

# The Eastern Partnership

## Three dilemmas in a time of troubles

Bob Deen  
Wouter Zweers  
Iris van Loon

*With contributions from:*

Elżbieta Kaca (PISM)  
Cristina Gherasimov (DGAP)  
Gustav Gressel (ECFR)

Clingendael Report



**Clingendael**

Netherlands Institute of International Relations



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Elżbieta Kaca – Polish Institute of International Affairs (PISM)  
Cristina Gherasimov – German Council on Foreign Relations (DGAP)  
Gustav Gressel – European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR)

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**January 2021**

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### **About the authors**

**Bob Deen** is coordinator of the Clingendael Russia and Eastern Europe Centre (CREEC) and Senior Research Fellow in the Security Unit of the Clingendael Institute. His research centres on international security issues and multilateral cooperation, with a particular focus on Eastern Europe, Russia, the Caucasus and Central Asia. Prior to joining Clingendael he worked as Head of Section and Senior Adviser to the High Commissioner on National Minorities of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE).

**Wouter Zweers** is a Research Fellow at the EU and Global Affairs unit of the Clingendael Institute. His research revolves around the external dimension of EU policy-making, focusing specifically on the Eastern Partnership and Western Balkans regions. He coordinates Clingendael's 'Balkans Hub', a project in which Clingendael engages with local think tanks from the Western Balkans in joint research and events.

**Iris van Loon** is a research assistant at the EU & Global Affairs unit of the Clingendael Institute. Her work focuses on EU enlargement and integration of the Western Balkans and the European Neighbourhood countries. She is a graduate in European Studies from the University of Amsterdam and the College of Europe in Warsaw.

## External partners


**Elżbieta Kaca** is a senior research fellow at PISM, working on EU relations with Eastern European countries (notably the Eastern Partnership region) and EU external relations (e.g. decision making process, EU diplomacy and EEAS, sanctions, financial aid). Before that, she led numerous projects related to Eastern Europe and EU integration process at the Institute of Public Affairs (2008-2012).


**Cristina Gherasimov** worked as research fellow at the German Council on Foreign Relations in Berlin during 2019-2020. Before that she worked with Transparency International Defence and Security and Chatham House in London. Since January 2021, she is foreign policy advisor to the President of Moldova. Cristina holds a PhD degree in Political Science from Rutgers University in New Jersey, USA.


**Dr. Gustav Gressel** is a Senior Policy Fellow on the Wider Europe Programme at the ECFR Berlin Office. Before joining the ECFR he worked as desk officer for international security policy and strategy in the Bureau for Security Policy in the Austrian Ministry of Defence from 2006 to 2014 and as a research fellow of the Commissioner for Strategic Studies in the Austrian MoD from 2003 to 2006. He also was committed as research fellow in the International Institute for Liberal Politics in Vienna. Before his academic career he served five years in the Austrian Armed Forces. Gustav earned a PhD in Strategic Studies at the Faculty of Military Sciences at the National University of Public Service, Budapest and a Master Degree in political science at Salzburg University. He is author of numerous publications regarding security policy and strategic affairs and a frequent commentator of international affairs.


The Clingendael Institute  
P.O. Box 93080  
2509 AB The Hague  
The Netherlands

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# Executive summary

In early 2021 a new Eastern Partnership (EaP) Summit will take place between the European Union and the six countries in its eastern neighbourhood: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. After over a decade, the ambitious objectives of the EU's Eastern Partnership policy to deliver 'stability, security and prosperity' to the region remain far from reality. Democratization and good governance reforms have been stalled by vested interests in Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova, while Azerbaijan and Belarus have remained outright autocratic, and the latter faces sustained domestic protests. The EaP faces geopolitical pushback by an increasingly assertive Russian Federation and the region is further affected by multiple protracted and ongoing conflicts, including the recent bitter war over Nagorno-Karabakh. But despite its shortcomings, the EaP is not without successes, especially but not only in the economic sphere. The EU has also managed to keep the door open for conversation, spurred lower-level reform and provided civil society support. As such, the EaP has an important role to play in the policy of the Netherlands towards the region, especially in light of recent requests by the Dutch Parliament to formulate an Eastern Europe strategy. But many thorny questions remain in the run-up to the summit.

This report assesses three policy dilemmas that need to be considered by the Netherlands and the European Union in order to make the EaP more effective. First, the EU needs to reconcile its geopolitical interests with its normative aspirations. Second, the added value of the EaP's multilateral track should be deliberated with consideration of the differentiation in bilateral relations with EaP countries. Third, the EU will need to consider how to deal with protracted conflicts, hybrid threats, and other security challenges in the EaP region.

On the first dilemma, the report finds that to foster democratisation while simultaneously being responsive to geopolitical pressures, the EU should play a 'long game' that does not compromise on its values but instead uses them in a more geopolitical and strategic manner. In order to do so it should swap opportunistic policies of tacitly supporting undemocratic regimes for a more normative and consistent approach that offers a longer-term perspective of good governance, transparency and the rule of law.

Regarding the second dilemma, the report argues that while further differentiation and strengthening of the bilateral tracks is key to the success of the EaP, this does not conflict with its multilateral track that also has added value. It maintains a minimum level of engagement, helps keep EaP countries on the EU agenda, and offers a platform for cooperation on common challenges.

Finally, the report finds that further EU engagement on security-related issues is crucial to fill the security deficit that undermines both stability in the region and the momentum for reforms. Within the EaP, increased cooperation could take place on countering 'hybrid threats' such as cyber and disinformation but should also include security sector reform. Finally, the EU should intensify its efforts to resolve the many protracted conflicts across the region, even if it does so outside the EaP framework.

# Introduction

When the European Union (EU) launched the Eastern Partnership (EaP) in 2009 to bring ‘stability, security and prosperity’ to the EU and to the six countries of its eastern neighbourhood, little did it know how rocky that ride would be. A decade later, three countries (Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine) have signed Association Agreements (AAs) but are grappling with multiple protracted conflicts within their territories. Two others (Armenia and Azerbaijan) have just fought a war over Nagorno-Karabakh, while the sixth (Belarus) is facing a sustained popular uprising against its autocratic leader. Reforms in the three association countries are frustratingly slow and often stalled by vested interests; after a decade of unmet promises, their populations’ trust in their own institutions is low and their initial over-optimistic enthusiasm for European integration has been replaced by realism at best – or cynicism at worst. The Russian Federation has pushed back hard against what it considers European encroachment on its traditional sphere of influence, using a range of political, military, economic and other means that the EU struggles to respond to. As a result, the EaP has become a geopolitical tug of war in all but name, despite European leaders’ insistence to the contrary. And to make matters even more complicated, the economies and societies of the entire region are badly affected by the Covid-19 pandemic.

If this grim picture is compared to the Eastern Partnership’s lofty goals, it is tempting to draw the conclusion that it has failed altogether. It has not. Instead, it is a policy that is ‘underestimated for what it has accomplished but overestimated for what it can achieve’.<sup>1</sup> Despite its initial naiveté and its shortcomings, the EaP remains the EU’s only coherent policy towards its turbulent eastern neighbourhood – and the only format in which it engages with all six countries. The EaP has significantly boosted EU trade and leverage in the region and, through its bilateral track and its AAs, has promoted several key reforms in Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova and linked them more closely to the EU than ever before. It has given Armenia a chance to remain in a relationship of sorts with the EU despite its dependency on Russia, and it has cautiously kept the doors open for engagement with Belarus and Azerbaijan should the currently adverse circumstances change.<sup>2</sup>

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1 Steven Blockmans (May 2019). [‘The Eastern Partnership at 10: the road to hell is paved with good intentions’](#), CEPS Publication.

2 For a good overview of the results of the first ten years of the Eastern Partnership, see: Stanislav Secieru and Sinikukka Saari eds (July 2019). [‘The Eastern Partnership a Decade on: looking back, thinking ahead’](#), European Institute for Security Studies Chaillot Paper 153.



This also matters to the Netherlands, a country that is traditionally both supportive *and* critical of the Eastern Partnership. The Dutch approach to EaP countries has focused on promoting good governance, rule of law, societal transformation and market reforms, while wanting to avoid discussions on eventual EU membership – and steer clear of geopolitical confrontations with the Russian Federation.<sup>3</sup> In September 2020, in a debate on an update to the government's Russia strategy, the Dutch parliament called on the Minister of Foreign Affairs to also develop an Eastern Europe strategy. In light of both the upcoming EaP Summit and the ongoing strategic review, this report will examine three particular dilemmas of relevance to the Netherlands.

First, it is at present unclear how the EU can invite government representatives from Belarus, considering the sanctions it has imposed on President Lukashenka and his regime. This is yet another illustration of the challenge faced by the EU to balance its geopolitical interests with its values of democratisation and good governance. It is also difficult to see how Armenia and Azerbaijan will participate in the same multilateral format with the EU despite the bitterly fought war of autumn 2020, which raises the question of the added value of the multilateral track in light of the increasingly different situations of the six EaP countries. And finally, even before the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh flared up, concerns were mounting that the security dimension of the EaP is sorely underdeveloped. The EU has been insufficiently able to respond to the challenges of hybrid threats, protracted conflicts and unreformed security sectors, but several EU member states are reluctant to include these sensitive issues in the EaP itself.

After a discussion of these dilemmas, the report will put forward certain recommendations on how the Netherlands could help shape the EaP in a way that supports its own strategy towards Eastern Europe. Finally, the annexes comprise three contributions from external authors, who have each analysed in-depth one of the dilemmas.

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3 See: 'Policy Review of the Dutch contribution to the European Neighbourhood Policy (2011-2017)' and the 'Kamerbrief over beleidsdoorlichting Europees Nabuurschapsbeleid', presented by Minister of Foreign Affairs Stef Blok to the Dutch Parliament, 29 November 2019 (in Dutch).

