

Realizing the Vision of a Europe “Whole, Free and at Peace”: A New Strategic Approach to the Eastern Neighbourhood

Andreas Umland & Hugo von Essen

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Executive Summary

Thirty years after the break-up of the Soviet Union, the West's engagement with the European Union's Eastern neighbourhood needs a fresh start based on a return to the common vision of a Europe “whole, free and at peace”. Merely trying to maintain the status quo will result in more backsliding, further instability, and less security in Eastern Europe and beyond, including the EU itself.

The future of the Eastern neighbourhood has strategic implications not only for the region, but for the entire European project, the future of Russia and the fate of the European security order. A recent diminution in strategic interest in the region in Brussels, Washington and elsewhere, various forms of political regress in East European states, and an increasingly assertive Russia are each causes for concern. In combination, they represent a trend that must be reversed.

To achieve sustainable reform, strengthened resilience and a better approximation of European values, norms, and standards in the Eastern Partnership (EaP) states, the West, in its various incarnations, needs to be re-inspired by a unified vision that directs it to work in a coordinated way. This report presents such a renewed vision and an overhaul of the EU's approach to post-Soviet Europe that more vigorously supports security, democracy, and reform in the Eastern neighbourhood. In particular, it proposes that the EU's EaP programme more clearly differentiates between the six target states and focuses on the Association Agreement (AA) trio. At the same time, in all six countries, the EU should renew its promotion of democracy, human rights and the rule of law in line with these countries' international commitments. Accession even by the AA trio to the EU and/or NATO is unlikely in the next few years. A deliberate re-engagement with them within the EaP will therefore be critical for their survival and development as democratic, sovereign and prosperous states, to the benefit of all of Europe.

Introduction: Towards a New Strategic Approach to Eastern Europe

The EU's six official Eastern Partnership states – Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova, Armenia, Azerbaijan and Belarus – are not just neighbours, but part of Europe. They are full participants in the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). Apart from Belarus, they are also members of the Council of Europe (CoE) and the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR). In principle, all six countries fall under Article 49 of the Treaty on European Union and therefore theoretically have the option of applying for accession. It was therefore apt for the EU in 2009 to establish a separate partnership programme for the six that goes above and beyond the broader European Neighbourhood Policy programme.

While there have been some achievements, the overall picture in the Eastern neighbourhood today looks bleak in multiple ways. The EU's Eastern Partnership (EaP) has not thus far resulted in unambiguous, unequivocal progress towards prosperous, stable and democratic societies. Not even the Association Agreement (AA) trio of Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova, which have signed especially far-reaching EU Association Agreements that include Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas (DCFTAs), have seen thoroughgoing reform or been given explicit EU membership perspectives. Corruption, vested interests, byzantine state structures and fickle governments present considerable obstacles to implementation of the ambitious transition agenda.

The complex, non-linear reform progress so far has led to increased fatigue and a loss of the sense of the strategic importance of this region in Brussels, the EU member states and Washington. It has reinforced some EU politicians' aversion to anything that even resembles the possibility of further Eastern enlargement – a sentiment also influenced by the lack of progress with the Western Balkan states and Turkey, which already have official membership prospects. As the EU's indispensable partner, the US has also reduced its engagement in the EaP region, and become increasingly ambivalent due to its desire to establish a “predictable and stable relationship” with Russia.

Most worrying of all, Moscow has become increasingly aggressive and assertive over the past two decades. The Kremlin today uses all the means at its disposal – military, diplomatic, economic, political and hybrid – to curtail the sovereignty, stability and integrity of the EaP states. That this Russian policy is detrimental not only to the common neighbourhood, but also to the entire European project and security order has, so far, been insufficiently understood and internalized by many EU politicians and diplomats.

Despite the tremendous challenges, there is still a vision of a united, prosperous and democratic Europe. This strategic image of a unified Europe – once envisaged by US President George H. W. Bush as “whole, free and at peace” – has been fading in recent years. Today, it must be revisited and reinvigorated.

Three decades after the break-up of the Soviet Union and the fall of totalitarianism, the project of a united Europe built on democratic principles and respect for human rights, the rule of law and the primacy of international law requires a new breath of life and substantive updating. A stable, secure and safe Europe is only possible if based on the common values, norms, and standards included in the rules-based global system and the European security order. These are based on international law, in general, and OSCE and CoE principles and commitments, in particular. The foundations of this vision are rule-of-law-based states, well-governed democratic societies that respect political freedom and human rights, economic prosperity and, last but not least, international security.

