

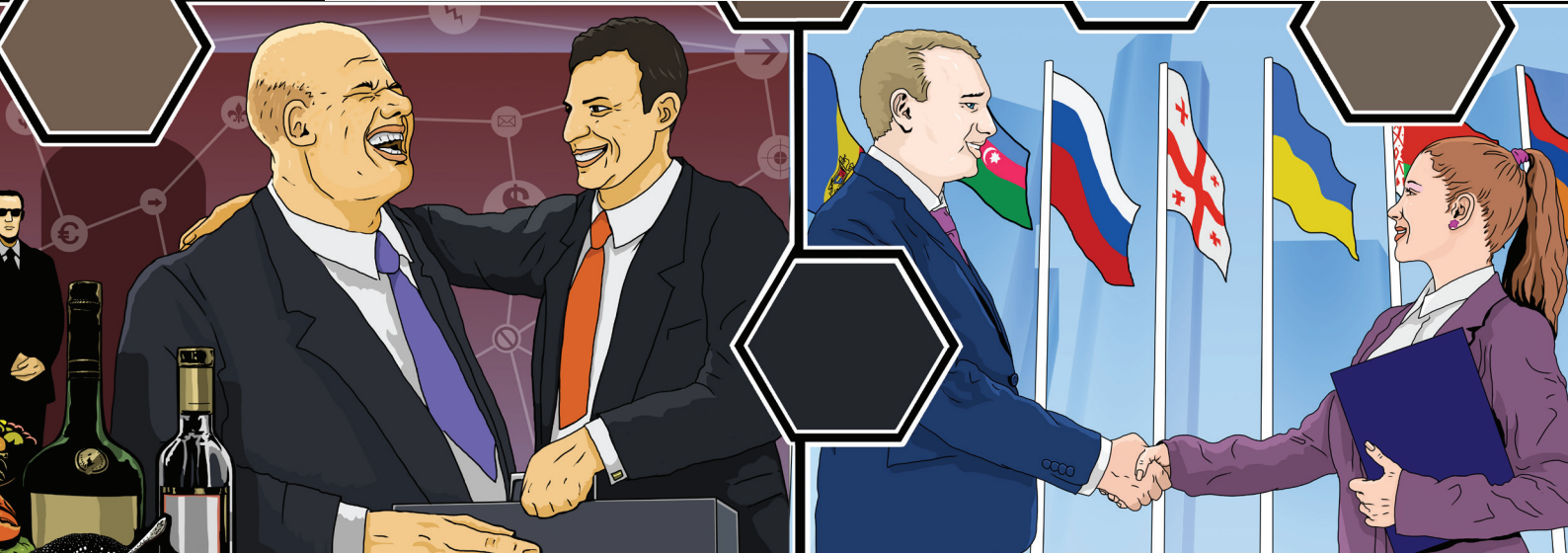


The Eastern Partnership in 2030

Four Scenarios for the Future
of the Region

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The Eastern Partnership in 2030. Four Scenarios for the Future of the Region

Kyiv: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2019.

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ISBN 978-617-7157-98-3

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Introduction

The ten-year anniversary of the Eastern Partnership (EaP) offers an excellent opportunity to take stock of the past achievements of the initiative as well as to look into the future of the six member states and the region in general. Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine certainly form quite a heterogeneous group. While Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine have signed Association Agreements with the EU, Armenia and Belarus are still members of the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union. Although, Armenia has signed a Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement with the EU, Azerbaijan has decided to stay non-aligned thus far.

The aim of the Eastern Partnership was to bring its eastern neighbors closer to the EU and build a common area of shared democracy, prosperity, and stability. Ten years after its launch, the results of these rather ambitious goals are rather mixed. On the one hand, intensified trade and investment flows led to stronger economic growth in the region and people-to-people contacts have increased through civil society cooperation as well as the launch of visa-free regimes. However, on the other hand, the societies still suffer from

widespread corruption, oligarchic influences, and inefficient state structures. Democratic reforms and improvements in the rule of law are unfortunately progressing rather slowly. Furthermore, large parts of the population in the countries do not feel a positive impact from the Eastern Partnership. Poverty continues to be widespread due to unemployment, low wages, and the absence of a functioning welfare state.

From a geopolitical perspective, the region is still in great turmoil. Five of the six countries are dealing with territorial conflicts, with the war in Eastern Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea dominating the headlines during the last years. In the eyes of the Russian administration, the Eastern Partnership is seen as a vehicle of the EU to advance its interest in the near neighborhood which Moscow considers its own sphere of influence. The EU, on the other hand, argues for the sovereign right of the EaP countries to choose their own path, but, at the same time, does not want to offer them a membership perspective. The deep crisis between the West and Russia is a dilemma, as the countries “in the middle” are often caught between the diverging interests of the two major actors. Which challenges will the countries of the Eastern Partnership face over the course of the next decade and what does their future look like?

