*Article*

# Boosting the EU's soft power in Eastern Partnership countries

## Michael Gahler

## Abstract

In 2009 the Eastern Partnership (EaP) was established, through which the EU formalised its relationships with Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova. The EU's objective was to deepen cooperation; contribute to these countries' economic, political and social development; and improve stability in the region. In the past decade the EU has achieved varying degrees of closer cooperation as well as seeing considerable progress in terms of development in the EaP countries. At the same time, Russia, considering the EaP countries to be within its sphere of influence, has tried to undermine the partnership through means of disinformation and hybrid warfare. This requires the EU to further boost its soft power to counter Russia's destabilising policy in the region. This article outlines the development of the EaP and its achievements, examines Russian influence and disinformation in the region, and finally, points out possible measures to boost EU soft power to address the Russian challenge.

## Keywords

Eastern Partnership, EU, Soft power, Russia, Disinformation, Resilience

## Introduction

European integration, culminating in the establishment of the EU, is a direct result of a very costly historical lesson learnt by the European nations: after centuries of focusing on national interests at all costs, even war, in the competition for power, the European states and their people finally understood that in the long run only cooperation can create a lasting win–win situation for all. Not only has this conviction made the EU the most successful peace project in history but it also laid the foundation for the EU's economic success, through which it has generated prosperity for its 450 million citizens.

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However, the lasting success of the European project not only depends on internal cooperation and conditions but also on the international environment, especially the near neighbourhood of the EU. Accordingly, close cooperation with neighbouring countries in the east and south is essential to maintaining stability and security, as well as supporting economic, political and social development on the European periphery. At the same time, the EU's neighbours are equally drawn towards cooperation due to the EU's success, and it is from this that the EU's soft power is derived, notably in the economic field. This is especially the case with regard to the Eastern neighbourhood and the former Soviet republics. This interest in closer cooperation from both sides meets within the Eastern Partnership (EaP), which was initiated in 2009 to strengthen relations with Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova.

While the EaP can partially be described as a success story, as will be illustrated in the next section, cooperation between the EU and the EaP countries is challenged and even undermined by Russia, which considers the EaP a threat to its (former Soviet) sphere of influence. Therefore, it is indispensable to take Russian politics in the EaP countries into account (section two) in order to define further steps to boost the EU's soft power in the East. Such a boost would counterbalance Russia's anti-EU and anti-Western campaigning (section three). It is also necessary to assess the future prospects for EU–Russia relations with regard to EaP countries (conclusion). The article points out that the EU needs to complement its efforts to develop EaP countries with measures to support the resilience of these countries in order to counter Russia's disinformation campaigns and destabilising influence in the region.

## Elements and achievements of EU soft power in EaP countries

EU collaboration with EaP countries aims to facilitate cooperation in the areas of economic development, governance, environmental protection, improved relations with the EU and the strengthening of civil society. Therefore, the EaP is designed as a flexible partnership, offering the respective countries the chance to decide for themselves on the desired level of cooperation. The gradual and differentiated evolution of the EaP through various agreements with its eastern neighbours (for an overview see EPRS 2020, 9) reflects this approach. The initial step was marked by agreements on visa facilitation and liberalisation that entered into force between 2011 and 2017 for five of the EaP countries, including visa-free travel for citizens of Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova. In the case of Belarus, a visa facilitation and readmission agreement came into force in July 2020. These agreements provide an important basis for cooperation on the economic level and contribute to a stronger connection between the civil societies of the EU and the EaP countries. These ties are further reinforced through the Erasmus+ exchange programme for students and academic staff, which resulted in 6,200 exchanges in 2019, of which 4,547 people came from EaP countries to the EU (European Commission 2020e, 33). The visa agreements and the Erasmus+ programme, as well as other short-term exchange initiatives for young people, constitute the primary elements of EU soft power as they

strengthen ties, especially on the social level, improve mutual understanding, and offer a direct personal experience of the EU's economic and social success for EaP citizens.

A further step in the evolution of EU–EaP relations was the development of Association Agreements and Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) agreements with Georgia (2016), Moldova (2016) and Ukraine (2017). With Armenia, an Association Agreement and a DCFTA have been negotiated but have not been signed due to Armenia's membership of the Eurasian Economic Union (EPRS 2020, 10). However, in 2018 a Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement provisionally came into force. Negotiations with Azerbaijan on a Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement began in 2017.

