

The European Union's Transformative Power in the Countries of the Eastern Partnership

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Politics in Central Europe (ISSN 1801-3422)

Vol. 18, No. 1

DOI: 10.2478/pce-2022-0006

Abstract: *The article examines the Eastern Partnership (EaP) as the initiative of the European Union (EU) through the prism of the constructivist concepts of soft power, normative power and transformative power. The research focuses on the assessment of the EU's transformative strength in Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus, based on the analysis of declared EU policy goals and instruments and the real results of political reforms in partner countries. The results of the study show that the EaP has little transformative impact and needs further revision. The analysis of empirical indicators in the field of political transformation of the EaP countries shows that since its inception, as well as after the signing of Association Agreements with three countries and the renewal of the European Neighborhood Policy in 2015, no radical changes have been made, and the EU's influence on the course of reforms has been insignificant. Institutional and geopolitical constraints and challenges that complicate the EU's ability to influence its eastern neighbours are addressed. The article analyses prospects for strengthening the effectiveness of the EaP in the context of its latest update after 2020.*

Keywords: *Eastern Partnership, normative power, transformative power, eastern neighbours, transformation.*

Introduction

Since the start of the Russia-Ukraine conflict in 2014, the Eastern Partnership (EaP) has become one of the EU's most discussed policy initiatives. Later, the interest in the programme intensified during the celebration of its 10th anniversary in 2019. At the heart of the discussion, there was the urgent need to update the ideas and mechanisms of the EaP in order to strengthen the EU's ability

to promote regional stability by promoting European values in the countries of Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus. However, the radical transformation of the EaP did not take place, but rather, on the contrary, the EU seems to have reduced its transformative ambitions in the region. The ongoing Russia-Ukraine conflict and growing tensions between the EU and Russia have been testing the EaP for strength and putting the EU in a position to choose between fundamental values and interests.

Since its launch in 2009, the EaP has reflected the EU's desire to exert normative influence on its neighbours in order to spread common European values and norms, e.g., democratic institutions, the rule of law, good governance, etc. The EU's transformation aspirations stemmed from its experience of enlargement in Central and Eastern Europe in 2004 and 2007. For post-communist Central and Eastern Europe in the 1990s and early 21st century, the EU's model had a magnetic power that led candidate countries to dramatic transformations, which the EU used successfully to stabilise the states of the former Yugoslavia (Middelaar 2021: 102). Moreover, this formula of transformative influence later became the basis of the European Neighborhood Policy, launched in 2003–2004, and the EaP as its eastern regional dimension since 2009. The main aim of this model was to influence the behaviour of the countries which wanted something from the EU. As Middelaar rightly points out, at that time, the EU did not realise or acted as if it did not realise how much this influence depended on the promise of membership which is the main prize available to the EU (Middelaar 2021: 103). In addition, the EU's policy in its eastern neighbourhood has clashed with Russia's policy towards neighbouring countries, its subversive information strategy and the spread of misinformation in Europe and neighbouring countries. The strength of the EU's influence also depends on the correspondence between the values of the EU and the values, aspirations and interests of neighbouring countries and their political elites. Permanent crises and internal political instability in the EaP countries have a negative impact on the EU's ability to act here in a normative manner. In addition, today, the EU's normative influence is not regarded in a neutral context but in a contradictory and turbulent regional and international environment.

There is a lot of literature on the analysis of the EU as a transformative power in the process of its enlargement in Central and Eastern Europe, which proves the important role of the EU in the process of democratic transformation of candidate countries (Grabbe 2004; Borzel – Risse 2009; Lavenex – Schimmelfennig 2009; Vakhudova 2009). At the same time, the question of the effectiveness of the EaP as a project to promote the transformation of neighbouring countries through normative socialisation and material incentives remains less explored. A number of authors draw attention to the contradiction between EU norms and values in the region, as well as to the influence of the Russian factor, etc. (Dimitrova – Dragneva 2009; Valiyeva 2016; Crombois 2019). Nevertheless, the

limits of the EU's transformative power in the eastern neighbourhood are not thoroughly examined.

The study of the transformative power of the EU in the EaP countries at the present stage is of particular interest for a number of reasons. Firstly, the signing of the Association Agreements with the three countries (Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine) in 2014 and the further liberalisation of the visa regime with them marked a new step in developing the EaP. Thus, it is necessary to determine to what extent these events affected its transformative power. Secondly, the Russia-Ukraine conflict and, more broadly, Russia's vivid desire to prevent further Europeanisation of Eastern Europe have created a new political reality in Europe; taking it into account, the EU can change (weaken or strengthen) its own transformative aspirations. Thirdly, the analysis of the EU's transformative power in the EaP is likely to develop further or refine the concepts through which the EU's foreign policy is most often explored, i.e., soft power, regulatory power, transformative power, etc.

The above ideas define the following structure of the article. In the first part, we describe the concept of transformative power based on its comparison and contrast with such concepts as soft power and normative power. The second part includes the analysis of the EaP documents, which reflect the EU's intention to transform its eastern neighbourhood, the goals and mechanisms of the programme and their evolution. In the same part, we analyse empirical data on the results of transformation processes in six EaP countries based on a comparison of several indices (Freedom House, World Justice Project and Transparency International) and determine the EU's role in these processes. In the third part, we consider three groups of factors that, in our opinion, affect the effectiveness of the EU's transformative power in the region: 1) conceptual and institutional constraints of EU policy; 2) internal challenges in partner countries; 3) Russia's influence as a counterweight to Europeanisation of the EU in the region.

