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A new bridge between East and West?

While Moldova, Georgia, and Ukraine are strengthening their relationship with the EU with a new agreement, Russia is feeling increasingly surrounded

Last month the Ministries of Foreign Affairs of Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine came together in Brussels for the first time as the 'Associated Trio'.

This new tripartite format for cooperation on issues related to EU integration was founded on the basis of 'The Trio Strategy 2030 on the Future of the Eastern Partnership' as a wide-ranging initiative set up to strengthen consultation mechanisms in the field of European integration, regional security, digitalisation, cybersecurity, the transport infrastructure, the green economy, and healthcare. This type of regional initiative, designed to enhance cooperation between the countries of a region and to accelerate their joint integration, is a concept the EU, itself a regional alliance, sympathises with. Moreover, such initiatives are highly successful and pragmatic.

The rapidly evolving events in the Eastern Partnership countries highlighted a clear need for the current format to be changed. For the EU, it is not only the expectations of the partner countries that are important, but also that they display initiative and are committed to the process of integration, something that is unfortunately not reciprocated by Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Belarus.

These countries are currently facing domestic political difficulties and conflict, with the aftermath of the war in Nagorno Karabakh, Russian military presence in Armenia, and Moscow's support for Lukashenko's authoritarian regime. However, after Minsk announced that it would be suspending its participation in the Eastern Partnership as a reaction to European sanctions, it became clear that dialogue between Belarus and the EU was not going to be possible under the current circumstances.

A chance to prove oneself to the EU

In light of the complexity of the situation, Russia's continued influence, and its use of both hard and soft power, the EU counted on the willingness of Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine to follow the European development path and in the given circumstances decided it made more sense to strengthen cooperation with the 'Trio'. That's not only a logical but also a pragmatic decision.

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Within the expert community in Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine, there is often a lack of optimism with regard to the prospects of EU membership — the 'Associated Trio' is regarded as nothing more than a formal rapprochement of the three states. The chances are that Brussels will proceed with the 'more for more' approach within the framework of the already existing Eastern Partnership.

As a result, the new format currently emerging will prove to be non-functional and no more than a diplomatic initiative. However, if this 'Trio' demonstrates that it has the potential to deepen cooperation with the EU, then it could become more attractive, at least from an economic perspective.

A Russian answer

The rapprochement between Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine has not gone unnoticed by Russia, which, since the establishment of the Eastern Partnership, has perceived this format as anti-Russian.

According to a statement by Russian MP and member of the parliamentary Committee on International Affairs, Elena Panina, the 'Associated Trio' is an attempt to build a 'sanitary cordon' against Russia in the southern part of the post-Soviet space. 'The activities of the alliance are unlikely to have anything to do with European integration, the chances of Georgia and Ukraine in this regard are almost nil, and for Moldova are only relevant if the country is swallowed up by Romania.

This is just another example of the implementation of the notorious 'anaconda strategy', the strategy of engulfing Russian ring of hostile alliances', Panina said.

In sum, the establishment of the 'Associated Trio' is both a timely and logical step with the potential to accelerate the European integration of Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine.

Russia's reaction is of course not at all unexpected. The Kremlin will continue to defend its interests in the region in the future, heightening tensions and militaristic sentiment. The conflicts give Russia the additional advantages of control and influence over developments in the region. Recognition of this motivated Kiev and Tbilisi to intensify their efforts in the direction of European-Atlantic integration, which is, after all the best way of ensuring security and defence.

Is there a reason for Russia to worry?

The Party of Action and Solidarity's win in the early parliamentary election in Moldova and the signing of the memorandum on the establishment of the 'Associated Trio' is seen by pro-Russian political forces as an attempt to bolster pro-European policies. Notably, in one of his statements, former president Igor Dodon spoke out against collective action in the security sphere, referring to the republic's status of neutrality that is enshrined in the constitution: 'This is a very dangerous document. It is clear that a defence belt is being built against Russia'.

In sum, the establishment of the 'Associated Trio' is both a timely and logical step with the potential to accelerate the European integration of Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine. In their statements, European partners have repeatedly emphasised that they share the commitment of these three countries to strengthening political association and economic integration.

However, this can only happen provided the countries manage to overcome their domestic political conflict and economic difficulties, as well as to fully implement the terms of the Agreement of Association. The latter essentially means creating the necessary foundations for full integration into the European Union.



Natalia Stercul

Chisinau

Natalia Stercul is Associate Professor, Political Analyst, Expert of the Department "Eastern Studies: Ukraine and Russia" of the Foreign Policy Association of the Republic of Moldova.