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The War Against Ukraine: A Game Changer for the Region and the EU's External Policy

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Before debating the future of the Eastern Partnership (EaP), it is useful to refresh our memory of the initiative. Back in 2007, after the fifth wave of European Union enlargement, when Bulgaria and Romania joined, a special neighbourhood instrument for the eastern border was in the air. Two big ideas emerged from this: Black Sea Synergy, on the one hand, and the Eastern Partnership, on the other. Both remained on the table and benefited from EU support but, after almost 15 years, it is obvious that the EaP scenario is the one that was largely adopted by Brussels and is seen as a relative success of the European Neighbourhood Policy. Thus, the EaP can be defined as a joint initiative between the EU and its six eastern neighbours with the aim of promoting political and economic integration between them.

However, recent years have brought several new challenges related to migration, defence and security, enlargement and international threats from Russia. Little is left of the original goals of the EaP, since the most committed partners have been made member candidates or, in the case of Georgia, offered a clear perspective on achieving candidate status. Azerbaijan and Armenia will be able to develop more effective bilateral relations with the EU, each taking its own approach and path, especially following the recent escalation in Nagorno-Karabakh and Russia's failure to live up to its commitments as peacekeeper. This indicates the need for a new direction for the EU's enlargement policy in its eastern neighbourhood.

Thus, in the past few months, dominated by the recently ended Czech EU presidency and the current Swedish presidency, there has been discussion of the future of the EaP and what such a new direction might look like. There had been speculation, at the crossroads of the two presidencies, that the time might be right for the EaP to split into two avenues with the trio (Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia) following an ambitious accession path while the other three remain the subject of neighbourhood policy. Now, at the mid-point of the Swedish presidency, it is good to see that there is the political will to continue the EaP with a different, more ambitious approach. Having taken part in several consultation events and relevant processes, I can highlight the key aspects of this important debate and the most important current challenges in bringing the EaP closer to the EU.

- First, the key challenge for the trio will be to ensure a smooth but relatively rapid transition from the subject of neighbourhood policy to an active actor in accession policy. The invasion of Ukraine has caused a huge change in the EU leaders' approach to Eastern Europe, from gradual political integration and democratization to making rapid, radical political decisions. As a result, the EU has taken unique steps in terms of security, defence and membership enlargement. These moves offer Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia an opportunity to put all the necessary reforms required by the accession process in place while at the same time sharing their experience and motivating the other EaP countries to follow a pro-western path and bring people closer to European values.

At the beginning of February, the European Commission published an analytical report on the level of preparedness of each trio member's legislation in relation to the 33 chapters of the EU acquis. Later in the spring, the Commission will start to assess the level of implementation of EU recommendations, while in the autumn the first reports under the EU enlargement package will be published. It is at this time that the decisions will be made on when and under what conditions accession negotiations will be opened with Moldova and Ukraine, and whether to offer Georgia candidate status. It is likely that for Georgia this will be the most crucial moment in proving its pro-European orientation, despite the contradictory signals sent in the recent past and the visible differences between the will of the majority of the population and that of the political establishment.

Another important aspect is cooperation between the trio. Thus far, this cooperation has mainly been at the bilateral level. All three countries have different levels of advancement in different fields, which means that there are significant mutual learning opportunities and significant expertise that Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia can share with each other.

- Second, the remaining three countries – Armenia, Azerbaijan and Belarus – should continue to be actively targeted by the neighbourhood policy. This will strengthen the EU's strategic position in the region. As the world becomes increasingly multipolar and the EU faces new global challenges, maintaining constructive relationships with these countries will help to keep its immediate neighbourhood and beyond secure.

Armenia's increasing aspirations for EU orientation should be recognized and supported. The Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA) has played an important role in this pro-western direction, but Russian inaction in line with its peacekeeping obligations during recent escalations in Nagorno-Karabakh is also a factor. Some in Armenia saw this as a sign that Moscow was not fully committed to Armenia's territorial integrity. This, coupled with broader economic and political challenges, has led to increased interest in closer ties with the EU. The conflict has served as a catalyst for Armenia to strengthen its relationship with the EU, but Armenia's path to EU will face significant challenges, not least Russia's continuing, albeit weaker, influence in the region. It is now up to the EU how it benefits from this regional opportunity and Armenia's desire to move closer to Europe, possibly by offering a perspective for candidate status in the foreseeable future.

The mass demonstrations that took place all over Belarus in the summer of 2020 clearly showed the people's adherence to EU values. In the current circumstances, active support for the Belarus opposition and civil society, most of which is outside Belarus, must be continued. Despite their relocation to the EU and the Caucasus, independent media, human rights defenders and members of the opposition and civil society are still playing an important role in shaping Belarus society by positively influencing those who remain in the country. This is the critical mass that, once the current regime has gone, will be able to take over the leadership and ensure that democratic governance and human rights are at the centre of its policies.

Probably the most complicated strategic approach to be taken is with Azerbaijan. This must balance the EU's need for energy resources, Azerbaijan's role as a source and transit country, its recent behaviour in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and the continuously shrinking space for democracy and civil society in the country. While Azerbaijan is an important economic partner for the EU in the energy sector, the EU should use its leverage to promote democratic reform and human rights in the country. This should include supporting civil society organizations and an independent media, promoting dialogue with the opposition, encouraging the government to respect the rule of law and fundamental freedoms, and addressing regional security concerns. All this will require a careful balance between engagement and pressure, and a long-term vision for building a stable, prosperous and democratic future for the country and the wider region.

- Third, it will be important to capitalize on different cross-cutting opportunities as they arise. One example was the tenth session of the EuroNest Parliamentary Assembly, which took place in Chisinau on 19–21 February 2023. The assembly is an interparliamentary forum in which members of the European Parliament and the national parliaments of Ukraine, Moldova, Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia participate in order to forge closer political and economic ties. The EaP countries provided a good example of coordinating a common agenda and advocating for their joint interests. They were able to pass three resolutions: on the Russian Federation's aggression in Ukraine; on the European course of Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia; and on the start of Moldova's and Ukraine's pre-accession negotiation processes with the EU.

The next similar opportunity will be the upcoming second meeting of the European Political Community (EPC) on 1 June, which following the first meeting in Prague will take place in an EaP country. The EPC is an intergovernmental forum that met for the first time in October 2022, bringing together leaders from 44 European countries with the aim of providing a policy coordination platform at the pan-European level to address issues of common interest, such as security, stability, energy crises, climate and migration. While this complementary initiative does not replace the framework of the enlargement policy, it is an excellent opportunity for the EaP states to work together to promote a joint agenda, especially as the second meeting will be hosted by Moldova. This will be the perfect time to discuss issues related to regional security, energy, enlargement, Ukraine's post-war reconstruction and additional support for the other EaP countries.

In conclusion, it is important to underline that the EU has taken some firm steps in the past to keep the EaP trio close, such as visa liberalization, Association Agreements and candidate status, but more must be done because, as recently demonstrated, these processes are not irreversible and depend very much on political leadership at any given time (see Hungary, Romania and Georgia). Geographical proximity to Russia and historical experience leave the EaP states vulnerable to Russia's political ambitions, cyberattacks and energy blackmail. It is therefore possible that a special status for these countries in the Political and Security Committee before becoming members could be an option to ensure that they remain anchored to the EU.

Despite these challenges and outstanding questions, the EaP is likely to remain an important forum for promoting closer ties between the EU and its eastern partners. Through continued cooperation and dialogue, the partnership can help to foster greater stability and prosperity in the region.



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