# 1 Dilemma 1: Fostering democratic reform amidst geopolitical realities

The EU seeks to advance democracy and good governance in the EaP region but has hit upon hard geopolitical realities in its endeavours, affecting its efforts in two ways. First, EU engagement and norm promotion become subject to geopolitical competition and are, in addition to challenges stemming from the EaP countries themselves, confronted with Russian economic, military, diplomatic and informational pushback. Russian pressure on Ukraine and Armenia not to sign AAs with the EU provides a good example; the pressure on Armenia proved successful because of Russia's position as that country's security guarantor. Second, in their efforts to offer the EaP countries support against pressures from the Russian Federation, EU interlocutors often fall into the trap of tacitly accepting or even actively supporting regimes that do not share EU values. Compromising on its values out of short-term geopolitical considerations regarding sovereignty and stability risks undermining the EU's very own democratisation agenda.<sup>4</sup>

The past decade has made it clear that the EU is, in practice, a player in the same geopolitical game as the Russian Federation – but does not necessarily have to play by the same rules. This section therefore examines how the EU could move towards a value-driven approach that considers geopolitical realities.

## The Eastern Partnership: a geopolitical project?

The European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) was initially not designed as a geopolitical project. It was entrenched in the treaties as a policy framework aimed at spreading European norms and values, although based on a 'special relationship'.<sup>5</sup> After a short period of relative cooperation between the EU and Russia, the latter declined an invitation to join the ENP in 2003, signalling the beginning of a period in which divergences in the EU's and Russia's values, interests and world views became ever

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4 Kadri Liik (August 2017). '[How the EU Needs to Manage Relations With Its Eastern Neighborhood](#)', Carnegie Task Force White Paper.

5 European Union. [Treaty on European Union](#), art 8.

more apparent, especially in relation to the shared neighbourhood.<sup>6</sup> By the time the EaP was founded in 2009 as an additional, more ambitious, multilateral format for the ENP, the Russian rejection of the 'westernisation' of the EaP region had already been reflected in the country's military actions in Georgia, to be followed by military action in Donbas and Crimea in 2014.<sup>7</sup>

The EU revised the ENP in 2015 to adapt the policy to the increasingly tense geopolitical context, enhance the focus on security and stability, and better match the level of ambition of EaP countries to deepen relationships. Apart from the growing importance of geopolitics, the EU had learned that 'the neighbourhood countries themselves ha[d] proven to be less inclined to adhere to EU norms than initially thought'.<sup>8</sup> While upholding a discourse of democracy and good governance promotion, the balance in the EU's actual EaP policies shifted from a normative to a more opportunistic and transactional approach, for which the EU has received much criticism. One author wrote that the EU in 2019 'once more [...] shied away from holding incumbent eastern neighbourhood regimes fully accountable for half-hearted, sluggish or even entirely absent political and judicial reforms, state capture and misuse of state resources ...'.<sup>9</sup>

Indeed, the EU's transactional turn has been the wrong response to increasing geopolitical pressures. It has led to a significant gap between the EU's normative discourse and its actual policies towards the EaP countries. Belarus is a case in point. Even though Lukashenka's commitment to democratic values had consistently been low, the EU already dithered with its sanctions policy before the August 2020 election. This was largely due to geopolitical considerations, with the EU being keen to offer Belarus an alternative to its alignment with Russia. After Lukashenka's electoral fraud and brutal crackdown, the EU equally struggled to impose sanctions against his regime due to internal squabbling.

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6 For a full analysis of EU-Russia relations in the post-Cold War period, see: Hiski Haukkala (2015). 'From Cooperative to Contested Europe? The Conflict in Ukraine as a Culmination of a Long-Term Crisis in EU – Russia Relations', *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, no 23(1).

7 For the changing attitude of Russia towards the region, see: Sinikukka Saari & Stanislav Secieru (July 2019). 'Shifting Ground. How Megatrends are Shaping the Eastern Neighborhood', in [The Eastern Partnership. A Decade on](#), pp. 7-11.

8 Wouter Zweers (February 2018). '[The State of EU relations with Russia and the Eastern Neighbourhood](#)', in: *Clingendael State of the Union 2018 Report*.

9 Tobias Schumacher (2020). 'The EU and its Neighbourhood: The Politics of Muddling Through', *Journal of Common Market Studies*, vol. 58, p. 191.

**Svetlana Tikhonovskaya showing a picture of democratic protests in Minsk during an EPP conference in September 2021**



Source: [EPP Group](#)

In the case of Georgia, the EU's intentions to support the country's sovereignty has resulted in a failure to hold politicians publicly accountable for a lack of democratic reforms.<sup>10</sup> The case of the failed AA with Armenia also attests to the effect of geopolitics and security concerns on EU ambitions, as discussed later in this report. In the case of Azerbaijan, the EU has focused primarily on its (energy) interests, while failing to call the authoritarian spade a spade.

The EU's transactional turn means Brussels has done away with one of its most important geopolitical weapon: its values. Of the two cornerstones of the Union, normative and economic power, only the latter is fully employed. While searching for adequate responses to geopolitical challenges, EU policies have decayed into an ad-hoc 'saving what can be saved' endeavour lacking prescient and confident strategy, leaving commentators no choice but to conclude that the EU's policies are in 'suspended animation'.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Schumacher, 'Politics of Muddling Through', *op.cit.*

<sup>11</sup> Steven Blockmans (December 2015). '[The 2015 ENP Review: A policy in suspended animation](#)', CEPS Commentary.

## Think geopolitics... play democracy

During the EaP Summit, the EU will need to give new impetus to its normative aspirations while simultaneously advancing a more realistic geopolitical agenda. That is especially the case because the main debates in some of EaP societies have moved beyond geopolitics. This post-geopolitical realisation renders current EU policies counter-effective to the needs of their populations. In Moldova, both the campaigns and outcomes of parliamentary and presidential elections in 2019 and 2020 have made it clear that citizens do not seek reforms because of a wish to join the EU, but because they wish to get rid of oligarchic state capture. In an August 2020 poll undertaken by IRI, citizens in Moldova almost exclusively cited issues of political corruption and incompetency, as well as socioeconomic issues, as the most important problems facing their country.<sup>12</sup> These were the topics dominating the elections, not geopolitics.<sup>13</sup> The same can be observed in Belarus, and to a lesser extent in Ukraine and Georgia.

Given that security challenges stemming from unresolved conflicts are here to stay,<sup>14</sup> how can the EU better anticipate the geopolitical context in which it operates? The EU would do well to recognise that geopolitics are inevitable. It would benefit from taking geopolitics into account in its calculations, without playing by the same rules as the Russian Federation. In short, the EU needs to think geopolitics, but play democracy.

The EU could do so by stepping away from its opportunistic approach, which has not provided a sustainable path towards its democratic aspirations nor towards resolving geopolitical tensions. The EU could better anticipate the needs of citizens – particularly in Moldova, Belarus, Ukraine and Georgia – by more resolutely supporting their democratic ambitions. This would require the EU to become more vocal towards EaP governments on undemocratic and corrupt practices. Instead of (implicitly) accepting or backing governments for the sake of stability or geopolitics, the EU could better play into the post-geopolitical needs in various EaP countries and aim to foster real societal resilience. The EU boasts of significant soft-power capabilities that could be used more proactively and confidently to support such a policy. The contribution of Elżbieta Kaca to this report provides recommendations on how to give democratisation efforts new impetus. If applied consistently and patiently, the EU's values of good governance, rule of law and transparency could be its most potent geopolitical instruments which may, in the long run, prevail over the short-term interests of wooing particular regimes.

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12 Only 3% of respondents cited 'international relations' as an issue that should be a top priority for the government. See IRI (2020). ['Public Opinion Survey: Residents of Moldova'](#), p. 6.

13 Also see, Dumitru Minzarari (December 2020). ['Moldovan Presidential Elections Driven by Insecurity Not Geopolitics'](#), *SWP comment*.

14 Thomas de Waal and Nikolau von Twickel (March 2020). ['Beyond Frozen Conflict'](#), CEPS Publication, pp. 7-8.

## 2 Dilemma 2: Why keep the multilateral dimension?

From the outset in 2009, the EaP was ‘to be governed by the principles of *differentiation* and *conditionality*.’<sup>15</sup> During the 2015 Riga Summit, it was reaffirmed that it is ‘the sovereign right of each partner freely to choose the level of ambition and goals to which it aspires in its relations with the European Union’.<sup>16</sup> Over the years, relations between the EU and the six EaP countries and the domestic developments within them have all developed differently. The trend of the last couple of years has moved towards bilateral cooperation and differentiation, especially after the EU signed AAs with three out of six EaP countries. The European Commission (EC) confirmed in its 2020 Joint Communication that ‘Bilateral cooperation remains the way to ensure a tailor-made approach’, aiming for ‘deeper sectoral cooperation and exchange between interested partner countries’.<sup>17</sup> At the same time the Commission also maintained its multilateral approach, arguing that ‘The revised multilateral EaP architecture adopted at the 2017 summit is a useful framework for exchanges and cooperation, through regular meetings and exchanges.’<sup>18</sup>

As such, the EaP is currently built on two pillars: a framework for multilateral cooperation as well as deepening bilateral cooperation with the EU. The multilateral track of the EaP covers issues such as good governance, economic cooperation, energy security, mobility and people-to-people contacts. Apart from the governmental level, cooperation takes place at civil society level through the EaP Civil Society Forum, as well as at parliamentary level through the Euronest Parliamentary Assembly.

