The Eastern Partnership – Soft Power Strategy or Policy Failure?

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Introduction

At the launch of the European Union’s Eastern Partnership (EaP) in December 2008, Commission President Jose Manuel Barroso declared that in comparison to the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) the new policy would be a significant “step change”, and would project EU soft power into the former Soviet Union. “This partnership shows”, gushed the president, “what could be called the power of soft power, the ability of the EU to attract others and bring about changes in societies.”¹ Six months later, at the inaugural EaP summit in Prague, Polish foreign minister Radoslaw Sikorski stated that the EU will “not apologise for the civilisational attraction of its Eastern Partnership project.”² If soft power is to be understood in the classic sense, as “the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion and payment”³ and “getting others to want the outcomes you want”⁴, then the EaP is supposedly a medium for such attraction, and for co-opting the eastern neighbours around the EU’s agenda.

And yet, less than five years later, things have not exactly moved the EU’s way. In fact, the EU has found it difficult to make its influence felt in the Eastern neighbourhood, and all the partner countries remain either fragile, undemocratic, economically underperforming, torn by frozen conflicts, or all four at once. The notion that whole societies would change under the influence of EU soft power has clearly gone vaunting. Although the Commission claims that the EaP has been a great success in a number of ways,⁵ the conclusion at this point in time, a medium term assessment, must be that the EaP has not lived up to the high hopes.

In this paper we argue that this outcome was all too predictable. From the outset the EaP has been marked by the same ambiguity that also characterised the ENP. The issue of eventual membership has consistently been downplayed, and it has mainly been EU interests determining the scope of relations. Even if viewed as an example of the EU

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⁴Ibid., p. 5.
pursuing ‘milieu goals’ - that is of indirectly shaping the external environment by means of diplomacy and soft power – the ‘step-change’ in relations has been pursued with too little vigour to be fully effective. Largely, this reflects internal EU divisions over further enlargement (or ‘enlargement fatigue’) and relations with Russia. More important, for this paper, than the root causes of the EU’s muddled position, which will not be treated in detail, is the lack of strategic clarity that results from it and how this makes the policy fail on its own terms. In short, the EU’s ambiguous stance makes for an ineffective policy, which fails to fully consider the challenges faced by the partner countries, and is poorly geared towards both achieving its milieu goals and utilising the actually considerable reservoir of soft power the EU potentially possesses.

We start by placing the ENP and EaP in the theoretical context of milieu goals and discuss soft power’s efficacy towards that end. The paper then describes the way the EaP came into being, and the compromises that characterised (and undermined) it from the outset. The next part turns to the empirical record of soft power projection through the EaP and its influence on the partner states, before lastly discussing why the EaP has not been an attractive and effective policy. It concludes that soft power will not in itself make the EaP a successful policy as long as its substantive shortcomings are not addressed.

**Milieu Goals and Soft Power**

Naturally, the EU has always had an interest in matters beyond its own borders. The 2003 European Security Strategy (ESS) spoke of the Union wanting “…to promote a ring of well-governed countries to the East of the European Union… [and extending] the benefits of economic and political cooperation to our neighbours in the East while tackling political problems there”, and of “preventive engagement” as being the preferred method for dealing with trouble zones. The European Neighbourhood Policy of 2004 followed in a like vein, speaking of engaging the new neighbours, creating “…a ring of countries, sharing the EU’s fundamental values and objectives, drawn into an increasingly close relationship... [bringing] enormous gains for all involved in terms of increased stability, security and well-being.” Moreover, the ENP set out a strategy for attaining such goals, utilising the EU’s various forms of economic and political power.

Both documents implicitly speak of ‘milieu goals’. These are objectives aimed at shaping one’s external environment in ways considered conducive to one’s interests. Unlike ‘possession goals’, which are tangible, often involving some form of self-extension, and requiring direct action, milieu goals are indirect. Actors will work to promote certain less tangible objectives, such as democracy, respect for human rights, international law, economic development, environmental protection etc., relying on political, diplomatic and economic means for doing so. Milieu goals tend to combine an

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element of altruism with interest, in that the dividends of a successful policy may often accrue more clearly to the ‘object’ of the policy than to the actor pursuing it. Rather, the attainment of such goals will in general help secure the sort of international order that actors consider in their interest. 8

The ENP’s milieu goal logic is that countries sharing the EU’s ‘values’, i.e. adopting the EU’s legislative basis and operating along the same lines, are more likely to be stable, hence enhancing the EU’s own security. The EU’s promotion of democracy and good governance therefore has not only a normative aspect, but also a milieu aspect. This is clearly acknowledged by Eneko Landaburu, formerly of DG RELEX, in a 2006 speech: “The ENP is a virtuous circle; a policy based on shared values and enlightened self-interest: by increasing our neighbours’ prosperity, stability and security, by projecting our prosperity, stability and security beyond our borders, we increase our own. In a very real sense, ‘by helping our neighbours, we help ourselves’.” 9

The ENP and EaP have partly sought to achieve these goals through inducements and conditionality. In this, the policies are explicitly built on the EU’s experiences with the enlargement processes of the 1990s, although naturally with a greater degree of differentiation between the partner states in the closeness of their relations with the EU. As for the form of the EU’s milieu goals, the acquis communautaire is the basis for relations and their closeness dependent on successful adaptation. Conditionality - which was acceptable in the accession process because of the ‘golden carrot’ of eventual membership – is the other main feature, as seen in the ENP documents’ references to “effectively sharing” the EU’s norms and values. 10

