



# The EU and other external actors in the Eastern neighbourhood: Maximizing the transformative impact

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Marta Jaroszewicz, Tadeusz Iwański, Kamil Całus, Dovilė  
Jakniūnaitė, Laurynas Jonavičius, Margarita Šešelgytė,  
Ramūnas Vilpišauskas, and Elyssa Shea

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Editorial assistance and production: Elyssa Shea

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Freie Universität Berlin  
EU-STRAT  
'The EU and Eastern Partnership Countries -  
An Inside-Out Analysis and  
Strategic Assessment'  
Innestr. 22  
14195 Berlin  
Germany  
[eustrat@zedat.fu-berlin.de](mailto:eustrat@zedat.fu-berlin.de)  
<http://eu-strat.eu>



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## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

The EU's influence on the Eastern Partnership (EaP) countries is increasingly in competition with some regional and global players, while it is complemented by the approaches of others. The coherence of the EU's policies towards the EaP is furthermore challenged by the diversity of positions held by EU member states. This policy brief presents key insights from our research on how the EU's approach towards Ukraine, Belarus, and Moldova differs from or aligns with the positions of other external actors, including Russia, the United States (U.S.), international financial institutions (IFIs), NATO, and China. The key question we examine is whether and how particular external actors foster or hamper the EaP countries' transitions into more open and competitive political and economic orders. We then make recommendations for how the EU can better engage with complementary and countervailing actors in the region, which we have addressed by four sectors: trade, energy, security, and migration. These specific sectors were chosen due to their significance for external actors and impact on the internal transformation in the EaP region<sup>2</sup>. The results are also presented by sector due to the EU's increased emphasis on a sectoral approach, including in the '20 Deliverables for 2020' adopted at the Brussels EaP Summit in November 2017.

## Evidence and Analysis

We identify three sets of findings for how the EU's engagement with the EaP countries is shaped by other external actors' approaches.

Firstly, the analysis revealed different patterns of external approaches: **supportive** of transition into more open political and economic orders, **ambivalent** towards transition (or guided purely by economic gain), and finally, **constraining** reform or reinforcing current regime stability.

**In terms of complementing the EU's approach towards the EaP, the U.S., NATO and the IFIs stand out as supportive partners.** There seems to be no major change in the overall strategy of the U.S. towards Ukraine since the election of U.S. President Donald Trump, although a higher level of unilateralism and unpredictability appears to characterize current U.S. foreign policy. Less frequent visits from high-level U.S. political officials seems to indicate some recent decline in political attention towards reform in Ukraine. Nevertheless, the current U.S. administration also delivered Javelin antitank missile systems to Ukraine in April 2018 to aid in "defend[ing] its sovereignty and territorial integrity"<sup>3</sup>, in line with this growing unpredictability. In comparison to NATO's very active pre-2008 engagement in the Eastern neighbourhood, when it was the main instigator of defence sector reform in Georgia and Ukraine, current NATO engagement in these two countries can be described as 'supporting' the internal transformation agenda, rather than as having a crucial transformative impact. The IFIs, in particular the International Monetary Fund (IMF), play an important role in supporting the transition of EaP

<sup>1</sup> The opinions shared in this policy brief represent the views of the authors, rather than the EU-STRAT consortium as a whole.

<sup>2</sup> Trade has been a traditional area of EU external involvement, with a proven record of spill-over effect onto areas such as structural reform and anti-corruption. Energy remains crucial for the prosperity of EaP countries but is highly contested in terms of external actors' approaches. In security, the EU is least active, but the contrasting strategies of Russia vs. NATO and the U.S. in the region make it immediately relevant. Finally, the migration sector has deep EU and Russian involvement and the greatest potential for mobilizing public support in EaP countries depending on the strategies deployed by each actor.