To achieve this vision, the EU and its member states, together with their international partners, need a new comprehensive strategy that combines novel tools with a substantial revision of the existing ones. Such a fresh approach should have an approximately 10-year perspective and comprise various novel ad hoc initiatives and an updating of the Eastern Partnership (EaP). A modernized EaP programme would, as is detailed below, require clearer differentiation between real and slow reformers, deepened integration of the three AA states, a revitalization of democracy promotion and extended security cooperation.

Both the EU member states and the EaP states need to more publicly acknowledge and more widely communicate that the stability and prosperity of the EaP region is not just a matter of humanitarian solidarity. It is also about the core values of the entire West, which now includes former Eastern Bloc states as well as Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova that aim to become full members of the EU. Eventually, it concerns the future security of the EU itself and is in the self-interest of all European democracies.

Moreover, the alternative to the implementation of such a vision is not, as many assume, a simple continuation of the current status quo. The internal problems of the EaP countries and the external threats posed to them, most notably by Russia, will if left unchecked lead to further backsliding – if not worse scenarios. The force of the alternative vision for Europe’s future championed by the Kremlin should not be underestimated. From its neo-imperial perspective on Eastern Europe, Moscow is aiming to establish its own new, overhauled European and global security order. This counter-vision envisages the revival of a concert of great powers and their privileged spheres of influence, and a world where some states are less sovereign than others.

Contrary to Russian propaganda and that of some of its foreign supporters, the West is not in an adversarial geopolitical competition with Russia trying to establish its own spheres of interest in Eastern Europe. Instead, the inclusive vision of a common, cooperative and peaceful future for the entire European continent includes a democratic Russia that adheres to international law and to the jointly agreed European security order. A new vision for the Eastern neighbourhood is about upholding this order based on international law and OSCE principles, as well as about ensuring freedom for states to choose and change their security arrangements and international allies.

Various Pathways in a Strategic Vision of Europe

The particularly tricky combination of tough domestic and geopolitical conditions in the EaP countries means that a complicated set of policy challenges faces any Western actors that might want to help. What realistically can genuinely concerned Western governments, organizations and groups do to implement the vision of a Europe “whole, free and at peace”? What policy tools are available to apply a new strategic approach to the Eastern neighbourhood? How best can democratic good governance be fostered, in particular in the three AA countries, while at the same time strengthening their security and ability to counter the Kremlin’s hybrid aggression?

Even in the case of a full-scale Russian military invasion of, for instance, Ukraine, Western countries will remain unwilling to directly confront Moscow on the ground. Nonetheless, it is possible for both national and international actors interested in supporting the EaP countries to advance a number of pathways to support these countries and achieve greater progress in their consolidation as independent nation states. Contrary to a widespread misperception, there are various non-kinetic instruments to support the security, integrity, and stability of the EaP states and gradually increase their international embeddedness.

One such strategy currently being implemented, above all by the Association Agreement trio, is the creation of novel – or further development of existing – East-Central European regional collaboration schemes. In addition, certain EU and non-EU states, above all the US and the UK, are building or strengthening coalitions as well as bilateral links with the AA trio, and consider engaging in new collaboration frameworks. There are many other opportunities to create novel or substantively upgraded support schemes with especially engaged singular Western nations. Multilateral ad hoc coalitions could engage more actively with certain states in the EaP. An instrument that has been underutilized thus far, for instance, is the easing of rules on foreign direct investment in countries with protracted conflicts through insurance against political risks.

Another way to achieve progress would be for the EaP countries themselves to search for new strategies to increase their bilateral or multilateral cooperation and integration with the countries, programmes and organs of the EU and NATO. There is, for instance, an opportunity for the EaP countries unilaterally to further liberalize their visa and residence regulations for EU citizens interested in travelling to – or even moving temporarily or permanently to – a country in the Eastern neighbourhood, to mention just one example.

However, the main responsibility for reviving the vision of a united Europe lies with the West. The key point for Western countries and organizations has been and will remain the need for more collective strategic engagement with the association countries at a senior political level. This should include, between the EU, the US, the UK, Canada, Japan and others, a “tough love” approach when needed, as well as better coordination at the level of state capitals on collective reform and support efforts in the six countries.

This brief report does not discuss these general issues and such topics as deepened NATO cooperation with, above all, Georgia and Ukraine, which were given official membership perspectives in 2008. Nor does it cover other forms of support for EaP countries through a plethora of international governmental and non-governmental organizations, such as the IMF, the World Bank, the Council of Europe, the EBRD and the OECD, as well as from Western political foundations and NGOs. Instead, the focus here is on ways to intensify and innovate the most critical framework for EU support and cooperation between the EaP region and governmental and non-governmental actors interested in these countries’ European integration – the EaP programme itself.

