POLICY BRIEF

The role of the EU as a security actor in its Eastern neighborhood beyond 2020: interests, challenges and opportunities

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Background

In the past two decades, the Eastern neighbourhood has been one of the EU's key foreign policy priorities.[1] With the enlargement waves of 2004 and 2007 in Central and Eastern Europe, the EU found itself in neighbouring countries that were once part of the Soviet Union, thus bringing unresolved conflicts and fragile democracies closer to its own borders.

Since the launch of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) in 2014, and the Eastern Partnership (EaP) in 2009, the EU has sought to enhance cooperation on wide-range of areas with its partner countries. In addition, the EU also aims to play an active role as a security actor in the region, in particular on issues such as border management, combating illegal migration and organised crime, as well as cybersecurity and fighting cyber threats.[2]

To some extent, the events that have occurred in this region in the past decade suggest that the stability, prosperity and security of the Union's Eastern neighbours have an impact on its own interests in the region, due to the EaP countries' increased access to the European market as well as the clash with Russia's goal to expand its sphere of influence in the former Soviet republics.[3] However, the EU and its member states seemingly face challenges in elaborating and defining policies and strategies that promote their interest and create strong and effective value-based partnerships with the countries in the region.

On 18 March 2020, the European Commission published a proposal regarding the EU's long-term policy objectives of the EaP beyond 2020 which is expected to be endorsed by the member states at the upcoming EaP summit in June 2020. While the proposal outlines the fact that "good governance and democratic institutions, rule of law, successful anti-corruption policies, fight against organised crime, respect for human rights and security, including support to populations affected by conflict, are the backbone of strong and resilient states and societies", it also seems to suggest that these long-term goals are rather orientated towards trade and economic integration.[4]

State of Play

The EU's policies and strategies towards its Eastern neighbourhood at a glance

At the beginning of the century, as the EU was preparing to receive twelve new member states in 2004 and 2007, its leaders were aware of the profound impact the two enlargement waves will have on the Union's approach towards its Eastern and Southern neighbours. This fact was acknowledged in the European Security Strategy, adopted in 2003, which stated: "Neighbours who are engaged in violent conflict, weak states where organised crime flourishes, dysfunctional societies or exploding population growth on its borders all pose problems for Europe."[5]

Under these conditions, the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) was created in 2004 with the goal to avoid "the emergence of new dividing lines between the enlarged EU and its neighbours and instead strengthening the prosperity, stability and security of all".[6] Moreover, through the ENP, the

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[1] https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/neighbourhood/eastern-partnership_en

[2] https://ukraineoffice.blogactiv.eu/2018/10/30/does-the-eastern-partnership-promote-common-security-for-eastern-europe-views-from-ukraine/

[3] https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUISSFiles/cp153_EaP.pdf

[4] https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_20_452

[5] http://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-15895-2003-INIT/en/pdf

[6] https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/neighbourhood/european-neighbourhood-policy_en

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EU committed itself to "support and foster stability, security and prosperity in the countries closest to its borders."[7]

In order to deepen and strengthen its relations with six countries in the post-Soviet space, namely Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine, the EU launched the Eastern Partnership in 2009 as a specific dimension of the ENP.[8] Through the EaP, the EU aims to promote democracy, prosperity and cooperation in the region. In 2014, the EU signed the Association Agreements and Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas (AA/DCFTAs) with Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. Within the framework of the AA/DCFTAs, visa free travel restrictions for Moldovan[9] citizens were lifted later that year, followed by a similar act in 2017 for Georgian[10] and Ukrainian[11] citizens.

Due to the triggering of crises such as the Arab Spring of 2010-2012, the ENP was revised in 2015 in order to address new challenges in EU's Eastern and Southern neighbourhood, "with a greater focus on stabilisation, resilience and security".[12] As such, the revised ENP laid the groundwork for a more tailor-made approach towards the other three EaP countries: Armenia, Belarus and Azerbaijan.[13] In the following year, the EU Global Strategy was published, which focuses on building resilience and increasing stabilisation in the EU's neighbourhood, as a method to achieve "sustainable peace". Furthermore, the Global Strategy underlines the importance of "paving the way for these countries' further involvement in CSDP."[14]

In line with the objectives and priorities laid out in the revised ENP and the EU Global Strategy, the EU released a set of 20 deliverables for 2020 for the EaP which includes strengthening "security cooperation, notably to disrupt organised crime, support conflict resolution, crisis prevention, civil protection against new threats and cybersecurity".[15]

The EU's involvement as a security actor in the region

Even before the creation of the ENP, the EU seemed determined to strengthen security cooperation with its partners from Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus. Therefore, in 2003, an EU Special Representative for the South Caucasus (EUSR) was appointed to manage the unresolved or frozen conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh which throughout the years has sparked tensions between Azerbaijan and Armenia.[16]

In 2005, the European Union Border Assistance Mission to Moldova and Ukraine (EUBAM) was deployed to contribute to the settlement of the conflict in Transnistria by supporting the Moldovan and Ukrainian authorities to deal with illegal cross-border activities including human trafficking and smuggling. However, the role of the EUBAM is to advise and provide technical assistance to the Moldovan and Ukrainian border guard and customs service.[17]

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[7] https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/neighbourhood/pdf/key-documents/151118_joint-communication_review-of-the-enp_en.pdf

[8] https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/neighbourhood/eastern-partnership_en

[9] https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/1538/republic-moldova-and-eu_en

[10] https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/1237/georgia-and-eu_en

[11] https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/1937/ukraine-and-eu_en

[12] https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_17_1334

[13] https://eeas.europa.eu/diplomatic-network/eastern-partnership/419/eastern-partnership_en

