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EASTERN PARTNERSHIP AT THE SERVICE OF GEOPOLITICS?

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SUMMARY

10 years after the launch of the Eastern Partnership (EaP), the EU finds itself in a dilemma: On the one hand the ‘European aspirations’ of many of the Eastern partners are the driving force behind their domestic democratic reform process; on the other hand, the very same European course nurtures a climate of geopolitical instability in which a democratic transformation and subsequently EU integration seems hardly possible.

Attributing success and failure of democratic reforms in Moldova solely to a geopolitical dimension (EU versus Russian influence) underestimates the agency of domestic political actors. The EU should therefore avoid geopolitical confrontation over the eastern neighbourhood but focus mainly on economic development and enable domestic governments to create better living conditions for their citizens.

INTRODUCTION

In 2009, the Eastern Partnership (EaP) was launched under the umbrella of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP)¹. The ENP’s and the EaP’s aims are hardly novel, but stem from the EU enlargement process: accelerating political association of the partner states (by, for example, concluding Association Agreements), fostering economic and democratic reforms and thereby contributing to stability, democracy and prosperity. However, 10 years after the launch of the EaP Moldova experiences democratic setbacks, suffers from a protracted reform process and Russia’s geopolitical interventions. Noticing the difficult



Railway graveyard in Moldova

circumstances, the EU has downgraded the EaP from a broad transformative ambition based on EU integration toward a foreign policy instrument. Between 2009 and 2020 a set of sophisticated instruments has been developed aiming at towards ‘strengthening resilience’ and ‘generating concrete tangible results for citizens’².

Currently, the EaP finds itself at the crossroads: Some member states such as Romania, Poland, Sweden and the Baltic States as well as the European Parliament advocate stronger EU engagement in the neighbourhood, while others, such as Germany and France and the Netherlands, have become critical towards EU integration and tend to favour consultations with Russia. Against this background, it remains to be seen how Ursula von der Leyen’s mantra of a ‘geopolitical Commission’ will find its way in the future programming of the Eastern Partnership³. Should the EaP follow geopolitical considerations and try to limit the Russian influence in the region, or should the EU pursue a strictly technical reform agenda and keep a low profile in (geo)political terms?

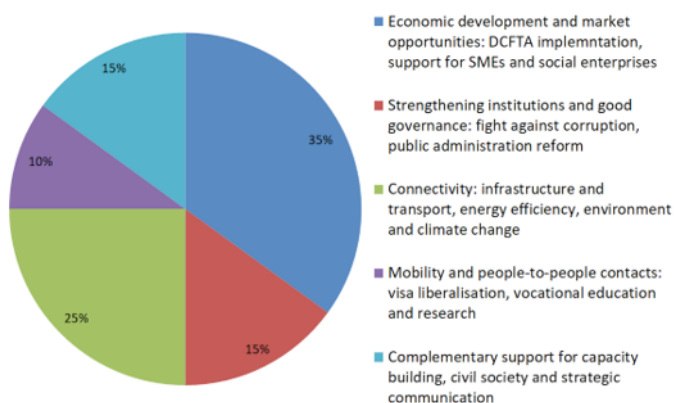


Figure 1: The budget allocation of the Single Support Framework for Moldova (2017-2020) recognizes the development needs of Moldova: It strengthens support for SMEs, vocational education and training and infrastructure and transport. Still more attention could be paid to decentralized activities and bottom-up initiatives. Source: author's illustration.

KEY FINDINGS

Systemic resilience to democratic development in Moldova

Despite the EU's push for reforms, Moldova's political system still suffers from Oligarchy and individual's vested interests. Moldova, which has been hailed front-runner of EU integration before 2014, has experienced grave setback in terms of democratic standards. In 2014, the pro-European reform coalition became entangled in a massive corruption scandal in which more than 1 billion dollar (roughly 15 percent of Moldova's GDP) was embezzled from three of the largest Moldovan banks. Since then the Democratic Party, chaired by Oligarch and media tycoon Vladimir Plahotniuc, has managed to establish firm grip over Moldova's politics and keeps challenging judicial independence, a situation labelled 'state-capture'.

After the parliamentary elections in February 2019 a coalition was formed between the 'pro-European' reform bloc ACUM and the Socialist party close to President Igor Dodon. The disagreement over the foreign policy orientation of Moldova (a strong pro-EU course versus a balanced foreign policy between Russian and the EU) was subordinated to 'purging' the system from Plahotniuc's oligarchic networks. However, the coalition broke after a dispute over position of the general prosecutor. Both parties had rather different views how 'de-oligarchization' efforts should look like. President Igor Dodon and his Socialists brought the Democratic Party (purged from

Vlad Plahotniuc) back. Both parties now support a 'technocratic' government, which is unsurprisingly staffed with followers of Igor Dodon.

The past 10 years has unveiled the massive systemic resilience to transformation rather than the success thereof. The political practices in the neighbourhood countries indicate that it is not the lack of formal institutions such as (anticorruption) agencies and regulatory frameworks that are the problem, but the lack of accountability structures through which the correct application of the laws is ensured. Despite local CSOs often call upon the EU to hold domestic politicians accountable, the EU lacks efficient institutional mechanisms to do so. This shifts the focus back to domestic accountability structures. At the core of such domestic accountability structures is the distribution of resources between the government, oligarchs and other stakeholders of the private sector. Civil society, often represented through the far too narrow concept of Civil Society Organizations, cannot substitute for a variety of economic actors with tangible economic interests. Economic development, the strengthening of socio-economic identities and non-oligarchic interest groups (business organizations, worker's unions, farmers associations) is the best way to ensure accountability and to diversify and democratize the political parties and other stakeholders that participate in the political process.

