



# Eastern Partnership at a crossroads

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**T**he EU's Eastern Partnership (EaP) initiative aimed to bring increased stability, prosperity and democracy to the six partner countries - Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine. Over the last five years, the EaP has produced mixed results, achieving more in some partner countries than others. While some states wish to become full-fledged EU members, others want a more minimalistic approach.

Structural policy weaknesses and different socio-economic realities of the Eastern partners notwithstanding, a significant challenge to the policy has come from Russia which views European integration and democracy on its borders as a threat to its own security. Today insecurity and instability in the EU's eastern neighbourhood is far greater than it was five years ago as Russia has pushed back against the aspirations of Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia to further integrate with the EU.

While trade embargoes have been used to undermine economies, Russia has created instability via the existing frozen conflicts in the region and by creating new ones. Hence, while the framework of the EaP was correct, the assumption was wrong – namely the EU under-estimated how Russia would view the threat to the spread of Western values to its borders.

The future of the EaP, not to mention the security of the Eurasia region, depends on the EU's ability to clearly define its objectives in the region, respond robustly to Russia, and give the countries that are committed to modernization and democratization sufficient political and economic support.

The EU's new leadership has promised a review of the Eastern Partnership. This is important because the EaP in its current form has run its course. There is now a broad recognition that there is a need for a more differentiated approach. This does not mean scrapping the policy, but rather deconstructing and reloading it, taking into account the new realities on the ground.

There is little to be gained by putting countries that see their future as full members of the EU (Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia) and which are committed to carrying out political and economic reforms, with those countries that want very different types of relationships (Armenia, Azerbaijan and Belarus). Much greater focus needs to be placed on bilateral ties rather than on the multi-lateral approach, meaning the EaP requires a tailor-made approach, linked to each partner's achievements and the wishes - not just the political elites but other actors such as civil society and business.

## Ukraine-Moldova-Georgia

The Russia-Ukraine crisis forced the EU to boost its engagement with Ukraine to an unprecedented level which has had a knock-on effect on Moldova and Georgia. All three countries signed Association Agreements (AA) including Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas (DCFTA) with the EU in June 2014. These are now being implemented, although in the case of Ukraine the provisional application was postponed until the end of 2015. However, the road ahead will be far from easy as implementation of AA/DCFTA's will not be easy or cheap.

With Ukraine, the EU has increased political, economic and security ties and has acted as an interlocutor in gas talks between Ukraine and Russia. The crisis with Ukraine has created greater solidarity in terms of steps to strengthen energy security, and has been a wakeup call to the EU in terms its relationship with Russia. However, Ukraine's new coalition government faces significant challenges of both an internal and external nature and Kyiv will require significant economic and political support for the foreseeable future, otherwise Europe risks a failed state on its doorstep.

Yet despite Ukraine's economic woes, economic support must be linked to reform. While Russia is without doubt a significant threat to Ukraine, security, stability and prosperity will only be achieved if Ukraine's political elites make a complete break from the corrupt and criminal style of governance that has plagued the country for the last two decades.

Meanwhile, the recent parliamentary election in Moldova has underlined how divided Moldovan society is, with the pro-European parties winning by a whisker. Despite the ruling coalition declaring that European integration is irreversible, almost half the country continues to favour closer ties with Russia. Moscow has been particularly proactive. As in Ukraine, Russia carried out a successful information war, promoting its own Eurasian Union, decimating the EU, while also placing trade embargoes on Moldovan produce and threats of restrictions on labour migration in Russia.

The EU and the Moldovan authorities have failed to match Moscow's proactivity in terms of promoting their own policies, including failing to explain the benefits of closer integration with the EU and drawing attention to projects, including infrastructure such as roads and bridges, that has been financed by the EU. The new coalition government, together with the EU, will need to significantly beef-up their communication strategy if they are to turn this situation around.

The Georgian approach to the EaP has been successful for a number of reasons: political consensus for Euro-Atlantic integration; broad public support from all parts of society; a genuine desire for democratic change and a shared belief that, given its geopolitical situation, membership of the Euro-Atlantic institutions is the only way to guarantee Georgia's independence and long term security.

