

# Building a Lifeline for Freedom: Eastern Partnership 2.0

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**Martens Centre**  
for European Studies



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The Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies is the political foundation and think tank of the European People's Party (EPP), dedicated to the promotion of Christian Democrat, conservative and like-minded political values.

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## Executive summary

The Eastern Partnership (EaP) initiative is an ambitious policy which pursues the goal of transforming the countries in Europe's eastern neighbourhood into more prosperous and free societies. Unlike the EU's enlargement policy, which has achieved a similar transformation in the former Soviet satellite states in Central and Eastern Europe, the EaP, however, is not promising the six eastern partners EU membership. EaP 1.0 has also not been backed up by the political and economic resources necessary for securing such a transformation.

This paper examines how the EaP can achieve the desired transformation by focusing on supporting democracy and strengthening the European choice of the citizens in the EaP countries. While the five-year framework is not a sufficiently long period to pass final judgement on the merits of the EaP's transformative power, a realistic and pragmatic assessment of the accomplishments and shortcomings so far suggests some trends of central importance. It is clear that in order to achieve the desired outcome, the EaP needs a fresh start in view of the new geopolitical realities, as well as the evolving domestic political and economic situations, in the partner states. To achieve its goals, EaP 2.0 should focus on different players, methods and political technologies.

In the last five years, the EaP has managed to accomplish more in some countries than in others. The signing of the Association and Free Trade Agreements between the EU and Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine on 27 June 2014, despite Russian pressure, was a monumental achievement. The majority of the eastern partners also have advanced on the road to facilitated access to EU countries through the liberalisation of visa requirements. In April 2014 Moldova became the first eastern partner to enjoy visa-free access to the EU.





The strengthening of the bureaucratic framework of cooperation between the EaP countries and the EU is another important achievement. The various cooperation platforms and instruments, covering all the important areas of public policy addressed by the EaP, have created the necessary infrastructure for advancing the process of European integration within the EaP countries. The EaP Civil Society and Business Forums extend the benefits of those closer ties with Europe to the non-governmental players in the eastern partners.

That said, the EaP has also experienced some major setbacks. Armenia has decided to join the Russian-led Eurasian Customs Union (ECU). Democratic reforms have not advanced in either Azerbaijan or Belarus. The human, economic and political costs paid by the Ukrainian people for moving closer to Europe have been staggering. The pro-European coalition in Moldova is battling to retain power, with corruption and ineffective state institutions posing serious challenges. The commitment of the new Georgian government to a European future has been validated by the signing of its agreements with Europe. However, questions regarding the use of 'selective justice' against political opponents cast a shadow over Georgia's democratic future.

The EaP has often lacked the required level of flexibility to respond to the demanding and divergent challenges facing each individual partner country. Compared to the countries covered by the enlargement policy, the eastern partners operate within a much more complex historical, cultural, geopolitical and security context. This makes their transformation a formidable task. This level of complexity in the challenges facing the EaP has not always been adequately factored into the EU's EaP policy planning.

The inherent structural weaknesses of the policy and the difficulties facing the partner countries notwithstanding, the main challenge to the EaP, however, has come from a third party. The EU reached out to Russia from the day the EaP was conceived, looking into the option of inviting it to join the EaP as a partner





country. However, Russia was not interested in this option and chose to pursue a 'strategic partnership' with Europe instead. It also chose to view the EaP as yet another Western plan to 'encircle' it. Without much delay, Russia masterminded a rival integrationist project—the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU)—issuing an ideological and geopolitical challenge to Europe.

EaP 2.0 will continue to face a challenging international context as the geopolitical stand-off between the EU and Russia is likely to continue. The current Russian government cannot afford the successful democratisation of the EaP countries. This would threaten the stability of the Kremlin regime. The setting of a precedent by the existing functional democracies in the former Soviet republics, Ukraine especially, could be a fatal blow to the stability of 'sistema' or the power vertical which Vladimir Putin has constructed. As Putin enters the final stage of his reign in Russia, likely to last for another decade or more, the concerns regarding potential destabilisation will only increase. Sustaining the image of a Russia under siege from external enemies that are attempting to take away what is rightfully hers will be an increasingly attractive option for the Kremlin. The high political dividends won by the current regime through its attempts to re-establish its dominance in the former Soviet space also make it unlikely that Russia will abandon its chosen approach of a 'zero-sum game' with the EaP. Russia will continue to put economic and political pressure on the EaP countries, attempting to export instability to them, for as long as the Western reaction to Russia's aggression fails to make the costs of such a policy choice far more substantial than its benefits.

The positive socio-economic impact of the agreements signed by the EU and advancing EaP countries will not be immediate. In the nearest future these agreements imply more obligations for these EaP countries than direct benefits. Russia will try to capitalise on the potential among their voters for growing disillusionment with regard to EU integration that might follow the high expectations resulting from the signing of the agreements.



Wielding its political, economic and soft-power tools, the Kremlin will do all it can to undermine voters' support for the EU among Georgians, Moldovans and Ukrainians in the next few years.

The 'zero-sum' approach chosen by Russia goes against the interests of the eastern partners. They want to enjoy free trade relations with both the countries of the EEU and the EU. The legal framework of international trade regulations makes such a solution possible. Except for the political will in Moscow, the eastern partners could have parallel free trade regimes with the EU and the EEU.

The people of the EaP countries are attracted to the EU by their belief in the European model of democracy, rule of law and social market economy. Left out of the cycle of peaceful democratic development brought to post-Second World War Europe by the European project, the majority of citizens in the EaP countries are the most enthusiastic Europeans. They have also proven themselves to be ready to pay a heavy price for standing up for European values. The same values and the European project itself, as witnessed in the last European elections, are increasingly being challenged within the EU. Therefore, the EaP's success is more important than ever. It puts to the test both the ever-enduring appeal of the European values and the strength of the EU's transformative power. The EU should continue to support the diplomatic solution, which would offer a 'win-win' solution for all parties concerned. Unless Europe is ready for a new 'Munich' moment in its history, the freedom of the people of the EaP countries cannot be held hostage by the Kremlin's opposition to finding such a solution. Europe needs to continue to strengthen the EaP, building a lifeline of freedom for the citizens of the eastern partners.

**Keywords** Eastern Partnership – Democracy support – Free Trade and Association Agreements – Armenia – Azerbaijan – Belarus – Georgia – Moldova – Ukraine – Former Soviet Union – Russia – Eurasian Union – Geopolitical competition – Soft power



## Introduction

As the Prague Summit of 2009 rolled out the Eastern Partnership (EaP) Initiative, the new EU policy for enhancing stability, democracy and prosperity in six former Soviet republics in Eastern Europe (Belarus, Moldova and Ukraine) and the South Caucasus (Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia), the ‘shared neighbourhood’ of the EU and Russia, as well as the prospects for EU–Russia cooperation, looked dramatically different from the bleak reality of today.

While the Russo-Georgian War of 2008 resulted in a temporary freeze in EU–Russia relations, the *Report of the Independent Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia*,<sup>1</sup> sponsored by the EU, chose to give a politically expedient judgement of the events, making it possible for the world to move on. It concluded that the decision of the Georgian authorities to resort to the use of force in its breakaway region of South Ossetia was in breach of international law.<sup>2</sup> This, in turn, qualified the Russian aggression, although also in violation of international law, as a ‘disproportionate’ response.<sup>3</sup> Georgia was offered substantial financial assistance and EU monitors on the ground to avoid economic collapse and further destabilisation. The EU returned shortly after the war to a ‘business as usual’ attitude with Russia under the auspices of the strategic partnership.

The Russo-Georgian War did, however, leave a footprint on the conscience of EU policymakers. Achieving a common position

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1 Independent Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia, *Report of the Independent Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia*, September 2009.

2 ‘There is the question of whether the use of force by Georgia in South Ossetia, beginning with the shelling of Tskhinvali during the night of 7/8 August 2008, was justifiable under international law. It was not’. Ibid., vol. I, 22.

3 ‘Hence the Russian use of force for defensive purposes during the first phase of the conflict would be legal. On the second item, it must be ascertained whether the subsequent Russian military campaign deeper into Georgia was necessary and proportionate in terms of defensive action against the initial Georgian attack. Although it should be admitted that it is not easy to decide where the line must be drawn, it seems, however, that much of the Russian military action went far beyond the reasonable limits of defense’. Ibid., 23.



on the enhancement of EU cooperation with those countries of the former USSR considered to belong to the Russian sphere of influence had been a monumentally difficult task prior to the war. Just how tragic Europe's reluctance to engage with the region turned out to be became clear in 2008 with the loss of hundreds of human lives and the displacement of thousands more.<sup>4</sup> As the EU was confronted with the economic and political consequences of the 2008 war none could dispute that stabilisation of the countries in the EU's eastern neighbourhood was in Europe's own best interests.

In a telling sign of its reluctance to engage with the future eastern partners before the Russo-Georgian War, despite their geographic, religious and cultural proximity to Europe, the EU looked to the south first when deciding to strengthen relationships with its neighbours. The EaP Initiative was largely modelled after the Union for the Mediterranean,<sup>5</sup> the French policy initiative for closer political and economic ties with the countries from North Africa and the Middle East. It is quite possible that the EU would have adopted a similar policy for the east, even if the sounds of exploding bombs and the footsteps of the Russian military marching on Tbilisi had not called European policymakers back from their summer retreats in 2008. However, the war made it much more difficult to argue that the EU should defer to Russia where the countries in its shared neighbourhood were concerned. As a result, when, shortly after the Russo-Georgian conflict, a joint Swedish–Polish initiative on a new policy framework was circulated in Brussels, first as an informal 'non-paper', it was received with much less resistance from those EU countries that had traditionally been in favour of staying out of Russia's backyard.

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4 In the period 2005–8, the Georgian government spent considerable diplomatic resources on trying to convince the EU to deploy an EU monitoring mission in Georgia, well before the war broke out. Worried about the Russian reaction to enhanced EU engagement, however, the EU remained unresponsive.

5 Launched on 13 July 2008 at the Paris Summit as a continuation of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (Euro-Med), also known as the Barcelona Process, established in 1995.