<sup>3</sup> Defense Security Cooperation Agency (2018) 'Ukraine – Javelin Missiles and Command Launch Units', *News Release*, 1 March, available at [http://www.dsca.mil/sites/default/files/mas/ukraine\\_18-02.pdf](http://www.dsca.mil/sites/default/files/mas/ukraine_18-02.pdf) (accessed 3 September 2018).

countries to market economies, including institutional changes aimed at removing barriers to competition and reducing incentives for rent-seeking and corruption. The IMF often acts as a monitor of conditionality and coordinator of assistance from external actors supportive of transition reforms.

**China appears largely ambivalent towards the transition of EaP regimes.** With no immediate goals of altering the existing political status quo, China remains an external actor that tends to ignore the internal dynamics of EaP countries unless they harm its economic interests. The one exception to this would be Belarus, where China's approach might be considered as conducive to supporting internal reform, given its interest in increasing its economic presence via promotion of investment opportunities and trade.

**Russia positions itself as the primary opponent of the EU's active role in the region,** as it is intent on constraining EaP domestic reform. In this sense, Russia appears to be the strongest proponent of sustaining regimes with limited degrees of political and economic competition. This notion is very much embedded in the **internal Russian social logic**, where a parallel 'framework' of incentives for domestic actors exists, including rent-seeking schemes and decision-making based on personal connections rather than formal institutions.

Secondly, our analysis has confirmed that **the EU institutions and member states have been experiencing policy dilemmas when aiming for the simultaneous promotion of democracy and stability in the EaP countries.** These two goals often come into conflict, which is particularly striking in Moldova and Ukraine, where some actors are pursuing an immediate, geopolitical agenda towards the region, while the EU still focuses on supporting long-term transformation. On the operational level, however, **the EU has advanced at applying a differentiated approach across the EaP countries and sectors.** The same relates to its '**blending**' capacities, meaning the EU's ability to build coalitions of external and internal players and financial mechanisms across certain reform sectors, such as anti-corruption reform in Ukraine.

There were **complex results in terms of compliance between the EU's policies and its EaP vision and then the bilateral agenda towards the region pursued by Germany, France, Poland, and Lithuania.** The most critical dividing lines prohibiting the EU and its member states from developing a more comprehensive strategic vision towards the EaP are (a) differing perceptions of the EU as a more normative vs. more geopolitical power, (b) positions vis-à-vis Russia, (c) divergent views over the possible extent of the EaP region's integration with the EU, and lastly, (d) stances on whether the EU can actually become a security provider in the region.

Our third set of findings was that **the actual convergence or polarization of goals and activities in the EaP countries between the EU and other external actors varies significantly depending on the sector analysed.** The **trade sector** (and wider economic reform) is the most comprehensively addressed by the EU, in particular in cooperation with the IFIs. In trade relations, the EU has utilized incentives, for instance offering market access, to advance reforms in the EaP countries that have signed Association Agreements, while Russia has for example often reacted by sanctioning these countries. In the **energy sector**, divergent EU member state interests and pressure from Russia are primarily what undermine a uniform approach from complementary external actors. Apart from limited assistance in law enforcement, the EU is rather non-present in **security sector** reform. There is, however, room for the EU to further engage with external actors in this field by increasing its political presence in security dialogues, and combating Russia's strategies of destabilization. The EU can do this through targeted strategic communication with the local populations on common EU-EaP democratic values, as well as increasing

awareness of EU good governance activities in the region. Lastly, apart from Russia, the EU appears to be the sole external actor in the EaP engaged in transformation of the **migration sector**, leaving it plenty of room to innovate in terms of supporting comprehensive EU-wide migration sector reform. It can do this with the support of the United Nations (UN), and specialized international organizations strongly emphasizing the link between migration and development.

## Policy Implications and Recommendations

### *The EU's consolidated approach towards external actors*

The EU should cooperate with other actors whose goals in the EaP countries do not substantially collide with the EU's – at least in the policy areas that the EU can agree on internally. The most self-evident and effective partners for the EU are its member states, the U.S., NATO, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), and IFIs. Close cooperation on and realistic assessment of reform initiatives is particularly important in addressing horizontal issues such as imitation or piecemeal and inconsistent implementation of reforms, particularly when dealing with corruption and rent-seeking.

