



# The Eastern Partnership: Geopolitics and policy inertia

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## Abstract

On the eve of its tenth anniversary, the EU's Eastern Partnership seems to be drifting towards placing greater emphasis on differentiation and stabilisation than on reforms. This contrasts with the transformative ambitions displayed by the EU when it launched this new initiative in 2009. These ambitions have produced mixed results and were partly abandoned in the 2015 European Neighbourhood Policy Review. Since then, policy inertia seems to have prevailed. This exposes the EU to the risk that its relations with its eastern partners will become increasingly geopoliticised. This might lead the EU to lower its transformative ambitions even further. And this, in turn, could throw into question a fundamental aspect of its foreign policy identity, the EU's role as a transformative power. In other words, such a development might not only weaken the EU's role in its eastern neighbourhood but also undermine the added value of its foreign policy.

## Keywords

Eastern Partnership, Geopolitics, Neighbourhood, Transformative power, Russia

## Introduction

Interest in the Eastern Partnership (EaP) was rekindled during the 2013–14 Ukrainian crisis but waned quickly thereafter. It is not much in evidence today despite the upcoming tenth anniversary of the EaP. There is a risk that the EU will slip into a comfortable policy inertia with regard to its relations with its eastern partners. This might lead to the increasing geopoliticisation of these relations at the expense of the EU's transformative ambitions.

The EaP was launched in November 2009 as an extension of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP). It was meant to bring about the closest possible economic

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and political relations between the EU and its eastern neighbours that could be achieved short of membership. The rising tensions with Russia and the ongoing crisis in Ukraine are testing its limits and putting the EU in the position of having to choose between values and interests (Youngs 2017, 212–37).

These points will now be developed. The first part of the article offers a brief overview of the origins of the EaP. Part 2 looks at the EaP from the perspective of the EU as a transformative power. Part 3 deals with the question of the growing geopoliticisation of the EaP. The fourth and final part discusses developments since the ENP Review in 2015, including the agreement on the 20 deliverables for 2020.

## **From ‘Eastern dimension’ to ‘Eastern Partnership’**

The need for the EU to design a specific approach to its eastern neighbours was first expressed in the discussions leading to the adoption of the ENP in March 2004. The idea arose from a convergence of concerns about the effect of EU enlargement on countries such as Belarus, Moldova, Russia<sup>1</sup> and Ukraine. Later in the same year, the Polish government submitted to the member states a non-paper calling for an ‘Eastern dimension’: a new and specific EU approach to these same countries, but extended to include the countries of the South Caucasus. Also included in the non-paper was the possibility of EU membership for Ukraine. These initiatives, however, were met with concerns by certain member states—France and Spain in particular—which asked that the countries along the southern shore of the Mediterranean should be included in the new policy as well (Schäffer and Tolksdorf 2009).

As a result, the member states opted for a new approach aimed at all the EU’s southern and eastern neighbours under the name ‘the European Neighbourhood Policy’. More specifically, the ENP was based on the conclusion of action plans that were negotiated on a bilateral basis and that led to the signing of Partnership and Cooperation Agreements with the EU’s neighbours. These action plans included the proposals that the countries involved should have a stake in the single market and would cooperate with the EU in new fields such as energy, environment, justice and home affairs, and security. In May 2008 the ‘Eastern dimension’ resurfaced in a proposal made to the Council by the Swedish and Polish governments for an ‘Eastern Partnership’ to be developed by the EU with its Eastern European neighbours (Poland, Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2008). The EaP was officially launched in Prague in November 2009. It included Belarus, Moldova and Ukraine as well as the three South Caucasus republics of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia. While being somewhat ambiguous as to EU membership, the EaP aimed at developing a new relationship with these countries that went beyond the relationship that existed within the framework of the ENP. More concretely, it offered the EU’s eastern partners the possibility of entering into Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreements (DCFTAs) with a view to establishing a Neighbourhood Economic Area. Included in these agreements are approximation with EU legislation in the economic field and visa liberalisation for their nationals.<sup>2</sup> The EaP also focuses on creating new areas of multilateral cooperation in fields such as good governance and democracy, economic

convergence with EU legislation, energy security, foreign policy and defence (European Commission 2008).

