

## The EU in Eastern Europe HAS NORMATIVE POWER BECOME GEOPOLITICAL?

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The November 2013 Eastern Partnership (EaP) summit in Vilnius played a key role in the transformation of the concept of the EU as a normative power. The summit was not only a focal point for developing the EU's eastward policy, it has repositioned the EU as a geostrategic actor. Even Germany, which is usually cast as an "advocate" for Russia, joined other EU member states in support of the "European choice" of Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia. The urge to counter Russian aspirations in these countries has created a rare period of European foreign policy unity. At the same time, the ability of the EU to effectively adopt a geopolitical approach in Eastern Europe is limited because of a series of structural and institutional factors. In the end, the outcome of these contemporary East-West tussles will depend more on actions on the ground than on various balances of power between Brussels and Moscow.

### **The EU Plays Geopolitics**

Most European experts would not rank countries like Moldova or even Ukraine at the very top of the EU's foreign policy priorities. Yet in EU discourse, the EaP's success is often referred to as a pivotal element of EU political actorness. EU elites gradually reconsidered their previous skepticism about Moldova and Georgia (and, at least before the latest developments, Ukraine) and believed it possible for these states to engage in a normative rapprochement with the EU. The Vilnius summit was to be a major indicator of the EU's ability and commitment to effectively act in and help shape the future of Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus.

Such a policy, however, requires a readiness to engage in clear competition with Russia. Indeed, the EaP project essentially reflects the desires of the most ardent proponents of the EU's normative expansion to jettison a "Russia first" philosophy. The attempt to drastically decrease the Russia-centric nature of its Eastern policy has led the EU to mirror some of the instruments that Russia itself uses in the region. The EU has

not only increased funding and technical support for Moldova and Ukraine. Multiple visits to Chisinau and Kyiv by representatives from EU member states (including Poland and Sweden as EaP initiators and Germany as the traditional leader of *Ostpolitik*) have clearly established the EU's eagerness to play the role of mentor, articulating these countries' national interests as grounded in the preservation of their pro-European orientation. This resembles what Moscow has been desperately doing for years—trying to articulate the national interests of Moldova and Ukraine as part of the Russian-led Eurasian integration endeavor (currently exemplified by the work of Russian presidential envoy to Transnistria, Dmitry Rogozin, and presidential economic advisor, Sergey Glazyev).

The EaP has made the EU increasingly assertive in its challenge to the status quo that Russia pursues with regard to states of the region. This relates, in particular, to the question of frozen conflicts. Stimulating the reunification of Moldova and its breakaway region of Transnistria is part of the EU's far-reaching vision for the EaP area. According to EU Commissioner Stefan Fule, the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) is a good basis for reunifying Moldova, since Transnistria's non-participation in the DCFTA can cause the region serious economic problems. A similar logic applies to Georgia, which is eager to expand to the breakaway territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia the economic benefits that will stem from its Association Agreement with the EU, thus paving the way for the country's reunification.

That said, Brussels has entered into a geopolitical struggle with Russia without having at its disposal—or even desiring to have—the corresponding military force (which was Russia's trump card in Armenia's case) or mercantilistic power (which derailed Ukraine's Association Agreement). The EU's understanding of geopolitics differs from classical geopolitical approaches and is closer to what is known as “critical geopolitics.” This school of thought claims that geopolitics still matters, but instead of struggles of hard power the conflict is one of identities that are transformed via competing discourses, communications, and narratives. By this interpretation, geopolitics is about rearticulating actors' geographical affiliations and getting them to reconsider their belongingness to certain geographic spaces. It is more about choices than control. The shift, for instance, of what was formerly known as Eastern Europe into Central Europe may be understood in this way. Similarly, the EU is now eager to have its more easterly neighbors move closer to the EU-based normative order.

### **Reasons for “Geopoliticizing” the EU Approach**

The EU's eagerness to strengthen its geopolitical muscle and challenge Russia in its so-called “near abroad” is a result of at least two related factors that suggest fragmentation within the EU rather than its consolidation.

