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The European Union's New Eastern Policy: Striking a Balance Between Security, Democracy and Prosperity

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The EU's strategic ambiguity on the future of the Eastern Partnership region was perceived as a weakness by the Kremlin, and this provoked Russia's aggressive behaviour. The European Union can no longer afford to build its regional policies on the foundations of avoiding conflict with Russia at all costs. Reacting to Russia's aggressive agenda with "too little, too late" half-measures cannot sustain stability in Eastern Europe. In the post-February 24 status quo, Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia can no longer remain in what the Kremlin has attempted to turn into a grey zone. Russia has imposed a zero-sum game in which all parties must make clear choices. Concrete strategic vision, posture and messaging on not only the security of the EU and NATO member states, but the whole Euro-Atlantic area should be an essential aspect of deterring Russia's aggression. The EU should ensure that the organizing principle of the European security architecture brings sovereignty back to the centre of the discussion. This would exclude the possibility of manipulation through "frozen conflicts" and "grey zones". A sustainable policy is outlined below that would counter the risks of entering the same vicious circle that led to the war in Ukraine and the current geopolitical turbulence.

The Problem

Since the early 1990s, Russia has been consistently extending its influence through hybrid strategies in the Eastern Partnership (EaP) region. By effectively controlling protracted conflicts in the region, Russia has tried to undermine the economic and democratic development of the countries in its neighbourhood, thereby preventing their western integration and keeping the West out of the post-Soviet space. Constant manipulation of and blocking solutions to the conflicts in Transnistria, Nagorno-Karabakh, Abkhazia and Tskhinvali (South Ossetia) gave Russia an advantage in extending its malign influence in Moldova, Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia. The West failed to convince Russia that those countries "between" Russia and the EU are indeed part of Europe whole and free, and that invading them would lead to painful consequences. The main problem with EU policy is that it exclusively aimed to assist EaP countries with economic and democratic development through soft initiatives, leaving the security context out of the equation and thereby yielding the initiative and full control over the conflicts to Russia.

The West's ambivalent response to blatant violations of international law and challenges to the fundamental principles of the European security architecture showed the Kremlin that its escalation strategy, through multiple domains, was facilitating a gradual increase in Russia's influence in the EaP region, ultimately leading to the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. As a result, even though Ukraine is not a member of the EU or NATO, the organizing principles of the European security architecture have been fundamentally challenged by an illegal, unjustified and unprovoked full-scale military aggression against the country. The grey zones or frozen conflicts at the periphery of Europe threaten the entirety of Euro-Atlantic security. The EU must therefore develop a bold strategy aimed not only at supporting democracy and prosperity, but also at promoting security in Eastern Europe by playing a practical role in forging political solutions to the conflicts in the region.

Coherent Strategy: Extending Influence Through Grey Zone Conflicts and Hybrid Warfare

The fundamental error in the West's strategic thinking was the false assumption that following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Russia would be willing to transform into a constructive partner and fit into the western-dominated rules-based international system. However, a severely weakened Russia immediately sought opportunities to maintain control over its claimed sphere of influence by instigating so-called ethnic conflicts in neighbouring states. The ultimate aim was to keep its neighbours vulnerable to pressure through destabilization. Right at the start of the 1990s, Yevgeny Primakov formulated Russia's grand strategy of striving for a multipolar world while insisting on Russia's primacy in the post-Soviet space and opposing NATO expansion. To achieve these objectives, Russia had to consolidate its remaining instruments and apply a strategy cutting through all key domains. This approach, driven by harsh realities, was the prototype of what later became known as hybrid warfare.

Irresponsible behaviour, illegal actions and escalation have built up deceptively effective patterns for extending Russian influence. By controlling the conflicts, Russia managed to neutralize the advantages of its adversaries through a so-called kill chain – a five-step cycle that constituted the primary logic of Russia's hybrid warfare strategy:

1. Russia finds suitable momentum to create a crisis by enforcing new realities.
2. Russia invites interested parties to discuss the imposed status quo.
3. In parallel, Russia escalates the crisis and threatens more belligerent actions.
4. The escalation continues until the parties involved agree to the concessions in exchange for defusing tensions and normalizing relations.
5. Russia digests the new status quo, secures the gains, and waits for the next opportunity to repeat the pattern in different theatres.

