

HOW THE EU NEEDS TO MANAGE RELATIONS WITH ITS EASTERN NEIGHBORHOOD

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When U.S. President Donald Trump said he wanted to make a deal with Russia, many people immediately worried about Eastern Europe, which is often seen as a geopolitical battleground, a contested territory torn between Europe and Russia. And it can be tempting—or terrifying—to think that such territorial questions could indeed be resolved by a deal, be it a cynical *quid pro quo* or a prudent compromise.

However, viewing countries in the Eastern neighborhood—namely, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine—first and foremost as a geopolitical battleground obscures important layers of a more complex reality. The internal tensions in most of these Eastern European countries are not underpinned by geopolitical choices. This is not a struggle between the Eastern and Western worlds, even if some local politicians portray it as such. Rather, the tension is between self-interested elites and societies that are maturing and increasingly demanding accountability. But these ordinary internal tensions have become intertwined with geopolitics in ways that are unique to Europe and potentially very dangerous.

This combination of factors presents Europe with policy dilemmas that cannot be resolved quickly—either by reaching a deal or other means. But these challenges need to be diligently managed, so as to avoid dangerous escalations and to keep the door open for positive developments in

the future. And while Europe does indeed need a new policy for the region, it cannot consist of easy fixes.

EUROPE'S EASTERN NEIGHBORHOOD VERSUS CENTRAL EUROPE

The Eastern neighborhood often has been viewed as just a new version of Central Europe in the 1990s: that is, as another group of countries that want to democratize, escape Russia's domination, and join the West. Things are admittedly harder this time around—local motivations for reform are weaker, corruption is deeply entrenched, Russia's resistance is stronger, and Western resolve to back the countries involved is less steady. There is also no explicit promise of EU membership. On this point, the EU is split: while some countries—Poland, Sweden, and the Baltic states, to name a few—back extending this offer to neighbors in Eastern Europe, other countries are held back by enlargement fatigue or fear of Russia's potential reaction.

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Yet otherwise the essence of the EU's policy toward these countries has remained in many ways similar to what the EU's approach to Central Europe twenty-five years ago: to work toward a friendly, democratic, and like-minded neighborhood by offering greater degrees of closeness and association with the EU in exchange for reforms, democratization, and the gradual adoption of the EU's legal framework. This has also been the core of the EU's Eastern Partnership (EaP) policy since 2009, which some experts have dubbed "enlargement-lite."¹

However, some important though often overlooked differences between Central Europe in the past and the EaP group today prevent this policy from working as it used to. In Central Europe in the 1990s, the drive to pursue reforms had deep cultural and psychological roots. Many people in countries such as Estonia and Poland wanted to rejoin the West—which they saw as their natural home—after decades of Soviet domination.

This desire united the elites and general publics of these countries; it served as a mandate for action for political leaders and the measure of their success. EU integration was hegemonic discourse; the elites had no other option. While the scale of Central Europe's transformation was indeed unprecedented and the EU could not have been prepared for it, for these reasons, it was nonetheless relatively easy and straightforward for the EU to influence, if not dictate, the direction of change and the nature of reforms.

The countries that eventually joined the EaP, by contrast, gained—or in some cases restored—their independence partly by accident in 1991. This process was not informed by the same geopolitical and cultural passions as in Central Europe during the 1990s, at least not to the same degree. In the EaP countries, the myth of returning to the West was weak or non-existent; there were no memories of independent statehood that could have played a meaningful political role. The West did not serve as a vision of the future capable of uniting the population and empowering leaders. This is why these countries' statehood could be hijacked by corrupt elites who used it for their own benefit—or simply by provincial elites, who failed to recognize historical opportunity the way it was recognized

in the Baltic states, for example. A quarter of a century later, in at least some of these countries, societies are growing stronger and have started to demand greater accountability from elites. This development is a force to be reckoned with, and it creates a sustainable source of pressure on elites.

