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# Recommendations to the EU in light of Russian policy towards the Eastern Partnership

By Jakub Benedyczak

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Published with the financial support of the European Parliament.

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## Recommendations to the EU in light of Russian policy towards the Eastern Partnership

By Jakub Benedyczak \*

### Russia's attitude to the Eastern Partnership

The policy of the Russian Federation in relation to the Eastern Partnership (EaP) countries<sup>1</sup> is conditioned by and rooted in Russian revisionism towards the post-soviet region. Russian authorities believe that the collapse of the Soviet Union has brought negative consequences to the Russian nation and to the entire post-soviet region.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, ever since the USSR collapsed, Russia has sought to save its supremacy on this territory. Russia's former prime minister Dmitry Medvedev expressed it very succinctly – “for Russia, as well as for other countries, there are regions in which it has privileged interests”.<sup>3</sup> His country therefore has a ‘natural right’ to political, military, social and cultural supremacy on the territory of the EaP countries. Furthermore, from the Kremlin's perspective, if the European Union, or any other country, wants to launch regional projects here, the Kremlin's blessing must be sought, and the conditions of the project negotiated with it. Otherwise, such efforts would mean a threat to stability and security in the region. In other words, “Moscow emphasises that attempts at regional cooperation in this part of Europe are impossible, unless the Russian Federation is involved”.<sup>4</sup>

It is therefore not a surprise that when the EaP was launched in 2009, Russia's reaction was moderately negative. Sergei Lavrov, the Russian minister of foreign affairs, hinted that the initiative undermines the geopolitical influence of Russia in eastern Europe and strengthens the position of the EU. As he said, “we are accused of having spheres of influence, but what is the Eastern Partnership, if not an attempt to expand the EU's sphere of influence?”<sup>5</sup> However, Moscow has not been able to stop the process of the region opening to other players (mainly the EU, China and Turkey) and therefore of weakening Russia's own power and position since “space previously dominated by a single political, economic, cultural and

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<sup>1</sup> The Eastern Partnership (EaP) is a joint initiative involving the EU, its member states and six eastern European partners: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine.

<sup>2</sup> Путин: Распад СССР - крупнейшая геополитическая катастрофа векаб, 27 October 2013 ([www.youtube.com/watch?v=d4Xlwd91IY6](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d4Xlwd91IY6)).

<sup>3</sup> Интервью Дмитрия Медведева российским телеканалам, 31 August 2008 (<http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/1276>).

<sup>4</sup> Zagorski, A. (2011) ‘Eastern Partnership from the Russian Perspective’, *Internationale Politik und Gesellschaft*, vol. 3, 2011, p. 46 ([http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/ipg/2011-3/05\\_zagorski.pdf](http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/ipg/2011-3/05_zagorski.pdf)).

<sup>5</sup> Colton, T. and Charap, S. (2020) Глава 2. Соперничество усиливается, №6.1 2017 Спецвыпуск, *Global Affairs*, 16 July (<https://globalaffairs.ru/articles/sopernichestvo-usilivaetsya/>).

military centre of gravity underwent a process of geopolitical diversification as alternative powers progressively infiltrated the region and engaged with local rulers and societies”.<sup>6</sup>

In recent years, Georgia and Ukraine have adopted a pro-European foreign policy stance, with the priority of becoming accession countries of the EU and NATO. In 2018, Georgia defined integration with NATO as a national task in Georgia’s constitution,<sup>7</sup> and one year later Ukraine introduced a constitutional amendment committing Ukraine to becoming a member of NATO and the European Union.<sup>8</sup> While Moscow would reluctantly tolerate an EU accession negotiation, NATO was deemed to be a red line. In order to prevent Georgia and Ukraine from joining NATO, which Russia traditionally defines as the fundamental threat to its national security (as indicated in the Russian National Security Strategy,<sup>9</sup> the Military Doctrine,<sup>10</sup> or even in Energy Security Doctrine),<sup>11</sup> Moscow has been using various methods, including the instrumentalisation of the so-called separatist republics and the continuation of frozen conflicts. Russia therefore supports and keeps alive the internationally unrecognised republics of Abkhazia and South Ossetia which separated from Georgia as a result of the Russian-Georgian war. The frozen conflict in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, *de facto* and *de jure* rules out Georgia's accession to NATO. With regard to Ukraine, after the Maidan Revolution Russia annexed Crimea, fuelled and got engaged in the Donbas war, and then recognised and started to support the internationally unrecognised Donetsk and Luhansk People’s Republics. The frozen conflict in these separatist republics also provides serious obstacles for Ukraine’s accession to NATO.

### **Losing supremacy**

However, Russia has had to pay a price for its policy. It has lost two out of six Eastern Partnership countries – Georgia and Ukraine – that will not return to the Russian sphere of privileged interests. What is more, bearing in mind that Moldova is still being torn between a Western and a pro-Russian geopolitical direction, that Azerbaijan conducts foreign policy independently of Moscow, and that only Armenia and Belarus fully belong to the political, economic and military regional blocs managed by Russia (the Eurasian Economic Union and the Collective Security Treaty Organization), it can clearly be seen that since the EaP was launched, Moscow has lost part of its supremacy in the EaP area to the EU. This has especially been the case in the 2014-2020 period.

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<sup>6</sup> Saari, S. and Secieru, S. (2019) ‘Shifting ground: How megatrends are shaping the eastern neighbourhood’ in S. Saari and S. Secieru (eds) *The Eastern Partnership a decade on: looking back, thinking ahead*, Chaillot Paper 153, European Union Institute for Security Studies, July, p. 3.

<sup>7</sup> ‘NATO-Georgia Commission Declaration at the Brussels Summit’ (2018), NATO, 12 July ([www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official\\_texts\\_156627.htm](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_156627.htm)).

<sup>8</sup> ‘Ukraine President Signs Constitutional Amendment On NATO, EU Membership’ (2019), Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty, 19 February ([www.rferl.org/a/ukraine-president-signs-constitutional-amendment-on-nato-eu-membership/29779430.html](http://www.rferl.org/a/ukraine-president-signs-constitutional-amendment-on-nato-eu-membership/29779430.html)).

<sup>9</sup> Указ Президента Российской Федерации от 31 декабря 2015 года N 683 "О Стратегии национальной безопасности Российской Федерации" (2015) *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, 31 December (<https://rg.ru/2015/12/31/nac-bezopasnost-site-dok.html>).

<sup>10</sup> Военная доктрина Российской Федерации (2014) *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, 30 December (<https://rg.ru/2014/12/30/doktrina-dok.html>).

<sup>11</sup> Указ Президента РФ от 13 мая 2019 г. № 216 “Об утверждении Доктрины энергетической безопасности Российской Федерации” (2019), Kremlin.ru, 13 May (<http://static.kremlin.ru/media/events/files/ru/rsskwUHzl25X6lijBy20Doj88faOQLN4.pdf>).

