

# **The European Union's Eastern Neighbors and their East-West Foreign Policy Vacillation: Consequences, Challenges and Policy Recommendations**

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## **Introduction**

Former Communist States in Europe have followed divergent foreign policy paths since the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Whereas the former Socialist countries in Eastern Europe, together with the Baltic States, thoroughly integrated into Western political, economic and security organizations, others such as Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia have oscillated between the West and Russia. A combination of external circumstances and domestic political conditions explain why some post-Soviet states' foreign policy orientations have vacillated between Russia and the West. While Western governments encouraged democratic and economic reform in the region, they refused to commit to the possibility that these states could eventually join western institutions such as the EU and NATO. This Western noncommittal stance encouraged Russia to intensify its efforts to strengthen its dominance in the region, as well as to exploit the unpredictable and sometimes turbulent internal developments characterizing these countries. In addition, Western leaders' reluctance to consider offering these countries a clear membership prospect in organizations such as the EU and NATO played into the hands of domestic political elites. Absent a clear prospect of membership, political leaders in both Moldova and Ukraine adopted a strategy of playing the two sides (the West and Russia) off one another, vacillating between more pro-Russian or pro-Western foreign policies in order to extract the most political and financial assistance from the two sides. So long as the West withholds a prospect of membership to these states, it will remain easy for Russia and for corrupt domestic elites to exacerbate instability and conflict in the region. This memo argues that the Western governments, especially the EU Member States, should consider offering an EU membership prospect to Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia. This approach is the most advantageous for the West to support reform-minded elites and to promote democracy, rule of law, and respect for human rights as well as help curtail corruption in the region.

## **Background**

Following the end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Central and East European Countries (CEECs) were quick to choose integration with the West, i.e. with NATO and the EU, as their foreign policy priorities. The CEECs pursued their pro-Western choice in a consistent and

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effective way, mainly because the West offered them a clear membership path to NATO and the EU. This prospect of membership, under a watchful Western eye, led to a pro-Western domestic elite consensus and helped these countries transform and undertake painful reforms, keeping their eyes on the much-wanted prize at the end, NATO and EU membership.

For the past 25 years, Ukraine and Moldova have been caught in between the West and Russia, oscillating in their foreign policy choices between the two poles. Despite multiple diplomatic efforts and pleas on the part of Ukrainian and Moldovan diplomats, the West refused to offer these states a prospect for membership in Western security and economic institutions. “*Cooperation – yes, aid – yes, integration – no*”<sup>2</sup> – was the mantra adopted by the EU member states at the beginning of the 1990s and applied to these states henceforth.<sup>3</sup> Lack of consensus among the EU Member States was advanced as the main reason for Western reticence to offer these countries a prospect for membership.<sup>4</sup>

In the absence of a clear Western membership perspective, facing an unpredictable Eastern neighbor and being concerned with their own political survival, leaders in Ukraine and Moldova opted for ambiguous and “multi-vectored”<sup>5</sup> foreign policy orientations. The Western consistent “no” could have been perceived, both at home and internationally, as a policy failure, a defeat on the part of the post-Soviet leaders. This is why, in order to leave more room for maneuver and avoid suffering the consequences of a policy nonfulfillment, post-Soviet elites embraced ambiguity strategically<sup>6</sup> when advancing foreign policy orientations. Ukrainian and Moldovan leaders remained open to alternative integration options, especially when these alternatives proved successful for their domestic tactics to maintain political power.

### **The Effects of the East-West Foreign Policy Vacillation**

This vacillation between East and West has affected the political transformations, the economic reform progress and the social developments in these countries.

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<sup>2</sup> This is how Ukrainian diplomats summarized the European Community’s position with respect to the former members of the Soviet Union. Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine. Kiev, Ukraine. File accessed in July, 2015.

<sup>3</sup> The EU launched the Eastern Partnership program in 2009 to institutionalize its relations with the former Soviet states, without offering a membership perspective. It involves the EU, its Member States and 6 eastern European countries: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine.

<sup>4</sup> The archival documents suggest that there are several factors explaining this “lack of consensus.” Some EU members, notably Spain, Portugal, Greece, were against Ukraine’s membership, because their governments did not want to share EU’s structural funds with other countries. The “Russian factor” is said to have influenced the positions of France and Italy. Finally, the lack of a “country-sponsor” inside the EU, which would have advocated for these countries’ interests on a consistent basis, is another factor explaining the cold-shouldered attitude of the EU toward Moldova and Ukraine.

<sup>5</sup> Former Ukrainian President, L. Kuchma, is known for coining the term “multi-vectoredness”.