Arnold Wolfers noted in his classic discussion of foreign policy goals, that some milieu goals may, over time, morph into possession goals. 11 The EU enlargement process stands as an example, as countries gradually adapt to both the EU’s legislative basis and its political norms, thus changing the external environment, before eventually becoming integrated parts of the union. The successful 2004 ‘Big Bang’ enlargement showcased an effective combination of soft power and hard power in the form of conditionality and economic assistance. Something similar is seen in the Stabilisation and Association Process in the Western Balkans today, which has been hailed as “EU soft power at its best”, and is clearly acknowledged to have spurred positive reform. 12 Several countries covered by this framework have over time moved from association to candidate status. The policies for the new eastern neighbours, however, don’t have such a clear end-point,

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9 Eneko Landaburu, ‘From Neighbourhood to Integration Policy: Are there Concrete Alternatives to Enlargement?’, speech in Brussels, 23 January 2006.
10 See for example the ENP Strategy Paper, 2004, p. 3 and p. 13
and will not become an accession process in the short term. The EaP is instead, if one accepts the views of the EU leadership, underpinned primarily by the EU’s soft power.

As noted above, soft power is the intangible politics of attraction and co-option rather than coercion or inducement. It is different from the conditionality and incentives described above, both of which are tangible, and thus considered hard power. Soft power may be derived from culture, when seen as attractive and positive; societal and political values, such as democracy and respect for human rights, when seen as being applied without hypocrisy; and policies, when seen as being legitimate and espousing the actor’s political values. In other words, soft power is about projecting an image and ‘a brand’ and shaping the perceptions others. The tools of projecting soft power can be varied, typically including cultural exchange, as well as information campaigns and public diplomacy. A successful integration of soft power into foreign policy can help reduce the costs in carrots and sticks of securing desired policy outcomes. In the pursuit of milieu goals, soft power can clearly have a role to play. After all, it is easier and less costly to attract people to democracy and the rule of law than it is to coerce them to it.

Potentially, the EU has significant sources of soft power. Its past achievements in delivering economic integration and prosperity through the single market and its well-regulated, prosperous and balanced market economy are one such source. Another is its commitment to the values of democracy, human rights and good governance. Similarly, the historical narrative of peaceful cooperation, integration, and contractual re-ordering of relations between the European states, and the strong track record of taking in new members, is an important part of its brand. As noted recently by Commissioner Maroš Šefčovič, “Europe has remained so far a pole of attraction standing as it does for democracy, social progress, good governance, and economic openness”. The challenge has been to craft policies that would effectively project these values, or, as put by Eneko Landaburu in the same 2006 speech quoted above, “how can we use our soft power, our transformative power, our gravitational influence, to leverage the reforms we would like to see in our neighbourhood?”

The ENP and the EaP are essentially the answers to this question: Seeking to steer neighbouring countries towards the EU’s vision of a positive external environment, with EU soft power as the glue keeping the process together.

There are limits to the use of soft power, though, as Joseph Nye clearly points out. Soft power’s capacity to “…[produce] certain policy outcomes has to be judged in particular cases. Attraction doesn’t always determine others’ preferences…” Costs may be prohibitive - whether in the form of economic, political, or indeed military pressure -

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14Ibid., p. 17.
16Eneko Landaburu, ‘From Neighbourhood to Integration Policy: Are there Concrete Alternatives to Enlargement?’, speech in Brussels, 23 January 2006.
even when the attraction is present. As one of Nye’s critics, the strategy scholar Colin Gray, has moreover argued, “soft power resides in the ability to attract the willing…”, and thus mainly works when it is least needed, or when there are other issues at play: “Societies and their political leaders may be genuinely attracted to some features of …ideology and practice, but the clinching reason for their agreement …will be that [an actor] looks convincing as a guardian…” 18

The key point of a policy strategy is the direction one wants to move others in; what one wants to influence them towards; what one is willing to do in order to succeed; what one wants from them; and what one is willing to offer in return. One cannot therefore separate soft power from the wider strategy of which it is part. It is, after all, a tool of policy, a means to an end, and not an end in itself. Although soft power shouldn’t be underestimated in the pursuit of milieu goals – it may indeed be what convinces others of the attractiveness of such milieu goals - policy strategies have to be sufficiently balanced between hard and soft power to provide sufficient incentive and support when compliance costs are high. Whereas the membership perspective used to be the ‘golden carrot’ under the enlargement policy, the success of the EU’s milieu shaping policy is to a much larger extent predicated on soft power alone.

The ‘step-change from the ENP to the EaP

The European Neighbourhood Policy was itself a novelty once, as the EU’s general practice between 1991 and 2004 had implicitly been to prepare its neighbours for accession negotiations. The ENP instead focused on coordinating relations with the EU's neighbours without offering the membership perspective. By the time the EaP was introduced in 2008, however, it had become clear that the ENP was inadequate to the challenges it was meant to address. Instead, critics were discussing several dissatisfying aspects of the policy, all of which fed the environment in which the EaP was developed.

