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Stars in their eyes

Countries on Europe's eastern periphery aren't nearly ready to join the EU. We shouldn't give them false hope

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The European heads of state and government were right not to recognise the six Eastern Partnership (EaP) countries (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine) as potential candidate countries at November's Brussels summit. Neither side is ready for that – the gulf between the EU's demands and the political situation on Europe's eastern periphery is simply too wide.

In any event, the only eligible countries would be those that already have association agreements with the EU (Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine) – Brussels parlance for formal treaties of cooperation. The other three countries are either members of the Russia-dominated Eurasian Economic Union or are not interested in EU membership.

Putting the EU's own house in order

Brussels and the EU member states have a heap of internal problems to keep them occupied for years to come. The EU is still knee-deep in the worst crisis in its history. The Brexit vote and the refugee and economic crises have rocked the continent to its core and caused deep rifts between member states.

The EU still hasn't indicated how it will deal with the illiberal governments of Poland and Hungary with their attacks on freedom of the press and the rule of law – fundamental values of the European project.

In September, French president Emmanuel Macron set out his vision for Europe: a reinvigorated EU with deeper political integration, and common policies on security, migration and the economy – including a finance ministry and a Eurozone parliament with its own budget.

When Germany finally gets round to forming a government, it will need to respond quickly to Macron's proposals and kickstart a real discussion on the EU's future. That's the only way to overcome the current EU deadlock and address sticking points like unemployment and immigration. In short, while the European house awaits renovation, it makes no sense to plan further extensions.

Sense of disenchantment

The West Balkan states of Albania, Bosnia, Montenegro, Serbia, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Kosovo were identified as potential candidates for EU membership as far back as 2003.

Negotiations with some of these countries are going ahead, but very little progress has been made over the past 14 years. The resulting disillusionment has seen the EU's appeal nosediving in these countries. The process of joining the EU requires great patience. It's more a marathon than a sprint.

The Eastern Partnership countries are light years away from fulfilling the Copenhagen Criteria – the rules that define whether a country is eligible to join the EU. In particular, the requirement that candidate countries achieve a 'stability of institutions guaranteeing democracy and the rule of law' represents an insurmountable hurdle – at least for now.

In all these countries, politicians use their influence and position to amass wealth and control clientelist structures. Personal financial interests usually come before the good of the country.

Kickbacks and coverups

The Republic of Moldova, once a model country in the post-Soviet space, is now one of Europe's poorest countries. In a 2014 fraud scandal, some €1 billion vanished from the small country's banking system.

Oligarchs continue to dominate the political landscape. In the summer of 2017, despite protestations from the EU, the Council of Europe's Venice Commission and NGOs, Moldova announced a move from proportional representation to a 'mixed' voting system designed to cement entrenched interests.

Georgia, on the other hand, has made significant progress in its battle against corruption and its efforts to reform the country's institutions.

But oligarchs and interest groups are still using monopolistic structures and privatisation programmes to get rich at the public's expense.

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Ukraine has carried out more reforms over the last four years than in all the time since independence in 1991. But four years after the Maidan protests, euphoria has given way to disillusionment. A great deal has been achieved on the legislative level, and touted to the West as progress. But the adopted legislation is rarely implemented properly.

The country continues to suffer as a result of widespread corruption and a dysfunctional judicial system. The National Agency on Corruption Prevention, which is responsible for the electronic system that monitors assets and income, is ineffective and is itself facing serious allegations of corruption.

The system of e-declarations, which compels senior public officials to declare their wealth in a new electronic database, is a pretty blunt tool. Investigations by the National Anti-Corruption Bureau – the only agency recognised by the West as being independent and not corrupt – have been hampered by other government bodies. Major legal cases against corrupt government officials have stalled and come to nothing.

Anti-corruption campaigners were hoping European Commission president Jean-Claude Juncker would insist on the establishment of an independent anti-corruption court during his recent visit to Kiev. He didn't.

However, the EU is now making a clear link between reforms and financial aid. The EU has given the Ukraine €13 billion in assistance so far, but has held back the final instalment due to a lack of progress.

We need to talk Turkey

The EU will not be ready for new members in the foreseeable future, and the Eastern Partnership countries will not be ready to join.

Membership negotiations with Turkey are a powerful example of what happens when unrealistic expectations are not fulfilled. Turkey has largely turned its back on Europe. Negotiations that have no prospect of success inevitably lead to disillusionment and frustration on both sides.

This, however, does not mean that Europe should ignore the EaP countries. It should continue to work with civil society and progressive forces in these countries, while monitoring compliance with reforms.

Relaxing visa requirements and signing association agreements were important milestones. The EU could also consider offering membership of its customs union in the future. As Germany's Europe minister Michael Roth put it, 'We must continue to hold out our hand.' But pretending EU membership is an option is dishonest and counterproductive.



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