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# Beyond the Eastern Partnership: The Time has Arrived for a New Policy in the East of Europe

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*In the context of Russia's war in Ukraine, the EU membership perspective of Ukraine and Moldova, and the protracted crisis in Western relations with Belarus, the EU's Eastern Partnership initiative is looking increasingly anachronistic and out of sync with reality. It should be replaced with a more ambitious but at the same time more individually tailored set of policies that would drop the pretence of dealing with a distinct region or political grouping, and enable the West to better differentiate between the partners and achieve tangible results through separate bilateral relationships.*

## **Eastern Policy: the New Thinking**

While for as long as the war in Ukraine continues it will not be possible to fully anticipate the future structure of economic and political relationships in Eastern Europe, or the role the West will be able to play in this space, it is clear that Russia's invasion of Ukraine has already fundamentally changed Western perceptions of and political approaches to the area. There is no way to return to the status quo prior to 24 February 2022.

The most radical shift is that neither the US nor Europe is any longer seeking the position of mediator in the war between Russia and Ukraine. Instead, both have chosen Ukraine's side and are now providing it with significant economic, military, political and diplomatic assistance, without which Ukraine would not have been able to put up such strong resistance. Notwithstanding statements, especially from some European capitals, that the West does not see itself as a party to the conflict, and the self-imposed restrictions on sending particular types of heavy weapons to Ukraine, it is undeniable that the West's current stance is in stark contrast to the previous policy of avoiding head-on confrontation with Russia through means of "sanctions and dialogue".

Furthermore, the West has abandoned its earlier default preference for a frozen conflict over a “hot war”. This explicit or implicit preference weakened Ukraine’s positions following Russia’s annexation of Crimea and during the Minsk process dealing with the hostilities in Ukraine’s Donbas. The West now seems to have realized that a frozen conflict is not a solution but a pause before a new, more disastrous phase of a war. This understanding means that a much bigger effort and sacrifice than was previously seen as acceptable will be required from the West to achieve a sustainable peace in the region.

No less crucial is a revision of the earlier tacit recognition of Europe’s division into an area of Euro-Atlantic integration and a post-Soviet space where different rules apply. The June 2022 decision to grant Ukraine and Moldova EU candidate status removed the old mental map that guided many concrete European decisions on the cooperation formats available to post-Soviet states. Again, it did not go unnoticed that none of Russia’s post-Soviet allies, with the exception of Alexander Lukashenko’s regime, openly supported the Kremlin’s actions in Ukraine. This is yet more evidence that Russia does not enjoy the unquestionable hegemony in the region that until recently some in the West believed.

### **The Problems with the Eastern Partnership**

The significance of these conceptual shifts is difficult to overestimate. It should be obvious that since Western policy on Russia will never be the same again, this has implications for the entire region. Paradoxically, however, the 2009 EU initiative of the Eastern Partnership (EaP) remains a parallel – some would say competing – conceptual framework for charting the course of Europe’s relations with Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine.

It is true that the EaP has evolved over the years. It learned to see a difference between partners willing to come closer to the EU and those that were reluctant to do so. It also helped to achieve Association Agreements and visa liberalization with Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia. These and some other successes should be recognized and praised.

That said, it should also have been clear that given the deep divisions among the partners, despite all the rhetoric about “connectivity”, synergistic and positive effects could not and should not have been expected across the region from the outset. Offering “ownership” of the initiative to the partners meant giving those unwilling to change too much say over what was originally supposed to be EU policy on transforming the respective countries, rather than an assistance mechanism to “boost resilience” – in some cases, in practice, the resilience of the regime rather than society, let alone the democratic elements within these societies.