Recognizing this, the ENP revisions from 2015 and 2019 have started to strengthen economic and trade-related instruments, decentralized activities and engagement with the private sector, local governments, cities, villages and civil society. While this is surely a positive development, the instruments continue to suffer shortcomings: The EU's instruments are still too prescriptive, they are too inflexible to assess and address local needs, or favour 'imported' agendas and best-practices instead of local practices (Leitch 2017, Wolzok 2019). Second, despite the ENP strongly focuses on economic development, the strategic document miss to take into account two important feedback loops: First, that liberalization and rule externalization may have negative effects on the government's ability to protect certain sectors and industries. And second, that the export of labour force and the inflow of remittances has become the predominant economic development model in the eastern neighbourhood countries. (Langbein 2016, Adorov 2016).

Geopolitics on the rise

In addition to the lack of economic developments and democratic reforms, the EaP became challenged by Russia's antagonistic integration project. This has two consequences: First, it became clear that the Kremlin's policies matter to determine the outcome of EU policies on the ground: Russia possesses the power to stir instability in EaP countries by spreading disinformation or promoting the Russian world view or to 'punish' partner state's foreign policy choices by trade-related sanctions. Second, besides Russia's direct responses, geopolitics has captured domestic political discourses in Moldova. On a domestic level 'pro-EU reformers' (ACUM and former Prime Minister Maia Sandu) stand against a camp of EU-sceptics (President Igor Dodon and the Socialist Party) that are supporting a balanced foreign policy orientation between the East and the West. The resulting polarization of domestic discourses may not only weaken social cohesion in the partner states (Groza et al. 2018, figure 2) but also foster populist discourses that open room for manoeuvre of self-serving elites (Delcour 2018).

Conclusion

The limited performance in terms of democratic transition and economic development stands against the geopolitical dimension of the EaP which has massively gained importance in the past 10 years. However, attributing the limited performance to Russia's influence underestimates the agency domestic actors have in either resisting or

Would you vote in favour or against EU membership?

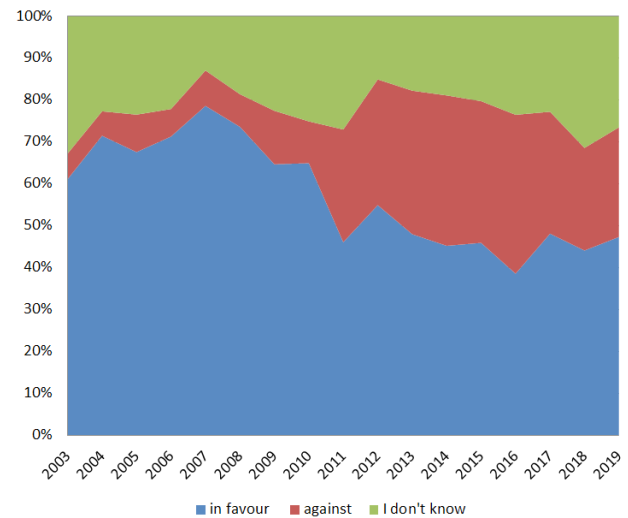


Figure 2: The support for EU membership in Moldova has significantly decreased since 2007. This can hardly be attributed to 'Russian propaganda' but rather to disenchantment on parts of the population with what the EU has achieved in Moldova. Source: IPP Public Opinion Barometer (<http://bop.ipp.md/>)

pushing for reforms. Drawing Moldova closer to the EU on the basis of geopolitical consideration will therefore not improve the outcome of the reform process. On the contrary geopolitics run the risk of widen the existing rift in Moldova's society and foster domestic political instability.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- There is no quick fix in Moldova. Only long-term engagement on a broad societal level resulting in tangible (economic) outcomes for the people will make Moldova more resilient and democratic.
- The EU should abstain from geopolitical rhetoric but instead lower the expectations on what EU integration can achieve, even if this undermines 'pro-European' actors in Moldova.
- EaP instruments should be brought even closer to citizens' needs. Instead of its own normative agenda, the EU should shift towards a development agenda, focusing on smaller, more flexible instruments to support bottom-up initiatives. The CLLD⁴, originating from rural development, should be the guiding principle of donor support. This would empower a variety of stakeholders in the political process and strengthen domestic accountability structures.
- The EU should stop overlooking the fact that the regional security architecture has become very unstable. A constructive dialog between the neighbourhood states and Russia is vital for the EU's interests in the neighbourhood. As a first step, this view should be endorsed in the EU's strategic documents (e.g. EaP summit declarations)

ENDNOTES

¹ See https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/31797/2009_eap_declaration.pdf

² See the ENP revision from 2015 (https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/neighbourhood/pdf/key-documents/151118_joint-communication_review-of-the-enp_en.pdf), the Joint Staff Working document from 2017 (https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/eap_20_deliverables_for_2020.pdf) and the EaP Summit declaration from 2017 (<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/31758/final-statement-st14821en17.pdf>)

³ See https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/tenders/consultation_eap_en

⁴ See https://ec.europa.eu/commission/commissioners/sites/comm-cwt2019/files/commissioner_mission_letters/president-elect_von_der_leyens_mission_letter_to_oliver_varhelyi.pdf

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