The Upside and Limitations of Scenarios

Scenario thinking concepts offer a possibility to approach an uncertain future. Scenarios are supposed to allow the reader to contemplate different possible pathways and to think about plausible driving factors which might lead to certain outcomes. The best-case scenario is they will shine a light on possible solutions which are beneficial to all parties. The task of developing short narratives encourages the authors to think outside the box, to include unconventional assumptions, and to consider alternative perspectives.

Of course, it goes without saying that scenarios are unable to predict the future. Often, they might seem improbable, even undesirable to the members of the scenario team as well as to the reader. Nonetheless, sometimes the course of events goes in a way most people would have never considered as being remotely possible. Who would have thought even a few months before the elections that Volodymyr Zelenskiy or Donald Trump would become President in their respective countries? The Scenario Project is supposed to be an intellectual endeavor which should challenge its authors as well as its readers. It should not be considered as the end of a thought process but rather serve as a basis for discussion.

Building the Scenarios

The authors behind the Scenario Project are from all six Eastern Partnership countries, Russia, and Germany. During the Sixth Eastern European Academy for Social Democracy in Vienna, the group has concluded that the most important factors determining the future of the EaP region were the degree of cooperation in the international environment as well as the socio-political development of the six countries. Therefore, the two variables international cooperation (high or low) and socio-political development (positive or negative) ended up being the axes of a 2 x 2-scenario matrix. Hence, four scenarios were developed. In mixed groups, the authors then created a descriptive narrative including the agreed upon driving factors. Finally, the participants specified the events that would have to occur in order to lead from today's status quo to each scenario in 2030.

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Nikolaos Gavalakis



Scenario No. 1

Cohesion

Iuliia Kulakova, Polad Muradli,

Stanislav Makshakov, Nicolae Arnaut

The State of Affairs in 2030

Suffering under the confrontation of the main international actors, the Eastern Partnership countries rather focus on the development of their internal capacities. The Parliamentary elections that took place in the EaP countries between 2020-2024 brought a new political elite to power. Only Belarus continues to stick to its old political elite, still being ruled by the Lukashenko family. The countries are halfway through the route of democratic transition thanks to successful political and economic reforms. Civil society organizations are playing a significant role in the preservation of civil and democratic rights. However, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine are still not members of either the European Union (EU), or the North Atlantic Treaty

Organization (NATO), since Russia successfully used its political leverage in the international arena to stop the accession.

The Road to 2030

After failing to soften Russia's imperial ambitions in the Eastern Partnership region, the EU ultimately decided to reform their Eastern Neighborhood Policy. Under the revised policy, the EU acknowledged that any kind of geopolitical project in the region faces an instant and harsh reaction from the Russian side. Thus, the new EU policy refused to pronounce any geopolitical ambitions regarding the region, focusing instead on stability and security, and choosing the role of a technical assistant in the realm of institution building. The EU abandoned its path of further enlargement and took a rather subtle approach towards its Eastern neighbors by focusing on good governance practices within Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine. In the case of Armenia, it continued to provide increasing financial and technical support, without requiring Armenia to change its geopolitical orientation towards Russia.



Leaders of Azerbaijan and Belarus focused their attention on strengthening civil society in order to improve their image in the international political arena. Ultimately, the visible socio-economic achievements of the Eastern Partnership countries increasingly attracted the existing separatist regions, thus creating a conducive environment for the resolution of territorial conflicts.

New Leadership

Parliamentary elections which took place in the EaP countries in 2019-2020 brought into power a new generation of politicians that focused on fighting corruption, eradicating poverty, improving the educational system and providing affordable medical insurance. The Association Agreements provided a useful framework for Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine to improve their democratic institutions through successful reforms, and the EU's financial and technical support played a huge role in this process. Meanwhile, significant but "silent" changes in institution building have also been observed in Armenia. While retaining its geopolitical loyalty towards Russia, Nikol Pashinyan has embarked on a successful path towards getting rid of

"Soviet" elements within the internal administration. For the first time, these countries held transparent and democratic presidential elections. Enhanced Mobile Broadband has been significantly widespread in all EaP countries, which caused a rapid development of e-services and e-governance. This was particularly the case in Moldova, which made substantial improvements thanks to a new generation of young and dynamic politicians. The new mayor of Chisinau – Ion Popescu – was even awarded the price for "the fastest urban developing city with sustainable solutions."

