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Europe and the war in Ukraine – Policy papers 1/4, 2025

The relations between the EU and Eastern Europe

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Abstract

Until February 2022, Western European political leaders tended to turn a blind eye on the nature of the Putin regime and its destabilising interferences in Eastern European countries. The lack of significant reaction to the Russian aggressions against Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014 emboldened the Russian leader to take more. The 2022 full-scale invasion helped all EU Member States grasp the implications of the war in Ukraine.

Countering the Putin regime threats implies supplying Ukraine with the necessary military and economic means to push back Russian aggression, providing Moldova and Georgia with the tools to face Russian hybrid interferences, integrating Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia into the EU, offering political association and economic integration to Armenia, and boosting energy cooperation with Azerbaijan. The key words of the EU enlargement process are now security and gradual integration. The EU must raise the costs of Russia's aggressions against Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia, interferences in Armenia and its hybrid warfare in the EU. To that end, the EU must build a common security strategy to contain and counter the Russian threat.

Keywords: Eastern Europe, EU, Russia

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The relations between the EU and Eastern Europe

Until February 2022, the Western European countries were in denial of reality regarding the nature of the Putin regime and its constant destabilizing activities in Eastern Europe, despite the numerous warnings of the Baltic and Nordic States, and Poland.

After the Putin regime crimes in Chechnya (1999-2009), invasion of Georgia (2008), annexation of Crimea and occupation of Donbas (2014), and massacres of civilian populations in Syria (2015-2024), the February 2022 Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine led to a brutal awakening of these Member States' leadership. EU Member States acknowledged that i) the Putin regime aims to destroy the European security order based on the UN Charter principles and ii) maintaining grey zones on our continent represents a security threat.

As a result, the lack of appetite for a new EU enlargement which prevailed since Croatia's accession in 2013 came to an end. Opening a membership perspective for Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia was no longer perceived as charity for these countries, but as a strategic investment for the EU security. The EU candidate status was granted to Ukraine and Moldova in June 2022, to Georgia in December 2023. Enlargement has been integrated in the Council's 2024-2029 strategic agenda and is a priority for the 2024-2029 Commission.

Regarding Russia, the EU has been able to impose 18 packages of sanctions but has not yet drawn up a strategy for the post-war period. Amid military confrontations and political developments in the South Caucasus, the EU attempts to strengthen its partnerships with Armenia and Azerbaijan.

The European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) and the Eastern Partnership (EaP) are outdated. The countries covered by these policies face different political and economic challenges, and have different aspirations toward the EU. The EU has to focus on bilateral relations with its Eastern neighbours.

1. Ukraine's and Moldova's path to the EU

1.1- The upcoming enlargement takes place in radically different conditions than the 2004-2007 ones for two main reasons:

- first, the EU is today very different from what it was in the early 2000s. Twenty-five years ago, the EU was mainly a single market (SM) and an emerging economic and monetary Union (EMU). Today, the main challenges facing the bloc are the green and digital transitions, the management of migratory flows, the wars in the Middle East and Ukraine ... The geopolitical dimensions have taken an unprecedented importance.
- second, the rules-based international order which was prevailing in the early 2000s has collapsed, multilateral institutions are in disarray, and the transatlantic alliance has been shattered.

These new geopolitical and economic environments should lead the EU to adapt the enlargement process on several aspects.

Although accession to the EU implies a large amount of technical work (taking over of the *acquis*), political considerations should prevail. This implies that the EU moves faster in the accession talks. The screening sessions should be carried out in a few months' time. The negotiating frameworks should be adapted to each candidate country's specificities (the negotiating frameworks adopted in June 2024 for Ukraine and Moldova are identical, and the same as the ones adopted for Albania and North-Macedonia.) As proposed by Germany and Slovenia, and allowed by the Treaties, unanimity should no longer be required to open negotiation clusters (35 clusters, i.e. 70 decisions). A Member State should no longer be allowed to block for years the accession process of a neighbour because of historical/memorial disagreements (North-Macedonia's delay provoked by Greece and Bulgaria, Hungary's blackmail on Ukraine.)