That said, bickering over the priorities between the ‘east’ and the ‘south’ aspects of the EU’s neighbourhood policy was a major obstacle to getting the EaP off the ground. Germany, while generally supportive of the EU’s new policy, initially refrained from throwing its full weight behind the EaP. Before building the Polish–Swedish alliance for the EaP, Warsaw had approached Berlin with a proposal to present the EaP as a joint Polish–German initiative. Germany, however, declined to put its name on it, choosing instead to support it in the background. This response to the Polish proposal made it clear that, wary of Russia’s reaction, Germany would not be at the forefront of attempts which aimed to increase the EU’s presence in the countries which Russia considers its backyard. A pivotal handicap of the EaP Initiative from the very beginning was the failure to build the triangle of political support necessary for any policy initiative that hopes to survive the grinding machinery of the EU’s foreign-policymaking process. This cornerstone of political support, together with Brussels, has to include at least two of the EU capitals of Paris, Berlin and Warsaw.<sup>6</sup>

In addition to the shaky political commitment of a number of member states, other factors have complicated the early years of the EaP. The euro crises, ongoing economic difficulties and subsequently shifting political landscape have made the voters in Europe increasingly introverted. The financial constraints imposed by the economic crisis on a number of EU member states have also resulted in limited resources being available for the financial backing of the initiative. General enlargement fatigue in the EU among both the populations and the elites has also led to a reluctant attitude towards a strengthened relationship with Europe’s neighbours. Wary of further enlargement, some European policymakers were concerned that the EaP would be viewed as an ‘antechamber’ for further enlargement. As the EU foreign policy agenda tends to be driven by crises, the emergence of the new political challenges in the countries of the ‘Arab Spring’ had taken

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6 Given the increasingly Eurosceptic approach of the UK, Warsaw seems to be replacing London at lightning speed in the triangle of powerful EU capitals.



the limelight away from the EaP Initiative, until the crisis in Ukraine refocused Europe's attention back on the east.

The last five years have also coincided with major changes in the set-up of the European institutions in accordance with the Lisbon Treaty. The ongoing changes in the bureaucratic machinery dealing with EU foreign policy have taken their toll on the implementation of the EaP. The major challenge to the EaP Initiative, however, as discussed at greater length later on in this paper, has been the emergence of the ECU, the rival geopolitical concept created by Russia. The stark choice with which the eastern partners were confronted—joining the ECU or choosing the path towards the EU, risking Russian wrath—put an additional obstacle in the way of the EaP's success.

It is against this historical backdrop that we embark on an analysis of the effectiveness of the EaP Initiative to bring the EU's transformative power to the countries of the EaP and define the priorities for its future.

## First five years: the road from Prague to Vilnius

The EaP Initiative was designed as a policy which pursued two goals. First, even if the EaP did not set EU membership of the eastern partners as its desired policy outcome, in contrast to the enlargement policy of the EU, it aspired to use the EU's transformative power to achieve the necessary political and economic reforms in the EaP countries. Second, the policy assumed that increased prosperity and security and stronger democracy in the neighbourhood would, in turn, also have a positive impact on the stability of the European continent. As defined by the Joint Declaration of the Prague Summit, the overarching goal and rationale behind the policy is



to create the necessary conditions to accelerate political association and further economic integration between the European Union and interested partner countries. . . . With this aim, the Eastern Partnership will seek to support political and socio-economic reforms of the partner countries, facilitating approximation towards the European Union. This serves the shared commitment to stability, security and prosperity of the European Union, the partner countries and indeed the entire European continent.<sup>7</sup>

An institutional vehicle for achieving the declared objective was the negotiation and signature of the Association Agreements (AAs) and the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreements (DCFTAs) between the interested eastern partners and the EU. The policy initiative, which covers both non-member states of the WTO (Azerbaijan) and those which were already well advanced in their negotiations on the Association and Free Trade Agreements with the EU at the time of the Prague Summit (such as Ukraine), could not have developed a uniform approach to all partners. The EaP was conceived as a multifaceted policy instrument and was not expected to use the same toolbox for each partner country. The level of ambition pursued by the EU was fine-tuned to the realities in each of the EaP countries. However, whether or not the level and degree of differentiation was adequate is a subject of debate and will be addressed later.

The first benchmark summit following Prague arrived in 2013, when the Vilnius Summit was set to finalise AAs with the four ‘front-runners’ of the EaP. Ukraine was set to sign the AA and DCFTA, while Armenia, Georgia and Moldova were to initial the same agreements. Vilnius fell short of these expectations. Georgia and Moldova did initial the agreements with the EU, but Armenia opted instead to join the ECU. The summit, nevertheless, turned out to be a historic watershed. It was a turning point, at which the

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<sup>7</sup> Council of the European Union, ‘Joint Declaration of the Prague Eastern Partnership Summit’, 8345/09 (Presse 78) (7 May 2009), 6.





refusal of the then Ukrainian government to sign the agreements with Europe ushered in a new, post-Vilnius era, not only for the EaP Initiative but for the whole European continent.

Declaring the EaP a failure and the crisis in Ukraine a direct result of the faulty conception of this policy has been the way that some commentators have chosen to assess the outcome of the Vilnius Summit. According to this emerging school of thought, the EU should have listened more seriously to the concerns of Russia regarding the EaP and designed its policy with consideration for Russia's interests from the very beginning.<sup>8</sup>

There are a number of other criticisms voiced in respect of the EaP. Some of them concern the absence of the prospect of membership as the light at the end of the tunnel on the road to European integration. The European bureaucracy has also often been criticised for applying a uniform approach to the EaP countries when negotiating the Association and Free Trade Agreements, without a sufficient level of nuance for addressing the specificities of the economic and political realities of each partner. The EU is also often blamed by non-governmental players for engaging with corrupt EaP governments as long as they stayed on the path towards EU integration. This, in the view of critics, has had a negative impact on the image of the EU in some EaP countries. The EU's double standards with regard to democracy and human rights in the EaP countries are often cited by those who wish for greater EU engagement with Belarus. Belarus remains the most excluded EaP partner due to the state of democracy there, even though critics of the EU often remind Brussels that Azerbaijan's record on human rights and democracy is not much better.

In contrast, an optimistic assessment of the EaP summit last year claims that in the face of tremendous challenges, the EaP has still managed to deliver considerable results, while the goals set for Vilnius might not have been realistic from the outset. The signing

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<sup>8</sup> A number of French, Italian, German and EU officials have stated this position in the press, as well as in private interviews with the author.



of the agreements between the EU and three EaP countries in June 2014 was indeed a great achievement. The fact that this happened despite incredible political and economic pressure from Russia, culminating in military intervention in Ukraine, makes this achievement even more significant.

The EaP has had some other important achievements along the way. The eastern partners have advanced on the road towards facilitated access to EU countries through the liberalisation of visa requirements, with Moldovans enjoying visa-free access to the EU as of April 2014. Another achievement of the EaP has been the strengthening of the bureaucratic framework of cooperation between the EaP countries and the EU through the establishment of a large number of cooperation platforms and instruments covering all important areas of public policy. The EaP Civil Society and Business Forums extend the benefits of closer ties with Europe to the non-governmental players in these countries. The multitude of such cooperation platforms generated by the EaP is extremely important for laying down the infrastructure for the European integration of the eastern partners.

However, looking forward, both the self-congratulatory approach to the EaP's achievements and the downplaying of them could be equally damaging. If the EU decides that the EaP has failed because the Russian position was not sufficiently taken into account, and thus in future the EU agenda for cooperation with the EaP countries should incorporate the Russian position, the EU will not be able to move forward. As long as the Russian government continues to pursue its own integrationist project, which it frames as a challenge to the EU's own ideological and economic model, it will continue to create insurmountable difficulties for closer economic and political integration between the EU and the EaP countries. On the other hand, declaring the EaP Initiative a success despite its obvious failure to trigger the desired transformations is equally undesirable. This will encourage a downgrading of expectations, reducing the political and economic resources



pledged for the implementation of the policy, and will mean taking a step back from the EU's strategic engagement with the region.

Five years is not a very long time frame for passing final judgement on the effectiveness of the EaP. A realistic and pragmatic assessment of the accomplishments so far, however, suggests that the EaP needs a fresh start in view of the new geopolitical realities, as well as the evolving domestic political and economic situations, in its partner states, focusing on different players, methods and political technologies for achieving its goals.

## The new geopolitical reality: the challenge from Russia

The EU's attempts to transform the countries of the EaP Initiative have been less successful than hoped for, partially due to the new geopolitical realities facing the region. The enlargement of NATO and the EU towards the former Warsaw Pact countries in the 1990s unfolded as Russia, infested with enormous domestic economic and political problems, was no longer acting in the role of regional rival to the West. This is no longer true. Over the course of the last decade Russia has reasserted its role as the regional hegemon in the space of the former USSR, actively opposing the processes of both democratisation and Westernisation in the former constituent parts of the USSR.

Ever since the democratic Orange and Rose Revolutions in Ukraine and Georgia put these countries on the radar as potential members of the Western-led alliances, Russia's position of vehement opposition to their accession to NATO has been voiced both loudly and consistently. However, the deepening of cooperation between the EU and the countries in the shared neighbourhood with Russia was viewed with much less concern. This position was communicated not only publicly, but also in private conversations between Russian interlocutors and the



officials from these countries. This benevolent approach to the EU has changed rather quickly and abruptly for two reasons. First, the EaP Initiative was the first attempt to seriously upgrade the EU's presence in these countries. Prior to the EaP, the EU's framework of cooperation with the countries in the common neighbourhood with Russia was rather weak. In the absence of any policy of rapprochement between the EU and the countries that were invited to join the EaP, Russia had nothing to worry about. Second, the Russian position itself, which seemed to be directed towards developing a 'strategic' partnership with the EU, has gradually transformed, with Russia now setting itself up as a rival to the EU as the regional hegemonic power. The proposal of an alternative regional integrationist project in the former Soviet space, rivalling both the ideological and socio-economic model of Europe—the Eurasian Union—was the final step, solidifying this change of policy.

With the changes in both the EU and Russian policies, Russia has managed to frame the discourse on the EaP along the lines of a geopolitical competition and zero-sum game. Moscow declared the EaP to be the EU's plan to encircle Russia, which fits well with Putin's policy of nurturing the notion of Russia as a 'besieged fortress' under threat from external enemies.<sup>9</sup> This has fundamentally changed the strategic dimension of the EaP Initiative; a change, which neither the Brussels bureaucracy nor the European capitals were ready for.

A detailed analysis of the project of the EEU is beyond the scope of this paper. However, as the project has a direct impact on the future of the EaP Initiative, it is important to establish its main parameters and understand why it will continue to be an obstacle to the success of the EaP.

When then Prime Minister of Russia Vladimir Putin introduced this new integrationist project in the space of the former USSR

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9 L. Shevtsova, 'The Putin Doctrine: Myth, Provocation, Blackmail or the Real Deal', *The American Interest*, 14 April 2014.



he suggested an ambitious free trade zone from ‘Lisbon to Vladivostok’.<sup>10</sup> However, this idea was promptly dismissed by the Kremlin shortly afterwards. The establishment of a free trade zone between the ECU and the EU would require Russia and other potential members of the ECU to adopt matching standards. It has been clear from the outset that Russia would have to adopt EU standards which, in fact, are Western standards. While initially it seemed that this might have been a possibility, it very soon became clear that the ECU would continue to operate under its own Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) standards, modelled after the old Soviet ones, rather than opting for the EU model.<sup>11</sup> Russia was not ready to adopt the EU customs and transport regulations or sanitary and migration controls and standards necessary for establishing a free trade zone with the EU. The establishment of a free trade zone between the ECU and the EU would also force Russia to compete against the EU for a market share in the countries of the ECU. Russia was not ready to face such competition. More importantly, the EU’s standards were not suitable for the Russian and Kazakh economic models, with their heavy dependency on the exportation of oil and gas. In addition, as long as Kazakhstan and Belarus, two members of the ECU, remain outside of the WTO framework, any formal negotiations on a comprehensive free trade agreement between the ECU and the EU would not be feasible.