Escalation and manipulation through conflict became key to the gradual encroachment of the hybrid warfare strategy and extension of Russian influence, ensuring that EU initiatives such as the EaP were rarely effective at bringing about strategic change. In practical terms, extending Russian influence was achieved by a series of interrelated measures: crippling Georgia's westernization through a military attack in 2008; establishing a solid Black Sea anti-access and area denial (A2AD) bubble by annexing Crimea in 2014, followed by the destabilization of eastern Ukraine; exploiting the Nagorno-Karabakh War and stationing additional "peacekeeping troops" in the region in 2020; and seizing the opportunity of mass

protests in Belarus to establish a permanent military presence there. By this point, Russia decided that the West had lost the ability to respond to its aggressive strategy and it was time to initiate a vital phase of re-establishing control in the neighbourhood – a full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Russia issued ultimatums to NATO and the US in line with Primakov's doctrine, once again proving the coherence and seriousness of Russia's strategic intention to dismantle the rules-based international system.

Georgia is an illustrative case of how Russia boosted its influence through hybrid warfare. Russia's coherent strategy gradually brought pro-Russian policies and sentiments from the margins of the political process in 2012 to the current mainstream through three synchronized efforts:

1. Psychological pressure on government and society (e.g., "borderization" and hostile activities across the line of occupation);
2. Strengthening anti-democratic forces, weakening pro-western powers and undermining democratic values and institutions (e.g., support to ultra-nationalist forces and targeting of pro-western civil society organizations, media and opposition parties);
3. Dissuasion of initiatives and projects that have the potential to strengthen connectivity and strategic partnership between Georgia and the West (e.g., interrupting the deep-sea port project in Anaklia and disrupting EU candidate status for Georgia).

The pro-western narratives of the Georgian Dream ruling party, which aimed to maintain a facade of positive dynamics, was always challenged by its reluctance to upset Moscow with rapid progress on Euro-Atlantic integration. Over time, the enormous gap between declared policies and the implementation process led to an erosion of democratic institutions and processes. Democratic backsliding, in turn, obstructed tangible progress on Georgia's westernization. The rhetoric and actions of the Georgian authorities in the run-up to the decision on EU candidate status, especially the imprisonment of a critical media manager just before the final decision on candidate status, left an impression of deliberate attempts to prevent progress. Despite the push by Georgia's vibrant civil society to keep the country on a pro-western course, the ruling party left the EU with limited policy choices, resulting in a lost opportunity to achieve candidate status alongside Ukraine and Moldova in June 2022. At the strategic level, the biggest loser in the whole process was pro-western Georgian society. The rollback of an at one time best performing, most reliable partner is also harmful to EU policies on the wider region. Further disengagement by Georgia from western interests and values will have a negative effect on the state of democracy in the region and the policy choices of other countries. The only winner in the current context is Russia, and its proxies in Georgia, as hybrid warfare strategies seem to have delivered the desired results.

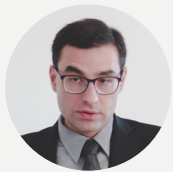
Conclusions and Recommendations

The fundamental precondition for achieving stability in the EaP region is a proper balance between ensuring security and providing opportunities for democratic and economic development. The EU should seize the initiative to develop a sustainable strategy for a political resolution to the conflicts in the region based on the fundamental principles enshrined in the UN Charter, the Helsinki Final Act and other relevant agreements. As a solid practical demonstration of its willingness and ability to do so, the EU should coordinate with NATO a commonly acceptable end-state for the war in Ukraine, and set out the following preconditions for Russia's return to the international community:

- Recognition of the territorial integrity and borders of the EaP states as determined at the moment of their accession to the United Nations in 1991–92.
- Renunciation of all illegal recognitions and annexations of the territories of EaP countries.
- Withdrawal of all military forces based in EaP states without the consent of the host nation.
- Reaffirmation of the right of all EaP states to choose their own security arrangements and alliances.

Putting these principles at the heart of all policies related to Russia and the EaP region would be a litmus test for the ability of the West to stand up for the rules-based international system and the credibility of the EU's Eastern European policies. A clear indication of the solution to existential security concerns would provide a boost to the seriousness and consistency of the EU's efforts to engage with EaP countries. Meanwhile, it will be essential to reinvigorate democratic processes in Georgia through the following measures:

- Empower the pro-democracy forces in Georgia by immediately granting candidate status to the country. Use this as a tool to prevent further estrangement from the West and reverse democratic backsliding. Create an EU-Georgia joint implementation and verification mechanism led by CSOs to ensure the gradual achievement of the 12 recommendations initially designed as criteria for granting EU candidate status.
- Expose and reprimand political leaders and civil servants with a proven track record of undermining democratic institutions and processes in Georgia. Enforce visa restrictions and seize the property owned in western countries by Russia-linked political decision-makers and individuals impeding electoral or judicial processes.



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