



# The EU's communication with Eastern Partnership countries

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EU-STRAT Policy Task Force

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## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Since the Eastern Partnership (EaP) was launched in 2009, the European Union (EU) has highlighted three major objectives of the initiative: stability, security, and prosperity. These catch words have laid the foundation for activities in the EaP framework and the EU has used a number of instruments to achieve them, such as supporting structural reforms, deepening economic cooperation, and reaching out to the public. But are these goals also reflected in the EU's communication with EaP countries? Do political and societal actors on the ground receive these messages? While empirical developments cast doubt on the consistency of both the sending and receiving end, there is little systematic knowledge on how the EU communicates with EaP countries and how these messages are received; a research gap that EU-STRAT seeks to close.

This policy brief highlights first results in this regard. In order to do so, it first outlines some of the challenges of the EU's communication in the political context of the EaP countries. Based on EU-STRAT's ongoing research, it then presents findings on the EU's core messages towards and preliminary results on their reception in the EaP countries. The policy brief concludes with a set of recommendations for more adequately tailoring the EU's communication and messages to the political context in the neighbourhood.

## Challenges for the EU's communication with EaP countries

The fundamental aim of the EU's engagement has been to ensure the security, stability, and prosperity of its neighbouring region. In order to achieve these goals, the EU set out to deepen the sectoral cooperation and the implementation of contractual agreements, including the so-called Association Agreements (AAs) and Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreements (DCFTAs). Ideally, this approach was to create a win-win situation for all partners involved, based on joint ownership and in line with the aspirations of each partner country. However, the aims and means of this engagement strategy need to be communicated by the EU and received by partner countries accordingly; a task that has proven to be a formidable challenge in the EaP countries.

In Ukraine, for instance, the reception of the EaP initiative itself was ambiguous from the very beginning. While initially welcomed as an instrument providing tangible benefits such as the DCFTA and visa liberalisation, many politicians in Kyiv criticized the EaP for its lack of an EU membership perspective and for putting Ukraine in one basket with countries such as Azerbaijan and Belarus. The aftermath of the so-called Revolution of Dignity (or Euromaidan Revolution) in 2013 and 2014 and the ensuing conflict with Russia saw the highest percentage of public support for European integration since the Orange Revolution in 2004: 59 % in September 2014.<sup>2</sup> The perception of the EU in Ukraine, however, has worsened ever since<sup>3</sup>, driven by, among other things, Ukrainian domestic politics, Russia's objections, and the results of the referendum in the Netherlands – all of which

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<sup>1</sup> The brief draws upon the findings of the EU-funded research consortium 'The EU and Eastern Partnership Countries - An Inside-Out Analysis and Strategic Assessment' (EU-STRAT) (<http://eu-strat.eu>). The EU-STRAT Policy Task Force for this policy brief consisted of Rafał Sadowski, Kamil Całus, Tadeusz Iwański, Marta Jaroszewicz, Antoaneta Dimitrova, and Esther Ademmer.

<sup>2</sup> International Republican Institute (2016), 'Public Opinion Survey Residents of Ukraine', accessed at: [http://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/iri\\_ukraine\\_poll\\_-\\_october\\_2016.pdf](http://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/iri_ukraine_poll_-_october_2016.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> International Republican Institute (2016), 'Public Opinion Survey Residents of Ukraine', 2016, accessed at: [http://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/iri\\_ukraine\\_poll\\_-\\_october\\_2016.pdf](http://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/iri_ukraine_poll_-_october_2016.pdf).

delayed the implementation of the DCFTA. This was aggravated by the authorities' poor communication about the reform process and the role of the EU.

In Moldova, the nominally pro-European authorities in Chişinău officially endorse the EU's approach. They have declared their strong commitment to reforms proposed by and to far-reaching integration with the EU, including full membership. However, the official openness of the authorities to the reforms promoted by the EU does not seem to go hand in hand with their full implementation. Doubts remain whether the current government is indeed interested in structural reforms of the Moldovan state and its modernisation.<sup>4</sup> In addition, the EU has been under fire from some political actors in Moldova. The opposition Socialist Party and Igor Dodon – President of Moldova since November 2016 – claim that Brussels supported Moldova's previous government for being nominally pro-European, turning a blind eye to corruption for the sake of geopolitical interests. At the same time, certain reforms proposed by the EU, such as protecting the rights of sexual or religious minorities, are met with scepticism from some parts of the society, arguably for being distant to Moldovan culture and to the values of the Orthodox Church.

Communication is by no means easier in the case of Belarus. The EU-Belarusian relationship is the least developed one in the EaP context, as there is no contractual agreement regulating mutual relations and challenges to the EU's communication there are manifold. They arise especially from the highly authoritarian and centralised nature of the political regime in Belarus. In the past, Belarusian authorities have openly condemned EU activities related to the promotion of human rights or rule of law standards. Additionally, the very active Russian media challenges the EU's communication in Belarus.