The first is the growing activism of Poland and Germany as co-shapers of the new political landscape in Eastern Europe. “We don't want to let Ukraine shift toward the Euro-Asia orbit or toward any kind of Russian hegemony,” said Andreas Schockenhoff, an influential German MP in charge of Russian policy. “There is a big strategic competition taking place. We are not convinced that it is in Ukraine's interests

to be exposed to Russian interference.”<sup>1</sup> The Baltic states have also contributed to elevating the political importance of the EaP region for the whole of the EU.

The second is the predominance of European, particularly German, economic lobbyists in the policymaking process. They do not necessarily support the EaP as a political project but still advocate for economically tying Russia’s neighbors to the EU market without Moscow’s consent. For example, the powerful German Committee on Eastern European Economic Relations openly advocates such an approach. However, the insignificant volume of trade between EaP states and the EU makes these economic arguments seem but justification (at least to Russia) for the EU’s “truer” geopolitical intentions.

The geopoliticization of EU policy toward the EaP region is not as unusual as it might seem. The EU has conducted itself in geopolitical fashion before—for example, in accepting Bulgaria and Romania, two states that turned the EU into a full-fledged Black Sea actor. The EU’s mild stance toward nondemocratic regimes in Azerbaijan (an EaP state) and Kazakhstan (an OSCE member) is based to a large extent on geopolitical logic. Some well-positioned politicians within the EU are also not immune to geopolitical thinking. For example, Romanian President Traian Basescu often makes provocative statements about Moldova as a Romanian country taken away from Romania by the Soviet Union and now under pressure by Moscow. Lithuanian Foreign Minister Linas Linkevicius has implied that the Russian exclave of Kaliningrad could hypothetically face an economic blockade if Moscow were to continue blocking the access of Lithuanian dairy products to Russia. Still, the geopolitical aspects of the EU and its individual members are not consistent or straightforward. They are activated at certain times and suppressed at others.

The EaP’s implementation illustrates this trend. The elevation of Yulia Tymoshenko’s case to the top of the EU’s Ukraine agenda made its entire policy toward Ukraine quite fragile. The focus on Tymoshenko reflected a certain normative path dependency based on the EU’s previous political commitment to this case as a demonstration of Ukrainian selective justice. Ultimately, however, political disagreements—such as Kyiv’s refusal to release Tymoshenko for medical treatment—were less a stumbling block to concluding an Association Agreement than was the EU’s refusal to provide a certain level of economic commitment to the Ukrainian government. Yet, as subsequent developments have shown, the whole controversy became deeply politicized—and geopoliticized. Facing a choice between two competing centers of power, Yanukovich decided to halt association with the EU. In the meantime, the EU came to see its Ukraine association project as geopolitical rather than purely technocratic. The EU’s determination to bring Ukraine (even in its current state) closer to Europe was increasingly reinforced as the pro-European rallies in Kyiv expanded.

Moldova’s drift toward Europe cannot be taken for granted either. It cannot be ruled out, for example, that the country’s anti-European and authoritarian-leaning

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<sup>1</sup> Judy Dempsey, “Can Merkel’s Russia Policy Work?” *Strategic Europe*, Carnegie Europe, September 30, 2013.

Communist Party will gain power in parliamentary elections later this year. Its leader, Vladimir Voronin, has indicated that if it does, the party will revise all decisions that have brought Moldova closer to the EU. The prospect of having Moldova's Association Agreement fall victim to Moldovan domestic politics could strengthen the political commitment of the EU to Moldova in the coming months.

### **Challenges with the EU's Geopolitical Turn**

Ultimately, however, the ability of the EU to mold its international identity along geopolitical lines is constrained by a number of factors. First, the EU's strategy remains grounded in "positive incentives" that do not necessarily provide an effective balance against Moscow's predominantly "negative incentives." Moreover, the EU's positive incentives are conditional and may bear fruit only in the long run, while Russian pressure and receivables exert immediate effect.

