

## EaP as a Zone of Uncertainty between Europe and Russia: Will the War Change This?

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### *The EaP Zone as a Border Area*

When we discuss the border between the EU and Russia, it is often tacitly assumed that, apart from the entities called “Europe” and “Russia” (or “the Russian World”, or a zone dominated by Russia), there is an area of geopolitical uncertainty.

Creating the EaP in 2009 was the EU’s way of recognizing this strategic ambiguity as a problem to be addressed. It signaled its enhanced interest in this region without properly explaining (beyond the usual banalities of “peace,” “democracy”, “development,” and “regional cooperation”) exactly what this interest was – probably because member-states could not agree on anything more specific. The participant countries were expected to Europeanize without the prospect of becoming part of Europe; they were tacitly encouraged to refrain from joining the “Russian world” without preparing them for Russia’s reaction. The latter interpreted this ambiguity as a combination of Western threat and weakness; this contributed to the two invasions of Ukraine in 2014 and 2022.

In effect, the EaP served as a buffer zone and, at the same time, a zone of contestation between Russia and the EU. How will this change following the ongoing war? Hypothetically, a better-defined border regime may emerge between the EU and Russia (“the Russian zone”); alternatively, the pre-existing ambiguity may be reformulated but still persist.

This might be the core question for this conference to discuss. Nobody can answer it at this point, but my hunch, or my fear, is that substantial ambiguities will continue, though in a new shape.

One could view this issue from a “big” geopolitical perspective, implying a (tacit) grand bargain between great powers such as Russia, the EU, and the US. But I will follow the direction suggested by the title of our conference and focus on the “grass-roots” perspective, which, in this case, implies perspectives of countries and peoples that constitute this unhappy and poorly defined buffer zone.

### *The EaP and Its Unintended Consequences*

The EaP project tacitly presumed the irresistibility of European soft power, as captured in the concepts of “normative power” or even “normative empire”. It took it for granted that the EaP nations shared the wish to become part of Europe (who wouldn’t?); the only issue was how far the EU would allow the integration process to proceed.

For countries like Poland and Sweden, and others that pushed for and actively supported the EaP project, it had an important geopolitical dimension. It was widely perceived as some kind of European response (inconclusive as it was) to the Russian invasion of Georgia in 2008. The case

of this country validated the above assumption: Georgian commitment to the European path was not in question; it was the Russian resentment of it that had to be addressed.

If judged on its own terms, the EaP project was far from successful, but it has proven rather *consequential* – if we focus on its unintended consequences. Whatever the calculations of European policymakers could have been, the EaP pushed the participant countries and their publics to define more clearly where they stood regarding Europe and Russia. This stimulated sharper distinctions and divisions both between and within them.

Contrary to the EU's professed aim of encouraging horizontal integration among the six EaP countries, differences between them were further accentuated. Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia saw the EaP as an opportunity for meaningful European integration and hoped to eventually overcome Europeans' opposition to their membership. In other cases, the EaP remained peripheral to their national agendas. More recently, Georgia flipped to the anti-Western camp, while Armenia moved in the opposite direction, though the nature of the discrepancy stayed salient.

Moreover, the EaP inadvertently deepened pre-existing internal rifts *within* countries. Ukraine's and Moldova's societies had been divided between predominantly Russia- or Europe-leaning constituencies, and this split was crucial for understanding their domestic politics. While the Georgian public appeared solidly pro-European, the "pro-Western vs pro-Russian" divide had always been prominent in its political discourse; this fissure became central after Bidzina Ivanishvili, Georgia's informal tsar, showed his true colors, rejecting the European path in favor of a Putinesque worldview. While this turnaround contradicted the European aspirations of most Georgians, Ivanishvili's openly anti-Western policies (masquerading as "sovereignist" and "pro-peace") also have significant societal support.

Conversely, until quite recently, Armenia had been presumed to be reliably pro-Russian; however, following the second Karabakh war, this changed, which made "Europe vs Russia" the central topic of its recent Parliamentary elections (here, the pro-Europeans won).

This is not to say that average citizens primarily base their electoral choices on geopolitical or civilizational considerations: it's more complicated than that. However, especially in recent years, the elite opinion, as well as most international players, view every election in these countries as a referendum on a choice between Russia and Europe, or Russia and the West. So far, only Belarus and Azerbaijan have escaped such fissures – probably, because their sturdily autocratic regimes do not provide space for any political divisions at all.

### *Clarity of Borders or a Reformatted Ambiguity?*

How will the war change all this? We know that we don't know what the outcome of the war will be. However, one may suggest that neither side (which implies Russia vs Ukraine, but also Russia vs "the collective West") will emerge as a clear, irrefutable winner. If this is the case, both internal societal divisions and geopolitical ambiguities will endure.

At the geopolitical level, Ukraine and Moldova appear to be closer than ever to actual EU membership; nevertheless, it is far from clear that they will become members any time soon.

Despite a radically changed rhetoric, the prospect of actual membership may be problematic. If these assumptions are true, these countries may continue to constitute zones of strategic ambiguity.

This also implies that domestic political divisions will continue to have a crucial geopolitical dimension. As concerns Ukraine, which is the most important case, one can confidently predict that Russia will not reconcile itself to a truly sovereign Ukraine, even if territorially diminished. One should remember that the initial objective of the war was to control all of Ukraine, and Russia is unlikely to give up on that objective. Based on its behavior in other countries, its top post-war priority may become to seek and promote some version of a Ukrainian Ivanishvili. This does not mean it will succeed: we saw his Moldovan and Armenian iterations defeated in their respective countries. It is undeniable that the war has significantly strengthened pro-Western commitment and anti-Russian sentiment in Ukraine. However, if the war ends inconclusively, some Ukrainians may question the wisdom of relying on the West, and Russia will continue to treat Ukraine as a zone of strategic ambiguity and do its best to exploit internal divisions.

The Georgian lesson (however sad for me personally) may be instructive in this manner. The initial reaction to the 2008 Russian invasion was a national consolidation around the pro-Western government and the project of European integration. However, the same episode also left a residue of fear of the Russian invasion and sowed a seed of skepticism towards the reliance on Western support. We saw that a genuinely high level of public commitment to European integration, combined with an effective taboo against openly pro-Russian sentiments, is not a sufficient guarantee for staying on the European integration course. It was this fear of Russia and distrust of the Western commitment that Ivanishvili's government skillfully manipulated to engineer its geopolitical U-Turn.

All this makes me doubt whether the end of the war will bring conclusive clarity regarding the new border between Russia and Europe. Strategic ambiguities are likely to persist; the border between Russia and Europe will also run through these societies.