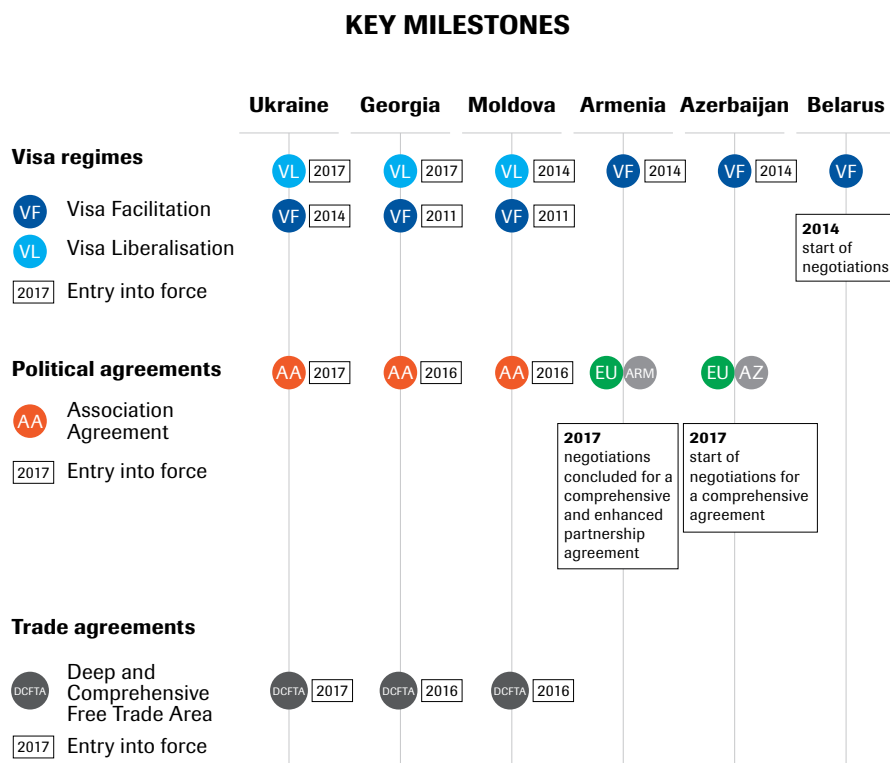
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15 Council of the European Union (May 2009). Joint Declaration of the Prague Eastern Partnership Summit, ‘[A more ambitious partnership between the European Union and the partner countries](#)’.

16 European Council & Council of the European Union (May 2015). ‘[Joint Declaration of the Eastern Partnership Summit](#)’.

17 European Commission (2020). Joint Communication of the European Commission and the EEAS, ‘[Eastern Partnership policy beyond 2020. Reinforcing resilience – an Eastern Partnership that delivers for all](#)’.

18 Ibid.

**Figure 1 Bilateral agreements reached within the context of the EaP**


Source: @European Union 2020

Bilateral cooperation, on the other hand, is strongly differentiated. With Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia, bilateral cooperation revolves around the AAs, which include Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas (DCFTAs). Armenia represents a unique situation with simultaneous participation in the Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA) and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). Bilateral cooperation with Belarus and Azerbaijan remains at a relatively low level (see figure 1).

The divergence in both ambition and actual levels of bilateral cooperation between the EU and individual EaP countries raises questions about the multilateral format. What is the added value of continuing with the multilateral format with all six countries for the EU, its member states and the EaP countries themselves? This question is particularly relevant now, as the countries themselves increasingly question the value of the multilateral framework. The three Association Countries are reluctant to share a format

with three countries that have very different relations with the EU and the Russian Federation, while the acrimonious relations between Armenia and Azerbaijan make a multilateral conversation even more difficult than before.

## The added value of an 'empty' framework?

At this moment, the three associated countries have a strong wish to cooperate closer on more sector-specific integration with the EU. In their view they have made the reforms required in their AA frameworks. They feel they are being held back by being in the same multilateral basket as the 'slower' EaP members who are less ambitious in their Europeanisation efforts, and are openly considering applying for EU membership in accordance with article 49 of the Treaty of the European Union.<sup>19</sup> Further differentiation is likely to lead to even more divergence between the six countries. For the already associated countries, the next steps in deepening bilateral relations could include more sectoral cooperation with the prospect of becoming part of the EU energy and banking market. Access could also be granted to the EU's Single European Payment Area (SEPA) as an impetus for business opportunities.<sup>20</sup> However, differentiation within the EaP could also benefit the non-associated countries. It could assist Azerbaijan in diversifying its resource-driven economy, reduce the rising levels of industrial energy consumption in Belarus, foster Armenia's economic development, and eventually back Azerbaijan's and Belarus' bid for WTO membership to ensure further potential for bilateral trade relations.<sup>21</sup> For each country there is more to gain from the bilateral track than from the multilateral track. Still, the latter could function as an important platform to return to when needed. There are benefits for the six EaP countries and for the EU itself to maintain the multilateral track.

A primary benefit of the multilateral format is that it functions as a framework for discussion of certain priorities that are important for the region at large, such as democracy, human rights, rule of law and structural reforms. The multilateral framework stimulates regional and sectoral cooperation among the six EaP-countries, for which extra EU funding is available. Coherence in the EaP is key for addressing the shared challenges the region has been facing and will continue to struggle with in the years to come; this includes, for example, corruption, the rule of law, climate change and, more

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19 [Statement of the Foreign Ministers of Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova on the Future of the Eastern Partnership](#), 5 December 2019.

20 Stanislav Secieru and Sinikukka Saari (eds) (July 2019). '[The Eastern Partnership a Decade on: looking back, thinking ahead](#)', European Institute for Security Studies Chaillot Paper 153, p. 58.

21 *Ibid.*, p. 109.



recently, the Covid-19 crisis and its aftermath.<sup>22</sup> On the other hand, the EU uses the EaP multilateral framework to its advantage to address problems that are important for the EU itself, such as energy and connectivity.

A second benefit of the multilateral track is that it provides individual EaP countries with a window of opportunity to gain prominence on the EU agenda. The EaP offers bi-annual summits, annual ministerial meetings and various thematic reunions and multilateral flagship projects that can be used by countries individually to intensify their dialogue with the EU. Ukraine in particular has used the multilateral framework to its own advantage.<sup>23</sup> By themselves, Georgia and Moldova would be less likely to attract a similarly high level of political attention. In the same context, the multilateral format is beneficial because it enables non-associated countries to learn from countries that have already deepened their relations with the EU through the AAs, which at present is particularly of interest to Armenia. Despite waning interest from the EaP countries, they would hence do well to realise the added value of the multilateral format. The EU, on its part, could more actively communicate the long-term benefits of the multilateral framework of the EaP.

A third advantage of the multilateral track relates to the fact that the situation is *in flux* and the EaP needs to be able to constantly adapt to challenges in the region. Belarus, for example, is currently largely left out of the EaP bilateral cooperation, but there is a chance the situation might change in 2021. To that extent, the multilateral aspect serves as a minimum level of engagement that allows the EU to scale up fast(er) when opportunities arise or demand increases. For that reason the inverse should also be asked: what might happen *without* the multilateral component? Would, in that case, the EU need to reinvent the wheel time after time without being able to use the tools available that were once meant for the 'one-size-fits-all' approach? As for Azerbaijan and Belarus, the two countries with which bilateral relations are least developed, the multilateral track has been the only form of dialogue possible.

As also argued by Cristina Gherasimov in Annex 2, there is clearly no alternative to further differentiation. However, there are ways to make it 'smarter'. This means that although more significance will be given to the bilateral agreements, there is no need to compromise the multilateral framework as it remains 'an important source of reference and inspiration in particular for the three non-associated partners'.<sup>24</sup> In that sense, the EaP as a multilateral framework should not merely be considered the 'lowest common denominator', but rather as the foundation for relations with all EaP countries. From

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22 Charles Michel (18 June 2020). [Remarks by President Charles Michel after the Eastern Partnership leaders' video conference.](#)

23 EUISS, 'The Eastern Partnership a Decade on', *op.cit.*, p. 29.

24 *Ibid.*, p. 4.

there, following the principle of differentiation, bilateral relations could be further developed with non-associated countries – potentially leading to AAs in the future. For the already associated countries the AAs could be updated by granting enhanced EU market access or by means of approximation of legislation to explore further possibilities for cooperation.<sup>25</sup>

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25 Guillaume Van der Loo and Tinatin Akhvlediani (May 2020). '[Catch me if you can: Updating the Eastern Partnership Association Agreements and DCFTAs](#)', CEPS, p. 9.

### 3 Dilemma 3: Should the Eastern Partnership address the security deficit?

From its very formation, the EaP pointedly sidestepped one of the region's main problems: the profound security challenges stemming from protracted conflicts, hybrid threats and weaknesses in national security sectors, all of which have a negative impact on the domestic reforms foreseen by the EaP. Both EaP countries themselves and several analysts increasingly argue that this approach is becoming untenable and that this security deficit needs to be addressed *within* the EaP in one way or another.<sup>26</sup> This argument is further elaborated in the external contribution of Gustav Gressel in Annex 3. Cognizant of the geopolitical risks involved, France among others maintains that including security and defence could be 'dangerous and counter-productive' for the EaP.<sup>27</sup> The EC itself prefers to speak about 'resilience' rather than 'security', but did plead for 'stepping up support for security dialogues and co-operation' in 2020.<sup>28</sup> Questions on the security dimension of the EaP are therefore likely to feature prominently on the agenda for the March 2021 summit. Here we discuss the pros and cons of an EaP engagement with each of the three aspects of the security deficit (that is, protracted conflicts, hybrid threats, and security and defence cooperation).