Soft, normative and transformative power as basic approaches to studying the EU's policy towards its neighbours

In current studies of the EU's foreign policy, as well as the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) and the EaP, the main discussion centres on rationalist and constructivist approaches. Without going into their detailed description, which has been well done in the scientific literature (Valiyeva 2016: 13–17), we note that while constructivists consider ideas and values to be a major factor in EU foreign policy, rationalists argue that the EU is primarily concerned with maximising its interests, and, as a result, its behaviour is strategic. This discussion in the context of the EaP continues because the EU's policy towards Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus shows an evident fluctuation between the two leading approaches, which are due to its rational strategic interests and

the desire to spread fundamental values in the nearest neighbourhood. Thus, often the EU's behaviour cannot be placed in a purely constructivist or purely rationalist framework because, in practice, both interests and values can play some role in introducing certain EU initiatives.

At the same time, it should be emphasised that the promotion of European values and norms remains one of the most important dimensions of the EU's foreign policy and its international and regional activity. The EU's foreign policy stems from a certain system of values and principles that constitute the essence of European integration and define the EU's goals in the international arena. The dramatic historical experience of the world wars has strengthened Europe's shared belief that these principles are of absolute value in relations between European states and that they should be extended in the outside world. Thus, they are a fundamental part of the EU's foreign policy identity. Moreover, this quality of the EU and its strong experience of integration and cooperation distinguishes it from traditional state entities, which are guided primarily by national interests (Valiyeva 2016: 15).

During the 1990s, the EU's desire to extend its norms, ideas and values in third countries, combined with membership conditions, had a significant impact on the promotion of norms, rules and policies for candidate countries in Central and Eastern Europe wishing to join the EU. Therefore, a lot of scholars have recognised the EU as a soft power (a term used to refer to the EU's ability to influence other countries through nonmaterial factors such as ideology, culture and institutions) (Dimitrova et al. 2016: 8–9), a normative power (a term used to denote the EU's role in creating and spreading international norms) (Manners 2008: 23) and a transformative power (a term used to denote the EU's influence on candidate countries or neighbours) (Grabbe 2004: 36).

The original definition of soft power belongs to Joseph Nye. He interprets it as the ability of an international actor to achieve the desired results in foreign policy through its attractiveness and involvement, i.e., the ability to get 'others to want the outcomes that you want' using nonmaterial factors such as ideology, culture, etc. (Nye 1990: 153–171). Thus, when the EU promoted democracy and human rights principles adopted by many Central and Eastern European countries through the enlargement process, it exercised its soft power.

Manners, the author of the concept of normative power of the EU, believes that the EU is a normative power, which has an ideational nature, based on shared values and principles. Moreover, in recent years, according to the researcher, the EU has increasingly used normative power, striving to form its own international norms (Manners 2008: 23). The primary way the EU implements normative power is by building asymmetric relations with third countries, where the EU extends its norms and values based on the legitimacy of the EU as the bearer of these norms. As Manners says, 'the concept of normative power is an attempt to suggest that not only is the EU constructed on a norma-

tive basis, but importantly that this predisposes it to act in a normative way in world politics' (2002: 252). He argues that 'the most important factor shaping the international role of the EU is not what it does or what it says, but what it is' (2002: 252). Thus, an actor which is defined as a normative power does not aim to impose its own rules and regulations and does not use that power as an instrument of power, e.g., military or economic power. On the contrary, normative power primarily lies in the power of the norms themselves and their attractiveness to other subjects, and it is realised mainly through socialisation mechanisms.

The question of the relationship between soft power and normative power remains poorly studied. Manners points out that soft power is an empirical construction and a foreign policy instrument, while normative power is a purely theoretical concept based on social diffusion and normative practices. He also believes that Nye uses the term soft power to describe US foreign policy, making it unsuitable for studying the EU (2002: 236).

Finally, there is a wealth of literature on the EU as a transformative power (Grabbe 2004; Borzel – Risse 2009; Lavenex – Schimmelfennig 2009; Vakhudova 2009; Dimitrova – Dragneva 2009; Dimitrova – Pridham 2005), which is mainly based on its essential role in the process of democratic transformations of the candidate countries, as well as initiatives to promote reform in neighbouring countries through regulatory socialisation and material incentives. It is rightly argued that the EU's transformative power is explicitly or implicitly rooted in the model of European integration, through which the EU can influence states that would like to join or develop closer ties with the EU (Dimitrova – Pridham 2005: 91–95). Thus, the transformative power of the EU is limited to potential candidate countries and neighbours, while soft and normative power can be exercised further. However, the results of some studies suggest that outside of its eastern and southern neighbourhoods, the EU is not perceived as a normative power (Chaban – Knodt – Verdun 2016). The success of the EU as a transformative power depends on several conditions, such as the ability to include the prospect of membership for the country it is trying to influence, as well as the compliance of the EU's policies with the interests of the local elites (Borzel – Ademmer 2013: 606–607). In the case of candidate countries, the EU's transformative power may be limited by internal factors, and in the case of the EU's eastern neighbourhood might be influenced by Russia (Dimitrova – Dragneva 2009: 870).