These developments exemplify some of the challenges that the EU faces for getting its messages across to a diverse range of political and societal actors. Systematic differences and commonalities in the EU's communications towards the EaP countries have not yet been researched thoroughly; a research gap that EU-STRAT seeks to close. The next sections therefore summarise the preliminary findings of analyses of the EU's communications towards the EaP countries based on EU documents, on the one hand, and of the coverage of the EU in the partner states' media on the other hand.

## **EU-STRAT insights into the EU's communication with EaP countries**

Osrodek Studiów Wschodnich (OSW), one of EU-STRAT's partners, studied the overall narrative in policy documents related to the EaP, including EaP summit declarations, European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) strategic documents, Commission communications, and action plans.<sup>5</sup> The analysis found that the underlying narrative has slightly changed over time. The focus was initially on areas where progress could be achieved, especially in the area of economic cooperation and reforms. After 2011, the Arab spring, and growing authoritarian tendencies in some partner states, the emphasis shifted to the need for respecting democracy and the rule of law and to issues of regional security and conflict resolution; yet without specific proposals.

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<sup>4</sup> Caţus, K. (2017), 'Pro-Russian turn or preservation of "oligarchic" status quo? Moldova after presidential elections', *EU-STRAT Newsletter No. 2*, Berlin: Freie Universität Berlin, pp.3-4.

<sup>5</sup> All strategic documents related to the ENP and the EaP can be accessed at: [https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/search/site\\_en?f%5B0%5D=bundle%3Adocument&f%5B1%5D=im\\_field\\_er\\_thematics%3A273](https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/search/site_en?f%5B0%5D=bundle%3Adocument&f%5B1%5D=im_field_er_thematics%3A273)

Another change in the narrative occurred after 2014 and the dramatic events in Ukraine, the signing of AAs/DCFTAs with Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova, and the withdrawal of Armenia. Currently, the EU avoids making long-term offers and focuses on the practical implementation of the AAs/DCFTAs and sectoral cooperation. It tries to increase its visibility by delivering concrete results, hoping for them to be noticed by the partner countries' citizens.

In an effort to provide an assessment of the EU's communications towards select EaP partners, a team of EU-STRAT researchers led by Leiden University systematically analysed the core concepts used by the EU on its delegation websites in Belarus, Moldova, and Ukraine from January to June 2016. This analysis found that the EU's communications vary to a considerable degree between EaP countries.<sup>6</sup> The one common feature is the large proportion of communications that are event-driven and provide general information but do not necessarily help bring the EU's policies and messages to the citizens. The percentage of event-driven references is 26 % for Ukraine, 17 % for Belarus and 16 % for Moldova, respectively. The differentiation in messages is reflected in the rest of the concepts the EU refers to in its communications.

To capture different ways in which the EU's policies are projected in its communications, the research team defined three distinct models representing different kinds of power, based on their content and focus. The well-known concept of soft power as developed by Nye<sup>7</sup> can be represented as a mix of ideational (attractive model to emulate, rights, culture) and economic influence. When the EU acts as a transformative power, by contrast, it aims to promote reforms across a broad spectrum of governance areas: democratic institutions, rule of law, public administration, economic restructuring, standards and regulatory issues. Last but not least, when the EU primarily emphasises norms and rights, it has been defined as a normative power.<sup>8</sup>

In the case of Ukraine, EU communications refer to a number of different concepts, with the most frequently used (after "general info" 26 % of all concepts) being "democracy" (12 %), "assistance" (12 %), and "reforms" (8 %). The concepts referred to in the Union's communications towards Ukraine are relatively balanced with no issue dominating the communications and a focus on reform processes and transformation. As the spectrum is broad and the references to reform consistent, the team finds that the EU communicates towards Ukraine as a transformative power.

In the case of Belarus, on the contrary, core concepts used by the EU are related to "rights" (20 %), "EU values" (17 %), "general info" (17 %) and "rule of law" (6 %). Based on the issues that the EU raises, it appears that the most contentious issues in its relations with Belarus are norms and rights, particularly human rights. This leads to the conclusion that the EU engages with Belarus as a normative power.

Finally, the EU's messages addressed to Moldova focus mostly on "assistance" (15 %), "reforms" (11 %) and "economy" (10 %). As in the case of Ukraine, the emphasis is on reforms and economic transformation processes. In sum, the analysis shows so far that the EU's communications towards the EaP countries reflects the state of mutual cooperation. In the cases of Ukraine and Moldova, both of which are implementing the AA

<sup>6</sup> Dimitrova, A. et al. (2016), 'Soft, normative or transformative power: What do the EU's communications with Eastern partners reveal about its influence?', *EU-STRAT Working Paper No. 1*, Berlin: Freie Universität Berlin.

<sup>7</sup> Nye, J. S. (1990) 'Soft Power', *Foreign Policy* 80(Autumn), pp. 153-171.

<sup>8</sup> Manners, I. (2002) 'Normative Power Europe: A Contradiction in Terms?', *Journal of Common Market Studies* 40(2), pp. 235-258.

and DCFTAs, which seek to transform the EaP countries' economy and society, the EU has indeed communicated as a transformative power.

