



Rethinking the Eastern Partnership and EU-Russia relations

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2021 has seen the deterioration in relations between the Russian Federation and its neighbours to the west. A Russian military build-up on the Ukrainian border has led to new fears about a possible Russian escalation, with the Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy going so far as to suggest a coup d'état was being planned. Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko has caused an international crisis on the Polish-Belarusian border, with thousands of people stuck on the forested border areas in freezing conditions. With few supplies and a lack of state support from either country, a serious humanitarian emergency is underway. After the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in 2020, both Armenia and Azerbaijan are coming to terms with the new reality of the situation. Russian soldiers are stationed across Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenia, and it is unlikely they will leave for the foreseeable future, as the tense relations after the conflict simmer on. For the first time since its independence in 1991, Moldova has a real pro-European government, which is ready to tackle the necessary reforms. However, the 14th Russian army is still present in Transnistria and relations with Moscow have been further strained by negotiations about a new gas delivery contract.

Russia

EU-Russia relations are currently in a precarious position. The latest deployment of troops by the Kremlin prompted a reaction from the US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken, who claimed that there will be serious consequences for any Russian aggression in Ukraine. The EU has maintained economic sanctions against Russia since the annexation of Crimea in 2014, thus both economic and political relations have been frosty ever since. Russia's neo-imperialist ambitions to assert its own sphere of influence has often brought it into direct confrontation with its neighbours, especially Ukraine and Georgia. In doing so, the Russian Federation fails to respect the sovereignty of its neighbours and deliberately hinders the integration process of sovereign states that want to join the EU.

The Eastern Partnership

The EU's Eastern Partnership (EaP) aims to improve and deepen the EU's relations with six post-Soviet countries in Eastern Europe (Moldova, Ukraine, Belarus) and the South Caucasus (Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan). Founded in 2009, it was supposed to promote and facilitate deeper integration of these countries with the EU. Over the last 12 years, however, it has become clear that some EaP countries are more committed to European integration than others, and they appear to be in different streams in how much they desire to further approximate with the EU. As the strategic interests of the countries increasingly diverge, this could in the long-term lead to a fracturing of the EaP as a cooperation platform.

Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova – the “Association Trio”

In May 2021, the three most pro-EU members of the EaP – Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova – formed among themselves a new initiative called the Association Trio. These countries have signed Association Agreements (AA) and have Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreements (DCFTA) with the EU. With the new Association Trio initiative, these countries will cooperate more deeply with each other and with the EU to facilitate deeper integration into the EU Single Market, enhance cooperation in all areas, including security and defence, as well as support access to EU funds for the implementation of projects of common interest. They are also committed to using the EaP and recognise its strategic importance. Now fully committed to becoming members of the EU, they are hoping to apply for full membership in 2024 and ultimately join the union in the 2030s.

These three countries also have the most troublesome relations with the Russian Federation. They all have ongoing territorial disputes within their borders, which Russia has been exploiting to maintain control over these territories and hinder these countries’ European perspectives. Nevertheless, the Association Trio are determined to realise their goal of full EU membership and they are willing to explore in good faith various solutions to the problem of occupied territories. Even though it is limited in how it can help the Trio, the EU remains committed to supporting their domestic reforms and increasing their harmonisation with EU norms and standards.

Armenia

Although there are many in Armenia who want closer relations with the EU, Armenian governments has since 1991 pursued a policy of ‘complementarity’ in its foreign relations, which in practice means pursuing good relations with all of its neighbours. This is because of its heavy dependence on the Russian Federation for security and the very precarious situation regarding Nagorno-Karabakh. Armenia is also a member of the Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO). Even though Armenia had in principle agreed an AA with the EU, at the last moment Armenia, like Ukraine, did not sign and instead announced its intention to join to the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), which it did in 2015. In spite of this, the EU and Armenia were able to salvage some parts of the AA, while removing the parts that were incompatible with EAEU membership. This resulted in the creation of the Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA), which was signed in November 2017. Armenia has demonstrated its commitment to deeper European integration to the degree that it does not affect its strategic partnership with Russia. Moreover, the Association Trio have also proposed a ‘Trio + 1’ format to specifically include Armenia. Nevertheless, Russia’s strong military, economic and political involvement hinders Armenia’s integration prospects.