But one must not be mistaken: while this pressure can appear, and at times it can actually be, geopolitical, its main focus is domestic. Even though Ukraine's Maidan demonstrators in late 2013 and early 2014 carried EU flags, in essence this was an anticorruption revolution that had long been waiting to happen. Virtually anything could have triggered it. The EU-Ukraine Association Agreement that then president Viktor Yanukovich failed to sign simply happened to play the role of the match thrown onto the powder keg.

Eastern European elites and society at large view the EU very differently. In the eyes of Eastern European societies, the EU is popular not so much as a geopolitical destination as it is a means of establishing rule-based governance at home, and it is judged by its ability to assist in that pursuit. Elites, in contrast, might be more interested in institutional links to the EU as a means of hedging against Russia, but at the same time, they are inclined to avoid real reforms that infringe on their powerful vested interests. For ordinary citizens, the EU is about development; for elites, the EU is about geopolitics and power conservation.

This presents the EU with difficult policy dilemmas. It can rely on citizens, nongovernmental organizations, activists, and other societal actors to exert pressure, but this often involves working against elites' sense of self-interest. This may mean that the offer of eventual EU membership, even if it were on the table, might not serve as an automatic trigger of vigorous reforms the way some Westerners hope. Elites remain instrumental in implementing any reforms, so there are limits to how much the EU can feasibly alienate them while still trying to work with them. But if the EU is seen as siding with nominally pro-European but essentially corrupt elites, then this too will affect the EU's standing in the eyes of these societies.

The EU's shifting popularity in Ukraine offers a telling example. It reached its low point toward the end of the nominally pro-European presidency of Viktor Yushchenko: in 2008, only 28 percent of Ukrainians thought the country ought to aspire to foster a closer relationship with the EU, while 54 percent believed it should develop ties with the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) and greater integration with Russia.² By the end of the ostensibly Russia-friendly Yanukovich's presidency, however, this trend had reversed. In October 2013, 32 percent of Ukrainians had favorable views of the EEU, and 47 percent placed their hopes in the EU; by 2015, the same figures were 13 percent and 62 percent respectively. The lesson is obvious: self-serving elites tend to eventually discredit any concepts they nominally adhere to.

While this standoff between elites and societies acts as an undercurrent across the region, it manifests in different ways in different countries. There are countless "shades of grey," as a pair of European researchers has put it.³ In Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine, elections matter and power does change hands—albeit sometimes more peacefully and sometimes less so. In Azerbaijan and Belarus, it never does.

At the same time, democratic progress is not necessarily correlated with high standards of governance and effective measures to curb corruption. Pluralistic Ukraine is as corrupt as authoritarian Azerbaijan, and nominally pro-European Moldova is as corrupt as nominally pro-Russian Armenia. Georgia managed to bring a new generation into power and address corruption, but then suffered a setback due to many mistakes that were made in the process. Belarus, meanwhile, features some embryonic mechanisms of accountability hidden within a thoroughly authoritarian system.

None of these societies have managed to break through and form a sustainable, responsible, and visionary alternative political elite reminiscent of those that existed in some Central European countries—like Poland—in the 1990s. It is impossible to say if and when such a breakthrough will happen. But the gradual emancipation of these present-day Eastern European societies is unlikely

to fade either: on the contrary, their citizens are increasingly sophisticated in how they pressure their governments.

This dynamic likely points to a future of perpetual internal tension that may occasionally spike into major upheavals. These countries are confined to a bumpy ride that is likely to continue for years to come. This in itself would be nothing new—these days, tensions between citizens and elites have become a feature of many advanced democracies, not to mention developing ones. However, what makes the situation in Eastern Europe uniquely dangerous is its interplay with geopolitics.

RUSSIA'S VIEWS ON EASTERN EUROPE

While the idea of an East-West dichotomy does not define the internal political dynamics inside the EaP countries, it does define Russia's attitude toward the region. President Vladimir Putin's inner circle largely views international relations in terms of a zero-sum struggle for dominance and influence among a few powerful countries. According to this worldview, smaller countries are almost inevitably confined to the status of what one observer has characterized as "vassal states," the only question being whose vassals they are.⁴ Moscow feels that it has already conceded a lot: it has given up on Central Europe and the Baltic states, leaving these countries in what Moscow views as the U.S. sphere of influence; now Russia is determined to keep the EaP region—its last buffer zone against the West—under its control.

