



# The Ukraine war and the future of the Eastern Partnership

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## Abstract

Russia's unprovoked war against Ukraine calls into question the future of the EU's Eastern Partnership (EaP) initiative on two levels. First, the war challenges the very geopolitical premise that underpins the Partnership. Second, the EU's granting of candidate status for Ukraine and Moldova in June 2022, while postponing its decision on Georgia's membership application, undermines the main rationale of the EaP: to keep the door to EU membership closed. This article argues that while the war in Ukraine may lead to a reshaping of the EaP, its fundamental features will remain for some time.

## Keywords

Eastern Partnership, EU enlargement, Geopolitics, NATO, Russia, Security

## Introduction

With the outbreak of Russia's unprovoked war against Ukraine in February 2022, some observers and analysts were quick to write the Eastern Partnership's (EaP) obituary and call for it to be totally revamped, justifying this as necessary due to the new geopolitical context that had been created by the return of war to Europe (Meister 2022; Michel 2022; Mosches 2022). This context was marked by two main changes. First, the outbreak of war confirmed that hard power and geopolitics mattered once again. Second, the EU proved unable to resist the persistence of some of the EaP countries in applying for actual EU membership.

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These two aspects have undermined the fundamental principles on which the EaP was built. The first principle resided in the EU's willingness to project itself as a new kind of power, that is, a normative power in international relations vis-à-vis its Eastern neighbours and Russia. The second principle concerned the question of EU enlargement for at least three of the six Eastern partners: Moldova, Georgia and, of course, Ukraine. For while the EaP appeared to take an ambiguous stance on the question of EU membership for these countries, in reality it was there to support a closed-door policy.

This article revisits the EaP in the light of these two changes and will attempt to assess its future. It is divided into three parts. The first part will discuss the EaP in the light of the return of geopolitics to Europe. The second will address the question of EU enlargement and the EaP. The third part will assess the impact of the two changes on the partnership.

As its main argument, this article asserts that while the changes brought about by the war in Ukraine may lead to some modifications to the EaP, they do not threaten the partnership or its fundamental features. In particular, the author believes that the EaP will likely move towards greater differentiation, while its multilateral dimensions may increasingly lose their pertinence.

## **The EaP and the return of geopolitics to Europe**

When launching the EaP in 2009, the EU did not view its relations with its six Eastern partners<sup>1</sup> through a geopolitical lens but rather as a vehicle to expand its governance dynamics eastward (Youngs 2017, 50). Indeed, the main rationale was to deal with the consequences of the EU enlargements of 2004 and 2007, which extended the EU's borders to Eastern Europe, by developing a new relationship that would go beyond the one that existed under the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP). More concretely, it offered the Eastern partners the possibility of concluding Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreements. The EaP also opened cooperation in new fields such as good governance and democracy, economic convergence with EU legislation, energy security and, to a lesser extent, foreign policy and defence (European Commission 2008).

As such the EaP reflected the transformative ambitions of the EU vis-à-vis the Eastern partners. These ambitions were geared towards promoting reforms to align them with EU values and norms such as commitment to the rule of law, good governance and the approximation of their domestic legislation with the single market acquis. In other words, the EU was trying to replicate its enlargement policy among the Eastern partners without providing the same level of financial support or a clear pathway to EU membership (Crombois 2019, 91–2).

These transformative ambitions were premised on a normative narrative that rejected the geopolitical dimensions of relations between the EU and its Eastern partners and, to some extent, Russia. The situation changed, however, with the forced annexation of Ukraine's Crimea region by Russia and the outbreak of hostilities in Eastern Ukraine in March 2014. For some observers, the main reason for the falling out between the EU and

Russia was the lack of a clear geopolitical approach by the EU to its relations with the Eastern partners (Byrnes 2014; Klusman 2014).