<sup>6</sup> Here I borrow the term “strategic ambiguity” from the field of organizational communication. Eric M. Eisenberg defines the term as “instances where individuals use ambiguity purposefully to accomplish their goals”. Eisenberg, E. M. “Ambiguity as Strategy in Organizational Communication,” *Communication Monographs*, vol. 51, 1984, p. 230. The “comforts of ambiguity” have been valued in international relations for a long time, with some voices even arguing that “the exercise of power is impossible if political actors are denied the use of ambiguity”, Eisenberg “Ambiguity”, 1984, p. 235, who cites Yoder, 1983.

Without a promise of EU membership, reform-minded elites were demoralized and sidelined and domestic governments struggled to implement painful reforms. Given the constant struggle for power, reform-resistant elites took advantage of the Western aloofness to these states and followed an avenue of illicit actions to amass significant wealth and consolidate power over state institutions.

These actions at the elite level affected the West's image in the eyes of the masses in Ukraine and Moldova. Associating European Union, its institutions, as well as the values it stands for, with the corrupt domestic political elites, contributed to a decrease in the public opinion support for European integration.<sup>7</sup>

In addition, the fact that the West keeps these states at bay paves the way for Russia's efforts to attract and financially support domestic actors in these countries, ready to promote pro-Kremlin policies. The risk is the emergence of "puppet governments," which would implement whatever policies the more powerful external power induces them to, rather than promote policies to improve people's lives, strengthen democratic practices and stability in the region.<sup>8</sup>

### Western challenges in the region

Strengthened autocratic tendencies, poor economic performance, increased instability, overall insecurity – these are among the main threats facing EU's eastern neighbors.

Among the challenges faced by the West in this region is how to engage with political elites, which while in principle are committed to a pro-Western path and use the pro-EU rhetoric and slogans to obtain Western political support and funding, in practice do not take a hard line on corruption, depoliticize the judicial system or implement the necessary economic reforms.

Russia's interest and increased assertive behavior in the region is another challenge faced by the West. Some voices might argue that a Western membership perspective offered to Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia might trigger an assertive reaction from Russia. Keeping the Western doors shut to countries in Europe which would want to join the West someday, so as not to trigger Russia's aggressive reaction is counterproductive, however. The fact that the West was overly cautious in the region for the past twenty-

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<sup>7</sup> In Moldova, support for the European Union has plummeted to 38 percent in 2016 from 62 percent in 2010. Barometer of Public Opinion (October 2016). Institute for Public Policy. Retrieved from [http://ipp.md/public/files/Barometru/BOP\\_10.2016.pdf](http://ipp.md/public/files/Barometru/BOP_10.2016.pdf)

Barometer of Public Opinion (November 2010). Institute for Public Policy. Retrieved from <http://ipp.md/libview.php?l=ro&idc=156&id=558>

In Ukraine, even though support for the EU increased from 42 percent in 2011 to 54 percent in 2016, this sentiment varies widely by region. While in the Western regions, support for the EU is 82 percent, only 24 percent of the residents from the country's Eastern regions support joining the EU. Center for Insights in Survey Research. "Public Opinion Survey Residents of Ukraine. May 28 – June 14, 2016." *The Government of Canada*. Retrieved from [http://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/wysiwyg/2016-07-08\\_ukraine\\_poll\\_shows\\_skepticism\\_glimmer\\_of\\_hope.pdf](http://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/wysiwyg/2016-07-08_ukraine_poll_shows_skepticism_glimmer_of_hope.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> In 1995, the then Russian President, Boris Yeltsin, issued a Decree, "The Establishment of the Strategic Course of the Russian Federation with Member States of the CIS." Assessing the Decree, the Ukrainian Ministry of Foreign Affairs noted, "[E]conomic and political stability in the CIS states is an asset for Russia only if those countries lead friendly policies toward Moscow." Analysis of "The Establishment of the Strategic Course of the Russian Federation with Member States of the CIS," August 14, 1995. Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine. Kiev, Ukraine. File accessed in August 2015.

five years has not altered Russia's course in this part of Europe.<sup>9</sup> Recognizing Russia's entitlement to a zone of "privileged interests" would undermine the rights of these countries to self-determination and would indicate "the abandonment of pro-Western forces" in the region.<sup>10</sup> Isolating these countries from the overall European processes may be tempting, but the consequences would be far-reaching. As a former American Senator was pointing out back in 1994, "[...] real crises on the periphery [of Europe] are not peripheral to the future of European stability. There can be no lasting security at the center without security at the periphery."<sup>11</sup>

Another challenge which the West is facing in EU's eastern neighborhood, is Russian propaganda, which uses targeted and controlled anti-Western narratives in order to shape the principles, sentiments and opinions held by the masses in this region with respect to the EU, NATO and the US.<sup>12</sup> The public in this region prefers and trusts Russian state-controlled mass media entities.<sup>13</sup>