There are serious doubts about the positive economic impact of the Eurasian Union project on Russia’s medium- and long-term interests. However, economic considerations seem to take a secondary place in Russia’s approach to this geopolitical project. The ECU re-establishes Russia’s effective rule over the countries which it considers to be ‘in its sphere of privileged interests’.<sup>12</sup>

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10 V. Putin, ‘A New Integration Project for Eurasia: The Future in the Making’, *Izvestia*, 3 October 2011.

11 O. Shumylo-Tapiola, *Eurasian Customs Union, Friend or Foe of the EU*, Carnegie Europe, 3 October 2012.

12 C. Clover, ‘Russia Announces “Spheres of Interest”’, *Financial Times*, 31 August 2008.



It is important enough that Russia is willing to pay the necessary economic price to achieve its creation. Belarus has been exploiting its pledge to join the Russian-led Union as a way to get substantial economic assistance from Moscow. Russia has also promised other potential members, such as Armenia and Kyrgyzstan, that it will compensate them for the economic costs they will be exposed to as a result of their accession to the ECU.

Its economic rationale notwithstanding, this expansionist policy is an integral part of the 'Putin Doctrine', which seeks to ensure the survival of autocratic rule by restoring militarism and a fortress mentality in Russia. It is vitally important for the survival of the current Russian regime<sup>13</sup> and the continuation of the general policy of disengagement from Europe in favour of restoring its sphere of influence in the former USSR.<sup>14</sup> The current Kremlin regime has decided that 'modernisation is, however, to make the old ways work better, continuing to rely on the extractive industries and the military-industrial complex for future prosperity'.<sup>15</sup> Russia has also decided that the EU's approach to human rights, freedom and the rule of law are not universal principles which it shares.

Putin's paradigm for retaining and consolidating power in Russia has experienced a significant evolution over the course of the last 15 years. If the first decade of his rule lacked any clear ideological basis, Putin's reincarnation as president following the nominal rule of President Medvedev, was accompanied by a rapidly developing ideological programme. Most probably, the Kremlin decided that a purely socio-economic contract with the Russian people could not guarantee the necessary level of public support in the long term, especially if there should be a threat of economic decline, to which Russia's undiversified economy is always exposed. Russia needed a new ideology, which the former KGB colonel unsurprisingly decided to frame as opposition to the West, based on the

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13 L. Shevtsova, 'The Putin Doctrine'.

14 I. Bond, *The EU and Russia: Uncommon Spaces*, Centre for European Reform, April 2014.

15 Ibid., 5.



assertion that the ‘unipolar world has failed’<sup>16</sup>. In his address to the Russian ambassadors gathered in Moscow on 2 July 2014, while bringing up the idea of a common economic space from Lisbon to Vladivostok, Putin once again repeated this notion and denied the universality of Western liberal values.<sup>17</sup>

In the search for a basis for his own ideology, Putin has decided to resort to the idea of ‘Eurasianism’ propagated by the Russian political scientist and historian Alexander Dugin.<sup>18</sup> Prior to his current prominence, Dugin’s ideas of ‘Eurasian supremacy’ were dismissed for a long time as the marginal and irrelevant rumblings of a semi-mystical philosophical school. In its essence, this ideology claims that Russia is a unique civilisation of its own merit, which does not have a place either in Europe or Asia, and is a true warden of Christian values—a new Byzantium.<sup>19</sup> While Putin is unlikely to believe in any of Dugin’s ideas, they have proven to be an expedient tool for his political and geopolitical ambitions. It is clear that the successful democratic and economic transformation of any former Soviet country, engineered by the West, would be a fatal blow to both his credibility as well as the potential of his ideological and geopolitical model. This, in its turn, could speed up the bringing down of his citadel of power.

The assertion that the ECU is a primarily political project for the Kremlin is reinforced by the fact that Moscow has made signing a DCFTA with Europe mutually exclusive with signing a free trade agreement with Russia and the other ECU members, against the logic of international trade rules. The EU has never opposed the idea that the countries of the EaP could be signatories to several free trade agreements at once. For example, the EaP countries

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16 RIA Novosti ‘Unipolar World Model Has Failed—Putin’, 1 July 2014.

17 P. Felgenhauer, ‘Putin’s Speech to Russian Diplomats: The Time of US World Domination has Ended’, *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, 3 July 2014.

18 A. Dugin, *The Eurasian Mission—Program Materials* (Arktos Media, Moscow, 2005).

19 A. Barbashin and H. Thoburn, ‘Putin’s Brain—Alexander Dugin and the Philosophy Behind Putin’s Invasion of Crimea’, *Foreign Affairs*, 31 March 2014.





could have free trade agreements with the countries of the CIS, while at the same time negotiating DCFTAs with the EU. It is true that in the absence of a free trade agreement between the EU and the ECU, the countries which have DCFTAs with the EU cannot become members of the ECU. However, Russia could have offered the countries which still wanted to pursue a DCFTA with the EU the possibility of a free trade agreement with the ECU, rather than fully fledged membership. Serbia, which is on its way to becoming a member of the EU, has a free trade agreement with Russia. It is unclear why the eastern partners cannot continue to enjoy the free trade agreements they have with Russia and the other CIS countries under the CIS common economic area alongside DCFTA agreements with Europe.<sup>20</sup> This would be consistent with the approach to create a common economic space between the EU and ECU which would also foster Russia's own economic modernisation and competitiveness.<sup>21</sup> However, this is not how the current wardens of power in the Kremlin happen to think. Instead they have decided to apply serious pressure, ranging from economic sanctions to military intervention, to force the EaP countries to abandon their DCFTAs with the EU in favour of joining the Russian-led ECU.

Russia's pressure on the EaP countries has worked better in some cases than others. Neither key policymakers, nor business or academic elites in Armenia are under any illusion that joining the ECU will benefit their country economically. However, with security concerns dominating the policy thinking of both Armenia's governing elite and its citizens, Armenia succumbed to Russian pressure. It has traded its economic interests for the security guarantees offered by Russia.<sup>22</sup> Russia is Armenia's main ally in the frozen conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-

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20 S. Aleksashenko, *For Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia Free Trade with Europe and Russia is Possible*, Carnegie Moscow Centre, 3 July 2014.

21 European Parliament, Directorate General for External Policies of the Union, Directorate B, 'Countdown to the Vilnius Summit: The EU's Trade Relations with Moldova and the South Caucasus', Policy Paper, PE 433.755 (January 2014).

22 Author's interviews with Armenian officials, Yerevan, April 2014.



Karabakh. Russia's threat to withdraw support for Armenia and to considerably increase Russian arms sales to Azerbaijan both played a significant role in Armenia's U-turn from the DCFTA towards the ECU.

Russia has been meddling with the domestic political and economic affairs of both Georgia and Moldova, attempting to thwart their progress towards Europe. The trade sanctions and threats to incorporate Moldova's break-away region of Transnistria into the Russian Federation and create other potential hot spots in Moldova have so far failed to sway the country away from Europe and towards the Eurasian Union. Most recently, disappointed by the decision of the Georgian Dream coalition (კობახიძის ქართული ოცნება) government to continue the course of European integration set by its predecessor, Russia has threatened to reconsider its economic relations with Georgia. The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs has confirmed that Georgia's third largest trading partner, Russia, will be forced to consider how it should react to the signing of such an agreement.<sup>23</sup> Following the signature of the agreements between the EU and Georgia, the Russian and Georgian experts are supposed to be starting discussions on the implications of the DCFTA for Russia–Georgia trade. Moldova has already been given a deadline to produce evidence that the products it exports to Russia are compatible with ECU standards, in addition to European ones, or it risks losing access to the Russian market.

Questions regarding the viability of the Eurasian Union and the ability of Russia to actually bring about this geopolitical project persist, both in the EU and amongst the potential members of the ECU. At this stage it is premature to declare the Eurasian Union either a success or a failure. Despite the thorny road to its final destination, which has not been made smoother by Russia's decision to annex Crimea, the ECU has recently taken another step

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23 V. Rukhadze, 'Russia Warns Georgia Against Signing the Association Agreement with the EU', The Jamestown Foundation, *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 11/100 (29 May 2014).



forward. On 29 May, in Astana, the leaders of Belarus, Kazakhstan and Russia signed the treaty establishing the Eurasian Union. The signature was preceded by an uneasy process of negotiations and Russia had to sweeten the deal with considerable financial assistance to Belarus, as well as a number of concessions for Kazakhstan. Armenia is likely to join soon, followed by another Central Asian country—Kyrgyzstan—by the end of the year.<sup>24</sup> Thus, in the nearest future, we can safely assume that Russia does not intend to back off from this strategic project, even if it has to proceed without the important attributes of integrated government structures—such as the Parliament of the Eurasian Union, an initiative blocked by Kazakhstan with the tacit support of Belarus.

Putin is set to impose his own terms for the end of the Cold War on the rest of the world, restoring Russian rule over the former constituent parts of the USSR which are still outside of the EU and NATO umbrella. Russia will continue to push for successful integration of the countries of the former USSR into the Eurasian Union for several reasons: first, it helps distract the attention of Russian citizens from the problems of corruption and failing state institutions at home. Second, the expansionist policies and anti-Western posture are popular with Russian voters—Putin's ratings have skyrocketed following his decision to annex Crimea. The crisis in Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea have fully exposed how weak the EU's position vis-à-vis Russia is. Finally, the threat of a potential spillover of democracy from the EaP countries into Russia would expose Putin's regime to inevitable destabilisation. This is why Russia is unlikely to bury the hatchet and wait, in the midst of declining economic performance, for the cries for reform and change to become any louder in Red Square. Russia will continue pressing Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine for as long as it believes that there is no one there to stop it from doing so.

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24 J. Lillis, 'Kazakhstan: Landmark Eurasian Union Treaty Signed Amid Protests and Arrests', *Eurasianet.org*.



## European response

How should the EU respond? Clearly, de-escalation of the conflict is in the interests of both the EU and the eastern partners, but how it can be secured without sacrificing the sovereignty of the EaP partners is a difficult question. Those European politicians who blame the EU for pushing Ukraine and the other eastern partners to the edge of an abyss by forcing a choice between the EU and Russia are wrong. The most powerful voice in Europe to express this view is German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier, along with other officials from his Social Democratic Party (Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands).<sup>25</sup> Advocating a way forward that is inclusive of the Russian position of a zero-sum game would compromise the sovereignty of the eastern partners as nations capable of making their own choices. The advocates of redesigning the EaP with consideration for the Russian position should first define how the new policy framework offered to the eastern partners would safeguard their sovereign choice for further integration with the EU while Russia continues to oppose it.