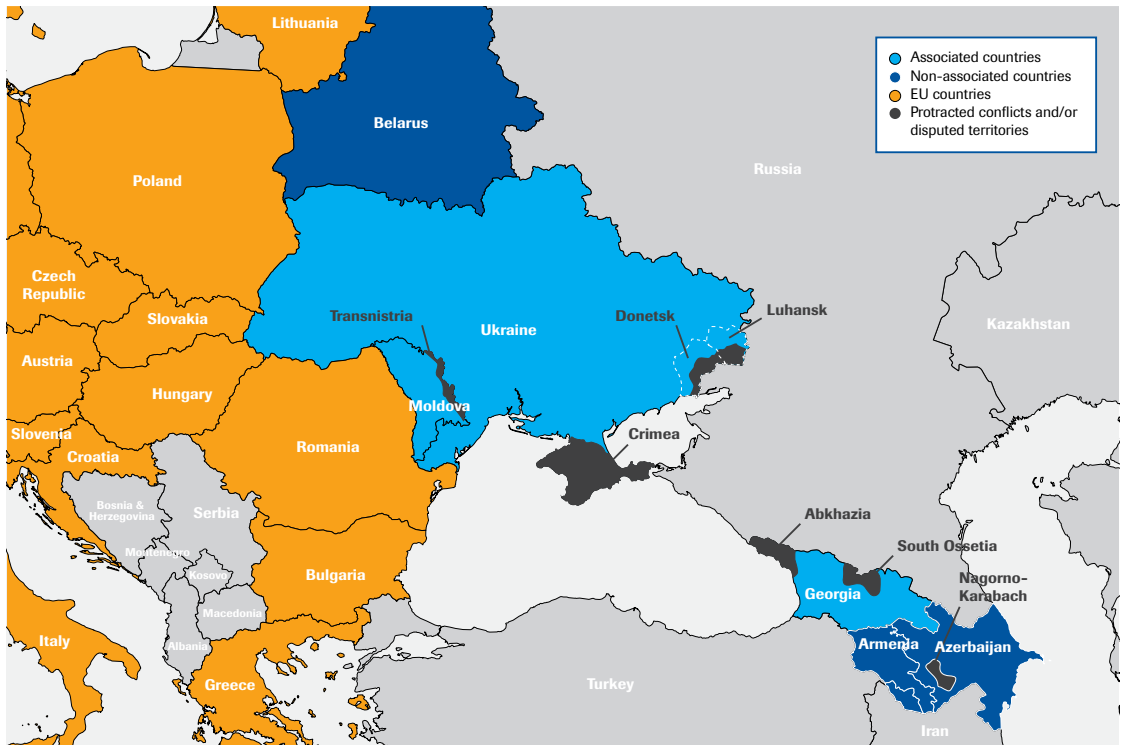
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26 Nicu Popescu and Gustav Gressel (November 2020). [‘The Best Defence: why the EU should forge Security Compacts with its eastern neighbors’](#), ECFR Policy Brief. See also the [statement of the Foreign Ministers of Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova on the Future of the Eastern Partnership](#), 5 December 2019.

27 French non-paper with its contribution to the Structural Reflection on the Future of the Eastern Partnership, 25 October 2019.

28 European Commission and EEAS (March 2020). [‘Eastern Partnership policy beyond 2020. Reinforcing resilience – an Eastern Partnership that delivers for all’](#), (SWD(2020) 56 final).

**Figure 2 Map of the Eastern Partnership region, including protracted conflicts and/or disputed territories**



## The protracted conflicts – the buckets behind the boats

Five out of the six EaP countries are grappling with unresolved territorial disputes or non-recognised entities on their territory in which Russian troops are (in)directly involved (see figure 2). Russia holds the key to the resolution of these conflicts and actively leverages them as a deterrence to geopolitically risk-averse EU member states and to distract association countries' governments from much-needed reforms. Sometimes it uses them as outright pressure points, as it did towards Armenia.

The EU has been cautious about inserting itself fully into the resolution of these protracted conflicts due to its reluctance to engage in a geopolitical square-off with the Russian Federation, its internal disagreements and a subsequent tendency for France, and increasingly Germany also, to act in their national capacities. The EU Special Representative for the South Caucasus is one of three co-Chairs in the Geneva International Discussions on Abkhazia and South Ossetia and the EU is one of two observers in the OSCE-mediated 5+2 negotiations on Transnistria. But the EU has no formal role in the Normandy Format, where Germany and France negotiate with Ukraine

and Russia on the settlement of the Donbas conflict; and it is wholly absent from the OSCE Minsk Group on Nagorno-Karabakh, where France is one of three co-Chairs. As the conflict escalated the EU could do little more than issue statements and had to cede the initiative to Russia and – to a lesser extent – Turkey.

Ultimately, a more geopolitical and strategically autonomous European Union cannot afford to shy away from addressing protracted conflicts in its direct neighbourhood. It should invest more political and financial capital into their resolution, even if there are no quick fixes. Most of the negotiation formats were set up in the 1990s and still featured a prominent role for the United States, which remains nominally committed but in practice is increasingly phasing out its involvement. It is up to Brussels to pick up the slack, and the EU has a range of tools at its disposal to do so. Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) missions such as the EU Monitoring Mission (EUMM) in Georgia or the EU Border Assistance Mission (EUBAM) make a modest but nonetheless significant difference in mitigating the negative effects of protracted conflicts on EaP countries. EU Special Representatives (EUSRs) remain valuable diplomatic assets who can maintain a permanent political dialogue, even if they sit somewhat uneasy within the EU's legal structure.<sup>29</sup> EU support for civil society dialogue and peace initiatives can help prepare the ground for longer-term conflict resolution; these projects could be further mainstreamed into the bilateral assistance provided within the EaP framework.

However, it is exactly its multilateral dimension and diverging views between EaP countries themselves that makes the EaP not the ideal format for conflict resolution. Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova demand more active EU involvement in their protracted conflicts but do not necessarily want to discuss them in the presence of Belarus, Azerbaijan and Armenia; the latter two were already barely on speaking terms even before the Karabakh conflict escalated in 2020. In that regard, concerns that these conflicts will derail the EaP altogether are well founded. Instead of 'importing' conflict resolution into the EaP or pretending that the conflicts do not exist, the EU could instead make it explicit in its strategic communication that it intends to play a more active role in conflict resolution *within other formats*, most notably but not exclusively in the various OSCE-facilitated processes.<sup>30</sup>

## Countering hybrid threats

The EU's reluctance to insert itself into conflict resolution processes contrasts sharply with the political attention given to combating 'hybrid threats', a catchphrase that includes

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29 For a thorough evaluation of the role of the EUSRs, see European Parliament, ['The Scope and Mandate of EU Special Representatives \(EUSRs\)'](#), Study commissioned for the AFET committee (PE 603.469), January 2019.

30 For other ideas on how the EU could contribute to conflict resolution, see Elkhani Nuriyev (January 2020). ['How the EU could help re-energise peace processes in the Eastern Partnership'](#), *New Eastern Europe*.

everything from disinformation campaigns to cyber attacks, and from hostile intelligence operations to covert military action.<sup>31</sup> This issue has increasingly gained in prominence in the EU's security discourse since 2015, as it is clear that the EaP countries – in particular the three association countries – face a wide range of hybrid threats emanating largely from the Russian Federation. Disinformation campaigns aim to undermine the momentum for reforms, erode support for Euro-Atlantic structures, and influence the outcome of electoral processes. The generally low trust in democratic institutions and, more recently, the Covid-19 pandemic, create fertile ground for such campaigns.<sup>32</sup> Vulnerability to cyber attacks is only likely to increase with the rapid digitalisation of the economies of the EaP countries and the growing share of the ICT sector in their exports.

While primarily of importance to the three association countries, the overarching theme of 'counter-hybrid' and protection of critical infrastructure fits well with the overall objective of improving resilience across the region and could be expanded upon.<sup>33</sup> This would not only increase the security of EaP countries and remove obstacles to reform, it would also increasingly benefit the EU itself, given the growing security interdependence between the EU and its neighbourhood. Not only can EaP countries learn from the EU but individual EU member states – including the Netherlands – can benefit from the expertise and experience of countries that have been in the front line of hybrid threats for much longer.<sup>34</sup> Even for countries reluctant to embark on security cooperation, countering cyber threats and disinformation are relatively uncontroversial starting points; a logical step might be to extend the current cyber security co-operation with Ukraine to Georgia and Moldova. But more could also be done to diversify the media landscape and make electoral systems more robust against interference.

## Security sector reform and defence cooperation

In the last decade the EU has ramped up its assistance to security sector reform in EaP countries but has primarily focused on 'soft security', most notably the prosecutors, the judiciary and the police. Due to its reluctance to address matters of 'hard security',

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31 For a good overview of how the concept of 'countering hybrid threats' became a prominent part of security discourse within the EU, see Eitvydas Bajarūnas (March 2020). '[Addressing Hybrid Threats: Priorities for the EU in 2020 and Beyond](#)', *European View*. For a discussion on the merit of the concept 'hybrid', see Hugo Klijn and Engin Yüksel (November 2019). '[Russia's Hybrid Doctrine: is the West barking up the wrong tree?](#)', Clingendael op-ed.

32 For an overview, see EUvsDisinfo (May 2020). '[Secret labs and George Soros: COVID-19 disinformation in the EU Eastern Partnership Countries](#)'.

33 National perspectives of the EaP countries and suggestions for differentiation are set out in Kakha Gogolashvili, editor, (2019). '[Hybrid Threats in EaP Countries: Building a Common Response](#)', German Marshall Fund of the United States Policy Paper.

34 Dumitru Minzarari and Vadim Pistrinciu (April 2020). '[A problem shared: Russia and the transformation of Europe's eastern neighbourhood](#)', ECFR Policy Brief.

including the military and the security services, it has largely deferred to the United States, NATO and individual EU member states. This in turn reduces the leverage and relevance of the EU as a security partner. It is no surprise that the EaP countries, and in particular the three association countries, seek assistance elsewhere, given the paramount importance they attach to their national security and building the capacity of their military and security services to ward off external threats. This is why Gressel and Popescu have advocated for an 'Eastern Partnership Security Compact' that includes intelligence cooperation, both 'soft' and 'hard' security and even assistance to modernise military hardware.<sup>35</sup>

It remains debatable whether or not the EaP *itself* is a suitable framework to engage in such security and defence cooperation. France and other countries that do not want to antagonise the Russian Federation incorrectly assume that if Europe stays out of the security sector, so will Russia; on the contrary, this self-restraint creates a situation where the EU focuses on 'soft issues' and Russia exploits hard security vulnerabilities. The EU has a growing range of instruments at its disposal, including the beefed-up European Defence Fund (EDF) and the Permanent Structured Co-operation (PESCO) framework. It also has relevant training facilities such as the European Security and Defence College. In theory these could be opened up bilaterally to EaP countries.<sup>36</sup> But the EU itself already struggles to strengthen defence cooperation among its members and grapples with the unresolved question of the role of third countries (including the UK) in PESCO and the EDF. Few member states will be ready to open up these mechanisms to EaP countries. A gradual approach whereby training of military and intelligence officers is included in capacity-building projects, building on experience obtained from the EU's bilateral assistance to Ukraine, might be more feasible in the short to medium term than an ambitious programme aimed at modernising the armed forces and military industries of the three association countries.