Thus, for more than two decades after the fall of communism, the EU was able to make neighbouring European states want what it wanted, which Nye defines as soft power. The EU's focus on the norms of its relations with third countries made the EU unique among international actors, and that is why Manners calls it a normative power. For countries wishing to join the EU, the EU not only promoted international norms but also encouraged a wide range

of reforms in the spheres of democracy, market economy and good governance, which allowed it to be classified as a transformative power.

In this article, the transformative power of the EU in the EaP countries refers to the degree of its influence on the transition from undemocratic or hybrid political systems to the creation of true democracy and the rule of law, as well as from a command to a market economy in target countries using non-coercive means. Thus, the next part analyses the transformative power of the EaP through the prism of the stated EU goals, tools for achieving them and, most importantly, the results of political reforms in the target countries on the basis of empirical indicators. The authors do not consider the role of the EU in promoting economic transformation; it may be the subject of a separate study.

The Eastern Partnership of the European Union as a weak attempt to transform its eastern neighbourhood

After the Eastern enlargement, the EU, wishing to transform its external environment, has focused on its eastern and southern neighbours, driven by growing interdependence with those countries and new threats to the EU's security and prosperity. The ENP and its regional branches, including the EaP, have become a concrete embodiment of the EU's desire to change, i.e., democratise, Europeanise and stabilise its environment using norms, rules and values. It was openly stated by former European Commissioner for Enlargement and Neighbourhood Policy Štefan Füle, who explained the overall goal of the EU concerning its eastern neighbours: 'It is about finishing the transformation of the European continent' (Dempsey 2013).

The EaP has paved the way for the gradual and partial integration of partner countries with the EU, based on their progress with internal reforms. The innovation of its bilateral dimension was that all eastern neighbours got opportunities for the development of the relations, like those that the EU previously offered to Ukraine, i.e., Association Agreements, Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas, visa liberalisation, integrated institutional development programmes, etc. (European Commission 2008). The instruments provided by the multilateral dimension, e.g., a summit, Council of Ministers, thematic platforms, working panels, flagship initiatives, Civil Society Forum, Euronest, etc.) have become entirely new for the region (European Commission 2008).

The EaP aims to promote transformation processes in its member countries in order to spread EU norms and values, such as commitment to the rule of law, respect for human rights, good governance, approximation of national legislation to the rules of the EU single market. Whether defined as soft, normative or transformative power, the EU's influence is based on a complex combination of its economic attractiveness, interdependence, promotion of international norms and the promise of closer integration, attractive to some of its eastern

neighbours, e.g., Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine. Ultimately, the influence of the EU also depends on its actual policy and ability to implement it effectively.

From the very beginning, the EaP has left open the question of what should happen if any partner country implements the envisaged reform programme and becomes Europeanised and compatible with the EU. As a result, the EaP is rightly described as a failed attempt at a bureaucratic answer to a political question (Wilson 2017). The political question is where the final borders of a united Europe should be drawn. Therefore, the EaP is designed to provide a projection of the EU normative model in the eastern neighbourhood while keeping silent about the possibility of future enlargement. That is why the problem of the EU's eastern border in the EaP seems to have been avoided.

Since the founding summit of the EaP on 7th May 2009, in Prague, the EU has reviewed some of its instruments as part of the ENP reforms initiated by the European Commission's joint Communication, i.e., *A New Response to a Changing Neighbourhood* on 25th May 2011 (European Commission 2011) and *The Review of the European Neighbourhood Policy* on 18th November 2015 (European Commission 2015), as well as by the results of six EaP summits. In particular, in 2011, a clear 'more for more' principle was established to show interdependence between the EU's assistance and adopted reforms in partner countries (European Commission 2011). Moreover, partnerships with neighbouring societies were strengthened, and support for non-governmental organisations in partner countries was stepped up (European Commission 2011). At the same time, since 2015, there has been a marked shift in emphasis on the stabilisation and differentiation of the eastern neighbourhood and a certain departure from the value-oriented normative approach focused on its democratic transformation (European Commission 2015). In this context, several researchers speak about the geopoliticisation of the EaP, the formation of a more pragmatic view of the EU on its eastern neighbourhood and the reduction of its transformative ambitions in the region (Valiyeva 2016, Crombois 2019).

In 2015, the ambitions initially stated in the EaP yielded mixed results and underwent changes. In the Review of the ENP on 18th November 2015, the EU reviewed not only certain instruments of the EaP but also the previously accepted assumptions about its attractiveness to its neighbours in the east, focusing more on stabilisation and differentiation than on reforms in the eastern neighbourhood (European Commission 2015). This document reflects the EU's tendency to move towards a real policy to the detriment of a universal approach based on its own values (Crombois 2019: 93) and the transition from normative rhetoric to the priority of stabilisation (Valiyeva 2016: 20). The changed approach to the neighbourhood, including the EaP, shifts the focus from promoting democracy to stabilisation as a key political priority of the renewed ENP. The EU document also recognises that not all partners seek to adhere to its rules and standards, so there is a need to consider each country's wishes regarding the nature and

dynamics of its relations with the EU. If reforms continue, a differentiated approach combined with the 'more for more' principle will enable reform-oriented partners, i.e., Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine, to benefit from enhanced financial and technical assistance. However, in the case of Armenia, Azerbaijan or Belarus, which are seeking to avoid political and regulatory conditions in political dialogue with the EU, the principle of differentiation may undermine the EU's image as a normative power, and the EaP may lose its relevance as a tool for a democratic transformation of the partner countries.