It is important to understand the nature of the control that Moscow desires. It does not intend to restore the Soviet Union, even on a reduced scale, nor does it view land grabs as an important end in and of themselves. But Moscow does indeed feel a sense of entitlement in the EaP region. It expects these countries to be sensitive to Moscow's wishes and wants to have economic and political leverage that could be used to make sure they are. To this end, old Soviet economic ties and local corruption are handy tools.

This domination need not be inevitably or inherently anti-Western: what is important for Moscow is not so much to turn these countries against the West, but to have the ability

to manage, arbitrate, and (if necessary) veto particular aspects of their relations with the West. But this also means that Moscow is determined to prevent the expansion of Western organizations into this part of the world, and it assumes that any Western actions in the region should have Russia's approval. The way Russian diplomats have rebuffed Western Europeans' attempts to call the region a common neighborhood illustrates this well: according to the Russians, this is their neighborhood, not a common or a European one.

What Moscow wants to avoid is the emergence of direct links and true rapprochement between the region's countries and the West: this is why Russia went to great lengths to prevent the EaP countries from signing association agreements with the EU, and succeeded in doing so in the case of Armenia.

WHAT MAKES THE SITUATION DANGEROUS

This situation is aggravated by potential and actual misunderstandings and the different conceptual paradigms that Moscow and the West respectively hold. For many years, the EU has tried but failed to get Moscow to accept a more win-win viewpoint that sees democracy and prosperity in this common neighborhood as good for both Russia and Europe. Moscow, on the other hand, assumes that any actions by the EU specifically and the West in general are rooted in the same great-power competition that frames Moscow's worldview. Russia strongly believes that Europe is trying to spread its norms and values in the EaP region with the aim of expanding its sphere of influence at the expense of Moscow's, with an eye toward enlarging the EU as well as, potentially, NATO.

Furthermore, Moscow has a blind spot for societies and the power they can have. It sincerely believes that former Ukrainian president Yanukovich was toppled by the West for geopolitical reasons, rather than by Ukrainian people who wanted a different future. Russia saw visits by Western politicians to Maidan—which were in fact largely just symbolic actions and a substitute for true policy—as proof of Western involvement in these events.

In the future, Moscow is likely to see any domestic struggles in the EaP region through a geopolitical lens and suspect the West of fueling anti-Moscow sentiments. This is especially so because in any potential domestic struggles, Russia and the EU are likely to find themselves on different sides of the barricades: the EU's instinct, and usually also its policies, will be to support the aspirations of citizens, while Russia is likely to side with corrupt elites against their people. This is not because democratic change in the Eastern European neighborhood would necessarily inspire a similar movement in Russia—although some in Moscow may fear this, while some in the West may hope for it. Instead, it is simply because corrupt elites are easier to control and handle in ways that Moscow finds familiar.

Overall, this indeed makes the six EaP countries contested territory, a space in which different sets of normative rules compete—both in terms of these countries' internal systems of organization as well as the international rules of the game. It has become a kind of geopolitical gray zone that did not exist during the Cold War. The distrust between Russia and the West and the tendency by both sides, but especially by Russia, to misread the other's intentions also makes things very dangerous. Under these unfortunate circumstances, a fairly trivial incident in the EaP region could spark a conflict that could then escalate far beyond its original scope.

The potential for escalation is magnified by other characteristics of Russia's policymaking and policymakers. For one thing, the strikingly homogeneous worldview of the Kremlin's narrow circle of decisionmakers makes them prone to groupthink and paranoia. In addition, Moscow understands that it remains politically, economically, and militarily weaker than the combined strength of the West, and it has learned to compensate for these weaknesses by being more prone to risk taking.

Russia has seen that its capability and willingness to use military force decisively and unexpectedly is unmatched by the West, and that this works to its advantage. Moscow sees the 2008 war in Georgia and the 2014 annexation of Crimea as outright success stories that achieved their aims

(mainly the goal of stopping NATO).⁵ As for the Russian interventions in Ukraine's Donbas region (2014) and Syria (2015), the jury is still out, but success remains possible if military action is followed by effective diplomacy.