A New Strategic Approach: Towards an Upgrade of the EaP

The EaP was launched in 2009 as a reimagination and extension of the EU’s older Eastern Neighbourhood Policy programme. Since then, the EaP has achieved several positive, tangible and substantial outcomes for the EU’s eastern neighbours – and thereby indirectly for the EU itself. The large pro-reform sections of these countries’ elites and wider populations have been bolstered and mobilized in their fight for fairer and more democratic societies. EU financial assistance along with growing European market access helped to mitigate the consequences of the global financial crisis and of hostile Russian trade embargoes.

In particular, the AAs, with their DCFTAs, which entered into full force with Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova in 2016, have resulted in approximation of the EU *acquis*. This has

taken relations with the EU to a whole new level, markedly increasing trade flows with the EU, strengthening these countries' domestic industries and building a solid foundation for further integration. In addition, visa-free travel regimes for citizens in the association countries visiting the Schengen Zone have boosted people-to-people contacts.

Although these results are considerable, even the Association trio have not experienced the consistent rise in prosperity, democracy and stability that was envisaged in the EaP initiative. The full potential of the three mammoth agreements remains far from realized. Economic growth has been sporadic and unequal, corruption has been unmasked but not undone, and oligarchic elites and vested interests have viciously fought back. While the EaP countries' increasingly EU-friendly populations have valiantly pushed for change, many reforms have been only partially, superficially or weakly implemented – or, in some cases, reversed altogether. Worse, an ever more antagonistic and destabilizing Russia means that the security and stability of the entire region has decreased rather than increased since the launch of the EaP in 2009.

Against this background, the EU should double its efforts to preserve, continue and build on the positive results achieved so far, better address the serious challenges that the EaP countries face, and more effectively help creating a strong and prosperous Eastern neighbourhood. Above all, the EaP programme must be renewed and refurbished. Specifically, this means *enhanced differentiation, deepened integration and reclaimed democratic development* in the EU's engagement with the EaP. For the AA trio, moreover, there is an especially urgent need for *expanded security cooperation and strengthened defence against hybrid threats*.

Enhanced differentiation: The EaP was conceptualized as a multilateral, inclusive framework to encourage and enable regional cooperation on such issues as security, the economy, energy, connectivity, democracy, structural reform and climate change. It was designed to strengthen its member countries' collective clout and their visibility vis-à-vis Brussels. Today, it also provides a cooperation baseline and a source of inspiration for the non-associated countries. Since its creation in 2009, a nascent differentiation, which means that each EaP partner country can choose for itself the extent of its bilateral relations with the EU, has led to distinct relationships between the EU and each EaP country.

To make better use of the specific potential and tackle the daunting problems facing each EaP country, the EU needs to further differentiate and intensify its bilateral relations in its Eastern neighbourhood. This would mean designing policies that are both visionary and feasible, tailored to address each country's unique circumstances and aspirations. The EU's aims in the EaP region should be implemented through more sharply targeted

incentives, stricter conditionality and customized action plans fitted to each individual country’s specific desires and abilities to participate in European markets, treaties and institutions.

Obviously, this agenda concerns first and foremost the aspirations and needs of the three AA countries. The Association trio have made clear that they want to take their relationships with Brussels further as soon as possible. They do not want to be held back by less ambitious states in the EaP, such as Belarus.

The European Commission and EU External Actions Service’s 2020 Joint Communication “Eastern Partnership Policy beyond 2020: Reinforcing Resilience – an Eastern Partnership that Delivers for All” mentions differentiation, the need for more tailored bilateral cooperation and for deepened sectoral cooperation, as well as the goal of gradual economic integration, but it does not explain what these plans mean in terms of practical policies. Such specifics need to be set out as soon as possible. We briefly highlight below four particularly salient directions for implementation of new or updated policy initiatives.

Deepened integration: A more resolute EU approach to the Association trio, resulting from enhanced differentiation, would mean deeper integration into the EU in several areas. This should entail more support for aligning their legislation with the EU *acquis*, their deepened participation in the single market (especially for energy and banking), and improved cooperation in areas such as transport, digitalization and security. It also implies speedier inclusion in more internal EU programmes and agencies, a closer institutional relationship overall, and expanded high-level bilateral and multilateral meeting formats.

The three AA states have already come a long way in some areas of legal approximation, but a lot remains to be done. Moreover, much new legislation has been adopted in the EU since the conclusion of the AA negotiations. Thus, both the AAs themselves and the content of numerous association-related laws adopted in the three countries since 2014 will need to be updated.