In practice, these new EU approaches can be traced to the preparation and signing of less ambitious, compared to the Association Agreements, Partnership Agreements with Armenia and Azerbaijan, and stabilisation of relations with Belarus from 2016 until the presidential elections on 9th August 2020. Despite Armenia joining the Eurasian Economic Union in October 2015, the EU began negotiations with it on a Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement, which was signed at the EaP Summit in Brussels in November 2017. The trade part of the Partnership Agreement, unlike the Association Agreements, does not contain their most important component, i.e., the free trade zone, and is adapted to Armenia's obligations under the Eurasian Economic Union (Sydoruk – Tyshchenko 2018: 219). In February 2017, the EU began the negotiation process on a Comprehensive and Extended Partnership Agreement with Azerbaijan (Sydoruk – Tyshchenko 2018: 219).

Approved at the EaP Summit in Brussels in November 2017, the 20 Deliverables for 2020 are primarily aimed at increasing the stability of the region, its economic development, strengthening people-to-people contacts, improving infrastructure, promoting energy cooperation and collaboration at the civil society level, etc. (Sydoruk – Tyshchenko 2018: 222). The fulfillment of these tasks certainly helps strengthen ties between eastern neighbours and the EU, but they reaffirm that the latter is increasingly focused on practical cooperation with partner countries and avoids strategically and politically ambitious tasks.

The Joint Communication of the European Commission *Eastern Partnership policy beyond 2020: Reinforcing Resilience – an Eastern Partnership that delivers for all*, published on 18 March 2020 (European Commission 2020), and Joint Staff Working Document *Recovery, resilience, and reform: post-2020 Eastern Partnership priorities*, issued on 2 July 2021 (European Commission 2021) confirm the strengthening of the resilience as the overall policy framework of the EaP and identify its five key long-term goals, i.e., resilient, sustainable and integrated economies; accountable institutions, the rule of law and security; environmental and climate resilience; digital transformation; fair and inclusive societies. At the same time, the Communication of the European Commission from 2020 emphasises:

'The EaP will continue to aim to build an area of democracy, prosperity, stability, and increased cooperation based on common values. The EU has a strategic

interest in advancing its global leadership on human rights and democracy in external action, including in relation to the EaP. Respect for human rights is an essential element of resilient, inclusive and democratic societies. Focus will therefore continue to be on outstanding issues from the current objectives, notably the rule of law, protection of human rights, the fight against corruption and discrimination, the role of an independent media and civil society and promotion of gender equality' (European Commission 2020).

In this way, Brussels reaffirms its transformative ambitions in the region, desiring to continue contributing to the continuation of political reforms in the target countries. Moreover, the European Commission declares its desire to develop an incentive-based approach, clearer guidance on specific reform priorities with objective, accurate and detailed benchmarks. First and foremost, it provides ways to better assess the quality of judicial reform and facilitates progress in ensuring the rule of law and strengthening EU support in the fight against corruption (European Commission 2020).

After a brief presentation of the content and mechanisms of the initiative, it is sensible to analyse the real results of this policy. Despite the significant deepening of political and economic cooperation, i.e., the signing of the Association Agreements with three (Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine) of six partners in 2014, the launch of the EaP did not achieve the stated goals, especially in terms of its transformative impact. In order to assess how successful the EU's transformation efforts have been, it is necessary to analyse, first of all, its progress in promoting the principles of democracy and human rights and bringing national legislation closer to European standards.

An analysis of Freedom House's annual Transition Reports over a twelve-year period since the EaP launch (2009–2020) for the six participating countries (see Table 1) shows that their democracy index has remained at the same level, while in some countries, such as Azerbaijan and Ukraine, it has even decreased

Table 1: Index of democracy in the EaP countries in 2009–2020.

Country	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Azerbaijan	6.25	6.39	6.46	6.57	6.64	6.68	6.75	6.86	6.93	6.93	6.93	6.86
Belarus	6.57	6.57	6.57	6.68	6.71	6.71	6.71	6.64	6.61	6.61	6.61	6.61
Armenia	5.39	5.39	5.43	5.39	5.36	5.36	5.36	5.36	5.39	5.43	5.07	5
Georgia	4.93	4.93	4.86	4.82	4.75	4.68	4.64	4.61	4.61	4.68	4.71	4.75
Moldova	5.07	5.14	4.96	4.89	4.82	4.86	4.86	4.89	4.93	4.93	4.96	4.89
Ukraine	4.39	4.39	4.61	4.82	4.86	4.93	4.75	4.68	4.61	4.64	4.64	4.61

Source: *Nations in Transit. Comparative and Historical Data Files*. All Data – Nations in Transit, 2005–2020. Available at: <https://freedomhouse.org/report/nations-transit>

(the scale from one to seven, where one is the highest index and seven is the lowest one). Countries, e.g., Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine that had hybrid regimes twelve years ago, have remained so. During this time, they all have undergone a rapid political change, but their political systems have not changed. Azerbaijan and Belarus have entrenched consolidated authoritarian regimes throughout this period, while Armenia has not changed its semi-consolidated authoritarian regime.