There are other reasons as well. Russia now interprets its diplomatic experiences with the West from 1992 to 2012 as a geopolitical retreat, rooted in attempts to be friendly. That now gives Moscow an incentive to escalate preemptively, so as to engage in talks from a position of strength. Moreover, the Kremlin's—and Putin's—obsessive, pride-driven stance makes it very hard for Moscow to de-escalate, even in cases when it feels it has gone too far and bungled things. De-escalation is still possible for Moscow, but on its own terms and only when doing so cannot be interpreted as a victory for the other side—thus, de-escalation would likely be hard to achieve at the height of a fast-moving crisis.

True, the Trump presidency may have halted this escalatory logic for a time. Moscow feels safe in its risk-taking behavior when it faces predictable partners in the West, but Trump is viewed as unpredictable. Also, decisionmakers in Moscow recognize that Trump does not prioritize the American-led world order and its principles the way his predecessors have, and this gives Moscow some hope that it can agree with the United States, and—indeed—make a deal. They also understand that the way Russia has become a factor in U.S. domestic politics makes any such deal impossible for the time being. But they are ready to wait, assuming that once what they interpret as a power struggle in Washington has been settled, the time for talking may come. Tensions may have relaxed for the time being, but as long as the fundamentals of the situation remain unchanged, risks remain and can resurface at any time—during the Trump presidency as well as afterward.

WHAT EUROPE CAN DO

The EU is aware of the gravity of the situation but is not sure how to respond. Nor does it have many options: upon a closer look, it becomes clear that, for now, the EU cannot win the conflict, cannot transcend it, and cannot give in either. The only choice that remains is to manage it.

When the chasm between Russia's and Europe's worldviews became evident in 2014, the instinct of many European countries—first and foremost Germany—was to look for ways to transcend it. EU cooperation with the EEU was briefly discussed as a means of establishing a wider cooperative framework. However, it soon became evident that, in reality, such cooperation is possible just on limited trade-related issues that cannot serve as a basis for a big political breakthrough.

It is also hard to see how any such cooperation would address the EaP countries between the EU and EEU. Had Europe politically legitimized the EEU as a Russia-led integrationist bloc, this probably would have given Moscow additional incentives to expand it, and thus put pressure on the potential candidates. It would also have alarmed the countries in the region, including the ones that are already EEU members. None of them want to give up their direct links to Europe. Finally, in order to really do away with the geopolitical tensions stemming from the region, such an arrangement probably still would have been anchored in a territorial deal, implicitly or explicitly.

A territorial deal, stemming from a new arrangement regarding the European security order, is probably the very thing that Russia would want. Presumably, such a deal would need to involve placing limits on the sovereignty of EaP countries, curtailing their right to ever join Western organizations like the EU and NATO, unconditionally accepting Moscow's and its allies' (or vassals') domestic arrangements, and regarding pro-Western regime changes as unacceptable—both in the form of armed intervention (as has happened in the Middle East) as well as that of color revolutions, as have occurred in the post-Soviet space.

For Europe, this is impossible. Europe cannot enter into geopolitical deals over spheres of influence. Not only has history made this a taboo, but many Europeans also understand that spheres of influence cannot work the same way anymore. During the Cold War, such geopolitical arrangements could potentially be held together by coercion, but these days some attraction is needed. Russia may lay claim to a sphere of influence, but it cannot really hold one without such an arrangement being accepted by

the societies—as well as elites—of the countries concerned. A closer examination of Russia's relationships with all the EaP countries shows that Moscow has not been able to achieve that anywhere.

Conversely, the EU also cannot integrate these countries into its own sphere of influence until these countries' elites carry out the reforms needed to put down roots in Europe and to close openings for undue outside influence. In this context, the statement that it is up to the countries themselves to decide where they belong stops being a noble principle and becomes a fact of life. It follows that giving in to Russia's wishes and endowing it with a sphere of influence would not just be immoral, but simply impossible—even if Europe wanted to do it.