Significant developments took place with regards to energy cooperation between the Eastern Partnership countries. Several agreements were signed between countries of the EaP that improved and renovated the current infrastructure such as the Trans-Anatolian Gas Pipeline (TANAP) pipeline, and even enabled new projects such as the Tbilisi-Supsa-Mikolajiv gas pipeline. Moreover, new capacities were established through a new reverse-flow system between Romania and Ukraine, as a means to achieve secure energy supplies to EaP countries in case of possible crises. Moreover, several bilateral and multi-




lateral trade agreements for different commercial sectors were signed between the EaP states, creating an alternative market for export products in case of trade barriers, imposed by Russia or harsh competition from the EU market. These agreements paved the ground for regional co-operation. This resulted in cross-country projects, such as “The Truth is in Wine” (Moldova-Georgia) and “Apple Paradise” (Ukraine-Moldova-Belarus) pooling their resources together to promote their local products. Goods exported from Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine countries to the EU finally managed to become competitive. The substantial yearly market growth significantly improved the economic conditions of these countries. In the meantime, the OECD Index Reports on Azerbaijan and Belarus demonstrated significant improvements in areas like the development of small and medium enterprises as well as the fight against petty corruption and monopolies. Through technical assistance by the EU, these two countries even managed to become members of the World Trade Organization. While Ukraine’s tourist sector experienced a boom, especially thanks to its great value for money health resorts, Belarus became the leading supplier of snails to the EU market. The liberalization of trade put all EaP countries on the

top 75 list by the magazine The Economist for conducive business environment.

The Rise of Civil Society

As a result of further democratization, the EaP countries have facilitated the development of civil society. The social impact of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and other civic movements have extremely increased during the last ten years. They became the driving forces for reforms. Most economic and social reforms were implemented by local authorities in cooperation with NGOs. Azerbaijan and Belarus introduced civic councils on the state and municipal level in order to increase the level of civic participation in the decision-making process. Gender policies, including gender budgeting, have become key priorities in Moldova and Ukraine. Due to the efforts of civil society, the rights of marginalized and vulnerable groups have been significantly improved in most of the EaP states.

In many countries, educational programs were set up that strived to include all historic identities thereby accom-




modating interests from all different groups of society. Instead of patronizing certain linguistic and political factions, the policy approaches focused on finding a common denominator thereby leading to social reconciliation. In Ukraine, for example, the support of a heterogeneous language environment helped to significantly decrease the level of polarization in society. Moreover, activities directed at fighting disinformation and improving the reliability of information on social media were successful in strengthening social cohesion.

The Continuation of Hybrid Conflicts

The tug of war between the EU and the US on one side, and Russia on the other, continued to influence the region. The diplomatic relations between the countries of the Eastern Partnership and Russia, still governed by Vladimir Putin, further deteriorated due to Russia's increased assertive behavior. The Russian government financed radically oriented organizations, such as "Armenia is all above", "Transnistrian patriots" and "Slavic Belarus" in order to destabilize and to stir social conflicts. Nevertheless, the EU supported reforms in these countries and assisted them financially and

technically. In 2022, Peter Schmidt took office in Germany, who continued to support the Nord Stream pipeline. Having been in operation for the third year now, the transit of gas through Ukraine has completely stopped. Consequently, the EU's interest in Russia's relationship with EaP countries diminished considerably.