These agreements, especially the DCFTAs, reflect the strong economic ties between the EU and the EaP countries. The EU is not only the primary or secondary trading partner of the EaP countries, with a share of between 18.1% (Belarus) and 53.6% (Moldova) of the trade volume of these countries (see EPRS 2020, 10–20), but also provides substantial financial support to its eastern neighbours. In terms of financial assistance, Ukraine is at the centre of the EU's support, having received over €15 billion since 2014, of which €4.4 billion was awarded as macro-financial assistance, loans and grants bound by certain conditions and €8.6 billion was in the form of additional loans from the EU's financial institutions. EU member states complemented Union assistance to Ukraine by providing an additional €1.3 billion though bilateral cooperation (European Commission 2021). In December 2020, Ukraine received €600 million in additional macro-financial assistance within the COVID-19 emergency programme for neighbourhood countries and enlargement candidates (European Commission 2020b). Georgia and Moldova also benefit substantially from macro-financial assistance: since 2009 Georgia has received €137 million through three programmes (European Commission 2020c) and Moldova has received €190 million through two programmes since 2010 (European Commission 2020d). Additionally, these countries were awarded €100 million and €50 million respectively in macro-financial assistance in November 2020 under the COVID-19 emergency programme (European Commission 2020a).

Besides financial support, the EU also provides economic support to the EaP countries through the EU4Business programme that supports the projects of small and medium-sized enterprises. With a budget of €787.33 million in 2019, funding for 116 projects in EaP countries, ranging from 19 in Belarus to 47 in Georgia, supporting a total of 78,995 small and medium-sized enterprises, resulted in the creation of more than 117,000 jobs and the generation of €1.3 billion in extra income in the partner countries. The main beneficiaries of this programme were the partners with DCFTA agreements, with more than 50,000 jobs created in Ukraine, 31,000 in Georgia and almost 22,000 in Moldova. Around 4,000 jobs were created in each of the other three EaP countries (EU4Business 2021). Furthermore, the EU supported the employment of young people in the EaP countries between 2017 and 2020 through its EU4Youth project to the amount of €20 million (EU Neighbours 2021).

The financial support and economic cooperation described above are essential elements of the EU's soft power within the EaP countries. However, Europe's economic success is founded on its values and political culture of upholding democracy, the rule of law and human rights. To promote and foster these values in EaP countries is accordingly a crucial element in further strengthening ties and cooperation with the EU. In addition to the aforementioned conditionality of the macro-financial assistance programmes, direct cooperation to improve governance is another indispensable element of EU soft power in EaP countries. Cooperation on governance covers initiatives such as the €2.4 million of election support for Armenia in 2018, 50 projects twinning the ministries and public institutions of EU member states with those of Azerbaijan, and the training of 5,000 people working within the judicial sector in Georgia. In addition, €300 million of support has been provided to assist with Ukrainian reforms in the areas of decentralisation, anti-corruption, upholding the rule of law, public administration reform and public finance management. A further €8m was provided to a programme to prevent and fight corruption in Moldova in 2019. Furthermore, ongoing dialogues such as the justice policy dialogue in Armenia, the biannual dialogue of senior officials within the EU–Belarus Coordination and the EU–Belarus Human Rights Dialogue constitute additional instruments to foster governance development in the EaP countries and bring the EU's soft power to bear (European Commission 2021).

In the context of political dialogue, the European Parliament also plays an important role with regard to EaP countries. Within the Euronest Parliamentary Assembly, established in 2011, Members of the European Parliament engage directly with their counterparts in EaP countries, thereby fostering cooperation. Furthermore, the European Parliament also exerts its soft power through various tools that are especially visible in Ukraine: it conducted election observation missions in 2014, 2015 and 2019; has been engaged in an annual consultation with the Ukrainian parliament within the format of the Jean Monnet Dialogue since 2016; awarded the Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought to Oleg Sentsov in 2018; and supports political development through the Young Leadership Programme (EPRS 2020, 7).

Finally, the EU also exerts its soft power in the EaP through the activities of nongovernmental organisations, the foremost being the European Endowment for Democracy (EED) which fosters democratic development by engaging with and supporting civil society organisations, political activists and the media. In 2019, the EED supported 11 projects in 4 of the 6 EaP countries in a range of areas from anti-corruption activities to the strengthening of independent journalism and fostering political dialogue (EED 2020).