Finally, valid concerns about corruption in unreformed security services and military establishments further deter EU engagement with these partners. However, corruption is not only a matter of good governance or financial transparency, it is also a *security* issue that undermines the ability of these institutions to protect the vital interests of EaP countries. The EU's efforts to support the fight against corruption should therefore explicitly include the armed forces and the security services. In particular, reforming the intelligence services, linked as they are to the vestiges of power in EaP countries, is an arduous and long-term process that could benefit from both longer-term European assistance and increased political attention – including within the EaP.<sup>37</sup>

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35 Gressel and Popescu, *op.cit.* See also the contribution of Gustav Gressel to the present report in the Annex.

36 Gressel and Popescu, 'The best defence', *op.cit.*

37 See, for example, Nazli Yildirim Schierkolk (2018). '[International Standards and Good Practices in the Governance and Oversight of Security Services](#)'.

# Conclusions and recommendations

The Eastern Partnership is continuously at risk of slipping off the priority list, despite efforts by the EU's easternmost member states in particular. This is due not only to the many other issues that crowd themselves on to the EU agenda, but also to disagreements among EU member states on a range of questions – including the three dilemmas outlined in this paper.

For the Netherlands, the EaP is one of the ways to achieve the overall aim of promoting a stable, well governed and prosperous neighbourhood with respect for the rule of law.<sup>38</sup> In order to make a future iteration of the EaP better fulfil that purpose, the following steps could be considered in the run-up to the 2021 EaP Summit:

- The Netherlands should strive to help the EU **reconcile its geopolitical interests and its values**. Both The Hague and Brussels need to acknowledge that the EaP is part of a broader geopolitical game with the Russian Federation – but it should not play that game by Moscow's rules. Pandering to nominally pro-European kleptocrats or going easy on unpalatable regimes out of short-term geopolitical interests harms the EU's longer-term credibility. Instead, the Netherlands should propagate playing the 'long game', in which the EU harnesses its core values as its main geopolitical tool and offers a longer-term perspective of good governance, transparency and rule of law to the societies of all six EaP countries.
- While the greatest value of the EaP clearly lies in its bilateral approach towards the different countries, the Netherlands should aim to **maintain the multilateral track** of the EaP. It could use the framework for specific priorities for the EU and the Netherlands, such as rule of law, good governance, energy security and green growth/green transition within the EaP. Without the multilateral track there would be scant – if any – discussion on these issues with Belarus, Armenia and Azerbaijan. A minimum level of engagement should also be maintained within the multilateral framework to enable the EU to scale up its cooperation should the political situation change.

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38 See the '[Fiche](#)' presented by Minister of Foreign Affairs Stef Blok to the Dutch Parliament about the future of the Eastern Partnership, 24 April 2020 (in Dutch).



- On **security**, the Netherlands should advocate for a realistic approach that strengthens both the institutions and societies of the EaP against hybrid threats. Signing a 'security compact' consisting of pragmatic and realistic steps, such as stepping up cyber dialogues and the inclusion of military and intelligence officers from the three association countries in relevant training programmes could be an important step. It would reduce the security deficit and also signal to the Russian Federation that the EU aims to address the current asymmetry in which the EU focuses on soft issues while Russia exploits hard security vulnerabilities.
- On the **protracted conflicts** the Netherlands could encourage the EU to take a two-track approach, including in its strategic communications. First, it could make it explicit at the upcoming summit that the EaP is not the preferred format for conflict resolution. At the same time the EU should indicate that it intends to invest more political and financial capital in the understanding of and engagement with these conflicts. It can do this particularly by strengthening its leverage and role in the respective negotiation processes *outside* the EaP framework. It could consider, for example, asking the EUSR for the South Caucasus to take up the position of co-Chair of the Minsk Group on the conflict in Nagorno Karabakh, a position currently held by France.

# Annex 1 Elżbieta Kaca – Geopolitics and EU democracy promotion in the Eastern Partnership: Lessons learned

Polish Institute of International Affairs (PISM)

Since the formation of the Eastern Partnership (EaP), geopolitical considerations related to Russia's expanding role in the region have significantly affected EU democratisation policy towards EaP partners.<sup>39</sup> The Russo-Georgian war in 2008 and the gas crisis in Ukraine in 2009 led the EU to become increasingly convinced it should block Russia's efforts to expand its zone of influence in the EaP region. The EU strongly supported, both politically and financially, reforms implemented by pro-EU political forces in the EaP countries (e.g. in Moldova). In parallel, it tried to encourage the authorities pursuing so-called multi-vector policies to deepen relations with the EU (e.g. Armenia, Ukraine).

Russia's aggression against Ukraine in 2014 was a turning point for the EU, as member states had not expected Moscow to become militarily involved in an EaP region. Because of the risk of further Russian interventions, the EU reduced its political commitment to democratisation in EaP countries, although it has remained an important donor of aid to civil society. It has not proposed any new or ambitious proposals to develop the EaP. The EU has also been reacting cautiously to political crises in the region so as not to confront Russia (e.g. in Belarus in 2020). Moreover, it has proposed a new model of deals for countries with advanced relations with Russia (i.e. Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus), a model less ambitious than the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement.

The EU's geopolitical interests primarily reduced its democratisation efforts in the authoritarian states of Belarus and Azerbaijan. In the period 2016–2020 the EU pursued a policy of critical engagement with Belarus, i.e. sectoral cooperation with the regime

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39 The other factors include the importance of relations with individual EaP countries for the member states, the position of EU institutions dependent on appointments in high positions in the EC and the EEAS, the importance of the EU as a guarantor of security and EU assistance to individual EaP states, the internal situation in the EaP states and the possibility of EU support for development of civil society in authoritarian states.

along with support for the independent non-governmental sector. The EU wanted to develop relations with Alexander Lukashenko in order not to deepen Belarus' integration with Russia. In the case of Azerbaijan, the EU has not been pursuing an active democratisation policy due to that country's significant importance for the EU's energy policy and the low importance of EU aid to that country which would enable any effective pressure to be put on the authorities.

## Lessons learned for the EU

The effectiveness of the EU in motivating EaP partners to implement reforms and in supporting democratic transformation has varied across countries. While the EU has been successful in some sectors of cooperation (e.g. decentralisation reform in Ukraine<sup>40</sup>), many reforms demanded by the EU have not been implemented, particularly with regard to anti-corruption and the judiciary. The following elements of the EU's approach to democratisation have failed:

### Applying the logic of enlargement policy

The EU supports reforms in partner countries based on the logic of its enlargement policy. Together with its partners, it selects ambitious sectoral reforms, formulates conditions mainly concerning approximation of legislation with EU standards, provides assistance for their implementation, and then scores the results. The partners most often agree to such an approach due to the need to maintain good relations with the EU, without conducting in-depth analyses of the gains and losses of the introduction of required *acquis* (e.g. Georgia thus agreed to the DCFTA, which has not so far been highly beneficial for its economy). However, in the absence of any prospect of EU membership, sufficiently high EU funds to cover the costs of transformation and the interests of oligarchs hampering reforms, partner countries use 'cherry-picking' strategies, selectively implementing EU guidelines and conditions. Two examples of EU failure are its support for the reform of decentralisation in Georgia, where there was no political will to carry out such a reform, and its support for reform of the Ukraine energy sector during the presidency of Yanukovych.

Bearing in mind the absence of structural funds for investments in infrastructure, EU support for structural reforms has not been visible in EaP societies, which are mainly interested in improving welfare in the short term. EU aid for an independent judiciary and anti-corruption mechanisms as well as legal approximation are abstract

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40 See Daniel Szeligowski (August 2020). '[The Next Step Towards Decentralisation in Ukraine](#)', PISM Bulletin, or Valentyna Romanova and Andres Umland (September 2019), '[Ukraine's Decentralization Reforms Since 2014. Initial Achievements and Future Challenges](#)', Chatham House Research Paper.

concepts for the average citizen and brings economic and social benefits only in an indirect way and in the long term. The EU is trying to respond to this challenge by launching social aid, for example to mitigate the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, but its financial capacity does not allow for ambitious projects in this area (e.g. in the field of infrastructure).

### **Wrong political calculations**

The EU has been inconsistent in applying conditions to aid disbursement to individual EaP countries. In some cases it has been trying to encourage EaP governments to cooperate by using low-conditional political and financial support, while turning a blind eye to their lack of progress on reforms. In such cases the EU has often overestimated the European ambitions of supported governments; it has not appreciated their real interests, the scale of their ties with local oligarchs and Russia, and their low interest in implementing reforms. An example was EU support for the pro-European government coalition in Moldova in the period 2010-2013 and the promotion of Moldova as an EaP policy success. The 2014 banking scandal exposed the scale of nepotism and the fact that reforms had not actually been implemented. The EU also provided additional financial support to Armenia during Sargsyan's presidency under the 'more for more' principle in order to convince the country to tighten integration with the EU, although the reforms were not implemented.