In principle, the EaP countries would welcome the EU stepping up its role as a moderator of their uneasy relations with Russia. Creating win-win solutions is the first and foremost priority of these countries. They want to have DCFTA agreements and closer links with Europe, but, at the same time, continued access to the Russian markets and normalisation of bilateral relations with Russia is in their own best, and vitally important, interests.

Unfortunately for them, the truth is that solutions that avoid creating new dividing lines, desirable as they might be, are not easy to find. The potential to create incentives for Russia to step away from the zero-sum approach does not look very promising. Equally, EU policymakers in Brussels, Berlin, Warsaw and Paris

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<sup>25</sup> *Newsweek*, 'German Official Says It was Wrong to Make Ukraine Pick between EU and Russia', 5 April 2014.



recognise that there is very little the EU can do to create a new, positive momentum in relations with Russia as far as the common neighbourhood is concerned.<sup>26</sup> Some important EU initiatives, such as the proposal of the foreign ministers of the Weimar Triangle (Germany, France and Poland) to start tripartite consultations between the EU, Russia and the eastern partners on the impact of the AA for both sides, have not, so far, delivered any results.<sup>27</sup> Russia found that this proposal was not enough. The eastern partners, while welcoming the EU's involvement in facilitating their relations with Russia, were seriously alarmed by any proposal that hinted at the idea that their future could be negotiated with Russia's participation.

Even if the EU does not wish to be involved in a geopolitical competition with Russia, it cannot change the fact that it already is. The EU has to recognise that short of potentially crippling economic sanctions directed at Russia or threatening to respond to future military excursions by Putin into Russia's neighbours, it has no way of influencing Russian policymakers. The Ukraine crisis has exposed just how little taste Europe has for either of these options. Short of supporting any meaningful sanctions from the day the conflict in Ukraine broke out, France has even found it difficult to halt its military cooperation with Russia, as its reluctance to call off the deal on Mistral warships has highlighted. Both France and Germany seemed only too eager to close the chapter on confrontation and return to business as usual with Russia, before the downing of the Malaysian Airlines flight MH7 and continued destabilisation of Ukraine's eastern regions made this impossible. What Putin's reaction will be to the toughening of the Western position and increasingly biting sanctions remains to be seen. However, considering how dangerous a retreat would be for his personal power base, a defeat in Ukraine might only strengthen his resolve to go after the other eastern partners.

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26 Interviews with foreign ministry officials conducted by the author in April and May 2014.

27 F.-W. Steinmeier et al., 'Joint Statement on Ukraine of the Foreign Ministers of the Weimar Triangle', 3 March 2014.



The Russian approach to the countries of the EaP has proven that there is little potential for constructive, results-oriented cooperation with regard to these countries. The EaP is part of a larger problem of rapidly deteriorating relations with Russia, which mandates a serious rethink of the EU's Russia policy. While it is clear that the framework proposed by German Foreign Minister Steinmeier back in 2008, in the form of a Partnership for Modernisation, is no longer working, alternative policies for engaging with Russia without damaging the interests of the countries in the shared EU–Russia neighbourhood are not emerging quickly.

Stepping out from the established paradigms of EU–Russia relations will be neither easy nor quick, not due to a lack of effort on the EU's part, but mostly because the Russian position is unlikely to change in the near future.<sup>28</sup> Unless the EU is ready for a new 'Munich' moment in European history, the interests of the EaP countries cannot be held hostage by this status quo. Therefore, when thinking about the immediate future of the EaP Initiative, in the absence of a major policy change from the Kremlin, the EU needs to recognise that the geopolitical stand-off is likely to continue and plan accordingly. Russia will continue to put economic pressure on the EaP countries, as well as attempting to export instability to these countries by creating a deteriorating security environment.

As the advanced partners of the EaP sign the DCFTA agreements, the positive socio-economic impact of which will not be immediate, Russia will try to capitalise on the disillusionment of the voters with EU integration and undermine support for the EU in the EaP countries. Thus EaP policy planning needs to take a more proactive approach to pre-empting Russian moves against the EaP countries, while offering them a solid and strongly diversified framework of cooperation. The EU's main advantage in

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28 S. Stewart, *The EU, Russia and the Less Common Neighbourhood*, German Institute for International and Security Affairs, SWP Comments 3 (Berlin, January 2014).



this competition is its 'soft' or 'transformative' power. By offering their countries a way towards a more democratic, secure and prosperous environment, the EU still has a much stronger hold on the hearts and minds of the citizens of the EaP countries than Putin's Russia can ever aspire to have. It is no coincidence that the EaP has managed to deliver results in those countries where the breathing space for democracy still exists.

## The EaP policy and democracy

The political and economic challenges facing the six EaP partners could not be more different from one country to the next. The quality of their democratic development is also widely divergent. This divergence is the result of a complex web of political, economic, security and social factors. Therefore it is difficult to establish to what extent the EaP has contributed to the relative success or failure of the democratisation process in the six partner countries. However, if we take the finalisation of the Association and Free Trade Agreements between the EU and the EaP countries as a measurement of the success of the EaP, a clear pattern emerges: in the countries which have relatively open political systems and nascent democratic institutions the EaP has managed to achieve more progress.

On 27 June 2014 Georgia and Moldova signed the agreements with Europe, taking a significant step forward on the path towards EU integration. Both countries enjoy a functional, if flawed, democratic framework. Both have experienced a change of government as the result of peaceful, free and fair elections. In both cases the voters have so far endorsed the choice of a European future for their countries. The second democratic revolution in Ukraine over the course of the last decade has also been triggered by the choice for a European future and democratic movement in support of this. While Ukraine faces incredible political and economic challenges and its future still





hangs in the balance, it has signed an AA and DCFTA.

It seems that in the three countries which have managed, in some cases at considerable cost, to move forward on their path towards a European future, a certain level of maturity is present in the democratic political culture. The choice of the voters is not easy to ignore. There would be a substantial political cost imposed should the decision be made to abandon the course towards European integration in spite of the citizens' support for it. The outcome of elections, including the presidential elections of 25 May 2014 in Ukraine, suggests that the majority of the voters in these countries believe that they are beneficiaries of the EaP Initiative. As long as the citizens in these countries continue to believe that the EU offers them a better path to prosperity and security, they will support a European future.

The domestic political realities facing the three other EaP partners—Armenia, Azerbaijan and Belarus—are quite different. While compared to Azerbaijan and Belarus, Armenia has stronger democratic institutions, the decision of the Armenian president to deviate from the course of EU integration in favour of joining the ECU was widely criticised for its lack of any democratic endorsement. This decision provided the impetus for the creation of a broad coalition of political parties and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in support of a European future. However, the decision has not been met by a public outburst similar to that seen in Ukraine. The explanation for this is the paramount importance which the Armenian public places on its security concerns and the role of Russia as its security guarantor. It remains to be seen how the mood of the voters in this country might change if economic performance deteriorates following the decision to join the ECU. At present the challenge is to retain a space for the democratic debate of policy choices. The overwhelming majority of Armenians support a stronger relationship with Europe—their preferences need to be factored into the state's policies. Armenia needs to continue consolidating



its democracy otherwise it risks a transition back to a more repressive political system that would begin to more closely resemble those of the other ECU members.

The political realities in both Belarus and Azerbaijan are similar to Putin's model and rely on a 'social contract' and suppression of the opposition movements. As long as President Lukashenko in Belarus maintains stability and a level of living standards which the Belarusians find satisfactory, he will continue to manoeuvre between Russia and Europe as he considers best for his own political interests. While democracy faces a considerable challenge in Azerbaijan, the polling data quoted below also shows that the Azerbaijani voters are the least interested in stronger relations with Europe. Therefore, the democratic choice of the voters is the least relevant to the success of the EaP in this eastern partner. That said, however, the area in which a large majority of Azerbaijanis do want the EU to play a stronger role in their country is democracy.

This pattern of interdependence between the capacity of the EaP to deliver results and the functionality of the democratic process suggests where the EaP's strengths and weaknesses lie. Ultimately, the future of the countries of the EaP is in the hands of their citizens, rather than those of the EU or any other external actor. Therefore, the success of the EaP Initiative will depend on overcoming two challenges. The first is advancing democracy and the second is securing continued support for the European choice in those EaP countries where the open political system requires democratic endorsement of the choices of the decision-makers.

Despite the absence of the promise of membership, the EaP Initiative has borrowed many tools from the EU's enlargement policies, aspiring to transform the eastern partners. However, the differences between the EaP countries and those in Central and Eastern Europe, which were covered by the EU's 'big bang' enlargement in 2004, should not be overlooked. History, culture and exposure to democratic rule all play their role in defining these differences, as does the new geopolitical reality. In this sense



the EaP, while having less political and financial backing than the enlargement policies of the 1990s, is a much more ambitious policy, as it is an attempt to transform the societies themselves, which are monumentally more difficult to reform than those of Poland, Hungary or the Baltic countries were a decade ago.

Achieving the final goal of the policy, which in its essence means a complete transformation of the political and economic realities of the EaP countries, will take a considerable time. It can only be managed through the Initiative if the policy has clearly defined short-, medium- and long-term outcomes. It will require a sustained and long-term commitment, working with a flexible toolbox that contains a wide variety of instruments. The most important tool, which the EU should wield with greater efficiency, is the consolidation and support of democracy and commitment to the values on which European integration is built in the countries of the EaP.

## Building constituencies for Europe

A more detailed look at the expectations of the eastern partners reveals that while the policy objectives vis-à-vis the EU might be different amongst the elites, the differences are much less substantial when one assesses the mood amongst the voters. For example, polls conducted in the countries of the EaP show that most Ukrainians feel that the EU is an important partner and would like it to play an even greater role in their country, across a range of areas. Just over three-quarters of those asked (76%) wanted a greater EU role in economic development, 69% in trade, 64% in human rights and 60% in democracy. Meanwhile, most Moldovans also feel that the EU is an important partner, bringing peace and stability to the region. Again, just over three-quarters of those asked (77%) want a greater EU role in economic development, 60% in trade, 60% in human rights and 52% in democracy. More than half of those asked (55%)



saw the EU in a positive light, while just 12% expressed a negative view of the EU. In Belarus the majority expressed a wish for the EU to play a greater role in their country, especially in economic development and trade. Two-thirds of those asked (65%) wanted a greater EU role in economic development, 71% in trade and 53% in regional cooperation. Georgians are the most enthusiastic pro-Europeans. Almost all of those asked (92%) wanted a greater EU role in economic development, 87% in trade, 87% in human rights, 85% in democracy and 83% in regional cooperation—consistently higher than the average across the region. Similarly, despite its government's decision to pursue a path towards Eurasian integration, Armenians showed significant support for increased relations with the EU in all sectors. Eighty-five per cent wanted a greater EU role in economic development, 87% in trade, 84% in human rights, 74% in democracy and 78% in regional cooperation, demonstrating numbers similar to neighbouring Georgia. It seems that the EU remains furthest from the hearts and minds of the Azerbaijanis, who largely felt that the current state of relations between Azerbaijan and the EU was sufficient. Of those asked, just 37% felt that the EU was an important partner. Most of those asked wanted a greater EU role in democracy (59%) and human rights (51%), with smaller percentages looking for a greater role in economic development (48%) and trade (47%).<sup>29</sup>

What these statistics make clear is that, even in a country like Belarus, the EU agenda has strong support amongst the population, an overwhelming majority of whom still believe that closer cooperation with the EU is to their overall benefit. The EU, in their view, is an important economic partner, but they also believe in the EU's transformative power, which can bring democracy, rule of law, good governance and functional state institutions to their countries. This is what makes the EU's appeal considerably stronger for the citizens of these countries, when compared to the rival geopolitical project of the Eurasian Union.