EU soft power has a positive influence on the EaP countries: this is illustrated by attitudes towards the EU in the region: 49% of EaP citizens have a positive impression of the EU, with Moldovans being the most positive (61%) and Azerbaijanis being the least (44%). This marks an improvement of 4% since 2016, while negative perceptions have also fallen, from 13% to 11%, ranging from 7% (in Georgia) to 12% (in Belarus and Ukraine). A majority of 66% also describes EU relations with their respective country as good, and 60% of all EaP citizens consider the EU trustworthy, while the Eurasian

Economic Union is only trusted by 29%. Furthermore, 53% of EaP citizens describe EU support as effective, with the highest level of agreement in Armenia (80%) and the lowest in Ukraine (46%) (EU Neighbours 2020, 1–2).

## The Russian challenge in EaP countries

While the EU is making considerable efforts to support the economic and social development of EaP countries, it is confronted by strong Russian attempts to undermine such cooperation. Perceiving the EaP countries to be part of Russia's traditional sphere of influence within its 'near abroad', Russia considers the EaP countries' relations with the EU and the West in general to be a threat to its interests. Accordingly, Russia conducts hybrid warfare activities ranging from disinformation campaigns to direct military aggression, as in Ukraine, thus creating political, economic and social instability.

With disinformation being its main tool with which to fight the West, Russia uses a strategy that combines traditional state-controlled media, such as the television broadcaster Russia Today; Internet news websites, such as Sputnik; and sophisticated social media campaigns that use trolls, bots and automated accounts to further reinforce the media messaging (Helmus et al. 2018, 1–2, 22–5). The importance of disinformation to Russian strategy is reflected in the budget dedicated to it. According to RAND Corporation, in 2014 Russia spent over $1 billion on media activities (Helmus et al. 2018, 8).

In the EaP countries, Russia's ambitions meet several favourable conditions. The first is the prominent role of the Russian language in the region and the existence of strong ties to Russia. For instance, Russian is the primary language in Belarus, and in Moldova 50% of the population has ties to Russia (Boulègue et al. 2018, 21, 29). The second is that Russian media and social media platforms play a significant role in the region. Fifty-three per cent of EaP citizens consume Russian media, with notably high rates in Moldova (66%), Belarus (65%) and Armenia (56%) (EU Neighbours 2020a, 6–7). In Belarus, more than half of the mass media content, including news, is produced in Russia and, in 2015, Russian social media platforms possessed a market share of over 60% while Facebook's market share was less than 15% (Boulègue et al. 2018, 22). In Moldova too, a considerable proportion of media content is of Russian origin (Boulègue et al. 2018, 31). The third favourable condition is that Russia reinforces its disrupting influence in the EaP countries through government-organised non-governmental organisations, such as the Federal Agency for the Commonwealth of Independent States, and through support of the Orthodox Church, which is especially visible in Belarus and Moldova (Boulègue et al. 2018, 24–5, 33). Finally, the shared Soviet past, post-Soviet social experience and shared conservative values provide Russia with the basis to build a strong and attractive narrative (Helmus et al. 2018, 10).

While the communication of pro-Russian statements and anti-Western resentments is central to Russian disinformation, Russia's information warfare in the EaP countries does not primarily aim to achieve a united and closed front against the West, at least not

in the medium term. To maintain its influence in the region and to push the EU back, the Kremlin's foremost aim is to create political instability by reinforcing social and political division and polarisation in order to undermine cooperation between the EaP countries and the West. In addition to disinformation, the direct and indirect support of separatism in Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine, as well as the annexation of Crimea, illustrates how far the Kremlin is willing to go to achieve that end.

## Addressing the Russian challenge

Boosting the EU's soft power in the EaP countries is not primarily a question of further strengthening the instruments illustrated above. While economic cooperation, as well as the incentive- and conditionality-based approach of EU support, has already proved beneficial for the economic, political and social development of the EaP countries, the lasting success of EU–EaP cooperation largely depends on countering Russian disinformation and its disruptive influence.

The May 2020 European Council Conclusions on the EaP reflect this, stating: 'Strategic communication should remain a key task, in order to promote the visibility and benefits of the cooperation between the EU and the Eastern Partnership countries, not least in the wake of growing disinformation' (Council of the European Union 2020, 6). In that context, the Council has also called for the development of a common narrative, as well as the improvement of the EaP countries' capacity for resilience to disinformation. The latter is an especially crucial aspect for countering Russia's disruptive efforts.

