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Friends with benefits

The case for granting candidate country status to the EU's eastern neighbours

Read this article in German

When eight former communist countries joined the EU in 2004, their citizens' lives changed for the better. The economy grew and living standards went up, despite the legacy of these nations' communist past. For the first time in decades, citizens could choose their governments.

However, the expansion eastwards created new problems for the EU. It now shared a common border with a bunch of former Soviet states, some of them dictatorships, most of them highly corrupt.

Europeans had little appetite for further expansion. In any case, the countries bordering the EU to the east were in no state to join: neither their political systems nor their economies shaped up to the bloc's rules.

To protect itself, the EU attempted to foster a 'ring of friends' around its old and new member states by supporting its newest neighbours politically and economically. The European Neighbourhood Policy was born, and a few years later split into a southern and eastern and dimension.

Partners or frenemies?

The latter was called the Eastern Partnership (EaP). But the six countries that make up this 'partnership' – Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine – are drifting apart. Politically, economically and socially there are escalating differences between them, and these differences are becoming more and more difficult to reconcile.

While Ukrainians overturned their autocratic government in 2013/14, for example, in Azerbaijan the old elites still rule the roost. Following its 2008 war with Russia, Georgia turned towards the EU. Armenia, on the other hand, sees a protector in Moscow. And by 2014, Moldovans were

able to travel to the Schengen area without a visa. But in Belarus, the process of relaxing visa regulations with the EU is only just starting.

To complicate matters further, Russia sees the Eastern Neighbourhood Policy as a threat. Moscow wants to secure its sphere of influence and is trying to create a sort of buffer zone in its western neighbourhood. It would perceive any further EU (or NATO) enlargement towards the East as meddling. That's a problem, as Russia is quite prepared to use military force to protect its own interests, such as when it annexed Crimea in 2014. If the EU fails to address these challenges it could spell the end of the EaP.

One fundamental problem is the EU's failure to grant candidate country status to the three countries that have shown themselves most open to the EU and signed Association Agreements (official treaties of cooperation) with the bloc – Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine.

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The prospect of accession to the European Union is the best incentive for implementing reforms, but no mention of a future within the EU has ever been made within the framework of the EaP. Indeed, in 2016 the European Council explicitly reaffirmed that candidate country status is not on the agenda. The final statement from the most recent Eastern Partnership Summit in Brussels also excluded the possibility of membership.

'Second-class citizens'

The European Parliament has taken a bolder stance and does not see the Association Agreement with Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine as the end goal in terms of those countries' relationship with the EU. MEPs support the European aspirations of these countries and have proposed an enhanced partnership known as Eastern Partnership Plus.

This could involve membership of the customs union, the energy union and the Schengen Area, or it could entail extended access to the EU's single market and closer collaboration on joint security and defence policy. The abolition of roaming charges and increased finance for joint youth programmes would represent further steps towards facilitating exchange between citizens of these three countries and those of the EU.

However, the ultimate aim of the EaP Plus initiative would be to promote the prospect of EU membership, subject to progress being made

regarding the implementation of the Association Agreement, and visible and lasting success when it comes to reforms.

Candidate country status is not an end in itself. The battle against corruption and efforts to improve public administration must go hand in hand with a democratic transition that benefits society as a whole. Legislation for non-governmental organisations must provide ample legal and financial leeway for active civic participation.

There must also be a greater focus on the social dimension when implementing the Association Agreement. Each country must strengthen workers' rights, introduce an appropriate minimum wage, and improve occupational safety.

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The prospect of potential EU membership would reveal a clear course for reform and highlight an explicitly stated objective. Otherwise, these countries will ask why they are making such an effort when they will always be treated as second-class citizens destined to remain on the margins of Europe.

The compromise option

By signing Association Agreements, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine have started on a clear course of European reforms. However, the other three members of the Eastern Partnership – Armenia, Azerbaijan and Belarus – have shown little interest in establishing closer relations with the EU.

Azerbaijan's significant oil and gas reserves mean it needn't depend on the EU financially. It is currently negotiating a fairly unambitious agreement with the bloc.

Relations with Belarus have thawed over the past two years but there are currently no official negotiations between Brussels and Minsk. Presidents Ilham Aliyev (of Azerbaijan) and Alexander Lukashenko (of Belarus) are no fans of the Eastern Neighbourhood Policy. They also mistrust the EU, and are not heeding the bloc's calls to observe civil and human rights.

After unexpectedly withdrawing from an Association Agreement in 2013, Armenia recently signed a less ambitious Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA) with the EU. The CEPA is aimed at improving the investment climate and boosting trade with EU countries. It does not include a free-trade agreement. But it does still

facilitate trade and should lead to an increased exchange of goods and services for both parties. It also contains several elements of the abandoned Association Agreement, e.g. in the areas of political dialogue, the rule of law and security policy.

If Belarus decides at a later point to cooperate more closely with the EU, the new agreement with Armenia could serve as a blueprint. CEPA provides a way of listening to Russia's concerns about the Eastern Partnership without leaving the EU's eastern neighbours in the lurch.

Whilst it's true many of the problems facing the EaP countries are of their own making, and the burden of the Soviet legacy is huge, Moscow's aggressive bearing is making it more difficult to implement reforms. Apart from Belarus, all the eastern neighbours are dealing with various territorial conflictstypo3/#_msocom_1. Russian involvement in these conflicts has only served to ratchet up tensions.

One of the central themes in the Global Strategy for the EU's Foreign and Security Policy, which was adopted two years ago, is 'resilience', i.e. boosting resistance to internal and external threats. Developing relations with Russia is regarded as a key strategic challenge in that regard.

It's good to talk

Relations with eastern states cannot and must not be a simple matter of imposing sanctions and maintaining distance. Sanctions were unavoidable in response to the annexation of Crimea and military intervention in eastern Ukraine, but intensifying sanctions at this juncture would be counterproductive.

Now is the time to try and reopen negotiations, for example on relaxing visa requirements. This would encourage rapprochement and strengthen links between Russia and the EU. As members of the OSCE, the EU and Russia are already cooperating in a limited way.

To encourage economic development, the EU should seek direct talks with the Eurasian Economic Union in order to explore potential openings for more intensive collaboration. A free-trade zone linking Lisbon and Vladivostok is still a distant dream, but that shouldn't discourage the EU from seeking further economic cooperation.

The Eastern Partnership will not function for much longer unless the EU explicitly states that particular countries can hope for membership of the European club in the long-term, and that candidate country status is a

realistic target. The EU must also have clear alternatives at the ready for countries that are not aiming for membership.



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