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EU's Failed Eastern Neighborhood Policy – An Awakening of the Geopolitical EU?

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Introduction

On the 24th of November 2022, one thing became more evident than ever. Something is going wrong in the direct eastern neighbourhood of the EU. Russia's president Vladimir Putin orders a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, which shares borders with four EU member states stretching over 2200 kilometres. Many experts and lawmakers had previously criticised the EU's Eastern neighbourhood policy for being ineffective in establishing security and stability. The ongoing war spotlights the whole region and fuels the discussion about the goals and meaning of the EU's neighbourhood policy and partnership with Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova, Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Belarus. This incident has consequences for how the EU's Eastern Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) is looked at but also (re-)awakes the discussion in the European Union about a Geopolitical Europe. This essay points out how these two debates are interwoven and dare to look ahead in terms of an awakening of the Geopolitical EU.

The ENP - a failed attempt?

To understand the EU's relationship with its eastern neighbours, it is necessary to have a look at the ENP. The ENP was launched in 2004 to promote stability, prosperity, and democracy in the direct EU neighbourhood. However, despite its intentions, the ENP falls short of achieving its goals due to multiple factors. Firstly, the ENP faces challenges in terms of political and economic reforms in the eastern partner countries. While the EU has encouraged democratic governance, the rule of law, and market-oriented economic reforms, progress has been slow in many cases. Corruption, lack of transparency, and weak institutions hinder the successful implementation of reforms (Freyburg et al., 2011). Secondly, the ENP struggles with the issue of differentiation among its partners. The ENP offers a "one size fits all" approach, treating all countries in the eastern neighbourhood as equal partners, regardless of their political, economic, and social contexts. However, the Eastern neighbourhood countries

differ considerably in how they perceive the EU and what they expect from the partnership with the Union (Langbein & Börzel, 2013). A missing coherent strategy regarding the Eastern Partnership by the Member States decreases its impact. The ENP lacks the flexibility to adapt to each country's diverse needs and aspirations. As a result, the EU's influence has been limited, and the policy has not been able to effectively address the specific challenges and opportunities of each partner country. Thirdly, the ENP faces external pressures, mainly from Russia, which finds its pick in the ongoing war provoked by Russia. President Putin sought to maintain regional influence and actively opposed the EU's engagement in its eastern neighbourhood. Russia uses various means, including political pressure, economic coercion, and military intervention, to undermine the EU's efforts to promote democracy and closer ties with its Eastern partners (Delcour & Wolczuk, 2015). As the latest allegations show in which Russia is accused of paying anti-EU protesters in Chisinau, Moldova's capital, there seems to be no limit to the ingenuity on Russia's side to mobilise against the ENP (Minzarri, 2023). Moreover, as discussed below, the region was a scene of some developments that made it impossible for the ENP to succeed.

Looking eastern – a ring of fire

A shortcoming of the ENP was the long absent security and geopolitical considerations. As high as the ambitions to strengthen the rule of law and democracy in the eastern neighbourhood as ignorant was the Union towards the ongoing conflicts within the eastern neighbourhood. While Russia constantly tries to exert geopolitical influence in the region threatening Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova, two other countries of the Eastern Partnership programme, Armenia, and Azerbaijan, are deeply divided over the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Meanwhile, Belarus is ruled by Alexander Lukashenko, who refers to himself as the “last dictator in Europe” and suspended Belarus' participation in the Eastern Partnership programme in protest of EU sanctions.

Overall, the EU has multifacetedly attempted to transform its Eastern Neighbourhood into a “ring of friends”. However, the interventions mainly focused on political association, economic integration, people-to-people contacts, support for reforms and good governance, and civil society engagement while ignoring significant security and stability considerations “on the ground” (Buras & Lang, 2022). It can be safely said that the awakening process of the EU that it needs peace, security, and a geopolitical strategy in the region came too late. In 2014, when Russia annexed Crimea against international law, the EU added hybrid threats to the Eastern Partnership's security agenda. Latest since Russia's invasion of Ukraine territory, it is clear that this was not enough and that it needs a stronger focus on security linked to state resilience in various areas to match the new reality in the region (Meister et al., 2023). That the EU, its partnership, and its integration policies have a geopolitical component does not need to be explained to the citizens

of the Eastern Partnership countries. However, it seems that the awareness by decision-makers in Brussels of the EU's geopolitical component was missing for the last two decades.