Above all, Russia has gradually been losing the economic battle because the EaP states have effectively been diversifying their economies. Trade volumes from 2016 to 2019 between the EaP countries and the EU increased by 27% in Armenia, 55% in Azerbaijan, 40% in Belarus, 7% in Georgia, 42% in Moldova, and 50% in Ukraine.<sup>12</sup> In 2019, the EU was the biggest trade partner for Moldova (Russia was the second biggest with a share of 10%),<sup>13</sup> as well as for Georgia, Azerbaijan and Ukraine (for these three countries Russia was the third biggest trade partner with a share of 12%,<sup>14</sup> 9%,<sup>15</sup> and 6.5%<sup>16</sup> respectively). Over the same time, the EU was the second biggest trade partner for Armenia and Belarus (Russia remained their biggest trade partner with a share of 27.1%<sup>17</sup> and 49.2%<sup>18</sup> respectively). Furthermore, the number of companies from EaP states taking advantage of exporting to the EU between 2015 and 2019 under the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas (DCFTA) increased in Georgia by 46%, Moldova by 48%, and Ukraine by 24%.<sup>19</sup>

The flourishing trade between the EaP countries and the EU has served as an inhibiting factor regarding Russian ambitions to create a deep and integrated economic union with a free trade area and customs union. Unlike all previous geo-economic initiatives by the Kremlin, the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), which was created in 2014, would be a very promising proposal if it included a pro-Russian Ukraine because Ukrainian agriculture and industry, especially in the military, engineering, mining and metallurgic sectors, is very well-developed. The failure of this initiative, due to the Maidan Revolution (2014), has forced Moscow to moderate its ambitions regarding the number of members of the EAEU. Without Ukraine the value and momentum of the EAEU has decreased significantly, or indeed the initiative has altogether lost its sense in terms of economic integration and development.<sup>20</sup>

Additionally, the growing number of Ukrainian, Georgian and Moldovan workers in the EU member states, and their declining numbers in Russia, has reduced the dependence of these three countries' economies on remittances from Russia. In recent years "the share of Russia in Georgia's remittances illustrates the decline: remittances from Russia fell by 23% between

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<sup>12</sup> Omielianienco, V. (2020) 'Eastern Partnership: What is Beyond 2020?', Young European Ambassadors, 10 August.

<sup>13</sup> 'Moldova' (2020), European Commission, 21 November (<https://ec.europa.eu/trade/policy/countries-and-regions/countries/moldova/>).

<sup>14</sup> 'Georgia' (2020), European Commission, 21 November (<https://ec.europa.eu/trade/policy/countries-and-regions/countries/georgia/>).

<sup>15</sup> 'The foreign trade of Azerbaijan' (2020), The State Statistical Committee of The Republic of Azerbaijan, 27 August ([www.stat.gov.az/source/trade/?lang=en](http://www.stat.gov.az/source/trade/?lang=en)).

<sup>16</sup> Довідка "Зовнішня торгівля України товарами та послугами у 2019 році" (2020) Міністр розвитку економіки, торгівлі та сільського господарства України, 30 July ([www.me.gov.ua/Documents/Detail?lang=uk-UA&id=30d3074d-6882-4aac-bc4f-f4af8a30b221&title=DovidkazovnishniaTorgivliaUkrainiTovaramiTaPoslugamiU2019-Rotsi](http://www.me.gov.ua/Documents/Detail?lang=uk-UA&id=30d3074d-6882-4aac-bc4f-f4af8a30b221&title=DovidkazovnishniaTorgivliaUkrainiTovaramiTaPoslugamiU2019-Rotsi)).

<sup>17</sup> 'European Union, Trade in goods with Armenia' (2020) European Commission, 21 November ([https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/isdb\\_results/factsheets/country/details\\_armenia\\_en.pdf](https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/isdb_results/factsheets/country/details_armenia_en.pdf)).

<sup>18</sup> 'Belarus' (2020), European Commission, 21 November (<https://ec.europa.eu/trade/policy/countries-and-regions/countries/belarus/>).

<sup>19</sup> '20 deliverables for 2020 Monitoring – State of Play in February 2020', Eastern Partnership ([www.euneighbours.eu/sites/default/files/publications/2020-06/Monitoring%20Spring%202020\\_20%20Deliverables%20for%202020.pdf](http://www.euneighbours.eu/sites/default/files/publications/2020-06/Monitoring%20Spring%202020_20%20Deliverables%20for%202020.pdf)).

<sup>20</sup> Ф. Лукьянов (2015) Совсем «Восточное партнерство» *Russia in Global Affairs*, 22 April (<https://globalaffairs.ru/articles/sovsem-vostochnoe-partnerstvo/>). Fyodor Lukyanov is a chief editor of *Russia in Global Affairs*, the most important Russian journal on international affairs.

2010 and 2017, whereas those from Israel surged from 1% in 2012 to 9% in 2017”.<sup>21</sup> An even deeper change took place in the case of Moldova where “from 2012 to 2018, Russia’s share halved from 64% to 27.1%, whereas the EU’s share doubled from 18.6% to slightly above 40%”.<sup>22</sup> The situation looks similar when it comes to Ukrainian remittances – the share of Poland in the Ukrainian economy increased by 34%, outstripping Russia by 14%”.<sup>23</sup>

Moreover, the EU has gained the sympathy of the EaP countries’ citizens, who were traditionally treated as the basic recipients of Russian soft power (language, culture, civilisation and state-building models). According to the EU Neighbours East survey conducted in 2019, “65% of the EaP citizens (6% more than in 2017) are confident that ‘the EU provides tangible benefits to citizens in their everyday lives’”.<sup>24</sup> At the same time, 83% of Georgians treat Russia as a threat<sup>25</sup> and 55% of Ukrainians have a bad or very bad attitude towards Russia.<sup>26</sup>

Since Moscow perceives the EaP initiative as part of Russia’s geopolitical competition with the West, the most dangerous projects for Russia’s interests are those involving energy, and also the DCFTA agreements. Geopolitical competition with the West is thus less about roads, railways, ports, inland waterways, airport facilities or logistics centres built with support from EU funding, and much more about energy, given that the Russian economy depends on the export of mineral resources. In 2019, energy accounted for 65% of Russia’s exports and 40% of its budget revenues.<sup>27</sup> Meanwhile, the 14th achievement of the EaP issued for 2020 is that “the Southern Gas Corridor” reached completion, “with different sections now connected (the South Caucasus Pipeline, the Trans-Adriatic Pipeline, and the Trans-Anatolian Pipelines)”.<sup>28</sup> The Southern Gas Corridor project, which was initiated and strongly supported by the European Commission, will diversify gas supplies to the EU from Azerbaijan through Turkey. Despite Russia’s attempts to stop it, this project was launched at the end of 2018 and in the next few years it will be “extended to Austria, Germany, France, the United Kingdom, Bulgaria, Croatia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina. The completion of construction will deprive Russia of the part of the EU market, where almost all of Russian gas is exported”.<sup>29</sup>

Overall, given that the EU economy is ten times bigger than that of Russia,<sup>30</sup> not to mention that it is much more technologically advanced, Russia is not able to provide an attractive economic model for the EaP countries. Moreover, Russia needs to attract European high-tech

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<sup>21</sup> Saari, S. and Secieru, S., op cit. pp. 21-22.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> ‘Opinion Survey 2019: Regional Overview’ (2019) 3 July ([www.euneighbours.eu/en/east/stay-informed/publications/opinion-survey-2019-regional-overview](http://www.euneighbours.eu/en/east/stay-informed/publications/opinion-survey-2019-regional-overview)).