Two elements are needed for an effective strategy encouraging transformation. One, a consolidated political dialogue with strict conditionality that is linked to external loans, macro-financial and security assistance from as many external actors as possible, and two, support from a wider coalition of internal actors. The external actors supporting transformation should uniformly communicate a joint, transparent set of actions to the authorities of each EaP country. This would help prevent EaP domestic actors from playing the demands of external actors off of one another. The long journey of anti-corruption reform in Ukraine has shown that **only when the EU more intensively coordinates its stance with the U.S., IFIs, Council of Europe, and the OSCE, do the Ukrainian political elites start to address anti-corruption with greater attention.** Encouragement of domestic reforms should also be done in combination with 'positive conditionality', which would provide benefits to cooperative domestic actors in Ukraine while limiting the political risk they take on for their support. Positive conditionality would be conditionality that emphasizes incentives, such as further removal of barriers to trade and other freedoms of the EU Single Market. Other possible incentives could be the inclusion of Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova in sectoral unions of the EU, i.e. the Energy Union or proposed Digital Single Market.

Forums like the G7 carry particular political weight in Ukraine due to their inclusion of key Western countries, and could more actively be used as a platform for communication of Western policy advice to the domestic audience in Ukraine. This would be particularly valuable for speaking as a collective, as the efforts of the seven member countries remain dispersed at present. **The G7 could also increasingly play the role of a 'strategic consultant'** for the political elite in the event that the U.S. reduces its presence in the region. Other actors such as IFIs have sound expertise and institutional memory from previous attempts at reforms and assessment of reform progress – this could be more fully utilized.

Whereas Russia tends to solidify and deepen existing clientelistic networks in the EaP in its own interest, China appears to be guided purely by its economic interests, which could have both negative and positive impact in terms of support for internal transformation in the region. In some specific instances, such as in pushing for

streamlined customs procedures, **China may actually bring the financial and infrastructural resources required for the EaP countries' development.** The EU should thus support China's involvement in select economic and technical cases, which will be elaborated upon in the follow section.

## **Trade**

In the area of trade relations, there are important differences between the external trade regimes of particular EaP countries. On the one hand, Belarus is part of the Eurasian (Customs) Union and therefore its trade policies with the EU are relatively restricted. Moreover, Belarus is still in the process of accession into the World Trade Organization (WTO). On the other hand, the EU's trade with Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia has been liberalized since the implementation of the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreements (DCFTAs), which have formed a major part of the 'association' policy. This has already facilitated growing trade links between the EU and the latter EaP countries.

In terms of the EaP's overall trade openness, **China could be considered as a potential EU partner for further opening of the EaP countries' economies.** China's general economic agenda towards the region includes facilitating Chinese investments (treating the EaP as a potential production base in Europe), as well as increasing the EaP area's capacity to transit and handle EU-China railway trade. Some of the norms and practices China is trying to introduce (ex. non-competitive bidding procedures and limited access to the infrastructure built along the Belt and Road Initiative) may reinforce more closed political and economic orders in the region and should be countered by relevant EU institutions. However, Beijing's attempts to develop transport corridors going through the EaP, such as by streamlining customs procedures, may contribute to a general opening of regional economies. This also applies to economic instruments such as industrial zones like the Great Stone industrial park in Belarus, where China is promoting a more open and competitive regulatory environment. While the EU should facilitate China's access to the region on a technical level (to infrastructure, improved custom procedures, tax exemptions), it must monitor that China's pro-trade drive actually leads to the long-term evolution of the EaP countries into more open regimes.