Other indices show similar dynamics. The Rule of Law Index, developed by the World Justice Project and aimed to measure adherence to the rule of law in the world from 2014 to 2021 (earlier it was not assessed), shows that the indicators for four EaP countries during this period fluctuated within a few points with a slight trend of improvement in Ukraine and Moldova and some deterioration in Belarus (see Table 2). On the scale, a score less than 0.40 indicates worse compliance with the rule of law, whereas more than 0.81 shows better adherence to the rule of law.

Table 2: Rule of Law Index in the EaP countries in 2014-2021

Country	2014	2015	2016	2017	2019	2020	2021
Azerbaijan	The evaluation was not performed						
Belarus	0.51	0.53	0.54	0.51	0.52	0.51	0.48
Armenia	The evaluation was not performed						
Georgia	0.60	0.65	0.65	0.61	0.61	0.6	0.61
Moldova	0.45	0.48	0.49	0.49	0.49	0.5	0.51
Ukraine	0.47	0.48	0.49	0.50	0.50	0.51	0.51

Source: World Justice Project. Rule of Law Index. Available at: <https://worldjusticeproject.org/rule-of-law-index/country/2021>.

The most credible indicator of the quality of anti-corruption reforms is the Corruption Perceptions Index, an annual ranking of countries in the world compiled by Transparency International on a scale from 100 (with no corruption) to 0 (highly corrupt). The dynamics of this index for most EaP countries from 2012 to 2020 (earlier a different assessment methodology was used) also fluctuated within a few points, except for significant improvements in Belarus since 2015 and Armenia since 2019 (see Table 3).

Table 3: Corruption Perceptions Index in the EaP countries in 2012-2020

Country	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Azerbaijan	27	28	29	29	30	31	25	30	30
Belarus	31	29	31	32	40	44	44	45	47
Armenia	34	36	37	35	33	35	35	42	49
Georgia	52	49	52	52	57	56	58	56	56
Moldova	36	35	35	33	30	31	31	32	34
Ukraine	26	25	26	27	29	30	32	30	33

Source: Transparency International. Corruption Perceptions Index. Available at: <https://www.transparency.org/en/countries>.

It is clear that anti-corruption policy has been more successful in recent years in countries, e.g., Armenia and Belarus, that are not associate partners of the EU. Moreover, the latter still does not have a basic agreement with the EU and withdrew from the EaP in 2021. The introduction of an electronic declaration system for the assets of government officials and the creation of new anti-corruption bodies in Ukraine, which are rightly related to the country's achievements in fulfilling its obligations to the EU, has slightly improved Ukraine's performance after 2014; the country moved from 26th to 32nd place in the 2014–2018 period, then dropped to 30th place in 2019, and rose to 33rd place in the ranking in 2020. Despite similar efforts, Moldova had a lower index (34th place) in 2020 compared to its 36th place in 2012.

Thus, the analysis of empirical indicators in the field of political transformation of the EaP countries shows that since its launch, as well as after the signing of the Association Agreements and renewal of the ENP in 2015, no radical changes have taken place, except for the 'jump' of Armenia in its anti-corruption policy. This example, as well as the previous experience of Georgia, which is significantly ahead of the rest of the countries in terms of the rule of law and anti-corruption activities, shows that progress in reforms is mainly achieved due to internal factors, i.e., political motivation of elites, and the EU's transformative power has a barely noticeable positive effect (Ukraine and Moldova). The link between the EaP and internal transformation in the target countries remains weak and unclear.

Although the promotion of democratisation is included in the priority objectives of the ENP, and its importance has been later further emphasised in the EaP, the ENP allocates only 30 % of its funding for this purpose (Shapovalova – Youngs 2012). For all states, including the EU's associate partners, there remain the same threatening problems, e.g., to fight against corruption, ensure judicial independence and the rule of law, stop excessive state monitoring of the activi-

ties of non-governmental organisations, etc. Even the legal approximation of associate partners' legislation to the single market rules required by the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area parts of the Association Agreements has proved to be more difficult than expected due to the lack of funding needed to mitigate the inevitable costs (Delcour – Wolczuk, 2013).

On the other hand, the EU's desire to expand its economic and political influence in the region through the signing of Association Agreements and establishing the free trade zones has met resistance from Russia, which has seen such policies as interfering in its traditional sphere of influence. This situation has created new dividing lines as partner countries had to choose between two integration projects and centres of power. Thus, the EaP has also failed to ensure stability and security in the region, and the Russia-Ukraine conflict clearly illustrates it.