<sup>25</sup> ‘Public Opinion Survey Residents of Georgia September-October 2019’, Center for Insights in Survey Research, p. 15.

<sup>26</sup> ‘Attitudes of the population of Ukraine toward Russia and of the population of Russia toward Ukraine’ (2019), Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, February ([www.kiis.com.ua/?lang=eng&cat=reports&id=831&page=2](http://www.kiis.com.ua/?lang=eng&cat=reports&id=831&page=2)).

<sup>27</sup> Benedyczak, J. and Zaniewicz, M. (2020) ‘The Russian Economy and COVID-19’, Polish Institute of International Affairs, Warsaw, 29 July ([www.pism.pl/publications/The-Russian-Economy-and-COVID19](http://www.pism.pl/publications/The-Russian-Economy-and-COVID19)).

<sup>28</sup> ‘20 deliverables for 2020’, op cit.

<sup>29</sup> Benedyczak, J. (2019) ‘Assumptions and Prospects of Russia’s Policy Towards Georgia’, Polish Institute of International Affairs, Warsaw, 28 August ([www.pism.pl/publications/Assumptions-and-Prospects-of-Russia-s-Policy-Towards-Georgia](http://www.pism.pl/publications/Assumptions-and-Prospects-of-Russia-s-Policy-Towards-Georgia)).

<sup>30</sup> International Monetary Fund (2020) ([www.imf.org/en/Publications/SPROLLS/world-economic-outlook-databases#sort=%40imfdate%20descending](http://www.imf.org/en/Publications/SPROLLS/world-economic-outlook-databases#sort=%40imfdate%20descending)).

cooperation and assistance (or Chinese) due to its own deficit in this area – even if this deficit concerns Russia to a lesser extent than the rest of the post-soviet region.

### **Ideological clash**

Besides the economy, the ‘ideological clash’ factor is also an extremely sensitive point for the Kremlin. The Russian authorities perceive the EaP project, with its very strong components of civil society and democratisation, as an export of ideology that “lead[s] to tragic consequences and to degradation rather than progress”.<sup>31</sup> In the perception of Russian elites, the so-called colour revolutions that took place between 2003 and 2014 – which not only happened in the EaP space but elsewhere as well (eg, in the Middle East) – do not bring democracy. Furthermore, Russian elites perceive these revolutions as resulting in social and political chaos, bloodshed and casualties, and as causing a decline of the economy, weakening the state institutions and authorities, strengthening oligarchic structures that take over a state, and bringing street populists to power. During his speech at the 70th session of the United Nations General Assembly, Russia’s President Vladimir Putin stated:

“We should all remember the lessons of the past. For example, we remember examples from our Soviet past, when the Soviet Union exported social experiments, pushing for changes in other countries for ideological reasons, and this often led to tragic consequences and caused degradation instead of progress. It seems, however, that instead of learning from other people’s mistakes, some prefer to repeat them and continue to export revolutions, only now these are ‘democratic’ revolutions. Just look at the situation in the Middle East and Northern Africa already mentioned by the previous speaker. Of course, political and social problems have been piling up for a long time in this region, and people there wanted change. But what was the actual outcome? Instead of bringing about reforms, aggressive intervention rashly destroyed government institutions and the local way of life. Instead of democracy and progress, there is now violence, poverty, social disasters and total disregard for human rights, including even the right to life”.<sup>32</sup>

The Kremlin is thus ready to use even undemocratic means, including state violence (overdeveloped police and secret service structures, digital surveillance, media control)<sup>33</sup> and the violation of human rights and the rule of law because the impact of employing these means is still perceived as less harmful than that of a colour revolution.

From this point of view, the Kremlin is right to be worried because during the Putin era, from 2000 until now, the civic awareness and national identity of citizens from the EaP countries has increased significantly (eg, 78% of Georgians claim to be proud of being a citizen of their country, as is the case for 82% of Ukrainians and 69% of Moldovans).<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, the impact and legacy of the four democratic revolutions in the EaP is still felt across the region: the revolution in Georgia (2003), two in Ukraine (2004, 2014) and even one in fully pro-Russian Armenia (2018). In addition, after the rigged presidential election in Belarus in 2020,

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<sup>31</sup> ‘Do you realise what you’ve done?’ Putin addresses UNGA 2015 (Full speech), Youtube, 21 November 2020 ([www.youtube.com/watch?v=q13yzl6k6w0&feature=emb\\_title](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q13yzl6k6w0&feature=emb_title)).

<sup>32</sup> 70th session of the UN General Assembly. Vladimir Putin took part in the plenary meeting in New York, 28 September 2015 (<http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/50385>).

<sup>33</sup> Benedyczak, J. (2020) ‘Surveillance and Control: Russia during the COVID-19 Pandemic’, [PISM Bulletin no 115 \(1545\) 1 June 2020f](#), The Polish Institute of International Affairs, Warsaw.

<sup>34</sup> Saari, S. and Secrieru, S., op cit, p. 17.



Belarusian citizens attempted once again to organise a democratic election process through peaceful protests. Despite oligarchic structures, corruption and a strong deficit in the rule of law in the EaP countries, they have nevertheless thus made progress in the process of democratisation – with significant support from the EU. For instance, despite the bloody revolution and the lasting armed conflict in the Donbas region, Ukraine has been able to organise fair and free parliamentary, local and presidential elections, as well as to keep a strong civil society sector and free media. The same democratising effect can also be seen in Georgia, with social protests regularly organised against authorities. In Moldova, a country suffering from a catastrophic economic and demographic situation, the opposition took power in the 2019 parliamentary election, and one year later a female, pro-European and opposition candidate, Maia Sandu, became Moldova's president. Even in Armenia, which is economically and militarily dependent on Russia, there was a "stand for democracy and transformation in 2018 with its peaceful overthrow of the incumbent administration".<sup>35</sup> In addition to this, civic awareness and activity has also risen significantly in the Russian Federation itself. After the return of opposition leader Alexei Navalny to Russia and his subsequent imprisonment in early 2021, between 110,000 and 160,000 participants took to protests on the streets of over 120 Russian cities, despite the Covid-19 pandemic and the fact that in some places the temperature had dropped to around -50°C.<sup>36</sup> One should also remember the Russian protests in 2011-2012, which were aimed against the return of Vladimir Putin to presidential office.