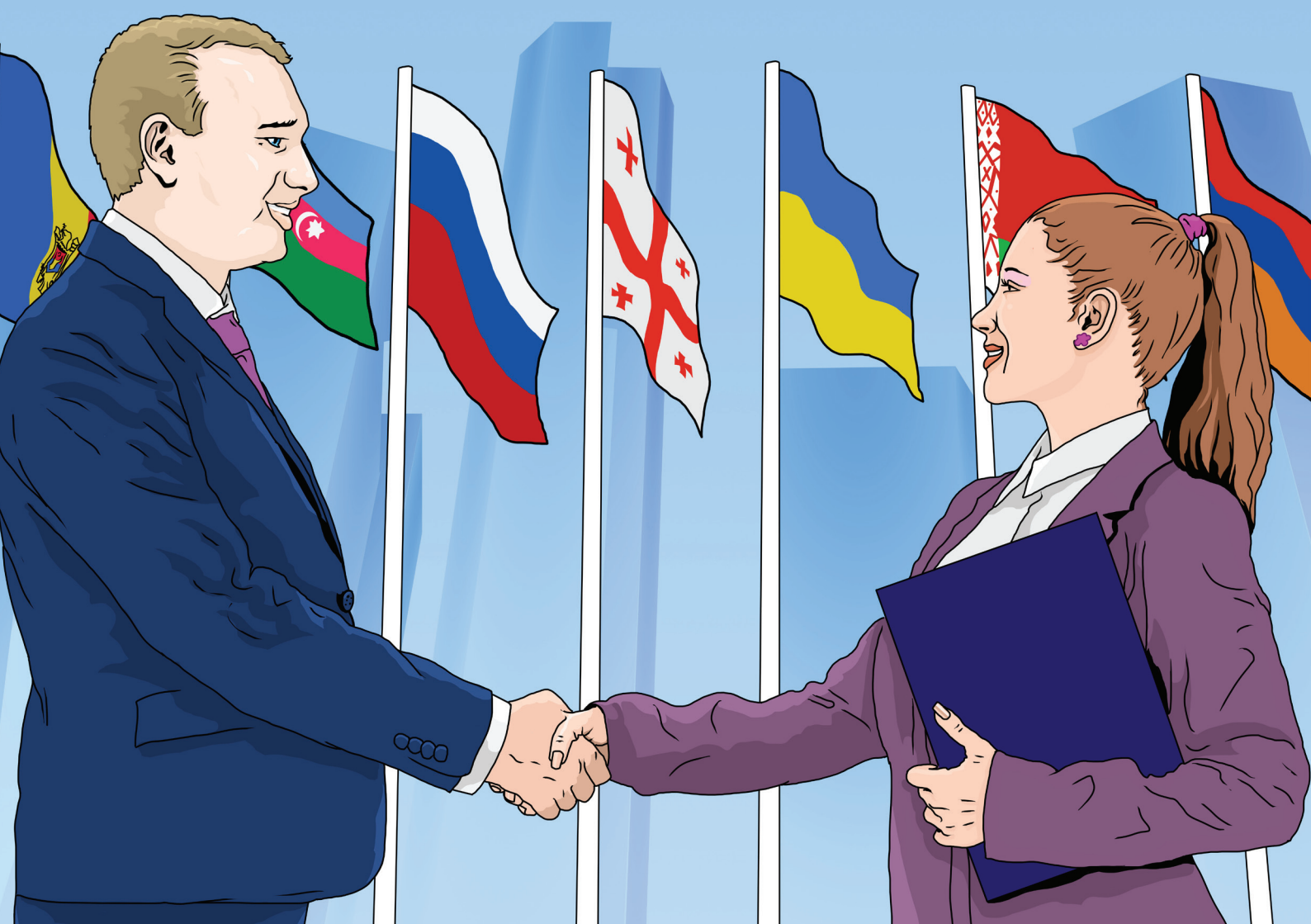
Russia strengthened its marine and managed to obtain full hegemony in the sea of Azov. To avoid escalation, the EU only condemned Russia's actions, yet did not send any military support. Since EaP countries did not get the support from the EU against Russian aggression, they appealed to the USA. However, due to a strong Russian lobby and the United States' focus on the Middle East and China, the response was rather reserved, as the US decided to provide only a limited number of defensive weapons. The three NATO-oriented countries, Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia, had to stop their Euro-Atlantic aspirations due to increasing political pressure from Russia and no significant support from the West. Although the EaP countries had previously cooperated with NATO several times in form of international military training exercises, they decided to put their rapprochement towards the West to



a halt. The USA continued its policy of unilateralism and gradually isolated itself from its Western European allies. The country left NATO in 2022 and began to pursue independent military policies.

In an effort to promote reconciliation between Ukraine and Russia, the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) decided to increase its missions in EaP countries. Unfortunately, the OSCE's consensus-based decision-making process caused a political gridlock that impeded the advancement of the peace-building process.

Russia's effort to destabilize the EaP countries led to an escalation of existing conflicts and to the rise of new ones in Belarus and Armenia. Russia increased its presence on the territories of frozen conflicts through so-called "peace-maker troops". The re-integration process failed and was put on ice. Conflict territories became a fertile ground for terrorism, human trafficking, and smuggling. By 2030, the situation in these territories has not been solved in any of the countries.



Scenario No. 2

Cooperation

*Maryna Tereschuk, Laura Simonyan,
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The State of Affairs in 2030

The EaP countries remain on the right path of democratic development. In Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova and Armenia the key role is now played by younger people, who gradually replace the “older generation” on all levels of government. They are successful in strengthening the rule of law and making institutions more inclusive, which makes it hard for authoritarian parties to gain political ground. In Azerbaijan and Belarus, President Lukashenko and President Aliyev remain in power and are starting to prepare their sons Nikolai Lukashenko and Heydar Aliyev for their succession. Nevertheless, the interest in economic cooperation with the EU continues to grow for both countries. Strong economic ties with the EU are forcing Baku and Minsk to initiate first democratic reforms.