One was the “ill-defined concept of partnership”19, which effectively meant the EU being the dominant party and partner countries having to conform to the EU’s rules and requirements. Another was the enlargement-based design, the effectiveness of which was questionable in a situation where membership was not on offer.20 Moreover, by emphasising various soft security issues such as immigration, crime, terrorism, border management etc., the ENP was criticised for signalling that neighbours were considered

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18 Colin S. Gray, Hard and Soft Power: The Utility of Military Force as an Instrument of Policy in the 21st Century, Strategic Studies Institute, 2011, p. 37-38. Gray wrote this with explicit reference to the United States and its soft power, but the point is equally applicable to the European Union’s usage of the term, and the role the membership perspective played in relations with its old neighbours, now the newish members.
“buffer zones” or “potential threat sources”. Such attitudes clearly did not contribute to avoiding “new dividing lines”, as was intended in the ESS and ENP documents. Lastly, the ENP criticised for treating the countries covered by the ENP as one group, and not taking into account the significant cultural, political and economic differences between the partner countries, nor their very different relationships with Europe.

The ENP, of course, was very much a result of different understandings and expectations among the EU member states and this was reflected in the final policy design. The same was later true of the EaP. The predominant sentiment among especially the older EU members was against further enlargement in the short term, whereas particularly newer member states from Eastern and Central Europe, and the partner countries in the Eastern neighbourhood, preferred to see the neighbourhood policy as “insurance” for the membership prospect. As a result, the ENP evaded the enlargement topic altogether, to the disappointment of those countries expecting the EU to acknowledge their eventual right to join the EU. The member states’ division over the essence of the ENP also reflected the competition between the Eastern and Southern neighbourhood inside the EU, with every member state seeking support for neighbours behind their own borders and being less interested in the more distant neighbourhood.

The EaP, along with the Union for the Mediterranean and Black Sea Synergy, was part of the EU adopting a more specialised approach towards its neighbourhood. In addition, the EaP included several updates compared to the ENP such as negotiating new Association Agreements to replace ENP Action Plans as the basis of relations with the EU, establishing Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas (DCFTAs) and offering gradual visa liberalisation. The predominantly bilateral focus of the ENP was complemented by a multilateral track consisting of four thematic platforms “crucial to the objectives of the EaP”. These new initiatives were meant to “create the necessary conditions to accelerate political association and further economic integration” between the EU and the partner states.

Yet, drafting this new policy – although moving it from proposal to strategy took only one year, which is remarkable by Brussels standards – was not easy, and the final outcome very much a case of the lowest common denominator. On the enlargement issue, Polish Foreign Minister Sikorski described the Eastern countries as “European neighbours with a natural membership perspective”, whereas the Southern partner

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countries were simply “neighbours of Europe”.26 The final declaration, however, never mentioned possible accession, and in fact, the member states even struggled over the EaP draft’s provisions on free trade and visa-free travel.

Another aspect of the EaP development is related to the “significant other” in the Eastern neighbourhood. Russia seems to be the elephant in the room that nobody wants to talk about but cannot avoid either. The EU member states' different positions on Russia affected the EaP directly. On the one hand, the then-Commissioner for External Relations and European Neighbourhood Policy, Benita Ferrero-Waldner, stressed in 2009, that Russia's recent actions against Georgia (the 2008 war) and Ukraine (the gas different disputes 2005-2009) were important factors behind the EaP.27 On the other hand, several member states and EU officials have rejected Russia’s claims that the EaP has been directed against it.28 Despite protestations to the contrary, the ‘Russia factor’ is a major reasons why the EaP has not gone beyond recognising the “European aspirations” of the partner countries. As one analysis puts it, “on the one hand,…Brussels…[has] to implicitly adjust the tempo and the depth of the EaP to make it commensurate with the EU’s relations with Russia…On the other hand, Brussels has to accommodate the preferences of other EU member states that are not willing to pursue a ‘Russia-first’ policy.”29

Considering the background of the EaP’s formulation, the policy’s ambiguous nature is hardly surprising. The question is whether an ambiguous EU can really be a pole of attraction? The EaP’s record to date is hardly encouraging.

**The Eastern Partnership in practice**

The following section will provide brief overviews of the state of play between the EU and the partner countries. It will focus on democracy promotion and regional stability as the main milieu goals pursued by the EU, on Association Agreements, DCFTA, and people mobility as the main tools, and discuss the extent to which soft power helps achieve these goals. Although the EaP is more geographically focused than the broader ENP, it arguably is still an attempt to create one policy for a very diverse group of states. While the countries of the Western CIS have a very strong claim to ‘Europeanness’, and see themselves as potential membership candidates, the position of the South Caucasus countries in this respect is more dubious. Moreover, as will be seen below, the closeness

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of the relations developed between the partner states and the EU varies significantly, as does the level and form of competition for influence the EU faces from other actors. These differences make for very different circumstances in which the EU’s milieu goals are pursued, and in which its soft power can work.

