

Geopolitics on the EU's Eastern Borders

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Public health and economic crisis may have forced the EU to look inwards for much of 2020 but it cannot overlook its place in the world. On its eastern borders, the EU's neighbours face serious political and economic challenges in the years ahead. In a region that is no stranger to instability, neither the EU's existing Eastern Partnership programme nor the ambiguous accession processes seen elsewhere will cut it, argues Nóra Hajdu. The EU needs a new approach to relations with its Eastern neighbours based on a political commitment and shared prosperity.

In 2009, the European Union launched the Eastern Partnership, as part of its broader Neighbourhood Policy. The aim was to establish an institutional dialogue between the EU and six former Soviet states: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine. A review of what the initiative has achieved so far, its enduring aims, and what recent political changes mean for the future of EU relations with its Eastern neighbours is long overdue.

Two fundamental dilemmas have persisted since the launch of the initiative. First, the participating countries face significantly different internal challenges and hold a range of views on relations with the EU. Second, the EU itself has limited opportunities to influence these countries, since full EU membership is not an option. However, in addition to regular contact between institutions and the sharing of best practices, the EU can at the very least "entice" the elite of these countries to cooperate through the provision of certain resources.

The countries of the Eastern Partnership fall into three categories. The first group is Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine. Three countries have concluded both association and free trade agreements with the EU. Visa liberalisation is already a reality, meaning that their citizens can travel to EU countries without a visa. Armenia is a case of its own. The ties agreed between the EU and Armenia in the 2017 Comprehensive and Advanced Partnership Agreement are weaker than those with Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine. This weaker integration is partly due to Armenia's close relationship with Russia and membership of the Russian-initiated Eurasian Economic Union. The third group comprises Belarus and Azerbaijan. In Minsk, the seat of the Belarus' authoritarian President Lukashenko who has ruled since 1994, the relation with the EU is mostly that of multilateral meetings and exchange organised through the Eastern Partnership, most notably dialogue with civil society. Recent high-ranking bilateral contacts with Western European politicians in Minsk may suggest preparations for a post-Lukashenko era. In the future, a post-Lukashenko Belarus may join Armenia in signing some kind of agreement with the EU, but in the meantime faces only sanctions. By contrast, Azerbaijan is only interested in economic cooperation.

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There have been backwards steps, even in states where the relationship had made its most progress. Gwendolyn Sasse, in a [study](#) published by Carnegie Europe, argues that the past 10 years have shown that cooperation between these countries and the European Union is not necessarily a linear process. In Moldova, the long-standing domestic political consensus in favour of the Association Agreement has become uncertain. Developments in Armenia, on the other hand, have led to a marked boost in aspirations of integration. The Eastern Partnership programme must therefore remain adaptable to the political and economic evolutions around the integration question. A shift towards adaptability could mean reinforcing existing integration conditions, pausing the application, or redefining the existing framework if that proves necessary.

Putting the Eastern Partnership and related agreements into practice cannot be considered a purely technocratic task. The broader political context, expectations, hopes, and fears are part of the reality, as Ukraine in 2013 and 2014 illustrates. The decision of the then-President Viktor Yanukovich to reject the association agreement with the EU contributed to mass demonstrations. The escalation in turn contributed to Russia's armed intervention, the annexation of Crimea, and the creation of the East Ukrainian front. The conflict continues as a local war with nearly 13 000 dead, 1.8 million internal refugees in Ukraine, and 1 million refugees in Russia.

Severed dreams

Taking stock of the Eastern Partnership 10 years on, its mixed result might not seem to give the EU much reason to pursue closer political relations with the countries concerned. Overall, the current framework for relations with Europe's Eastern neighbours might appear sufficient. However, while the association agreements and free trade agreements have been concluded, the populations of the participating countries have not yet seen the benefits of EU cooperation.

Achieving full membership remains an important prospect for Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova. Nevertheless, the Union is careful not to make any promises and is currently facing internal questions of integration and cohesion. Deepening the Eastern Partnership is not on the agenda. The one [high-level political declaration](#) on this issue states that all European countries are eligible for accession if they fulfil the necessary conditions (legal, economic, and political). The union is still silent about membership, which prevents the possibility of a meaningful dialogue on the future of the Eastern Partnership more generally.