Today, the EaP looks like an anachronism. Conceived and launched at a time when the EU and Russia were calling each other “strategic partners” and proclaiming a “partnership for Russia’s modernization”, on the one hand, and the West had no appetite for clashes with Russia over the shared neighbourhood, on the other, the policy is out of sync with reality. Nor can it be attractive for countries already engaged in superior formats of cooperation and integration with Europe or those which have never been convinced by the offer. Belarus’ June 2021 decision to suspend its membership of the EaP was not surprising, given that this “partner country” had found itself subject to EU sanctions, but it is nonetheless a telling illustration.

## Towards a New Policy

Instead of tweaking the EaP and persuading itself that it still has potential, it is probably high time for the EU to replace it with a policy – or rather a set of policies – that is more ambitious but at the same time more individually tailored. This would enable the EU to differentiate better between the partners and achieve tangible results with separate bilateral relationships.

The key task – and a key challenge – in relations with **Ukraine** will be to demonstrate that the EU takes Ukraine's candidate status seriously. This might seem mission impossible, given the ongoing war, the expected huge difficulties of post-war reconstruction and the possible weaknesses of Ukraine's governmental and societal institutions, on the one hand, and the insufficient commitment of some EU member states, on the other. Nonetheless, Ukraine should not repeat the never-ending story of Balkan enlargement. That would be too devastating a blow to the EU's reputation as a foreign policy actor. Strict conditionality should be applied to promote reforms, but should not be used as a pretext to postpone membership beyond reason or derail it altogether.

The same set of recommendations applies to **Moldova**, which in some respects might be an even more difficult case, given the lack of internal consensus on the country's European future. Importantly, neither Ukraine nor Moldova should be hostages to each other's underperformance but be judged on the basis of their own merits. "Group accession" should not be the aim.

**Georgia** should know that its 'EU perspective' can be opened up if it gets back on track and catches up. However, it should also be clear that if it does not – or if there is regression in terms of institutional reform or the standards in the political process, – the Association Agreement will not be expanded into a more advanced form of interaction.

Relationships with **Armenia** and **Azerbaijan** would be difficult to upgrade into something more comprehensive than the current respective models, considering the former's close ties with Russia and the latter's growing self-confidence, above all, as an energy exporter. That said, the pluralism of Armenian society and the energy resources of Azerbaijan could, each in their own way, serve as vehicles for EU cooperation. The EU should also continue to seek opportunities to increase its mediation role in the conflict between the two states.

The biggest potential for an EU breakthrough in the east of Europe, however, can be found in **Belarus**. This is where the historic choice of whether to integrate with Europe is yet to be made. Of course, the starting point would be to get rid of any illusions that a re-engagement with the Lukashenko regime, which has proved a failure so many times in the past, will be possible just because Lukashenko will presumably want to increase his room for manoeuvre vis-à-vis Moscow. To think otherwise would not only betray the many thousands of Belarusians who have endured humiliation and torture in the regime's jails, and undermine Ukraine's efforts by demonstrating that Lukashenko can continue to make Belarusian territory available for Russia's aggression against Ukraine with impunity. It would also be a failure to understand how systemically anti-West the Minsk regime is. A precondition for any minimal dialogue with Belarus should be the release of all political prisoners, media freedom in the country and that it ask Russia to withdraw its troops from the country. More importantly, the EU should be clearly formulating an economic, political and institutional offer to post-Lukashenko Belarus that could be debated in society, assisting it to make its choice.

In addition, the EU should think about how to increase its presence in **Central Asia**. If

Russian positions in the region weaken, which is probable as a result of the war in Ukraine, Central Asian countries may need an anchor in the West in the face of a stronger China.

The Eastern Partnership does not seem to be purposeful, resourced or flexible enough to cope with this agenda. A revamped policy might and should be.

### **Policy Recommendations:**

- ✦ Replace the Eastern Partnership with a new set of country-specific policies.
- ✦ Take the EU candidate status of Ukraine and Moldova seriously.
- ✦ Avoid re-engaging with Lukashenko's Belarus, but prepare instead an offer to the Belarusian society that can help it make the European choice.



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