Scholars and political observers declared that the Eastern neighbourhood policy of the EU failed (Nilsson & Silander, 2016). Yet, the EU foreign ministers met their counterparts from the Eastern Partnership countries, except Belarus, to announce a continuation of the policy in December 2022. While they reaffirmed making the policy more flexible and tailored to the individual needs of the Eastern Partnership countries, they also agreed to work with willing countries to support their resilience and security (Meister et al., 2023). However, a strategic outline of the role of the EU as a geopolitical actor in the eastern neighbourhood region remains missing.

Looking forward – an awakening of the Geopolitical EU

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has significant implications for the European security architecture, necessitating a readjustment of the approach and policies of the EU, its member states, and the countries included in the ENP framework. The invasion has exposed the vulnerabilities and challenges of the existing security framework in Europe (Paszczel, 2022). It has underscored the need to reassess the EU's approach towards Russia and its role in European geopolitics. However, it also showed that difficult partners are better than enemies. With the suspension of the association agreement signature in 2013, the Maidan Revolution, the annexation of Crimea by Russia, the Donbas war, and internal issues like oligarchism and corruption, Ukraine turned out by no means to be an easy partner for the EU over the last years (Ghersimov, 2020). However, this difficult partner now fights for a Europe that will not be dominated by the imperial claims of Russia's President Vladimir Putin.

Russia's invasion spotlights the need for a new European security architecture that allows the EU to strengthen its partnership with the Eastern neighbourhood. Next to the insight that the ENP might be more important than ever, there are three considerations for a new Geopolitical Europe with a focus on the EU's Eastern neighbourhood. Firstly, the invasion of Ukraine has highlighted the importance of strengthening the EU's deterrence and defence capabilities. Russia's blatant violation of Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity has raised concerns among EU member states about the potential threat Russia poses to the security of Europe. As a result, there is a renewed emphasis on enhancing the EU's defence posture, including increased spending, improved military capabilities, and closer cooperation among member states on defence and security matters (Loss & Puglierin, 2022). Secondly, the invasion has underlined the need for a more comprehensive and coherent approach towards Russia. Already, the EU has adopted a more assertive stance towards Russia, imposing sanctions, condemning its actions, and expressing solidarity with Ukraine. The change in approach towards Russia

is due to a growing realisation that a shift in policy is needed, including a combination of deterrence, dialogue, and engagement, to address the multifaceted challenges posed by the Putin regime. Thirdly, the invasion has emphasised the importance of rethinking European regional security cooperation (Simón, 2023). The Organization for Security and Cooperation, the world's largest regional security-oriented intergovernmental organisation with observer status at the United Nations, failed to establish stability and prevent conflicts between its 57 member states. Moreover, the OSCE allows Russia to actively deploy its military in all the six EU's eastern partnership countries. The peacebuilding formats in which Russia participates, such as the OSCE 5+2 talks on Transnistria and the OSCE Minsk Group on Nagorno-Karabakh, are in a stalemate or wholly blocked (Meister et al., 2023). The situation has underscored the need for greater regional security cooperation among EU member states, NATO allies, and the countries included in the ENP framework to address common challenges such as hybrid warfare, disinformation campaigns, and regional instability. In this context is an expansion of cooperation as part of implementing the EU Global Strategy, with partners like NATO, integral to strengthening European security and defence.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the ongoing war in Ukraine shows that the partnership between the European Union and its Eastern neighbours is more important than ever before and that, in any case, it is better to have difficult partners instead of enemies. The invasion has demonstrated the vulnerability of the EU's Eastern neighbourhood to external pressure and aggression and the need for an awakening of the Geopolitical EU. This awakening is essential to establish a new European security architecture that ultimately ensures stability and peace once the war in Ukraine has ended. To do so, the EU must continue supporting reforms, strengthening democratic institutions, promoting economic development, and, most importantly, assisting with defence and security capacity-building, working towards a reformed European security architecture.

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