### **Russia's assets**

Russian losses in the EaP are only one side of the picture. Although Russia is no longer a superpower in the region, it has nevertheless blocked the expansion of the EU and Euro-Atlantic community. In the last 20 years, Russia has confirmed its military dominance in the region of eastern Europe. It has managed to maintain the separatist republic of Transnistria in Moldova, which was established in the 1990s,<sup>37</sup> and it has also created the separatist republics of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Georgia, and Luhansk and Donetsk in Ukraine, as well as annexing and militarising the Crimean peninsula. The existence of all the separatist republics that declared independence (not recognised internationally) is used, first of all, to block the accession of Ukraine and Georgia to NATO. Meanwhile, all the separatist republics are integrated with the Russian army, security services, economy and social policy, and a large number of their residents have received Russian passports. In short, the republics are totally dependent on the Russian Federation. This gives Moscow the option of armed intervention in Georgia, Ukraine or Moldova, using the pretext of protecting its citizens, and thus provoking incidents with the much weaker Georgian, Ukrainian or Moldovan forces.

Russia's military presence in the region also allows the frozen conflicts in some of the EaP countries to be maintained. This in turn means that the EaP countries are "unable to regain

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<sup>35</sup> Minzarari, D. and Pistrinciu, V. (2020) 'A problem shared: Russia and the transformation of Europe's eastern neighbourhood', The European Council on Foreign Relations, 23 April ([https://ecfr.eu/publication/a\\_problem\\_shared\\_russia\\_and\\_transformation\\_of\\_europe\\_eastern\\_neighbourhood/](https://ecfr.eu/publication/a_problem_shared_russia_and_transformation_of_europe_eastern_neighbourhood/)).

<sup>36</sup> Domańska, M. and Rogoża, J. (2021) 'Russia: mass protests in defence of Navalny', Centre for Eastern Studies, Warsaw, 25 January ([www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2021-01-25/russia-mass-protests-defence-navalny](http://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2021-01-25/russia-mass-protests-defence-navalny)).

<sup>37</sup> Pienkowski, J. (2017) 'Renewal of Negotiations on Resolving the Transnistria Conflict,' PISM Bulletin no 126 (1066) 19 December, The Polish Institute of International Affairs, Warsaw.

control of their entire territory and causes economic losses, delayed reforms, and social conflicts”.<sup>38</sup> Georgia and Ukraine, for instance, “must maintain a high level of expenditure on their armed forces and keep them in constant, increased combat-readiness. All this prevents them from making progress in Euro-Atlantic integration”.<sup>39</sup> Additionally, a Russian military contingent of about 2,000 soldiers in Nagorno-Karabakh is crucial for Armenian national security and independence, which is threatened by Azerbaijan and Turkey. Russia uses this situation to have an even greater impact on the political and military situation in Armenia.<sup>40</sup>

Russia has also installed military bases in Crimea, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Armenia and Belarus. These bases typically have a few thousand troops in each region, along with S-300 or S-400 missile system units covering the territory of central and eastern Europe, as well as Turkey. Together, this all ensures Russian domination over the Baltic and Black Seas<sup>41</sup> and at the same time it “limits NATO’s operational capabilities in the region and secures the Russian gas and oil pipelines running along the EaP countries, as well as the Baltic and Black Seas”.<sup>42</sup>

This situation certainly increases the EU’s risks in moving forward with the initiative of the Eastern Partnership, as well as in pushing forward any integration plans with Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova. Neither is the EU going to risk confrontation with Moscow over Belarus, or Armenia, as both countries belong to the EAEU, are strongly tied to the Russian economy, and are politically and militarily dependent on Russia. Given the military and political limitations of the European Union “in establishing the original Eastern Partnership, the EU adopted a halfway house that sought to avoid directly challenging Russia and thus omitted any offer of EU membership”.<sup>43</sup>

Over the years, the Kremlin has become confident that cooperation with Brussels brings “powerful economic development (...), institutional innovation and knowledge but does not guarantee security and protection of national interests”.<sup>44</sup> This has become especially apparent in the South Caucasus. The EU does not, for example, play any significant role in the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh between Azerbaijan and Armenia, which has been going on since the end of 1980s and which has periodically been frozen or refrozen. The fact that a peace agreement was brokered by Moscow following the last six-week war between the two countries during the summer of 2020 is indicative of this stance of non-intervention by the EU. Indeed, the EU is deprived of military capabilities and this decreases the potential and significance of its involvement in the South Caucasus region. Despite the presence of a European Union Monitoring Mission in Georgia, Brussels did not react to Russia’s process of the ‘borderisation’ of Abkhazia and South Ossetia (moving the demarcation lines into Georgian territory, partly in order to take over Georgian pipelines). The same phenomenon can be seen in Ukraine. The so-called ‘Normandy Format’, which is dedicated to resolving the

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<sup>38</sup> Dyner, A.M. (2020) ‘The Importance of Foreign Military Bases for Russia’, PISM Bulletin no 112 (1542) 25 May, The Polish Institute of International Affairs, Warsaw.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Zaniewicz, M. (2020) ‘The Significance of Russia’s Militarisation of Crimea’, PISM Bulletin no 36 (1466) 3 March, The Polish Institute of International Affairs, Warsaw.

<sup>42</sup> Benedyczak, J. (2018) ‘Assumptions and Prospects of Russia’s Policy Towards Georgia’, PISM Bulletin no 117 (1188) 28 August, The Polish Institute of International Affairs, Warsaw.

<sup>43</sup> Minzarari, D. and Pistrinciuc, V., op cit.

<sup>44</sup> Е. Чимириш, Страны Восточного партнерства — буферная зона или переговорная площадка?, Российский совет по международным делам, 6 November 2019 (<https://russiancouncil.ru/analytics-and-comments/analytics/strany-vostochnogo-partnerstva-bufer-naya-zona-ili-peregovornaya-ploshchadka/>).

conflict in eastern Ukraine with the direct participation of Ukrainian, Russian, French and German leaders, has not therefore been able to settle the Donbas conflict.

### Russia's policy after 2020

In the coming years Moscow will not be as concerned about the EaP project as it was a decade ago, when it viewed this project as a source of serious geopolitical competition and a geopolitical threat. Firstly, Russian military superiority in the EaP space has now increased and it seems that Russia is the main actor in the region, capable both of establishing a security architecture there, and periodically negotiating with Turkey and Azerbaijan over the South Caucasus when necessary. Secondly, Moscow has accepted the fact that it has to share the EaP space with other actors in the economic domain and that it cannot count on its former dominance related to the Russian language, culture, education and history. And thirdly, the Kremlin is aware that the policy of friendship with the countries of the post-soviet region does not exist, and that achieving good mutual relations requires serious efforts. As a result of this situation and the devaluation of the Eastern Partnership project over the last ten years, Russia's future approach towards the Eastern Partnership initiative will be based on three principles.