Security issues should be at the forefront of the accession process. The EU should provide more support to candidate countries to face hybrid threats (disinformation, cyberattacks, political interference, elections meddling, weaponisation of migration, disruption of satellite communications, airspace violation, sabotage...). The « security and defence partnership » established with Moldova should be strengthened and extended to all candidate countries, which should be integrated in EU's defence and security initiatives (PESCO, European Defence fund, European Defence Agency, CSDP operations...). Security issues should get far more importance in the « fundamentals » cluster.

A large majority of EUMS have expressed concerns at the democratic backsliding observed in 3 Members who joined in 2004: Hungary, Poland under PiS and Slovakia since Fico took over. These illiberal regimes made it far more difficult for the EU to set common objectives in key policy areas. It is imperative to reduce the risk to get additional illiberal regimes when the EU integrates 6 to 9 new Members. This requires the EU to place more emphasis on the need to respect core values, as presented in article 2 of TEU, during the accession talks. Is it in EU interest to allow countries to make progress on the EU path when their political leadership denies the right of certain minorities or refuses to align with the EU CFSP positions (Bosnia-Herzegovina, Serbia)?

The difficulties faced by the EU to shape and implement some key policies (migration and asylum pact, green deal...) indicate that EU reform is necessary irrespective of enlargement. Candidate countries should be reassured that enlargement will not be hostage to EU reform. But it is obvious that enlargement will come with new challenges: need for additional resources, adjustment of agricultural and cohesion policies, complexity of decision-making process, composition and functioning of EU institutions. The Commission will carry out policy reviews and put forward proposals to redesign a number of key policies and to start discussions on the next Multiannual Financial Framework.

1.2- Gradual integration.

Candidate countries should be integrated in some EU policy areas before full membership. This will ensure an improvement of the living conditions of their population and later on a smooth integration of new Member States. As a first step, candidate countries should integrate the single market (SM). The implementation of the deep and comprehensive free trade areas (DCFTA) included in the Association agreements should allow the economies of Ukraine,

Moldova and Georgia to gradually integrate some sectors of the SM through regulatory convergence (removal of non-tariff barriers to trade). Following Ukraine and Moldova's recent integration in the « roam like at home area », candidate countries should join the EU energy market and the « single euro payments area » before accession. The latter should benefit from some EU funding instruments (cohesion funds) and participate, generally as observers, to some EU meetings (ministerial meetings, COREPER, PSC).

1.3- Ukraine

Unlikely to end in the near future, Russia's aggression requires sustained EU military, political and economic support for Ukraine, regardless of US involvement. The EU has to i) strengthen Ukraine's deterrence capacity through supply of weapons and ammunitions, and training of armed forces; ii) define in agreement with Ukraine acceptable conditions for a ceasefire; and iii) prepare the deployment of security guarantees, including the presence of a « reassurance force » on Ukraine's territory.

Following the presentation by Ukraine of the three required roadmaps (functioning of democratic institutions, reform of the public administration and rule of law), the EU should take the necessary steps to open the accession talks on the 3 clusters where screening is completed (fundamentals, single market, CFSP). Hungary has been delaying this process for months. It would be in Ukraine's interest to move ahead with the conclusion of the Agreement on conformity assessment and acceptance of industrial products (ACAA), and to join the Single euro payments area (SEPA). The Autonomous Trade Measures expired on 6 June 2025. The EU should ensure a smooth transition to a preferential export regime for Ukrainian goods, in particular for agricultural products. On 5 June, the EU extended the safeguard measures suspension on iron and steel. The agreement on the liberalisation of freight transport (no need of special permits for Ukrainian carriers) was extended in June 2025. The reconstruction and recovery programmes have to be closely coordinated with the accession process. The EU will provide the necessary financial support through the « Ukraine facility » (50 bio till 2027) and the G7 ERA initiative (45 bio.) Enhanced military support will be made available through the European Peace Facility (EPF) and the EU military assistance mission.

Since the February 2022 invasion, Ukraine has been under the martial law, which implied some restrictions on democratic governance. But this cannot justify a power concentration in the hands of a few unelected officials in the President's office. Officials who had been recognised as competent and independent (V. Zaluzhny, D. Kuleba, O. Kubrakov, M. Nayem) have been side-lined. Independent media, civil society activists and political opponents have been facing increasing pressure. Following the attempt to undermine the independence of two key anti corruption institutions (SAPO and NABU) in July, the reaction of the civil society made Zelenski and his team understand that the erosion of checks and balances will not be accepted by Ukrainians and impact Ukraine's EU accession process.