The failure of EU policy in Moldova marked a turning point and the EU began to apply a more conditional approach. More frequently, it retained aid tranches when conditions were not met and publicly announced such action (e.g. several times in Moldova in the period 2015-2018). However, this approach has still not been consistently applied in relations with other EaP countries – an example being the disbursement of macro-financial assistance to Ukraine despite the country's failure to meet all EU conditions. Still a dilemma for the EU is the wise use of conditionality with a view to not causing a significant deterioration of the internal economic and political situation, which would likely for instance increase the popularity of pro-Russian political parties.

### **Focusing on cooperation with governments, and to a lesser extent with society**

Despite increased EU funding for civil society organisations (CSOs) in its neighbourhood following the 2011 Arab Spring, it is a secondary priority in EU aid disbursed in the EaP region; aid is directed mainly towards central and local authorities. In the years 2009-2019 grants for CSOs accounted for one-fifth of the EU financial aid.<sup>41</sup> Thus, the EU

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41 Giselle Bosse (2019). 'Ten years of the Eastern Partnership: What role for the EU as a promoter of democracy?', *European View*, vol. 18(2), 2019, pp. 220-232.

is not adequately responding to the social potential of the EaP region, which has seen largescale social mobilisation over the last decade (at least 16 protests on a large scale contesting the policies of the authorities). Moreover, even though relations with the authorities are important for maximising cooperation within the EaP, in the situation of oligarchic systems, unstable democracies and autocracies in this region, the EU's focus on cooperation with governments has not brought the expected results.

In relations with authoritarian regimes, the EU's reliance on cooperation with the authorities, in turn, reduces its credibility among the independent non-governmental sector. An example is the policy of critical engagement in Belarus pursued in 2016 to 2020. The EU's compliance with the Belarusian authorities' restrictive law on the registration of foreign aid led to delays and refusals in the registration of grants as well as financing of GONGOs (government-organised non-governmental organisations) that could obtain approval for registration. This has called into question the EU's credibility as a donor of aid to non-governmental sector.<sup>42</sup>

However, the EU has been gradually boosting its support to civil society in countries that have seen a deterioration in human rights standards. Since 2014 and the crisis in relations with Moldova, the EU has been re-shifting aid from the central administration towards civil society (e.g. in Moldova in 2018 and Belarus in 2020). In response to a wave of social protests, the EU also granted additional aid to non-governmental communities, for instance it granted EUR 10 million in Ukraine in 2014 in relation to Revolution of Dignity, and EUR 7.5 million in Armenia in 2018 after the Velvet Revolution.

### **The following elements of the EU's approach to democratisation in EaP countries are examples of good practice:**

#### **EU assistance responds to the partner's needs and is conditional**

EU support for democratic transformation in the EaP region works when some of the following conditions are met: EU-supported reforms already happen to be a priority for the government; good relations with the EU are important for the government for various reasons (e.g. difficult economic and geopolitical situation) and it is ready to make some concessions in its relations with the EU; the conditions are realistic; and reforms are supported through EU advice and coordinated international aid.

An example of EU good practice is the signature of visa facilitation and visa-free agreements, which are highly important for EaP countries. The deals were combined

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42 Elżbieta Kaca (November 2020). 'EU Aid to Belarusian Civil Society: Needs and Challenges', PISM Bulletin no 223.

with numerous EU conditions regarding border and migration management reforms (signing of readmission agreements), as well as issues related to minority rights (e.g. refugees, sexual minorities), which the countries had to meet. Georgia has introduced, for example, an anti-discrimination law, despite the dominant conservative views in society. Moreover, the EU noted partial success in supporting reforms in Ukraine after 2014. It offered a significant aid package, coordinated with the IMF and EU member states and conditional on progress in reforms, and it launched a special support group for Ukraine to help it implement the reforms.<sup>43</sup> Although many reforms could yet be reversed, and the introduction of anti-corruption measures is blocked by oligarch interests, the EU has successfully supported the process of Ukraine's decentralisation, reform of the energy sector and improvement of public procurement law (the introduction of the ProZorro online procurement system).

### **EU assistance to civil society is flexible and reaches local communities**

With regard to EU assistance mechanisms directed to civil society, the launch of the European Endowment for Democracy (EED) in 2013 proved to be successful. Thanks to this foundation, remaining outside of EU structures but receiving permanent funding from the EU and some member states, it has been possible to provide fast and flexible support for pro-democracy forces (i.e. informal civic groups, local NGOs, independent media). The EED supports activities that cannot be subsidised by the EU or member states for various reasons (e.g. it is not an aid priority, there are technical problems in providing aid) and in crisis situations when immediate aid needs to be activated. Importantly, the EED is able to subsidise small initiatives, which is a challenge for the bureaucratic European Commission.

For example, the EED is effectively supporting local pro-democracy groups in Belarus. While many donors faced technical problems delivering on-site assistance, the EED has developed electronic channels for the transfer of funds. The foundation has granted, for example, the purchase of equipment for journalists, publication of materials on protests produced by citizens, activities of informal and local groups, creation of digital tools used to organise protests as well as covering cost-of-living expenses for human rights defenders. The effectiveness of the EED in providing support to Belarusian society has been confirmed by increased funding from the European Commission and some member states (e.g. Poland).

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43 Kataryna Wolczuk and D. Žeruolis (August 2018). '[Rebuilding Ukraine An Assessment of EU Assistance](#)', Chatham House Research Paper.

## Increasing people-to-people contacts

Since the formation of the EaP in 2009, the EU has increased the number of people-to-people contacts with the EaP region. This is indirectly important for strengthening democratisation processes, as it allows people to understand the experience of democracy 'with their own eyes'. For example, the current protests in Belarus have been initiated partly by the middle class (IT sector) and young people who have numerous contacts with Western countries.

The increase in people-to-people contacts as seen by the rapid growth in short-term travel has largely been achieved by means of agreements on the visa-free regime or visa facilitation.<sup>44</sup> Together with the signature of Common Aviation Agreements, they have boosted the development of the low-cost airline network and tourist traffic. The other important factor in the growth of personal contacts has been student exchanges programmes with the EU. Thanks to the boost in Erasmus+ funding for EaP countries in the years 2014 to 2019, around 22,000 students went to the EU, while about 11,000 students from the EU obtained scholarships in EaP countries.<sup>45</sup> Although the scale of exchanges does not yet reflect the population potential of Eastern Partnership countries, it is a positive change. Before the EaP launch, the number of exchanges was negligible. Importantly, the EU has successively included the universities of EaP countries in its programmes in the fields of education, science and culture (e.g. Horizon, Jean Monnet programme).

## Recommendations

The EU should pursue democracy promotion in its relations with EaP countries. Unlike Russia, China and Turkey, which have become more engaged in this region, the EU is a reference point for an increasingly active EaP civil society. In Moldova, the EU's strict conditionality related to reform implementation after 2014 has helped to restore public confidence in the EU.

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44 Synthesis Report for the EMN Study (March 2019). '[Impact of Visa Liberalisation on Countries of Destination](#)'.

45 Own calculations based on data *Erasmus+ Country factsheets: The EU's Neighbourhood, Western Balkans and Russia*, accessed on 25 November 2020, [https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/about/factsheets\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/about/factsheets_en).

While the EU should differentiate its approach to individual partners, there are steps that could be undertaken by EU in the majority of EaP countries to increase its influence on democratisation processes:

- EU delegations should consult more often with parliamentarians, interest groups and the non-governmental sector on the choice of reforms required by the EU and its terms. Public pressure on government is key and to achieve this campaigns are needed to explain the essence of supported reforms and their impact on human well-being. The EU should also work with other international organisations and aid donors to coordinate aid in a given sector. Local NGOs should regularly participate in EU aid monitoring committees to ensure transparent use of financial resources (e.g. as in Georgia).
- The EU should consistently apply conditionality to the authorities on the basis of the 'less for less' principle when it comes to granting financial aid in all EaP countries, as in the case of Moldova. Where human rights standards have deteriorated, the EU should always increase funding for civil society at the expense of support for government administration.
- In order to increase its impact in the fight against corruption, the EU should link the conditions related to independent judiciary with the disbursement of EU funds. This should apply to all financial resources for central and local authorities (not only macro-financial assistance, but also budget support or assistance under sectoral cooperation). However, the conditions should be realistic for partner countries.
- In the new financial perspective, the EU should increase funds for European Endowment for Democracy in the EaP region. Assistance for civil society distributed at EC level (DG NEAR) should be provided primarily through agencies, foundations and large organisations from member states with the relevant experience in providing assistance to organisations in the EaP region.



# Annex 2 Cristina Gherasimov – An argument for further differentiation

German Council on Foreign Relations (DGAP)

The multilateral component of the Eastern Partnership (EaP) that brings the six eastern partners under one institutional framework with the EU member states strengthens their leverage vis-a-vis Brussels and other European capitals, improves their visibility, and can lead to the creation of additional tools to face common challenges in Europe such as energy security, and environmental and climate resilience. But more recent developments in the region once again reiterate the diversity of paths that these countries undertook to strengthen their sovereignty, and their relations with neighbouring countries, including with the EU. A more tailored approach to addressing the challenges and needs of these countries would better prepare the EU to respond to current and future crises as well as to undertake new opportunities in the region that arise as a result.

## Advantages of a multilateral approach

The multilateral framework of the Eastern Partnership policy brings definite advantages to both the EU and the eastern partner countries. The framework helps keep the region on the EU agenda, and it increases the leverage over policy making in Brussels of those countries that seek closer ties with the EU but are unable to do so on an individual basis. For small countries like Armenia, Georgia or Moldova, bilateral relations are not an option if they want to maximise their presence and extract more benefits from Brussels. Only a multilateral framework can give them more prominence on the EU agenda.

This is particularly important now, when the EU's focus lies elsewhere such as fixing the transatlantic relationship or addressing the medium and long-term socioeconomic consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic within the European community itself. It also helps the EU formulate a coordinated approach towards its immediate eastern neighbourhood – a region of primary strategic interest for the EU's stability and security at its borders.