Ukraine, among the EaP states, has the by far most extensive and complex interactions with the EU. Following the Orange Revolution, the country was for a time among the pushiest for a membership perspective. The EaP was partly a way for the EU to upgrade relations without going that far. As a means of gaining influence, though, the EaP has been a mixed success at best. Since Viktor Yanukovych’s victory in the 2010 presidential elections, concern has increased at the deteriorating state of democracy and the rule of law, focusing particularly on the seemingly politically motivated trial and conviction of former Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko, and other opposition leaders, for abuse of power while in office.30

But has the EaP been a very purposeful way to gain leverage or bring change? Ukraine is the first EaP state to conclude negotiations – started as far back as 2007 - on an Association Agreement, including DCFTA and the agreement was formally initialled in March 2012. However, the EU has postponed signing, let alone ratifying, the agreement, making those steps dependent on Ukraine’s “…performance [regarding]…respect for common values and the rule of law…” After the parliamentary elections in October 2012 were also judged to have fallen short of EU standards, the Council declared that signing the AA could, at the earliest, happen at the EaP summit in Vilnius in November 2013, provided Ukraine could “…demonstrate determined action and tangible progress...”.31 Although this can charitably be viewed as an example of the EU being true to its own values, it seems an unproductive way of seeking influence. That Yanukovych went ahead with the AA negotiations at all was not entirely to be expected at the time of his election, when he was widely seen as the pro-Russian candidate. He has, moreover, faced significant pressure from Russia to join its proposed customs union and the Eurasian Union. That he hasn’t done so, suggests a certain attraction exerted by the EU. The decision, effectively, to pull back at this late stage from a process that has been going on for six years - and which, by not including the membership perspective, is already a disappointment to Ukrainians - calls the EU’s own sincerity into question. As Ukraine’s ambassador to the EU noted, “the closer we get to the end, the more little obstacles seem to be emerging; there are several member states which don’t see Ukraine as a potential EU country, which don’t want to send any positive messages on

enlargement.” It moreover removes some of the incentives for better behaviour, and reduces the potential impact of the EU’s soft power and ability to co-opt important constituencies – the exact opposite of what one would expect the EU to want.

The DCFTA has a clear appeal to Ukraine’s business community, and independent analysts suggest the agreement would, assuming reforms be enacted, be beneficial for the country in the medium term, but carry significant short-term adaptation costs. The latter could become particularly high should Russia choose to retaliate, Ukraine’s trade still being higher with Russia than with the EU. However, even among Yanukovyč’s supporters in Eastern Ukrainian business circles, support for DCFTA is high, and equally so the expectation that the president can deliver. These business interests would seem potential takers of EU norms, ready for co-option. But by making DCFTA strictly contingent on political conditions being met, the EU removes the incentive for these to comply with the acquis, and denies itself an avenue for creating future pressure on the government. Conditionality of this sort works best when there’s something to be gained.

Regarding visa liberalisation, the picture is similar. Negotiations have been going on for a long time, the ultimate objective being the “…establishment of visa free regimes in due course…” The Commission notes progress on implementing visa facilitation and readmission agreements, but the biggest effect of the slow pace is the connection not created to the average Ukrainians who still struggle to get EU visas (Ukraine unilaterally abolished visa requirements on EU citizens in 2005). Rather than outreach, the EU’s priority remains its own immigration and border security, and it has, once again, not made the best use of those assets that could generate soft power and influence.

Ukraine’s traditional policy, prior to 2004, was of balancing between Russia and Europe, a strategy it has on occasion tried reviving since 2010 when finding the EU not very forthcoming. However Russia has a number of times, even under Yanukovyč, used economic pressure to try and steer Ukraine away from closer EU relations. Brussels’ reactions in these cases have generally been muted and not overly supportive of Ukraine. To some extent, this very pressure, and what it implies for Ukraine’s potential relationship with Russia should it give in, has in fact contributed to making Yanukovyč more committed to the EU path. However Ukraine continues to face a great deal of

33 Andrew Rettman, ‘Ukraine signals readiness to finalise EU pact’, EUobserver.com, 6th July 2011. There have furthermore been voices from within the Union questioning the motives of certain other members wishing to take a harder line on both the AA, and on the more symbolic snub of staying away from the Euro2012 football tournament co-hosted by Ukraine. See Andrew Rettman, ‘Poland: Euro2012 boycott based on ulterior motives’, EUobserver.com, 3rd May 2012.
34 Marek Dabrowski & Svitlana Taran, ’Is Free Trade with the EU Good for Ukraine?’, Case Network E-briefs, no. 06/2012, March 2012.
37 ‘Viktor’s dilemma’, The Economist, 24th September 2011.
scepticism from leading EU members wary of enlarging eastwards, or even giving the appearance thereof, particularly where Russian sensitivities are raw. Instead, the policy has been one of repeated snubs and insistence on upfront political conditionality, while delaying on all things tangible, i.e. AA, DCFTA, visas etc. It has been an odd way of projecting soft power in support of milieu goals.

In the case of Belarus, it is rather a question of no change at all. The Lukashenka regime – long dubbed ‘Europe’s last dictatorship’ – remains as intransigent as always. Past EU efforts have been intermittent at best – only in 2009 was an EU representation in Minsk opened - its policy of sanctions leading some to question whether the EU even sought change in that country. Others have highlighted the conflict between value diffusion and goals of stability in the EU’s policy. Alone among the countries covered by the ENP, Belarus has never even agreed on an Action Plan. Yet the county matters for at least two reasons: as a transit country for Russian gas and as a non-compliant and hence potentially threatening neighbour.

Belarus participates in the EaP’s multilateral dimension, but not very actively. On the bilateral dimension, there has been a see-saw of rapprochement and refreeze. Between 2008 and 2010, when relations between Minsk and Moscow temporarily soured, the EU briefly sought to engage. A visit by Radek Sikorski and Guido Westerwelle in autumn 2010 brought an EU offer of intensified dialogue, conditional on political reforms. The violent post-election crackdown in December that year brought that thaw to an end, and a group of EU foreign ministers took to the pages of the New York Times to express their dismay, signalling that dialogue was now off. Since, the EU has adopted a stricter policy of targeted sanctions against individual members of the political and economic elite. By late 2010, the EU had all but abandoned the outreach initiated in early 2009.