A lot more can be done to advance cooperation in different fields. On *transportation*, road transport agreements are needed, and the regional infrastructure of the AA trio must be adjusted to Europe as a whole rather than mainly Russia. The AAs already address many of the requirements of the EU Transport Community. A logical next step should be the three countries’ accession to the European Transport Treaty.

The fast-growing *digitalization* sector is a central and strategic part of the modernization and reform process. The AA countries' IT industries, local infrastructures and international cooperation have been rapidly expanding in recent years. Against this background, the wish of the associated states to accede to the EU's Digital Single Market, not mentioned in the 2020 Joint Communication, should be addressed.

On *energy and the environment*, the next steps should be the AA trio's further integration into the EU Energy Union. This would entail an as far as possible inclusion in the EU Green Deal initiative. In the area of *justice, police and home affairs*, improved cooperation is needed with the relevant agencies and structures, such as Europol, Eurojust, the European Public Prosecutor's Office and the European arrest warrant.

Although the AAs provide a basic association infrastructure, including councils and committees, the institutional relationship between the EU and the three associated states could be widened – another theme absent from the 2020 Joint Communication. A major wish of the AA trio is to open a new joint quadrilateral communication format – the EU plus the three associated countries – on all matters of common concern, such as how to update the AAs to account for the EU's legal development and policy revisions. Additional potentially novel arrangements might be joint meetings between the associated countries' governments and the European Commission, and the AA trio attending informal European Council meetings, as the non-EU member states in the European Economic Area already do.

Expanded security cooperation: The security situation in both Western and Eastern Europe has deteriorated significantly and is continuing to do so due, above all, to a growing Russian threat. In the EaP countries, this is further exacerbated by their protracted conflicts, which have been shrewdly instrumentalized by Moscow; weak national security sectors; and domestic as well as international corruption. The AA trio's national security is tightly intertwined with their political stability, economic prosperity, and reform efforts, which makes it imperative to reinforce all four.

The EU has thus far not comprehensively addressed the EaP region's glaring safety deficit. Those initiatives that do exist are poorly funded and not embedded in a wider framework. They often concern soft security issues and lack sufficiently resolute support from the larger EU member states.

This omission stems from internal disunity within both the EU as a whole and many individual EU member states. In Western Europe, there is only limited understanding of

and interest in the Eastern neighbourhood. As a result, the EU's security agenda is heavily focused on topics such as counterterrorism, international peacekeeping or the Chinese challenge. A further principal challenge is that some EU member states, including France and Germany, wish to maintain separate bilateral ties with Russia that have implications for their stances towards the six EaP countries. Last but not least, the EU's unwillingness to encroach on topics and areas that are seen as falling exclusively within NATO's remit prevents its engagement in the AA trio's security matters.

Notwithstanding Moscow's increasingly provocative behaviour in recent years, there is still no EU unity on how to approach Russia. Some think that EU security cooperation in the common neighbourhood might provoke Russia, that a stable balance of power with Russia can be achieved without an increase in security for the AA trio, or that Russia will eventually start respecting international law. The 2020 Joint Communication focuses on “resilience” and only briefly mentions support for security dialogues and cooperation. This repeats a major deficit in the three 2014 AAs, where, despite the agreements' general comprehensiveness, the articles on security cooperation and convergence lack detail.

Lack of EU unity concerning various international security challenges has impeded its influence, its value as a serious geopolitical partner, and the success of the EaP programme. It has allowed or even encouraged other actors, above all Moscow, to become more assertive in the pursuit of geopolitical aims, move positions forward, and force the West to play by their rules. If the EU is to become a strategically autonomous and effective international player able to project its core values and employ its normative power globally, and if the EaP is to deliver true change, the EU must start investing more seriously in the security of its Eastern neighbourhood.

Renewed security cooperation, especially with the AA trio, could expand on existing EU structures, such as Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), the European Defence Fund (EDF), the European Peace Facility (EPF) and the European Security and Defence College. In addition to initiatives such as the Lithuanian-Polish-Ukrainian Brigade, there is a need for more bilateral or multilateral projects between willing EU and EaP countries. Ideally, a comprehensive and multifaceted initiative would combine existing EU level and EU member states' institutions, and new funds or initiatives in a major new structure.

Enhanced security cooperation should include such measures as material support, personnel interaction, structured coordination and capacity building, and should also involve NATO. Possible collaboration areas include work to increase joint situational threat awareness, and defence and security sector reform, cooperation, and assistance. All this

means that the Eastern Partnership policy needs an – already widely discussed – new EaP Security Compact.