[14] http://eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/top_stories/pdf/eugs_review_web.pdf

[15] https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/swd_2017_300_f1_joint_staff_working_paper_en_v5_p1_940530.pdf

[16] https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/PRES_03_196

[17] http://eubam.org/who-we-are/

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The Russo-Georgian War in August 2008 and the subsequent occupation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which are internationally recognised as part of Georgia, accelerated the need to enhance the cooperation on security-related issues between the EU and its eastern neighbours. As a response to Russia's actions in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the EU deployed an unarmed civilian monitoring mission in Georgia (EUMM) in September 2008 to "contribute to the stabilisation of the situation on the ground."[18] Around the same time, the EU also appointed a special representative to facilitate the implementation of the settlement agreement between Russia and Georgia.[19]

In an attempt to promote peaceful settlements of the conflicts in the South Caucasus, in 2011, the EU appointed a special representative to deal with both the conflicts in Nagorno-Karabakh, as well as Abkhazia and South Ossetia. As such, the positions of the EUSR for the South Caucasus and the EUSR for the crisis in Georgia were effectively merged.[20]

In 2014, the European Union Advisory Mission in Ukraine (EUAM) was launched at the request of the Ukrainian government following the Maidan revolution. The main objective of the EUAM is to support the Ukrainian authorities in their efforts to reform their civilian security sector based on EU values such as good governance and human rights. This includes law enforcement and rule of law agencies and institutions such as the Ministry of Internal Affairs, National Police and Security Services as well as the General Prosecutor and local courts.[21]

Security trends in the Eastern neighbourhood

The recent history of the former-Soviet republics in Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus has been marked by civil wars and intra-state conflicts which have affected most of these countries, with Belarus being the only country who has managed to avoid such situations. Despite international efforts which involved actors such as the EU, the United States or the OSCE, the progress in settling the frozen conflicts has proven to be limited. Instead, this situation has led to the creation of "de facto" states within the borders of five countries in the region. Moreover, at least in the cases of Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine, the breakaway regions have been a persistent obstacle in these states' aspirations to join the EU or NATO.[22]

The ongoing armed conflict in Eastern Ukraine along with the illegal annexation of Crimea by Russia, are perhaps among the most pressing security challenges for the EU in the region. Triggered as a reaction to the Euromaidan Revolution of 2013-2014, the Ukrainian crisis has had a significant impact on the Union's policies towards its Eastern neighbourhood as well as its relations with Russia. Consequently, the EU has imposed sanctions on Russian officials for violating Ukraine's territorial integrity and sovereignty.[23]

Due to the rapid technological development, elements of hybrid warfare have been posing major security risks to the EU and its Eastern neighbours in recent years and it is likely to continue to do so in the years that will follow. According to the European Commission, "hybrid threats aim to exploit a country's vulnerabilities and often seek to undermine fundamental democratic values and

[18] https://www.eumm.eu/en/about_eumm
[19] https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A32008E0760
[20] https://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:L:2011:221:0005:0007:en:PDF
[21] https://www.euam-ukraine.eu/our-mission/about-us/
[22] https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2016/578001/EXPO_STU(2016)578001_EN.pdf
[23] https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2019/642225/EPRS_ATA(2019)642225_EN.pdf

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liberties".[24] To that end, in 2016, the EU has pledged to intensify information-sharing with its neighbouring countries in order to counter hybrid threats.[25]

Although the EU is currently facing unprecedented challenges amid the COVID-19 outbreak, it did manage to provide an emergency support package worth more than €800 million to its Eastern partners[26]. Moreover, the EU has offered additional support to the six EaP countries through various tools and mechanisms including the regional Rapid Response Mechanism[27] and the EU Civil Protection Mechanism.[28]

Conclusion

The creation of the ENP and the EaP has provided the EU with the opportunity to foster its relations with its Eastern partners, thus having a meaningful impact on the political, social and economic development of these countries in the past two decades. The EU has also increased its presence in the region as a security provider by addressing frozen conflicts, hybrid threats and matters concerning civil protection, law enforcement and border management. However, the Union's actions to manage these conflicts have proven to have had limited success despite engaging at a diplomatic level coupled with the deployment of peacekeeping missions on the ground, such as the EUMM in Georgia.

In terms of hybrid threats, the EU is actively involved in countering disinformation and misinformation in its Eastern neighbourhood, mainly through the EEAS East StratCom Task Force.[29] At the same time, taking into account the security risks hybrid threats pose to the EU and its neighbourhood, on 10 December 2019, the Council has called for additional resources to be allocated to all StratCom Task Forces (East, Western Balkans, South).[30]

Looking over the European Commission's proposal for the objectives of the EaP beyond 2020, perhaps it might be worth showcasing the fact that Union tends to place security in the same category with good governance and the rule of law. Therefore, one could argue that by supporting resilient and accountable institutions and the rule of law reform can enhance the capabilities of the countries in the region to deal with a broad range of security-related issues including organised crime, human trafficking and smuggling, as well as hybrid threats. Moreover, this approach could not only allow the EU to play an active role in settling the frozen conflicts in the Eastern neighbourhood, but it also has the potential to prevent similar situations in the future.

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[24] https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52016JC0018&from=en
[25] Idem 24
[26] https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/coronavirus_support_eap.pdf
[27] Idem 26
[28] https://ec.europa.eu/echo/news/coronavirus-eu-channels-assistance-ukraine_en
[29] https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/2116/-questions-and-answers-about-the-east-stratcom-task-force_en
[30] https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2019/12/10/countering-hybrid-threats-council-calls-for-enhanced-common-action/

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