Moreover, both EU member states and eastern partner countries increasingly face challenges that require a concerted effort to overcome. A regional approach to

addressing challenges such as Covid-19 economic recovery, connectivity and security in the Black Sea Basin, and the need to strengthen environmental and climate resilience, to name but a few, would benefit both the EU and its eastern partners. These challenges also come more to the forefront of shaping the security and economic environment of the partner countries' future development trajectories. These can be overcome more effectively when they are tackled multilaterally through common strategic approaches and combined efforts. The EU, for instance, could develop a new comprehensive Investment and Economic Recovery Plan to address the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic in the EaP countries, similar to the one developed for the Western Balkan countries.

## The case for further differentiation

The EU faces three central challenges in the EaP region over the next decade. The first is helping the fight against corruption and state capture in the six countries. The second is to improve the security environment to help these countries unleash their development potential. And the third is to adapt the EaP to the continent's environmental needs. A multilateral framework is necessary to tackle these challenges but it is not sufficient to achieve sustainable results. The solutions to such challenges must be tailored to national contexts to maximise their impact.

For instance, to be able to assist the six countries address the environmental challenges that lie ahead, the EU should help address the inherent structural weaknesses of public institutions which are responsible for the implementation and oversight of the green agenda. Most of these countries, in addition, do not have a national strategy for how to strengthen environmental resilience. This is where the EU's tailored approach would enhance its leverage on both the design of the green agenda priorities in these countries, and shape the future reform progress around them.

Equally important, differentiation is already a reality and is shaped by developments on the ground in the EaP. The Association Agreements, the visa-free regimes and intensified political dialogue already constitute a considerable degree of differentiation. But the more recent developments in the EaP region have exposed the EU's lack of appropriate instruments to intervene or strong levers to influence developments in particular contexts. The EU's slow, reactive approach to the region's multiple crises, such as in Belarus or Nagorno-Karabakh, undermines its credibility and reputation as a strong player in the region. A more tailored, country-specific, differentiated approach would improve the EU's capacity to act in its eastern neighbourhood.

Moreover, many of the hard-core challenges are domestic and specific to each country – for example, rule of law, fight against corruption, and influence of vested interests on the media environment. Reforms in Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia have reached

a point where they bite at the heart of economic and political forces that want to preserve the status quo. Closer ties with the EU means adopting and practising norms and rules that are detrimental to their interests and clientelistic networks. Reformist forces in these countries require new carrots to keep the difficult reform process going, as a result, but they differ from the incentives that Belarus or Azerbaijan would accept. The ultimate carrot for many is the prospect of EU membership. There is no consensus in the EU, however, on the future of EU enlargement. The EU's multilateral approach, from this perspective, is often perceived by countries seeking closer ties with the EU as a straitjacket that does not respond to aspirations for EU membership. As a result, many reformers worry that the multilateral track will gradually replace a more nuanced differentiation. A further application of a smarter, more tailored, and targeted conditionality would help the EU improve its standing in the region, and speed up reforms.

To ensure that the multilateral track does not limit progress in bilateral EU-EaP country relations the EU needs to deepen cooperation in absolutely key areas for the future of the EaP states. The next logical step for cooperation with countries that seek closer ties with the EU – Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova – should be deeper sector-by-sector economic integration into the EU Single Market. The EU and the three associated EaP countries need to jointly establish a roadmap on their gradual and tailored accession to the four freedoms during the next ten years. Another helpful measure would be the acceptance of the associated EaP states into the Single European Payment System, which is likely to bring benefits for people who travel and do business in EaP and EU countries. Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia are ready for closer integration with the EU in the fields of energy, trade, transport, digital economy, customs and security cooperation.

## Conclusion

When it comes to addressing common challenges and crises, the added value of a strengthened multilateral framework is undeniable. It brings benefits both to the EU, which seeks to increase its capacity to shape developments on its eastern borders, and to the eastern partner countries that seek stronger leverage vis-a-vis Brussels. The medium and long-term challenges that the Covid-19 crisis has unleashed could also be tackled more effectively via joint efforts. At the same time, the political and geopolitical developments in the region increasingly require more differentiation for the solutions applied to be sustainable. More differentiation would also give the EU a greater presence and the ability to act promptly via the development of new tools and instruments to intervene, and of strong levers to influence developments in the region.

# Annex 3    Gustav C. Gressel

## – EU Security Compact for the Eastern Neighbourhood: Why unity of command is an issue in politics too

European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR)

In November 2020 ECFR published the proposal for a EU Security Compact suggesting the EU to mend security ties with selected Eastern Partnership countries.<sup>46</sup> The proposal was quite unusual, and for EU diplomats and bureaucrats very uncomfortable: it deliberately included issues of defence and hard security to the basket and blurred the line between security and defence. As the Common Security and Defence (CSDP) is almost abandoned and carries little to no defence component, dragging the EU into this field contradicts the EU's non-military operational culture. It could be argued that NATO is much more accustomed to defence matters and has the respective institutional culture and structures in place. So, why not bother NATO with this endeavour? As Donald Trump is out of the White house, why not let Washington do the hard-security support once more, and garnish the US effort with some symbolic gestures of EU solidarity? This paper argues that compartmentalisation and outsourcing of security and defence support efforts across a wide variety of actors will complicate matters rather than facilitate it when it comes to shaping support measures into political leverage. There may be other actors out there who, from a purely bureaucratic perspective, may be better suited to deliver the kind of aid that was suggested in the Security Compact, but this in turn would not create any influence and leverage for the EU.

In the military field there is a principle called 'unity of command': all assets necessary to fulfil a certain objective must be united under the realm of the commander who is responsible for achieving this task. If the final responsibility for a task is split among different commands, then squabbles or disunity between them on procedures, timing, etc may soon derail the entire effort, even if in sum enough means were allocated to the effort. Hence, in military affairs, final responsibility for one specific task needs to

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46 Gustav Gressel and Nicu Popescu (November 2020). ['The best defence: Why the EU should forge security compacts with its eastern neighbours'](#), ECFR Policy Brief.

rest with one commander. This short article argues that this principle is also relevant in foreign policy and ignoring it has substantially weakened the EU's power and foreign policy success so far.

## What is at stake?

As 2020 has been dominated by the fight against Covid-19, many in the EU and in member states are preoccupied with domestic affairs where policy is concerned. Literally, most of the Union is in self-isolation. While this is definitely advisable for public health, in terms of foreign policy it is counterproductive. The year 2020 saw an unprecedented and alarming rollback of key achievements of the EU Eastern Partnership that could throw back the entire effort to the status of 2012.

Taking a closer look at some of the EaP countries, Ukraine faces a constitutional crisis after a controversial constitutional court verdict that toppled key anti-corruption reforms and institutions, and was poised to stop land reform as well.<sup>47</sup> The verdict jeopardises all reforms that served as preconditions for closer ties with the EU, obviously for political reasons targeting Western integration of Ukraine. But this is not the first time in Ukraine's history that courts act in the name of certain political interest groups rather than an established opinion of the law. The crisis is just one aspect of the total failure of judicial reform in Ukraine, a process that received primary attention in the EU, and the European political establishment kept telling their interlocutors in Kyiv they need to address.<sup>48</sup> 'Progress', however, was always either cosmetic or only partial, and, given its lack of influence, the EU had to settle for partial success.

In Georgia, accusations of fraud in the 2020 parliamentary elections have led to another political crisis, with opposition parties refusing to join the new parliament and demonstrations ongoing.<sup>49</sup> After the 2018 presidential election was found to be

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47 Andrew Wilson (November 2020). ['Misrule of law: Ukraine's constitutional crisis'](#), ECFR Commentary; Mattia Nelles (November 2020). ['Ukraine caught between constitutional crisis and counter-revolution'](#), Atlantic Council Alert; Dejure Foundation (October 2020). ['The Constitutional Court destroyed the asset declaration system: analysis of the decision'](#), Dejure Foundation News; Oleg Sukhov (October 2020). ['Constitutional Court destroys Ukraine's asset declaration system \(UPDATES\)'](#), Kyiv Post; Anti-Corruption Action Center (September 2020). ['The decision of the Constitutional Court does not compromise NABU's activity'](#), AntAC's Analysis.

48 Anti-Corruption Action Center (March 2020). ['Abolition of Zelenskyi's judicial reform: analysis of the decision of Constitutional Court'](#).

49 European Forum (November 2020). ['Georgian opposition refuses to enter parliament demanding new elections'](#), European Forum for Democracy and Solidarity; BBC News (November 2020), ['Georgia protests: Tbilisi police fire water cannon at demonstration'](#).

fraudulent, the EU tried to push for election law reform that would make the regular electoral process less vulnerable.<sup>50</sup> The compromise brokered by the EU and the US proved to be less effective than was hoped for.<sup>51</sup>

These rollbacks happen in states associated with the EU and in key portfolios the EU considers as the core of its own mission and values: democracy and rule of law. In the wider neighbourhood, the loss of EU influence is even more dramatic. In Belarus, Russia used military manoeuvres as a signal to the West not to intervene.<sup>52</sup> The EU was left to watch a brutal crackdown of a peaceful protest movement demanding representative elections and the advent of a Kremlin-managed leadership transition meant to tighten and institutionalise Moscow's control over Minsk.<sup>53</sup>

In the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in the Caucasus, Russia and Turkey agreed to implement the Lavrov plan by military force.<sup>54</sup> European observers have chosen to ignore early voices from the Russian entourage claiming that Moscow agreed on a limited Azeri offensive if it would weaken [Pashinyan](#), reverse the 2018 decision on a new government, and strengthen military and political control over Armenia. Not surprisingly, this is what Russia got.<sup>55</sup> While most European observers speculated on a Russian-Turkish split, the gentlemen's agreement between Putin and Erdogan has proved to be durable and lasting.