Finally, Europe could try to win the argument—so to speak—but what would winning actually mean? A prominent group within the EU views support for the Eastern neighborhood as an optimal Russia policy. According to this logic, if Ukraine reforms and becomes a successful democracy, that would not only put it out of Russia's reach and thus curtail Moscow's imperialistic appetites, but it might eventually also inspire change inside Russia.

This thinking has some merits. Indeed, if Ukraine manages to become a stable, consolidated democracy and Russia were to see this, then Moscow might eventually change its calculus with regard to the conflict in Donbas and seek a face-saving way out, giving up on attempts to use the region as a way to gain leverage over Kyiv's decisionmaking. This would diffuse the most acute source of geopolitical tension in Europe's Eastern neighborhood, which would be no small achievement.

At the same time, it is hard to believe that democracy in Ukraine would bring about democracy in Russia. Russia has its own internal political dynamics that are not comparable to those of Ukraine, although changes in Ukraine could certainly prompt suspicion and paranoia in the Kremlin—as already happened, as a result of both the Orange Revolution (2004) and the Maidan demonstrations (2013–2014.)

Ultimately, it is vital to understand that while democratic change in Ukraine and other countries in the region is surely a very important end in itself, this would not in fact solve Europe's Russia quandary. That is because this question is not just about geopolitics and not so much about territory, but first and foremost about norms and paradigms. If, by some miracle, the whole EaP region managed to democratize and join Western institutions, Europe would simply be beating Russia at Moscow's own game—that of spheres of influence—as opposed to bringing Russia around to the Western game consisting of cooperative win-win arrangements that Europe sees as a *modus vivendi* for the continent.

And, conversely, even if these countries fail to reform, they should still be entitled to retain their territorial integrity and not be invaded. They are still supposed to have a say about their own governments and have the chance to try again to reform. Europe cannot make the whole continent's normative geopolitical order dependent on certain countries' ability to reform—or not.

MANAGING AND MUDDLING THROUGH

What Europe really needs to win is the normative conversation with Russia. Right now, the prospects for doing this are dim. Russia has no incentive to accept the West's normative terms as long as it is not sure that these terms are here to stay, and for the time being, Moscow has serious doubts. The United States under Donald Trump is seen as deviating from the Western-led normative order, though the country is mired in infighting, and it is unclear which, if any, coherent worldview will prevail once the dust settles.

Europe is in many ways more invested in the Western-led order than the United States, but for Moscow, Europe's own future is an open question. The talk of an imminent EU collapse may have faded somewhat since the recent French elections. But for Moscow to accept and accommodate Europe's version of the normative order, Europe needs to demonstrate much more staying power—and also the power to shape the world and its normative rules.

Until Europe lives up to this challenge, its options will likely remain confined to simply managing the situation at hand. One can point to factors outside Europe that could bring about a positive breakthrough, but such factors are impossible to usher in by political or diplomatic means. Change could come from within the EaP region, through the emergence and consolidation of a strong, responsible political elite in at least some of these countries. But this cannot be done by outsiders: elite formation is a complicated process that can take decades or longer, and its mechanisms are not fully understood. Furthermore, the conditions for this process taking root in the region currently seem poor. After all, problems stemming from globalization are causing elite dysfunction in several advanced democracies, so it is not reasonable to expect the EaP region to stay entirely immune to this trend.

One can speculate about change in Russia, as it is possible to envisage different scenarios in which Russia would redefine its relations with the West and its neighbors in a less zero-sum manner. Among these scenarios, Russia's need for economic modernization—articulated more and more often in Moscow where the limitations of the current economic model is acutely felt—may play some small role. But it remains unclear to what extent economic considerations can in the end change a political system that views stability and control as overarching goals.

Furthermore, one also should not invest too much hope in the prospect of Putin's ultimate departure: post-Putin Russia may not necessarily be very different in its philosophy and worldview. Yet if this were to happen, Russia may at least have a somewhat more heterogeneous political elite, which may be less prone to the groupthink and paranoia that make Putin's Russia uniquely dangerous and that make the risks related to handling the country so high.