**The EU could consider a direct dialogue with China within the EU-China Connectivity Platform and develop specific task groups,** with a particular focus on the 'soft' infrastructure (standards, customs, border crossing facilitation, and digitalization) where China could be regarded as a pragmatic partner. As regards railway trade, the EU could actively engage in existing multilateral trade facilitation platforms, like the Organization for Cooperation between Railways (OSJD), where it could empower EaP countries vis-à-vis Russia and China (both form strong voting blocs). Concerning the financing of physical infrastructure within the EaP, 'up-to-date' China tends to insist on using its own regulatory frameworks, which are not in line with the EU's agenda on competition and transparency. Therefore, the EU should work alongside multilateral IFIs (such as the World Bank) and consider forming lending consortiums with the European Investment Bank in order to present a viable alternative to Chinese soft-loans.

**The IMF and the World Bank have gone through an important learning process as a result of their involvement in the EaP countries, and should thus be seen as valuable partners for the EU.** The perceived need for a politically inclusive dialogue to broaden potential support for country programs, for strengthening reform ownership, and the emphasis on tackling corruption and better governance have all been key lessons drawn from

their experiences cooperating with those countries. The EU could consider further development of the External Investment Fund (to be channeled through 'blending' mechanisms, where EU funds are guaranteed for IFIs loans) in the context of the EaP neighbourhood. In particular, development of infrastructure and modernization of industry and agriculture would be relevant fields to target. Also, reducing regulatory burden for market entry, including in the work of customs, should be given more attention, as some EU regulatory norms (in particular those setting high production process standards) may be suboptimal for those countries, or their implementation would only be formal. In addition, more extensive liberalization of EaP countries' external trade, going beyond what is foreseen in the DCFTAs (for example, in the field of agriculture) – implemented together with appropriate institutional building and structural reforms – could be useful for bolstering economic growth and anti-corruption efforts.

## **Energy**

Although there is a strong interdependence between Russia and the EU in the energy sphere – Russia is the main supplier of gas and oil to the EU, and the European market plays a key role in Russian energy export – there are critical differences in terms of the policy goals of both actors. According to its adopted energy policy documents, the EU aims to diversify its sources of supply, increase energy production in the EU, speak with one voice on external energy policy (including ensuring that EU countries inform the European Commission early on about planned agreements with non-EU countries that may affect the EU's security of supply), strengthen emergency and solidarity mechanisms, and protect critical infrastructure. In turn, Russia is determined to maintain (or even increase) its share in the EU's energy market, hamper the process of building the Energy Union through boosting energy ties with selected individual EU member states, and use energy as an instrument of political influence in EU member states.

Therefore, considering Russia's high level of dependence on the EU energy market (a roughly 65 % share of Russia's oil and gas export) **the EU should be more devoted to the diversification and solidarity supporting goals that were developed in the Energy Community strategic documents.** It should strongly oppose Russia's activities that contradict these goals, such as new pipeline projects or abuse of the dominant position Russian companies may hold on the EU market. An important aspect of this is also bringing the stances of EU member states in line with a common EU position. Nord Stream 2 has served as a prime example of divisions amongst EU member states: Germany supports the construction of this new gas export pipeline, which will run directly from Russia to Europe across the Baltic Sea, while Poland and Lithuania are staunchly against it. The German explanation for support has predominantly been that Nord Stream 2 is a commercial project, rather than a political one. In its '20 Deliverables for 2020' the EU stated the objective of developing increased gas interconnectivity between the EU and EaP countries, hence a pipeline that cuts out EaP countries is a step in the wrong direction. EU member states, including Germany, should thus address the potential negative impact that Nord Stream 2 could have on the EaP initiative, and stand behind a joint EU position.

In its energy dialogue with Russia, **the EU should more assertively address the issue of cooperation between Brussels and its Eastern partners within the framework of the Energy Community.** Brussels should support the process of energy reforms conducted by its Eastern partners, as progress in this field should be seen as an important method of increasing the EU's own energy security. The EU-Ukraine Association Agreement indicates the need for EU solidarity with Ukraine in terms of security of gas delivery. The European Commission should

therefore put emphasis on encouraging as much EU member state support as possible for successful talks regarding gas transit through Ukraine during the EU-Ukraine-Russia Triologue, which will continue meeting in the coming months.

