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No Stable EU Without a New Eastern Enlargement

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The events of recent years have proved that building a stable and secure European Union will be impossible unless it finds a place for its eastern neighbours. The Eastern Partnership (EaP) has accelerated the transformation of the region and has a place in the history of the EU foreign policy agenda, but a new strategic vision is now crucial. Granting candidate status for Ukraine and Moldova, and potentially also Georgia – something that a year ago would have been seen as unrealistic or a fantasy – is today not enough. A new eastern enlargement tied to Ukraine's reconstruction should be at the centre of the EU's post-EaP policy. For the time being, it will be crucial to substantially increase military support for Ukraine as its success is key to the future of the entire region.

The Eastern Partnership's Heritage

Before the Eastern Partnership (EaP) was launched in 2009, the EU's eastern agenda was amorphous or even non-existent. The initiative led the EU into a new region and significantly assisted with that region's transformation. However, the EaP framework was created in relation to complex and diverse countries with differing ambitions and foreign policy goals. Covering Belarus, Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan in a single policy, and treating them all as theoretically having similar goals, was its "original sin". The countries were perceived as a common area, but in practice different political and economic systems and geopolitical orientations meant that such an area never existed. The EaP was not a success at the scale of the whole region, but it has had undoubted achievements, the most important being the Association Agreements and the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement signed in 2014 with Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine, as well as visa liberalization with these countries.

The EaP is often criticized, but the region's history can be separated into before and after the initiative. The initiative was created in a different international situation and quickly fulfilled its goal of bringing increased EU attention to its Eastern Neighbourhood. However, the EaP policy framework is no longer relevant for Ukraine and Moldova, as both have been granted candidate status, and Georgia should soon be able to follow both nations.

Since its launch, the area covered by the EaP has changed dramatically. Russian aggression in Ukraine has destroyed the previous order in Eastern Europe, beginning the transformation to a new political era. Along with other factors, the EaP played a positive role in bringing the region to this new political stage. Its framework is already outdated, however, and it should be replaced by a more ambitious policy that will consider the progress of reforms made by some of the eastern neighbours, new priorities, and the level of euro-enthusiasm, which is higher than in many EU member states. Ukraine, a crucial eastern neighbour, never really liked the EaP initiative, perceiving it as temporary and insufficient.

In Search of a New Vision

The June 2022 European Council conclusions, which granted candidate status to Ukraine and Moldova, were not so much the EU's own strategic decision as a forced and delayed response to Russia's aggression. In recent years, EU policy towards its Eastern Neighbourhood has been short-sighted and lacked any long-term vision. The often-repeated appeals of some member states to grant the eastern neighbours a membership perspective went unanswered or were even considered to "lack realism". Although not officially acknowledged, the Russian factor has influenced the level of the EU's ambition in Eastern Europe and the Caucasus.

Candidate status for Ukraine and Moldova confirms both nations' European aspirations, but it is not a policy in itself. A final favourable decision must be transformed into a long-term concept – a new eastern enlargement – to complete the European project, which is impossible without integrating the eastern neighbours. It is an especially urgent task in a situation of the biggest threat to European security and order since 1945. The full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine and the previous conflicts or revolutions in Eastern Europe and the Caucasus of the past three decades demonstrate that the EU's security and stability are inseparable from the security and stability of those regions.

A new EU Eastern agenda based on strategic patience is now crucial. Its cornerstone should be a recognition that the future of the international order in Europe depends on the outcome of the ongoing war and – at a later stage – on Ukraine's effective rebuilding and successful modernization, as it is a crucial country for the transformation of the entire region – and of Russia.

The European Union should not repeat the same mistake it made in the Western Balkans. For many years, EU enlargement policy was that region's main stabilizing and transformative factor. However, it was eventually ineffective due to some EU member states' reluctance to accept new members, which substantially slowed the reform process. Perception of the EU as an actor that merely promises but does not deliver led to a European integration deadlock. The vast support for EU accession seems to have been ignored by the EU. Bitter lessons from the policy towards the Western Balkans show that enlargement remains its most attractive tool for influencing and pushing transformation in neighbouring countries.

A new policy towards the Eastern Neighbourhood should adapt to the new realities and be based on genuine leadership. After granting candidate status to Ukraine and Moldova, the next step should be to define the specific conditions for starting membership negotiations with both nations, beginning talks in the first half of 2023. In

June, the European Council formulated preconditions for Kyiv and Chisinau, expecting more active internal reform, particularly a strengthening of judicial independence, and more effective anti-corruption measures. Future EU decisions will be dependent on meeting these terms. Brussels should not put the eastern neighbours in the same basket as the Western Balkans, as each region has its own specificities and needs a separately tailored policy with the necessary administrative, expert and financial support.

Strike While the Iron is Hot

The EU and its member states should not artificially block the beginning of accession talks but use the momentum to play a more active role in the region. In addition, an alleged lack of absorption capacity or a need for internal reform, such as changing EU voting systems, should not be used as an excuse by those member states that oppose further enlargement. The first eight months of Ukraine's defensive war against Russian aggression has shown that the EU remains in the shadow of US leadership on military transfers and financial assistance. In the cases of Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia, the decisive impetus for implementing reform can be delivered by including them in the enlargement policy. The EU should also play a significant role in post-war reconstruction in Ukraine, which would transform the country and boost economic development in the region and the EU.

The entire Eastern Neighbourhood region is in the process of rapid political transformation, which Russia's aggression against Ukraine has accelerated. In a situation where the countries of the Caucasus and Central Asia are trying more or less openly to distance themselves from neo-imperial Russia, there are growing aspirations for EU links, and for the EU to be more profound in its declarations and to have a comprehensive plan for the region. This will not constitute charity as the stability of the Eastern Neighbourhood is in the interests of the rest of Europe. Realistically, any accession process would take many years. Nonetheless, there is no alternative, particularly if the ongoing war is considered a turning point in the West's perception of the region, challenging deeply rooted traditional stereotypes. The process, however, is far from complete, and the EU should strike while the iron is hot.

The EU candidacy of Ukraine is good news for future post-Lukashenko Belarus as, following democratic transformation, Minsk can be granted similar status. The EU must send a clear political message to Belarusian society that the country would be welcome following regime change. The current political situation in Belarus is frozen but one day – probably sooner rather than later – it will be back on the EU agenda. A window of opportunity for the EU to be an essential stabilizing actor has appeared in the Caucasus, especially in the context of the Armenian–Azerbaijani war.

Russia's weakening role in the entire region and the turmoil in that country have the potential to create an unprecedented role for the EU in Eastern Europe and the Caucasus, similar to that which it played in Central Europe's highly successful transformation after 1991. History provides a chance to restart and complete the European project. This will require a bold vision. However, an opportunity is one thing: the other is to want to seize it.

Policy Recommendations

- A new eastern enlargement should be at the core of the EU's policy on the region. A prosperous and secure EU is impossible without integrating its eastern neighbours.
- The eastern neighbours should not be addressed in a single policy, but policy must be differentiated and tailored to each country. Their European integration process should be conditional and depend only on the progress of reforms.
- Accession talks with Ukraine and Moldova should start as soon as both countries have met the preconditions. Their integration process should not be postponed on the pretext that the EU has still to introduce internal reforms or because of an alleged lack of absorption capacity.



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