## The limits of the EU's transformative power

Since its inception the EaP has reflected the EU's ambition to be a transformative power (Borzel and Risse 2009). Mark Leonard describes the idea of Europe as a transformative power as follows: 'Europe's obsession with legal frameworks means that it transforms the countries it comes into contact with, instead of just skimming the surface. . . . Europe doesn't change countries by threatening to invade them: its biggest threat is to cut off contact with them' (Leonard 2015, 2). This was openly claimed by the former EU Commissioner Štefan Füle, who once explained the EU's overall objective for its eastern neighbours as follows: 'It is about finishing the transformation of the European continent' (Dempsey 2013, 1).

The EaP is aimed at guiding the reform process in the eastern partners in order to align them with EU values and norms, such as the commitment to the rule of law, good governance and the approximation of their domestic legislation to the single market *acquis* (European Commission 2008). In this, the EaP reflects the role that the EU has assigned for itself—that of being a transformative power. In playing this role, the EU relies essentially on financial assistance, partnership, the expansion of the field of applicability of its norms to include partner countries and a reluctance to use military force.

The EU's transformative ambitions are deeply embedded in the experience of its enlargements into Central and Eastern Europe in 2004 and 2007. The debt that the ENP owes to the EU enlargement policy is particularly evident (Kelley 2006). The ENP's use of terms and concepts such as 'conditionalities', its approximation of domestic legislation and its use of benchmarks are all reminiscent of the EU's enlargement policy. Moreover, in 2015 the decision was taken to put one EU Commission Directorate-General in charge of both policies.

That said, the two policies have tended to grow further and further apart. On the legal side, one can point to the inclusion (by means of the 2007 Lisbon Treaty) of Article 8 in the Treaty on European Union. This article mentions the need to develop a special relationship with the neighbouring countries. It poses the risk that the eastern partners will become locked into a permanent non-member status. In November 2017 the EaP–EU Summit declaration restricted the eastern partners' EU aspirations to what had already been provided for in the existing agreements (Kostanyan 2017).

To assess how successful the EU's transformative efforts have been, one has to consider its record in promoting democracy, human rights and legal approximation. While promoting democracy was included in the objectives of the ENP and then emphasised still further for the EaP, only 30% of the ENP funding has been committed to this goal (Shapovalova and Youngs 2012, 3). The human rights situation in the eastern partners has shown little sign of improvement, with the possible exception of Moldova and

Georgia. In Ukraine the situation in the Russian-occupied territories (the Donetsk and Luhansk regions) and in Crimea should not divert attention from what is transpiring in the rest of the country, where concerns remain about political rights, civil liberties, LGBTI rights, corruption, freedom of the media and the excessive state monitoring of NGOs (Rácz et al. 2018, 10–13). Even the legal approximation to the single market *acquis* required by the DCFTAs has proved more challenging than expected for the countries concerned due to the lack of funding needed to mitigate its costs (Delcour and Wolczuk 2013, 14).

In conclusion, the EU's efforts to transform the eastern partners have thus far produced mixed results. This does not mean that the EU's ambitions should be abandoned altogether. Indeed, these relate to the more fundamental discussion on the distinctiveness and added value of a foreign policy central to which is the idea of the EU as a transformative power. In this respect, both the EU's ENP Review and the Global Strategy (from 2016) are indicative of a shift in emphasis as far as the EU's approaches to its neighbours are concerned. It is a move away from promoting democracy to more specific objectives, based on the new concept of 'resilience', which sees security as a precondition for prosperity and democracy (Pishchikova and Piras 2017, 114–15).

## The EaP and geopoliticisation

The Russia–Ukraine crisis broke out in March 2014, following in the wake of the Euromaidan protests of the previous autumn. This crisis led observers and analysts to stress that the EU had adopted a more geopolitical approach to its relations with the eastern partners (Makarychev and Devyatkov 2014; Nitiou 2016). The net effect, they argued, was a growing geopoliticisation of the EaP.<sup>3</sup> Such views should be assessed with caution for the following two reasons: (1) they create the misleading impression that the EaP had previously been devoid of a geopolitical dimension; and (2) they tend to misread Russia's policy towards the countries in the Partnership.

Concerning the first reason, there is no doubt that the EaP did have a geopolitical dimension from the start. The positions of various member states make this clear. For example, Poland and the Baltic States saw the EaP as constituting a buffer zone between them and Russia. Other member states, including France and Germany, viewed it as a possible bridge with Russia. It is worth keeping in mind that the 2008 conflict in Georgia was not mentioned in the Swedish–Polish memorandum, which focused its attention instead on Ukraine. Nevertheless, this conflict contributed to accelerating the discussions for the adoption of the EaP by the member states. The Ukrainian crisis and the subsequent annexation of Crimea had the effect of bringing these two views closer together. This can be seen in the statement released in April 2014 by the foreign affairs ministers of the Weimar triangle countries (France, Germany and Poland), which called for a reform of the ENP (Germany, Federal Foreign Office 2014).