#### 1. Acceptance of the incurred losses

The Russian authorities realise that their country will not recover the potential to counterbalance the economic expansion of the European Union or China in the EaP countries. Russia is also aware that it will slowly lose its attraction as an economic hub among elites and populations in the region. This process will moreover increasingly concern the attractiveness of the Russian culture and language, not to mention that of the Russian political model. Even if Russian autocracy based on the strong leader's personality is *de facto* adopted in some countries (eg, Azerbaijan and Belarus) or partly in Georgia and Armenia, it is never officially treated as a model. Most of the leaders from the EaP countries consider the Russian regime as an anachronistic form of state management and of a nationalised economy, which result in limited fundamental freedoms. Russia has become an anti-model state from which the EaP countries want to bounce towards the Western model. This explains why most of the Kremlin's attempts to restore Russia's ideological power have failed. These have included the conservative revolution proposed by Vladimir Putin,<sup>45</sup> the Russian specific model of democracy called 'sovereign democracy' (a term used by Putin's former adviser, the ideologist Vladislav Surkov)<sup>46</sup> as well as the so-called 'Russian World' (Ruskyi Mir) concept, which is built on an intellectual tradition of Russia as a distinct and self-sufficient civilisation, based on common language, culture, heritage.<sup>47</sup> All of these attempts have failed conclusively. Russia is perceived as a traditional and effective authoritarian regime and Vladimir Putin as a talented, strong leader. Nothing more.

Russian soft power in the EaP will therefore gradually but significantly be displaced and Moscow will not invest in its restoration, realising that such a move would be counterproductive. Indeed, Ukraine and Georgia now block Russian TV channels and social networks. They have shut Russian cultural centres, put up Russian language barriers in

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<sup>45</sup> Walicki, A. (2015) 'Andrzej Walicki o poglądach Władimira Putina', *Tygodnik Przegląd*, 27 July ([www.tygodnikprzeglad.pl/andrzej-walicki-o-poglądach-wladimira-putina/](http://www.tygodnikprzeglad.pl/andrzej-walicki-o-poglądach-wladimira-putina/)).

<sup>46</sup> Fisher, S. (2014) 'Sovereign democracy: Russia's response to the color revolutions', College of Arts & Sciences.

<sup>47</sup> Naydenova, N. (2017) 'Holy Rus. (Re)construction of Russia's Civilizational Identity', *Slavonica*, no. 1-2, 21, pp. 37–48 (DOI: 10.1080/13617427.2017.1319120).

schools, and have changed their policy on teaching history to focus on national history and their interpretation of it, rather than the Russian version of it. Ukraine has even banned Russian pop culture (film, music and artists).<sup>48</sup> Azerbaijan meanwhile went through the entire process of eliminating ‘Russian-ness’ and the legacy of the USSR as early as the 1990s. Armenia too has a strong sense of separateness from Russia and has formed a very strong national identity, despite its close military, economic and political ties with the Russian Federation. Even Moldova is in the process of forming a Moldovan national identity. The Kremlin will therefore discard its illusions of the common Russian world in the post-soviet area, as well as of Slavic unity, ‘the brotherhood of nations’ or undisputed iron alliances. Instead, Moscow will increasingly invest in relations with the EaP countries on condition that these relations are profitable for Russia – but not to sustain alliance. This became clear during the war between Armenia and Azerbaijan in summer 2020, when Russia withheld its political and military support for Armenia (its ally from the EAEU and the Collective Security Treaty Organization) because Russia benefits much more from economic and military cooperation with Azerbaijan and Turkey. Neither will Moscow unconditionally subsidise Belarusian industry or the country’s gas sector. Instead, Russia is in the process of setting the conditions for deepening joint integration.<sup>49</sup> The only thing Russia will in fact struggle for is to maintain its domination in the EaP region and to enforce Western countries to respect this domination. This will not necessarily meet with friendliness from the EaP nations, and it will certainly be without their belief in the Russian mission of bringing a separate civilisation model to the region.

## *2. Strengthening military superiority and using offensive measures*

Russia’s inability to compete with the EU economically, combined with the country’s relative restoration of military capabilities, will likely lead to Russia’s promotion of an asymmetric foreign policy strategy that is underpinned by a proclivity for coercion in order to guarantee its own strong position in the region. Russia will choose a strategy that is built on its fundamental strength (ie, its coercive capabilities and readiness to use them swiftly). When economic or political instruments do not deliver results, Russia will therefore become less restrained in its display and use of military force. This will probably entail Russia’s further support of the separatist republics and frozen conflicts, which guarantee that Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova will not join NATO. Should the EU make any attempt to challenge Russian domination in Belarus, Armenia, Turkey or Azerbaijan, Moscow will likely be quick to repeat the Donbas or Abkhasian-Ossetian scenario.

The EaP countries can probably expect traditional Russian offensive measures such as cyber espionage, cyberattacks or disinformation campaigns (especially on the internet). “This comprises resistance by local political elites that is, in turn, buttressed by resistance from Russia, whereby the Kremlin targets Eastern Partnership countries with indirect aggression technologies to weaken their social fabric, create conflicts on their territory, and discredit reformist politicians (...) fuel inter-ethnic insecurities and anti-Western sentiment”.<sup>50</sup> It is noteworthy that during the first few months of the Covid-19 pandemic, the Ukrainian Institute of Mass Media found 66 stories on five websites that had discredited the Ukrainian state and

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<sup>48</sup> Pasenti, M. (2021) ‘Ukraine’s cultural revival is a matter of national security’, Atlantic Council, 19 January ([www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/ukraines-cultural-revival-is-a-matter-of-national-security/](http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/ukraines-cultural-revival-is-a-matter-of-national-security/)).

<sup>49</sup> Soldatkin, V. (2019) ‘Putin to Belarus: No gas discount before union state is advanced’, Reuters, 19 December ([www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-belarus-union-idUSKBN1YN1Y1](http://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-belarus-union-idUSKBN1YN1Y1)).

<sup>50</sup> Minzarari, D. and Pistrinciu, V., op cit.

its institutions – in April and May 2020 alone.<sup>51</sup> Furthermore, the 2019 report of the Georgian State Security Service showed that Russia conducts operations aimed at “establishing distrust, uncertainty, hopelessness, and nihilism in the public; creating destabilization on ethnic and religious grounds in order to cause disintegration processes and polarize the Georgian society” by using “propagandistic media campaigns, disinformation, cyber-operations and cyber-attacks, destructive political groups and public organizations”.<sup>52</sup> Moscow’s use of all of these tools is very likely to be continued.