## Policy Recommendations

### *A Step-by-Step Approach to Streamline the Western Monitoring of Reform Progress*

Given the limited "transformative effect" of the EU on domestic reforms,<sup>14</sup> the slow progress in promoting policy change<sup>15</sup> and the ongoing instability in the region, the halfway commitment of the West with respect to Ukraine and Moldova is no longer sustainable. The lack of a clearly defined policy objective with respect to these post-Soviet states only reinforces vacillation between the West and Russia in an unstable way. In the end, choices will have to be made. The longer the West withholds a prospect

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<sup>9</sup> In fact, diplomatic documents suggest that the Ukrainian diplomats were disheartened by the Western dual policy in Eastern Europe in the 1990s, when Western capitals tried especially hard to accommodate Russian requests in negotiations with Moscow on behalf of the Baltic States, for example, and showed an extremely "cautious" attitude in negotiations on behalf of Ukraine. Diplomats in Ukraine and in Moldova were also disappointed by the "Russia-first" policy pursued by the US and the Western European states in the years following the dissolution of the USSR. Ukrainian diplomats were reporting that the West went to great lengths to show to Russia that, in comparison with the rest of the Soviet successor states, it had a privileged relationship with the West.

<sup>10</sup> Kulesa, L. "Russia and the West: Russia's Recent Assertiveness, Western Response, and What the Future May Hold." *Harvard International Review*, 37(4), January 2017. Retrieved from <http://hir.harvard.edu/russia-and-west-assertiveness-response-what-the-future-may-hold/>

<sup>11</sup> Statement of Senator Richard R. Lugar "European Security Revisited: the State of the Alliance and US Vital Interests in 1994." Delivered at the Overseas Writers Club, June 28, 1994, p. 2. Retrieved from <http://fedora.dlib.indiana.edu/fedora/get/iudl:1776916/OVERVIEW>

<sup>12</sup> Eastern Partnership: Battleground of Russia's Disinformation War. Civil Society Forum. February 2017. Retrieved from <http://eap-csf.eu/index.php/2017/02/06/eastern-partnership-battleground-of-russias-disinformation-war/>

<sup>13</sup> In Moldova, for example, the latest public opinion data (from October 2016) show that *Prime TV (Первый Канал в Молдове)*, which rebroadcasts around 90 percent of *Pervyi Kanal* programs from Russia, is the most preferred source of news information for 64 percent of Moldovan TV viewers. The other two Russian TV channels, RTR Moldova (Россия РТР) and NTV (HTB) enjoy high audience figures as well: 19 percent and 16 percent, respectively. Barometer of Public Opinion (October 2016). Institute for Public Policy. Retrieved from [http://ipp.md/public/files/Barometru/BOP\\_10.2016.pdf](http://ipp.md/public/files/Barometru/BOP_10.2016.pdf)

<sup>14</sup> Wolczuk, K. "Implementation without Coordination: The Impact of EU Conditionality on Ukraine under the European Neighborhood Policy." *Europe-Asia Studies*, 61(2), 2009, p. 187-211.

<sup>15</sup> Dimitrova, A., Dragneva, R. "Shaping Convergence with the EU in Foreign Policy and State Aid in Post-Orange Ukraine: Weak External Incentives, Powerful Veto Players." *Europe-Asia Studies*, 65(4), 2013, p. 658-681.

for membership from these states, the stronger those internal actors and external forces interested solely in maintaining an upper hand over these countries' political and economic institutions become. Only a strategy advanced by a united and decisive West in the Eastern neighborhood region, with clearly defined objectives, will alleviate pressures from the East.

One of the main arguments advanced by European officials as to why the EU cannot offer its eastern neighbors a membership perspective is the lack of reforms, high corruption and economic backwardness of these countries. This is a counterproductive argument, however, which has the effect of spurring the vicious cycle of reinforcing those actors who have little interest in promoting democratic and economic reforms, while demoralizing and marginalizing the reform-minded actors. As the Baltics' and CEECs' ten years' experience of joining the European Union shows, the prospect of EU membership played a crucial role in implementing unpopular reforms and undertaking democratic political transformations.

Therefore, in order to support the domestic agents of change, band them together around a common goal, and lock in the reform process, it is crucial that the West offer these states a membership prospect.<sup>16</sup>

The so-called "enlargement fatigue" is a factor which needs to be taken into account; a potential approach would be for the EU to divide its strategy toward these states into smaller stages, a "short-term" versus a "long-term" perspective. The "short-term" perspective would consist of small tasks aimed to incentivize and mobilize reformist domestic elites and help them coalesce around bigger reform projects. The EU should make it clear that in order to receive a clear promise of membership, certain short-term objectives should be attained first. In other words, instead of "dangling" one big carrot at the end of the long-term process, the EU should divide the task into smaller pieces and offer small "prizes" at the end of each successful completion. This process would make both the implementation of reforms, as well as the Western monitoring of the process, more efficient. While the countries would be able to focus on smaller tasks and make deliverables more attainable, the EU would have the opportunity to spot issues and fix them early on in the process.