Strengthened defence against hybrid threats: A fundamental part of increased security cooperation with the EaP countries, and a key instrument for improving the EU’s own security, would be a deepening of EU and NATO cooperation with Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova on countering *hybrid threats*. The strategic combination and coordination of various existing and new instruments could lead to the emergence of a holistic EU Hybrid Threats Toolbox that might – at least partially – also be applied to the Eastern neighbourhood

Such an approach would cut across different parts of EU and national structures and should be implemented in close coordination with international partners such as NATO, the US and the UK. Russian disinformation in the EaP region can be remedied through upgraded strategic communications, heightened EU visibility at the citizen level, projects that amplify the EU’s awareness, and boosted support to independent local media.

Reclaimed democratic engagement: A fundamental goal of the EU’s relations with the EaP countries is to foster and support democratic and well-governed societies. Despite the centrality of this declared aim, however, the EU has in recent years become increasingly opportunistic and transactional in its approach to recalcitrant EaP governments. As a result, Brussels has repeatedly turned a blind eye to partial, artificial or even absent reforms, and sometimes to their reversal.

This deficient approach is also reflected in the text of the 2020 Joint Communication, which only mentions democracy in passing. This widening discrepancy between declared values and actual policies, however, undermines the EU’s wider agenda. Brussels is losing credibility in the eyes of the reform-oriented segments of the populations of the EaP states. While larger geopolitical ramifications and the Russia-factor cannot be ignored, such considerations should not lead the EU to forsake one of its chief policy instruments – that of being a normative power that enjoys, in that capacity, high levels of respect and attraction around the world.

To ensure the successful and sustainable implementation of reforms, and to uphold an empowering democratic vision among the populations of the EaP countries, the EU must upgrade its political engagement and bring its core values more aggressively to the fore. *First*, the EaP democratization policy should be refocused on institution-building, with priority given to rebuilding and reforming the Eastern neighbourhood states’ public

administration, judicial systems, anti-corruption agencies and security services. *Second*, there is a need for more systematic, strict, consistent and smart conditionality to be tailored to each specific country, whereby, for instance, funds are flexibly reallocated to civil society actors if governments fail to deliver successful reform. The EU's well-established support principle of “more for more” and “less for less” should be properly outlined, clearly communicated and operationally applied.

Third, the EU needs to widen and diversify its involvement with, and financial assistance to, actors beyond national governments. This means, for instance, increased funding for the European Endowment for Democracy and its activities in the non-governmental sector throughout the EaP region. More consultation with civil society organizations (CSOs) on their monitoring of reform implementation should lead to better-informed EU support for transition processes, and the joint development of new conditionality mechanisms. Moreover, the EU needs to gain a wider understanding of civil society that reaches beyond professionalized, urban CSOs to new and different types of actors connected with local urban and rural communities, including stakeholders that are sometimes equivocal or hesitant about EU integration.

Conclusions

More strategically coordinated implementation of substantive steps along the above-mentioned and other pathways for supporting the EaP countries could gradually improve security and democracy in Eastern Europe. Sufficient political, organizational and logistical development in various directions at the same time could lead to a renewed quality of reform processes in, and the international embeddedness of, at least part of the EaP region, notably the AA trio. Implementing several of the above and related initiatives in parallel could have mutually reinforcing effects, especially in terms of the national resilience and security of the countries that benefit from them.

In a best-case scenario, the multi-directional realization of a reinforced vision of a Europe “whole, free and at peace” by several actors through various initiatives could lead to outcomes that are greater than the sum of their parts. The affected EaP nations could, as a result of implementing such a vision by multiple means, be empowered to leave the current geopolitical grey zone of *Zwischeneuropa* (In-between-Europe) that they currently occupy. They could substantively improve their international embeddedness and national security even before joining the EU, NATO, or any other relevant political bloc, as full members. In this way, they could bridge the risky interregnum until a formal accession to

an international organization that can firmly anchor them – or at least the territories that their governments control – becomes possible.

This would not just benefit the Eastern Partnership countries. It would contribute to the safety and prosperity of a flourishing Europe as a whole and strengthen the underlying European security order. Not least, this could also lay the foundations for the long-term prospect of a free, democratic and cooperative European Russia that respects common values and norms. A more visionary, resolute and concerted engagement with the EaP region by the EU and its member states would contribute positively to the future strategic stability of the entire northern hemisphere.



Andreas Umland
Analyst at SCEEUS



Hugo von Essen
Analyst at SCEEUS

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