The Russian-Turkish strategic entente that wilfully applies military force to secure their own strategic goals, co-manage the European periphery and push the West out – or make Western presence conditional to their own demands – in all important strategic questions, is an entirely new challenge for European security that most politicians in Brussels have not yet understood.

## Why the EU's self-restraint is outdated

On paper, the EU was happy to endorse the comprehensive approach, but in reality 'comprehensiveness' was a fig-leaf to substitute real defence policy with placebo policies in the civilian soft-security field. The excuses for this were plentiful: first and foremost, the EU had no culture or experience of working on hard security, and Common

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50 Deutsche Welle (December 2018). '[Georgia protests decry presidential 'election fraud'](#)'.

51 Krassen Stanchev (June 2020). '[Electoral reform – the good news we missed from Georgia](#)', Euractiv.

52 Gustav Gressel (August 2020). '[Russia's military manoeuvres at the Belarus border – a message to the West](#)', ECFR commentary.

53 Pavel Slunkin (November 2020). '[Lukashenka besieged: Russia's plans for Belarus](#)', ECFR Commentary.

54 Ivan Preobrazhensky (October 2020). '[Is there a peace plan for Karabakh?](#)', Iddle.

55 RBC (July 2020). '[Пашинян ответил на пост Симоньян о неблагодарной Армении](#)'.

Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) remained a paper-tiger at large. Nothing of that relieves Europeans of the need to be more active in the security field – or risk negative repercussions in the neighbourhood.

In addition to that, there are numerous quasi-strategic arguments that suggest that doing nothing is just fine: sooner or later, Chinese-Russian rivalry will drive Russia into Europeans' arms, sooner or later Russian-Turkish rivalry will escalate, sooner or later the Russian economy will collapse, etc. None of these arguments resembles reality. Europe has also been largely unwilling to adjust its governance structures, legal frameworks, security services' competences or policy responses when Moscow extended the political confrontation into spheres Europe deemed neutral or in the common interests: cyber-attacks, hostile information campaigns, weaponizing culture, history and other intellectual domains, and using threats or lethal force against dissidents within and abroad. While paying lip service to resilience, few European citizens and politicians regard Russian, Turkish or Iranian hostile operations as a serious cause for concern. This negligence is above all an expression of European self-righteousness: Europe is the wealthiest, most advanced, most civilised part of the world; hence, it is entitled to victory, even without acting to bring victory about. Debunking all these myths is beyond the scope of this paper. Nevertheless, if victory had always been unique to the most advanced, progressive and civilised actors, all Europe would speak Latin today and Europeans would be wearing togas.

On the eastern flank, it was feared that any substantial engagement would enrage or insult Russia. However, the Turkish example in particular illustrates that the opposite is true. Turkey is a military actor that has supported warfighting factions opposite to the ones backed by Russia, both in the Libyan and Syrian civil wars, as well as in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. It has shot down a Russian plane in Syria and its proxies a helicopter in Armenia. Ankara has intervened militarily in Syria counterbalancing Russia. All these difficulties have been managed, and Putin has a very high opinion of Erdogan and Turkey (like he had of George W Bush).<sup>56</sup> Military power is the language the Kremlin knows, speaks and respects. If other powers speak the same language, managing even conflicting interests – as in the case of Turkey – becomes a lot easier. On the other hand, the EU refrains its actions to the economic and civil society sphere – in the Kremlin's eyes part of an economic warfare and subversion/colour revolution strategy – which is much more difficult for Moscow to understand and to manage. Therefore, if Europe were to seek better relations with Moscow, it would first need to become a military actor.

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56 See: Kremlin website (2020). '[Meeting of the Valdai Discussion Club](#)'; Kremlin website (2007). '[Speech and the Following Discussion at the Munich Conference on Security Policy](#)'.

Now that Joe Biden has won the US presidency, the temptation to sit back and watch the US shouldering security efforts again is strong in Europe. It might work in the short run, but it is self-defeating in the long term. Not only will Biden be preoccupied with domestic politics and rebuilding institutions, but the domestic challenge posed by the populist section of the Republican party will not fade on 20th January. Europeans will face constant pressure to spend more on defence and to do more in the security realm. Ignoring the pressure would be the most effective way to undermine the Biden presidency and its re-commitment to NATO, something Europeans will want to avoid. On the other hand, post-Corvid-19 financial restraints will limit their freedom of action in spending resources. Hence, substituting, to a certain extent, spending with increased actions – like largescale manoeuvres with foreign partners to rehearse the defence of Europe or a partner country, or with military support for Ukraine, etc – will be necessary to show Washington that Europe is serious about defence, although not immediately able to skyrocketing defence budgets. In such a case, it would be advisable to think beforehand how to engage in the most meaningful way with the resources at hand, and where the Europeans could have the best impact with limited resources. Note, all measures described in the EU Security Compact are relatively cheap. And financial contributions to foreign military aid programmes may be a way for die-hard pacifist states to increase military spending without enlarging their own military apparatus and capabilities.

The other temptation will be to shift all security efforts to NATO. This was done in the past in Ukraine and Georgia, resulting in the US performing all the meaningful tasks and European allies standing by. While NATO definitely has the culture and organisational skills to handle security assistance programmes, there are risks attached to this division of labour. First, NATO has its own organisational and bureaucratic inertia. If programmes are conditionalized, the criteria will reflect NATO's own agenda, which focuses on civilian control of the armed forces, efficient defence management, implementation of NATO standards in administration and armed forces, etc. This agenda is not wrong in itself, but falls short of the wider vision of the democratic transformation the EU wants to bring about in the Eastern Neighbourhood. And because the EU is failing in its core policies in the Eastern Neighbourhood it urgently needs leverage to reinforce its own goals (notably election security, democracy, rule of law, separation of power, judicial reform, etc). Programmes managed and evaluated by NATO cannot be conditionalized to wider EU-defined goals. Second, these programmes would be subject to political dynamics stemming from different memberships in EU and NATO. Efforts to link any EU and NATO policies have been killed so far by Turkey and Greece, who are trying to take such links hostage to their own demands. As Turkey has become more assertive and transactional in recent years, it will hardly miss this opportunity to spoil the efforts if it does not get concessions in other fields – and it is questionable whether the Europeans are willing to pay. While close cooperation with corresponding NATO programmes is advisable for the EU as such, as well as EU member states providing individual support measures, Europeans need to steer clear of these political stumbling blocks.



Hence, for the sake of ‘unity of command’, it would be advisable to keep as much as possible under the EU umbrella. Additionally, for the sake of political impact and influence, it would be highly advisable not to water down initiatives to ‘civilian’ security programmes only. They will not yield results in terms of leverage, and will not create wider influence and diplomatic weight for Europe.

In conclusion, the EU framework is sufficiently flexible to allow opt-out clauses or confine participation in a PESCO initiative to few members. Member states interested in the Eastern flank for their own security will most likely be the key providers for practical cooperation – on cyber, intelligence, military, and defence industries. However, having at least a coordinating framework in Brussels that allows for the coupling of security assistance with the ample EU resources in the economic and civil society realm would amplify and reinforce existing EU policies and give Europe a voice that is heard again on issues regarding its own neighbourhood.

While this paper advocates a broader role for the EU, at least in a coordinating role, there are of course traps to fall into as well. For example, due to unanimity, CFSP missions and programmes are set on bureaucratic autopilot once created. Any re-adjustment or evaluation is very much avoided in order not to question the programme/mission and open the Pandora’s box of council decisions again. However, programmes on autopilot are ill suited to be used as leverage, because the recipient state knows that the programme concerned will continue, no matter what. The same, unfortunately, was true for some conditionalities set up within the Eastern Partnership: the EU-Ukraine summit in October 2020 remained largely silent on the rapid rollback against reforms taking place in Kyiv since spring 2020.<sup>57</sup> One of the main reasons for this was that the EU bureaucracy feared budgetary cuts in the post-Brexit era, hence was very eager to report ‘successes’ to justify the Eastern Partnership. This, as events in Kyiv in October and November have shown, proved to be a grave mistake.

The paper argues that security partnerships and support measures should be part of the Eastern Partnership’s ‘more for more’ portfolio. Linking security cooperation measures to specific targets on reform, democratic transformation, and rule of law, would in fact be the best way forward for Europe in the direction it wants to go. Implementing the programmes would then rest with a PESCO, CFSP or coalition-of-the-willing format; bureaucratic ‘boxology’ is not the main issue.

That said, no organisational, diplomatic or bureaucratic setup will relieve Europeans of the burden of political leadership and open, sometimes difficult, confrontation of reform spoilers and vested interests in partnership countries. If the EU and its member states

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57 European Council (2020). ‘EU-Ukraine summit, 6 October 2020’.

fail on this, they will fail also in their overall goal for the Eastern Neighbourhood, as well as in decades-long policies put in place to support their EaP partners.

While at operational level, implementation of the EU security compact will need to be decentralised in many fields – particularly in those fields where the Union in a narrow sense has no capacity on its own, e.g. intelligence or military cooperation, etc – a European umbrella and coordination would increase effectiveness and political impact and contribute to the achievement of a unified chain of command. In such a role, the EU would also be in a better position to closely coordinate support measures with the United States – where both military and civilian capabilities are in one hand. Both actors will have to link security and non-security assistance measures to emphasise the agenda of democratic transition for the Eastern Neighbourhood. If the EU wants to be a valuable partner for the new Biden administration – and this should be a goal shared across Europe – it will also have to find ways to streamline its command and control structures and – including on defence support matters – be faster and more flexible than a cacophony of 27 member states.

Implementing the Security Compact will be uncharted territory for the EU and its member states for many reasons. It will be uncomfortable, and demanding. It will break with current bureaucratic routines and political traditions. But the EU has little choice on the matter: either it will further watch its slide into political irrelevance, or it will have to act beyond the current programmes and policies. Both will be uncomfortable paths, but only one provides the chance for happy endings.