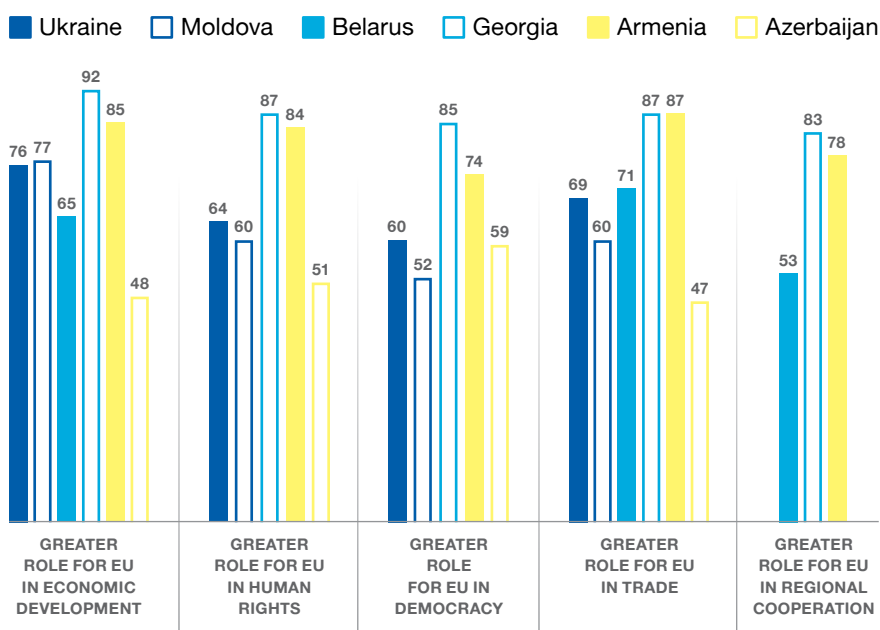
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29 A. Warren, 'ENPI Barometer, Taking the EU Pulse in the Eastern Neighbourhood', 3 May 2013.



Figure 1 Attitudes to the EU among the eastern partners

## EASTERN PARTNERSHIP POLLS



Source: A. Warren, 'ENPI Barometer, Taking the EU Pulse in the Eastern Neighbourhood', 3 May 2013.

Therefore future EU policies towards these countries should rest on the assumption that the most important 'partners' of the EaP are the people of the EaP countries, not the individuals or groups of people which happen to govern them at a given moment in history. The political and economic realities in each EaP country mandate a differentiated approach from the EU to support democracy in these countries. However, the need to develop a 'citizen-centric' approach in order to support the political and socio-economic transformation the EU is seeking to achieve is equally relevant to all of them.



## Finding the right messengers

The most important lesson that the EU has learned from Ukraine and the Arab Spring countries is that dealing with authoritarian, corrupt governments, and hoping that they will sign agreements with the EU, is futile. The EU cannot rely on a dodgy leadership to deliver the necessary reforms. If the EU is perceived to be working closely with a corrupt and ineffectual government, to the detriment of the interests of the people, it risks alienating the citizens from the European choice. This is why the argument that the EU should have signed the agreement with former President Yanukovich sooner to avoid the crisis in Ukraine is wrong. According to some Ukrainian civic leaders, the NGO community in Kyiv has started referring to the EaP as the 'Eastern Gangstership policy', reflecting the decision of the EU to continue dealing with the corrupt and incompetent government of Yanukovich. Some EU officials and NGO leaders also acknowledge that the EU's full and unconditional support of Moldova's pro-European coalition government in the face of ongoing corruption concerns among its citizens has helped to increase the ranks of supporters of the anti-European players in Moldova's politics.

The need to engage broadly with the public and create a pro-European constituency across society, with the civil sector, business and other segments, is imperative for the EaP's future success. It also means that the assistance programme funds need to be channelled away from the government to non-governmental players. This requires a major shift in the EaP framework.

EU officials admit that they have offered 'too little too late' when countering the widespread anti-EU campaign waged by Russia, for example in Ukraine. For the most part, the EU has deferred promotion of the European choice in Ukraine to the national government.<sup>30</sup> The fact that the government led by

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30 Author's conversation with a former EU official from the EU delegation to Ukraine.



President Yanukovych might have been neither a reliable partner nor the right ‘messenger’ for the EU cause has not been given due consideration. The Ukrainian crisis has sent a clear signal to Brussels and other EU capitals that this has to change. In the aftermath of the Vilnius fiasco, the EU has stepped up its public outreach campaign in the countries of the EaP, not only in the capitals, but also in some regions. For example, the EU has started playing a much more proactive role in one of Moldova’s regions, Gagauzia, where an illegally held referendum with tacit Russian support asserted that the local citizens were against signing the AA with the EU.<sup>31</sup> Stepping up the EU’s engagement in explaining the benefits of EU integration and countering Russian propaganda in Moldova has set a good example for how to proceed in the future.

Another welcome development in the aftermath of the Ukraine crisis has been the increased number of high-level visits from EU officials to the region. For example, the president of the European Council, the president of the European Commission, the president of France and other high-ranking EU officials have recently visited the EaP countries. This tendency should continue, with EU leaders working out an advanced coordinated agenda of high-level visits to the region. The power of reassurance which such visits bring, both to the governments as well as the people of the EaP countries, cannot be overestimated.

The message delivered by European politicians to the people of the eastern partners is also extremely important. What the voters in these countries need to hear is that Europe’s commitment to bring them into the European family is a firm and irreversible decision. In this respect, as mentioned later in this paper, it is important that the EU finds a way to communicate the prospects of ever-closer cooperation between the EU and the EaP countries, going beyond the AAs. The citizens in the EaP countries firmly believe

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31 For example, the visit of Commissioner for Enlargement and Neighbourhood Policy Štefan Füle to Gagauzia, Moldova in January 2014.





that their future is with Europe. They need to hear that this desire is reciprocated. This is why, together with managing expectations for the near future, a commitment to their prospects for EU membership as a long-term objective and the final destination, needs to be clearly articulated and communicated.

While high-level visits to the region are important, for its public outreach campaign to be successful the EU also needs to diversify the channels of communication and target the right opinion-makers in the societies of the EaP countries. Throwing more funds at NGOs which do not have an impact on perceptions in society will not make the EU's public outreach work more efficient. In some cases, the potential opinion-makers might be outside of the regular realm of civil society and include influential religious organisations or figures.

## Outreach to religious leaders

Georgia, for example, while being an enthusiastically pro-European eastern partner, is also the country where, according to polling results, the most influential opinion-maker is the Orthodox Church and its leader, Patriarch Ilia II.<sup>32</sup> As a result, the meeting of EU Commissioner For Enlargement and Neighbourhood Policy Štefan Füle with the leader of the Georgian Church in March 2014, and the subsequent statements of the Patriarch in support of a closer association between Georgia and the EU, might have done more for strengthening public support for the EU than other, more traditional public outreach activities.<sup>33</sup> Georgia is not an exception—the authority of the Church is significant in some other EaP countries as well—Armenia, Moldova and Ukraine, for example.

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32 See, for example, the latest poll results from the US National Democratic Institute, 'Public Attitudes in Georgia: Results of an April 2014 Survey', 5 May 2014.

33 European External Action Service, 'Myths about the AA and DCFTA Agreements Between Georgia and the EU'.



While this level of authority is discomforting for modern secular society and exposes the weaknesses of civil society in these countries, it is also a reality unlikely to change in the immediate future. Russia and its Orthodox Church have a long-standing tradition and channels of cooperation with the religious establishments of the EaP countries. Russia has attempted to use this connection as a 'soft power' tool against the Western presence in the EaP countries and will continue to do so, as religion plays an important role in the Kremlin's new confrontational line with the West. The role of Orthodoxy, as the new cultural–civilisational basis for Russia's drive to restore its dominance over the countries of the EaP, was best revealed in Ukraine. The Russian foreign minister framed the confrontation between Russia and the West over Ukraine as the Russian struggle to defend the traditional, Orthodox society from attempts by the West to impose alien, Western values on them.<sup>34</sup> At least some parts of the Orthodox religious establishments in Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine have also become powerful allies of Moscow in its attempt to turn the confrontation between Russia and the West into a civilisational stand-off, reminiscent of the world according to Samuel Huntington.<sup>35</sup>

In the medium to long term, it would be desirable to reduce the authority of non-transparent and non-inclusive institutions, such as the church, and strengthen the influence of the secular public opinion-makers in these countries. However, in the immediate future, it is important to keep in mind that they will continue to wield power vis-à-vis the voters and that the EU should seek ways to engage with influential religious leaders.

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34 P. Goble, 'Moscow Draws a Religious Line in the Sand in Ukraine', *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 11/104 (10 June 2014).

35 Political scientist Samuel Huntington developed a theory in the 1990s that people's cultural and religious identities would be the primary source of conflict in the post–Cold War world. See S. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and Remaking of the World Order* (Ann Arbor, MI: Simon and Schuster, 1996).



## Weak civil society

As mentioned above, the influence of the religious establishment in the countries of the EaP correlates with the failure of civil society actors to have a significant impact on public opinion. A study, quoted below, on the role of NGOs as the public opinion-making bodies in the countries of the EaP concludes that civil society in Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine remains weak.