More than ten years of experience in the EaP's policy implementation show that the EU has not yet managed to seriously increase its influence in the region of Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus. In recent years, the range of instruments of the EaP has expanded many times, but despite the efforts, the real influence of the EU on the transformation processes in its partner countries remains insignificant. It is clearly illustrated by the example of Ukraine, in the case of which the EU's policy has an important but not transformative impact. In the next part of the article, we analyse why the EU's efforts to transform the Eastern Partners have not yielded obvious positive results.

Institutional and geopolitical constraints of the European Union's transformative power in the Eastern Partnership

Three groups of reasons hinder the EU's regulatory influence and hamper democratic transformations in partner countries: a) conceptual and institutional constraints on EU policy towards the eastern neighbours (lack of membership prospects, weak incentives, etc.); b) internal challenges for the sustainable transformation of the EaP countries (selfish interests of elites, systemic corruption, inefficient state institutions, etc.); c) Russia's influence, which counterbalances the Europeanisation of the EU in the region.

The main weakness of the EaP, which is already well described in academic publications (Valiyeva 2016, Wilson 2017), is the lack of support in the form of membership prospects and generally weak incentives offered by the EU to partner countries. Indeed, market access or visa-free travel offered in the EaP as an alternative to membership is important but not vital. That is why the European magnet has less attraction for its eastern neighbours than for the candidate countries.

Incentives, offered by the EU in the framework of the EaP, are traditionally formulated as three M's, i.e., money, markets, and mobility (Kasciūnas et al. 2014: 15). They are proposed in Association Agreements, which set out guide-

lines for political and economic reforms aimed at making countries conform to EU rules and standards. These incentives include EU financial assistance for reforms; access to the EU common market (its part), which is envisaged within the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area and is legally and technically coordinated; and visa liberalisation. The EaP and enlargement policy are based on conditionality (to get an 'x', you have to do a 'y'), but its main incentives, e.g., free trade and free movement of the population, are not as attractive as full EU membership. Moreover, the EaP's financial assistance is insufficient to offset the costs of comprehensive reforms. Schimmelfennig and Scholtz believe that due to the lack of membership prospects, the effect of conditionality in the ENP is doomed to failure (Schimmelfennig – Scholtz 2007: 3).

Association Agreements with Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine are also based on conditionality, but the costs of implementing the necessary reforms remain high. It is therefore unclear how these Agreements alone can contribute to the required legislative and practical changes. The Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas promise the eastern neighbours access to the EU's internal market. The offer is certainly generous but somewhat vague, distant and expensive in terms of assessing short- and medium-term prospects for neighbours. The EU's strategy is based on the benefits of neighbouring countries from access to the EU's internal market, but this access depends on compliance with the rules and standards of the internal market. Therefore, the EU proposes that neighbouring countries adopt a significant part of the *acquis*, which regulates the activity of the internal market (about 80 %). In the case of the EaP countries, such a proposal presents a considerable challenge not only due to the lack of legal and administrative capacity to adopt and implement the *acquis* and the need to change established business practices but also because of the inevitably considerable expenses. The countries of Central and Eastern Europe that joined the EU incurred such expenses for membership benefits (including access to EU structural funds). The EaP does not provide such motivation. Most of the EU's financial assistance to partner countries is loans, but not grants. For example, grants for Ukraine account for only 6 % of total EU assistance (Kobzova 2017). The EU's model of integration without membership proposed in the framework of the EaP does not have the tools to stimulate truly profound reforms.

Uncertainties of Eastern partners about the membership prospects will sooner or later clear up, at least for pro-European Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia. Nevertheless, there is another weakness of the EU's transformative power in the EaP, i.e., EU attractiveness is passive and, as such, it does not provide opportunities for active influence. That is why the questions remain as to how to influence governments insensitive to European attraction or how to act if a movement caused by European magnetism leads to opposition from other players, instability or conflict (as in the case of the Russia-Ukraine conflict). Such cases require a completely different set of foreign policy instruments.

Analysing the role of the EU in the internal reform of Central and Eastern Europe, Vakhudova divides the levers of EU influence on the internal life of candidate countries into passive and active. The researcher defines passive levers as the power of gravity that the EU exerts on the domestic political life of candidate countries. The components of these levers are the enormous political and economic benefits of membership, the threatening loss of membership and the EU's harsh treatment of non-EU countries, e.g., in trade negotiations, protecting the EU producer, the EU market, etc. However, the researcher proves that between 1989 and 1994 the EU had little influence on the political change of candidate countries. The EU's passive levers made liberal reform strategies in Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic stronger but failed to prevent illiberal strategies from gaining and exploiting power in Romania, Bulgaria and Slovakia. Only after the EU 'moved towards enlargement', i.e., began to use active levers, i.e., targeted policy towards candidate countries, its influence on the course of internal transformations increased disproportionately (Vakhudova 2009: 20–21). Three characteristics of active levers make them particularly powerful, i.e., asymmetric interdependence (candidates are weak), coercion (rigid but fair), conditionality (to get an 'x', you have to do a 'y'). Therefore, candidate countries voluntarily agreed to comply with extensive internal requirements and then overcome tedious verification procedures to join the EU (Vakhudova 2009: 21). This strategy has appeared to be successful.