Instead, the EU launched the ‘European Dialogue on Modernisation with Belarusian Society’ in March 2012, allocating €20 million for promoting civil society. Negotiations on visa facilitation have gone nowhere since 2009, regime essentially being non-responsive. Although approval rates on actual visa applications are relatively high,

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40 With no Action Plan in force, no Country Progress Reports have been issued. The Commission did, however, in order to provide an overview of relations, publish ‘Memo/12/XXX’, Brussels, 15th May 2012.
44 This has been countered by the Belarusian authorities with more restrictions on the work of NGOs.
the application fee of €60 deters most in a country as poor as Belarus.\textsuperscript{45} This state of affairs blocks people-to-people contacts, indirectly strengthening the hand of the regime.

The EU has been no more successful in creating pressure on the regime by building ties to Belarus’ economic elites, any changes in trade relations having been made conditional on political reform. Considering how heavily dependent Belarus’ economy is on Russia, the costs of closer integration would be massive in short term and the gains uncertain for a long time. The EU’s current frameworks thus offer no realistic alternative, and Belarus is therefore currently more involved in the Russian plans for a Customs Union.

To some extent, Moldova’s progress mirrors that of Ukraine, except being behind by a few years. Negotiations on the Association Agreement started in 2010 – the Commission reporting “very good progress”\textsuperscript{46} - and on the DCFTA in February 2012. Visa facilitation negotiations are also on-going, but at the same slow pace as seen elsewhere. Considering that Moldova starts from a very poor position, in a sense, things can only improve for the country, both economically and politically.

Throughout almost the entire period under consideration in this article, Moldova has experienced prolonged political deadlock over the election of a new president, a conflict only resolved in March 2012. This conflict did slow the adoption of a range of legislation needed to implement Moldova’s Action Plans fully, although the process never completely stopped.\textsuperscript{47} Renewed political instability in early 2013, leading to the collapse of the reform-minded government, has once again cast doubt on the country’s ability to see through the necessary reforms. As important has been the continuing conflict over the breakaway region of Transnistria. The EU has sought to mediate as part of the multilateral “5+2” format, but a solution remains elusive. Moldova’s geographical position means it has few alternatives but to seek closer integration with the EU. Its small size probably makes it easier for the country to adapt to EU requirements, assuming the political will exists. The bigger question is whether the small, troubled state can command sufficient attention and support from the EU to make the necessary reforms? And secondly, whether the long-winded and slow-moving EaP will provide a sufficiently attractive framework for pursuing that process? Neither seems obvious at this point.

Georgia has been one of the most eager reformers in the neighbourhood and has strongly expressed its “European choice”\textsuperscript{48} since the Rose Revolution. In Georgia, the EU’s soft power has been seen working at its best, with Georgia being the most pro-

\textsuperscript{45} Although the Commission did note the intention of member states to be more flexible regarding visa fees, potentially waiving them for some categories of citizens.


European neighbourhood country\textsuperscript{49} in spite of the EU’s reserved stance on its efforts. While the EU has praised Georgia for remarkable progress in democratization, there is little the EU can actually take credit for: there is nothing the EU has offered to Georgia that it has not offered to other neighbourhood countries. Much of Georgia's sentiments towards the EU are today motivated by the expectations that the EU would help strengthen Georgia's territorial integrity and act as a regional security provider against Russia but the EU has avoided any political action other than talk to back Georgia up.

Georgia's progress in implementing the Action Plan\textsuperscript{50} regarding technical and economic issues is significant, compared to other partner countries, but less so in areas where strong political will is required, e.g. rule of law, human rights, strengthening of the legislative and judicial branches, and socio-economic reforms. Georgia's ENP Progress Report regarding 2011 still lists a number of issues (‘recommendations’) Georgia needs to address.\textsuperscript{51} Georgia's „European way“ is winding: the current president Saakashvili has taken steps to tighten its grip on the political opposition and has pushed through a constitutional reform which after the next presidential election will increase the prime minister’s powers at the expense of the president’s, raising concerns that once his second term expires in 2013, the president will want to continue to govern the country as Prime Minister.\textsuperscript{52} The results of recent parliamentary elections still need time before they can be adequately assessed.

Negotiations on the EU-Georgia Association Agreement started in July 2010, with “good progress” specifically in areas of Georgia's interest, such as visa facilitation (visa facilitation agreement signed in June 2010, Readmission Agreement in November 2010) and trade-related issues. However, in other areas Georgia has appeared reluctant, which can be seen as an example of EaP’s inability to induce changes in areas partner countries do not feel comfortable reforming. While the Georgian elites find the EaP profitable economically and politically, certain political reforms are considered too costly without the incentive of an accession perspective.\textsuperscript{53} When it comes to the DCFTA, Georgia's interest is considered to be high, especially in light of the August war in 2008 and economic recession,\textsuperscript{54} however, the feasibility study conducted in 2007-2008 pointed out that “serious questions remain regarding the willingness and institutional capacity of Georgia”.\textsuperscript{55} The current regimes are giving few tariff reductions and advantages for

\textsuperscript{50}EU-Georgia AP expired on 31 Dec 2011, but jointly agreed to extend it until “the negotiations on an Association Agreement are sufficiently advanced”, http://ec.europa.eu/world/enp/docs/2012_enp_pack/progress_report_georgia_en.pdf
\textsuperscript{51}http://ec.europa.eu/world/enp/docs/2012_enp_pack/georgia_memo_2011_en.pdf
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\textsuperscript{55}http://www.case-research.eu/upload/publikacja_plik/20963402_rc79.pdf, p 185
Georgia.\(^56\) Thus, the EU's offer in the current shape might not be as desirable for Georgia as presented.