The citizens have little capacity to influence political developments owing to a lack of engagement, clientelist networks and corruption. Western-funded NGOs form an ‘NGO-crazy’, where professional leaders use access to domestic policymakers and Western donors to influence public policies, yet are disconnected from the public at large. New civil voices use mass mobilisation strategies and social media more and are visible in public spaces. They are more effective at influencing the state and political society than Western-funded NGOs. Many large Western donors, who invest substantial resources in strengthening civil society, often support NGOs’ patronage networks and sustain the gap between a few well-established groups and active citizens. Wider civic engagement would help build the power of the middle class to work together to enable citizens to influence policy and further advance democracy in those countries.<sup>36</sup> It should also be added that, in some EaP countries, the governments are attempting to create ‘governmental NGOs’, or ‘GONGOS’, which further weakens public trust in the NGO community.<sup>37</sup>

The challenges facing the EU in strengthening civil society in the EaP countries differ from one country to another. However, the common challenge, which is relevant as much in Ukraine as in Azerbaijan, is the need to foster the culture of civil society as a whole. In its essence, a civil society is one in which the citizens

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36 O. Lutsevych, *How to Finish a Revolution: Civil Society in Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine*, Chatham House (London, January 2013).

37 A. Jahorau, ‘Who Has Benefited From the Implementation of the Neighbourhood Policy in Belarus?’, *Belorussian Political Science Review* 1 (2011).



start viewing civil society actors—NGOs, associations and so on—as vehicles for expressing their concerns and triggering governmental action. When the EU is identifying civil society partners to support in the EaP countries, it should step away from its traditional approach of working with those NGOs that best know how to communicate with the donors. The most recent experience in Ukraine, where Euromaidan emerged as the true grass-roots ad hoc movement that was decisive in returning Ukraine to the European path, offers an important lesson.

More EU funds need to be redirected to funding true grass-roots movements which use creative methods for public outreach and can generate a true social impact, rather than working with the traditional members of the NGO-cracy. Such civil society actors often lack the institutional history and administrative capacity to qualify for the projects offered by the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights or other EU mechanisms, which require grantees to have sophisticated organisational capabilities and also have a larger potential impact on public opinion. Measuring the connection NGOs have established with a larger group of citizens should be an important factor in evaluating the success of the organisations or groups implementing the EU-funded projects. Increased public trust in an NGO actor, the best indicator of which might be financial or volunteering contributions from ordinary citizens to the cause of the NGO, should be a firm benchmark for evaluation and performance measurement.

Strengthening civil society in the EaP countries does not necessarily mean offering multiannual funding projects for already well-funded organisations. In effect, it means increasing the EU funds available for the kind of assistance which the European Endowment for Democracy (EED) provides to the civil sector in the countries of the EaP. In some EaP countries, such as Azerbaijan and Belarus, where the governments do not shy away from using financial and political leverage to pressure NGOs, the EU can assist democratic movements only through the



support of unregistered civil society actors, made possible by the kind of framework provided by the EED. The EED provides flexible and quick financial support to emerging grass-roots and civil society movements which do not have an established organisational structure or a history of implementing projects funded by donors. It also funds civil society actors which are not registered, as in the more authoritarian EaP countries registered NGOs sometimes face harassment and government prosecution. The EU's policy of supporting non-governmental actors should also encourage the strengthening of civil society organisations which have representational functions—such as businesses and trade associations.

The agenda of civil society actors should also be driven by the interests and preferences of the voters, rather than exclusively by the donor's agenda. The voters of the EaP countries have to start believing that the NGOs, associations, political parties and other civil society actors exist to respond to their needs. If NGOs are perceived to spend most of their resources on issues which are too far removed from the priorities of the mainstream public, such as gender discrimination, the problems of ethnic or sexual minorities, and so on, the citizens' trust in them will not increase. Instead, people will continue to perceive that the Western-funded NGOs do not represent their interests and civil society will continue to be a weak actor in the country.

As a transformative policy, the EaP also has the role of triggering changes in public perceptions across a range of issues, such as the treatment of ethnic minorities, non-discrimination and the rights of sexual minorities, where the eastern partners still need to advance to fulfil their obligations as members of the Council of Europe. However, encouraging civil society actors to spend more resources on responding to the needs and interests of the citizens in these countries will strengthen their connection to larger segments of society. If the citizens of the eastern partners start to feel that civil society actors represent their interests, it



will ultimately make it easier for NGOs to become true agents of change, triggering shifts in public attitudes or policy practices in the needed areas.

Increasing support for civil society will inevitably lead to countermeasures being implemented by the authoritarian governments in some EaP countries. However, even in a restrictive political environment there is room for civil action. Such action requires the rallying of citizens around causes such as social issues, education and health, which impact citizens' lives but have no direct political connotations. This might potentially serve as a way to deter a backlash against the civil society organisers by the authoritarian governments.

Other important players in civil society in a larger sense are the political parties, which continue to be chronically weak in the EaP countries. Fostering a framework of cooperation between the European parties and the political parties in the countries of the EaP will be an important building block in strengthening the ties between Europe and the eastern partners. It will foster a democratic culture and create powerful agents for driving forward the European agenda. Many political players from the EaP countries have succeeded in establishing such a framework of cooperation by becoming observer members of the pan-European parties. The EaP needs to factor this important vehicle of cooperation into its policy in the future, supporting such cooperation frameworks.

## Making the EaP work for people

If the opinion polls suggest a high level of support for European integration amongst the voters, why should the EU spend its resources on fostering support for the EU amongst the publics of the EaP countries? Public opinion is elusive and influenced by a complex web of political and economic factors. The EaP's



transformative power will achieve results in the partner countries only when democracy and the voters' choice in favour of Europe become irreversible in these countries. While the overwhelming majority of the citizens in the EaP countries support closer cooperation with the EU, it is important that they feel the positive impact of European integration without long delays in order to continue supporting it. The economy, mobility and security are all important areas which have a direct impact on the lives of the people of the EaP countries and influence their perceptions of the benefits of European integration.

## The economy

Quickly unleashing the potential of closer economic integration with Europe is an important objective in Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. The DCFTA is only one step removed from the higher degree of integration envisaged by the Common Economic Area, requiring full compliance with the EU *acquis*. When compared to the Stabilisation and Association Agreements between the EU and Balkan candidate countries, for example, DCFTAs have an even stricter timetable for adopting the EU *acquis* in the internal markets of the eastern partners, without the incentive of membership offered by the Stabilisation and Association Agreements.<sup>38</sup> Absorbing the costs of such a high degree of harmonisation will be a substantial burden on the eastern partners. Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine need a very clear action plan, backed up with substantial assistance, for absorbing these costs. They will need the EU's help in carrying out a sectoral impact assessment of the DCFTAs for their economies and defining the best response to the challenges they face.

The positive impact of the DCFTAs on the socio-economic circumstances of the voters in these countries will not be delivered immediately. With unemployment, access to affordable healthcare

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38 European Parliament, 'Countdown to the Vilnius Summit, the EU's Trade Relations with Moldova and the South Caucasus', Policy Paper PE 433.755 (January 2014), 22.



and education dominating the priorities of the voters, both the pro-European governments of these countries and the EU need to sustain the belief of the voters that integration with the EU is helping them to address these pressing problems. But as long as Russia continues to put economic pressure on the eastern partners, the delayed delivery of the economic benefits of the DCFTA in terms of its impact on investments and job creation will strengthen the Russian hand. The high-level investment conferences which accompanied the visit of President Barroso to Moldova and Georgia in June 2014 are a good example of how the EU can continue to leverage its political support for the EaP countries to their economic benefit. Bringing the EaP countries within the framework of any further integration of the EU's energy policy would also be an important aspect in strengthening their economic independence from Russia. For example, if the proposal of the Prime Minister of Poland, Donald Tusk, to create an Energy Union ever materialises, Ukraine and the other EaP countries should be invited to join, if interested.<sup>39</sup>

## Visas

It will be difficult to convince the voters in the EaP countries that the EU is willing to advance the relationship with them if obtaining a visa to visit EU countries remains a difficult and cumbersome procedure. Moldova was the first EaP country to be granted visa-free movement to the EU. This has had an extremely positive impact, not only on the Moldovan people's perceptions of the EU's commitment to their country, but also by creating incentives for the citizens in the breakaway region of Transnistria to apply for Moldovan passports.<sup>40</sup> The Georgian authorities have long been trying to convince the EU that easier access to EU countries would have a similarly positive effect in the breakaway regions of

39 P. Donahue, 'Poland's Tusk Proposes Energy Union to Break Russian Hold on Gas', *Bloomberg*, 22 April 2014.

40 K. Maksimova, 'Moldova Woos Transdniester with Visa-Free Travel to Europe', *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 5 June 2014.





Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Georgia. It would also serve as an important disincentive for the phenomenon of ‘passportisation’—which in effect is the distribution of Russian passports to Georgian citizens living in these regions. Agreements on visa facilitation, the first step towards the liberalisation of the visa regime, which all EaP countries have already made, have reduced the price of EU visas. However, obtaining a visa to visit EU countries continues to be a significant obstacle for many citizens. Opening the visa-free movement prospect up to all EaP countries would change this and send a strong signal of support. Mobility Partnerships, facilitating movement across the EU’s borders, have been another important vehicle from which the EaP countries have benefited. The EU needs to continue enhancing this framework of cooperation with the EaP countries and help them identify ways to benefit from it.

## Security

Without addressing the security concerns of the EaP countries, however, little progress can be expected, either in terms of improvement of the socio-economic situation in these countries or enhancing mobility between the EaP and the EU. Economic development requires foreign investment, which the DCFTAs hope to attract. However, predictability, an important precondition for the attractiveness of any country for foreign investment, cannot be sustained while the EaP countries remain as exposed as they are to a deterioration of the security environment. With the illegal armed presence of the Russian military in the occupied regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Georgia, the ongoing proxy war between Russia and Ukraine in Ukraine’s south-east, the arms race accompanying the unresolved dispute over Nagorno-Karabakh between Armenia and Azerbaijan, and the ‘frozen’ conflict in Moldova’s breakaway region of Transnistria, the region resembles a large gunpowder keg, ready to explode. While the DCFTAs will cover the full territories of Georgia and Moldova, it is still unclear how they will be implemented in the breakaway regions, where the central government cannot exercise power.



As the prospect of NATO membership looks less and less likely for any of the EaP countries, working out arrangements for the framework of their cooperation with the EU that will strengthen their security will be one of the most challenging tasks for EaP 2.0. The EU is already playing an important role in stabilising the region through its deployment of the EU Monitoring Mission in Georgia and the Border Assistance Mission in Moldova. In the aftermath of the Ukraine crisis the EU has started to establish a Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) mission in Ukraine as well. In the medium and long term one might hope that extending the benefits of the EaP to the citizens in the occupied or conflict regions of the eastern partners will, by default, bring positive results in terms of conflict resolution. However, in the short term, with Russia still holding a lot of the chips for destabilising the situation on the ground, the EU needs to deploy its CSDP tools with more efficiency to address the security challenges in its eastern neighbourhood. This means that the EaP countries need to be given top priority status when the EU is assessing how to best use its limited resources in the area. The existing mechanisms for cooperation in this area must continue—the EU missions in the region need to be reinforced, both financially and functionally.