In addition, Russia will very likely continue to exploit any negative, undemocratic trends observed in the EaP countries. This primarily means it will exploit the increase in oligarchic structures in the Eastern Partnership countries that has been undermining democratic processes, and especially reforms of the rule of law. Indeed, such exploitation “exponentially increases the rents that corrupt elites can remunerate their supporters with, increasing their chances of staying in power”.<sup>53</sup> This behaviour will likely be strengthened in order to weaken social and state resilience in the EaP countries, but also to achieve pragmatic political and economic goals for Russia (eg, favourable industrial and energy contracts). As happened in Ukraine after the Maidan Revolution,<sup>54</sup> Russia will prefer informal, non-transparent cooperation with oligarchic and plutocratic structures, as well as with semi-democratic and corrupt political regimes that do not necessarily need to be in the Russian sphere of privileged interests. Despite the fact that oligarchs in the Eastern Partnership countries do not flaunt their business connections with Russia, most of their business connections in Russia still very much exist, even when it comes to Ukrainian and Georgian oligarchs.<sup>55</sup>

### **3. Focusing on pragmatic policy and national interests**

In 2018, Vladislav Surkov, who has for long been perceived as the main ideologist of the Kremlin and is a former personal adviser of Vladimir Putin on relationships with Abkhazia and South Ossetia and with the Russian president’s representative for Ukraine, published an article called “The loneliness of the half-breed”.<sup>56</sup> In it, he claimed that the historical concepts of Russia as a leader in the Eastern world have failed, as have Russian attempts to catch up with the West. Russia belongs neither to the West, nor to the East, and is therefore doomed to a “geopolitical loneliness”. Surkov states that “Russia has only two allies: its army and navy –possibly the best-worded description of geopolitical loneliness which should have long been accepted as our fate. It is beyond doubt Russia will trade, draw investment, exchange knowledge, fight wars (war is a means of communication in a sense), participate in common undertakings, enjoy membership of organizations, compete and cooperate”.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Nazarenko, S. (2020) ‘The Russian disinformation virus and its victims in Ukraine and the EU’, Promote Ukraine, 12 July ([www.promoteukraine.org/the-russian-disinformation-virus-and-its-victims-in-ukraine-and-the-eu/](http://www.promoteukraine.org/the-russian-disinformation-virus-and-its-victims-in-ukraine-and-the-eu/)).

<sup>52</sup> ‘Georgia. Relations with the Russian Federation’, 24 September 2020, ([www.kremlinwatch.eu/countries-compared-states/georgia/](http://www.kremlinwatch.eu/countries-compared-states/georgia/)).

<sup>53</sup> Minzarari, D. and Pistrinciu, V., op cit.

<sup>54</sup> Åslund, A. (2018) ‘How to Keep the Kremlin and the Oligarchs Out of the Ukrainian White House’, Atlantic Council, 11 June ([www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/how-to-keep-the-kremlin-and-the-oligarchs-out-of-the-ukrainian-white-house/](http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/how-to-keep-the-kremlin-and-the-oligarchs-out-of-the-ukrainian-white-house/)).

<sup>55</sup> Skorkin, K. (2018) ‘Election Gambit: What’s Behind Russia’s Sanctions on Ukrainian Politicians and Businessmen?’, Carnegie Moscow, 22 December (<https://carnegie.ru/commentary/77693>); Åslund, A., op cit.

<sup>56</sup> Surkov, V. (2018) ‘The loneliness of the half-breed’, *Russia in Global Affairs*, 28 May (<https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/the-loneliness-of-the-half-breed/>).

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

Undoubtedly, Russia will preserve and protect the Eurasian Economic Union and the Collective Security Treaty Organization, but these organisations are much more modest and less developed alliances than the EU and NATO. Russia will therefore learn “its limitations; to repel residual nostalgia; and to think straight, putting issues before personalities, and staying focused on its own interests, leaving the empire farther and farther behind (...) Russia primarily cares about its own interests in the countries concerned and focuses on protecting those”.<sup>58</sup>

The most important dimension in what could be called the ‘Russia first’ principle is that Moscow has no allies whom it “will die for and *vice versa*”.<sup>59</sup> The best examples are the closest ones (ie, Armenia and Belarus). In their relations with Russia, the commitments are not always reciprocal, unlimited or for a lifetime (in either direction). Moscow demonstrated this in the crisis in Nagorno-Karabakh and during the Belarusian protests against Belarus President Alexander Lukashenko in 2020. “Russia will do what it is formally obligated to do, but no more. It will also insist on its allies being more loyal in order to deserve Moscow’s support. If an ally engages in a ‘multi-vector’ foreign policy, they should expect a similar attitude from Russia”.<sup>60</sup>

In other words, if Belarus is not ready for deeper economic, military and political integration within the Union State of Russia and Belarus for instance, but rather opts to diversify its foreign policy, Russia is not going to continue subsidising the Belarusian economy. The same principle also applies to Armenia. If Yerevan tries to rebalance its relations with the EU and Russia, Moscow will do the same. With regard to the war over Nagorno-Karabakh in summer 2020, Armenia and Armenian national security became caught between Russia’s global interests and partners. “For Russia, Armenia is an official ally; Turkey is a partner, albeit a difficult one; and Azerbaijan was until war broke out an example of model behaviour in the post-Soviet space foreign policy that is entirely independent from Russia, while maintaining a good relationship with Moscow and Putin”.<sup>61</sup>

In this sense, Azerbaijan is the model of relations with Russia. Baku has proven that having good relations with Moscow does not necessarily come at the cost of submitting to or joining integrated projects led by Russia. Perhaps this will be a formula for Russia’s future relations with Georgia and Ukraine, where the EaP countries will only be close or distant partners, even if the formal alliances are preserved – sometimes only in name.

The Russian approach is both bad and good news for the EaP countries. The bad news is that until Brussels and Moscow settle their mutual conflict and transform their competition over the EaP region into peaceful relations, the Eastern Partnership space will remain a territory of a moderate ‘cold proxy war’. This means that the EU will develop its economic predominance over Russia within the EaP space, and that Russia will intensify its use of offensive measures in order to protect its military superiority, and also to protect Armenian and Belarusian dependence on Russia and Russia’s ties with rest of the EaP countries. At the same time, the EU will try to democratise and westernise the EaP states – which Russia will treat with suspicion, trying to counter the EU’s agenda by using some of the aforementioned methods. The EU-Russia clash over the EaP will continue to impose on the regional states a

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<sup>58</sup> Д. Тренин, Три кризиса на границе России. Что они означают для отношений Москвы с союзниками, (2020) Carnegie Moscow, 28 October (<https://carnegie.ru/commentary/83061>).

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Д. Тренин, *op cit*.

<sup>61</sup> А. Баунов (2020) В ожидании союзника. Почему Россия не спешит помогать Армении в Карабахе Carnegie Moscow, 8 October (<https://carnegie.ru/commentary/82921>).

zero-sum geopolitical choice between a pro-Russian and a pro-Western orientation. However, the good news is that the EaP countries will consequently diversify their foreign policies in order to achieve a balance between Russia and the European Union, and the region will therefore become an area of non-violent competition instead of being a territory of a cold or hot proxy war.