Three objectives guided the establishment of the Eastern Partnership in 2009: connect with Eastern neighbours as closely as possible, prevent Russian influence from taking a hold there, and delay possibilities of membership. While these objectives have largely been met, the region has not become more stable or secure.

Since 2009 however, a number of important political changes have taken place in the post-Soviet region: the Euromaidan revolution in Ukraine in 2014 and the bloodless revolution in Armenia in 2018. Subsequently – and to the surprise of many – peaceful political changes took place first in Georgia in 2018 and then in Ukraine in 2019. Parliamentary elections were also held in Moldova in 2019. Throughout 2019 and 2020, dialogue was underway with Belarus and some, maybe too optimistic, experts argued that a political transition might materialise within a few years. Belarus's disputed elections this August have resulted in unprecedented pro-democracy protests, and it is still unclear where the movement will lead.

The signing of association agreements with Georgia, Ukraine, and Moldova is strong evidence that the EU can successfully deploy its soft power capabilities in the region. The EU has not only garnered the trust of the elites but mobilised civil societies to achieve its goals – as in the case of Moldova with the establishment of the EU-Moldova Civil Society Platform. But the goal of joining the EU remains a distant dream, and current cooperation with EU leads to significantly less financial support than the countries of Central and Eastern Europe received in the 1990s during their negotiation process. In 2009, even achieving visa-free travel seemed like an ambitious undertaking and

yet Ukraine achieved it in nine years, Georgia in five years, and Moldova in four. Considering the earlier hesitance of the EU member countries about visa-free travel for non-members, this process is certainly accelerating.

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The conclusion of association agreements also means that the Eastern Partnership countries are necessarily aligned with EU foreign policy but have little say over it, as [Balázs Jarábik](#) has argued. In many cases, relevant foreign policy consequences for Eastern Partnership countries have been overlooked by EU decision-makers who have instead focused on political communication. Here, as well as when considering the Eastern Partnership more generally, it is essential to talk about Russia. Moscow perceives the Eastern Partnership as an attempt to “encircle” Russia. In a region where Moscow has resorted to armed force twice, in Georgia and Ukraine, since 2008, Russia's willingness to go beyond the level of threats and discourse cannot be ignored.

The Eastern Partnership so far shows that free trade agreements with the EU cannot alone provide participating countries with key economic growth, warns Jarábik. The EU's current economic offer will not help these countries in the short term. Although exports from Georgia, Ukraine, and Moldova to the EU increased, only Moldova was able to compensate to some extent for the loss of trade with Russia, as seen with its wine trade.

The outcome of the 2019 Ukrainian elections which resulted in President Zelensky's landslide victory forced the West to reassess its economic ambitions in the region. Necessary macroeconomic stabilisation in Ukraine has been extremely painful and the much-hoped-for investment has not arrived. In 2018, Ukraine's trade deficit with the European Union doubled, making it the poorest country in Europe. 4 million Ukrainian citizens working abroad provide more financial support to the Ukrainian economy in the form of remittances than the International Monetary Fund. While Russia has provided 22 billion dollars to Crimea since the outbreak of the conflict in Ukraine, the U.S. government has given a total of 1.96 billion dollars in military and economic assistance between 2014 and 2018. The EU and single European countries have provided about 6 billion euros of aid to Ukraine. Ukraine will have to repay 36 billion dollars between 2019 and 2021 to external lenders, money borrowed predominantly during the era of the pre-Maidan President Yanukovich.

The EU must therefore be present in a region that it wishes to stabilise. These countries, through these Eastern Partnership agreements have opened up their markets to the EU but have received far less compensation than Central and Eastern Europe during their accession process, or even than the Western Balkans. It may be that the EU has caught the “Dutch disease”. In a 2016 referendum, the Netherlands voted against on the Ukrainian Association Agreement (mostly due to fears that it would lead to accession). As a result, the Dutch government negotiated a clause to the agreement stating the agreement would not be a stepping stone for accession. According to the [2019 Eurobarometer survey](#), the respondents are divided about further enlargement of the EU in the coming years.

The EU's achievements in the region are fragile and will require resources and investment to sustain. Uplifting speeches are no longer enough. The Union's long-standing neoliberal consensus does not help this impoverished region enough. Instead of repeating decades of economic dogma, the EU needs reflection, due diligence, and flexibility. In the absence of strong, depoliticised institutions in the Eastern Partnership region, EU support for political consolidation – in line with democratic requirements and the rule of law – in these countries is also needed.