## Deliverables for the Riga Summit in 2015

While sharing a common history and some of the challenges associated with the post-Soviet transition, the six eastern partners are also fundamentally different from one another in terms of the political and socio-economic challenges facing them. Russia also has different points of leverage against each partner. Therefore, the EaP Initiative can only continue to function as a loose umbrella policy of the EU, with a very high degree of differentiation between the bilateral tracks of cooperation with each of the EaP partners. The EU's relations with different eastern partners should range



from promise of admission to the Common Economic Area without closing the door to eventual membership for the most advanced EaP countries, to a nominal framework of cooperation with the governments of countries such as Belarus, with a strong emphasis on democracy support. The EU should not shy away from a radical approach to differentiation for fear of undermining EaP policy, as the key to the EaP's success is in less, not more, synchronisation.

### Azerbaijan: key to the South Caucasus

The least exposed of the eastern partners to Russian pressure and most independent of Moscow, both economically and politically, is Azerbaijan—an energy-rich economy with direct access to the EU markets. Azerbaijan often mentions the Norwegian model as an example for its future relations with Europe. However, it seems to aspire to emulate only the economic dimensions of Norwegian–EU relations, rather than using the Norwegian example as the model for its political institutions. Azerbaijan presents a very difficult case, where the EU's approach to conditionality and its strategic interest in strengthening relations with Azerbaijan are not easy to reconcile. The will for reforms among the political elites is absent, while the voters, as the polling data suggest, do not particularly demand closer ties with Europe. Therefore, the policy choices for Europe are limited. The EU needs to continue fostering a close framework of cooperation with this country, despite the democratic shortcomings of its government, while continuing to support the democratic actors in the country. The finalisation of the Strategic Modernisation Partnership and AA should not become hostages of 'conditionality', as this risks bringing the relationship between the EU and Azerbaijan to a dead end. After all, the EU was ready to finalise such an agreement with Russia, whose record on democracy and human rights is even worse than that of Azerbaijan. Unlike Russia, Azerbaijan is a responsible member of the international community and has not violated the territorial integrity of its neighbours or occupied parts of a sovereign state.



At the same time, the EU needs to be aware that the relationship between Azerbaijan and the EU is one of mutual dependency. Baku needs access to the EU markets, but even more so to the European know-how and investments needed to sustain its economic development and independence from Moscow. In the face of the growing diversification of energy resources, in a medium-term perspective Azerbaijan's needs vis-à-vis Europe are likely to be even greater than Europe's thirst for Caspian energy resources. The EU should use this leverage to better position itself to support democracy in Azerbaijan and strengthen its public outreach capacity in the country. Public education and active information campaigns regarding the EU, given the low level of public interest in it, might have the largest marginal impact in this country. The signing of the agreements with Azerbaijan at the Riga EaP Summit in 2015, as planned by the Latvian EU presidency, will strengthen EU–Azerbaijani cooperation and lay down a clear framework for the relationship for the future.

### **Belarus: civil society and mobility**

The political reality in Belarus does not offer the EU any other option between now and the Riga Summit but to limit the EU's assistance to support for the civil sector and to foster people-to-people contacts between Belarus and Europe. Other than more progress in the field of mobility, there are no high expectations set for the Riga Summit as far as EU–Belarus cooperation is concerned.<sup>41</sup>

### **Armenia: AA without a DCFTA**

Following the change of course in Armenia and subsequent cooling of relations with the EU, it has taken a while for the Armenian leadership to define its expectations vis-à-vis the EU. Various ideas, such as an 'Association Agreement without a DCFTA' (AA Light) or an upgraded Partnership and Cooperation

41 Author's discussions with officials at the Latvian Ministry of Foreign Affairs preparing for the Riga Summit.



Agreement (PCA Plus) have been discussed.<sup>42</sup> The Armenian leadership is eager to sign the political provisions of the AA with the EU, though its willingness to commit to the reforms envisaged by the AA, even in the absence of a DCFTA, is less clear. The EU should not punish Armenia for its decision to join the ECU. The EU needs to continue its strategic partnership with Armenia in the framework of a new political document, focusing on the improvement of democratic institutions and the judiciary, the promotion of human rights and the rule of law, good governance, the fight against corruption, and the strengthening of civil society.<sup>43</sup> The framework for such cooperation should be clearly endorsed at the Riga Summit.

The reform agenda supported by the EU enjoys a strong lobby in Armenia in the form of a very active civil society as well as serious political players. A group of pro-European NGOs and political parties have recently initiated the Platform for European Choice Coalition, (Եվրոպական ընտրություն) which could be an important counterpart for the EU in pushing forward the reform agenda in Armenia.

The new framework for cooperation does not necessarily have to exclude cooperation on trade. The EU and Armenia could consider the possibility of sectoral agreements in trade. They could also explore other options, similar to the ones which the EU has with members of regional customs unions in other parts of the world—for example, cooperation between the EU and the Southern Common Market member states.<sup>44</sup>

Armenia presents a very interesting case for exploring the potential for a member of the ECU to develop politically and economically significant ties with the EU. As the country with

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42 This agreement defined the cooperation framework between the EU and the EaP countries before the EaP came into existence.

43 European Friends of Armenia, 'EU-Armenia Relations: Future Development and Prospects', Policy Paper, March 2014.

44 Ibid.



the most developed democratic infrastructure and experience of political and economic relations with the EU compared with other ECU members, the opportunities for the EU to remain 'present' in Armenia in a meaningful way are significant and should be duly utilised.

### **Advanced partners: Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine—A Common Economic Area, without closing the door to eventual membership**

The EaP has been extensively criticised for failing to give the eastern partners 'the light at the end of the tunnel' in the form of the prospect of EU membership. However, the political will for changing this seems to be absent in the EU's important capitals. Even in the midst of the crisis in Ukraine, with the outcome of its struggle for a democratic future hanging in the balance, the Council of the EU could only agree that the AA did not constitute the final goal in EU–Ukraine cooperation.<sup>45</sup> With the results of the latest European elections, the mood for further enlargement of the EU is unlikely to improve. On 25 May 2014, as Ukraine cast a clear and definitive vote for a future with Europe, many European citizens decided to vote against Europe in the European elections held on the same day.

While the prospect of EU membership for the EaP countries would give them a well-lit road towards an irreversible democratic and sovereign future, it is unlikely to happen in the near future. If the success of the EaP is made dependent on the prospect of membership, both the policy and the eastern partners will lose out. Without excluding the possibility of eventual membership, the EaP needs to inject new momentum into the policy by giving the most advanced EaP partners—Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine—the prospect of further political and economic integration with the EU, going beyond the AA and DCFTA. In the medium term, such a framework might be the Common Economic Area. It seems that

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45 European Council, 'Council Conclusions on Ukraine', 6264/14, 10 February 2014.



this idea has been gaining some traction in important EU capitals and could potentially be a politically more viable option than securing the EU's commitment to the membership prospect. The EU will have the opportunity at the next EaP summit in Riga to expand the horizon of EU integration for these countries by delivering a clear promise for a Common Economic Area in the short term and finding the language to incorporate a reference to Article 49 of the European Treaties into the final declaration of the summit, signalling that the door to eventual EU membership is not closed.

## **Regional cooperation**

While the geopolitical context, as well as the unresolved conflicts in the regions, will continue to place considerable constraints on the multilateral dimension of the EaP, regional cooperation within the framework of the EaP needs to be fostered. The meetings within the framework of the EaP might be the only occasion at which representatives of the six EaP countries come together. The added value of such contacts and the potential for sharing experience and building connections between the countries will play an important role in the transformation sought by the EU.

## **Building political support for the EaP in Europe and countering Russian propaganda**

### **All roads lead to Berlin**

The success of EaP 2.0 will require a clear political commitment and the building of solid support for this policy in Brussels and the other important EU capitals. The German position will be key to this success. France will continue to concentrate its attention on the regions where it has traditionally enjoyed stronger political



influence—the southern group of European Neighbourhood Policy countries. The results of the latest European elections also clearly suggest that any political party advocating anything which might hint at further enlargement of the EU in France would be committing political suicide. The French will continue to insist that implementation of the DCFTA will be a considerable burden in itself and that the EaP countries should focus on putting the existing framework of cooperation to best use. However, if Germany becomes more supportive of the EaP and suggests an enhanced framework of cooperation with them, it is likely that Paris will assume the German position.<sup>46</sup>

The position of Berlin, as far as the EaP countries and Russia are concerned, is currently evolving. Comparing Germany's positions on the accession of the EaP countries to both NATO and the EU presents an interesting pattern and gives an insight into German policy thinking. At the NATO Bucharest Summit in 2008, Germany blocked the granting of a Membership Action Plan to NATO for Georgia and Ukraine, though signing the declaration that each would 'one day become a member of NATO'.<sup>47</sup> Six years later, during the visit of the Georgian prime minister to Berlin in June 2014, it became clear that the German position remains the same—the German chancellor informed her Georgian counterpart that granting a Membership Action Plan to Georgia would not be a subject for discussion at the NATO summit in Wales. At the same time, the German policymakers in Berlin are very busy working out a formulation which would allow them to grant EaP countries the prospect of closer cooperation with the EU without promising eventual EU membership. Germany is ready to give more political and economic support to the EaP, creating a framework of further rapprochement, as long as the membership option is not on the table.<sup>48</sup> In effect, while Germany has promised NATO membership

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46 Author's interview with French officials in charge of the EaP policy in Paris, April 2014.

47 NATO Summit Declaration, Bucharest, 3 April 2008.

48 Author's interviews at the German Foreign Office and Chancellery, April 2014.





to Georgia, it blocks the road leading to it; in the case of the EU, it is committed to supporting further economic and political integration without framing it as the path towards eventual membership.

The logic of the German approach is clear, since Germany views the relationship with countries such as Ukraine or Georgia from a 'Russia-first' perspective—analysing what impact these decisions would have on Russia and Russo-German relations. As long as Russia continues to draw a line through the idea of NATO expansion, the German position on Georgia's or the other EaP countries' advancement towards NATO membership is not likely to change. NATO creates inconvenience in terms of being a positive obligation to provide security to other countries—which could create a situation in which it would end up in a direct military confrontation with Russia. NATO membership could also happen more quickly if the political will of the member states could be secured. This would force Germany to take the unpleasant decision sooner, rather than later. Deepening the EU framework of cooperation with the EaP countries, on the other hand, does not create any potentially cumbersome obligations similar to those of NATO. Such progress will also proceed at a much slower speed. Considerable efforts will go into the implementation of the AAs and DCFTAs, followed by the creation of the Common Economic Area between the EaP countries and the EU. It could take another decade or more until the question of granting membership becomes relevant. Thus, by not giving the prospect of membership to these countries today, German politicians aim to avoid alienating both Russia and the Russian lobby in Germany.