### **Recommendations for the EU**

The fundamental issue for the EU is to define the degree of risks and commitment that it is ready to undertake towards the Eastern Partnership countries. “Russia's willingness to stop the expansion of the European and Euro-Atlantic institutions has been fully demonstrated. [Unlike Russia] Europeans do not want to expose themselves to high costs and high risks in order to extend EU standards and regulations even further eastwards. The European Union feels its possibilities, both political and economic, were limited” .<sup>62</sup> The EU therefore needs a consensus on its final goal when it comes to the overall EaP programme and component countries. Given that the visa-free regime, association and DCFTA agreements with Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova have been signed, the only natural goal for these countries seems to be the opening of EU accession negotiations. Even if the EU is not ready to begin this process at the moment, Brussels should at least draw a timeframe for doing so, in order to strengthen its position towards Russia and to mobilise Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia to make much greater reform efforts under the supervision of the EU institutions. In the longer-term perspective (ie, 10-20 years from now), this would also encourage Belarus and Armenia to make efforts towards achieving some sort of independence from Moscow.

Should the EU decide not to open the accession process yet, which would be harmful for the EU in the long term, Brussels should clearly define a model of relations with each EaP country individually. The most appropriate model for Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine would be to establish the long-term goal of membership of the European Economic Area (EEA – comprising the 27 EU member states, Norway, Iceland and Liechtenstein). Membership of the EEA involves compliance with EU regulations and respecting its four freedoms (the freedom of movement of goods, services, capital, and people). It also involves respecting EU competition and state-aid rules, as well as complying with EU law in many horizontal policies.<sup>63</sup> At the same time, the EEA “provides for equal rights for, and obligations on, EEA citizens and companies on the single market, including the right to take up employment and obtain social benefits”.<sup>64</sup> Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia would be suitable for EEA membership in the long term as they are currently in the process of implementing DCFTA agreements and as they have successfully completed visa liberalisation talks, which involved four groups of benchmarks including on border management, migration and asylum, public order and security, and fundamental rights.

However, none of these three countries is currently able to adopt the EEA legislation, conduct costly reforms or build a well-developed democratic system. Furthermore, the EU is unlikely to avoid opposition from its own member states, which will fear the inflow of cheap labour and the expense to be incurred from helping the development of Ukraine, Georgia and

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<sup>62</sup> Ф. Лукьянов, *op cit*.

<sup>63</sup> Каса, Е., Benedyczak, J., Pienkowski, J., Gibadlo, L., Dyer, A. and Szeligowski, D. (2019) ‘The Eastern Partnership Vision after 2020’, The Polish Institute of International Affairs, Warsaw, March, p. 29 ([www.pism.pl/files/?id\\_plik=25592](http://www.pism.pl/files/?id_plik=25592)).

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid*.

Moldova – expense which is disproportionate in comparison to the potential benefits. The EEA membership of Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova can therefore only be a long-term project.

Armenia is positioned somewhere between the pro-Western EaP countries and the oppressive authoritarian regimes of Belarus and Azerbaijan. It seems that the most appropriate goal for Armenia would be that of signing a DCFTA agreement and pursuing the establishment of a visa-free regime. Armenia is currently proceeding with the four benchmarks of the visa liberalisation action plan, and in 2017 it signed a Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA) with the EU, which covers a wide range of cooperation areas in economic, trade and political relations. Armenia also belongs to the GSP+ (the General System of Preferences Plus) which abolishes customs duties on goods (almost 66% of EU customs duties). According to The Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index, "Armenia is closer to Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine than Azerbaijan and Belarus".<sup>65</sup> However, in order to move to the DCFTA dialogue stage, Armenia needs to overcome two problems. First, it needs to negotiate a green light from Moscow to start dialogue on a DCFTA agreement with the EU – which is not impossible, but this has been made much more difficult following Armenia's defeat by Azerbaijan in the war of summer 2020 and the subsequent increase of Armenia's dependence on its Russian ally. Second, Armenia needs to overcome the oligarchic structure of its economy and politics, which considerably inhibits the country's implementation of the rule of law and reforms of its judicial system, and thus slows down Armenia's cooperation with the EU.

For the EU, cooperation with a strong authoritarian Azerbaijan can only mean support for Azerbaijani civil society and common energy projects that will allow the EU to diversify its energy supplies. However, it should also be remembered that this kind of economic cooperation will always take place at the cost of the EU turning a blind eye to the violation of fundamental human rights by the Baku regime.

The situation is even worse for Belarus because, unlike Azerbaijan or Russia, Belarus has no attractive economic offer for the EU. The Belarusian position has even worsened since the country's rigged presidential elections in August 2020 and the mass repression of the opposition that then followed. The EU's policy must therefore be limited to the creation of support mechanisms for the Belarusian opposition and civil society, on the one hand, and to applying an intelligent sanctions policy against the regime, on the other hand (ie, sanctions that will affect Belarusian society as little as possible). These sanctions could include the limitation or suspension of certain Belarusian projects that are financed by the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development and the European Investment Bank; imposing a ban on trading Belarusian state bonds on the territory of the EU; or sanctions against the entire state apparatus of repression.

The right step for the EU is to continue the EaP with the 'more for more' principle – which means developing stronger partnerships with those neighbours that have made more progress in terms of the implementation of democratic reforms. These democratic reforms should be understood as reforms of state institutions, the economy and the judicial system. The 'more for more' principle would also weaken pathologies within the EaP countries such as oligarchisation, corruption, citizens' distrust of the state, dysfunctional institutions and nepotism, which have effectively been dismissed by Russia in its policy for the region.

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid.



A fundamental prerequisite for the EU is to define its margin of concessions towards Russia. It seems quite easy to identify Russia's expectations when it comes to the EU – ie, lifting sanctions (especially those imposed after the Crimean annexation); permitting inflows of high technology (especially dual-use technology and drilling equipment); recognising Crimea as a part of Russia;<sup>66</sup> fulfilling the Russian conditions of the Minsk agreements; increasing energy and economic cooperation; and restoring European foreign direct investment in Russia. In short, Moscow expects a return to a business-as-usual situation. In exchange, it offers the possibility of reducing or stopping cyberattacks and even targeted physical attacks on European streets; supporting the EU with migration processes since it is militarily involved in Libya and Syria; and building a more stable security architecture in Europe. Brussels therefore needs to determine where the EU's limitations are towards Russian demands, and what the risks and benefits of Moscow's agenda are for the EU. Regardless of the degree of concessions, the EU is obliged to push its demands towards Russia concerning matters related to the EaP countries. These demands include the need to stop fuelling the war in Donbas; to fulfil the Minsk agreements; to allow free and fair economic competition in the EaP area; to abandon the kind of zero-sum politics that forces the EaP countries to choose between the West or Russia; and to cease the use of active measures against the EU institutions and member states – such as cyber espionage, assassinations of Russia's political opponents on EU territory, and intensified disinformation campaigns. The EU must obviously not refrain from further sanctions or stronger economic pressure when this is needed as a response to aggressive Russian policy both towards European and EaP countries.