Russia’s foreign policy has been changing significantly since the 2024 election that brought the new President, young democratic leader Daniil Krasnov, to power. Sanctions by the West and the change of leadership are forcing the Russian Federation to concentrate on solving internal issues, in particular the preservation of their own territorial integrity. As a result, Russian pressure on post-Soviet countries is slowly diminishing, and rebuilding relations with countries of the EaP has become one of Russia’s neighborhood policy priorities.

The Road to 2030

By 2030, several EaP countries have reformed their political system. Societies in all EaP countries have demonstrated a strong tendency to get involved in civil participation and to take on their civil responsibilities. The 2024 Parliamentary elections in Georgia resulted in a multi-party democracy and increased diversity in the political landscape. Emerging young leaders shaped the development of democracy in Armenia and Ukraine. Constitutional courts became indepen-



dent, impartial and powerful, and a parliamentary system was implemented in both countries. The growth of transparency in state governance played a crucial role in boosting the economy in Armenia, Georgia and Ukraine.

An Emerging Economic Hub

The Eastern Partnership business forum 2020 in Berlin had historic significance and a long-term impact for the economic development of the region. It paved the way for transforming the region into an economic hub that connects the East and the West. Another reason was the development of the *Belt and Road Initiative*, which generated foreign direct investments and helped to improve the infrastructure. Business to Business contacts especially in agriculture, have been strengthened among all EaP countries. In addition, Armenian, Georgian and Ukrainian governments have implemented measures against brain drain, such as job creation in the research and development sector, especially in the area of high-tech and engineering. The simplification of red tape created a competitive environment in new industries like the

start-up sector. As a result, many young professionals were attracted by emerging opportunities to develop their innovative ideas and started moving back to the EaP countries. Moreover, the governments sought to improve conditions in this area and promoted the development of their national IT industry. The “TUMO centre” in Yerevan has substantially extended its cooperation with the “TechnoPark” in Tbilisi. In Ukraine, the influence of oligarchic clans was significantly reduced in key spheres of the economy. The key changes were implemented through effective anti-corruption and anti-monopoly legislation such as the “Pure hands decree” in 2020 and the establishment of effective institutions. The support of the EU and US played a crucial advisory role in this process.

Tourism has become one of the strengths of Georgia's economy. In order to attract a higher number of foreign visitors, the country suggested simplifying travel laws for EaP nationals, so that travelers can travel with ID cards only. European, Ukrainian and Belarusian airlines have ramped up their offers of affordable flights to all EaP countries. Furthermore, energy and security cooperation



became one of the key priorities for the EaP countries, which is why Armenia and Georgia have started to develop self-sufficient and sustainable energy sources. Azerbaijan increased its investment in Georgia's energy sector. Moreover, ruling elites in Georgia and Armenia stopped conducting secret energy deals, which have been disadvantageous to consumers for a long time. Most importantly, energy dependence on Russian gas has decreased a lot in all EaP countries by 2030.

Social Reconciliation

Democratic forces in Armenia, Georgia and Ukraine started cooperating more intensively with the leading actors of civil society and managed to improve the human rights situation. Moreover, they jointly discussed a new approach towards Soviet legacy and the mistakes made during the state-building process after their countries' independence. This has significantly contributed to a more tolerant and inclusive political atmosphere in the region. The Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum has strengthened people-to-people contacts. This also enabled an open dialogue between young leaders and representatives of civil

society between Azerbaijan and Armenia. The exchanges within society have resulted in a higher acceptance of the LGBT community, which has always been a problematic issue in all EaP countries. Consequently, pride parades without any attacks from religious or far-right groups have become a norm. The open dialogue between governments and civil society organizations in Armenia, Georgia and Ukraine promoted cultural exchange and created a cooperative environment for socio-political debates. As a result of the shared effort from governmental and civil society institutions, the radicalization of young people and influence of far-right movements was significantly reduced.

Putting an End to Belligerence

The EaP countries decided to pursue a more neutral yet cooperative policy towards the EU, Russia, and the US, trying not to antagonize any of the key players in the region. Due to their Association Agreements and Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area with the EU, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine were able to substantially improve their economic performance, however,


without aiming for future EU membership. Meanwhile Armenia and Belarus have been performing well in the Eurasian Economic Union. Azerbaijan is trying to play the role of an independent regional actor in this regard. Furthermore, the country has invested in public infrastructure, such as the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway which has been further developed. Azerbaijan and Georgia have become a transit hub between Asia and the EU. An important role within this cooperation is played by China's *Belt and Road Initiative*.