1.4- Moldova

At the EU membership referendum which took place in October 2024, a narrow majority of votes were in favour of Moldova's EU aspirations, despite Russia's malign interference. A few weeks later, pro-western President Maia Sandu was re-elected to a second term thanks to

Moldova's large diaspora, despite Russia-instigated fraud and intimidation. Parliamentary elections took place on 28 September 2025. Russia and its proxies (Ilia Shor, Igor Dodon...) have been ramping up activities to destabilise the Government and weaken the pro-EU forces (street protests, disinformation, vote-buying...). The pro-EU « Party of Action and Solidarity » secured a renewed majority which would allow Maia Sandu to implement her reform agenda and Moldova to advance its EU integration process. The EU should strengthen its assistance to Moldova to counter information manipulation, hybrid attacks and energy blackmail. To that end, it would be useful to enhance the EU Partnership Mission (CSDP operation since April 2023) and accelerate the modernisation of Moldova's armed forces through EPF (60 mio € in 2025). With the « Moldova Reform and Growth Facility » (1.9 bio. till 2027), EU supports the implementation of the « Moldova Growth Plan » (economic convergence with EU and integration in EU energy market). The EU should open the accession talks on the « fundamentals » cluster without delay. On 4 July 2025, the EU and Moldova held their first Summit in Chisinau, reaffirming Moldova's place in the EU.

Transnistria's dependency on Russia (military, fiscal, trade and energy) has been declining in recent years. The EU should assist Moldova to assert its authority over the breakaway region (tighten EUBAM). The EU must explore ways to develop political contacts, provide development aid, trade and investment opportunities in this region. The 5+2 format is no longer appropriate for the settlement process. Russia is not an observer but is running Transnistria, and therefore a party in the conflict. Amid Moldova's EU membership perspective, the EU should be more than an observer.

2. The relations with other Eastern European partners

2.1- Georgia

After the October 2024 rigged parliamentary elections, the laws on « foreign agents » and anti-LGBTs, the Georgian Government intensified its shift toward Russia and its crackdown on its opponents. The Georgian government suspended the EU accession process in November 2024, announced its withdrawal from the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE), has placed the judiciary and law enforcement under control, stepped up the repression on civil society organisations CSOs, independent media and political opponents, and increased disinformation campaigns to discredit the EU. Faced to this Russian attempt to derail Georgia's euro-Atlantic trajectory, the EU reaction is marked by indecisiveness.

The EU should be more proactive and develop a comprehensive strategy aimed at supporting democratic forces and countering Russia's interferences. While targeting the Ivanishvili regime with sanctions (visa bans and asset freezes), the EU should deploy initiatives to strengthen economic links, increase financial and technical support for political opponents, CSOs and independent media, activate instruments to protect Human Rights (HR) activists and counter disinformation.

Abkhazia and South-Ossetia are under Russia's control and have disappeared from the EU agenda. Russia is entrenching its military presence in Abkhazia and decided recently to launch commercial flights to Sukhumi. The Geneva discussions which started in the wake of Russia's invasion in 2008 are irrelevant. Another format where the aggressor is clearly identified is

required. The EU should take steps to reinvigorate the negotiations and prevent Russia's annexation of these two regions.

2.2- Armenia/Azerbaijan

Azerbaijan took full control of Nagorno-Karabakh in September 2023. Around 120.000 Armenians had to leave this region. Prime Minister Pashinyan and President Aliyev initialled a Peace Treaty in Washington in August 2025. This agreement grants the US exclusive rights to develop a corridor connecting Nakhchivan to Azerbaijan through Armenia. This is an important step in normalising the relations between these two countries and the peaceful development of the region. The OSCE-led Minsk process is closed. The EU should re-engage through High-Representative (HR/VP) or ministerial-level EU Special Representative (EUSR) direct involvement to promote implementation of the peace agreement; support border delimitation and development of regional infrastructure in line with the Global Gateway strategy.