However, Russia's annexation of Crimea has forced Germany to the very confrontation line it had attempted to avoid. German policymakers have learned in the wake of the crisis in Ukraine that the room for manoeuvre they have, as far as policy towards Russia is concerned, is very limited. Those who expect bolder and more outspoken German support for the EaP countries should keep this



lesson in mind. The polls show that the German voters (together with the French) were the least supportive of the sanctions against Russia, as well as reluctant to support Ukraine.<sup>49</sup> According to some experts, this is explained by the fact that the German public place a much higher value on peace and stability, including the normalisation of relations with Russia, than on the strengthening of democracy in the countries of the EaP Initiative, their sovereignty, or supporting political and economic reforms in the countries in Russia's back-yard.<sup>50</sup> Germany's Russia lobby is quite powerful and includes the business establishment, as well as a faction of the Social Democratic Party and many Eurosceptics, on both the far left and far right. Their position is clear, confronting Russia on any issue risks catastrophe.<sup>51</sup> Until the tragedy of Malaysian Airlines flight MH7 imposed a human cost of the ongoing conflict in Ukraine on several European countries, the message of the German business sector could not have been more lucid: 'Sit down at the negotiating table and resolve this matter peacefully.'<sup>52</sup> This position has, however, changed following the incident, which cost 298 human lives, towards support of tougher sanctions against Russia.<sup>53</sup>

While Chancellor Merkel and her Christian Democratic Union (CDU-Christlich-Demokratische Union,) party often take a more values-based approach to relations with Russia, they also have to operate within the constraints which any politician faces in the form of the voters and the business constituencies. In a telling sign of this, Germany gave its unequivocal support to tougher sanctions

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49 W. Jordan, 'Russia Sanctions: Public Support Weaker in France and Germany', *YouGov*, 1 April 2014.

50 According to the experts at the Korber Foundation, the public opinion research they sponsor consistently shows that Germans place a greater value on stability and good relations with Russia than on the democratisation of Ukraine, Georgia and the other EaP countries.

51 J. Vinocur, 'The Russia Lobby in Germany', *Wall Street Journal*, 31 March 2014.

52 E. Cotes, former Daimler executive, head of the Ost Ausschuss, the German industry's lobby for Eastern Europe, in the *Wall Street Journal*, 'German Businesses Urge Halt on Sanctions Against Russia', 1 May 2014.

53 *DW.de*, 'German Business Hardens Stance on Russia Sanctions', 25 July 2014.



against Russia once the downing of the civilian airliner increased negative opinion towards Russia amongst both the business community and voters. The possible dimensions of Germany's redefined 'Ostpolitik' are a cause of friction in the current governing coalition. Powerful CDU voices, for example, have attacked the German foreign minister for claiming that it was the EU, rather than Russia, who forced Ukraine to choose between the EU and the Eurasian Union.<sup>54</sup> Some CDU members have also called for revision of the Russian policy, the strengthening of NATO's presence in Eastern Europe and enhanced cooperation with the eastern partners.<sup>55</sup> At this point it is still unclear if a toughened German position on Russia will translate into increased support for the eastern partners. If, however, Germany's approach to its relationship with Russia and the EaP countries continues to be focused on conflict avoidance, the interests of the eastern partners must under no condition be sacrificed. If recent history has taught us anything, it is that a Russia-first approach does not work. In the immediate future more resources and a more concentrated effort to build support for the EaP countries in the influential EU countries, especially Germany, should be another priority.

## Reaching out to the hearts and minds of Europeans

With its influential media and public relations machinery set in motion over the course of the last decade, Russia has infiltrated Western public opinion to a significant degree. Russian soft power has been quite efficient at delivering results in Western Europe. Sympathy towards countries such as Georgia and Ukraine is difficult to build in the shadow of the omnipotent public relations machinery operated by the Kremlin. While fostering anti-Western hysteria in his own country, where freedom of speech

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54 J. Mischke and A. Umland, 'Germany's New Ostpolitik', *Foreign Affairs* (9 April 2014).

55 A. Schockenhoff and K.-G. Wellmann, *Für eine Neubestimmung der Beziehungen zu Russland*, Position Paper (Berlin, 1 July 2014).



is still scarce, Putin has taken advantage of the open political and economic system of the West to infiltrate it to advance his own interests. While propaganda has always been an important weapon in this post–Cold War, postmodern world, Russia has managed to advance its own warfare capabilities in preparation for yet another stand-off with the West. This is a stand-off which Europe has not prepared for, as it assumed that its future relations with Russia would be based on a mutually beneficial strategic partnership.

While it cannot be ruled out that eventually the changes in Russia will make such a mutually beneficial partnership a reality, in the short term, as long as the *modus operandi* of Putin's regime remains unchanged, the West needs a new strategy for dealing with Russia's soft-power strategies, similar to the Truman Doctrine, Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points or Churchill's Iron Curtain speech.<sup>56</sup> Assuming that the EU's commitment to the EaP countries is firm, substantial assistance to help the Georgians, Ukrainians and others reach out to the citizens of Europe and generate more public support for their struggle to build modern, democratic countries should be an integral part of this strategy. The West should deploy its own soft-power tools—the media, think tanks and foundations—to counter the Russian monopoly on creating a narrative on developments in the former Soviet space. Following the end of the Cold War, the research interests of Western scholars, public policy pundits and others switched to other geographic areas that were considered more important. For example, funding for non-governmental actors working on Russian and former USSR projects has substantially decreased. This needs to change and the resources need to be redeployed to strengthen the think tank capacity of the West. It is also important that expertise on developments in the former Soviet countries, some of which are covered by the EaP, is distinguished from expertise on Russia. Russian experts are often not the best placed to understand what is happening in Georgia or Ukraine. They do

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56 A. Ilarionov, 'The Fourth World War', *Novosti Rossi*, 12 June 2014.



not know the local language and their viewpoints are influenced by what they read in the Russian media. In general, they lack the kind of in-depth understanding of these countries that is needed for producing high-level analysis or advocacy material. The Western media remains deeply uninterested in the EaP countries—unless yet another crisis brings their stories to the headlines. Support of media programmes which try to better explain both the challenges facing the countries of the EaP and what they are trying to accomplish will be important for fostering understanding of these countries in the rest of Europe.

## Conclusion

The EaP Initiative is the bridge which connects Europe to those countries that for historical reasons were left out of the cycle of peaceful development in a secure environment that was brought to post-Second World War Europe by the European project. The enlargement of the EU a decade ago was a powerful signal to the world of the strengths of Europe's transformative power. The failure of the EaP Initiative to transform Europe's eastern neighbours could equally signal that the foundations of the European project have become shaky. This would expose the EU as a weakening global actor, unable to project its soft power beyond its current borders.

For the past 20 years, the countries of the former USSR have been referred to as 'countries in transition'—meaning transition from authoritarian governments into liberal democracies integrated into the modern global economy. As the new integrationist project led by Russia is forcing them to transition back towards a more authoritarian political system and closed economic space, the importance of the EaP's success has become even greater. Failure to transform the EaP countries will, first of all, be tragic for their citizens, depriving generations of an opportunity for a better life. As the faith of many Europeans in Europe is declining, people in



the majority of the EaP countries remain the most enthusiastic Europeans. Today 'More Europe' might mean going east, giving a hand of support to the eastern partners that desire freedom, security and economic prosperity, which they believe lies in a closer alliance with Europe.

The first layer of the foundation for this close alliance, which has come at the cost of great effort, pain, suffering and even human life, has been built over the past five years. Injecting new momentum into the EaP and accepting it for what it is—not just a bureaucratic exercise generating a list of implemented projects and activities, but a powerful transformative policy which millions of people have faith in—will be an important step forward in completing the dream of Europe, 'whole and free'.

## Recommendations

- The EU should continue its attempts to engage Russia in a dialogue regarding the future of the countries in their 'shared neighbourhood', playing the role of a catalyst for improving relations between the EaP countries and Russia where possible. However, given that Russia might not be a willing partner in finding 'win-win' solutions, the EU's policy towards the EaP countries should not become a factor in its Russia policy.
- Germany holds the key to pushing the Russian position towards solutions that accommodate the interests of all parties involved. Berlin needs to put aside its Russia-first approach to the EaP and throw its full political and economic weight behind the EaP countries. If Germany frames the choice facing Russia between incentives for cooperation and significant costs for confrontation in unequivocal terms, EaP 2.0 could be much more successful than EaP 1.0.
- The EU should refocus its attention on broad engagement with the citizens of the EaP countries, supporting democracy



and civil society in a broader sense, and thus building solid constituencies for Europe.

- More EU funds need to be channelled into creating true civil society in the EaP countries, funding grass-roots movements rather than working with the traditional members of the ‘NGO-cracy’.
- The funding mechanisms for civil society need to be flexible in order to respond quickly and efficiently to civil society’s initiatives, similar to the framework used by the EED.
- Establishing two-way communication and mutual trust between civil society actors and citizens should be an integral part of the performance measurement for EU-funded initiatives.
- The EU needs to strengthen its public outreach in the EaP countries, involving the most influential opinion-makers. In some cases, the potential opinion-makers might be outside of the regular realm of civil society and include influential religious organisations or figures.
- The agenda of civil society should be less driven by the donor’s agenda and more responsive to the needs and interests of the citizens in these countries.
- The EU should support more grass-roots initiatives built around concrete economic, social or environmental issues, as well as membership-based organisations, trade associations and other groups with representational functions.
- The relationship between pro-European political actors in the EaP countries and the pan-European parties should be strengthened.
- The EU should help the governments of the advanced EaP countries to bring the benefits of EU integration to their people with as little delay as possible. The countries which signed the DCFTAs in 2014 will need substantial EU assistance to unleash



their potential and demonstrate the economic benefits of integration with Europe to the voters.

- Facilitating access to the EU for the citizens of these countries, creating the possibility for them to advance more quickly on visa liberalisation, is vitally important.
- High-level visits from European leaders and officials to the EaP countries, delivering a strong message of commitment to their irreversible European future, should be both frequent and systematic.
- The EU will need to strengthen its presence in the region through more and reinforced CSDP missions.
- The 2015 Riga Summit should have concrete deliverables for each eastern partner, with the aim of enhancing contractual relations with the EU. It should offer the advanced partners—Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine—a proposal for a Common Economic Area with Europe, extend visa liberalisation to Belarus, and finalise the strategic agreement with Azerbaijan. The EU needs to enhance contractual relations with Armenia.
- Most importantly, the Riga Summit should deliver the promise of an expanding horizon for EU integration—a reference to the open-door policy on future membership as a long-term prospect.
- While retaining the regional framework of cooperation, which is helpful for maintaining contacts between the EaP countries, the EaP must be a very loose umbrella policy, with a very low degree of synchronisation of the bilateral tracks of cooperation between the EU and individual EaP partners.
- The building of constituencies for the eastern partners in the countries of Europe, as part of the general European strategy to more efficiently counter Russia's information warfare, should be an important integral part of EaP policy.





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