement policy from the neighborhood domain.

⁵ Bogdan Neagu, Romania wants to be region's main stability and security hub, EURACTIV.ro, 27.04. 2022, https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short_news/romania-wants-to-be-regions-main-stability-and-security-hub/

It will not only give all necessary incentives to continue on the path of approximation for these countries, but secure a strong societal support for integration cause.

Recommendations

- 1 The priority of possible cooperation in multilateral regional coalition must be focused on ending war in Ukraine, creating initiatives and projects aimed at political, economic and military support to the Ukrainian state and society. All parties concerned have to provide Ukraine with means to protect its territory and people.
- 2 Romania may start actively position itself as promoter of the absolutely new compacts to the Eastern European partners. It might be considered as moral obligation for the Central European states to support pleas of Ukraine, Moldova and eventually Georgia to be granted a candidate status. For all EU countries from the Central European region, there is no need to explain the necessity of this status to intensify cooperation and integration with the EU.
- 3 Before the war, Ukraine was keen on local coalitions with partners in the region to pursue the regional agenda. Now it might be interesting to activate such formats like Romania-Moldova-Ukraine, Romania-Moldova-Poland-Ukraine
- 4 Situation in Transnistria should be an issue of special concern for the format Moldova-Ukraine-Romania. The situation in the breakaway region is tense in security terms and might be aggravated any time by Russia.

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