It is unsurprising then that debates over the geopolitical dimensions of the EaP resurfaced in the aftermath of the crisis between Ukraine and Russia in 2013. Whether inspired by classical or neo-classical geopolitics,<sup>2</sup> these discussions emphasised the geopolitical nature of the EaP. The EU's Eastern neighbourhood was now seen as a locus of competition between Russia and the EU. Indeed, the Kremlin viewed the EaP as an attempt by the EU to control Russia's immediate vicinity, both politically and economically, hence its growing opposition to it (Haukkala 2015, 7–9).

Until 2014, however, the EU member states were still divided on the need to approach the EaP as a geopolitical project. Poland and the Baltic states saw the Eastern partners as part of a buffer zone between the EU and Russia. Other member states, including France and Germany, preferred to view them as a possible bridge to Russia; in other words, the EaP was approached as a way to maintain friendly relations with Russia and to secure energy supplies (Depo 2014, 13).

These geopolitical dimensions were all too visible in the strong Russian reaction to the EU's Eastern partners when they showed a willingness to strengthen their relations with the EU through the new Association Agreements. In the end, only Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine succeeded in concluding these agreements with the EU (Youngs 2021). Two other countries, Armenia and Belarus—the latter by choice and the former as a result of pressure from Putin—opted instead to join the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union, designed as an alternative to the EU's proposed model of cooperation (Wolczuk et al. 2022). The last Eastern partner, Azerbaijan, preferred to develop its own bilateral relations with Russia and to a lesser extent with the EU, and these are mostly restricted to cooperation on energy (Shiriyev 2019, 29–30).<sup>3</sup>

The changes that occurred in March 2014 led the EU to review the ENP, of which the EaP is part. In 2017 this review led to the adoption by the EU and its Eastern partners of 20 deliverables to be completed by 2020. These revolved around three main priorities: economic development, good governance and connectivity. They also included three more general cross-cutting deliverables: gender equality, non-discrimination, and strategic communication and independence of the media. By February 2020, despite some real progress in the economic and connectivity fields and some successes in the fight against corruption, especially in Ukraine, the Eastern partners had fallen short of completing any of the set objectives (EU Neighbours East 2020).

The ENP Review also included new terminology that emphasised stability and differentiation in the relations between the EU and its Eastern partners. This shift is important as it implied moving away from the enlargement rhetoric and a limitation of the transformative ambitions of the EU for its Eastern partners. This shift was confirmed in the new EU Global Strategy approved by the member states in 2016 (Cianciara 2017, 9–10). This strategy embraced the changes produced by the crisis in Ukraine and

highlighted a new priority of strengthening the resilience of its partners, while outlining new ambitions for EU defence. These priorities were further confirmed in the EU Strategic Compass document that outlines new objectives for the Union in security and defence (Blockmans et al. 2022).

The implications of these changes for the Eastern partners are still unclear. It is worth noting that the Strategic Compass barely touches upon the EaP, but does mention the EU's new commitment to boost its cooperation with the Eastern partners in the areas of defence and security (Council of the European Union 2022a, 42). These objectives have been pursued through the provision of military assistance to Moldova and Georgia via the new European Peace Stability Instrument, and the launching, in October 2022, of the EU Military Assistance Mission to Ukraine, alongside the allocation of €16 million to support capacity building for the Ukrainian armed forces (Council of the European Union 2022b).

Despite this, the EU is not likely to be able to provide the kind of hard security that the Eastern partners may need in the face of a continuing Russian threat. As a key analyst pointed out, if the war in Ukraine has taught us anything, it is that 'there is no security in Europe outside NATO' (Meister 2022, 2).

## **The EaP and the issue of EU enlargement**

At the outset there was a clear path dependency between the EU policies on enlargement and the EaP. Over time, however, the two policies have tended to drift away from one another. Some EU member states, such as France, have been reluctant since the EaP's inception to accede to demands by Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia for EU membership. The main reasons for this refusal lie in the need to preserve the integration process and not antagonise Russia. As a result, the EU has adopted the rhetoric of 'European aspirations' instead of EU membership for these countries (Emmot 2021).

However, the situation changed completely with the outbreak of the war in Ukraine. In March 2022 the three most advanced Eastern partners, Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia, crossed the Rubicon and applied for EU membership. Soon after, in June, the EU's leaders, following the European Commission's record-speed production of an opinion, agreed to grant candidate status to Moldova and Ukraine while postponing their decision regarding Georgia, subject to the implementation of further political reforms (European Council 2022).