The EaP does not provide the use of active levers of the EU's influence on the domestic political life of neighbouring countries. The lack of prospects of EU membership in the foreseeable future eliminates the potential benefits from using active EU levers (disciplines of the pre-accession process). Recognition of the EU membership prospect for a certain country allows the pre-accession process to start, thus allowing the use of active levers of EU influence on the internal life of candidate countries, such as coercion, strict conditionality and constant monitoring of progress on internal change. The EaP does not allow the EU to shape the reform agenda the way it is in candidate countries during the pre-accession period. Only asymmetric relations between the candidate country and the EU give the latter the opportunity to influence domestic policy-making.

In our opinion, the high efficiency of the EU's transformative power, demonstrated during the enlargement policy in Central and Eastern Europe, is explained by the fact that it was not only soft and normative (passive) but also included tools of coercion (active influence) by using the levers of enlargement policy. A good combination of them provided the desired result.

Instead of a clear membership perspective that more securely binds candidate countries to the EU, the EaP proposes a vague concept of rapprochement with partner countries, which does not impose serious commitments on them. In the absence of a proper set of tools to stimulate democratisation, value transformation is perceived by the political elites of hybrid and authoritarian

partner countries as a significant threat to their power (Valiyeva 2016: 21). The reluctance of the political elites of the EaP countries to carry out reforms that threaten their power and existence (the fight against corruption, the rule of law, the independence of the judiciary, etc.) remains one of the biggest obstacles to their democratic transformation. After all, the success or failure of reforms largely depends on the transformative potential of partner countries, in particular the political will of the ruling elites, the level of development of civil society, etc. In this context, the EU's six partner countries remain weak states. Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine have made progress in ensuring free elections, developing many elements of civil society and implementing European norms and standards in a number of areas, but the proper implementation of these norms and ensuring sustainability and irreversibility of change remain a challenge. Most of the problems that hinder effective reforms are systemic corruption, lack of respect for the rule of law and inefficient state institutions in partner countries (Sydoruk – Tyshchenko 2018: 224–231).

Finally, a significant obstacle for the EU in terms of rapprochement with the EaP countries is the Russian factor, the importance of which the EU seems to have initially underestimated. The format of the EaP was deliberately aimed at shifting the main focus of the dialogue with neighbouring countries from political issues related to the prospect of membership in the EU to the issues of gradual rapprochement and integration in certain practical sectors. Russia, however, being hostile from the beginning, started looking for ways to stop the possible European drift of the common neighbourhood countries (this is indicated by the creation of the Eurasian Economic Union in 2015). The EU does not seem to have taken account of Russia's geopolitical concerns about its initiative and the strong leverage it has in the region. Back then, the EU sought to avoid rivalry with Russia, which can be illustrated by the eloquent opinion of Executive Secretary-General of the European External Action Service Pierre Vimont on Brussels' strategies in the eastern neighbourhood: 'Hence there is a permanent weakness in most of the strategies developed by the European Union's institutions, lying precisely in the fact that they are not real strategies, since there is no significant geopolitical analysis. Therefore the Eastern Partnership carefully avoids the issue of relations with Russia... Procedures are put forward (association agreement monitoring), principles are delivered (differentiation), instruments are developed (simplified action plans), but all of this provides the feeling of a political and strategic vacuum from which all power dynamics, antagonisms, and lines of division between nations have been sucked out' (Middelaar 2021: 109).

The movement towards closer ties between the EU and some partner countries, i.e., preparation of Association Agreements with Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia, has provoked resistance and opposition from Russia, so the region has become an arena for clashes between the two centres of power. The Russia-

-Ukraine conflict pertains to Ukraine's place in the continental system, as well as whether it will ever become a member of the EU. In 2013, the choice between the two centres of gravity was of the highest political importance for Ukraine. Just before the scheduled date for the signing of the Association Agreement at the EaP summit in Vilnius, the European regulatory power failed to attract Ukraine into its sphere. The power of opposition used by Moscow was too strong. The Kremlin played a geopolitical game, and the EU, remaining only a normative power and maintaining its geopolitical virtue, had nothing to oppose it (Middelaar 2021: 116).

With the beginning of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, the need to supplement the European normative power in the eastern neighbourhood with a policy of broader tools, e.g., sanctions, rhetoric and actions, has become obvious. For the European Union, this conflict has become one of the main factors in its geopolitical awakening and first steps towards clearer awareness of its own interests as political unity and its ability to defend them. Confrontation with the most serious opponent on the European continent led to the fact that the EU's political base outweighed economic interests, and the EU as a normative power had to recognise its existence as a geopolitical power capable of active diplomacy and pressure (Middelaar 2021: 114–117). Despite significant differences between the governments of individual European states on the issue of sanctions against Russia, their introduction and consistent continuation testifies to the unanimity of the view of the EU states on the fundamental nature of the threat and the strategic importance of a united front.