Located in a particularly volatile region, surrounded by undemocratic states and frozen conflicts, Georgia can be a role model for the region, representing an opportunity for the EU to demonstrate how adopting key reforms and values can improve the quality of life for the population. However, maintaining the current level of support will not be easy as Georgia begins to implement the AA and DCFTA.

All three countries require deeper support from the EU and the Union should be creative in terms of its engagement, including reaching out and initiating dialogue with other important actors, such as the Russian Orthodox Church.

### **Armenia-Azerbaijan-Belarus**

Armenia, Azerbaijan and Belarus have no aspirations to join the EU. Nevertheless, all three want relations with the EU but to different degrees. Armenia's relationship with the EU has entered a new phase based on the new reality of Yerevan's membership in the Eurasian Union. While what Yerevan is able to have in terms of cooperation with the EU is limited there is still space for the EU, and it's important for the EU to be there supporting civil society and other actors in the country.

Azerbaijan, an important EU energy partner, is looking for a strategic relationship based on mutual interests and objectives and is not interested in signing an Association Agreement or being a party to the EU's 'more for more' approach. Belarus is also looking to open a new dialogue with the EU and this should be explored, despite ongoing concerns related to human rights.

### **Expectations from the new team**

With a new team taking over the top EU posts there has been considerable speculation over what this will mean for foreign policy, and in particular how it could impact the Eastern Partnership at such a crucial time for the EU's relations with its Eastern neighbours.

It seems that the new leadership is unlikely to have a significant impact on the policy, particularly in terms of what the end game will be. President Jean-Claude Juncker's statement that there will be no further enlargement for the next five years, a remark that brought little counter-reaction from any of the member states, demonstrates that with the exception of a handful of states, there is little appetite for further enlargement and a continuing lack of political will to even begin to contemplate offering membership prospectuses to countries such as Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia.

Moreover, the new high representative for foreign and security policy, Italy's Federica Mogherini, has never been regarded as a strong supporter of further enlargement. And in terms of neighbourhood policy, Rome traditionally looks to the south when neighbourhood issues are discussed.

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While the new Commissioner for enlargement and neighbourhood policy, Johannes Hahn, stated during his hearing in the European Parliament that Ukraine would be his priority, his catchphrase for the countries in his dossier was 'quality before speed' - making the economic benefits of applicant and association agreements more visible and ensuring that these countries also did their homework in implementing reforms.

This again indicates that we are likely to see a continuation of the 'door is neither open nor shut policy' because of the ongoing enlargement fatigue and the very visible lack of consensus and vision amongst EU member states over how far and how deep the policy should go. The current state of the Union is very fragile due to poor economic growth and the rise of populism. This makes it all the more difficult to pursue normative values in external relations.

### **The Riga Summit and beyond**

The May 2015 Riga EaP Summit seems set to be a watershed moment as Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia are demanding a clearer, longer term perspective, as remaining in what could be termed as the 'the grey zone' indefinitely will be very difficult. While the Riga summit will be an opportunity to assess the provisional results of the implementation of association agreements, there is an urgent need for the EU to first of all deliver something tangible such as visa liberalization to Ukraine and Georgia as well as present a vision for the future. This could take the form of a roadmap that goes beyond what is currently on the table, to give all three states a sign that there is a light at the end of the tunnel and to clearly distinguish them from the other states in the policy.

Furthermore, any revised EaP would have to take into account the fact that Russia was the main threat, as witnessed by its annexation of Crimea and promotion of instability in Eastern Ukraine. It also had the tools to interfere in other EaP countries. Furthermore, when it comes to Russia and the EaP countries there can be no compromise and the EU must demonstrate unity in purpose. This means the EU devise a robust strategy for Russia which must include continuing with its policy of sanctions as long as Russia refuses to de-escalate the situation in Eastern Ukraine, despite the economic pain this is causing in some member states.

Steps to appease Russia or strike a grand bargain should be avoided as Moscow will perceive this as the EU allowing Russia a veto on the EaP and this is something we must never allow. If we do so we will, to all intents and purpose, be agreeing to Russia's goal of re-establishing zones of influence. ■