While the EU member states unanimously agreed to grant candidate status to Moldova and Ukraine, this consensus did not come easily. In February 2022 the leaders of the Baltic states, Poland, and four Central and Eastern European member states<sup>4</sup> issued a joint statement calling for an 'immediate EU accession perspective for Ukraine' (Reuters 2022). Other member states, such as France, the Netherlands, Denmark and Spain, were more reserved, damping down any ideas of a fast-track process (Zaborowski 2022).

In reality, the granting of EU candidate status to Ukraine and Moldova was mainly due to the need to show solidarity with these two countries which face the most immediate threat from Moscow (Brzozowski 2022).

Ironically, the granting of EU candidate status to the two Eastern partners further reconciled the EaP with EU enlargement policy. Indeed, the two policies were broadly similar in their conception, using the same principles of benchmarking and conditionalities. The main difference lies in the huge divergence in financial commitments from the EU, with enlargement policy receiving the lion's share (Crombois 2019, 92).

## Impact on the EaP

It is not easy to assess how the future of the EaP will be impacted by the war in Ukraine and the granting of EU candidate status to two of the Union's Eastern partners. All the same, some preliminary observations can be made.

On the geopolitical front, the future shape of the EaP will most certainly depend on the outcome of the war between Ukraine and Russia. Unless Russia suffers a crushing defeat followed by possible internal collapse, it is likely to remain a threat to the EU's Eastern partners.

To address the geopolitical changes in Europe, French President Emmanuel Macron launched, in May 2022, an initiative called the European Political Community (EPC). It aims to gather all the democratic European nations in a 'new space for political cooperation, security, cooperation in energy, transport, investment, infrastructure, and the movement of people' (Herszenhorn et al. 2022). For the French president, such a project allows him to deal with two problems at once. The first is to strengthen links between the EU and all its partners: the Eastern partners, the EU candidate countries and third countries, such as Britain. The second is to safeguard the European integration process. By severing ties with Russia, the EPC is viewed favourably by the EU's Eastern partners, even though they remain fearful of finding themselves in yet another antechamber of EU membership alongside the other EU candidate countries (Moyer 2022).

That said, the initiative is set to restrict itself to being a forum for discussion rather than a strong policy and security provider (Bechev 2022). This means that its impact on the EaP may be limited and it is therefore unlikely to replace it either in scope or in ambition.

The issue of granting EU membership candidacy to two or three Eastern partners is likely to have a limited impact on the EaP. The June 2022 decision of the European Council was more symbolic than anything else. Nothing seems to suggest that EU membership for these countries will happen anytime soon (Lippert 2019). Compared to the Western Balkan candidate countries, the three Eastern partners, despite performing better in terms of economic policy, lag slightly behind in terms of political and legal reforms (Emerson et al. 2021, 11–13).

## Conclusion

In uncertain times, predictions about the future are risky and this includes predictions about the future of the EaP. Whether renamed or reshaped, the fundamentals of the EaP are likely to remain the same for some time. The changes that may occur include greater differentiation between the Eastern partners, that is, between the new EU candidate countries and the other countries. In this way, the changes brought about by the war in Ukraine may simply speed up a process that has been underway since 2014. In doing so, the multilateral features of EU–EaP relations may well be further undermined and lose their pertinence for both sides. The challenge that the EaP is facing will remain: that is, ensuring successful transformations in the Eastern partners, which are all plagued by secessionist situations and conflicts.

## Notes

1. The EU's six Eastern partners are Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine.
2. Neo-classical geopolitics was developed in the post–Cold War period with the aim of breaking away from classical geopolitics and its environmental determinism and racism, while emphasising the role of geography in global conflicts and economic development.
3. In July 2022, the EU and Azerbaijan signed a memorandum agreement to double Azerbaijani gas exports to the EU.
4. Bulgaria, Czechia, Slovakia and Slovenia.

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