Belarus and Azerbaijan

Azerbaijan and Belarus are the two EaP countries that currently have the remotest EU membership perspectives. Belarus, ruled by dictatorial strongman Alexander Lukashenko, is firmly in the Russian camp geopolitically speaking. His authoritarian regime and disregard for human rights are the antithesis of European values. Unless something radical happens, Belarus has almost no perspective at EU integration. Azerbaijan, similarly, is controlled by an authoritarian regime, but the government of Ilham Aliyev is one that seeks positive economic relations that do not infringe on Azerbaijan’s domestic governance. Azerbaijan-EU relations are dominated by oil and gas, with the EU being one of Azerbaijan’s biggest export markets. Although the EU tries to encourage the Azerbaijani government to improve on human rights and democracy, Aliyev is bolstered by the vast

energy wealth of his country. Vis-à-vis Russia, Azerbaijan pursues a policy of ‘strategic hedging’, balancing Russian influence while diversifying its export markets. Fundamentally, Azerbaijan does not need an AA or DCFTA in order to sell its oil and gas to the EU. From the perspective of the Aliyev regime, it thus makes little sense for the country to accept the significant conditions imposed by an AA and DCFTA.

Future Perspectives

The future of EU relations with all EaP countries is highly dependent on what happens over the next few years with regard to their own domestic situations and their relations with Moscow. Crucially, however, it also depends on the EU’s own relations with the Kremlin. In recent years, Russia-EU cooperation has grown increasingly hostile, and before real progress can be made, mutual trust must be restored. To escape a potentially disastrous downward spiral, a long-term vision is needed. For it to be successful, dialogue has to return, ideally also through other formats like the OSCE. It is necessary to bring back the very basis for mutual exchange of points of view: to listen, to understand, and not only to be able to respond. On a restored foundation, the following recommendations would serve as a framework for the relationship between the EU, the EaP and the Russian Federation:

PS: Recommendations for a long-term vision for triangular relations (EU-Russia-EaP)

1. **Respect the decisions of sovereign states**

In order to foster better inter-neighbourhood relations in the region, all actors need to respect the decisions taken by sovereign states. This means no interference, be it directly, indirectly or hybrid, should a government decide to pursue deeper integration, regardless if it is Eurasian, European or Transatlantic. Shared sovereignty and regional integration could also alleviate the frozen and simmering conflicts.

2. **Find a common notion of Europe**

By respecting the different paths governments want to take concerning their country’s future, there is a need to define a common notion of Europe. The EU isn’t Europe, alternative models for integration are already now a reality and there should be a possibility to work together without undermining the different projects on the continent. Not every country wants or, indeed, can become, a part of the EU, and this should be respected. Ideally, the various frameworks would complement each other and participation should be flexible, based on government decisions.

3. **Create a common security framework**

Acknowledging the negative connotation NATO has for the Kremlin, but also among the general Russian population, a new common security framework should be developed. A European Neighbourhood Security Architecture could restore the framework, which has been undermined by ending several treaties in the last couple of years. A moratorium on NATO enlargement could also prevent further escalation at the borders. At the same time, all parties should provide each other with respective security guarantees.

4. **Benefit from economic development in the shared neighbourhood**

The potential economic development in the region is not a zero-sum game. Here the keywords should be integration, interconnection and interdependence. This applies especially to the fields of transport and energy. A European Neighbourhood Free Trade Area could help to foster complementary integration in the region, similar to EEC and EFTA.

5. **Respond together to mutual challenges**

The current pandemic situation has painfully shown that the global developments inevitably affect everyone. Therefore, the lesson needs to be that only common efforts will enable us to tackle challenges, which cannot be stopped at borders. An even bigger threat to humanity is climate change. Maybe here there is also an opportunity for joint cooperation, as the appropriate response can only be given jointly. The Russian Federation as well as the EaP countries should be incentivised to cooperate more closely within the Green Deal to foster transition, especially with regards to fossil fuels. The EU's Strategic Compass would be another possibility for more cooperation.

6. **Rethink the Eastern Partnership**

The EaP countries have naturally split into three streams of European integration: 1) Those actively trying to join the EU (Georgia, Ukraine, Moldova); 2) Those trying to integrate but largely limited in doing so (Armenia); and 3) those who do not seek significantly deeper integration (Belarus, Azerbaijan). It is time the EU recognised these streams and changed the cooperation framework to reflect this reality.

PPS:

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