The countries in the EaP region have renounced full membership of the two most significant security organizations of either NATO or the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). In fact, Georgia and Ukraine withdrew their initial request to join NATO. Furthermore, Armenia left the CSTO, which helped to gain Georgia's trust, and now these two countries have developed a strong security cooperation. Subsequently, Belarus remained the only country in the EaP region within the CSTO. In order to still be able to provide for their security, all countries nonetheless actively cooperate in various defense and security projects of one of the two organizations. At the same time, joint

projects were carried out within the framework of the OSCE. As a result of regional reconciliation and enhanced cooperation among the EaP countries, more OSCE offices were opened and the institution's international recognition surged.

In 2030, there are no armed conflicts anymore, and there is permanent peace in the EaP region. The countries have agreed not to let the conflicts escalate and have been working hard on managing them. Russia has diminished its influence and control on any of the regional conflicts due to its internal problems and the new President's foreign policy. Russia stopped supporting the proto-states "Donetsk People's Republic" and "Luhansk People's Republic" and withdrew its troops from the area. This led to a peaceful settlement in Eastern Ukraine. The Donbass region has been reintegrated into Ukraine with the guarantee of economic and political autonomy. However, Crimea remained under control of the Russian Federation.

As a result of the Pashinyan-Aliev agreement, the military incidents between Azerbaijan and Armenia have



stopped completely. The border between Armenia and Azerbaijan was opened and has created opportunities for people-to-people contacts. There are no more black-lists from the Azerbaijani government, and the

country introduced a visa-free regime for all EaP countries. This strengthened trust and created a foundation for peace and future cooperation in the Caucasus region.



Scenario No. 3

Cronyism

*Ivan Nagornyak, Darya Efimenko,
Vasili Kuchukhidze, Mahmud Musali*

The State of Affairs in 2030

The Eastern Partnership countries continue to be among the most corrupted, unequal and underdeveloped countries in Europe. As a result, they remain highly dependent on foreign actors. On one side, economically due to their substantial amount of foreign debts, as well as politically due to the great power's geopolitical interests in the region. The European integration of the region is gridlocked despite the EU's ambitious neighborhood policy and a less aggressive Russian foreign policy. On the other side, the EU continues to develop its own army due to the ambitious global strategy of the new President of the European Commission that is pushing for the EU's autonomy

from NATO. The EaP countries are an integral part of this initiative, as for them, cooperation with the European Army instead of NATO is perceived to be less antagonistic towards Russia.

In order to contain China's influence, the EU, Russia, and the US are cooperating closer and agree to demilitarize the EaP conflict zones and to establish the "Joint EaP Building Fund" to rebuild the damaged territories. This has created the preconditions for a peacebuilding process, however, in Moldova the process is obstructed by the political elites that keep misappropriating the funds. All the recent attempts to change the centralized political system in the EaP region failed, and corruption continues to prosper. Furthermore, societies in the EaP region continued to be polarized, especially due to growing social inequality. The lack of investments has strengthened the power of oligarchs and led to an increase of unemployment. The number of working emigrants has grown and continues to be one of the main sources of foreign currency inflow into the EaP countries' economy.

The Road to 2030

Salome Zurbishvili, the first woman elected as the President of Georgia, has failed to find a balance in foreign policy between Russia and the West and had to resign. She was especially criticized by her male political rivals, who used sexist rhetoric to attack her. After the 2020 Parliamentary elections in Georgia, the country was ruled by a minority government, which lacked the power and the means to undertake efficient and radical reforms. Thus, the government was only able to effectively govern for three years. Subsequently, a political stalemate followed that created a “Belgian situation” during which many attempts to form a stable government failed. In the 2024 Ukrainian presidential elections, two of the most powerful oligarchs decided to support Oksana Teleshchenko, a prominent political figure who used to be a business magnate in the nineties. Unfortunately, the democratic middle class and market-oriented business elites failed to unite and establish a joint political force. As a result, their fragmented political parties lost the 2024 parliamentary elections to Teleshchenko.

Therefore, the anti-corruption efforts unfortunately came to a halt, as the corrupt elites have yet again strengthened their grip on power. By 2030, neither Ukraine, Georgia, or Moldova have implemented the Association Agreements with the EU. Moreover, they postponed the full opening of their markets for the EU goods and services as it would have harmed the oligarchs’ economic interests.

The Transnistria Papers

As part of his strategy to reunite the country, the President of Moldova Nicolai Popescu called for increased public investments for Transnistria. However, in the beginning of 2028 the new “Transnistria papers” were published by Deutsche Welle, which shed light on a big money laundering scheme. It showed that the government’s investments were a pretense to extract more public resources for certain interest groups. The investments that were supposed to finance the reconciliation projects of the conflict zones were sent to fake accounts. In fact, it exposed the ties of the political elites with corrupt oligarchs and criminal syndicates that

even managed to embezzle foreign aid from the “Joint EaP Building Fund”. The situation became even worse after a journalist’s assassination in Kyiv. The latter used to be a member of a journalist’s group that was analyzing published documents and preparing a sensational article for the Ukrainian investigative project “Slidstvo.info”.