Given that the EU is deprived of military capabilities as a whole, it needs to use tools that will ensure Russia's supremacy in the region does not encroach even further, and that will force Moscow to move towards peaceful cooperation. This requires increased EU-financing of key transport and energy infrastructure projects – especially in Ukraine, Georgia and Azerbaijan – as these projects can assure the diversification of energy sources and routes for the EU. The benefit of this diversification was highlighted during the Eastern Partnership summit in Brussels in 2017, when “the agreement on the expansion of the trans-European transport network TEN-T was signed (...) The implementation of the agreements would bring an added value in terms of geographic connectivity between the EU, the EaP countries, but also the EAEU and Central Asia states”.<sup>67</sup> The EU should also provide financial and logistic support for projects such as Anaklia port,<sup>68</sup> the extension of the Baku–Tbilisi–Kars railway,<sup>69</sup> the development of the Baku–Supsa pipeline<sup>70</sup> and South Caucasus pipeline,<sup>71</sup> the Trans-Adriatic pipeline<sup>72</sup> and the Trans-Anatolian pipelines.<sup>73</sup> Energy and transport infrastructure are two crucial and painful points for Russia, since almost half of Russian state income derives from

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<sup>66</sup> Лавров заявил о невозможности отобрать Крым у Россииб, RBK, 16 March 2021 ([www.rbc.ru/rbcfreenews/6050fa3a9a79472f2f126e7e](http://www.rbc.ru/rbcfreenews/6050fa3a9a79472f2f126e7e)).

<sup>67</sup> Е. Прейгерман, Инфраструктурная связность и политическая стабильность в Евразии (2018) *Russia in Global Affairs*, 24 May (<https://globalaffairs.ru/articles/infrastrukturnaya-svyaznost-i-politicheskaya-stabilnost-v-evrazii/>).

<sup>68</sup> Anaklia Deep Sea Port (Construction) (<https://reconnectingasia.csis.org/database/projects/anaklia-deep-sea-port-construction/c43c3c4b-3b2c-4568-a4d4-7c03d5d21132/>).

<sup>69</sup> Baku–Tbilisi–Kars Railway (Construction) (<https://reconnectingasia.csis.org/database/projects/baku-tbilisi-kars-railway-construction/efca2104-5465-4e13-a869-e23d96faf30b/>).

<sup>70</sup> Socar ([www.socar.az/socar/en/activities/transportation/baku-supsa-western-export-pipeline](http://www.socar.az/socar/en/activities/transportation/baku-supsa-western-export-pipeline)).

<sup>71</sup> BP ([www.bp.com/en\\_az/azerbaijan/home/who-we-are/operations/projects/pipelines/scp.html](http://www.bp.com/en_az/azerbaijan/home/who-we-are/operations/projects/pipelines/scp.html)).

<sup>72</sup> Trans-Adriatic Pipeline ([www.tap-ag.com/](http://www.tap-ag.com/)).

<sup>73</sup> Trans-Anatolian Pipeline ([www.tanap.com/tanap-project/why-tanap/](http://www.tanap.com/tanap-project/why-tanap/)).

the export of gas and oil.<sup>74</sup> The EU therefore needs to get its foot in the door much more firmly in order to strengthen its negotiating position with Moscow and to obtain what it expects. Indeed, all these projects are of strategic importance for the EU.

The EU's commitment to security issues is also viewed as highly desirable in the region. Experts from the EaP countries emphasise their expectations on intensifying cooperation with the EU to counteract Russian disinformation or cyber and hybrid threats.<sup>75</sup> Georgia would like to see stronger engagement of the European Union Monitoring Mission in the country, especially near Abkhazia and South Ossetia. It would also like to see stronger engagement of the EU Special Representative for the South Caucasus, in order to stop the borderisation process, i.e., the border of South Ossetia being pushed further into Georgian territory.

The EU should not omit to brandish the threat of economic sanctions, nor to develop cooperation with Russia, especially in the form of trilateral Russia-EU-EaP discussions. The example of cooperation in the Arctic indeed proves that Russia and Europe are able to cooperate effectively. In the long term, all parties could benefit from the creation of negotiating platforms on the territory of the Eastern Partnership countries, and it would be beneficial to make the platforms specialised. They would then be dedicated to various issues with developed infrastructure and expert support, which seems to be an interesting alternative to the buffer zones of military and political confrontation. Moreover, the EU should try to intensify constructive relations between the EAEU and EaP members, being guided by the 'choose not lose' principle that would enable them to maintain good relations with both parties. The same could be offered to Russia by revitalising the Partnership for Modernisation and by developing trilateral and wider cooperation with common neighbours. As soon as Russia limits its geopolitical ambitions, the outlook for a future free trade zone between the EU, the EaP and the EAEU will become more feasible.<sup>76</sup>

Additionally, the EU should provide sustained support for independent media and civil society in the EaP countries. This support should be in the form of minimum 10-year programmes, which cannot be challenged or determined by the political conjuncture. Indeed, it was civil society that led to the democratic changes in the semi-authoritarian systems of Georgia, Ukraine, Moldova and Armenia, and the example of the Belarusian protests in 2020 shows that civil society is the most important factor for spurring democratic changes in this authoritarian model too. Moreover, the pro-democratic, pro-European stance taken by Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia is to a large extent the effect of the independent media and non-governmental organisations controlling and supporting this stance.

Long-term EU support for the EaP countries is important for one more reason. Brussels must not assume that the EaP countries will achieve stabilisation and development without EU assistance and long-term support, nor must it assume that these countries will gain the ability to conduct a balanced foreign policy in the coming years because of EU-Russia competition over the region. Furthermore, it remains very doubtful that Russia will give up its geopolitical ambitions of dominance over the EaP region in the next 10-15 years, given the

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<sup>74</sup> Benedyczak, J. and Zaniewicz, M. (2020) 'The Russian Economy and COVID-19', PISM Bulletin no 159 (1589) 29 July, The Polish Institute of International Affairs, Warsaw.

<sup>75</sup> Kaca, E., Benedyczak, J., Pienkowski, J., Gibadlo, L., Dwyer, A. and Szeligowski, D., op cit. For the purposes of the report, the authors conducted interviews with over a dozen experts and officials from the Eastern Partnership countries.

<sup>76</sup> Т. ван дер Тогт, Как преодолеть разделение Большой Евразии, *Russia in Global Affairs*, 7 April 2017 (<https://globalaffairs.ru/articles/poprobuem-sovmestit/>).

**Recommendations to the EU in light of Russian policy towards the Eastern Partnership**  
*Jakub Benedyczak*

unresolved issues of Crimea and Donbas (since 2014) and the cases of Abkhazia and South Ossetia (since 2008). Indeed, it seems even more doubtful, if not impossible, that Russia will accept the EU's original offer to be included as a part of the Eastern Partnership initiative as an equal player with the rest of the EaP countries.

**About the author**

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