**The gas sector reform in Ukraine may be considered as a partial success in terms of EU involvement**, primarily due to the other external actors such as IFIs supporting its agenda, and domestic support from the new management board of *Naftohaz*, a strong community of energy experts, journalists and public activists. Moreover, this agenda was not contested by the general public. This case could serve as an example when selecting the next most feasible energy reform priorities that could benefit from external support. The lesson learned here being that **the EU needs to align a coalition of not only external actors but also domestic supporters in order for a specific reform to advance**. This approach could also be applied to the case of gas sector reform in Moldova. In order to counter Russia's excessive influence over the sector, cooperation between the EU and IFIs is needed to support various aspects of change, such as the company *Moldovagas's* reform towards greater transparency and accountability.

## **Security**

In the EaP region, the EU is faced with Russia's countervailing strategies of destabilization, in which propaganda is often wielded as a weapon, and disregard for sovereign territory. In contrast, **NATO serves as an actor in the region that the EU shares many common goals with, such as democracy and respect for the rule of law**. By utilizing its current strengths in strategic communication as well as boosting security sector capacity-building activities, **the EU can counter Russia's strategies of destabilization**.

The EU is constantly confronted with the question of whether it can avert the destabilization efforts of actors with countervailing strategies, like Russia, or if it remains possible to sustain its assistance of the EaP region's internal transformation without any 'hard power' capabilities. The EU specifically lacks the instruments to contribute to the solution of the 'frozen conflicts' and its support for the Minsk Process negotiations as well as the operation of the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission in Ukraine is rather indirect. Until it develops these capabilities, it will be unable to engage directly with Russia as a hard security actor and may not be given a real 'seat at the table' by actors viewing the situation in realist terms. Despite this perception, **the EU should still seek greater political involvement in security dialogues**. It should stay attuned to any progress in U.S.-Russian negotiations over the possible deployment of a UN peacekeeping mission to the Donbass region. More direct participation of a top EU official, such as Federica Mogherini, the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, in the Minsk Process format or future negotiations would also signal a stronger EU presence.

**The EU should streamline its activities aimed at operationalizing key strategic concepts** endorsed by the EU Global Strategy or the EU-NATO Joint Declarations signed in 2016 and 2018, such as **"bolstering resilience"** or **"counter[ing] hybrid threats"**<sup>4</sup>. While NATO currently serves as a 'hard power', the EU could complement these

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<sup>4</sup> Council of the European Union (2016) 'EU-NATO joint declaration', available at <http://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/21481/nato-eu-declaration-8-july-en-final.pdf> (accessed 31 May 2018); Council of the European Union (2018) 'Joint Declaration on EU-NATO Cooperation', available at <http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2018/07/10/eu-nato-joint-declaration/> (accessed 3 September 2018).



activities by utilizing its **‘soft power’ strength in strategic communication**, which NATO is less geared towards providing. The EU should thus speed up the delivery of assistance promised at the Brussels Eastern Partnership Summit in November 2017, such as “strengthen[ed] strategic communication efforts”<sup>5</sup> towards Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia. Strategic communication is a crucial element in building wider understanding of the key values of democracy and rule of law in EaP societies and thus societal resistance against Russia’s hybrid threat tactics. **An important step forward would also be increasing the visibility and financing of the East StratCom Task Force**<sup>6</sup>, which was created to address Russia’s ongoing disinformation campaigns and develop communication products that explain the EU’s policies towards the EaP countries.