The “Tomos” of Autocephaly in Ukraine and the subsequent creation of an independent Orthodox Church set a contentious precedent. Religious institutions started to get gradually more instrumentalized by governments in the EaP region. Unfortunately, this also strengthened the religious institutions’ societal influence, which went hand in hand with increasing intolerance for religious minorities.

In Russia, Vladimir Putin refused to run for office in the 2030 Presidential elections and due to a compromise between the bureaucratic and financial elite, the investment banker Andrey Davidov won the elections as the candidate from the renewed ruling party “Prosperous Russia”. He privatized a substantial number of

public firms that had hitherto contributed to high levels of corruption and the misappropriation of funds. Furthermore, his working experience abroad and his personal connection to Western Europe prompted him to pursue a less confrontational course towards the EU and the EaP countries. Through his rapprochement he managed to gradually decrease Western sanctions, which in turn helped boosting the Russian economy.

High Inequality, Low Trust

The desire in the EaP region for a “strong leader”, who would effectively introduce reforms and bring back order, grew. That is why populism and the lack of ideological political parties continue to be an enormous problem for the political system of EaP countries. The economic model of the EaP region, dominated by a small elite of oligarchs, has further cemented the substantial socio-economic gap within society. Most countries of the EaP region have a level of social inequality that occupies top spots on most global inequality rankings. According to a report by Credite



Suisse, Ukraine is even among the top five unequal countries in the world. The unequal distribution of wealth led to a high increase of the middle class emigration and especially a huge brain drain among the youth.

Due to the EU's financial support for civil society, most NGOs have focused on monitoring the implementation of economic reforms, rather than protecting citizens' rights. However, reforms carried out by the governments did not lead to an improvement of living standards for most citizens. Consequently, many NGOs have lost support among the working class and the poor population. Most trade unions in the EaP countries lost almost all their influence or were dissolved as their corrupt leaders failed to take on the political and business elites and therefore lost their credibility. Most workers began to support political movements on the extreme right or the extreme left. The problem was particularly severe in Azerbaijan. After Aliyev's family lost power, the majority of the population supported the right-wing populist Mahmud Muradli from a pro-Russian political clan. All these circumstances

have led to a sharp deterioration of working conditions in EaP countries.

A Common Adversary

The successful realization of the *Belt and Road Initiative* helped cementing China's political economic influence in Asia and Russia. The Asian great power has managed to become the major economic power in the world in 2028 due to their increase of productivity. Especially, their cutting-edge technologies in the field of artificial intelligence, as well as their strategic investments in the EU and central Asian countries helped them to conquer the top spot. This has fostered cooperation between the USA, Russia and the EU with the aim of containing China. As a result of the growing threat from the East, the new, more cooperative government of Russia was inclined to ally with the Western powers in order to balance China. The pro-Western shift of the new Russian government enjoys huge public approval, as the abolition of Western sanctions helped boosting the Russian economy. Therefore, during the 2027 OSCE Summit, member-states agreed to withdraw all strategic offen-



sive weapons from the EaP region and decided on a military training moratorium in the region. Nevertheless, all EaP countries continue to be the objects of the great powers' geopolitical interests.



Scenario No. 4

Conflict

*Konstantin Schendzielorz, Mihail Popsoi,
Giga Chkadua, Armine Afitserian*

The State of Affairs in 2030

In light of the inherent instability and economic, social and political vulnerabilities of the Eastern Partnership countries, as well as its position between Russia and “the West”, the political situation continues to deteriorate. Russia has seized the opportunity to aggressively expand its influence in the region by occupying large parts of Ukrainian, Moldovan and Georgian territory. With the Western allies being divided and indecisive, the crisis keeps escalating, thereby further exacerbating the already dire economic and social conditions in these countries. This has created fertile ground for right-wing populist and authoritarian movements, which are embracing the opportunity to get to power. The political instability and uncertainty led to an increasing number of migrants seeking to enter the EU.

The Road to 2030

Due to the lacking response by the West during the Georgian-Russian war and the occupation of Donbas in 2014, Russia felt emboldened to extend its influence in Transnistria through the extensive use of “troll factories” and the spread of fake news on Twitter and Facebook. Moreover, tensions between the US and Russia increased especially thanks to the involvement of Russian hackers during the 2016 and 2020 U.S. Presidential elections. Furthermore, alleged manipulation of the elections in France, as well as the support of far-right and far-left populist parties in Europe contributed to a steady deterioration of EU-Russia relations. Information warfare and propaganda in Estonia and Georgia, combined with cyberattacks against the German Bundestag, further strained the relations. As EU assistance to these countries has been largely mismanaged and embezzled, it failed to increase the welfare of EaP citizens. Since the EU and NATO were unwilling to provide membership perspectives, the cooperation reached an impasse. This led to anti-western resentment and increased pro-Russian attitudes. Burning EU flags and scornful Macron caricatures were shown during frequent demonstrations.