The second reason why caution is needed when assessing the geopoliticisation of the EaP is linked to how Russian policy on the shared neighbourhood is to be understood.

Observers have been keen to emphasise the new geopolitical turn in Russian policy, but this should not be exaggerated. The Eurasian Economic Union failed to attract the EU's eastern partners, with the exception of Armenia (and here the results have been rather negative) (Ter-Matevosyan et al. 2017). Concerning Ukraine, there seems to be little chance that the plans of Russian President Vladimir Putin include the annexation of the Donbas and Luhansk regions. This is because doing this might set a precedent for Russia's own regions with the risk of undermining the country's federal structure. Finally, the unilateral annexation of Crimea and Sebastopol was anything but a geopolitical victory for Russia. Since the Euromaidan protests it has been the Kremlin's objective to draw Ukraine away from Western influence. But Russia's actions have instead contributed to pushing the country even further away from its own sphere of influence (Wood 2018, 120–38).

## The ENP Review and the 20 deliverables

The response to the changes to be made to the ENP led to the ENP Review, whose results were announced on 18 November 2015 in a joint communication by EU High Representative Mogherini and EU Commissioner Hahn. The ENP Review reflects the EU's inclination to move in the direction of a *realpolitik* strategy by abandoning its one-size-fits-all approach based on its own values (Blockmans 2015). This change is mirrored in the new terminology that the EU has been using in reference to its neighbours. The terminology stresses stabilisation and differentiation over democratic reforms (Cianciara 2017). The ENP Review also abandons the enlargement methodology, focusing instead on the benefits DCFTAs afford to its eastern partners. In the areas of conflict prevention and counterterrorism, it puts new emphasis on the Common Foreign and Security Policy and the Common Security and Defence Policy. These new developments have generally been welcomed, but they fell short of a fundamental reorientation of the ENP (Furness and Schafer 2015)

Since the ENP Review, the EaP has lost some of its visibility on the EU's external policy agenda. As a result it has drifted towards placing greater emphasis on stabilisation and differentiation. The former is reflected in the partial lifting of sanctions against Belarus and the invitation of its leader Alexander Lukashenko to the EaP summit in November 2017 despite complaints from the leaders of the country's opposition (Bosse & Vieira 2018, 25).<sup>4</sup> The new emphasis on differentiation can be seen in the signing of the Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement with Armenia. This agreement is much more modest in scope than the initially planned DCFTA as the latter proved to be incompatible with the country's decision to join the Russian-led Eurasian Customs Union. Another example of a less ambitious agreement is the new special agreement being negotiated with Azerbaijan amid criticisms related to the human rights situation in that country (European Parliament 2018).

At the EaP summit in November 2017, the EU and its eastern partners agreed 20 deliverables to be achieved by 2020. These deliverables revolve around three main priorities: economic development, good governance and connectivity, and energy efficiency

and climate change. There are also three more general deliverables related to civil society, gender equality and non-discrimination, and strategic communication and independence of the media. A meeting between the EU28 and the six EaP foreign affairs ministers held in Luxembourg on 15 October 2018 provided an opportunity to take stock of the modest progress made in this respect (Council of the European Union 2018).

## Conclusion

By emphasising the importance of ownership in all fields of cooperation and the need for greater monitoring, the EU is adopting a more pragmatic view on the EaP. While this might be the only way forward in the short term, there is a risk that it will perpetuate policy inertia in the long term. And since policy inertia sets stability above reforms, this might contribute to lowering the EU's ambitions even further. In short, it might lead to a growing geopoliticisation of the EU's relations with its eastern partners that could throw into question the EU's goal of being a transformative power—which is currently a fundamental part of its foreign policy identity. Such a development would not only undermine the added value of EU foreign policy but also weaken its position towards its eastern partners. In this context, the EaP's tenth anniversary should be used as an opportunity to reassert the EU's transformative ambitions in its eastern neighbourhood.

## Notes

1. Russia quickly refused to be included in this policy and sought a special bilateral relationship with the EU.
2. To date, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine have concluded DCFTAs with the EU.
3. In this article, 'geopoliticisation' is understood as 'the discursive construction of an issue or policy as a geopolitical matter' (Cadier 2018, 3).
4. In the end, Belarus sent only its foreign affairs ministers to the summit.

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