

Reshaped Geopolitics and Increased Turmoil in the EU's Eastern Neighborhood in 2020

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Since the European Commission issued its Joint Communication on the post-2020 Eastern Partnership (EaP) policy in March 2020, the region has been steeped in turmoil, which is reshaping the political and geopolitical environment for the EaP countries and the EU.

The first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic that hit most European countries in the spring led the EU to quickly revise its support for the region, resulting in an unprecedented assistance package ahead of the EaP summit of June 2020.

Since the summit, however, continuing to be preoccupied with deep internal challenges and other foreign policy priorities, the EU is less prepared to swiftly adapt its approach and toolkit to the challenges that continue arising in its eastern neighborhood. The EU's slow, reactive approach to the region's multiple crises – at times reflecting a lack of focus, of instruments to intervene, or of strong levers to influence developments – undermines its credibility and reputation as a strong player in the region.

A Reshaped Political and Geopolitical Landscape

This year has been a turning point for the EaP countries. First, uncertainties produced by the pandemic led to the imposition of unprecedented restrictions to manage the immediate and longer-term socioeconomic impact. Then, domestic developments and geopolitics took central stage in reshaping the EaP.

Protests in Belarus have shaken a regime that was stable for over two decades. A clear end to the current transition of power, which started after Alexander Lukashenka rigged the presidential election in August, is not yet in sight. The shape that the new Belarus will take is not clear either, but the country has changed. While Lukashenka is doing everything in his power to stay in office, the EU has to prepare for more instability to come from an EaP country with which it has a border.

The recent war between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh has reshaped the geopolitics of the South Caucasus, giving Russia a new position and the upper hand in the region with the deployment of its “peacekeepers.” Meanwhile, the EU and the United States were pushed to the margins with the failed attempts by the United States and France (as co-chairs of OSCE Minsk Group alongside Russia) to broker a ceasefire. The war in Nagorno-Karabakh also increased the regional role of Turkey, whose support for Azerbaijan will be the basis for a more comprehensive economic, energy, and security cooperation in the South Caucasus. As a result, Turkey will further challenge Russia's dominance in the wider Black Sea and South Caucasus region.

In Ukraine, the traditional oligarchic elites with their vested interests are working hard to undermine the country's reform agenda. It is becoming increasingly clear that President Volodymyr Zelenskyi has no real reform plan and is too weak to resist them. The continuous fragmentation of his Servant of the People party has diminished his influence. On top of this, a constitutional crisis is taking Ukraine into uncharted territory and might undo its anti-corruption track progress of recent years. A comeback of pro-Russia political forces cannot be discarded.

Georgia and Moldova are undergoing serious domestic turbulences after recent national elections. The victory of the reformist president-elect Maia Sandu has created a new momentum for Moldova. However, this will be challenged by status quo actors who are unwilling to give up their dysfunctional, slim parliamentary majority. Because of the limited powers of the presidency, Sandu needs early parliamentary elections and a subsequent functioning government for her reform agenda to be implemented. In Georgia, the opposition is contesting the results of the parliamentary elections, which shakes further the people's trust in public institutions. Compared to the country's two previous elections, this one was a setback, being poorly administered and witnessing the comprehensive misuse of administrative resources by the ruling Georgian Dream party of billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili.

Armenia is also set to face new political instability after Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan accepted his country's defeat in the recent war with Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh. Democratic forces and those who stand for reconciliation are discredited in the eyes of the population. It is to be expected that nationalist forces will gain more influence on politics.

Factors Driving the Current Turmoil

Once the strict pandemic-related measures that were applied this spring were lifted, Covid-19 got out of control across most of the region. Its short- and long-term socioeconomic effects will likely continue to drastically impact the domestic political structures and dynamics in the EaP countries. The pandemic, however, has only been a catalyst for the long-standing challenges and deficits that the region was already facing: poor management and coordination of government institutions unable to provide core services to populations in distress, no functional institutions and policies in health and education systems, and lack of social security systems for the poorest and most vulnerable groups.