Armenia has frozen its participation into the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) in February 2024. The Armenian Parliament calls on the Government to apply for EU Membership. PM Pashinyan backs the Parliament's request and suggests to hold a referendum. While trying to move his country closer to the EU and to normalise relations with Azerbaijan and Turkey, Pashinyan is facing mounting domestic political opposition, as evidenced by recent local elections. In the meantime, the EU should propose an Association Agreement to replace the Comprehensive Enhanced Partnership Agreement, ramp up military support through EPF, and strengthen the monitoring mission on the border with Azerbaijan. Armenia and the EU agreed recently on a new Partnership Agenda focused on economic development and security. To back it, the EU is putting in place a growth Plan of 270 million euros over the 2024-2027 period.

The EU should accelerate the talks with Azerbaijan on a new framework agreement to replace the 1999 Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA); warn Baku about the consequences of a renewed aggression against Armenia. Over the last months, Azerbaijan and Georgia have strengthened their ties amid strained relations with the EU. They clearly emphasized their opposition to any EU intervention in the South Caucasus, and reaffirmed their will to cooperate on regional transport and energy networks, such as the Middle Corridor. The EU has adopted a Black Sea strategy, which aims at boosting security, trade and energy cooperation.

3. Containment against Russia and Belarus

3.1- Russia

The EU has adopted its 18th package of sanctions, the 19th package is in preparation. The impact of these sanctions on the Russian economy is significant, but has not frozen the funding of the Russian war machine, due to sanctions circumvention by countries like China, India, Turkey, Kazakhstan and the UAE. The EU is working on a roadmap on ending reliance on Russia's oil and gas, while the latter is working hard to build an alternative international economic system with rogue states, including a payment system which uncouples payment from Western Banks.

After the end of the war in Ukraine, the Putin regime will remain a threat not only for Eastern Europe, but for the EU as well. The EU must build, together with like-minded countries (UK, Norway, Iceland...) a common security strategy to contain and counter Russia's threats against the European security order.

The EU should get rid of the fear of escalation and Russia collapse, step up the pressure on the Putin regime and put in place the appropriate deterrence. It will be imperative to push back and impose real costs on Russia's interferences in Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia and Armenia domestic affairs, and hybrid warfare in the EU. Putin does not fear NATO; he fears democracy moving next to Russian borders.

The gradual lifting of sanctions should be conditioned on the withdrawal from Ukraine's territory, the release of Ukrainian prisoners and deported children, accountability for those responsible for war crimes (special tribunal for the crime of aggression), and financial compensation for the destructions in Ukraine.

The EU should support Russian CSOs and opposition in exile.

3.2- Belarus

Since the 2020 rigged and contested presidential elections, Moscow has tightened its grip on Belarus. Mounting military threats have led Poland and the Baltic States to build fortifications and spread landmines along the border with this country. The Zapad-2025 Russia-Belarus common military drills in September raised concerns. Against this background, a renewed cooperation with the EU is very unlikely in the near future. The EU will have to: tighten sanctions (import bans on specific sectors, visa bans and asset freezes) on Lukashenko regime; assist the CSOs and support the opposition in exile.

Conclusion

Successful democratic transition and EU integration of Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia are an existential threat for the Putin regime, which means that Russia's aggressions and interferences in Eastern European countries are unlikely to end in the near future. The EU should move from being on a reactive stance to deploying the necessary policies and instruments to secure the sovereignty of these countries, ensure Ukraine and Moldova accession to the EU by 2030, and counter Russia's attempts to reshape a European order determined by its interests (draft agreements presented to NATO and US in December 2021). The message to the Putin regime (and the Trump administration) has to be clear: the future of Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia lies in the EU, and there is no place for a Russia's sphere of influence on this continent. The EU has the necessary instruments (economic strength, normative and soft powers) to be far more influential in the political and economic developments in Eastern Europe, provided a majority of Member States deploy the necessary political will. In the wake of Russia's aggression against Ukraine, EU's work on the reunification of this continent has gained a new momentum. Most EU Member States seem to have understood the imperative to remove the remaining grey zones in Europe for the sake of their own security. This should lead to a faster, more determined pace of EU integration, with enlargement principles and methodology adapted to the rapidly evolving geopolitical

environment. The key word of European integration is no longer market, but security. The EU institutions should drive the accession negotiations in accordance with the specific political features of each candidate country. Should the Armenians confirm their wish to live outside of Russia's grasp, the EU should grant them also a membership perspective.

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