The current EU crisis caused by Brexit and the rise of populist political forces across Europe might affect the fate of EU's eastern neighbors, their prospect for membership being highly dependent on EU's eventual choices. The present debate on the future of the EU and the idea of the so-called "multi-speed Europe," with different member states integrating at different levels and paces,<sup>17</sup> risks increasing Russia's leverage and level of influence in Eastern Europe. Without Western unity and concerted efforts to promote democracy beyond current EU borders, the prospect of membership for Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia becomes less probable and these states' path to stability and development is endangered.

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<sup>16</sup> Political developments in Turkey represent an example of what can happen to countries whose European horizons keep getting pushed back. For Ukraine and Moldova, having the added feature that domestic autocrats will be supported by Russia, developing a Turkey-style autocracy and anti-Western stance becomes very likely. For more details on the challenges in Turkish-EU relations, see Martti Ahtisaari et al. "Turkey in Europe. The Imperative for Change." Third Report on the Independent Commission on Turkey, March 2014. Retrieved from [https://www.independentcommissiononturkey.org/pdfs/2014\\_english.pdf](https://www.independentcommissiononturkey.org/pdfs/2014_english.pdf)

<sup>17</sup> Valero, J. "Tusk against the Quartet's multi-speed Europe." *Euractiv*, March 7, 2017. Retrieved from <https://www.euractiv.com/section/future-eu/news/tusk-against-the-quartets-multi-speed-europe/>

## *Support for the Reform-minded Non-State Actors*

Non-state actors play an important role in the process of bringing about the change and reforms, which would transform these Eastern neighbors into mature democracies and economic prosperous states. By actively involving civil society groups, independent mass media organizations, universities, schools, public libraries and places of worship in the reform process, these domestic non-state actors, apart from putting pressure on the governing elites, would provide a sense of “ownership” of the undertaken reforms to the masses in these countries.

In order to counter the anti-Western and anti-reform propaganda, the EU and the US should broaden the audience of the messages, policies, and projects destined for these Eastern European societies. Information about the values the West stands for and the support it offers for the reform process in these countries should not be spread only in the country capitals and among the educated/cosmopolitan public.<sup>18</sup> Different groups within these societies should be targeted. Farmers, rural schoolteachers and doctors, rural mayors and priests – represent opinion leaders in their communities.<sup>19</sup> By getting these groups of actors involved, the outreach work of spreading knowledge on the need on government checks, civic responsibility and political participation – would be more effective.<sup>20</sup>

Another non-state group that could be co-opted in the efforts of locking-in reform are the diaspora groups, which are numerous and powerful both at mobilizing participants in the West, as well as in their back-home communities. These groups usually have benefited from living abroad and experienced the “Western” civic and democratic participation style first-hand. Since numerous diaspora members have family ties in their home communities – their messages and engagements are going to be more credible and powerful.

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<sup>18</sup> A recently published White Paper by the European Commission outlining the future options ahead of Europe, suggests that the EU Member States suffer from decreased levels of trust and legitimacy at the community level as well. European Commission. “White Paper on the Future of Europe. Reflections and Scenarios for the EU27 by 2025.” March 1, 2017. Retrieved from [http://ec.europa.eu/romania/sites/romania/files/whitepaper\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/romania/sites/romania/files/whitepaper_en.pdf)

<sup>19</sup> In Ukraine, for example, more than 40 percent of the population faces pro-Kremlin beliefs and opinions and even though not transmitted directly by Russian mass media sources, these perceptions are spread at the level of localities from people-to-people. In Georgia, a quarter of the population are consumers of Russian mass media sources, especially in the regions mostly populated by ethnic minorities. The pro-Russia discourse, oftentimes spread by domestic nationalist and anti-reformist forces, is framed in an anti-Western message, and to spread the idea that the EU and the US do not care about Georgia’s fate. Baltic Centre for Media Excellence. “Gap-Asset Analysis of Russian Language Media Skill Set in the Eastern Partnership.”

<sup>20</sup> Whereas the European Commission and the European External Action Service has developed a document on offering clear and definite results to the citizens of the countries participating in the Eastern Partnership Program, focusing attention on civil society organizations, youth, women and researchers, the strategy suffers from the its lack of focus on the less educated, rural communities. Media reports from these countries, however, suggest that it is namely these communities who are most exposed to the Russian propaganda and who are less targeted by Western messages. For more details on the EU 2017-2020 strategy, see [https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/17364/eu-identifies-20-key-deliverables-2020-eastern-partnership\\_en](https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/17364/eu-identifies-20-key-deliverables-2020-eastern-partnership_en)