One of the critical issues for the Georgian government both domestically and regionally is the question of its two separatist regions Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The two regions are internationally commonly considered to be Georgia's sovereign territory occupied by Russia, whereas Russia (and a handful of other countries, like Venezuela, Tuvalu, Nauru, and Vanuatu) has recognised the Abkhaz and South Ossetian governments as independent. After the war, Georgia's foreign policy focus shifted away from the NATO and towards the EU, with the perception of the EU “as the only alternative for ensuring the security and territorial integrity of the country”.\(^57\) In this context, Georgia would have expected the EU to incorporate a conflict resolution and security dimension into the EaP.\(^58\) Indeed, aside of providing for “post-war assistance pledge”\(^59\), the EU has been toothless against Russia in the region, the most striking example being the EU monitoring mission to Georgia, an unarmed police mission, to which Russia still continues to deny access to the two regions.\(^60\) For Georgia, it gave the sign that “the EU is a soft power but (…) not a strong security organization that you can count on”.\(^61\)

Armenia's record of democratic development is less encouraging for the EU: for years the country has fluctuated between democratic liberalisation and semi-authoritarian power consolidation. Internal situation has been marked by political crisis, election fraud\(^62\), high corruption rates and opposition protests in 2008 and 2011, with protests having gained little, if anything at all. Democratic and market reforms recommended by the ENP Action Plan were basically ignored in 2009-2010,\(^63\) with the ENP Progress Reports mentioning “some progress” in political dialogue and reform\(^64\) in 2010 and suggesting „serious effort“ to address issues of human rights, fundamental freedoms and implementation of legislation in 2011\(^65\). Against this backdrop, it is difficult to understand the EU’s decision to initiate negotiations on the Association Agreement with Armenia 2010 without the precondition of free and fair elections.\(^66\) This makes the EU’s reference to fundamental values seem to Armenia like an empty decoration. It is possible, of course, to argue that the EU keeping a dialogue with Armenia would charm Armenia

\(^{59}\) Georgian progress report 2010 (May 2011), p 3
\(^{62}\) [http://www.rferl.org/content/armenia_elections_step_backward/24574517.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/armenia_elections_step_backward/24574517.html)
\(^{63}\) [http://www.pism.pl/index/?id=f490c742cd8318b8ee6dca10af2a163f](http://www.pism.pl/index/?id=f490c742cd8318b8ee6dca10af2a163f)
\(^{64}\) Armenia progress report 2010
\(^{66}\) Babayan, N, p 4
to stick to the path of democratic development, however, this should also require the EU to keep its actions and words consistent.

Since the AA negotiations, Armenia's interest in the EaP has risen, motivated by trade, investment and aid possibilities (the government side) and respect for the rule of law and other democratic values (the civil society side).\textsuperscript{67} To Armenia's economy, which is small and isolated with no significant energy resources, the idea of a DCFTA with the EU would be deemed attractive, however, the feasibility study has registered „serious doubts“ about the potential benefits of a „simple“ DCFTA for Armenian economy.\textsuperscript{68} Thus in order to be attractive, the EU might need to reconsider once more its „new“ offer on free trade, as the current one does not seem to correspond to the possibilities of at least some partner countries.

The lack of sufficient political reform is coupled with constant conflict situation at the border of Nagorno-Karabakh and the closed Turkish-Armenian border. At Nagorno-Karabakh, the situation has deteriorated to such an extent that it has been termed war „waiting to happen“\textsuperscript{69} with exchanges of fire on a daily basis and frequent casualties.\textsuperscript{70} Recently, the EU has decided not to extend the mandate of the Special Representative for the South Caucasus, which has caused disappointment in those locals that had counted on the EU's commitment to negotiate a peaceful settlement in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict along with long-term peace-building and hard security measures.\textsuperscript{71} It is very difficult to see how this rearrangement benefits the EU in the process of transforming its neighbourhood.

Due to little economic independence and conflict with Azerbaijan and Turkey, Armenia's foreign policy is tilted towards Russia. Armenia is a member of Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), and, for example, recent military exercises were held in Armenia, unsettling for its two Caucasian neighbours.\textsuperscript{72} In addition, Russia's military base is deployed in Armenia until at least 2044.\textsuperscript{73} The EU's „civilisational attraction“ does not suffice for Armenia under these geopolitical conditions, considering the EaP's gains and costs.