Institutional Decline and Economic Turmoil

Due to bad governance and endemic corruption in the region, the countries turned out to be vulnerable to external shocks. Another major economic crisis in Europe in 2025 that was caused by an excessive debt to GDP ratio in Southern Europe resulted in massive capital flight from the EaP region, high interest rates and a devaluation of national currencies. This led to a weaker purchasing power, massive unemployment and labor emigration, resulting in growing social turmoil. Banks and capital markets in Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine collapsed after the main oligarchs left the country, sold their assets and deposited their money abroad, especially in Switzerland, post-Brexit UK and other tax havens. Social upheavals were further exacerbated by Russia that suspended the supply of natural gas, which led to an excessive increase of petroleum prices, spiraling into a price explosion on most goods and commodities.

Due to an increasingly aggressive Russian foreign policy and an economic recession, authoritarian and

right-wing populist movements capitalized on the instability of society. In the aftermath of the elections in 2024, Nadiya Savchenko, a leader of a Russian sponsored volunteer battalion called "Bratstvo", orchestrated a coup d'état and seized power in Ukraine. Fearing similar developments in their country, anti-Russian extremists took over power in highly contested elections in Georgia and Moldova, which were not recognized by the international community due to massive electoral fraud and a failure to meet basic electoral standards of the OSCE. As during the aftermath of the fall of the Soviet Union, interethnic and linguistic conflicts reignited with new force, thereby exacerbating the already existing divisions, especially in Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova. Due to their development toward authoritarianism, the EU suspended economic and political assistance towards these countries. In contrast, Belarus turned out to be the oasis of stability in the region as Lukashenko's successor, his son Nikolai, proved to be more skilled in balancing between Russia and the West. Furthermore, the country benefited from having an economy, which was less reliant on the European market.


Social Mayhem

Ukraine, dealing with the social effects of the armed conflict and an economic recession that had started well before the Maidan demonstrations in 2014, suffered the most from the impacts of various upheavals and revolts during which citizens demanded jobs, affordable goods and national sovereignty. The coup d'état weakened social cohesion and trust in public institutions even further. Through a lack of strong actors in civil society, the failure of the state to support and protect its citizens could not be stopped. The Ukrainian government further escalated the situation by means of force, leading to civil war-like situations in various border regions in the West. With the anti-Russian government in Georgia, being unable to stabilize the economic situation of the country, violent demonstrations appeared especially in smaller cities. Having felt left behind by pro-Western governments, increasingly more people took a pro-Russian stance leading to clashes with supporters and police forces of the pro-Western government. These clashes were intensified by extensive propaganda about the well-being of people in territories annexed by Russia. Given Moldova's heterogeneous soci-

ety, ethnic and linguistic differences came to the surface. Russia has been decisive in stoking inter-ethnic strife for decades, which ended up contributing to violent clashes between Russian speaking minorities and the Romanian speaking majority. Russian propaganda has been also successful in building on the staggering income inequality and general pauperization to advocate for the resurrection of the Soviet Empire grounded on promises of equality and economic prosperity.

The Paralysis of International Organizations

Apart from the already occupied Donbas and Crimea, Russia managed to capture Gagauzia by sending unofficial armed groups without insignia ("little green man"), consisting of armed local militias and the private security companies "Wagner" and "Chopin". The military groups took control of critical infrastructure such as airports, the main railway stations and military bases. As a reaction, Moldova and Ukraine declared complete martial law and limited civil liberties for an indefinite period. Both countries asked the international community for support and military aid. The United Nations Security



Council convened a session but due to Russia's veto and the abstention of the People's Republic of China it concluded without any resolution.

The Baltic states appealed to the "Responsibility to Protect" in an emergency meeting of the NATO Council, in which most members supported this initiative. However, the United States refused to participate in any military action. The US underlined their security focus in the Pacific as a result of their geopolitical focus on Asia and

the tension in the South China Sea. The US cited a lack of credible evidence of Russian intervention, thereby undermining the credibility of NATO as a joint defense organization. Without a fully developed European Army, the EU struggled to mobilize its military capabilities and failed to mitigate Russian aggression. Due to the unanimity principle, the OSCE was just as paralyzed as the United Nations Security Council. Therefore, neither international organization was willing or able to support the EaP countries.

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Notes