The EU’s law enforcement reform efforts<sup>7</sup> could be considered as already existent methods of engaging with Russia’s strategy of destabilization. EUBAM, for example, amongst other mandates, assists with border control and combats illegal smuggling of goods and people from Russia-supported Transnistria into Moldova, which contributes to the country’s stabilization and positive transformation. However, with its rather limited mandate, EUBAM has relatively low visibility and thus receives little credit for its part in stabilizing the region through good governance activities. **The EU should communicate more strategically with local populations about the contribution of initiatives like EUBAM.** Better understanding of what the EU does and what its added value is would help combat negative Russian propaganda in the EaP region.

**A next step for the EU might also be engaging in capacity-building activities for the wider security sector in the EaP**, including military sector reform, such as anti-corruption and integrity activities for military personnel, and the re-training of retired military personnel. Beyond this, **another valuable step the EU could take would be further reflection amongst its member states on its desired long-term direction as a strategic actor**, and then building up the relevant tools and capabilities that could be deployed abroad in line with this strategy.

**The inclusion of EaP countries in the EU’s Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) missions abroad is an indirect but beneficial manner of supporting the region against countervailing actors**, as these operations are valuable in terms of capacity-building and generating a comprehensive understanding of security for EaP personnel. Moldova, Ukraine, and Georgia have already engaged in several CSDP operations, for instance, EUTM Mali and EUMAM RCA (in the Central African Republic). The EU should encourage its member states to utilize these partnerships further by teaming up with EaP countries in future missions.

**The EU could also consider supporting the re-opening of the OSCE office in Belarus**, as the OSCE would be a valuable partner in attempts to open Belarus up for certain aspects of security dialogue, primarily due to its perception as a more neutral actor than the EU.

## ***Migration***

In its relationships with the EaP countries, the EU applies the standard set of tools and approaches of its external migration governance, including readmission agreements, visa facilitation and visa-free movement policies, and

<sup>5</sup> Council of the European Union (2017) ‘Joint Declaration of the Eastern Partnership Summit (Brussels, 24 November 2017)’, available at <http://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/31758/final-statement-st14821en17.pdf> (accessed 31 May 2018).

<sup>6</sup> This task force was created in 2015 as a part of the European External Action Service (EEAS).

<sup>7</sup> The activities of the Special Measure III 2016 on Support to Rule of Law Reforms in Ukraine (PRAVO), the European Union Advisory Mission (EUAM) in Ukraine, and the EU Border Assistance Mission to Moldova and Ukraine (EUBAM).

the introduction of biometric solutions into border and migration management. Moreover, in the area of migration, the EU acts both as a security provider aiming to ensure secure population flows across EU borders, as well as an actor that provides support to internal transformation, linking visa liberalization issues with institutional reforms.

Being the near sole provider (apart from certain OSCE activities) of technical and financial assistance for migration sector reform, as well as a policy concept generator for wider Europe, **the EU could consider development of a more strategic and comprehensive vision of support for migration sector reform.** This reform would comprehensively address the Russian attempts to disseminate its own form of migration-related legislation in the region. This style of legislation is based extensively on the Soviet legacy, with excessive control and surveillance functions without proper emphasis on human rights observance and migrants' integration.

Moreover, this approach could include elements that are vital to the EU's relations with other geographic regions, and still underdeveloped in its relationship with the EaP countries, such as: sustaining links between migration and development, investing the remittances into countries' development, utilizing the human capital of returning migrants, and supporting the diaspora presence in the process of countries' reforms. In other words, contrary to the Southern neighbourhood, where new policy concepts stimulating the links between migration and growth are already being considered, in the EaP, the EU perceives migration sector reforms solely through the lenses of its administrative/control functions. **The EU has already agreed to cooperate intensively with the UN on the foreseen 'Global Compact on Migration'**, which will be an intergovernmental agreement covering all dimensions of international migration. As the modes of implementation for this ambitious agreement are still to be formulated, **the EU should use this opportunity to champion the inclusion of Eastern Europe** as one of the world's geographic regions that requires specific support in terms of migration and development. Acting in accordance with a comprehensive vision of migration sector reform would not only benefit the EU's security, but also the prosperity and social advancement of the EaP societies.



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## **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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