According to some researchers, the growing geopoliticisation of the EU's relations with Eastern partners may force the EU to reduce its transformative ambitions, which will weaken its role in the eastern neighbourhood and question the fundamental aspect of its foreign policy identity that distinguishes it from other actors and makes it a post-Westphalian political entity, i.e., its normative and transformative power (Crombois 2019: 89). Given the doubts about the EU's desire to continue to promote reforms in partner countries after the beginning of the Russia-Ukraine conflict and the renewal of the ENP in 2015 (European Commission 2015), the EU should reaffirm its transformative ambitions in the Eastern Neighbourhood. To maintain its position as a regulatory and transformative power and to avoid criticism for pursuing strategic interests, the EU must find the right balance between values and interests, i.e., its own desire to stabilise the region through exports of the European normative model and its geopolitical rivalry with Russia. From this perspective, we share the opinion of Youngs and Pishchikova that the EU can simultaneously act as a geopolitical power and remain committed to its based on norms project of transformation of the eastern neighbourhood. However, to ensure a sustainable balance between the two alternatives, the EU must be strategically consistent (Youngs – Pishchikova 2013).

From this perspective, in academic debates and in political discourse, there exist three opposing views on the prospects of the EaP, which have been widely discussed since the beginning of the Russia-Ukraine conflict. A number of researchers (Wilson 2017, Kobzova 2017), as well as politicians, mainly from the new EU member states, support further deeper involvement of the EU in Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus despite Russian resistance and do not rule out the membership prospect for associated EU partners, which is considered the main condition for an effective Eastern policy. On the other hand, there is a group of member states, mainly southern, which oppose the strengthening of the EU's policy in the region, stressing the need to focus attention on the Mediterranean. There is another view that the EaP policy has upset the balance of power in Eastern Europe, so that Russia has been forced to defend itself and take steps to restore it. For example, Mearsheimer, a well-known representative of neorealism, argues that the United States and its European allies, who have pursued overly active policies in the region, are primarily responsible for the crisis in Ukraine, not Russia. Mearsheimer underlines that 'the West had been moving into Russia's backyard and threatening its core strategic interests' (Mearsheimer 2014). According to the researcher, the conflict proves that 'U.S. and European leaders blundered in attempting to turn Ukraine into a Western stronghold on Russia's border. Now that the consequences have been laid bare, it would be an even greater mistake to continue this misbegotten policy' (Mearsheimer 2014). Consequently, the only solution is to restore the balance of power, recognise Russia's influence and suspend NATO and EU initiatives in the region (Mearsheimer 2014).

In our opinion, in recent decades, the strategy of the EU's eastern policy, i.e., not to create problems in relations with Russia, has appeared unsuccessful. Despite the EU's reluctance to clash with Russia, a confrontation with it is inevitable if the EU really seeks to promote democratisation, modernisation and the gradual integration of Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus, as it directly contradicts Russia's interests in the region. The EU must not leave the region and stop supporting those Western-oriented states. The EU has already won in many ways in the area, e.g., Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine are trying to avoid Moscow's embrace and seek further rapprochement with Brussels. However, this 'victory' also means more responsibility. The EU, looking for potential compromises with Russia, must be ready to confront it and provide assistance to the EaP countries if necessary (Kobzova 2017). Instead, the refusal of the EU to support the transformation of the eastern neighbourhood will untie Russia's hands and will not guarantee the restoration of stability in the region, and, as the situation in Ukraine shows, it could even pose more threats to the EU. Leaving Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia alone will lead to new aggressive attempts by Russia to limit their sovereignty. West-oriented citizens of these states will resist in response, which could lead to even more destabilisation. In

addition, such developments will not only weaken the EU's role in the eastern neighbourhood but will also undermine its normative power as the basis of its foreign policy.

Conclusions

Thus, the EaP, as a regional branch of the European Neighbourhood Policy, was launched as a tool to promote the transformation of Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus. However, its initiators did not consider the limitations of the EU's transformative power without the prospect of membership, significant internal obstacles to reforms in partner countries, the geopolitical situation in the region and the power of Russian influence. The EU's inability to offer strong incentives to deliver real democratic reforms in partner countries, as well as the lack of effective geopolitical levers to counter Russia's presence in the region, have weakened the EU's approach. The signing of the Association Agreements with Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine has not had a drastic impact on the dynamics of political reforms in the target countries, and the transformative power of the EaP continues to have a slight positive effect or is neutral.

After the beginning of the Russia-Ukraine conflict and the related revision of the ENP in 2015, the EU has focused on stabilising and differentiating countries in the region. However, assumptions about a possible reduction in the EU's transformative ambitions are refuted by the European Commission's Communications published in 2020 and 2021, which confirmed the EU's desire to continue promoting political and economic reforms in partner countries. If the EU is genuinely interested in it, in that case, the core of the renewed EaP's activity should be to strengthen incentives, especially for associate partners, to recognise the potential for EU membership, and to set more explicit requirements for specific reform priorities and objectives, as well as precise and detailed benchmarks. At the same time, the EU must also realise itself as a geopolitical power capable of active diplomacy and the use of levers of political influence, which is inevitable given the importance of the Russian factor in the region.

In contrast to the normative power, the transformative one of the EU is based not only on the power of its norms. According to the experience of enlargement, the EU can also use real policy instruments and material means of influence. Strengthening this part of the EaP is likely to make full use of its potential for a more profound transformation of the EU's eastern neighbourhood.

Possible directions for future research may be the analysis of the EaP's transformative power in forming free trade zones with Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia, particularly the impact of these processes on economic transformation, and the EU support programmes for civil societies of partner countries.

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