With the project 'EUvsDisinfo', established in 2015, the EU provides a valuable tool to support the resilience of EU member states and neighbouring countries vis-à-vis Russian disinformation campaigns by identifying, collecting and communicating about them. Therefore, further strengthening and promoting awareness of this project in the EaP countries would increase their resilience, and especially that of their societies, to Russian disinformation.

However, this tool alone is not sufficient to strengthen EaP countries' capacity for resilience to Russian influence. Given the importance of the Russian language and high share of Russian-produced content in the media, as well as the presence of Russian websites disseminating disinformation, it is indispensable to support more independent and professional media sectors in the EaP countries. To that end, EED projects such as that supporting the Russian-language online news platform Newsmaker in Moldova and the funding of the online news portal Sova News in Georgia (EED 2020 27, 29) are of the utmost importance in order to counter Russian disinformation through professional journalism that produces content locally. Accordingly, we need greater efforts to boost local content production, especially in Russian, to increase outreach and further improve journalistic professionalism in the EaP countries. Progress in this regard could be achieved through the training of journalists and cooperation between local and EU media companies to set up specialist exchange programmes and share high-quality content produced in the EU. These efforts would need to be accompanied by measures to raise awareness

of Russian disinformation and to increase the EU's visibility at the citizen level through public information campaigns and training to improve media literacy, ideally as part of school curricula.

In the long run, however, Russia's policy in the region is likely to backfire, as we can observe is currently happening in Belarus. Russia's aggressive politics in Ukraine left an impression on Belarusian President Lukashenko, Russia's closest ally in the region, causing him to take a step back from seeking further integration with Russia, and instead to place a stronger focus on the sovereignty and self-identity of Belarus. This process of 'soft Belarusianization' (Boulègue et al. 2018, 21) has led to the further political emancipation of Belarusian citizens, culminating in protests and ongoing calls for democratisation since the rigged re-election of Lukashenko in August 2020. In the light of the risk of a potential military intervention to safeguard Russia's influence in Belarus, the claim of the protesters for their legitimate right to self-determination is accompanied by the constant reiteration that their protest is neither pro-European nor anti-Russian. This statement illustrates the difference between the approaches of the EU and Russia vis-à-vis the EaP countries: Putin's Russia only cares about its influence without taking any interest in the well-being of the people in the region, even being willing to resort to force to achieve its ends. In contrast, driven by the goal of improving stability in its immediate neighbourhood, the EaP is the EU's offer to facilitate the positive development of these countries. As the term 'offer' illustrates, engaging in cooperation with the EU is a matter of free will and choice for independent, sovereign countries, without any intention of coercion.

## Conclusion: a destructive and unnecessary geopolitical competition

Cooperation creates a win–win situation for all involved. This is the founding and guiding principle of the EU, which is also reflected in its soft power in international relations through the aspirations of economic and social development. The EU addresses these aspirations in the EaP countries by making substantial and generally successful efforts to facilitate economic, political and social development and transformation. At the same time, the EU is challenged by Russia, which perceives international relations as a zero-sum game and, as a consequence, considers the EaP a threat to its power and influence in its near abroad. Russia is thus conducting intense and sophisticated information warfare campaigns to undermine perceptions of the EU in the EaP countries and to increase social tensions within these states.

Without having any positive agenda for the development of the region and its citizens, Russia solely aims to perpetuate instability to prevent any long-term domestic stabilisation or consolidation and further rapprochement with the EU. This negative and even destructive approach by Russia is forcing the EU into an unnecessary geopolitical competition as regional instability poses a threat to the EU. Accordingly, strengthening the resilience of the EaP countries vis-à-vis Russian disinformation has become an additional key aspect for the success of the EaP and the stability of the region.

In that regard, the EU can provide support to empower civil society as well as to facilitate a more diverse local media landscape in order to boost its soft power. However, one has to acknowledge the fact that the EU's capacity to facilitate resilience to Russian disinformation and disruptive influences has its limits. EU funding and projects can encourage a more active and resilient civil society and contribute to a stronger local media environment, but success in countering the Russian challenge ultimately depends on the consistent and enduring efforts of the EaP countries and their citizens themselves.

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