What remains most important for Europe is its ability to overcome the multiple crises it currently faces and restore its standing as a beacon and role model for others. This would certainly influence the outlook for the EaP region and would also affect the calculus of Moscow. But such renewal is also

not something that can be accomplished by a directive or an executive order. It will probably eventually happen—but the path leading up to this outcome will be chaotic, bumpy, and time-consuming. This means that Europe's best strategy for the coming years is to manage the Eastern neighborhood with care by trying to keep dangerous situations from materializing and by leaving the door open to positive change in the future.

The Eastern Partnership Summit in November 2017 will be a good opportunity for the EU to articulate a renewed vision for its neighborhood. The world has changed so much over the last year and a half that it would be a mistake to pretend that nothing has changed for the Eastern neighborhood. The EU needs to outline a new political vision, as opposed to handling matters in a familiar technocratic manner.

But this political vision needs to be credible. Issuing noble statements that cannot be backed up would be counterproductive—rather, the EU should say less, but focus on really meaning what it says. If Europe manages to take into account recent changes—the Trump presidency, Brexit in the EU, the refugee crisis, and fears of globalization that have been fueling isolationism in many EU countries—and still articulate a realistic and principled policy for the Eastern neighborhood, this would be a sign of seriousness and credibility.

This new vision should acknowledge that the countries in the Eastern neighborhood are imperfect democracies, but still entitled to sovereignty. In its policy statements, the EU has often conflated the two: it has purported to advance democracy in the neighborhood, but it has lacked adequate responses to countries, such as Belarus, where powerholders explicitly ask the EU to protect their sovereignty, even though they likely will not become democracies by EU standards any time soon. The EU habitually thinks of itself as a standard-spreading soft power, and not as a hard geopolitical actor, lacks not just policies for such situations—it even lacks the ability to talk about such dilemmas. Recently, several politicians who support Belarus's independence have found themselves claiming that the country is moving toward democracy—to legitimize the EU's support. Others, who

prioritize democracy and advocate toughness vis-à-vis Minsk, have found themselves belittling or overlooking the proverbial Russian axe hanging over the country's sovereignty. The truth is that democracy and sovereignty, though linked, are still different things. The EU should find a way of supporting both, without engaging in muddled thinking that conflates the two as interchangeable.

The EU should be clear that its unconditional support for the EaP countries' sovereignty does not necessarily mean that it supports all of their policies and politicians.⁶ Brussels should resist attempts by local elites to use geopolitical tensions to legitimize their practices. At the same time, the EU can try to use geopolitical tensions to promote good governance. Following Moscow's annexation of Crimea, all EaP countries are more concerned about Russia than they used to be. This gives the EU an opportunity to show how corrupt practices do indeed create openings for undue influence and can easily erode a country's sovereignty to a very dangerous degree.

The EU's new approach should also reconcile the principal perspective of EU membership—after all, all European countries are entitled to apply—with the understanding that, in the coming years, enlargement into the EaP region is not going to happen. This means that the region's countries cannot evade their security—and other—problems by escaping under the EU umbrella. Instead, they need to learn to live in the gray zone, at least for a while. And the EU needs to find ways of helping them to

address their current problems, as opposed to excessively arguing about whether to extend them membership perspectives or not.

The idea of managing and muddling through is not a captivating political slogan. It is unlikely to enflame hearts and win elections. But on many occasions, this type of low-key policy has proved to be the best way of bridging troubled waters until conditions are ripe for a more ambitious positive breakthrough. To say less and to really mean what is said, to underpromise but overdeliver, is a good approach in the meantime.

NOTES

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TASK FORCE ON U.S. POLICY TOWARD RUSSIA, UKRAINE, AND EURASIA

The task force will assess the strengths and weaknesses of U.S. and Western policy toward Russia, Ukraine, and Eurasia since the end of the Cold War and offer a set of guiding principles for a durable U.S. policy framework. The task force is a joint effort with the Chicago Council on Global Affairs and is supported, in part, by the Carnegie Corporation of New York.



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