EU's relations with autocratic Azerbaijan belong to a completely different category. Negotiations on the Association Agreement were started in 2010 (again, with no significant preconditions expected on democratic development) and are reported to progress at a „slow pace“, whereas no progress has been made on the DCFTA, as Azerbaijan is not a member of WTO which is a prerequisite for starting negotiations at

\textsuperscript{67}http://www.google.ee/url\?sa=t\&rct=j\&q=armenia+eastern+partnership\&source=web\&cd=3\&ved=0CFYQFfAC&url=http%3A%2F%2Fride.org%2Fdescarga%2FPB_94_Armenia.pdf\&ei=1frET9-vG4ed8gO7prWUBQ\&usg=AFQjCNFeHEePoLc5hw3p30gmtJbIFvMnV\_Q\&cad=rja\?, p 2
\textsuperscript{68}http://www.case-research.eu/sites/default/files/publications/25461307_RC80ENvok01.09.2008_0.pdf
\textsuperscript{69}http://euobserver.com/13/116244
\textsuperscript{70}http://euobserver.com/7/31989
\textsuperscript{71}http://euobserver.com/7/31989
\textsuperscript{72}http://www.rferl.org/content/csto-military-exercises-armenia/24709791.html
\textsuperscript{73}Rotaru, Vasile (2011) Does the Eastern Partnership Still Need a “Success Story”? Eurolimes 3, p 108
all. Since 1993, the country has been ruled by autocratic Aliyev’s family who seem to hold a tight grip: the society is politically suppressed, especially as a result of mass protests in the spring of 2011, resulting in a heightened number of political prisoners and constrained human rights. The elites have no interest in reforms that may shake their power position or affect the country’s sovereignty. In addition, Azerbaijan is mobilised over the open conflict on its territory in Nagorno-Karabakh which poses a security threat that may elevate into a war.

Azerbaijan presents a significant challenge to the EaP and the EU in general. It has chosen the tactics of balancing between different international actors in the region and taking the maximum benefits of that situation. Located in a strategically important position regionally, Azerbaijan may act both as a hub for potential energy trade between Asia and Europe and as an energy provider (alternative to Russia) for the EU. As the country receives most of its income from oil revenues (although distributed only to elites), it is economically independent, therefore there is little the EU can offer to attract the elite to introduce meaningful reforms. In the EU-Azerbaijani relations, Azerbaijan is interested in the EU helping to maintain regional security, for example, offering a stronger support in the frozen conflict of Nagorno-Karabakh, or in economic benefits, such as visa liberalisation and trade. However, Azerbaijan is not ready to conduct reforms for these distant and (yet) untangible gains.

It is hard to see why the EU and Azerbaijan have even reached this level of interaction as there is almost no interest from Azerbaijani elite in the EaP, and even less so when it comes to introducing any reforms suggested by the EU. In this situation, the EU lacks leverages on Azerbaijan because of its financial independence and its importance for the EU as a energy supply provider. The EU’s only option seems to be continuous call for „significant further efforts to meet... commitments regarding democracy” but there can be no dialogue if one party is not interested in participating.

Why the failure?

In analysing why the EaP fails at soft power projection and milieu shaping, a number of problematic points stand out when viewed in light of the record described above. Many of them are rather similar to the criticism made of the ENP.

Not about membership: This old criticism is obviously of varying relevance among the EaP countries. Armenia and Azerbaijan have never sought membership; for them the EaP may be fine. Ukraine and Moldova have both expressed strong interest; for them it is

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75 http://www.rferl.org/content/is_azerbaijan_ready_for_its_own_revolution/2334286.html
76 http://www.pism.pl/index/?id=f490c742cd8318b8ee6dca10af2a163f
78 http://ec.europa.eu/trade/creating-opportunities/bilateral-relationships/regions/south-caucasus/
clearly inadequate. The ambiguity as to whether the EaP is a permanent settlement or a way-station on the road to membership is not resolved, and that stretches the policy, as was the case with the ENP. More importantly, the membership perspective is the EU’s biggest soft power asset, and removing it reduces its leverage.

But would the membership perspective really make a difference? Could one have imagined Ukraine having done better on the reform path, or not started backsliding, had the EU been open and forthcoming? Might Belarus have started changing? It is of course impossible to say, and experience from other countries shows it’s not certain to. The case of Bosnia shows even a country with a clearly expressed perspective finding it difficult to move forward. But certainly it would not make anything worse either; it wouldn’t mean abandoning the Copenhagen Criteria or slackening the requirements in acquis compliance. Experience from far more cases suggests that enlargement did help sharpen political debate and create domestic pressure. Crucially, it made the EU look attractive. It strengthened the soft power appeal.

Having the ‘big carrot’ on offer makes the stick more effective too. By holding out the prospect of membership, the EU can more easily use conditionality to secure positive change in its partner states, i.e. on the milieu goals. This is not unimportant, considering the often significant short-term adaptation costs that states face when trying to meet EU standards, the positive effects of which will only show over the medium to long term. As Romano Prodi recognised, when speaking of the CEEC candidates of the 1990s, “by holding up the goal of membership we enabled these governments to implement the necessary reforms. Only the prospect sustained the reformers in their efforts to overcome nationalists and other resistance and fears of change and modernisation”.

Today, the EU seems to think that the EaP countries can accomplish it all on their own with little else to motivate than EU soft power - except the biggest soft power source has been left out.

Too focused on governments: The EaP is primarily structured around EU partnership with the neighbouring countries’ governments. That also means that change and commitment must first come from these governments. The EU has insisted on full conditionality in the political sphere with the Western CIS, while being profoundly lax on those same issues with some of the South Caucasus countries. That is not only a notable double standard, but also reduces the potential soft power impact of the EU. The focus on state institutions, elections, courts etc., important as it is, doesn’t do enough to foster alternative elites, whether in politics or in business, that can create pressure on different governments. The EU’s professed policy of strengthening civil society looks rather meek, especially considering that such efforts are not fully supported by the political branches of the EU. It basically ignores the role bottom-up pressure can play in effecting change.