In those EaP countries that held elections this year, Covid-19 hurt incumbents' chances of re-election. The ruling elites' reliance on populist politics rather than on governance and devoting administrative resources for electoral gain and short-term measures rather than to developing more sustainable policies, drove voters to the polling stations to express their discontent.

Societies are tired of elites not paying attention to their concerns or not addressing domestic issues. Those segments of society that are vulnerable to disinformation are further polarized by increased propaganda around Covid-19, which fosters the perception (sometimes correct) that elites have no control over the situation and thus further reduces the already low levels of trust in state institutions.

In Georgia and Ukraine, under the pressure of anti-corruption efforts conducted with the support of the EU, and without a clear and consistent vision for the future of societies and economies, vested interests are fighting back against existing reforms.

Russia's attempts to maintain its influence in the region and its interference in some EaP states further complicate democratic processes there. Lukashenka's rule might have ended long ago were it not for the Kremlin's support. Russia's decision not to support Armenia in the war over Nagorno-Karabakh has severely undermined Pashinyan's support and legitimacy. In Moldova, Russia openly supported the pro-Russian President Igor Dodon in the election. The Kremlin's assertive influence and its support for local Russia-friendly elites and domestic propaganda sustain old elites and create openings for them to gain new in popularity where current policies do not fulfil the demands of society. At the same time, while Russia strives to preserve the old clientelistic model of governance in the EaP states, more people there are demanding change. As a result, social conflicts are sharpening.

Third powers like Turkey, China and Iran are increasingly active in the region and challenge the balance of powers there, especially in the South Caucasus. This trend is only likely to grow and therefore more geopolitical changes can be expected in the Black Sea and Caspian regions and in Eastern Europe. There being a greater number of external players is likely to change the rules of the game, make the region more unstable and further accelerate the transformation of the post-Soviet space.

Instability in the EaP countries is thus not only geopolitically driven; it also occurs because societies are emancipating themselves. People demand respect and use institutionalized channels (where they function) and social mobilization to do so. Political elites, so far, have no answers to this societal challenge.

New Opportunities for the EU to Seize

In light of continuously unfolding challenges in the EaP countries, the key question for the EU and its member states that requires an immediate answer is how to adapt the EU's institutional framework so that it is able to shape the dynamics and developments there.

While current turbulences in the EaP countries continue to shake the public's trust in state institutions and domestic elites, the EU is currently seen as mostly absent or playing a marginal role in response to events on the ground, and especially to challenges in the field of security. Security engagement, however, is key to further democratization and transformation in the region.

The EU's reluctance to intervene in the crisis in Belarus, and its limited ability to reach out to Lukashenka or serve as a mediator between the opposition and the regime, has sidelined the EU as an actor able to act boldly in its immediate neighborhood. The EU member states' initial inability to agree on sanctions was a further blow to the EU's reputation. Its absence from the war in Nagorno-Karabakh and the brokered deal that put an end to the fighting further undermined the EU and exposed the limits of its

institutional toolbox to deal with such situations. Democratic forces in Armenia have been deeply disappointed with the EU's absence since the war erupted. Its lack of action undermines EU goals like democratization and strengthening civil society. The EU, moreover, should not underestimate the impact of third powers on regional stability. Otherwise, it risks paying a price with more instability, corruption, conflicts and war in its neighborhood.

The crises the region is undergoing, however, also create openings and opportunities for the EU. Belarusian citizens have displayed unexpected forms of social mobilization to withstand Lukashenka's brutal repression. The result of Moldova's presidential election has exposed the Kremlin's inability to keep a Russia-friendly president in power and showed that the misuse of administrative resources for electoral purposes may not always work. The Moldovan diaspora, whose votes were crucial for Sandu's win, proved its capacity to produce change and needs to be engaged more seriously between election cycles to help transformations at home. In Ukraine, reforms like decentralization are producing positive results that need to be further strengthened.

The EU should use the leverage and soft power that it has in countries like Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine. For most EaP societies it is still the major face of and partner for democratic transformations and the fight against corrupt elites. Active civil society and other reformist actors across the region are the EU's partners and allies when it comes to the opportunities that it would be ready and willing to seize.