Second, the EU's turn to geopolitics is structurally incomplete. In most cases, Brussels avoids making hard political decisions on whether to accommodate authoritarian and corrupt governments or sanction them for non-compliance with EU policies. Ultimately, it was Kyiv and Yerevan, not Brussels, that decided to put negotiations on hold. The decision not to close the door on Ukraine, taken under the influence of the Baltic states and Poland, leaves it up to Kyiv to make the ultimate decision.

Third, the essence of the tentative EU geopolitical project is understood in different ways within the EU. In particular, a split remains between "maximalists" who adhere to the EU-led concept of a wider Europe and "pragmatists" who in principle may accept, for example, that the loss of Transnistria could be an affordable price to pay for Moldova's Europeanization, in much the same way that the recognition of the status quo in Kosovo is a precondition for Serbia's integration into the EU.

### **How Feasible is the Idea of a Common Neighborhood?**

Is there an alternative to this geopolitical game? The concept of Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus as a "common" neighborhood has not gained much acceptance in either the EU or Russia. For many years, the two parties have failed to agree on a coordinated approach to the states between them. The EaP has only exacerbated the deficit of common solutions.

Following the Ukrainian government's suspension of negotiations with the EU, Moscow called for a trilateral (EU-Russia-Ukraine) framework for further talks. Brussels immediately rejected this proposal, saying only that the EU does not engage third parties in its bilateral discussions. Such a position seems to contradict Brussels' stated commitment to multilateral diplomacy as a foundation of EU foreign policy. It also raises the question of whether the EU really wants to transform Russia's "near abroad" into a common neighborhood or to detach Eastern Europe from Russia's sphere of influence.

These two scenarios differ greatly. A common neighborhood would, to a large extent, be grounded in the idea of "great power management" – with the EU and Russia

as the key political stakeholders. An intention to disassociate Ukraine, Moldova, and other states from Russia, on the other hand, assumes adoption of power balancing strategies. But since Russia and the EU possess drastically different instruments of power, this would most likely trigger multiple asymmetries and conflicts.

Stuck between these two perspectives, the EU tends to oversimplify the situation on the ground. The most typical explanation for the EaP's current difficulties is Russian pressure on its neighbors. Without questioning this factor, we can also identify structural underpinnings of Russia's hegemony in post-Soviet Eurasia. Russia established its military presence in EaP states at times when neither the EU nor NATO were very eager to engage with the region. Furthermore, the policies of Russia's neighbors often themselves make Russian pressure possible, an illustrative case being Armenia's intransigence on the issue of Nagorno-Karabakh.

### Conclusion

Controversies surrounding the EaP have revealed the conceptual incompatibility of EU- and Russia-led integration projects. Rhetorically, the Kremlin echoes the old EU narrative about "Europe from Lisbon to Vladivostok" but has substituted its original content, based on the universality of European norms, with an underconceptualized idea of two integration projects that will gradually merge with each other. Yet Russia's policy of attracting states like Vietnam and Syria to the Customs Union reveal an intention not only to diversify economic relations but to economically counter-balance the EU. This devalues Russian assertions that Ukraine or Moldova would ultimately be able to retain their European identities even as parts of a Eurasian Union.

This situation ought to make us reconsider the extent to which the post-Cold War environment grants smaller states freedom of maneuver between major world powers. In Eastern Europe, the likelihood of becoming a "double periphery" of both Russia and the EU is greater than the prospect that these countries will be able to use their location to become strong international actors.

This is not to say that *realpolitik* is destined to be the only game in Eastern Europe. The limited success of the Vilnius summit has reinvigorated a plea for a common Europe without dividing lines and strengthened a normatively explicit pro-European domestic agenda within Ukraine that could yet lead to the collapse of Yanukovich's rule. Despite attempts to substitute normative arguments with economic and financial ones, norms and values may still enjoy formidable political resonance in Eastern Europe in the coming months.

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