A more meaningful neighbourhood policy

The new European Commission wishes to make the European Union a “geopolitical” player. Sceptics may say that this ambition will only make the gap between the EU’s foreign policy expectations and its capabilities even more visible. Running as it did against the EU’s stated objective, many consider that further delaying accession negotiations with Northern Macedonia in autumn 2019 was a mistake. At the Thessaloniki Summit in 2003, the EU made an offer to the Western Balkans that included the prospect of membership. The offer has not only helped to alleviate ethnic tensions in the region but has also strengthened bilateral relations between countries in the Western Balkans. Northern Macedonia is an example of how the integration process has contributed to the stability of a country over the last 20 years. The dialogue between Serbia and Kosovo is another positive example. The autumn 2019 decision will instead weaken the EU’s influence in the Western Balkans.

The new European Commission must face the fact that not substantially altering their previous enlargement and neighbourhood policies risks compromising the strategic position of the EU in relation to its Eastern neighbours. A new structure is needed instead, says Barbara Lippert, a researcher at the Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik. The EU will need to make long-term investments, both politically and financially. According to Lippert, consideration should be given to creating a European Political and Economic Area, which would include the countries of the EU and of the Eastern Partnership.

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Freezing accession negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania highlights the fundamental problems with the EU neighbourhood policy. For a number of reasons, the EU only half-heartedly supports the accession of the Western Balkans. Meanwhile, its willingness and ability to help non-member countries that have neither economic nor political power to strengthen EU cohesion have declined. The absorption capacity of the EU has also been undermined by the fact that its performance and integration funds are weathering attack from the inside and from the outside. This echoes declining efforts by candidate countries to make the necessary reforms for accession. It is not surprising then that candidate countries are deliberately playing with the offers of other geopolitical competitors such as Russia, Turkey, and China.

The atmosphere of the Eastern Partnership countries is somewhat similar to that of the Western Balkans. In May 2019, on the 10th anniversary of the Eastern Partnership, the EU failed to make any promise of membership towards Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova. The Union did not even make good on the commitment to EU membership that it made to the Western Balkans in the early 2000s. It follows that the EU has a vital interest in formulating a new neighbourhood policy. This would include future relations with the United Kingdom, which has now left the EU, and for the never-ending question of Turkey’s membership negotiations.

For an enduring partnership

For the foreseeable future, the European Union will remain the dominant economic and political power of Europe, which confers it a responsibility towards its neighbours. The Eastern Partnership countries – most notably Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova – are hoping for support in dealing with their precarious internal and security situation. It is in the interest of the European Union to develop a new, high-quality neighbourhood policy with these adjoining countries.

The past few years can teach us two important lessons. First, the refusal in 2013 by the then-President of Ukraine

to sign the Ukrainian Association Agreement showed that even though this was a modest, small step in the relationship between the EU and Ukraine, Russia perceived it as a threat. The EU may continue to face similar reactions and must be able to deal with conflict – primarily with Russia. Second, it is time for the EU to face the fact that the accession negotiations with Turkey had essentially ended before they started. The EU has been divided on this issue since its inception, and this divide still exists. As Lippert argues, the long-standing lack of progress on the accession process has diminished the EU's influence in the country and Turkey no longer meets the accession criteria.

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It would be worthwhile to avoid these mistakes with the Eastern Partnership countries. It is not expedient to make an unjustified promise to join, but the association agreements concluded bilaterally to date could be bound together into a new structure: a European Political and Economic Area. The aim would be to establish a visible, functioning multilateral relationship between the EU and the countries participating in the Eastern Partnership, who do not have medium-term prospects of either EU or NATO membership. This offer is most realistic for Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova. The existing European Economic Area – which includes EU countries and European Free Trade Alliance (EFTA) members Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway – may be an inspiration, but the participants in the Eastern Partnership are more ambitious in political, rather than just economic terms. It is in the European Union's interest to develop projects with its neighbours that also serve its objectives. The EU is undergoing structural changes to its economic and social policy, such as an energy transition through the European Green Deal. Questions such as what kind of agriculture should be supported in the Eastern Partnership countries and how to reduce energy dependence on Russia will be key. These structural changes could be an opportunity to cement long-term cooperation between the EU and its six Eastern neighbours and ensure that these objectives are supported in those countries too.

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