In a further strand of research, EU-STRAT partners monitored the current TV coverage in Belarus, Moldova and Ukraine in an attempt to understand how the media in the EaP countries portray the EU. At this stage, the EU-STRAT team can draw some preliminary conclusions about the coverage and the presentation of the EU and its member states on national TV news. The EU receives less coverage than Russia, but also much less than the EU member states. At the same time, member states receive more coverage than Russia in all three countries. For example, in Belarus: 60 % of news items mention EU member states – as EU members or on their own – as opposed to 6 % mentioning only the EU and 30 % mentioning Russia. The Eurasian Union, of which Belarus is a member, is referred to in 3 % of news items dedicated to specific actors. In Moldova 57 % of news items feature EU member states, 12 % the EU, 28 % Russia, and 2 % the Eurasian Union. In Ukraine 47 % of items mention the member states alone and together with the EU, 11% mention the EU only, and 43 % mention Russia. The mentions of the Eurasian Union are close to zero in Ukraine.

Most coverage does not have an explicit evaluative tone. When it does, it differs per country. In Belarus, news about the EU is altogether balanced and neutral, whereas news about Russia is mostly positive. Coverage of the EU member states is more positive than negative. In Moldova, news about the EU is very positive. News about Russia and EU member states is also roughly equally positive. In Ukraine, coverage of Russia is overwhelmingly negative, but news about the EU and its member states is spread equally across the spectrum of positive and negative tone.

These preliminary results suggest that the EU's role and messages are not very prominent in the neighbourhood, but the member states do receive substantial news coverage. The challenge for the EU is for its role and policy to be recognised as a part of the news about the member states. EU member states are well covered by the region's media, but whether this means EU assistance and policies are covered in the media is not a given. Further monitoring will establish whether these first results are representative of a more lasting trend.

## **Conclusions and policy recommendations**

This policy brief has shown that the EU's communication with the EaP countries faces a number of challenges, exemplified by current developments in Ukraine, Moldova, and Belarus. Despite the well-established finding that the EU's communication operates in a challenging environment in the EaP region, there is still relatively little systematic knowledge about the EU's manner of communication and its reception in EaP countries. EU-STRAT researchers are currently working to close this gap. The preliminary results presented in this policy brief suggest that:

- 1) The EU's communications clearly reflect the different modes of cooperation with the EaP countries. The EU communicates as a transformative power where cooperation with EaP countries is based on AAs and DCFTAs and has therefore a transformational purpose. The EU communicates as a normative power where democracy and human rights are critically at stake, as in the case of Belarus.

- 2) The most positive coverage of the EU is on Moldovan TV channels. Russia is, predictably, covered in a more positive light than the EU in Belarusian TV and main news programmes. Coverage in Ukraine, however, is not only (understandably) negative about Russia, but also rather mixed regarding the EU.
- 3) EU member states receive substantial attention in EaP countries; demonstrated in that the amount of coverage exceeds even that of Russia. However, this does not mean that the EU's assistance and policies are well covered or explained.

There are further specific and broad policy recommendations that can be derived from these findings. With regard to a more specific recommendation based on the results of media monitoring conducted by EU-STRAT, a simple measure for strengthening coverage of the EU could be done through stressing the link between the member states and the EU in official and social media communication.

Another preliminary conclusion that can be drawn is that EU member states are important actors when it comes to disseminating EU communications in the Eastern neighbourhood countries. Therefore, it is important to develop close cooperation and even coordinate to some extent communication content and activities between the EU's institutions and member states.

In terms of broader conclusions, a renewed and broadly endorsed political narrative of the EU may be needed – but not only to shape the EU's direct perception in the EaP countries. In order to avoid the deterioration of the perception of the EU in partner states, there is need to refresh the messages that the EU has been trying to convey. Such a narrative may also bring other players – and governments – to rally behind a common cause and thereby multiply the EU's impact in the neighbourhood. And finally, in developing this narrative, the EU may also provide for a clearly defined and coherent long-term vision of the EU's policy towards its Eastern partners, thereby addressing the contestation arising from an unclear *finalité* of the EaP in the region.



## **The EU and Eastern Partnership Countries An Inside-Out Analysis and Strategic Assessment**

Against the background of the war in Ukraine and the rising tensions with Russia, a reassessment of the European Neighborhood Policy has become both more urgent and more challenging. Adopting an inside-out perspective on the challenges of transformation the Eastern Partnership (EaP) countries and the European Union face, the research project EU-STRAT seeks to understand varieties of social orders in EaP countries and to explain the propensity of domestic actors to engage in change. EU-STRAT also investigates how bilateral, regional and global interdependencies shape domestic actors' preferences and scope of action. Featuring an eleven-partner consortium of academic, policy, and management excellence, EU-STRAT creates new and strengthens existing links within and between the academic and the policy world on matters relating to current and future relations with EaP countries.

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