Too little trade: It is sometimes forgotten, that although the EU shares a long border with the former Soviet states, it is in fact only the biggest trading partner for Moldova.

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Other states have closer relations to Russia than to the EU. This makes it difficult for the EU to use economic leverage. It also underlines the extent to which countries will face adaptation costs if seeking to move ahead with DCFTA. ‘Normal’ FTAs might actually be a better option in the short term. They would be less technically complex than DCFTA, thus reducing the upfront amount of *acquis* compliance necessary. And it would give countries more options for diverse economic relations, while still having the potential over time to orient countries towards the EU. The political conditionality also makes it difficult to expand trade relations to begin with. Business elites, once co-opted by the EU can make powerful allies in the EaP states. That source of influence is barely tapped today. To be more effective, the EU ought to treat trade aside from politics, at least until the point when it enjoys some genuine leverage.

_Few tangible incentives_: In other ways too, the EaP doesn’t offer many incentives. Visa liberalisation, which is among the top priorities for the partner states, has been under negotiation for so long and the EU’s position so inflexible, that the prospect of actually abolishing such requirements seems extremely distant at best. It is difficult to spot the real upgrade in relations. As important, the funding made available under the EaP is fairly limited, and will be spread very thinly over so many countries. It appears all the stingier when compared to the pre-accession aid given to the CEE candidates in the 1990s. To put the limited funding in perspective, Ukrainian officials point out that the EU has spent less in the country than the amount Ukraine decided to forego when it unilaterally abolished visa requirements for EU citizens in 2005.\(^{81}\) The EU’s “more for more“ approach, which was introduced in 2010,\(^{82}\) envisaged that the more a a partner would engage with the EU, the more fully could the EU respond. It seems, however, that partner countries are still expected to carry out major reforms without having a clear vision how the EU will reward them in return.

_Little help on conflict resolution_: A full four of the six EaP countries have frozen conflicts on their territory, and have all at different times requested greater EU involvement in working towards a solution. The EaP was of course not set up specifically with conflict resolution in mind. But its success is still dependent on movement in those areas, and on the role the EU plays in bringing it about. The European institutions generally recognise this, and speak of the EU supporting efforts to mediate in the frozen conflicts. Yet others hold the keys to their solution, and there has been little movement. In this context EU soft power would seem best bolstered by trying to craft proactive policies in support of conflict resolution, peaceful cooperation, as well as respect for territorial integrity in accordance with international law – all values the EU profess commitment to. But soft power is not a tool for conflict management, and it is hard to see

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\(^{81}\) Popescu, Wilson (2009), p 20

the EaP framework opening many new avenues or bringing any greater energy to the task of resolving the frozen conflicts.

**Slowness:** As noted above, the lack of an end-goal and the limited nature of what’s on offer are major drawbacks of the EaP. The glacial speed at which it moves, on the other hand, calls into question the EU’s own sincerity and commitment. Although progress is constantly reported, in regard to both visa liberalisation and DCFTAs it has been painfully slow in coming. That it is the EU insisting on conditionality and on the detailed nature of the relationship gives the sense of stalling. Faster progress and clear, practical achievements would boost the EU’s image and soft power in the region, would lessen the political and economic costs to the partners, and would bring greater leverage. In the current situation the EU loses credibility.

**The divided Europe:** The EU is as disunited as always on how to engage with the east. There clearly are different signals sent from different member states, and different expectations in the partner countries. Relations with Russia are one factor, as several EU members are deeply wary of treading on sore toes. In that view, any suggestion of enlarging the EU would risk creating greater insecurity on its eastern border, and should therefore be avoided at all cost. Others are more willing to prioritise the ambitions of the partner states. Possibly the soft power rhetoric is another lowest common denominator; speaking of influence, but without much actual EU commitment, and without antagonising anybody gratuitously. But that is also part of the problem, as it affords another power significant influence over the EU’s policy towards its neighbours. For an actor speaking as often of values as the EU does, that cannot be an acceptable way of things. Whether it is actually true or not is almost beside the point. The damage is in the ambiguity and in the perception that the EaP is somehow an inadequate *ersatz* strategy.

**Conclusion**

The Eastern Partnership simply isn’t a sufficiently attractive policy. For several of the target countries, at least, it falls well short of their wishes. But it also fails from the EU’s perspective, in not being a successful vehicle for the pursuit of milieu goals. It doesn’t create a proper basis for partnership, or an adequate channel for the EU’s soft power.

In some ways, it is almost as if the EU made a strategic choice “to be attractive” - but without considering what the attractiveness might consist of. That is to divorce soft power from the general foreign policy it is meant to serve and the efficiency and success of which it is meant to enhance. The hard power elements are uncoordinated, and do not at present look like being successful at steering the neighbours towards EU values and norms. The EaP fails for a whole number of reasons, chief among them that it replicates the main weakness of the ENP too much. And it has been obvious all along that this might become a problem. From the outset it has simply offered too little, and hasn’t been what the Eastern Europeans are looking for. But given the deep divisions inside the EU on future enlargement, on relations with Russia, it is perhaps all there is. What is certain,
is that the current EU compromise disappoints both internally and externally, and is less a soft power strategy than simple policy failure.